

After Here
Surprised By Hope
September 12/13, 2009

Like the morning fog,
Like chasing the wind,
Just a brief moment, a mere breath;
From dust ... to dust.

The scripture paints for us the stark reality of our lives, a reality that we don't like to think about unless we're forced to.

"We are merely moving shadows, and all our busy rushing ends in nothing."

"All our busy rushing ends in nothing."

What a depressing thought! All the effort we invest in trying to accomplish whatever is on our "to-do" list; all the energy we put into our

personal and professional agendas; all the stress, all the strain, all the strategizing, all the maneuvering ... one day, all of it is going to come to an end, because *we're* going to come to an end. One day it's all going to vanish because we're going to vanish. "We are merely shadows" that appear and disappear with the movement of the sun.

Of course, if you're currently overwhelmed by your life, that might actually be a pleasant thought, that one day, the struggle, the heartache and longing, the sadness and grief will all be over.

But for most of us, this is not a happy thought. The idea that we'll spend 70 to 80 years dreaming, planting, building, investing in our relationships, investing in making ourselves and our world a better place, only to get to the point where that is no longer possible ... only to get to the point where it all withers, crumbles,

fades, and disintegrates ... well frankly, that just sucks. (And just so you'll know, I try to avoid that word in everyday conversation but, when speaking of death, I don't hesitate to use it. I cannot think of a better word to describe death and all that it entails).

Left to the natural progression of things, *this is* how it's going to end for all of us. Actually, that's how *everything* is going to end. It's all going to wither, crumble, fade and disintegrate – like so much dust in the wind.

Now, at this point, I'm pretty sure that some of you are thinking, "Man! I should've slept in this morning and skipped out on this service!"

And I'm sure that some who have suffered the loss of a loved one are feeling some sadness right now. Between the songs and the scriptures we heard and the video we saw, the grief has been stirred again and you're

agreeing with me: “you’re right, Rick. Death really does suck.”

But I would also guess that there are some who are a little ticked off by what we’ve done so far. “What are you guys trying to do here, Rick? Church is supposed to be uplifting. We’re supposed to be communicating *good* news, aren’t we? But this whole thing feels so depressing and hopeless, like *bad* news. If I didn’t know better, I would almost think that you guys are trying to manipulate everyone’s emotions or trying to scare people.”

Let me assure you that we’re not. We’re just trying to paint an accurate picture of reality in this service as it pertains to the brevity of human life. All of those pictures of deceased celebrities and soldiers *do* tell us a story, don’t they?

More importantly, they (and our own personal

experience with death) raise a really really important question – a question whose answer, quite literally, gives direction and meaning to your life whether you realize it or not. And the question is this: *is there any hope? Is there any hope?* Is there any reason to believe that death is not the end? Is there any reason to believe that withering, crumbling, fading and disintegrating might not be the final state of affairs? Is there any reason to say that “the Teacher,” Solomon, King of Israel, is wrong – that all we do is not ultimately meaningless? That it’s not merely “chasing the wind?”

Unfortunately, the question of hope is easy to push out of sight until we are confronted with the stark reality of death. And what we’re trying to do today is just bring that question back into the light – to raise it as forcefully as we can – which is why we began the service the way we did.

Answering the Question

So, let's move on from that and focus on the question. Is there any reason to hope?

Well, it depends on who you ask. Throughout history, people have wrestled with this question again and again and have come up with various answers and ways of living that follow naturally from those answers. I'm going to share a few of these with you and I'm sure you'll recognize them. Maybe some of us are living by them or you know someone who is.

1. Some would say that “in the face of death, there really *is* no hope, so just give in.”

There is no hope on a personal level friends – when you die, they put you into the ground and you turn into dust. And that's the end of it.

And there is no hope on a macro level either – we know that one of these days the sun will burn out and our planet will go cold and become, simply and literally, dust.

And, since this is the reality some would say, since there is no hope for anything more, just *give in* to whatever desire strikes you in the moment. Make it your goal to enjoy your limited time on this earth as much as possible no matter what. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. It's "game over" so play hard while you can.

Another way some respond to this "ultimate question" is to say ...

2. "There is no hope of escaping the finality of death, so the most sensible thing is to just give up."

We're all going to die and decay eventually and

the same thing is going to happen to the planet, so you might as well resign yourself to the fact now. Don't get too high or too low about that or anything else. Don't let your expectations get too high or too low about anything. Be kind of stoic. Just get through it.

Of course, some people follow that idea to its ultimate conclusion: they will decide to give up living altogether and they take their own lives. "Because there is no hope in the face of death," they think to themselves, "everything about this life truly is meaningless, so there is no rational reason to continue."

And just to be clear, I'm not talking about people who are emotionally unstable who make this choice. I'm talking about highly intelligent productive men and women. History is filled with them.

For instance, George Eastman, founder of the

Eastman Kodak Company back in the late 1800s invented film that came on a roll. He was a genius. His invention brought photography to the mainstream – everybody, after his invention, could have a camera and take pictures - and it also led to the invention of motion picture film. In 1932, at the age of 78, George Eastman took his own life, leaving a note that read, “My work is done. Why wait?”¹

There’s no hope – so just give in.

Now, in response to that, some would say “No, that’s wrong. That is so wrong! Yes, it is true that this life and this world will come to an end, *but there is more* to this life and to this world. There’s another dimension out there and that’s where our focus should be.”

3. “The only true hope of defeating death lies in a spiritual existence beyond this one, so the most reasonable thing to do is to figure out how to save your soul.(the

part of you that goes on after your body dies).”

And I don't necessarily mean saving your soul in the "Christian sense" because there are many, many spiritual paths that teach salvation of the soul; many that teach that the best thing to do is to figure out what it will take for the spirit to survive in whatever reality there is beyond this one and to do whatever it takes to get to that better place once you escape the chains of physical existence.

Of course, "whatever it takes" varies from religion to religion and maybe even person to person.

- Some say you just have to do enough right things now, in this world, so that your soul can be set free then, in that one.
- Some would teach that you need to believe the right things now so your soul

will be saved then.

- Some would focus on becoming more and more conscious of your soul's connection with the oneness of the universe now, so that it will be enveloped by it then.

And so on and so forth.

“Don't give up hope because, even though it's true that the physical life and physical world is going to end, the spiritual life and spiritual world goes on and on forever.” That's another way of looking at this.

Of course, in response to that, some would say “There's no way of knowing that for sure because by definition no one can see or touch 'the spiritual.' It's a nice idea but it might turn out to be just wishful thinking. Therefore, a more reasonable approach is to focus on *cheating* death instead of *beating* death.”

4. “The only real hope we have in the face of death is in increased sustainability, so let’s do what we can to preserve the planet and everything in it.”

The Earth *is* going to die someday, but it doesn’t have to be tomorrow if we are wise and disciplined. We can buy more time, if not for ourselves personally, at least for our children and for the rest of creation.

And by the way, those who subscribe to this would also point out the same principle applies to our physical body. It is going to die one day but it, too, can become a “sustainability project” so to speak. You can figure out how to gain extra time if you are wise and disciplined and, of course, lucky enough to be born somewhere that’s even possible (where there are no wars, famines, diseases or disasters that will wipe you out) *and* lucky enough to not get struck by lightning or any other type of random

accident. There are all these little conditions you have to put on this.

You may not be able to *beat* death, but at least you can *cheat* death for a little while.

Now, obviously, I've only summarized some of the most common answers given to the "ultimate question." And, I'm sure that by being so brief, I've shortchanged some of them. But I think you can see that none of them provide a resounding "yes" to the question. None of them boldly says "yes, there is reason to believe that death is not the end; that withering, crumbling, fading and disintegrating is not the final state of everything, including our bodies and our planet."

The Christian Answer

But there is an answer that does.

And I'm going to call it the "Christian answer" although, in reality, very few Christians these days are even aware of it. (Actually, most Christians would say that the "spiritual existence beyond this physical existence so save your soul" answer is the Christian answer. I would say that it's *part* of the Christian answer, but only a part – and not even the largest part).

So, what is the Christian answer? What is the hope we hold out in the face of death?

Let me try to walk you through it. It is hinted at first of all in the Old Testament prophets.

Isaiah tells us that ...

He [God] will swallow up death

forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.

Isaiah 25:8 (NIV)

That's the first hint we read of this. Hosea repeats that same promise but this time he puts it in the words of God Himself. God says:

"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?"

Hosea 13:14 (NIV)

Now, what these scriptures are saying is that, in some way or another, death and all of its effects are going to be undone. And the ancient Hebrews who believed in YHWH also believed this as well. And, yet, their understanding was

limited (which is why, in the scriptures we heard earlier, when Francine and Austin were up here reading those, death is viewed with such finality and resignation).

Fast forward, however, to the first century and to the man who we know as the Apostle Paul, and the answer to the question of hope has become crystal clear.

Here's what he wrote:

Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be ignorant [or uninformed] about those who have died. We don't want you to grieve like other people who have no hope.

Is there any reason to believe that death is not the end? Is there any reason to believe that withering, crumbling, fading and disintegrating might not be the final state of affairs? Is there

any reason to believe that this life is not ultimately meaningless and “chasing the wind?”

“Yes!” Paul says. “There *is* a reason for hope. And so, we don’t want you to think of death like everyone else does. We don’t want you giving in or giving up. We don’t want you thinking only about just the salvation of your soul. And we don’t want you to think that the best you can do is to cheat death out of a few years.”

Of course, the question is “why would Paul say such a thing? What is his reasoning?”

Let’s read on and find out.

“We don't want you to grieve like other people who have no hope,” Paul says, because ...

We believe that Jesus died and

*came back to life. 1
Thessalonians 4:14a (GW)*

*We also believe that, through
Jesus, God will bring back those
who have died. They will come
back with Jesus. 1
Thessalonians 4:14b (GW)*

*We who are still alive when the
Lord comes will not go ahead
of those who have already died.
1 Thessalonians
4:15 (GW)*

And, then, Paul goes on to explain how this little scene will happen.

He says ...

*The Lord will come from
heaven with a command, with
the voice of the archangel, and
with the trumpet {call} of God.
First, the dead who believed in*

*Christ will come back to life. V
16*

*Then, together with them, we
who are still alive will be taken
in the clouds to meet the Lord
in the air.*

*In this way we will always be
with the Lord.*

By the way, when Paul writes “in this way” I don’t think He means “in the clouds.” I think he means “in this way, in the union of both the living and the dead in Christ” we will always be with the Lord.

And then Paul closes with a restatement of his main point:

*So then, comfort each other
with these words! 1
Thessalonians 4:18 (GW)*

Remind each other that as followers of Christ,

we do not face death with hopelessness because we know and understand these things. These truths make a difference in how we look at death.

And since they are so important, since they do make a difference, let's go back through what Paul wrote and see if we can list them out. I see four truths in here that shape the "Christian answer" to the question of hope.

First of all we see that ...

1. Believers who have died are with Jesus (wherever He is) right now.

I mean, if they're going to "come back with Jesus," they have to be *with Jesus* right now, don't they? You can't come back with someone unless you are with them. And just to be clear, when I say "believers are with Jesus" I mean they're with Jesus in soul/spirit because,

obviously, their bodies are still part of this physical realm in some way.

BTW, this is a very interesting subject – what it means to be with Jesus after we die, so that’s what we’re going to talk about this next week in detail.

Now, you *could* take this truth as Paul saying that our hope as Christians is in a spiritual existence beyond this life. But I think it will become obvious that this is not what he is saying as we work through it ... which brings us to the second thing we learn:

2. Jesus will return in the flesh.

(Which is what Jesus himself had also taught on many occasions) He is literally going to come back to this earth someday. There’s going to be an audible sound of some kind and a visible appearance. This isn’t an occurrence in

the spiritual realm. It's physical, happening in our world.

And this, too, is a very interesting – and challenging – subject – the return of Christ – and so we'll talk about that in detail in *two* weeks.

Third thing we learn from this passage is that ...

3. When Jesus returns, deceased believers will physically come back to life.

Remember what Paul wrote? “The dead who believed in Christ will come back to life.”

Pretty plain, pretty straight forward. But just to be clear, we can't be talking about a spiritual awakening or coming back to life, because remember, the dead in Christ are already spiritually awake with Jesus wherever he is

right now. Coming back to life means a literal reuniting of a person's spirit with a physical body. That's what the Jews had understood coming back to life to mean for centuries; that's what Jesus taught; and that's what Paul is teaching here.

And *now*, this is getting kind of interesting. Because *now* we're getting to the real hope in the face of death because we're talking about something more than just saving of the soul. We're talking about hope for the body; that the final end really isn't "dust in the wind."

And we'll talk *more* about this renewed body idea in the final week of this series, when we also talk about this fourth thing that Paul points out for us (which, again, is echoed in the Old Testament and which Jesus himself had taught). And that is that ...

4. God's Kingdom – the ultimate reality and

goal of history – is coming in fullness on this earth (not somewhere else).

The Kingdom of God is not going to happen off in the clouds somewhere. It's going to happen here.

Of course, someone could say, "Now, wait a minute here, Rick. I'm trying to follow along with what Paul is saying here, and there was nothing in what he wrote about God's Kingdom at all. He never mentions the phrase. Where are you getting that from this passage?"

I'm getting it by reading closely and understanding the larger context. Remember how Paul started out the passage? He said, "I don't want you to be out of the loop concerning your beloved believer friends and family, who have passed away. I don't want you to get all upset."

Well, why would they be upset? Obviously, there was sadness over the loss of loved ones. But that's not what Paul was writing about here. He wasn't trying to get them to stop grieving. What he was trying to do was to say, "don't grieve like people who have no hope." So what was causing them to grieve like that?

The answer is alluded to in verse 15 ...

... when Paul reassures them ...

We who are still alive when the Lord comes will not go ahead of those who have already died.

1 Thessalonians 4:15 (GW)

Why would Paul need to reassure them of that? Apparently, these living believers were afraid that the deceased believers were going to miss out on something; they were afraid that these deceased believers would be left behind in

some way.

You see, in that day, the vision of Christians was that Jesus was going to return and set up his Kingdom on earth – not that people were going to be with Jesus in some spiritual “heaven” for all eternity. That was the vision, Jesus was coming back to this earth. As Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians:

We are citizens of heaven [the kingdom of heaven-not the physical place or spiritual place of heaven], where the Lord Jesus Christ lives.

And we are eagerly waiting for him [not to take us to heaven when we die but] for him to return as our Savior. He will take our weak mortal bodies [that turn to dust] and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power

*with which he will bring
everything under his control.*

*Philippians 3:20-21
(NLT)*

There was a dramatic change that was going to happen to the physical body when Christ returned. Christians were awaiting it and expecting it. And they thought that it was going to happen within a matter of a few years. They had no idea that God's plan was to save millions and millions of human beings throughout the centuries.

And so, when Jesus didn't return immediately, guess what happened? Some of the believers started dying! Some of them got old and just passed away. Some of them may have been martyred for their faith. And, there was great agony among those who remained – "What's going to happen to them? Have they missed out? Are they going to miss out on the Kingdom

(because the Kingdom is coming to earth when Jesus comes back and they're not here)? Are they going to miss out because they believed in Jesus in vain?"

But Paul reassured them, "Don't be upset about that. Those who are alive will be changed instantly. And those who have passed away will be raised and they, too, will be changed when the Kingdom comes on this earth in its fullness."

Are you getting the picture here? Are you seeing what frames up the "Christian answer?" Jesus returns; the kingdom comes; believers living and dead are changed into flesh that can no longer suffer and die and turn into dust. Pretty amazing!

And just to complete the picture, the Bible says that this same thing is going to happen to all of creation, not just human beings.

Paul explains it like this in his letter to the Romans:

Against its will, all of creation was subjected to God's curse.

[He's talking about the curse that Austin read about earlier in the service. He read that God said "the ground is cursed because of you Adam and your new wife, you sinned and now it's all cursed."] *Against its will, all of creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.*

Romans 8:20-21 (NLT)

And again, just so people don't forget, Paul applies that principle to believers in Jesus:

We, too, await with eager hope for the day when God will give

us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope [the hope of new bodies, not eternity in heaven, but the hope of new bodies] when we were saved.
Romans 8:23-24 (NLT)

Now, I know I've just run through this very quickly and that's why we're going to do a whole series on this and follow some of these ideas out, and it may be hard to understand, but just hang on for these other weeks.

Now, big picture, let's tie this up here: Jesus returns; the kingdom comes; believers living and dead are changed into flesh that can no longer suffer and die *and* the creation is transformed as well. It's incredible.

However, someone could say, “This sounds really cool. And if you believe it, it’s possible to see how and why it would inspire hope in you. But is it real hope? What separates this position from the other four that you taught us about earlier? What makes it more than wishful thinking?”

That’s a really good question! And the answer is revealed at the very beginning of what Paul wrote

*We believe that Jesus died and
came back to life. 1
Thessalonians 4:14a (GW)*

That’s the whole crux of the matter. Because Jesus defeated death, we who believe in him will also defeat death. In addition, this world will defeat death.

The hope we have in the face of death is that

someone has already defeated it. Someone has already risen above it. Someone has already experienced what God promises is going to happen to his creation and to his people.

So, if you want to express the Christian answer in it's fullness you might put it like this.

“Yes, there is reason to hope. Everything will be renewed, restored and regenerated because Jesus died and came back to life!”

There is reason to believe that death is not the end because Jesus is alive in the flesh. There is reason to believe that withering, crumbling, fading and disintegrating is not the final state of affairs because Jesus is alive. And there is reason to believe that all we do is not ultimately meaningless, that it's not merely “chasing the wind” because *Jesus is alive*.

Jesus, as Paul writes elsewhere, is the first in a

long line of resurrections to a new and glorified body and also a new and recreated world. And the early Christians believed that God was going to do for the whole cosmos what he had done for Jesus at Easter: to renew it, restore it and regenerate it. That's the hope. It's not a vain hope and it's not wishful thinking. And friends, I am so thankful, so thankful, that the hope we have is not just this, "Well, I think it might be this way. I hope there is a heaven. I hope..." Our hope is based in real flesh and blood in the person of Jesus.

And we can look forward to the day when all this is going to happen and God's promises are fulfilled and imagine what it's going to be like. In fact,

The apostle John tells us what it's going to be like. This is what he says:

I heard a loud shout from the

throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying no more pain. All these things are gone forever." And here is why:

Because the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!"

Revelation 21:3-5 (NLT)

He's not making a *new everything*. "I'm making all this *old* stuff this damaged stuff, this destroyed stuff, from people to the creation, I'm making it new. I'm starting it over. It's a wonderful thought.

Illustration & Invitation

And I know that I've been kind of intellectual on this. And some of you are going, "I think I get this and I'm really glad you're doing three weeks on this because I have a bunch of questions about what you just talked about." And we'll get to those, but I think it might be helpful for you, because it was helpful for me when I was thinking about this message, to move more to the emotional, the feeling side of this. To maybe capture a little bit of what John is writing about. What that is going to be like. What does the end game look like, what does it feel like? So, we're going to watch a video clip and then the band is going to do a song right after that, that I think illustrates this idea as well.

And, the clip – I hope you get it, I mean, I got it. I'm not sure everybody last night got it – the clip is from a movie called "50 First Dates," it's like one of the only Adam Sandler movies

worth seeing, at least all the way to the end. And if you've seen this movie you know that the story is that he falls in love with this girl. And, in the movie, you find out that she had an accident that causes her memory to basically be wiped clean every day and so she wakes up in a new world every day. So basically Sandler's character is in the role of redeeming her and restoring her and renewing her. She would not have a life except for what he does for her. And when I watch this scene, which is at the end of the movie, and I see the reaction and I see what she feels and experiences, for some reason my brain just goes to - *this is what it's going to be like when Jesus comes back*. This is the hope of the restoration and the renewal and the regeneration. And maybe you'll get that, maybe you won't. My wife didn't get it last night - that's okay. Maybe you'll see it, and if you do great. But if not, the band is going to do a song that will help us maybe to grasp it a little more directly. Let's watch and

hopefully you'll enjoy it.

Everything is going to be renewed, restored and regenerated because Jesus died and came back to life. That's the Christian hope. Of course the question is: What way of living naturally follows from this? All the other ways that we've talked about had a "therefore ... so live this way." Well, I think there are two things we should consider.

1. Believe in Jesus. Simply put our faith in him. Over and over Jesus talked about, "just put your faith in me. Trust me. Believe who I said I am. Believe in what I'm going to do." And the scripture says that we should do that. We need to come to a place in our lives where we confess that we're part of the reason that the creation is messed up. We're part of the reason the why it's all going to dust unless God intervenes. We're sinners and we need a savior, and Jesus is that savior. We need to

admit that, pray that, confess that. And then, the scripture says, when people do that, they get baptized. There is a symbolism to being baptized, and we won't go into that today. We're going to do Baptism in October on the 18th, third weekend of October. You'll be hearing lots more about that. But you might want to put that in your mind right now if your saying, "how do I respond to this today?" Believe and be baptized.

2. Second thing that I think is a "therefore" that comes out of this, and this is from something Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, Paul writes about this all the time in all of his letters, it's everywhere. He tells them ...

54 Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is

*your victory? O death, where is
your sting?" 56*

And then he says . . .

*58 So, my dear brothers and
sisters, be strong and
immovable. Always work
enthusiastically for the Lord,
for you know that nothing you
do for the Lord is ever useless.
1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (NLT)*

There is no vain effort in this life friends. There is no meaningless activity. It all can be towards God's glory. And that's what Paul is telling us, live for the Kingdom. Understand what God wants and live that way. Let him live his life through you.

Now, what we've talked about today and experienced (I hope) is monumental, it's *wonderful*, so we thought that an appropriate way to close this service would be to have a

little bit of time responding, because you've had to listen to me and watch the whole time, plus we started out so gloomy and sad that we thought let's lift the roof a little bit here. Let's end with a couple of songs of rejoicing and reflecting, worshipping God and honoring God for this truth that we've learned today.

Let's stand – shake off the cobwebs ... and let's sing.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://listverse.com/2007/10/07/top-10-scientists-who-committed-suicide/>