

# The Power of Remembrance in the Face of Death



by PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

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I have not been able to stop thinking about a friend who recently died of cancer. He was not my best friend—but we had known each other since the first grade. He entered life the same time that I had, and now he has left it. I keep asking myself the same question over and over, “How is he already gone?” He was thirty-one years old. *I am thirty-one years old.*

Death is always hard to accept, but I think it is especially difficult when the person who dies is the same age as you. If the person is much older, then death seems like a sad inevitability. If the person is much younger, then death is an unspeakable tragedy. But for someone my own age to die—that brought me special terror. I will die. And you will too. We will be taken away from all we know and love.

One author describes death this way.

After decades of superefficient operation, that great engineering marvel—your human body—will shut down and cease thousands of functions in a matter of minutes. Your heart muscle will stop pumping and masses of neurons in the brain will switch off. Your body’s core temperature will cool and

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rigor mortis will begin. What then becomes of the unseen essence of you?<sup>1</sup>

This physical description of death is unsettling, but the author's final question is even more so. What becomes of our souls? Where will the unseen essence of "me" end up? Where is the essence of my friend right now? In my head, I can still hear the cough-like sound of his laugh and see the wrinkles in his forehead when he furrowed his brow. But where is *he*?

Not being able to answer that question is disturbing, isn't it? Faith holds us up. But strong columns of faith that we have built over the years can start to crack and crumble because of death's quake. Moments before I learned of my friend's death I was steady and certain. In the next instant, I felt feeble and frail.

I don't think my reaction was unusual, but it did catch me off guard. I am a Christian. In fact, I'm a Christian who has spent several years studying theology so I could learn more about what I believe and why I believe it. At the core of these beliefs is my faith in the resurrected Christ of Scripture. I believe he conquered death by crushing the head of a seditious serpent. I believe that death has lost its sting because my life is hidden in Christ who rose from the grave (1 Cor 15:55; Col 3:3). Death cannot harm me anymore, at least not in any lasting sense. So shouldn't I be more secure in death's presence?

The truth is that studying theology does not guarantee emotional security. Being informed isn't a cure-all for spiritual instability. The faith *in which* we believe is a reservoir of truth about God. But the faith that *believes* is a muscle that must be worked consistently. I had forgotten this, and when I learned of my friend's death, I saw how weak my faith was.

Troubled by this, I began to think more deeply about two questions. First, why do we feel uneasy about death? Death is inevitable. We all know it's in our future, and we're constantly reminded of it. Yet when it comes close to us, it still assaults our sense of security. Why? Second, given that we react to death in this way, what can we do to steady our faith so that we can stand boldly before this assailant? I thought about these two questions as I reread the story of Lazarus's resurrection in John 11. Let's start with the first one.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Allen Rogers, *What Happens after I Die?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 22.

*Why does death rattle our sense of security?* Let's explore this question by beginning with two people shaken by death: Martha and Mary.

In response to their brother's illness, they send for Jesus and ask for his help. But Lazarus dies before Jesus arrives, and the sisters' response to his "late" arrival expresses the thievery of death that we all experience: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32). Put differently, "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have been stolen from us."

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Something in all of us screams out in opposition to death (Rom 5:14). We know it was not what God intended for the created order; instead it crept into his good world because of our sin. So when death confronts us, we look for hope, for something to tell us that it is not the period at the end of life's sentence. And God has given us this hope by giving us *himself*. The one who stood before Mary and Martha was life and hope in the flesh (John 11:25). They had to lay hold of this person, this hope, by faith. But this is not as easy as it sounds. Faith is not merely assent to the truth. As we noted earlier, it is a muscle that must be worked in the harsh spiritual environment of a sinful and threatening world.

Before Mary arrives, Jesus challenges Martha's faith with a declaration about himself that he follows with a personal question: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26). This question required her to put her faith in motion. Like exercise, this may have pained her at first, but it would strengthen her as she learned to wait for the fulfillment of Jesus' words.

Let's pause here. As we read this story, we cannot sit idly by and neglect to work our own muscle of faith. Do *I* believe this? Do *you* believe that those who put their hope and trust in the Son of God will never die? If you

and I neglect our faith muscle, it atrophies, and the imminent death of our bodies will always shake our foundation, just as it shook mine. In this condition, we will not be assured by faith that the great war for our souls has been definitively won by the God of life. Doubt might enter our heart: “Has God really defeated death?” “Can I honestly take him at his word?” “What if the gospel is just wishful thinking?”

Even if we can answer these questions with confidence, it can still be unnerving to see events unfolding around us that are seemingly unaffected by God’s victory, at least on the surface. Death has lost its sting, but death still roams the battlefield.

Everywhere we turn, this tyrant’s forces menace us with keen-edged weapons of destruction. His intelligence network probes our innermost thoughts. We can keep no secrets; he insinuates his dictatorship into every recess of the mind until it seems he knows us better than we know ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Death presses his rule, pursuing us into every corner of our lives.

Faith must learn to fight back against this harrowing dictator (cf. Eph 6:16). We strengthen our faith as we learn, through Scripture and through continual confession of the lordship of Christ, that though death is a dictator, he is not our rightful ruler. He is a thief who has stolen what was not offered to him, and he has no claim to ultimate authority. Only the God of grace has unrivaled rule. He is the one who breathed life into us (Gen 2:7). And when sin ravaged that life, his Son bled for our renewal. Jesus clearly set life before us: “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” All of life—physical and spiritual—*belongs* to him. So when death threatens to take life from us, we feel assaulted precisely because we know that death’s rule is illegitimate and wrong.

And Jesus agrees. Though he had intentionally arrived after Lazarus died,<sup>3</sup> it was not for lack of caring. He weeps at the tomb of his friend (John 11:35), and John says that Jesus was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled (11:33). Many translations fail to convey what these words mean.

<sup>2</sup> Rogers, *What Happens after I Die?*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> He did this in order to glorify God and foster belief in him (John 11:4, 15).

The original language actually connotes anger, outrage and emotional indignation.<sup>4</sup> Why did Jesus feel this way? Death's rule is *wrong* and Jesus *hates* it. Because he does, Jesus takes up spiritual arms and engages the devil's greatest emissary.<sup>5</sup> So, while death threatens our sense of security by looking to steal what we have been created to love, it also brings a righteous rage into the heart of God's Son. Death tries to take what belongs to Jesus—us. But as the bystanders point out, Jesus is also deeply moved because of love (11:36). The Son of God is enraged and weeps not because he is bitter about mortality or because he is filled with reckless anger, but because he loves those whom death has threatened. Jesus' indignation is a holy indignation.

In sum, death threatens to take all of life from us, even the eternal life that Christ has offered and secured for us. And because many of us are not accustomed to working our muscle of faith in the face of death, it shakes our foundation and assaults our security. At least, this was what I learned in response to the first question. The second question helps us know what to do about it.

***How can we shore up our faith when death threatens us?*** The previous discussion helps us to address this. If death threatens our faith and causes us to doubt the promise of eternal spiritual life in Christ, then what we have to do is work that faith muscle by clinging to the one who gave the promise. And this begins with a confession of faith. Martha replies to Christ's question with a simple answer: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God" (John 11:27). Confessing Christ is our first muscle movement in the presence of death. After we make this confession of who Christ is, we follow after him with unswerving commitment, just as Martha followed after Jesus that day. We shore up our faith by clinging to Christ, who conquered death and promised to one day raise all of those in him from the dead (Rom 6:4, 8).

Let's now think about the other person in this story—Mary. When Jesus calls for Mary, she sprints from the house, falling at his feet weeping. Seeing

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 415.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Köstenberger suggests that the Greek verbs for "deeply moved" and "greatly troubled" "indicate Jesus' excited anticipation of what he is going to do as he bristles and braces himself for his impending assault on death." Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 340.

Mary in distress deeply moves Jesus. He weeps with her and the mourners. He enters into her grief. And he then proceeds to show that he truly is the Son of God. He has already proclaimed that he is the resurrection and the life, and now he proves it by resurrecting Lazarus's life. In so doing, he demonstrates that he is worthy to believe in; he is the one in whom Mary and all the on-lookers can put their faith. He is the one they can cling to, even in death.

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Yet, we need to address a follow-up question given that we are not living during the time of the incarnation. We can't see Jesus or witness his works the way Mary and Martha did. We know from this story and the resurrection itself that Christ has conquered death, but we may still struggle to find peace in the midst of its destruction. So how do we bind ourselves spiritually to Christ? In other words, how do we "cling"?

Once again, John's Gospel offers us great insight. We cling to Christ through the person of the Spirit. The Spirit reminds us of all that Christ has said and binds us to fellow believers who affirm God's faithfulness in our moments of weakness. In John 14:26, Jesus says, "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Many parts of this verse are comforting when it comes to death's decimation: the Spirit is the Helper; the Father sends him on our behalf; we will learn all things under the Spirit's teaching. But I believe the most penetrating response to our struggle with death comes at the end of the verse: the Spirit will bring to our remembrance all that Christ has *said* to us and, by implication, all that Christ has *done* for us. Jesus' words connect to his actions—to what he actually does. In fact, many of his words *were* actions. His call to Lazarus to emerge from the tomb (words) was Lazarus's resurrection (action). So we cling to Christ through the person of the Spirit, who reminds us that what Christ says and what he does go together.

Notice that it is not mere memory that the gospel writer has in mind, as if we should think happy thoughts and drift into psychological serenity. He specifically states the content of what the Spirit brings to our remembrance: all that Christ has said to us, and, as noted above, done for us. And Christ has said and done many things! Perhaps one of the most uplifting things that Christ says to his disciples and to us comes just before that, in the form of a promise: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. . . . *Because I live, you also will live.* In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:18–20).

There is a lot in these verses, but consider just a few points. First, though we cannot converse with Jesus like Mary and Martha did, we are not left to ourselves. We are not orphans—secluded and isolated from our true family. We are children claimed and cared for by the Trinitarian, personal God. His care is not intermittent; it is constant. It fills our moments, our days, our life. And his care will carry us through death and into eternity.

Second, Christ, who *is* life himself, will come to us. He promised to make his home in us (John 15:4, 7). And the indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit is eternal. God forever lives in us. He has taken up permanent, eternal residence. Because God lives eternally, we will live eternally as well.

Third, when Jesus says, “Because I live, you also will live,” he is calling us to remember our union with him, especially in conjunction with his resurrection. This is precisely what Paul pleads with his readers to do in 2 Timothy 2:8. “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.” Remember how he died. Remember how he was buried and left in a tomb. Remember how he walked out of death’s abyss and left his headdress neatly folded on the rock (John 20:7)! Remember. Remember. Remember. Since we are united to him, and he is resurrected, then we too will share in that blessing. The physical death of our bodies is not the end of us. We have Jesus’ promises and his resurrection to stand upon.

Fourth, even when we fail to remember, God does not forget. Our hopelessness and lack of faith does not disrupt God’s perfect memory. How beautiful were the criminal’s words to Jesus on the cross before he died: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus simply responds, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42–43). It is as if

Jesus is saying, “Remember you? I’ve never forgotten you.”

Spirit-led remembrance of Christ’s words and actions—that is how we cling to the Lord. And behind it all, he remembers us and holds on to us. The Spirit brings Christ’s words to our minds, and we repeat them. We pray them. We ruminates over them. We burn John 14:18–20 into our hearts, and 11:25–26, and 5:24, and Matt 28:20, and—well, you understand. And when our memory fails us, we lean on brothers and sisters in Christ who *do* remember.

As I read John’s Gospel, I found great comfort in knowing that God does not leave us alone in the presence of death. Though I felt shaken and isolated by my friend’s passing, the Holy Spirit himself was whispering the words of Christ to my heart. He helped me to shore up my faith in the presence of death by Spirit-led remembrance of what Jesus has said and done for us.

Death, after all, cannot silence Christ. He raised Lazarus as a foretaste of something much bigger. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he was made alive—forever. And our Christ who lives speaks as much to us today as he did to Martha and Mary two thousand years ago. While death can make a thousand threats to steal our physical and spiritual life, it cannot hush the Son of God, who continues to speak through his Word. And when the Spirit helps us to remember all that Christ has done, we cling to our only hope. We cling to life himself. Over our lifetime, God will shore up our faith again and again and again—as many times as it takes until we are eternally in his presence. On that day, we will be fully united with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and death will be but a memory.

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