

Isaiah 25:8 - Death is Swallowed Up

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is taken from the book of Isaiah, and it's chapter 25, and we're reading from verse 1 to verse 9, and that's on page 709 in the Bibles.

Isaiah chapter 25. Lord, you are my God. I will exalt you and praise your name.

For in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago. You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners stronghold a city no more. It will never be rebuilt.

Therefore strong peoples will honour you. Cities of ruthless nations will revere you. You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall, and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners.

[1 : 22] As heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled. On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich foods for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations. He will swallow up death forever.

The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces. He will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

In that day they will say, Surely this is our God. We trusted in him and he saved us. This is the Lord. We trusted in him. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen. Well, thank you, Ruth.

[2 : 35] And let me add my welcome to Simon and Amy's. And if you are here for the first time this morning, if you're visiting, we do hope that you're able to stay on for refreshments afterwards.

And we'd love to get to know you amid the ensuing chaos. Be a great help to me if you would keep your Bibles open at Isaiah chapter 25.

And we are continuing in our summer series, our summer snapshots series this morning, where we're focusing each week on just a single verse or two.

This morning we are focusing on Isaiah chapter 25, verse 8. The Lord Almighty will swallow up death forever, and he will wipe away tears from all faces.

And we're going to be asking ourselves this morning the question, how do we think about death? How do we face up to our own mortality?

[3 : 41] And if you're here this morning and you wouldn't describe yourself as a Christian believer, then I invite you to listen to what Isaiah says.

Give Isaiah a hearing. Some 2,700 years on or so, it is not only relevant, but a matter of eternal significance.

And if you are a Christian, if you're a new Christian, or if you've been a Christian for some time, then Isaiah offers you the confidence that in Christ we can face the hardest parts of life, head on, even death itself.

And if this morning you're suffering or struggling, then God knows who you are.

He knows what you're going through. And may his spirit minister to you through these words in Isaiah. And so to that end, let us pray and ask God for his help.

[4 : 48] Lord God Almighty, you know each and every one of us here. You know each of our different situations and each of our different circumstances.

Some of us here this morning are rejoicing and glad. But others of us here are mourning. For some, the wounds are fresh.

For some, the scars are deep-seated. Some of us are struggling with a profound sense of loss or the prospect of that. Some of us are feeling buffeted by all that life has thrown at us this week and simply struggling to cope.

You know our sorrows and hearts and scars. Father, we pray that you would speak, speak powerfully to us into our lives by the Holy Spirit.

And may your word be a salve to our ears and a comfort to tender souls. Would you move us to place our trust in the Lord Jesus alone for our salvation and stay our minds on him.

[6 : 04] For it is in his precious name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Well, we are recently, a couple of weeks back now from holiday in Latvia where we were visiting my wife's family, my in-laws over in Latvia.

And while we were there, there was plenty of opportunity to eat outdoors. But from time to time, our alfresco tranquility was interrupted by the buzzing of a bee or a wasp.

And we were reminded in our children's contrasting reactions to wasps, I won't tell you who was who, but of a comedy sketch that I'd seen quite a long time ago by the comedian Michael McIntyre about different ways how to cope with bees and wasps.

And perhaps you've seen it. But Michael McIntyre has observed that there are basically three categories of dealing with bees and wasps.

And he believes that you'll deal with the situation, at least if you're a British person, in one of three ways. The first type of person, according to McIntyre, is what he describes as the wafter.

[7 : 26] And the wafter just sort of casually deals with the situation and wafting the air, a kind of blasé attitude to the whole situation.

So that's the first category, the wafter. The second type of person, according to McIntyre, is a very serious sort of person, and that is the stay stiller.

Their strategy is simply to stay still and to ignore it, just to simply stay completely still and it won't bother you. Don't move, don't waft, just stay completely still.

Then the third type of person is the total panicker who runs about screaming hysterically until the entire ordeal is over. I'm not sure about the science.

I'm not sure if any empirical studies have been conducted about which type of person is most likely to succeed in their strategy to avoid being stung. But it struck me as I was preparing to preach this passage that these categories for dealing with bees and wasps, at least the first two, roughly translate into the different approaches that we take in our society when it comes to dealing with death.

[8 : 44] There are those like the wafers who adopt a kind of relaxed, disinterested attitude. They'll put on a brave face and try to convince themselves and others that they're not afraid of death.

It's just part of the circle of life. Nothing to be afraid of and can be faced boldly. So Christopher Hitchens, a prominent new atheist and terminally ill with esophageal cancer, he suggested in an interview that the only properly stoic attitude to take is to recognize that I'm only here as a product of a process of evolution which rates life relatively cheaply.

The cosmos doesn't know that I'm here and won't notice when I'm gone. The wafers. Then there are those, I suppose, who are more or less equivalent to the stay stillers whose strategy is to just ignore it in the vain hope that if you ignore it for long enough, the problem will simply go away.

And actually, that would account for much of our Western society where death has become more or less such a fearful taboo that even the very mention of it tends to be avoided at all costs.

Mark Ashton was a minister at St. Andrew's, the great church in Cambridge. And some of you may have known Mark and shortly before he died, he observed that our age is so devoid of hope in the face of death that the topic has become unmentionable.

[10 : 36] And he illustrated this by explaining how, when he'd last been in the hairdresser, he was asked how he was. He replied that he'd just been given three months to live. That killed the atmosphere in the salon.

It went silent. The usual chattiness ceased. And no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't engage with his hairdresser. He couldn't get another word out of her for the rest of the haircut.

So those are the two main approaches that our culture adopts, two main strategies for dealing with death. Acting bravely on the assumption that there's nothing beyond death, nothing to worry about, or ignoring it at all costs.

But there is an alternative. And it's not total panicking. And by the way, if you're looking for examples of total panickers, then you can find on the internet all sorts of strategies and rituals and diets that people are prepared to go through to try and prolong their life and delay the inevitable. But our passage in Isaiah shows that there is another strategy, the Christian approach to death. As we're going to see, it's an attitude that enables us to face up to death and face it with confidence, yet all the while acknowledging the grief and the suffering and the pain this side of eternity.

[12:13] And in no way belittling the painful reality of that. So we've got two main headings this morning. Firstly, he will swallow up death forever.

And secondly, he will wipe away every tear. So firstly then, he will swallow up death forever. The thing that swallows us up is itself swallowed up.

Death, the only inevitability inevitability in life, as they say, is the great swallower up of life. And we don't know when it will be, but sooner or later, unless Christ first returns, death will swallow up each and every one of us here.

But here in Isaiah, we're told that death will be swallowed up forever. Notice that this is emphatic. Death will be swallowed up.

a divine promise. Notice it is the Lord himself who has spoken through the prophet Isaiah. It is emphatic and it is final.

[13:27] It will be swallowed up forever. There will be no comeback sequel for death. And so for us to understand the significance of this, the context is important.

both the context in Isaiah and in the context of the whole story of the Bible, the whole arc of its narrative. And the immediate setting in verses 6 to 8 is a feast on a mountain.

Now this is interesting because it follows a pattern in the Bible. So in the Exodus, when the Lord saved his people through departed waters, destroying their enemies in the process, so after the Exodus, when the covenant was established with Moses following that, there was such a feast at a mountain, Mount Sinai.

Read about that in Exodus 24. The mountain feast that Isaiah is here looking forward to marks also the salvation of the Lord's people, following the Lord's judgment on all the earth and the destruction of his enemies.

That's basically what chapter 4, the preceding chapter, is about, the final judgment to come. And so in our chapter, Isaiah is picking up on the theme of the Lord's reign on Mount Zion.

[15:00] You can see that from verse 23 of chapter 24. The mountain of the Lord, which would be established in the last days as Isaiah had foretold right back in chapter 2 of his prophecy and marking the inauguration of that reign will be a feast of rich food and a banquet of vintage wine prepared by the Lord himself for the Lord's people down through the, from the nations, down through the centuries.

and they meet in festive spirit to celebrate the death of death when death, the great swallower of all, will itself be swallowed up.

This then is the culmination of the wonderful things in chapter 25 verse 1 that the Lord, in perfect faithfulness, will accomplish and has long since planned.

before time even began. Now how can it be? How can death be swallowed up? Let's just take a minute to think about what death is.

What is it? What does it entail, biblically speaking? Firstly, death is not normal. It is not normal.

[16:29] Not according to the Bible. It may be our universal experience, but it's not the way it's meant to be. I recall going with my eldest niece when she was still just a small child to visit my mom's mother in her nursing home and by then her mind was ravaged by Alzheimer's and her mind was long since gone.

She was lying in bed, barely conscious, kind of breathing, sack of bones really and my poor little niece ran out of the room somehow recognizing the abnormality and horror of it all, the horror of death.

And there's something in us, something innate in us that tells us that death is an aberration, not the way we were originally designed in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 because death, secondly, is a consequence of our sin in Genesis 3, part of God's judgment pronounced on the earth.

The wages of sin is death, wrote the Apostle Paul in Romans. And death entered through sin and in this way death came to all people because all people have sins.

thirdly, death is characterized by separation, traumatic separation, a separation of body from soul, a separation of a person from loved ones.

[18:07] It is desperately, profoundly sad and often cruel, accompanied by grief and sorrow and heartache.

the Bible recognizes that. Fourthly, death is therefore an enemy. Indeed, it is according to 1 Corinthians 15, verse 26, the last enemy.

In fact, why don't we turn there? Just keep a thumb in Isaiah and turn there to 1 Corinthians 15 for a minute, pages 1, 1, 5, 6 to 1, 5, 7.

In the church Bible. We'll be looking at this chapter later on in the year, but in 1 Corinthians 15, 26, Paul writes, the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

but destroyed it most certainly is. Then cast your eyes over to the end of verse 54 and the facing page.

[19:28] Paul quotes from our part of Isaiah. When Christ returns, then the saying that is written in Isaiah will come true. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

death may be an enemy, but it is now a conquered enemy. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

How can Paul be so sure? Well, because he is writing on the other side of salvation history to Isaiah. He's writing on the other side of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul knows how death is swallowed up because he knows who swallowed it up. Christ swallowed up death on the cross. By his death on the cross, Christ did swallow up death in victory.

See, the cross looks like a moment of abject failure and defeat, but actually it's Christ's victory. He began to fulfill the things planned long ago, and death's destruction is sealed as a consequence of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

[20:44] The grave seemed to swallow him up, but in reality he swallowed it up. So although death remains a reality in our experience for now, death is not the end.

And when Christ returns, we will see the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises, the resurrection of the dead, judgment of the world, and for those who place their trust in him for our salvation.

He will be our salvation. He will be our shelter from the storm. He will shelter us with his presence, and we will feast, we will feast with our Lord Jesus.

We will eat and drink with him. We will eat and drink with him among all the saints of every nation and every age, and death will be banished forever.

George Herbert, the 17th century Anglican poet and presbyter, said that death used to be an executioner. Death used to be, used to be an executioner, but the gospel makes him just a gardener.

[22:02] what does he mean by that? Well, in his little book on death, Tim Keller explains what Herbert meant.

Death used to be able to crush us, but now all death can do is plant us in God's soil so we become all we were intended to be. So it's in that light, it's in that light that as Christians we can face death authentically, neither pretending that it will never happen, nor with a false bravado, but with a God-given confidence that it can be faced now as a defeated foe, merely a means to the end and not the end itself.

So that's the first part of it. Death is swallowed up by Christ. And one of the commentators in this passage observes that while outwardly evil culminates in death, subjectively it leads to tears. Outwardly evil culminates in death, but subjectively it leads to tears. And so the second part is he will wipe away the tears from all faces.

And this too is amazing. He will wipe away every tear. It's okay to cry.

[23:36] It's okay to cry. And I distinctly remember as a young boy about seven years old I think the occasion when I was told these words by my mother.

It's okay to cry. And we've already admitted that death can be cruel. Sometimes it can be very cruel indeed. Colin was a friend of mine who lived nearby, came to Sunday school.

I'd known him just about all my life. And on his seventh birthday he was given a bicycle by his parents. And on that very day he fell off his bike and hit his head at just the wrong angle, at just the wrong bit.

And he fell off without wearing a helmet and hit his curb and he died on his way to hospital in an ambulance on his seventh birthday.

Unimaginably devastating for his parents. Sometime afterwards as my mum gently broke the news to me, she told me that it's okay to cry.

[24 : 52] And there is surely an admission in this verse too that it is okay to cry. For the Lord himself will wipe away the tears from all faces.

Isn't this an image of the most tender beauty? There is an expectation that there will be tears to wipe away from all of our faces.

Whoever we are, however hardened we may be, however stiff our upper lip may be. Friends, we live in a fallen world. Life is precious and fragile and fleeting and we can expect to encounter loss. Well, the Bible doesn't just sweep that under the carpet. There is an acknowledgement here of the reality of suffering and sorrow. There is a recognition that there will be hurt and heartache in this life and of the unbearable agony of grief and of the outpouring of tears and the Lord knows our heartache.

He understands whatever it is you're going through and he has promised to take it upon himself to wipe away your tears, to meet you in your sorrow intimately, personally, and to repair your hurt.

[26 : 16] He sees the rawness of the pain. He has compassion for you. And Jesus himself wept when he walked among us.

He wept over the death of his friend Lazarus. He wept after speaking with Lazarus' two grieving sisters and encountering all the mourners and having compassion on them. Jesus wept even though he knew he would soon raise him from the dead and all those tears would turn to joy and they would be soon rejoicing together.

And it is in a similar vein in his letter to the Romans that the apostle Paul commands us to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and mourn with those who are mourning.

We might add weep. with those who are weeping. Brothers and sisters we need to be walking through the pain and the suffering together with tears not just for ourselves but for those around us. As someone said we've got a lot of crying to do and this side of eternity that's probably true. And yet as Paul elsewhere reminds us since death is a defeated enemy we do not grieve like those who have no hope like the rest of mankind.

[27 : 45] Remember death has lost its sting. and so let us bear patiently until the end.

Enduring the grief and the sorrow for now and the assurance of the promise that these will soon be done away with. Holding on to the hope that in the end he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

And so when face to face with Christ our Savior we will say surely this is our God. We trusted in him and he saved us.

This is the Lord we trusted in him. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation. and then let the eternal feast begin.

[28 : 48] Let's pray. Father you are our God and you have indeed done wonderful things.

Things planned long ago. We ask now that you would heal the brokenhearted among us and bind up their wounds.

We ask that you would grant them and we pray this for all of us here this morning. We ask that you would grant us a vision of life in which all tears are wiped away and all shadows have fled away. Raise us up in your spirit's power now to follow you in hope and trust. To rejoice and be glad and trusting in the sure salvation won by Christ.

Keep us in perfect peace forevermore for we ask in the name of the one who is the resurrection and the life. Even our Lord Jesus Christ.

[29 : 55] Amen.