

He transformed into a critic his family could have never anticipated. The son of a Lutheran pastor, surrounded by a mom, grandmother, aunts, and a sister who loved Jesus. But as he entered adulthood, he found a new "god." As he advanced into the heights of academia, he saw the belief in Jesus as beneath him. Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous 19th century existentialist, examined the morality of Western culture, and declared his most famous philosophical point: "God is dead." We as individuals must create our own values. We must create meaning without aid from God, dogma, or popular choice. We must allow ourselves to despair of the death of God so, as Jean-Paul Sartre suggested, we experience how "life begins on the other side of despair." As much as it may seem like Nietzsche's thought was original, it's really a philosophy as old as time. Human beings seeking our own gods, our sinful nature pulling us into the imaginary and shadowy world where God doesn't exist, but such a quest will lead us not just away from the one true God, but into the waiting arms of the ultimate anti-god. None of us here today would make a stand that "God is dead," but have you ever encountered the "god" called "Death?" The "god" who lies in wait behind every attack from the Evil One. The "god" who has infiltrated every facet of our lives? Perhaps, it's not that God is dead, but that Death is "god"?

The prophet Isaiah saw his own family and loved ones be caught up in such a false religion. He witnessed his nation turn to anything and everything besides the Lord. Yet, no matter what "god" they looked to, all the fake deities led to death, spiritually and physically. Day after day, Isaiah confronted his people, through tears, deep emotions, and vigor, he begged them to turn back to the Lord, to stop trusting in the sin-infected things of this world that can only lead to death, and instead to cling to the life that only God can create. He warned over and over, "if you do not worship and trust in the Lord, and him alone, you will experience death on a scale not even a lifetime of grieving could process." Death in the form of families separated, homes burned, children lost, life as you knew it, never to return. Without the Lord, death will infiltrate every aspect of life. Without God, all our created meanings for life end with death and despair.

I know this is heavy stuff, but if we are to fully experience the joy of the death of death, we must recognize how deep death's roots are. We may not be facing exile and being refugees like the Israelites in Isaiah's time, but death is an unwelcome guest in every memory, in every moment. I've heard it said like this: "We sense the hot breath of death in the flare-up of a pain that was not there in times past. Perhaps, we feel death's cold hand in a relationship that once burned with love and now has turned to icy indifference. Perhaps we hear death's laugh at the injustices of life. "Eat healthy, exercise hard, die anyway." As we seize the day, these encounters retreat into the background. Death will come someday, but not today, not now."

When a child is born, there is so much joy and excitement, and yet death is there in the labor and delivery room. An ending of a chapter of life, an ending of autonomy over your life as your child rightfully takes priority. When that child graduates from high school, while you feel a sense of pride for what your child has accomplished, yet it's a death of your former role as primary caregiver. For that child, it's the death of freedom from much responsibility, into adulthood where responsibility affects everything.

Think of how our culture tries to mask death's presence. The endless aisles of anti-aging products, designed to take away wrinkles and the smallest blemishes of death, but we'd be delusional to think that some powder and cream can make death but a dream.

Think of how we try to process past abuse and trauma, sexual, physical or emotional, and we still see how that death of innocence affects our perspective on life. We see how every family gathering has the death of departure. We walk through life with death as a constant companion. It could come knocking at any time. It could burst through in the form of COVID or cancer. It could run next to you as you mourn that loved one in a casket, in an urn, paralyzing you, placing the glasses of separation before your eyes.

We walk through the valley of the shadow of death, wearing that “**shroud that enfolds all peoples,**” **the sheet that covers all nations.**” Death doesn't play favorites. All of humanity is its target. All humanity, despite our best redressing efforts, is forced to wear mourning clothes as our never-changing attire.

Of course, the devil can't get enough. As he strategized his temptation for Adam and Eve, he knew what the result would be if he could lead them to choose death over life. Death of perfection, death of a perfectly close relationship with God, death of everlasting joy, death of hope. Death, Satan hoped, would become “god” for the crown of creation. He wanted to rip that crown away, and drive us into a living grave, where all we could focus on was our very demise. He would love nothing more than for you and me to become friends with death. In other words, he longs for us to lose ourselves in grief and fear. To live a melancholy existence where we can't stop looking back and wishing we could go back into those moments where we truly felt alive. He wants us to willingly take up those chains of death that once bound us. He wants us to forget our baptism, and be enslaved to him again.

But death, the universal swallower of life, has a final chapter too.

The saints of old, who experienced death all day long just like you and me, want to tell you the story of death's death to the saints of today, you and me. They want to welcome you into a banquet free from the death of departure. But before you and I ascend that marvelous mountain, we must climb into the pit of grief with Jesus.

Jesus couldn't stand the sight of death. As Mary breaks down in front of him, Jesus “**was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.**” The Greek here gives an even deeper glimpse: He was filled with grieving anger and he shook because of it. He was livid to the point of tears with how much death had ruined his people. How much death had destroyed! How much pain death had inflicted! He couldn't stand it. He had to do something about it.

He walks to the tomb, death not willing to go down without a fight. The stone pushed back, the odor of decomposition filling his airspace, but death couldn't disorient him. He lifts his voice to his Father, he remembers his dear friend, Lazarus, he calls him out by name, and there he is!

Walking, alive! The mere sounds of Jesus' words terrified death. It retreated, defeated. Jesus wiped away all the tears that day, but it was merely a precursor to what was to come.

The Easter Banquet would commence. That glorious day when Jesus walked through the throes of death and the universal swallower of life was itself swallowed up! Jesus **"has swallowed up death forever!"** The One who waited, suffered and died in solidarity with those who wait, his saints, now gets his day to dance. And he extends his hand for you to join him! **"On this mountain of Lord almighty,"** the God of angel armies, a place high above the effects of death, a feast has begun. Vintage, priceless wine is poured to the brim, platters are full for a guest list that was written down before time began. A guest list that has your name written in it. As you look at this gathering, tears well up as you look down the mountain and think about everything you went through before being here. Then, the master of ceremonies, Jesus, turns your face toward his, and **"wipes every last tear from your eyes."**

No longer does grief distort your view, but now the family you've always longed for surrounds you. That Christian friend who carried you through heartache, that child you longed to see again, that husband, that wife, now in a place with you where goodbyes don't exist. Your mom and dad giving you the tightest hug with your grandparents following close behind. You look at Jesus and his smile evaporates any thought of death. You raise your glass at the banquet table, and you melt as you realize that this gathering will always be. That Jesus will always be right there. Your hair stands up on the back of your neck, as you hear the collective voice of millions sing in beautiful and powerful tones, **"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."**

This is the story the saints of old want you to hear every single day. The God we waited for has come. The God who promised to end death's reign is here. Disgrace has been swallowed up by grace. The Lord has devoured that dish of death, and now invites you to enter into his joy both now and forever as kings who reign with him. When that whisper of doubt creeps in and asks you, "Can it really all be true?" You know it is. Why? **"Because the LORD has spoken."** The Lord of all power, authority, and compassion has said so. His Word rings true. The death of death has come! The death of death is final! The death of death has brought you life!

This is the hope for you, his saints, and it's not a tasteless hope. You get a foretaste when you take Jesus' body and blood into your hands. In that moment, you get a glimpse into what the eternal Lord's Feast will be like. As you eat the bread, drink the wine, Jesus invites you to look around at the Christians beside you, this family who will celebrate with you forever! You get a sneak peek into what living in the presence of God will be like!

It is in these small sights, smells, and sounds that we press on as we climb toward the mountaintop of the Lord. Dear saints, death is all around us, but its defeat is final. You and I will continue to experience every form of death until we see its faceless form personally. But have no fear. For even in those final moments, death is a mere doorkeeper to the celebration Jesus has been preparing for you since before time knew it existed.

As our sinful nature shrieks as its death approaches, remember who you really are. Remember the Lord has spoken, and this is what he's said, "**I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**" The death of death. Do you believe this? By faith, you do and the saints in heaven are rejoicing because of it. Amen.