



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Final Things

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SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ JULY 3, 2022

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The New Testament began with one letter. Paul traveled widely, talking about Jesus, moving from city to city, leaving behind small congregations of new believers. The New Testament began with just one letter, written by Paul to the Christians in Thessalonica, in Greece. I'm sure Paul did not know he was writing the New Testament; he wrote to remind these dear people what God has done for them, to assure them of what they should hold onto with courage and hope. In that letter, the first book of the New Testament, Paul talks to the young church about dying, about what death is and how they should think about it.

**B**rothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ... And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup>Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 17b-18 (NIV)

What is death like? Like sleeping, like falling asleep, writes Paul.

### **Like Falling Asleep**

Let's go back to a famous day: December 7, 1941. What happened that day? Nearly all of you remember that on that day Pearl Harbor was attacked, marking the entrance of our country into World War II. But there is never just one thing that happens on any day. God is

at work in many places and people. The attack on Pearl Harbor happened in the morning—that is, morning in Hawaii. But morning in Hawaii is afternoon on the East Coast of the United States where we live. So here is something else that happened on Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, hours before bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. That morning, the midshipmen of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland gathered for their required chapel service. There was a guest preacher, Peter Marshall, who would later become chaplain of the Senate.

Peter Marshall was an acclaimed preacher. He wrote his sermons carefully, word for word, and spoke them with compelling clarity. But that December morning he was uneasy. His prepared message was not the right message for the moment, for these young men, he thought. He felt urgently that he should speak a different word to them. He spoke to those young men, full of resilient and vigorous health, about dying. It became one of his most remembered sermons. In 1955 when Hollywood made a movie about his life, the sermon was included. In it, he told this story:

In a house of which I know, a little boy, the only son, was ill of an incurable disease. Month after month the mother had tenderly read to him, nursed him, and played with him; hoping to keep him from realizing the dreadful finality of the doctor's diagnosis. But as the weeks went by and he grew no better, the little fellow gradually began to understand the meaning of the term "death"—and he too knew that soon he was to die.

One day, he posed the question to his mother. "Mother, what is it like to die? Mother, does it hurt?"

Quickly, tears sprang to her eyes and she fled into the kitchen, supposedly to tend to something on the stove. She knew it was a question with deep significance. She knew it must be answered. She leaned for an instant against the kitchen door and breathed a hurried prayer that the Lord would not let her break down in front of the boy; that he would tell her what to say.

And the Lord did tell her.

Immediately, she knew how to explain it to him. “Kenneth,” she said, as she returned to his room, “you remember how, when you were a little boy you would play so hard all day that when night came you were too tired even to undress and would tumble into your parents’ bed and fall asleep. In the morning, much to your surprise, you would wake up and find yourself in your own room in your own bed. You were there because someone had loved you and taken care of you. Your daddy had come with big strong arms and carried you to your own room. Kenneth, death is like that. We just wake up one morning to find ourselves in the other room; our own room where we belong, because the Lord Jesus has loved us.”

The lad’s shining, trusting face, looking up into hers, told her that there would be no more fear; only love and trust in his little heart as he went to meet the Father in Heaven. He never questioned again, and several weeks later, he fell asleep just as she had said. That is what death is like.

*A Man Called Peter, 1955, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox*

As Peter Marshall and his wife Catherine drove home that afternoon, the music program on the car radio was interrupted. The announcer’s voice was grave: “Ladies and Gentlemen: Stand by for an important announcement. This morning the United States Naval base at Pearl Harbor was bombed.” The young men who heard those words that morning suddenly faced a different and daunting future. In the following months, letters arrived, written from distant places, thanking him for that message.

### **Like a Departure**

In his first letter to one of his churches, Paul told the young congregation that dying could be thought of as falling asleep. Fifteen years later, Paul wrote his last letter, not to a church but to a person he loved deeply. He had mentored Timothy for many years. Timothy was like a son. In this letter Paul isn’t speaking of death as a theological matter but as a truly personal one, as an approaching reality. He is in prison and he is near the end of his life. His words:

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.” 2 Timothy 4:6 (KJV)

This time, Paul doesn’t describe death as falling asleep but as a departure. For him, death is not obliteration or elimination or annihilation or nothingness or a cold void, or even an ending. It’s a departure. The Greek word for departure was used when a ship pulled up anchor and set sail for a new port. It was used when an army broke camp and marched out, leaving one place to go to another. Do you see? This, for the Christian, is what death is—it’s setting sail, it’s breaking camp, it’s departing this life so we can go home. The anchor is weighed and we set sail carried into God’s presence.

In 1999, 23 years ago, my mother was out walking on a quiet country lane in North Carolina. She had a heart attack. She fell to the ground and was unable to do anything to help herself. She lay there for an hour before my father found her. I told her later that if she had died on the side of a road, all alone, I would never have recovered. Immediately she said to me, “That was the sweetest hour of my life.” She said she knew exactly what had happened. The symptoms were classic. She knew this was probably the day she was going to die. She said she could not describe the peace that she felt.

When my father found her, he didn’t feel peace. I remember his voice on the answering machine when he called. When the ambulance arrived, her heart stopped and the EMTs used a defibrillator. It wasn’t peaceful for them. At the emergency room, there wasn’t peace. When she was transported to a helicopter to be airlifted, no one would have described a scene of peace. When she arrived at a medical center and was hurried into surgery, it wasn’t a scene of peace. Yet for her, alone in that hour, there was peace. The Lord ministers spirit to spirit. From the outside looking on, we do not know what is being experienced.

We who love the Lord live in the in-between place. We are firmly in this world where God has placed us. We love the beauties and comforts of this world. We love our families and our friends. Yet we

know the longing for another world. We are witnesses to the darkness, the streams of suffering and injustice that seem unstoppable. And we do not forget the promises of God. Yet we know the longing for another world.

In the Old Testament, many centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

On this mountain [the LORD] 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 the disgrace of his people  
from all the earth.  
The LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 25:7-8

Centuries later, the disciple John wrote in Revelation 21 the vision God gave to him:

**21** Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,”... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” ...

A thousand years before Jesus came, the psalmist wrote:

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you,  
my body longs for you,  
in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1

And in Revelation 22, John wrote:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...

Revelation 22:1

## **Homesick for Heaven**

We are homesick for heaven. Randy Alcorn described this:

Nothing is more often misdiagnosed than our homesickness for Heaven. We think that what we want is sex, drugs, alcohol, a new job, a raise, a doctorate, a spouse, a large-screen television, a new car, a cabin in the woods, a condo in Hawaii. What we really want is the person we were made for, Jesus, and the place we were made for, Heaven. Nothing less can satisfy us.

Every human being is made in the image of God and there is created in us a longing for ultimate things. But most in our culture have lost sight of their North Star; they have no greater goal, no ultimate good, no aim to give them focus. The young man recently charged with attempting to assassinate Judge Kavanaugh gave as his reason that he was “thinking about how to give his life a purpose.” (CNN)

To think beyond this life, to remember the promises of Jesus who said, “He who believes in me will never die but have eternal life,” is not to detach from the concerns and responsibilities of this life. C. S. Lewis said:

If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next ... Aim for Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in.”

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

The way we conceive the future will shape our present. It tones our thoughts and choices. If our sense of the future is weak, we will live without the vigor of a purpose-filled life. There is a crisis in mental health today, sadly, especially in the young, because they have been told the future is not good. But Christian faith has a focused, strong sense of the future. God holds it. God has it. We are not alone.

Secular humanists say, “There’s just us.” They mean there is no higher power, no creator, no ultimate arbiter of good and evil. So they say, “There’s only us to decide what is right and wrong.”

But we are gathered to worship today to say that it isn’t just us. The Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth holds the future, holds my future and your future. And it’s good. The Bible says, “Set your hearts on things above...” (Colossians 3:1)

Do you remember the last words of Jesus on the cross? His words “It is finished” were the next-to-last words. His work was finished. He had accomplished the purpose for which he came. His last words were not “it is finished” but “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” It was Jesus’ prayer of commitment and surrender.

I visited a couple I’ve known for many years. The husband was nearing the end of his days. A medical professional stepped in to ask his consent for hospice care, speaking in paragraphs with some legal and medical language. No response. The man’s wife leaned close and said very clearly, “Honey, when Jesus calls your name, are you ready to go?” He gave a firm nod, “Yes.” Paul said, “I am ready...” Jesus said, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

At a memorial service I heard the pastor say these words: “We are not people in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We are people in the land of the dying going to the land of the living.”

In his message on December 7, 1941 to the young men at the Naval Academy, Peter Marshall said:

If the Bible is true, and Christ has not deceived us, there awaits beyond the curtain of life that will never end, a life of reunion with loved ones, who, like ourselves, have trusted in the very presence of God. There shall be no more pain; no more sorrow; nor tears; nor parting; nor death—any more. Age shall not weary, nor the years condemn. **We shall enter into that for which we were created. It shall be the journey’s end for the heart and all its hopes. We have His promise for that.**

I ask you, Friends: “Is the Bible true?” Oh yes! Has Christ deceived us? No! “We shall enter into that for which we were created. It shall be the journey’s end for the heart and all its hopes. We have His promise for that.”

Paul wrote, “For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”  
Romans 14:8 (NKJV)

I am the Lord’s and so are you. When you know that, when you commit yourself to stand on that fact, you face the future very differently than “those who have no hope,” as Paul said. I am the Lord’s and so are you. ■

