

How to Ensure that You will Never Die

Rich Nathan
April 20 & 21, 2019
Easter
John 11

Happy Easter! Easter is supposed to be a happy and joyful holiday. But the good news of Easter can only be experienced as good news if it's preceded by, if it's undergirded by, a thorough understanding and exploration of bad news, especially the bad news of death.

Let me explain what I mean. Almost all of us have seen this famous photo of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square on VJ Day:

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Photo of sailor kissing

The extraordinary celebration that broke out in Times Square only made sense in light of the horrific four year war that America fought against Japan and Germany. Even the celebration that took place in Cleveland a few years ago when the Cavaliers won the NBA championship:

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Cavs parade photo

That celebration could only be appreciated if you first appreciated the fact that Cleveland had not won a championship in any sport in over a half a century.

Twitter exploded last weekend with the news that Tiger Woods won the Masters

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Tiger at Masters

after an 11 year drought for the majors and a 14 year drought at the Masters. You couldn't understand the celebration unless you set it against his marriage failure, the scandals, all the back surgeries, and his pain pill addiction.

A child born after years of infertility or multiple miscarriages is going to be celebrated in a unique and special way.

The good news of Easter can only be properly appreciated if we set it against the bad news of death. The Western world, and especially America, is really schizophrenic about death. We are in two minds when it comes to discussing death.

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The American way of death

On the one hand, death is everywhere in our entertainment. We live in a

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A death-saturated society

Video games like “Call of Duty”,

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Pic of Call of Duty

“Grand Theft Auto”

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Pic of Grand Theft Auto

or “Fortnite”

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Pic of Fortnite

that elementary school kids are playing are known for their graphic violence. TV cop shows have mind-blowing body counts.

It’s not just video games, TV and movies that saturate our culture with death. Over the last 20 or so years, there’s been an explosion of online autobiographical blogs in which the writer describes in intimate detail their own dying – almost always of cancer. These are accompanied by photos of the person’s withering body. On the one hand, we live in a death saturated society. On the other, we live in:

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A death-avoidant society

We have virtual death all around us on video games and TV shows and social media. But actual death, death of loved ones, death of friends, our own deaths, we don’t want to talk about that. And we don’t want to get too close to that.

For the first time in history, beginning in the 20th century, death and dying is left to the professionals. Funerals, up until the 20th century, used to be organized by family and neighbors and held at someone's home. People were often buried on family property. But as cities grew, cemeteries were set up. Funeral homes were established to help families with the logistics presented by death.

For many of us these days, death takes place in an institution like a hospital or hospice. Many of us have an arm's length relationship with death. Like the old Woody Allen line,

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"I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

And yet, there is something inside of most human beings that resists the thought of our own non-existence. There's something inside of most human beings that wants to believe that we will somehow continue on. That maybe death is not the end.

We have all these different feelings about death in America today. We are entertained by it. We write endlessly about it. We distance ourselves from it. But what if there was a way to ensure that you would never die? That's what I want to talk about this Easter in a message that I've titled "How to Ensure that You will Never Die". Let's pray.

Let me quickly mention that next week we're starting a month long series here called "Overcomers"

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Overcomers series graphic

We're going to do something really different for us here at Vineyard Columbus. We're going to be interviewing fascinating people who overcame an extraordinary obstacle in their lives. So, for example, next week we're going to be interviewing a man who spent 15 years in prison for aggravated drug trafficking. He came to Christ in prison and ended up discipling hundreds of fellow prisoners over the course of his 15 year prison sentence. Then I'm going to interview a man whose grandmother was brutally murdered by four teenagers. One of the teens, who was 15-years old at the time, was sentenced to death for the murder. And because of a remarkable encounter with Jesus and Jesus' call to forgive, this grandson of the murder victim worked tirelessly to see the teenaged murderer released from death row. It's an extraordinary story. All month, we're going to do interviews with overcomers and have briefer messages. I think you're going to find these stories fascinating and spiritually helpful.

We're going to be looking at John 11 today.

Chapter 11 is all about death and life. It's a pointer to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Let's read John 11:

Slide John 11:1-3

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

Jesus delayed going to Bethany and in the interim Lazarus died. Let's pick up the story:

Slide John 11:17-22

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

There are a number of ways we deal with death.

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How we deal with death

One way we deal with death is that we try to rewrite the past.

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Rewrite the past

That was Martha's method. We read it in verse 21:

Slide John 11:21

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. If he had not gotten in that car or gotten on that motorcycle. If she had not run out in the street. If I had just insisted on him getting a regular check-up. If we had just seen the signs of drug abuse or depression and did something about it, the suicide would never have happened.

The fantasy of the rewritten past is what's behind the Back to the Future movies. You've seen Back to the Future with Michael J. Fox traveling back through time in a DeLoren to the very moment when his father and mother's romance was about to be kindled. And

by interfering with the past, he sets history on an entirely different course so that the present is infinitely better than it otherwise would have been.

What would you like to rewrite about your past? Perhaps you've had trouble with one of your children and you wish you could go back and change the way you parented them. Maybe you have regrets that you worked too many hours, that you were uninvolved or you were too permissive or indulgent or too strict. Maybe you regret quitting school too early. If only I hadn't quit. If only I hadn't fooled around, I wouldn't be stuck in this dead end job. If only I had gone on to college or gotten my degree. Perhaps you regret your first exposure to pornography on the Internet or your first use of drugs or alcohol or cigarettes. If only I hadn't opened the door to that thing. Any of you feel that way? I wish I hadn't ever taken that road or opened that door.

How many times have you said to yourself, "If I had just done this differently, if I had just listened to my parents, if I had just known Christ earlier in my life, if my mom would not have died, if I hadn't given up on my marriage...?"

Lord, if we could just go back in time and do things differently, my loved one would have never died. Have you ever tried to rewrite the past after a loss or a tragedy? Or maybe you're not like Martha at all. Maybe you're one of those hard-headed realists who say, "Hey, I'm too busy living to think about death. I'm absorbed with this present moment." Some people deal with death, not by trying to rewrite the past, but by accepting the present.

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Accept the present

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Denial of death

There are lots of people these days that are too busy living they never think about death. Certainly, they know that they'll die one day, but that day is not yet. They are not concerned with what happens after death. The subject of death is just not very interesting to them.

The German playwright and poet, Bertolt Brecht, wrote these verses of poetry when he was young:

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Do not let them get you!

Life is not very big.

Drink it!

And go on drinking

And when at last you're thinking
You'll want another swig.

Don't let them get your hopes up!
Today is all there is.
Let pious people suffer!
Like all earth has to offer.
There's no life after this.

In contrast to this denial of death, there have been periods of time and individuals who were obsessed with death.

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Obsessed with death

The Victorian era in England was known by its refusal to have any discussion about sex but talked endlessly about death. It's exactly the opposite in the 21st century – now we talk about sex all the time, but we don't want to think about death.

How many of you are watching the Queen Victoria series on PBS? Queen Victoria elaborately mourned the death of her husband, Prince Albert, for 40 years – dressing in black every day and keeping their home exactly as it was on the day he died.

Each morning, servants laid out Albert's clothes, brought hot water for his shaving cup, scoured his chamber pot and changed the bed linens – all for a man who was dead. I'm not in any way suggesting that Victoria's response to her husband's death was psychologically or spiritually healthy. But in much of America today, especially among the wealthy and the well-educated, there is no room to grieve the loss of a loved one, for even a day or a week, much less a year or more.

Middle and upper class folks no longer have funerals. Funerals are too much of a downer. We have Celebration of Life services. A friend of mine recently attended a funeral where a relative of the deceased played the role of emcee and made her way through the crowd, telling people "We're not here today to grieve or to cry. We're here to celebrate this person's life." She walked up and down the aisles and had people call out a word that reminded them of the deceased and people were yelling out, "Golf!" "Smart!" "Hard-working!" "Sports!" Most of the people who spoke focused on funny stories about the deceased. At the end, they went outside and released balloons up in the air as the emcee said, "Now we release his spirit to the sky!"

In contrast to folks who have no time for death or are obsessed with death or deny death, Jesus was honest about death.

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Honest about death

For all the happy face emojis, celebration of life ceremonies we have, the release of balloons and butterflies, we still experience – all of us – this gnawing feeling inside that something is terribly wrong with death.

How did Jesus respond to his friend Lazarus' death? Here's what we read:

Slide John 11:32-35

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

What an incredible Savior. Jesus weeps not just for us in our sadness, but with us in our suffering. He stoops down and says, "Let me share this burden with you. I will help you carry this heavy yoke of grief.

It is OK to weep. Jesus wept. It's ok to have a funeral and not to laugh all the way through it. It is OK to grieve. A person does not have to go around smiling, if you don't feel like smiling.

What is amazing when we read the statement, "Jesus wept" is to recognize that this is not just an expression of the human Jesus, as if the deity that was joined to humanity in the person of Christ was unmoved by the grief all around him. Jesus is, according to the book of John, God incarnate. What Jesus does and says and feels, God does, says and feels.

When Jesus stood by the tomb of Lazarus, I believe that what's called to mind was the billions of graves that God has stood next to, the billions of times God has watched a mother bury her child, or a wife bury her husband, or a man die alone on a battlefield or a child die in a car accident, or killed by a drunken driver or die of a childhood cancer. The weeping at the grave of Lazarus was the expression of the brokenhearted God, who has watched the great enemy, death, attack people who God loves.

How do we deal with death? We often try to rewrite the past or deal with the present. Do you know what Jesus calls us to do? So how do we deal with death? We can:

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- Rewrite the past
- Deal with the present

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Look to the future

Jesus says this in verse 25 to Martha:

Slide John 11:25

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;

Throughout history, people have talked about living forever. What are the classic ways to live forever?

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Classic ways to live forever

Ancient Jews believed that the way you lived forever was through your children. That’s why it was such a horrible thing for ancient Jews to not have children – to be childless was to be cut off from living forever. The newspaper recently published an obituary that communicated this idea of living forever through your children.

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Dear Mama, You had my back in everything I did in life. Dear Papa, You modeled what it means to work with passion and dedication. I owe you everything. You are in me, and you live on in me.

Mama, Papa, you live on through me!

Some people say that you will live forever in our memories. Is it the case that people live forever in other people’s memories? First of all, no one knows all there is to be known about another individual – even your parents. You know something about them, the parts of their lives that you saw growing up. But you know them only in part – what they showed you, so your memory of any other person is only a glimpse.

But further, how long does memory persist? For example, how much do you know about your great-grandparents? How many of you can say that you know much if anything about your great-great-grandparents? Even famous people live on only in a Wikipedia article or in a biography. But that’s not the same thing as someone personally living forever.

Some cultures have taught that a way you live forever is by being reincarnated. Recent surveys found that 25% of all Americans, including a quarter of all Christians, believed in reincarnation. But this is really more of a Hindu doctrine than a Christian doctrine. Reincarnation is actually quite a cruel concept. It teaches that our present circumstances now are the result of choices that were made in past lives. So, if you were born poor or with a disability or are an abuse victim, that's just a result of bad choices you made in a past life. Your present bad situation is your fault.

Some folks say that you live forever by being dissolved into the universe. Your body dissolves in the ground and you come back as part of the brilliant yellow of a daffodil or the new grass that a cow eats. What a happy thought!

Jesus has a way to live forever.

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Jesus' way to live forever

Here's what we read:

Slide John 11:23-26

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

What does Jesus mean when he says, "Whoever lives by believing in me will never die"? Obviously, Jesus wasn't thinking about physical life. It's simply not true that the one who believes in Jesus will never physically die. Christians experience physical death as much as anyone else.

You know, the Bible gives us two different Greek words for our English word "life." The first Greek word is "bios"

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Bios = biological life

Bios is biological life; material life. But there is a second Greek word that John repeatedly uses; it is the Greek word "zoe"

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Zoe = spiritual life

Zoe is the word that was used by Jesus in John 11:25:

Slide John 11:25

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;

Spiritual life can only be found in Christ.

Now it is the neglect of zoe – spiritual life – that makes us so unhappy. We constantly think that if we have more bios – more material life – then we will be satisfied. The message that we constantly hear from every marketer and every advertiser is essentially you are just material. Every advertisement is about bios, about your body, feeding your body, pampering your body; adorning your body; comforting your body; relaxing your body; improving your body; exercising your body; clothing your body; strengthening, satisfying your body. It is bios, bios, bios.

The message that we get from marketers is so long as you cater to bios, your material life, your biological life, you will be happy. Yet we find wealthy people taking antidepressants and Hollywood stars checking in and out of rehab. What’s going on?

The Bible tells us that we need more than bios. We need zoe – spiritual life. Our children need zoe – spiritual life. Jesus says this to us over and over again.

Children need more than new sneakers to be satisfied. The poor need more than food and the wealthy need more than new cars and bigger houses.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford English professor, wrote about zoe in his wonderful book, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis said,

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God created us. He invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gas and it doesn’t run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. God himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That’s why it’s just no good asking God to make you happy in your own way without having to bother about Christianity. God can’t give you happiness and peace apart from himself. There’s no such thing.

The problem is people try to pour into their engine something other than God. That’s why the engine conks out.

Let me ask you a question, what are you pouring into your engine to fuel your own life? Is it zoe? Life from God? Or is it just more Bios? More material? More stuff? And

parents, what are you pouring into your children's engines that will cause them to enjoy the good life that Jesus came to bring over the long term? Are you pouring in zoe, spiritual life? Or just more bios, more material stuff?

So, Jesus says to us that zoe – spiritual life, the life of heaven, the life that comes by being attached to Jesus through faith, is not interrupted even by death. And you can start experiencing that life right now! Then he asks the question, “Do you believe this?” Jesus is asking us, “Do you believe that I have power even over death? Do you believe that if you're attached to me through faith, you will continue on? Not in the yellow of a daffodil or in a raindrop or in someone's memory, but you, the person who is uniquely you, will live forever.”

You might ask, “Why should I believe this? Why should I listen to Jesus and what he has to say about experiencing spiritual life right now and continuing to live even after I die?” We should listen to Jesus for one simple reason. It's the reason why we celebrate Easter. It's because if Jesus rose from the dead, he has unique authority to speak about life and death. No one in history has come back to life and continues to live forever. Other people, like philosophers, scientists, religious teachers, science fiction writers, can speculate about what happens after we die. But only Jesus can say, “When I speak about living forever, I am not speculating. I'm telling you what is absolutely true because I've been to the other side and I've come back! I died and I rose from the dead. You need to listen to me and only to me when it comes to eternal life.”

Let me close with this thought. You might ask, “But, Pastor Rich, how do we know that Jesus really rose from the dead?”

Let me suggest two reasons. The great scholar N.T. Wright says you've got to combine these two reasons together. First, Jesus' tomb was empty. When people went to the tomb of Jesus, his body wasn't there. Second, dozens of people saw and met the resurrected Christ. If his tomb was empty, but no one encountered the risen Christ, we'd conclude that his body was stolen. Someone dug it up and reburied it somewhere. On the other hand, if people encountered the risen Christ but his tomb wasn't empty, we'd say it was likely a hallucination. Lots of people had a break from reality. They do it now, they may have done it then.

But these two things together: the fact that his tomb was empty AND people encountered him points to one indisputable fact. Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Because he was resurrected from the dead he has unique authority to speak to you and me about how we can live forever.

Jesus says, “Whoever believes in me will never die.” The question that he asks Martha is the question that I'm going to close with today. “Do you believe this?” Do you believe that if you trust in Jesus you can have spiritual life right now and even after you

die you will continue to live forever? Will you trust Jesus with your life and with your death? Let's pray.

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