

If You Knew the Future How Would You Live? • Luke 18:31-34

Suppose I could tell you exactly when and how you are going to die? The information goes like this. Next Tuesday you will be driving down the interstate highway when a truck on the other side of the median will go out of control because the driver will suffer a heart attack. The truck will cross the median in front of you. You will hit your brakes in time to stop but the tractor-trailer behind you will not be able to slow down fast enough because it contains a very heavy load. The large truck will hit you from behind, crush your car and you will die from the combination of impact and fire.

If you knew my prediction to be true, what would you do? How would you live between now and next Tuesday? Would you be filled with fear? Sadness? Excitement? Or, would you make absolutely sure that

you were as far away from an interstate highway as you could possibly get by next Tuesday and hide in a bombproof basement for the entire day? In other words, would you avoid your predicted death or go straight ahead toward it?

Let me tell you what Jesus said and did:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."

The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

Jesus clearly knew what was coming. He knew he was destined to die. He knew when, where and how it was going to happen. This short speech from Jesus is only one of many times he predicted his death.

This raises some interesting questions about what Jesus knew and didn't know. There were

other times in Jesus' life when he said that he didn't know something about the future. For example, when asked when he would come back to earth and when other predicted events would occur at the end of our era, Jesus said he didn't know the exact day or hour, only God the Father had that information.

Jesus wasn't saying that the future was not knowable. Obviously, God knows the future or Jesus couldn't have predicted his death and resurrection. The Bible is full of prophecies about the

future, most of which have been fulfilled and others of which will be fulfilled. However, when the eternal Son of God became human he took on certain human limitations. Voluntarily he set aside the independent use of his divine powers. He chose to allow God the Father to limit his knowledge and other powers

while he was present on earth.

A few years ago CBS aired a miniseries on the life of Jesus. It drew an unusually large viewing audience and very high ratings. Generally it was well reviewed, but some criticized its attempt to properly portray both the deity and humanity of Jesus. The truth is that Jesus was fully God and fully human at the same time. We have to be careful that we don't get so caught up in the supernatural Jesus that we forget that he was and is as human as the rest of us.

It was because Jesus was supernatural that he knew about his death. But he had to deal with that knowledge as a man and that could not have been easy for him to do. I have wondered what it would be like to know when and how I am going to die. What difference would it make to me if it were next week by fire or when I'm 107 in my sleep? Would I live recklessly and godlessly if I knew I was immortal until more than 100? Would I change my life if I knew it was going to end in a few days?

Have you ever thought about such things? Because we all know that we will die. Every one of us has a date with death that cannot be eliminated from our biographies. Perhaps least important is

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when and how we will die and most important is that death is our eventual destiny. We, like Jesus, are going to die.

Jesus faced a difficult death. And he faced it with courage. He knew that when the time came he would be out of control: *“He will be handed over to the Gentiles.”* This meant that the Romans would arrest and execute him. Most of us hate to lose control of our lives and bodies. It is humiliating to have someone else make our decisions for us. It was especially humiliating for the Jewish Jesus to be controlled by the Gentile Romans.

He knew there would be psychological and spiritual abuse: *“They will mock him, insult him, spit on him.”* It wasn’t just death; it was the way he was going to die. Many of us have said, “It isn’t death that scares me but the way I might die.” We all want to die of old age in our sleep. None of us wants to die during a horrible and humiliating attack from a criminal. Yet, Jesus knew in advance that he would be publicly assaulted, humiliated, insulted. His was truly cruel and unusual punishment. He knew that he would be flogged and crucified to death. It was as bad as it could be. Jesus knew how hard it would be, and yet he faced it all with courage.

There are different types of courage. There is courage in crisis. It is wonderful when a soldier acts courageously to save others in battle. It is bold and generous when someone dives into dangerous waters to save a child from drowning. It is the courage of an instant and heroic decision to sacrifice oneself to save someone else.

That is different from the type of courage or heroism that is decided in advance. This is the person who knows what is coming and could walk away but does not. It is the deliberate decision that is carefully thought through ahead of time knowing full well what the consequences will be. This is the person who donates a kidney, volunteers to work in a war zone or offers to give away an entire fortune.

Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. He knew how horrible it was going to be. He could have run away. He could have changed his mind. Instead, he went straight to Jerusalem. He faced difficulty with enormous courage.

As Christians, we too can be courageous. We can face hard decisions, criticism, danger, oppo-

sition and suffering. Not because we are smarter or stronger or better than others, but because we have the same resources from God that Jesus had. God can and will be there for us. He is the center of our being and the source of our strength. When God is Number One in our lives he gives us the courage to face whatever the difficulties of life may be.

One of the reasons for Jesus’ heroic courage is that he faced death with hope. Jesus predicted that on *“the third day he will rise again.”* Jesus knew that the ultimate victory would not belong to the cross or to the tomb but to God. Jesus was headed for resurrection. He would be dead for three days and then come back to life again in his resurrection body.

Jesus faced death knowing two amazing truths. He knew the terrible power of sin and he knew the awesome power of God. Sin is a terrible thing. Sin is like a massive computer virus that destroys more than files and hard drives. It destroys lives. It starts out seeming so innocent but it grows and permeates and consumes. Do you remember the I LOVE YOU virus that did billions of dollars in worldwide computer damage? It started out so innocently. Its message seemed good and inviting and positive. But, once it gained access, it proved to be more about loss than about love, more about death than about life. So it is with sin that seems like fun and good but soon is out of control.

Jesus knew what sin could do. And he knew that when he was crucified all its terrible power would be downloaded on him. He knew it would be awful. He knew he would die.

But he also knew that the power of God is awesome. God can restore what has been destroyed. He can replace life where there has been death. He could bring Jesus back to life again. Jesus faced difficulty with courage and death with hope because he knew that God would raise him from the dead.

And the same goes for Christians. We are promised by God that we too will be raised from the dead and enjoy eternal life with Jesus. One of the distinctive marks of Christians in the early centuries is that their deaths were different from other deaths seen in and around the Roman Empire. Even when they were martyred for their Christian

faith (and some of them died horrible deaths!), they died with such courage and hope that the executioners would convert to Christianity.

I have seen it for myself. One of the most amazing lessons I have learned as a pastor is about the courageous and hopeful way that Christians die. They speak in the future tense. They are not frightened by death. They have a peace that passes my understanding.

While it is true that we do not know when or how we will die, it is equally true that as Christians we know for certain that we will live again, that we will share the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This raises a very practical concern for many of us. When we hear talk about dying like Christians we wonder if it is really true. We say that inside we are cowards at heart and have minimal tolerance for pain and suffering. We doubt that we can face death well and therefore dread the prospect of dying. However, God gives us grace when we need it. If we are not dying today we don't need dying grace today. It is not your strength or mine; it is God's strength given to us when we need it. I doubt that Jesus himself had the strength for crucifixion and death the day he spoke the words we are talking about here. However, he did have the confidence that God would be there for him when the time finally came. And we, too, can have the confidence and faith that God will be there for us to supernaturally face every difficulty and pain. God will be there for us when we are facing death itself.

Jesus knew what was coming. He faced difficulty with courage and he faced death with hope. But, Jesus' followers couldn't understand: *"The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about."*

Jesus' disciples were in complete denial. This was the seventh time Jesus had told them what was going to happen and they still didn't get it. They had already made up their minds what they wanted to happen and that blocked their ability to

hear what was really going to happen. They were convinced that Jesus was going to become a military leader to free the nation of Israel from Roman rule and restore the glories of an earlier kingdom. They knew it!

We all have our encounters with denial. Recently I talked to an employee whose co-worker wasn't doing a very good job. He was twice called into the boss's office and warned that he was about to be fired. The third time into the boss's office he lost his job. In an hour-long conversation with a co-worker he complained that he had no idea this was coming and was never warned by the boss. This certainly didn't fit the facts, but he only heard what he wanted to hear.

The same happens with family deaths. Grandpa has a terminal illness. When he tells the family that he is going to die, several interrupt to say, "Oh no, Grandpa, you're not going to die. You're going to get better. We're going fishing this summer and hunting together this fall and snowmobiling next winter. You are going to be just fine." It is denial—believing what we want

to believe and hearing what we want to hear.

Jesus' followers didn't understand. They didn't really listen. And they certainly didn't believe that he knew what he was talking about. It seems strange, but we need to be careful that we don't behave in exactly the same way. People frequently do not hear what God says. As Christians

we imagine that God is telling us what we want to hear and we ignore the truth of God from the lips of Jesus.

Our family used to regularly watch a television series called Early Edition. It was the story of a man living in Chicago who regularly received the Chicago Sun Times a day early. He knew what was going to happen before it actually happened. Usually it was something bad and usually he intervened to change the future.

Jesus gave an "early edition" to his followers. He said:

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets

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about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.”

Except Jesus did not intervene to change what he knew was going to happen. Instead, he faced difficulty with courage and death with hope.

What for them was prophecy is history for us. But, there are predictions for us. One of them is in John 16:33, where Jesus said, *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

Yes, Jesus predicted that our world and our lives would contain trouble and suffering. But as Christians we can face these difficulties with courage and hope. We can have absolute faith and confidence that no matter what we experience God will be there for us. He will give us peace and grace and eternal life. So, even though we do not

know the details of the future, we do know God and we have confidence that we will live again.

Our Father, thank you that you are our God. You care about us, you know the future and you will be there for us. You will meet our every need and you will give to us all the strength we need when we need it. And you will provide help and hope and courage—all through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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