

My life story (by David Foster)

My early years: Wrestling with Grief

I was born in Zambia along with my 6 brothers and sisters. In fact my father and his five siblings were also born there. My father died of cancer in Northern Rhodesia when I was eight years old and my youngest brother was not yet born. Two years earlier I had accepted Jesus as my Lord and Saviour.

The trauma of losing my father was lessened somewhat because my mother knew God so intimately. She was deeply aware of his comfort, reassuring us that God has promised to be father of the fatherless. Most people assumed that as a widow and mother of seven small children she would no doubt return to Canada, but God led her to continue serving as a missionary in Africa.

Having a godly mother who trusted in the Lord was a great blessing to us children, nevertheless, each of us faced deep inner struggles, after-shocks, from losing our father. About a year after Dad died another man whom we admired deeply died in a car accident.

Ten years later as a teenager I experienced deep inner struggles. I wondered, "What if I should die in some car accident or be stricken with an incurable disease?" After wrestling with such thoughts for about a year I came to the conclusion that I would put my trust in God to work out whatever he knew is best for my life, even if God would let me die before getting married.

Those struggles led me to a deeper realization of what it means to acknowledge Christ as Lord of my life. Five years later, at the age of twenty two, God gave me Cathy to be my best friend and life partner. However, it was a bitter-sweet joy because just two weeks before our wedding, my brother Stanley, who was to have been my best man, was killed in a terrible car accident. He was training to be a missionary pilot at Moody Bible Institute. Again I had to face the sober reality of death. My earlier fear of dying in an untimely car accident never happened to me! This tragedy befell my brother instead! Our family had to learn once again to lean on God as we struggled through yet another deep time of testing.

So far I've shared several heart sore experiences of bereavement but I didn't mention how I lost my mother some twenty years after my wedding, when she was sixty eight years of age. Tragically she slipped on the ice and died the following day from a pulmonary embolism. In a sense, losing an aging parent is not that uncommon. We have to endure the "school of hard knocks", but even so, such experiences do raise thought provoking questions about death.

Many years have passed since I got married, raised three children and now have thirteen grandchildren. Much water has gone under the bridge since the Lord called Cathy and I to a life of sharing the Good News. My aim for the remainder of this message is to summarize the last forty years of my life showing how my earlier painful memories left an indelible impression on who I am.

Solving the dilemma of death

Even for Christians who truly believe in Jesus, finding answers to tough questions about death is not easy. We know this from personal experience and also from the epic story of Job, who lost all six of his children in a freakish storm. Thereafter Job was stricken, himself, with an agonizing disease that almost killed him.

Death causes various kinds of negative feelings, including sorrow, pain and fear. These emotions provoke us to ask troubling questions. As for Job, he experienced mental and emotional turmoil during many deliberations with his so-called friends. In a similar way, the Psalmist explores in Psalm 49 how death poses a quandary, a riddle to be solved. Death is something we all dislike. Everyone fears death whether we're rich or poor. But we cannot escape it. The psalmist explains the human dilemma: no payment is enough to avoid or circumvent the grave and enable us to live on forever. No ransom is sufficient, except the ransom which God alone can pay. The Psalmist, similar to Job, exclaims, "But

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” (Psalm 49:15; Job 19:25-27)

Solomon also grappled with complex questions about death. According to the Bible and the Qur'an Solomon/Sulaiman was specially endowed with divine wisdom. Like the psalmist, he composed riddles and proverbs. One of his more well known sayings highlights how everyone dies, yet we long to live forever.

“There is a season for everything, a time to be born and a time to die. God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, yet even so, people cannot see the whole scope of what God has done from beginning to end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,11, NLT)

Followers of most religions including humanism, dream about how people can attain a peaceful life in the hereafter, but all of this speculation is shrouded in mystery. When Muhammad the prophet revered by Muslims, was asked about the hereafter, he admitted, “I know not what will be done with me or with you.” (Surah 49:6) This contrasts starkly with Jesus Christ, who expressed total confidence about going to paradise. (Luke 43:39-43) and he declared, “this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

In Ecclesiastes chapter 7 Solomon again mentions birth/death coupled with a very perplexing observation, “A good reputation is more valuable than costly perfume and the day you die is better than the day you are born.” (Ecclesiastes 7:1, NLT) This paradox provokes the question, “How on earth is death better than birth?” Notice, Solomon doesn't give a direct answer. He paints a typical funeral scenario involving grief and mourning and says that it is, “Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies—so the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time.” (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4, NLT)

A knowledgeable person will realize that in OT times (as well as many modern cultures) whenever someone touches a bone or a dead body they become ritually unclean. Also we recall how death first came into the world. It came as a direct consequence of man disobeying God in the garden. Can you see how this throws light on why death is so bad from God's perspective? (Numbers 19) This observation fits the pattern of “negative” emotions associated with death, feelings such as sorrow, pain and fear.

Finally, let us look at one more “negative” feeling. Whenever someone is diagnosed with a serious disease such as cancer, HIV or heart disease, he/she naturally takes urgent steps to get treatment. We struggle to stay alive and often pay huge sums to find a cure. Instinctively we resist the threat of death. In fact, it is quite common to read news stories where someone has won or lost the “fight” against cancer or AIDS. However, humans aren't the only ones who deeply dislike death. God does too.

The fight against death

According to Scripture God is deeply hostile against death and regards it as an enemy! We see this in two key OT passages: Ezekiel 18:31-32 says,

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have **no pleasure** in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live. (The expression “have no pleasure” is an understatement, implying that God actually dislikes seeing people perish. Genesis 6:6-7; Lamentations 3:33)

Furthermore, we read in Isaiah 25:7-9,

And he [God] will **swallow up** on this mountain [Zion] the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will **swallow up** death forever; and the Lord GOD will **wipe**

away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

The term “swallow up” is typically used in war-like circumstances where one fights against, indeed, “destroys” the enemy. For example, the Bible declares that God's Messiah “destroyed the last enemy,” which is, death. (1 Corinthians 15:26; cf. “abolished” in 2 Timothy 1:10) In fact, the Bible identifies the place where the epic battle against death is waged: Mt. Zion, namely, Jerusalem. And Jesus confirmed this in Luke 18:31-32. He clearly predicted that he would die in Jerusalem and rise again victoriously three days later. But notice the next verse, “his disciples understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them and they did not grasp what was said.” (Luke 18:31-33)

We seldom appreciate how difficult it was for Christ's disciples to grasp what he repeatedly told them, regarding his suffering and death. Have you noticed how many times the Gospel is described in the NT as a “mystery”? Is it any wonder that they struggled to grasp what Jesus was telling them? It is helpful to try walking a mile in the disciples' shoes as it helps us be more patient with our unsaved friends and neighbors who may find it very difficult to make sense of the “foolish” or “offensive” notion that Jesus had to die as the perfect sacrificial “Lamb of God” in order to save us from death.

Solving the riddle

How can we make clear the Gospel when it is shrouded in mystery? This deeply concerned the apostle Paul as we can see in Colossians 4:2-6 where he asks the church to pray for him specially in this regard;

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the **mystery** of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— 4 that I may **make it clear**, which is how I ought to speak.

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Paul underscored that in order to make the Gospel clear the Colossians must **walk in wisdom toward outsiders**. At the same time believers must be **gracious and season our conversation with salt**.

I cannot think of a better way to illustrate this than by considering Christ's example in John chapter four where he was so gracious and seasoned with salt. In this well-known story Jesus meets a woman at a well who belonged to a marginalized minority culture that was disdained by most Jewish people. Jesus broke the silence by politely asking for a cup of water. She reacted suspiciously but he responded graciously offering her the gift of God. At the same time he intrigued her by talking about special “living water” which he had. Jesus hinted this special water was linked to eternal life which sparked her curiosity. Initially, she wanted this living water, thinking it would save her from coming back to draw water again and again. In due course, she became spiritually hungry, and eventually, she wanted to know more about God as her heavenly Father.

Do you see a similarity between this approach and the wise sayings we looked at earlier? There was something unclear, yet appealing, about the special water Jesus offered – something that resonated deeply. Interestingly, this riddle wasn't instantly resolved. The conversation stretched over a period of time. In fact, Jesus was able to enlighten the Samaritans on these matters over a period of two “extra” days at their invitation. It's not hard to imagine Jesus mentioning the gem of wisdom in Ecclesiastes 3:11 and how it correlates with living water or Isaiah's teaching about drawing water from the wells of salvation. (Isaiah 12)

If solving riddles requires paying careful attention to unfolding a series of clues, then surely we ought

to use this approach. So, let us begin by recapping three wise sayings which we glimpsed earlier, though only briefly. We saw how Job and the Psalmist confidently affirmed God as their **Redeemer**. He pays the ransom and rescues us from the grave. Then we saw a few clues in Isaiah chapter twenty five. One detail Isaiah mentions has to do with the place where death will be destroyed (Mt. Zion/Jerusalem). Second we noted how “swallowing up death” means God will destroy it, meaning that he redeems or saves us from death and the grave.

Next we will consider a third clue at the end of verse nine, the word **salvation** which appears again in chapter forty nine verse six as part of a Messianic prophecy foretelling that God's servant will “bring his **salvation** to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6) This amazing promise of a global rescuer was fulfilled 700 years later with the birth of Christ. He was given the name, Jesus, meaning “God is **salvation**.” Clearly this is a perfect fit which neatly summarizes what God commissioned his Messiah to do.

So it is natural to ask, “How did baby Jesus reflect the meaning of his name, as he grew to manhood? How did he live up to his name, especially in terms of his actions and his personality traits?” These are especially important questions for Muslims because the Qur'an says, Jesus/Isa is the Messiah (Al-Masih). In fact, it says that the name Jesus was revealed to Mary/Maryam by an angelic messenger. (Surah 3:45) One Islamic scholar rightly noted in his book, *Names for Muslim Children*, “The name is the real introduction of a man’s personality and the real representation of a man’s activities.” Furthermore, Muslim scholar, Muhammad I. A. Usman, acknowledged in his book, *Islamic Names*, that the name “Jesus is the equivalent of Yeshua in Hebrew which means 'God is salvation'.” (p. 77, revised edition)

If Jesus' name means, “God is salvation” how exactly did he save?

Jesus healed people who were terminally ill thus saving them physically. He overcame the vice-like grip that death had on those who were buried, like Lazarus. (John 11) Finally, in Jesus' final moments on the cross, he reassured the repentant thief that even though he would die, he would definitely be admitted to paradise. (Luke 43:39-43)

On another occasion, while in the home of a notorious sinner, Jesus said, “*Salvation has come to this home today.*” He declared these words to Zacchaeus, after seeing him publicly show repentance and restitution. Then Christ added, “*For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.*” (Luke 19:9-10) Clearly Jesus knew what God commissioned him to accomplish – to bring salvation to sinners. As it is written, “*you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.*” (Matthew 1:21)

Considering what respected Islamic scholars and the Qur'an say about the name Jesus, you may wonder, “How in the world can so many Muslims suppress the truth and be so blind to who Jesus really is?”

Satan blinds people

We shouldn't be surprised considering that “our gospel ... is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) Scripture also says that when we preach Christ crucified it is “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:23)

With regards to Muslims, we must realize they've been raised from childhood having it drummed into their ears that Jesus never died on the cross. This is reinforced by sayings of Muhammad that teach Jesus/Isa will break all crosses when he returns to earth in the end times. In addition to all of this, if a Muslim dares to believe Jesus is the Son of God he is to be viewed as an apostate who has committed the unpardonable sin.

Jesus unveiled to the Samaritans that Messiah is God's salvation

Earlier I alluded to a well-known story where Jesus offered the gift of eternal life to a non-Jewish woman who came to draw water at the well of Sychar. As a Samaritan she revered Abraham and Moses. Her religion acknowledged that the Messiah would come, but the fact is: Samaritans, like modern Muslims, followed a false monotheistic cult. Yes they did believe there is one Almighty creator. They too believed God sent prophets to teach mankind, including Moses and the Messiah. They too circumcised their boys, nevertheless, their followers were snared in a counterfeit faith and so they were cut off from a true knowledge of God and his salvation. For this reason Jesus firmly said, “You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” (John 4:22)

We could say so much more from John 4 about how Jesus graciously and tactfully shared the truth with the people of Sychar but time is short so we'll close by making a few practical applications.

What does God want me to do?

Do you find yourself in circumstances where you have contact with Muslims? (not unlike how Jesus met the woman of Samaria at a well?) If we're honest, most of us would have to admit that we do because there are so many Muslims in our city – 10%. (Presently Muslims have migrated to many countries and are found in significant numbers, especially in cities in the Western world). Yesterday my brother in law was playing with his grandchildren at the park and he saw three Muslim families.

In such a circumstance, how much effort does it take for us to smile and make a friendly remark to newcomers? Surely we ought to be empathetic, knowing that many of them feel strange and unsure of themselves while struggling to learn a new language and get their bearing in a new culture.

As I go through my daily routine I meet various kinds of people. Sometimes I get into conversation with a cashier when purchasing an item at a store. Some believers view this as an opportunity to offer a tract with a relevant question on the cover such as, “Where are you going to spend eternity?” I'm sure there's a place for this, but in general I prefer to use a subtler, more gentle approach with fewer words. For example, I pray for an opportunity to give the cashier a small slip of paper containing a wise saying and then I say something like this, “Here's a riddle that I think you might like figuring out.”

“There is a season for everything, a time to be born and a time to die. God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, yet even so, people cannot see the whole scope of what God has done from beginning to end. ... A good reputation is more valuable than costly perfume and the day you die is better than the day you are born.”

My experience has been that most people accept it with a smile. In fact, because it's so small they often read it right away and then respond with a warm comment. On one occasion I gave this wise saying to a sales lady in cosmetics and then continued with my shopping. A few minutes later, after she searched through the store and found me, she said, “I just want to tell you how much I appreciate you giving me that small writing.” It so happened, this lady was a Muslim, however many non-Muslims have also appreciated it. (Note: I usually write my name and phone number on the back of the paper.)

Not only do I give this gem of wisdom to strangers, I also like giving it to friends and acquaintances. In fact, I want to encourage you to consider doing something similar. Perhaps this is a giant step out of your comfort zone. If so, you may need to ask the Lord whether timidity or shame could be holding you back. Then ask the Lord to give you the strength and courage.

I pray you'll have the joy of sharing this Gospel seed. I pray as well that the Lord will open a door to take the next step to point someone to Jesus. If they like what they read, what do you say next? Trust the Holy Spirit who lives in you to be your guide. Of course, you may wish to follow my example by saying something like this, “There's an unusual story which illustrates this proverbial saying. Maybe I

can tell it to you sometime? Would that be okay?"

Of course, this is just one suggestion, among others, that has been helpful as a way of following up on this saying from Ecclesiastes 3:11. The bottom line is: We know that death has been defeated. Now the Lord wants us to show others the way to eternal life. Are you willing?

Finally let me recommend a book by Roland Clarke that goes into more detail on these themes which is titled, "What every Christian needs to know about sharing the Gospel with Muslims." It is available online here: http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/authors/clarke/sharing_gospel.pdf

All Biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

If you wish to ask questions or correspond with me please write me here: raddad7@gmail.com

Endnotes

1. Job is one of a couple dozen Biblical prophets mentioned in the Qur'an. Muslims call him Ayoub who was famous for patiently enduring much suffering.
2. Muslims believe it is very important to think a lot about death. Some preachers advise pondering death each day for one hour. So when the "Preacher" says in Ecclesiastes 7:4 that a wise person thinks much about death this resonates with Muslims.

Questions for reflection and discussion

How does our secular society deal with grief and death?

How do other religions address death?

As a believer In the Lord Jesus how do you view death?

Re-read Ecclesiastes 7:1-4, but now, be sure to also read verse 5. Then ask: "Does it seem strange how the author seems to imply a connection between death/grief and rebuke?" Why do you think secular minded people might struggle to see grief and death as having any connection with the idea of rebuke and sin? But let us pause a moment and think from God's perspective. Perhaps it really does make sense to speak of a wise man's rebuke. Explore and compare James 5:14-20.