

Sermon November 3, 2024 All Saints Sunday

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

Holy Scripture is replete with what seem to be euphemisms for the death of believers. Francis Pieper, a notable American Lutheran theologian, calls attention to how our fathers noted this and compiled a list of these words as the *Sweet Names of Death*.

These names are not euphemisms. They are not meant to soften a harsh reality or avoid the truth. In fact, when speaking of the death of believers, the word death itself is misleading. For Jesus Himself says “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (Jn 11:25–26). It is those who seem to be alive, who are walking about the earth but without faith, who are dead. Thus says the angel to the false congregation in Sardis in the revelation to St. John, “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Re 3:1).

Jesus is the living One. We do not seek Him among the dead. We seek Him where He promises to be, among the living, in His Church. There, in Word and Sacrament, He makes us who were lost to be found and who were dead to be alive.

Jesus says, “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” That is neither a euphemism nor a metaphor. The actual meaning of the word life is to have what God breathed into Adam, not just a soul and breath, but to have the image of God. Christ Jesus has won this back for us by His endurance of both eternal and physical death on the cross. He restores it in us by His grace through faith. It is a free gift that He did not owe us, but which He bestows of His own will and love.

True death is spiritual and could be eternal. To be dead either spiritually or eternally is to lack the Spirit, the righteousness of God, and His image. The

elect will never experience either ever again. Barring the return of Jesus in Glory, those who believe in Him, will suffer physical death even as Jesus Himself did. They will endure the separation of body and soul. But then they will follow Jesus out of the grave in the Resurrection. They will not die but live. Their bodies and souls will be restored and rejoined. No one who believes in Jesus dies.

Paul plays with this language when he says, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Ph 1:21). The world thinks that physical death is the ultimate loss, but it isn’t. To die physically simply means that I have been relieved of my burdens, I have come to my reward, I bask in perfect joy in the nearer presence of God, and I live.

God speaks thus also to Hosea, saying, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction” (13:14)! Paul comments on this and mocks physical death in 1 Corinthians 15 when he says: “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The victory is given to faith, it knows that even as Jesus arose, so we will arise.

Those aren’t metaphors, but Scripture does often use metaphors. It is these which our fathers called the *Sweet Names of Death*. These are not euphemisms, but are picture language which accurately describes the reality rather than glossing over it.

One of these names is *Passage*. This is how Jesus describes death in John 5, saying “He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (Jn 5:24). Moses uses another sweet name, *Gathering*, when tells us that Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age. He says that Abraham “was gathered to his people,” (Gen 25:8). Jesus picks up this language when He describes the physical death of the beggar Lazarus as being gathered to Abraham’s bosom.

It is picturesque but it is also accurate. The gathering spoken of by Moses was seen by John on Patmos' lonely shores. There he describes Abraham's people as "a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Rev 7:9–10)! Those are not only Abraham's people. Those are also our people, people sealed by circumcision or by Baptism, who were sprinkled with blood for purification in the Tabernacle or Temple or who were given the Blood of God made Man to drink for the forgiveness of sins. We are those people, and we are united through the ages by a common faith and hope in the Messiah, who has not failed to deliver, who was slain and yet who lives, who is not amongst the dead.

Another sweet name is *Departure*. Thus does Simeon stand in the Temple ready to die as he sings: Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word" (Luke 2:29). Paul exclaims that he has a godly "desire to depart and be with Christ." That departure and arrival will be far more pleasant than to continue in this life of labor (Phil 1:23). In the letter to the Hebrews Paul confesses that death is a departure from this life and entrance into rest for which we should be diligent and eager (4:11).

Rest or Sleep is perhaps the most natural and common name for a Christian's death. Though they laugh at Him in their ignorance, Jesus says this of Jairus' daughter "Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping" (Matt 9:24). He also speaks of Lazarus this way, saying, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps (that) that I may wake him" (John 11:11). Paul wants to correct our ignorance which mistakes physical death as spiritual or eternal and final. He does this so that we would not mourn as those who have no hope. Physical death is not what it seems but is a kind of sleep from which they will awaken (1 Thess 4:13). The prophet Daniel likewise confesses: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:12.)

All this leads us to the theme of All Saints' Day: the saints by grace through faith are not dead but live. John writes: "Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

This is not wishful thinking or the avoidance of unpleasantness. This is a promise. Some of us have arrived on those golden shores. They have gained a victory that was won for them by Christ. But to be a saint by grace through faith and live rather than die is not only a future reality. It is also a present reality. Jesus lives. In Him, we live. We are the Living. This is a life of labor for the time being, but death has lost its sting. The sweet day of rest and joy is coming.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.

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