

[The following grew out of a recent experience with cardiac by-pass surgery and an ischemic event four days after the original operation. Seven weeks later I am recovered from a heart attack that resulted from the same cause as the previous ischemia . Due to the location of the event, God has spared both my life and bodily strength. The original testimony was intended for the congregation of our church]

PERSPECTIVE

“For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.”- I Timothy 6:7

When death moved from the safe distance of the future to be close enough to threaten my next breath some things changed. It became personal, yet so ordinary. There was a certain personal drama to it: shouting nurses rushed the hospital bed down a hallway, fixed needles in my veins so if my heart stopped and the vessels collapsed the IV fluids could still be given. Others charged the defibrillator to restart my heart if needed. They were strangers with my life in their hands and visibly serious for the sake of their responsibility. It was, I suppose, very much like a television show except there would be no commercial break and I had a very personal stake in how it would end.

On later reflection, though, it is obvious that dying is so ordinary and indiscriminate of age or accomplishment that one immediately loses the foolish consolation of self-pity or the imaginary self-delusions of heroic suffering. So many in our congregation now already know this. They have dealt with unspeakable losses of children, husband or wife and terrifying illnesses of their own. After all, babies die. Young women just graduated with honors from college die. Frail old women and small boys all do it. Of gray-haired old men it's pretty much expected. And, yet, at the ordinary but critical moment, there is very little consolation except for this: the abandonment of all pretenses and the desperate grasping for the hand of God through prayer. Even that, however, when we are desperate and helpless enough, becomes as the apostle Paul tells us, the speechless intercession of the Holy Spirit by what he called “groanings which cannot be uttered.” Our own inadequate prayers fail us at such a point and no wonder. For by then so has everything else of ourselves failed us. St. Augustine wrote “To be mortal is to be miserable” and here is the time when one fully understands why.

Before mortality changed from merely a realistic appraisal of my long term prospects to an immediate, in the sense of counting seconds, concern for whether I had an earthly future there were certain pieces of property about which I had concern for their welfare much as though one might want to protect a child or a pet

animal. I wanted those things to “have a good home” so to speak. They should go to someone who would not just appreciate them, but someone who would appreciate them adequately.

These things were after all an important part of my identity. They were my guns, my handmade hunting knives, my motorcycle and so on. They were things made by the hands of men and I tried to give those things the power of saying who and what sort of man I was. They were idols. That was why I had bought so many of them in the first place. I was trying to buy who I wanted to be.

This is one of the things that change. Even though still weak and selfish, at least now I know the eternal value of such things. Any pig in a sty will be fit to have them. The same could be said of all such earthly business. Their real value is apparent when it becomes in the Apostle’s words “certain we can carry nothing out.”

“Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.”-St. John 6: 68

Words have meaning that is real and ideas have power to shape and inform our actions. What we say about others and especially about ourselves helps to create who we are becoming, and we are always becoming something. However, even knowing this I was very surprised to know how much it comforted me to hear someone say that I was in their prayers. The power of prayer has very little credibility in the scientific world. My concern, though, was as much for the next world as for this, and I was changed by how precious those prayers became to me. To be held in positive regard by the body of Christ indeed gives as Christ himself promised “rest unto your soul.”

That rest was my only refuge and it came by the ministrations of prayer, the firm hand of friendship from brothers in Christ and the precious and healing touch of my wife. And the value of such things abounded like the grace of God: in inverse proportion to worldly hopes. As the prospect for earthly consolations diminished the grace, power and comfort of God increased. And it is the perfect helplessness in oneself that reveals the ultimate and perfect power of God’s grace. It was the means by which it was given to me to understand that at any time there is none other to whom we can go but Him. Only by experiencing the shocking extent of my own weakness did I collapse into the redeeming power of God.

There was nothing I could do to save my own life. How could I do anything to save my soul? To whom could I go but that Christ who has the words of eternal life?

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” Galatians 6: 7

Some are blessed from early in life with knowledge of Christ and the gift of faith. While God has called us to Him, some of us respond less perfectly and our seeking of Him can involve greater difficulty.

Therefore, considering the prize of reunion with God, even the most painful correction that steers us to Him can be welcome in hindsight. As Brother Dennis has reminded us, trouble may, indeed, be your friend.

The clear evidence of the unmistakable end to all things in this world, however, does not necessarily bring everyone to the same conclusion about God and Christ. Books that argue for atheism make best-seller lists and among some it has become fashionable to substitute the word universe for God. I once heard a seriously ill young man say on television that he had not asked the universe why he enjoyed good fortune before, so he would not ask the universe why his circumstances were so bad now. To those who seek their comfort from God it would seem to them just as well that he did not trouble the universe for an answer it cannot give. For the rest of us, God's grace is sufficient, and it is not in my power to describe how obvious it can be that such mercy is indeed all that we have.

While I have written about my experience, I pray that it is clear that this is not about me nor ever could be. It is instead about the revelation that already has come to us that God's mercy through the blood of Christ is our first, our last, and our only hope in this life for the life to come. Amen.

**Yours in Christ,
Leo Chappelle**

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leo Chappelle". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.