

Death Takes, But Only Temporarily

My mom, Jade Yong died Thanksgiving night, a few months ago. We knew it was coming. After all, based on percentages, only 25 percent of pancreatic cancer patients make it to five years. And she was diagnosed 4 1/2 years ago.

It was gut-wrenching to see her that Thanksgiving morning. Unresponsive. Breathing incredibly labored. Monitor alarms were sounding off left and right, screaming about my mom's lack of blood pressure.

But it was already that time. The nurses had no need to rush in with crash carts and emergency protocol. We just hit the mute button. This was the end, and we knew we would never hear my mother's voice again.

But, by the grace of God, right after my dad decided with the doctor to administer morphine in hopes of making her last breaths more comfortable, she woke up. In God's mercy to us all, we had our last conversation with her—to hear a little what was on her heart, and to express a little of what was on ours.

And I pray the words she whispered will echo down from generation to generation. There in her bed, between difficult and staggered breaths, she prayed her last prayer. Echoing the prayer of her Lord, she prayed, "God's will be done."

She didn't pray that with the slightest hint of resentment or resignation. No. She prayed those words confidently, trustingly and hopefully.

No doubt it was a prayer of a frail woman. She was a frail woman who entrusted herself into the hands of the all-powerful, all-sovereign, and good God.

But the prayer wasn't the only window that revealed the burning in her soul. Almost in effort to reassure *us*, and to calm *us* in our fears she said, "God's grace taught me how to live. God's grace taught me how to die."

The disposition of her heart as communicated in these final spiritual words makes us ask some questions: How did she do that? How did she, with her diagnosis and dire prognosis, look at the future and not get stuck mourning the present or the past, but instead—even in the face of death—hope in God?

The answer: She lived not for life, or the blessings of life, but for Christ.

Knowing Jesus was the essence, the aim and the end of her earthly life.

Unfortunately, that hope seems foreign to many of us. In fact, it seemed foreign to mom in her seasons of deepest struggle. But thank God, that even in the midst of struggles, her hope persevered, and her hope was preserved.

This hope may be foreign to us, but it need not remain that way. In the seas of sorrow and grief, we have the shoulders of giants to keep us afloat—just as mom did. Her giant was the missionary Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament. Among his most famous quotes, Philippians 1:21 captures His hope, and the essence of his life, even in death. "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

You may think, "How insensitive! How can you speak of death being gain at your own mother's funeral?"

I understand the reaction. It's in moments like these that we come face to face with the fact that death takes. Grief pierces deepest, and sorrow rises above our heads. We know sadness as we see our loved one suffer. We know grief as our loved one dies.

The mourner's world stops, yet the rest of the world goes on. But the mourner yearns all the more, waking up to a side of the bed that will never be warmed again. Or a passenger seat that will forever remain empty; toothbrush that ought to be wet. It's in these moments that the pain of death is obvious. Death takes. How can death ever be gain?

It is because the Christian lives for something greater than life itself.

Live for Something Greater

If all Mom ever lived for, strived for and grasped after was life itself or the blessings of life, like a perfect marriage, a good name, her children's education or success, grandchildren, or financial security—then you are right—death would finally have been a taker.

Why? Because as death approaches, it leaves life and life's things finally out of your reach, out of your grasp. You can spend all your life's energy striving and grasping after life, or life's things. And you may even reach those things, and hold them in your hands. But friends, when death comes, it leaves life and life's things out of your reach. And who is left, once again, striving, clenching, grasping at the air. Death takes.

Paul: Death is Gain

But for Paul, life and life's things were not ultimate. What does he say? "To live is Christ." All that he did, he did for Christ, and the good news of Jesus. If you read his letters in the New Testament, it is clear that his priority was knowing Jesus and seeing that others would know him as well. He delighted in Jesus, the Son of God, who came in the flesh ... the one who rescues and brings forgiveness and new life by dying on the cross for those who believe and follow him.

Paul, who considered himself the "chief of sinners," knew and experienced this salvation, and so he exhausted himself for

his Savior. "To live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Life & Death: The Stage

What then are we to make of the circumstances of life? Of life and death? Life and death—the plot points of life—build the stage on which we honor Christ. Whether in life or in death, all is for Christ. These are scenes in a believer's life in which he can display the fact that Christ far surpasses all other things.

As I saw my mom live through joys and disappointments, struggles and successes, I saw a woman who knew ... learned to know ... strived to know the surpassing worth of Jesus.

She was a woman who, though she knew no earthly father, came to trust in a Heavenly Father, the comforter and lover of her soul.

When family situations at home were trying, she learned to find her identity, not in family, but in God. In her weakness, she looked at the face of death, and trusted in the Rescuer. In sickness, she entrusted herself to the one who makes all things new. And in her sin, guilt and shame, she trusted in the Lord who restores and provides forgiveness.

She honored Christ on the stage of life and death.

Death Is Gain in Christ

We could come away from this thinking, "Wow, look at Paul's faith." Or, "Wow, look at Jade's faith. Her faith really helped her in times of difficulty." Don't get me wrong, that's absolutely true! Her God-given faith was amazing. But what is to amaze us most when Paul writes, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain," is the object of faith—the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Death is actually gain because of who Jesus Christ is, and what he has done on the cross. This, Jesus won for Paul and for my mother, salvation from sin and life from the dead.

This is man's universal need. We need our wrongs made right. We need life where there is death. Our conscience tells us this. Our grief and sorrows scream it even now—*"This is not the way it was meant to be."*

Why is that? It's because of sin. In the beginning, God created man good, without sin, and we had a perfect relationship with Him. God provided man with boundaries in which to live. The problem was, man chose to redraw those boundaries with disregard for God. And the Bible says this disregard for, and discontentedness with God is sin, wrongdoing. The consequence of sin was death and judgment.

The question then becomes, how can we have a restored relationship with God, and escape death and judgment? The amazing thing is—where man creates the problem, God provides the solution. In God's grace, and in His mercy, he provides a way out: Jesus Christ. God provided his eternal Son to live the life we couldn't, in complete obedience to the Father. He also died the death we deserved, taking his people's sin upon himself.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The Apostle Peter wrote that this hope of eternal life, in no matter the circumstance, is a "living hope" (see 1 Pet. 1:3). Even in the face of death, the hope that Christ won for us is living. Is it because we here today are so strong, so resilient to maintain our positive outlook, because in the face of death we can rise above all odds? No! Christians have a *living* hope "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3).

In the face of death, that is what gave my mom a living hope. She knew that "to be apart from the body, is to be present with the Lord" (see 2 Cor. 5:8). And she knew her

Savior rose up from the dead, defeating death and sin. But the Bible says there's more. The Bible teaches that when Christ returns, the "dead in Christ" will be raised to be with him (see 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

For the Christian, death is gain. Death may, in some sense, take now, but when Christ comes to finally destroy sin and death's grip on us, who is left grasping, clenching after the air? Death and the devil.

This hope, this forgiveness, this promise of new life, is for everyone who turns from his sin and believes in Christ. This hope was my mom's hope. When death comes, what will be your hope? Turn from your sins, and trust in Him who is the living hope.

Jeremy Yong serves as a pastor of First Baptist Hacienda Heights (Los Angeles Metro area), and is an adjunct theology professor at Biola University. Prior to returning to his home state of California in 2011, he served as associate pastor of the United Christian Church of Dubai, United Arab Emirates.