

Scared to Death

June 2023

This past month, I attended my 45th college reunion. I had not been to one of these reunion gatherings in 20 years. It was loads of fun seeing so many wonderful friends, remembering incredible times together. But what I did not expect was being asked to participate in a gathering of prayer and blessing before our dinner was served during our big Saturday night celebration. My alma mater is not known for being very religious these days; therefore, I was delighted we were praying at all. Then, I was taken aback to hear the names read of all our classmates who had passed away. We prayed patiently for each person. Nearly ten percent of our class of 1200 students are gone. That stunned me. However, what startled me even more was realizing that I am now 67 and growing older by the second! Suddenly it occurred to me that not all of us were going to make it to our 50th reunion, and that death was ready to greet us in the not-so-distant future whenever our lives are deemed complete. We looked at each other with great compassion and love realizing that the time had come for us to think a little more deeply about the passage of time and its ultimate conclusion.

One of the most jarring moments of my life occurred when I was on a plane to southern California the morning of September 11, 2001. Two-thirds of the way towards our destination the pilot interrupted our flight and told us we were going to make an emergency landing. The plane abruptly went into a sharp dive, and we were headed to Phoenix, Arizona at full speed. Although we were quiet, there was a confused panic among the passengers as we tried to figure out what was going on. A man a few rows ahead of me said he had intercepted the pilots' communication with the ground crew and that something tragic had just occurred in New York City involving an aviation accident. We were totally perplexed but anxious to cooperate.



I ended up spending four days in a hotel room in Phoenix watching newscast after newscast attempting to explain the terrorist acts which had just occurred in New York City, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. My heart raced as I tried to figure out the minds of the terrorists; why would someone do this? We were told the terrorists were religiously devout and politically motivated to attack their enemy they called "the Great Satan," the United States of America. What I later learned was that these Muslim terrorists were trying to earn their Allah's favor by committing these devastating acts of murder and destruction to eliminate their enemies from the face of the earth. From that moment on I was determined to share my Christian faith with Muslims, wanting them to understand the grace and love of the true God, and what Christ did by dying on the cross for humanity and the forgiveness of sins.

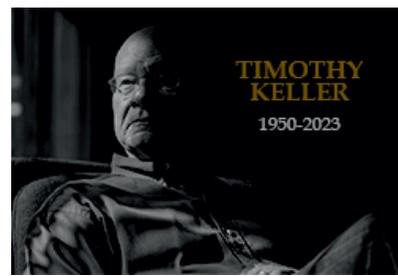
For the past 22 years, I have been involved in ministry to Muslims in both the Middle East and the United States. During this time, I have learned how much the average Muslim, especially the more fundamental ones, terribly fear death. It is constantly on their minds. Their holy books describe a horrifying description of hell and the terrifying emotional pains and suffering involved in death itself. For a Muslim, the only way to avoid an eternity in hell is to earn good favor with

Allah through daily obedience and good works. Their objective is to accumulate more good points than bad points for Allah's final judgment on their lives. Therefore, the more one attends mosque, prays, fasts, gives alms, the greater odds they have of avoiding hell; but it is up to the individual alone to earn these good points, and you will never know if you have earned enough until the moment you die.

For a Muslim one of the most effective and secure ways of earning a favorable judgment from Allah is to commit a violent jihad, especially one involving suicide, against an enemy of the Muslim people. The terrorists who flew the planes on September 11 and all the other jihadists who have committed terrorist acts in recent history, have been convinced that Allah will be waiting for them with open arms in paradise to congratulate them, and especially reward the men with many blessings, including an endless supply of virgins and wine.

But unfortunately, as we know, fear of God's final judgment can often lead to greater pride, prejudice, anger, and violence. Fear often brings out the worst in us.

Just a few weeks ago, one of the most revered and respected Christian leaders of our lifetime, Timothy Keller, died of cancer. Not only was he a very influential pastor, but he was a great author, often mentioned in the same breath as C.S. Lewis. These brilliant men were some of the most intelligent, grace-filled apologists for the Christian faith in the last two centuries. A year and half ago, Keller was unexpectedly diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at age 70. It was a shock to him, his beloved wife, family, and many Christians throughout the world. However, Keller did not panic or go into despair.



Certainly, he grieved sorrowfully, but he placed his trust and hope in the greater wisdom of his Lord. He understood the profound nature of grace. He had spent his lifetime helping people understand the Christian belief that there is nothing we can do to earn or merit God's favor, no matter how many good works or acts of righteousness we have done in our lifetime. Instead, like Timothy Keller, we are asked to accept the indescribable gift of grace and new life through the atoning work of Christ who died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. We are asked to live a life of humble faith and gratitude, rather than with panicked or nervous performance.

In his final days, Keller quoted the English poet George Herbert who once wrote, "Death used to be an executioner, but the Gospel makes him just a gardener. Death used to be able to crush us, but now all death can do is plant us in God's soil, so we become something extraordinary."

And as Timothy Keller said, "Anything wonderful or great in this world is only an echo or foretaste of what is present in infinity's greater depths in the vision of God and in the New Heaven and New Earth, the world of love."

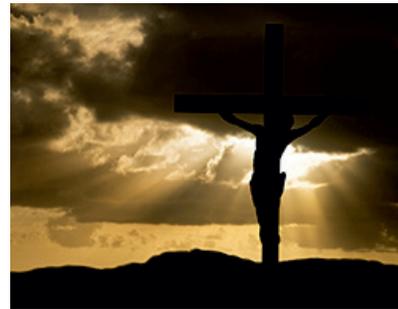
Have you noticed there seem to be less reports of terrorist acts and suicide bombings coming from the Muslim world these days? Very fortunately, much of the Middle East is beginning to lean towards a more moderate view of Islam. Thankfully, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the other Sunni fundamentalist groups have become less appealing to many Muslims. In fact, growing numbers of Muslims, especially young people, are now looking more seriously at the peaceful teachings of Jesus and the claims of the New Testament. They are discovering verses which explain the

assurance of salvation through a simple faith in Jesus Christ alone. For instance, Romans 5:1 tells us, “Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.”

As each of us grow older, getting closer to that great juncture in our lifetime, how do we spend our remaining days before our own inevitable death? Do we double down on trying to live life happily apart from even acknowledging God; do we bolster our resumes, good deeds, and accomplishments to impress and persuade God of our worthiness; or do we decide instead to surrender our wills, hearts, minds, and souls to the loving care of our Creator? Do we live our last days in worry or in faith? Perhaps today is the best time to remember the words of King David when he wrote, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all that I need. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.” (Psalm 23:1,4)

We cannot avoid it. Our bodies will eventually die. However, our spirits along with our resurrected bodies will live forever through our faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul assured believers of this promise when he wrote to the people of Corinth, “That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.” (2Corinthians 4:16-18)

Death was not a part of God’s original design for humanity. It entered our world through the acts of our sinful nature. However, Christ came to our world to defeat death and atone for our sins. Once again, living joyfully forever is possible through the gift of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Alleluia!



So, as I think of where I, my classmates, friends--everyone, for that matter—are on this journey we call life, do we need to be afraid? Do we need to worry what lies ahead, about making that next college reunion? Do we need to be frightened of death? Our lord and savior Jesus Christ answered that question for us. All we need to do is trust him.