

From the Pulpit of Church of the Good Shepherd
July 24, 2009, 10:00 AM
Funeral Service for Elizabeth Rasmusen
(Held at Sherwood Oaks Christian Church)

My Little Daughter Is Dying

Sermon Text: Mark 5: 21-24; 35-43 (see the middle of the sermon for the words)

(NOTE: This is from the manuscript for the sermon. As with most sermons, some things in the manuscript were not in the sermon and parts of the sermon were not in the manuscript. Eric Rasmusen put this into Latex and pdf, changing the formatting some.)

(Preliminary comments on the frequency of the death of children in Colonial America, compared to its frequency, today; followed by excerpts from prayer requests taken from the flip sides of Jonathan Edwards sermon manuscripts.)

Professor Stephen Stein, a retired faculty member here at Indiana University, read the flip sides of hundreds of the scraps of paper Jonathan Edwards wrote his sermons on. At the time, paper was a valuable commodity and Edwards recycled the pieces of paper given him by his parishioners containing their prayer requests each Lords Day. Later, Edwards wrote his sermons on these bits of paper. Professor Stein published an article outlining the content of those requests. The requests are instructive for us today, on this occasion of the funeral of little Lizzie Rasmusen.

Listen as I read you a few excerpts of these requests and see if there is anything for us to learn from souls who have gone before us. How do the Christians of Edwards day respond to the afflictions from God that entered their lives?

Shortly after the death of their son on August 1, 1743, Ichabod Strong and his wife handed a small slip of paper to their minister petitioning the prayers of the congregation (with these words): that God would sanctify his Holy and afflicting hand to them in taking away there youngest child by death.

Moses Parsons together with his parents desire the prayers of the congregation that God would sanctify his holy hand unto them in taking away his wife and their daughter by death. They desire prayers also for the child that is sick.

The widow Lydia Wright and her children desire the prayers of this congregation that God would sanctify his holy hand to them in taking away her husband and their father by death. They desire prayer that God would cause this affliction to work for their spiritual good.

Widow Sheldon desires (the prayers) of the congregation that God raise her up from a bed of sickness, it if be his will. Otherwise determined that God fit her and all concerned for his holy will and pleasure. And her children desire the same.

John Parsons and his wife desire the prayers of the congregation for her and their oldest child, they being dangerously sick, that God would be pleased to restore them to health if it be his will but if he has otherwise determined that he would prepare them for his will.

Ezra Clark and his wife desire that thanks may be given to God in this congregation for his great goodness to him in restoring of him from his late illness to such a measure of health as that he is able again to come to the house of God. They desire that this mercy and the late affliction they have been the subjects of may work together for their everlasting good.

William Judd desireth the prayers of this congregation that God would

sanctify to him and his children the afflicting shock of his hand in removing his wife by death.

At the time of the Great Awakening, colonial Americans believed in the sovereignty of God and their prayers were clearly aimed at submission to His will, both in accepting with joy and thanksgiving His blessings, but also in seeking their own spiritual growth through his afflictions.

Most men do what they must to keep a safe distance from death. Most men, in their actions and thoughts, refuse to live in light of the explicit statement of the Word of God the only Word of God, written that it is appointed unto man, once to die, and after that the judgment. Most men go through life fleeing God, evading Jesus Christ, and resisting the Holy Spirit as, from Gods kindness, He convicts us of sin and righteousness and judgment.

It is mans habit to sidestep spiritual matters and the questions of eternity moment by moment, week by week, month by month, year by year, decade by decade; and then to put on the stiff upper lip and face death with cheap talk about not being afraid to die and how death is only the natural end of the human organism.

But every now and then, we are awakened from our stupor, jolted out of our spiritual comas by the loving hand of God.

Some deaths are unavoidable in displaying the stark reality that death is an enemy, a terrible enemy. Such is the death of a tender child. Awful in its finality; in the springtime of life with the fair flower of youth in its budding beauty; death yanks a precious little one from the black soil of the love of her father and mother, sister and brother, and she is gone.

This one time, there is no helping it; there is no escape: we must grieve.

All of us must grieve. And all of us must face sin and death and righteousness and judgment and the awful holiness of our Maker and Creator, God.

Not just any god, mind you; no national or ethnic or partisan political god.

There are lots of gods in this world, but I am no wasting time speaking to you of any of these gods. They are idols, all of them, made by mans hands and mind, and bearing his image.

Following death, though, there is only one God all the others are gone. They have vanished, as the early morning mist burned away by the brilliance of the sun.

As we stand before the Judgment Seat, we will be called to give an account before our Creator, before the God Who, Himself, made us and this world and the ten billion light years of the universe.

He is the only God and He has made Himself known to us through His Only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Being jealous for His Own glory, He demands the worship and adoration of each of His creatures bearing His Own image from every girl and boy, man and woman of the race of man. But from our rebellion and wickedness, we turn away from Him and go our own way; do our own thing; rut in our pleasures and pride and refuse to repent and turn to Him in faith.

So, what does He do? Faced with our depravity and endless entertainments by which we amuse ourselves to death, does He allow us to pass on to judgment and Hell without warning?

From His kindness and love, today He has awakened us by an instrument that is the source both of His most severe discipline and His most tender affection; and that instrument is death the death of a tender child.

We have gathered to mourn the death of Elizabeth Grace Rasmusen.

And it is her gift to us to call us to God, to holiness and repentance and life. This is the meaning of this hour for every one of us.

God is calling us, through this terrible loss, to choose life.

Satan, the Evil One who is the Father of Lies and seeks our destruction, both now and eternally, hates life.

But God is the God of life.

I was reminded of this, reading through stories little Lizzie wrote. Heres the heart of a child who, like her Maker and Creator, loves life:

January 13, 2007

Once upon a time, there lived one one boy and two girls. And they wanted more brothers and more sisters. So they asked one morning a lady, Can you find us some brothers and some sisters?

The lady said yes.

There's a lady right behind my house, which is the blue one. She doesn't want so many boys.

So they went there and asked if they could have one of her boys. She said yes. Then they asked her if she knew anybody who didn't want a brother or a sister. She said, Well, there are four houses behind mine. One of them is rainbow-colored, one of them is blue, and one of them is pink, and one of them is aqua. Pick the one that's aqua. She doesn't want so many girls, because she has nine girls and one boy. So they went there. And they asked her if she could give them a sister. She said yes. Then they asked her, Do you know anybody who doesn't want so many brothers and sisters?

Yes I do, she said. There'll be two houses. Pick the one that's blue. And then go inside. She doesn't want so many brothers. So they did that. But instead of them picking the blue one they picked the pink one, which was the other one. Then when they were inside, they saw no children, so they went out. So, they went into the other house. And they asked her if they had any brothers or sisters. She said yes. She said she would give them a boy. Then they asked her, Do you know anybody who could give us any brothers or sisters?

Yes. Go to the house behind mine.

So they did that. And that lady said, I'll give you a brother.

They figured out it was dinner time, so they went home. The End.

Like her Creator, Lizzie loved life. So, naturally, her death has struck (and continues to strike) us a deep and bitter blow.

Where might we look for Gods sovereign purpose in such a death as hers? Of what value is such a tragedy in Gods eternal plan?

I have chosen for our time in Gods Word, this morning, a passage of Scripture that shows us the compassion of Jesus for those who mourn and His power over all the consequences of sin in this world. And this passage should have special meaning to us since it tells the story of the death of another child of tender age.

Listen, then, to Gods Holy Word.

Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43. When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered round him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."

So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ...

While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why

bother the teacher any more?"

Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.

When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep."

But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!").

Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.

He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat. This part of Marks gospel comes in a section showing Jesus authority over every weakness of mankind. His power over nature is demonstrated by his calming the storm. His power over Satan and his demons is demonstrated by the casting out of the many demons in the man who lived in the region of the Gerasenes. Then, on His way to the bedside of Jairuss sick daughter, Jesus is touched by a woman whose bleeding has gone on for twelve years with no remedy. Upon touching Jesus she is instantly healed.

And so we come back here to Jairuss daughter.

22 Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet.

Now Jairus was a wealthy man and one of the towns chief leaders. He was a ruler of the synagoguethe center of the towns social and religious life back then but neither his rank nor his assets could keep death from the door of his house and from his most precious daughter.

So, today we also must keep from thinking that somehow death can be warded off by our money, or by our defensive driving or good doctors, or miracle drugs. We ought to be careful lest we think the good judgment we have tried to train our children in will make them invulnerable. Death is no respecter of persons. All of us will die and in His perfect timing and nothing we can do will keep us from meeting our appointment with death.

It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment. (Hebrews 9:27)

Jairus was the leader of his community, but status was powerless to either keep his daughter from disease or to comfort her father and mothers sorrow when she had died.

Notice then, where or to whom Jairus did turn for help.

Verse 22: Seeing Jesus he fell at his feet

This is a posture of humble entreaty.

Verse 23: and pleaded earnestly with Him; My little daughter is dying.

A fathers heart of tenderness for his child; have you had any little children die? Have you ever felt the same desperation Jairus felt?

Verse 23: Please come put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.

Have you known the powerlessness of watching a little one especially your own child suffer? And has this caused you to hate sin? Can we help but hate sin when we see the terrible things it has brought on us and on our loved ones?

In this fallen world, sin has left its mark on everything. So, when you see a little child suffering, do you hate the agent that caused this suffering? Do you hate sin?

Verse 24: Jesus went with him Now, when they got near the home, this message came for them:

Verse 35 your daughter is dead

The messenger of death always tries to suck us into despair and hopelessness, but Jesus commanded Jairus to believe and not to give in to deaths oppressive dark-

ness. Although the messages of the messengers were:
why bother the teacher anymore?

The fact that this had started out as a case of healing a physical disease, but had now turned into a matter of raising the dead, was no big deal to Jesus. After all, which is harder for God to heal a physical ailment or to give eternal life and raise a man or woman, boy or girl, from the dead?

Verse 36 Ignoring what they said, Jesus told (Jairus), Dont be afraid; just believe.

Jesus tender understanding and care for a weak and wavering father.

There is never any fear that (our) faith will range more widely than the power of God. Calvin on Mark 5:36

Jesus told Jairus just believe

Only and just; the limits of our duties in the presence of the omnipotent God.

Faith is the condition for Jesus to heal any of our sickness, sins, and sorrows.

Verse 38 Commotion , crying, and wailing loudly

Theres no doubt this child was dead; the wake had already begun and the neighbors had gathered to share the sorrow and mourning.

Verse 39 Jesus told them; Shes only sleeping

Often death is referred to in Scripture as a sleep, and by this we are to understand the passing time of quietness and the coming awakening of the resurrection for those who belong to Christ.

This is quite different from what unbelievers experience in death; it is anything but a pleasant sleep for them, regardless of all accounts to the contrary.

So how did the unbelievers respond to Jesus?

Verse 40: But they laughed at Him

What is the character of unbelief?

Unbelief is inconsolable in grief and sorrow.

- no hope in resurrection -belief in extinction
- no hope of reunion
- no hope in the fatherly kindness of a Sovereign God just cruel fate
- unbelief cannot say, The Lord giveth and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job)
- unbelief ridicules true faith because it cannot understand it

- unbelievers are destined, however, for astonishment at the sight of eternal truths.

Verse 41: (Jesus) took her by the hand and told her (to get up)

Verse 42: Immediately, she did

Think of the change carried out in that home, at the moment death became life, doubt became faith, tears became laughter, and sorrow became joy. This is the power of God over all lives, to change us.

Verse 42: At this they were completely astonished

Jesus holds the keys to death in His hands. And one day, we are told in *Isaiah 25:8*, He will swallow up death in victory.

Hosea 13:14 I will ransom them...

When Jesus gathers His flock around Him on that great day of His appearance, not one lamb will be missing (Bishop J. C. Ryle in his commentary).

John 11:25 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

How often God calls us back to remember the grave, and to prepare for it.

Death enters all homes castles or shanties, alike and no bar or deadbolt can protect us from it. It hits all men alike. The sinner and the lover of God; the child of rebellion and the child of grace and beauty.

There are many occasions to think about the coming end of our days, but this past week, we had a particularly grievous reminder of death's constant presence in our midst in the death of Lizzie.

Let us, therefore, use this great sorrow as an occasion to think about the divine will of God and His purposes in death especially the death of a little child.

Though all men's lives are short and, like the grass or the flower of the field, quickly gone, death does not come to all men equally; some are taken much sooner than others and die in their years of tenderness.

Many children die in the womb before we have a chance to know them.

Others die as infants or as toddlers.

Others die as teenagers and young adults.

Cut down as tender shoots or flowers in the spring-time of their lives; in the time of their glory and strength.

So what, then, do we say to the deaths of our precious children? What purposes does our Heavenly Father have in such tragic events?

1. Sometimes, it is those God loves best who are taken soonest. Abel taken at a young age. Jesus Himself made an early death holy and good by His death in the prime of His life.

Whom the gods love die young. (Menander in 352 B.C.)

2. Sometimes, there are children who have a supernatural desire for heaven to be in their Fathers house and this is nothing for which to condemn them since we are all called to be heavenly-minded.

Paul said: For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (*Philippians 1:21*).

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. (II Corinthians 5:1-2)

3. It is possible that God knew that the child's life or anyone else's life, for that matter would not have gotten better or ended well, and that's why He took them. After all, there's no guarantee age produces a greater holiness or sanctification in any of us.

Paul himself talked about running the race so as not to be disqualified at the end. Think of how King Solomon

decayed.

We are sailing in a very tempestuous and uncertain sea, like mariners that sometimes set out with a fair and strong gale, and make half their passage in a few days; but then they meet with some rough contrary winds that force them to lie by at least, if they are not driven back, and have many a league to measure over again, if ever they make their passage at all. If the ship springs a leak, though it do not founder, but after many hardships the port is gained, yet the loss and damage sustained is usually very much. So are there many that set out well in their youth, and at last get to heaven, but it is sorely shattered and broken, through their falls before temptation and another in their way. The floods do not drown them in perdition, but yet through their ill conduct and foolish management much of their rich freight and lading is damnifyd and thrown overboard. They can show the riches they once had put aboard them, but alas, cankerd and marred now: they are not when they die, even what they were in their early years, but their beauty marred by the advance of age...

¹

For all we know, the child that dies might have grown in grace closer to Jesus; yet, also, for all we know, the child might have grown away from Jesus.

4. God sometimes takes the righteous away to spare them from evil (other peoples evil) to come in the future. The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. (*Isaiah* 57:1) We dont know how many of even our greatest joys will turn to evil in the coming

¹ Rev. Benjamin Colman, "A Devout Contemplation on the Meaning of Divine Providence in the Early Death of Pious and Lovely Children; a sermon preached by this puritan pastor on the occasion of the early death of Elizabeth Wainwright, age 14, on April 8, 1714," published in *New England Funeral Sermons; Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints*, Del Mar, New York; 1978, pp. 13, 14.

days, and become the source of our deepest heartaches. Think, for instance, of how many Christian parents end up seeing their children turn away from God. How many godly mothers and fathers live to feel a deep heartache because of their sons or daughters rejection of Jesus and their lives of sin?

So, sometimes we remark to one another concerning loved ones who have died, What a blessing that he or she didnt live to see this day! Hed turn over in his grave if he knew what was going on right now!

5. The death of youths is also useful to awaken the hard of heart who want to forget about eternity.

God cares for the souls of many through His providential dealings with one. (Rev. Benjamin Coleman, Colonial American pastor)

What practical applications are there here, or how can we improve our afflictions, the constant theme of the prayers of Edwards parishioners.

1. Young person: Think of how easily it might have been you. Are you ready to meet the living God?

Think along these lines: What is my life worth in the eyes of God compared to this life of Lizzie He has seen fit to take?

Are you taking advantage of the means of grace;

the instruments, disciplines, places, and times God has promised to use in bringing souls to Himself? Are you listening to your parents as they teach you about Jesus and eternal life? Are you seeking God with all your heart, soul, and mind?

How many more days do you have? Do you really think you are invincible?

Death by Sartre

One always dies too soon – or too late. And yet ones whole life is complete at that moment with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are— your life, and nothing else. (Jean-Paul Sartre in No Exit)

2. Adults, Parents, and the Elderly

What about our own souls? If the axe has come to the root of the tender young sapling, how much longer will it be held off from us? When we fall, where will we fall? Where will you fall into the pit of fire where the thirst is never quenched and the worms never die, or into the arms of our Heavenly Father?

God comes into His garden and plucks whichever flower He pleases.

Are we preparing our precious young ones to meet their God or are we wasting the time which remains with soccer camps, T ball, and piano lessons with not

the slightest effort to sit down and teach them about eternity or heaven or their Savior Jesus Christ or His precious Word the Bible?

We must not love our children more than we love God.

No matter how great the pain we must not rebel against God.

Rather, let us say: The sovereignty of God is a good enough reason for me and I need no more. This sovereignty is worth more than a thousand reasons when staring in the face of the inscrutable judgments of the Maker of the universe.

Note this well: Life and death are the sphere of responsibility of God, uniquely; not of any man or woman. He has made life and He holds the keys to life and death, to heaven and hell. Shall He not, then, do with our loved ones (and even our precious children) just as He pleases?

Can our children be in Heaven too soon? Can its peace, happiness, joy, praise, and holiness come to any person too quickly?

If a little baby boy is taken from his fathers knees to be gathered into his Heavenly Fathers arms, can this properly be referred to as a tragedy?

When a newborn infant is taken from her mothers breast can it be sad? Is it really heartbreaking for such a little one to leave off its mothers nourishment and, instead, lie in the bosom of Jesus, the shepherd of souls? To be cared for from this point on throughout eternity by Jesus; the one who promises to feed and care for and watch over and protect His sheep?

Ill close with a couple excerpts from an e-mail I just received a couple days ago

From: (A friend)
To: Tim Bayly
Date: Tue, 14 Jul 2009
Subject: Anna Elisabeth

Dear Tim,

You may have heard our sad news. On June 24, we delivered our stillborn daughter, Anna Elisabeth, who died after six months in the womb because the umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck. This is the official reason, but we know God ordains all things and supervised both the growth of that cord (we were told it was unusually long) and its movement in the womb. She was beautifully formed (Ps. 139). We were able to hold her for a long time and she spent the night next to (her mothers) bed. We had a funeral service for her followed by her burial on June 26. You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand, Jesus said (John 13:7). Were deeply grieving, but are also sensing His great comfort. Its an afflicting time for us, as the Puritans would say, and our heads are bowed down under it in worship, through heaviness and tears. Were learning by grace to give thanks in ALL circumstances, for this is the will of God through Christ Jesus (I Thess. 5:18).

Its been hard for us to tell many people about this just yet. Were planning to write a letter to friends when we feel a little stronger to write. Meanwhile, feel free to mention it to the CGS body as something for which we would greatly appreciate prayer.

I remember the grief you felt at Nathans passing, and now have some experimental sense of this. I also remember the words of your dad about the difficulty of burying ones dear children. He gives and takes away; blessed be His name. He is good in all things,

Steve

P.S. (My wife) was sure this was going to be a girl (as with the other three, we hadnt found out), so we only had a girls name picked out. Elisabeth means God is my oath or the oath of God, and has the connotation of consecrated. Indeed, we now see that God consecrated this one for Himself, and we take it as a sign of His covenant faithfulness to us. Anna of course (Luke 2:36-38) was the prophetess who stirred people up in the temple to look for the salvation of Israel. We trust that at her funeral, Annas mute stillborn tongue was used in the temple to establish strength for the Lord (Ps. 8:2) and testify to His goodness. Now we trust that she has been cut out for the temple not made with human hands (Ps. 144:12), perfectly satisfied in the fullness of the Lords presence.

P.P.S. Preparing to teach the Divine Comedy, I saw this morning that Dante consigns the souls of the unborn to Limbo in hell, but by faith we take King Davids words, under the true inspiration of the Spirit, as our gospel comfort: I shall go to him, but he will not return to me (II Sam. 12:23).