

Dealing with death

Dan Nelson - Pastor

Calvary Chapel of the Ojai Valley

Having arrived home from the county hospital a little while ago and reflecting on the events of the previous few hours, I decided to log on to Facebook and make a post. This is what I wrote: "Said goodbye to Billy Ray today — he is with Jesus now. Was on a different path most of his life, his tattoos tell his story in pictures. Made a decision to follow Jesus at Easter, stopped wrestling against God and was 'born again' by the Spirit. Wanted to stay alive to get baptized. Did it a few weeks ago. Today was his big day. He just graduated."

Anyone who has experienced death up close has had to grapple with some of the big questions. Some have the comfort and promise of God and have made it their personal faith; others blindly dismiss these messages for a more fatalistic sense of demise or alternate ideology. The interesting thing about death is that it has impressive statistics; it's 100 percent terminal and affects every person on the planet.

Like many of my friends, Billy spent years as a troublemaker; he caused pain for himself and others too. Sometimes he would get busted for his foolishness and spend time locked up. Other times, he would seem to get away with his behavior and wallow in it. He didn't see a need to repent and surely had no intention of ever becoming a follower of Christ. Even over the last five or six years that I have known him, most of his time in church was under duress, he was pleasing someone else by being there and darted for the van as soon as he could. He was a guy that one could get along with alright, but simply didn't see what others saw in this "savior" that they were all praying to and singing about. He would just as soon grab a beer as a Bible, and listen to classic rock as to a Sunday teaching. But somewhere along the line, something happened.

After years of abuse on his body began to take its toll, consequences set in and breathing became increasingly difficult. He began to contemplate his eventual departure. Lots of sermons were preached, but he wasn't really listening. One day last year he became desperate and asked for prayer even though he didn't quite believe. God was there even when he really wasn't. He made it through that dark period and God put more people into his life who spoke truth. There was a lot of prayer petitioning on Billy's behalf. Around Easter this year, a veil was removed from his eyes and he realized what he had missed his whole life; that the God of the Bible was real, and Jesus loved him just

like he had heard hundreds of times. He made a decision to dedicate his life to Jesus and received God's Holy Spirit into his life by grace through faith. Billy began to change. His desires and priorities seemed to radically transform. It became important to him to live long enough to get baptized. Our next baptism wasn't scheduled until September so he asked if we could do one sooner. We did.

Leaving the oxygen tank to step into the cold pool was difficult. With each step deeper into the water, the weight of the liquid pressing against his back and chest forced him to gasp for every partial breath. Then to consider the potentially fearful risk of inhaling water during the dunking struck a chord with the many watching while standing poolside. The courage that this one act took made many of us seem like a bunch of whining babies. What meant nothing to Billy before now meant everything to him. Why? Ask him yourself someday.

The key to this response would be the hope of the promise of Jesus to all who believe. This invitation is open to everyone to receive, especially you.

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Dan Nelson is a frequent contributor to the Ojai Valley News and currently serves the Ojai Valley Ministerial Association and community as editor of the Religion Column. Permission is freely granted to reprint the article in its entirety. Dan Nelson is pastor of Calvary Chapel Christian Church of the Ojai Valley.



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Sunday Worship:

9:00 & 10:30am
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley
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Mid-Week Study:

7:00pm Thursday
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley
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