

JESUS' CONCERN FOR OUR PERISHING

FOR WILL RENO, MAY 16, 1973 - MAY 11, 2007



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Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Refuge in God's Word:

On Friday, May 11, at around 3:00PM, William Morgan Reno died at St. Luke's Hospital. He had been battling brain cancer for a little over a year, and after numerous surgeries, chemotherapies and experimental trial drugs, he eventually succumbed to the complications of his condition. Many at Oak Hills know and love Will and Ruth—and have grown to love their family as well, and today, for so many here, the Reno's are on our minds.

All I know to do in times like this is turn to God's word—to seek refuge there. So that is what we'll do. But before we turn to God's word, I want to make three short observations as to why God's word is the best place to turn when our hearts are breaking. **First, God's word is TRUE.** A close companion to grief is confusion. We often feel guilt over this—as though the confusion in our hearts is the same thing as losing faith. But when we turn to God's word for foundational truth, we can find it there. He gives us unbendable precepts upon which we can stand and know we can rest in truth that cannot be shaken.

Second, the truth in God's word is ANCIENT. Often the crises in our lives are so fresh and immediate that we struggle to know whether we'll survive or recover. There is great comfort in turning to promises which were spoken long before we were born, and which will hold long after we're gone. When our pain and struggles are fresh, ancient promises remind us that God's faithfulness is timeless and cannot be diluted. Like an ancient tree, we can lean hard on the promises of God and trust they will hold, even when we ourselves are weak.

Third, the truth in God's word DEPENDS ON THE GOD'S CHARACTER, NOT OURS. We can lean hard on the word of God because the Bible is God's revelation of Himself to His people—and tells us of things too lofty to fully understand, and continually stands to instruct and remind us that God is the sole keeper of His sovereign will, and nothing ever happens outside of His providence, and nothing ever takes Him by surprise. When He reveals Himself through Scripture, He shows Himself strong, Holy, loving, just, merciful and all-wise. And He is all these things because they are who He is—and nothing can shake that foundation. So in times of trial, it helps to lean hard on the promise that God is unchanging and strong.

With this before us, we turn now to a day the disciples spent with Jesus out on the Lake of Galilee. It is the story of an unexpected storm. It is the story of people fearing disaster and feeling alone in it. It is the story of the power of Jesus over His creation. And it is a story with a profound question, and an even more profound immediate response which foreshadows the most comforting truth there is—that not only does Jesus care that we're perishing—He came to intercede on our behalf to **END** our perishing. May you find comfort in His Word.

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

The Coming of a Sudden Storm:

Will Reno was seeking to make a career move—a step up the ladder he had elected to climb—that of the commercial airline pilot. He had been flying smaller commuter planes for Mesa Airlines, and began to study to get licensed to fly the Boeing 737, which comprise Southwest Airlines entire fleet. Usually a quick study, Will noticed he was having an unusually tough time remembering things as he studied. It wasn't like him to struggle like he did, so he went to the doctor to get checked out. They discovered a mass growing in his brain which turned out to be cancer. This was about a year ago.

For Will, the woman he would marry just months later, Ruth, Will's parents and eight brothers and sisters, the news of his cancer came on much like this storm must have come upon the disciples. Things were supposed to be going one way—safe and predictable, but instead took them quickly to the place where their thoughts were on their mortality and on how fragile life is. One of the things I find so telling about our text is that when the storm threatens their lives, their focus shifts not on steering the boat, but in waking the sleeping Messiah in the stern. And they wake him with panic in their voices, and a question on their hearts and lips: "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

Why would they ask this? Because at that moment they knew for certain they were indeed perishing. If that storm persisted, they knew enough to know they would die there on that lake. And they also knew enough to know their only hope was for someone to overrule that storm at sea. So they woke Him, not to ask if He cared about the weather, but to ask if He cared about **THEM**. With a word He silenced the storm. And then he asked them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"

This sounds like a rebuke—which it might have been. But it was also an answer to their question. They had Jesus in their midst—and they even relied on Him as their only hope in the face of certain peril. But they were still gripped with fear—still unsure that they were safe with Christ. We live in a hard world, and they knew it well. They were a mix of emotion.

But imagine the scene. They were sure they were going to perish, and in a moment of desperation they turn to Jesus and with a word the wind and the waves **OBEY** Him. How is this even possible—that such inanimate things as wind and waves would **or even could** obey the commands of a man. And this set them wondering, “*What kind of man is this that the wind and the waves obey Him?*” He is the one who can arrest our peril.

Many here are in the midst of sudden storms, and you’re wondering where God is, and if He’s sleeping. Beloved of the Lord, He is not. He is here. And what’s more, He knows more of the peril we face than we do. And He has done something about it—something eternal... Something certain. It’s okay to grieve. In fact we are liberated to grieve well—not as those who have no hope, but as those who hope in Christ.

Will Reno has not Perished:

What can separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? The Apostle Paul helps with this question: “*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Rom 8:38-39) Not life, death, things present, things to come, nor anything in all creation! What Paul is telling us is that Jesus is permanently in the stern of our boat—that He is never not with us in the midst of our storms.

But even more than that, Paul is telling us something about Jesus Himself the disciples did not understand at that time—but Will did. And I’m not trying to elevate Will to some place of saying he has greater faith than Peter or James and John. What I am saying is that Will’s faith was more informed at the time of his storm than the disciple’s faith was at the moment of theirs. And this should encourage us greatly. There in that boat, they did not understand yet what Jesus had come to do. But we have the blessing of the rest of the story. Lean on the story. Will knew about the cross and the empty tomb. The disciples in the boat did not. Will knew before the storm that he had already been saved. If you do too, you know He loves you.

So Will has died. But Will has not perished. He is in the presence of Jesus—and has been for almost two days now. And there He will remain for all eternity, world without end. The reason he has not perished is because Jesus demonstrated profoundly to Will how much He cares that we were perishing. The very fact that Jesus was physically there in that boat with the disciples in the stern—that He had taken on flesh which grew weary, which a friend could grab hold of and shake in a crisis—assures us of His concern for our perishing. Because it is not ultimately the storm that brings us to perish. Jesus said, “*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*” (Mt 10:28) Notice how the disciples went from fearing the storm to fearing Christ.

It is good and right to revere and fear Christ. He was there in that boat in the flesh because He meant to offer up that flesh—to let His Body be broken and His blood be shed so that we might know life in communion with Him—the kind neither death nor life, angels nor demons, things present nor things to come—can separate us from. When everything in us cries out in the moment of affliction and pain, “*Don’t you care that we’re perishing?*” lean hard on the word of God—**on the whole truth** that not only does He care, but He also knows far better than we do the extent of our peril apart from Him. And not only that, He actually came and did something about it. Revere Him.

He spread out His wings to shelter you. He took your sin upon Himself. He satisfied the righteous demands of God’s wrath toward your sin by taking it upon Himself and dying in your place. He secured your place in His presence by rising from the grave, showing that He has conquered death. When your faith is in Him, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus—nothing. He cared that we were perishing enough to intervene in such a way that we would no longer perish, but have life in His name forever. Will has such life even now.

Are you Perishing?

Will wanted God to be glorified through his life and death. He wanted to serve the Lord and those around him in the name of Christ. So in that spirit, I want to conclude by posing some questions to you I believe he would approve of me asking.

DO YOU DEMAND AN ACCOUNTING FROM GOD FOR THE STORMS IN YOUR LIFE? I don’t pretend to know the struggles Will faced in His last weeks, which were painful. But just five days before He died, I was with him and heard him pray. By this time he had lost much of his memory and his ability to access words. But as Ruth set a bowl of soup before him, he thanked God for that food and for that day—and ate with vigor. Will trusted Christ and never cursed God for his affliction. Is it only during the storms in your life that you call upon Christ for salvation?

Do you demand that God give an account of Himself for the storms you weather? He **HAS** given an account of Himself. He said in John 10:18, “*No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*” All that He came to do—born of a woman, suffering under Pilate—He did intentionally with the authority of God Himself. The account He gives is we were perishing beyond what we could comprehend—and only by living the life we could not live, dying the death we deserved to die, and rising from the grave victorious can we be saved. This was His mission. He succeeded in securing our salvation for all eternity.

ARE YOU PERISHING? Will wanted His life and death to lead people to Christ. It is right to examine ourselves and our own mortality and ask, “*Am I separated from Christ in such a way that if I were to die, I would die without hope in Him as my redeemer, or am I so joined to him by faith that nothing in all creation would be able to separate me from the love of God in Christ?*” Will’s life is a testimony that we can know Christ and trust Him and love Him and lean on Him through great trial. And Will’s faith is a testimony that we can lean hard on the word of God. Do not take this lightly. We need what only Christ can give—reconciliation with the One Who made us.

A Closing Word of Thanksgiving:

We talk often about God being a God Who uses means to make His affection, glory and love known—and I want the people of Oak Hills to know that Will and Ruth, and their families have expressed to me how grateful they are for the people of Oak Hills who have loved them so well. Know that the Lord has been pleased to use this body to bring comfort and counsel to the Reno’s, and they praise God for you—which means you have been a means of grace to this family, and God has gotten the glory for it. May His name be praised among us, may His peace reign over the Reno’s and may His wisdom clothe us all as we continue seeking to love one another well in His name. And may our Lord Jesus Christ come back soon.