

WHEN HE DIED

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Recently, a friend of our family died of Covid-19. It was a shock and great loss. His name was Luis. He was a pastor, skilled tradesman, and family man.

But we learned something important about his death that reduced our sadness. When his sons viewed the body, they saw a big smile on his face. A nurse was amazed, because she had never seen a smile on the face of a corpse. She had witnessed many expressions of terror, anger or pain. But Luis demonstrated peace and joy.

I have been thinking about this. Why did Luis die with a smile on his face?

Paul told us that three experiences on earth will continue in heaven, but infinitely more intensely: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). Luis practiced these virtues as preparation for heaven.

Regarding faith, I imagine this passage from Hebrews 11 applying to Luis now. By faith, he “received [his] commendation” (v. 2). By faith, he “was commended as righteous” (v. 4). And through his faith, “though he died, he still speaks” (v. 5). John Calvin wrote: “When our faith is tested by suffering ‘as gold is tried in a furnace’ and we depend with confidence on God and rely entirely on his help, we will be granted the most excellent gift of patience and through faith we may victoriously persevere to the end.”

Regarding hope, Luis understood “what is the hope to which [Jesus Christ] had called [him]” and “what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Eph 1:18). He is now with Jesus, watching the drama of redemption unfold. But he is also waiting with us on earth “for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). I am reminded of this wonderful statement of Saint Augustine about our hope in heaven:

God himself, who is the Author of virtue, shall be our reward. As there is nothing greater or better than God himself, God has promised us himself. What else can be meant by his words through the prophet, “I will be your God, and you will be my people” than “I shall be their satisfaction, I shall be all that people honorably desire—life, health, nourishment, satisfaction, glory, honor, peace, and all good things?” This, too, is the right interpretation of the saying of the apostle “That God may be all in all.” God shall be the end of all our desires, who will be seen without end, loved without cloy, and praised without weariness.

Regarding love, Luis can now completely and joyfully fulfill Jesus’ commandment “that you love one another” (13:34). Luis is also experiencing this benediction in its fullness: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:14). With the saints in glory, he is flourishing, “being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:2). Jonathan Edwards provided a profound description of what Luis enjoys right now—a world of love. Edwards explained what we ought to learn in preparation for our own deaths:

If you would be in the way to the world of love, see that you live a life of love; of love to God, and love to men. All of us hope to have part in the world of love hereafter, and therefore we should cherish the spirit of love, and live a life of holy love here on earth.

This is the way to be like the inhabitants of heaven, who are now confirmed in love forever. Only in this way can you be like them in excellence and loveliness, and like them, too, in happiness, and rest, and joy. By living in love in this world you may be like them, too, in sweet and holy peace, and thus have, on earth, the foretastes of heavenly pleasures and delights. Thus, also, you may have a sense of the glory of heavenly things, as of God, and Christ, and holiness; and your heart be disposed and opened by holy love to God, and by the spirit of peace and love to men, to a sense of the excellence and sweetness of all that is to be found in heaven. Thus shall the windows of heaven be as it were opened, so that its glorious light shall shine in upon your soul. Thus you may have the evidence of your fitness for that blessed world, and that you are actually on the way to its possession.

Thank you, Luis, for reminding us of these essential lessons about life and death. Your smile showed us what is truly important and what to look forward to in heaven.

There is one other important facet of Luis' story. A while back, before he became sick with the virus, Luis commented to his wife that he wanted God to give his body a smile. He desired that whoever saw his face could see a testimony of God's peace and glory in his expression. He wanted to convey that he had an encounter with our Father.

God answered his prayer.

(When I die, I want to have a big smile on my face like Luis.)