

The Wired Word
Student Handout

Jeff Bridges' Lymphoma Diagnosis Causes Him to Appreciate His Mortality

Sunday, November 8, 2020 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Hybrid Class

In Person: First Floor Social Hall (Mask & Social Distancing Required)

or

Zoom: Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Popular actor Jeff Bridges recently revealed that he has cancer. He used the occasion of that news to tell his fans that his diagnosis has caused him to "appreciate" his mortality and his impermanence. His words give us an opportunity to look at how the Bible addresses the topic of our mortality and to examine our feelings about it. So that will be the topic of our next class.

How To Participate:

We are offering The Wired Word as a hybrid class. You can participate in person or via Zoom. The Wired Word will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. For those meeting in person, we will be in the old social hall of the church building (located on the first floor). If participating in person, please come with a mask and follow the COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Sunday School: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/news.html#COVID19Precautions>.

You can also participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWw0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220

Passcode: 195152

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Jeff Bridges' Lymphoma Diagnosis Causes Him to Appreciate His Mortality

The Wired Word for the Week of November 8, 2020

In the News

Late last month, well-known actor Jeff Bridges revealed publicly that he has been diagnosed with lymphoma and is undergoing treatment for it. He is now providing updates about his health on his personal website jeffbridges.com, where he's also expressed appreciation for all the support he's received from his fans.

"This cancer thing is bringing on feelings of preciousness, & gratitude, & good old fashion love & lots of it, big time," Bridges wrote on his site, where he also shares books, videos, drawings and links to causes and topics that are important to him.

"This cancer is making me appreciate my mortality, appreciate impermanence" (sic), Bridges said.

Bridges is perhaps best known for his iconic role in *The Big Lebowski* (1998). But he earned Academy Award nominations for his roles in *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974), *Starman* (1984), *The Contender* (2000), *True Grit* (2010) and *Hell or High Water* (2016), and won an Oscar and a Golden Globe award for his role in *Crazy Heart* (2010). Bridges has also starred in films including *King Kong* (1976), *Tron* (1982), *Iron Man* (2008), *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (1989), *The Fisher King* (1991) and *Bad Times at the El Royale* (2018).

Lymphoma is a cancer of the lymphatic system, which is part of the body's germ-fighting network. Treatment may involve chemotherapy, immunotherapy medications, radiation therapy, a bone marrow transplant or some combination of these.

More on this story can be found at these links:

['Gratitude & Good Old Fashion Love': Jeff Bridges Shares Lymphoma Updates With His Fans. KCAL Latest. Jeff Bridges](#)

Applying the News Story

"This cancer is making me appreciate my mortality, appreciate impermanence," Bridges wrote (we assume he meant that last word to be "impermanence"). Perhaps some people will find *appreciate* an unusual word choice regarding mortality. It's more common to hear people say that being diagnosed with a serious illness, narrowly escaping death in an accident, having a friend of similar age pass away or otherwise being confronted by the prospect of one's own death has made them *aware* of their mortality -- aware but not necessarily appreciative of it. Some people, in fact, are *haunted* by it.

Mortality is the state of being subject to death. Awareness of one's mortality means that one has come face to face with the fact that one's death is inevitable, maybe not right away and maybe not soon, but eventually. As Bridges said, one's life is intended for impermanence.

The formal name for this awareness of death's inevitability is "mortality salience," with salience meaning "the quality of being noticeable." The mortality salience term derives from terror management theory (TMT), which proposes that awareness of one's mortality causes existential anxiety, but that such anxiety may be buffered by one's sense of self-esteem and/or one's cultural worldview.

TMT holds that individuals with low self-esteem are more apt to experience the effects of mortality salience, whereas individuals with high self-esteem are better able to cope with the idea that their death is beyond their control.

TMT appears to lump such things as religious belief into the "cultural worldview" category, but Christian theology would specify that one's faith in God and commitment to Christ can buffer that anxiety as well, especially given Christianity's teachings about eternal life. At the same time, however, given the difference in emotional and psychological factors from one Christian to another, the fact that one may feel anxious about one's mortality should not be taken as a sign that one's faith in Christ is deficient.

There's a problem with TMT, however, for it *assumes* that contemplating our demise invokes fear and anxiety. We don't believe that is the case for everyone, and Bridges may be one who is not filled with fear. His statement of appreciation for his mortality and his impermanence could be bravado, of course, but it could just as likely be an acceptance without fear or anxiety of what is inevitable. It could also be an expression of gratitude for the reminder about what's really important in life. Bridges has studied Buddhism and practices meditation, which may have a bearing on his outlook regarding his diagnosis. But in any case, along with the announcement of his illness, Bridges wrote "I'm realizing if I have [stuff] to share, now's the time."

This lesson will give us a chance to think about our mortality and consider what the Bible has to say about this matter.

The Big Questions

1. When something causes you to think of your eventual death, what feelings are you aware of?
2. How, if at all, do you think your Christian faith affects your outlook regarding your mortality?
3. What effect, if any, has your view of your mortality had on your decision to follow Jesus? or to not follow Jesus?
4. Has the Covid-19 pandemic had any effect on your thoughts or feelings about your mortality, and if so, what effect?

5. What impact, if any, does your view of your mortality have on how you live your life now? If you knew that you had only a certain number of months left to live, how would you spend that time? Why?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 90:10

The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. (For context, read 90:1-12.)

Several of the biblical writers were clearly conscious of human mortality. The verse above from Psalm 90 is one example, but see also these:

- Job 8:9 - "... for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow."
- Psalm 39:4 - "LORD, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is."
- Ecclesiastes 8:8 (CEB) - "No one has control over the life-breath, to retain it, and there's no control over the day of death."
- James 4:14 - "Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

Questions: What emotions do you suppose the writers of these verses were feeling while composing them? Why? How, if at all, should these verses affect your long-range plans?

1 Corinthians 15:24-26

Then comes the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (For context, read 15:20-28.)

After a discussion about Christ as the first of those raised from the dead (verses 20-23), Paul writes the words above, ending by describing death as an enemy and saying it is the *last* enemy to be destroyed.

It's true that we sometimes hear death described as a friend, usually in cases where a person's suffering cannot be relieved by medication and the individual has no chance of resuming an active life. In those circumstances, death frees the person from suffering and may be viewed as a "friend."

However, Paul calls death an enemy not primarily because it brings an end to one's physical existence, but because he views physical death as the crossing point after which repentance from sin is no longer possible, and thus, for the unrepentant, *spiritual* death occurs, with such persons shut out from eternal life. Thus 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" (Matthew 10:28), and Paul wrote "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Likewise, in speaking about God's kingdom come, Revelation 21:4 says, "Death will be no more."

All of that notwithstanding, it seems clear that for the New Testament writers, the physical death itself of a follower of Christ was not the enemy, but the spiritual death that followed for those who died in an unrepentant state.

Thus Paul could write about his own upcoming death as if it were a friend: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Philippians 1:21), and could say to his fellow believers, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7-8).

Questions: Do you view your own death, whenever it may happen, as a friend or an enemy or something else (specify)? Explain your answer.

Psalm 23:4 (KJV)

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. (For context, read 23:1-6.)

This familiar psalm, so often read at funerals, speaks of the absence of fear possible as one approaches death -- possible because of the presence of God.

Question: What do you hear for yourself in this psalm?

1 Corinthians 15:50-57

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?"

Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (For context, read 15:35-57.)

This is the quintessential New Testament statement about the journey through death for those who die in Christ.

Questions: What is the most mind-boggling statement for you in this passage? Why? What is the most comforting? Why? How might this passage help you as you contemplate your own mortality?

For Further Discussion

1. A [2017 study of all available data about how people feel about dying](#) has indicated that the two groups least afraid of dying are the very religious and atheists. Assuming that is correct, why do you think that is?
2. A youthful subculture known as "Goths" typically favors black clothing, white and black makeup and goth music. One of the common stereotypes of Goths is that they are fixated on death. But [this article](#) says that is an over-simplification. Read the article and respond to its conclusions.
3. A startup called Memories lets you record videos to be sent posthumously, and thus, it seeks to give you more control over your ending. Read [the article about it](#) and respond.
4. William Draper's paraphrase of St. Francis of Assisi's poem *Canticle of the Sun* is known in the English-speaking world as the hymn *All Creatures of Our God and King*. The sixth stanza refers to "kind and gentle Death":

*And thou most kind and gentle Death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise him! Alleluia!
Thou leadest home the child of God,
Where Christ our Lord the way hath trod.*

Refrain:

*O praise him! O praise him!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Many current hymnals omit this stanza from the hymn. What are some possible reasons that this stanza is omitted? How can even a violent death be referred to as “most kind and gentle”?

5. Welsh poet Dylan Thomas' most well-known poem concerns death and our attitude toward it. Thomas advises in the repeated refrains,

*Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

While a Christian can definitely be angry at sin and death, there is comfort in the sure knowledge of the resurrection. Compare and contrast the origins of the attitudes toward death shown by Thomas and by Draper and St. Francis. How can knowledge of their attitudes help your own attitude toward death?

Responding to the News

You might like to learn more by reading "[How the Unrelenting Threat of Death Shapes Our Behavior,](#)" from *The Atlantic*, and then praying about any issues the article raises for you.

Prayer

O God, from whom we come and unto whom we return, be with us when we contemplate our end, and help us to find direction and peace from your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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