

Discussed: wailing, mutilated fingers, volcanoes, home, Lot's wife, Christmas,
forgiveness, repentance

Death and the Blessed Hope

By Matupit Dairus

As I looked through the glass door of the Intensive Care Unit, I noticed that the curtains were closed around the four-year-old girl I had visited earlier that day. When I opened the door, I heard wailing within. As I drew the curtains aside and entered, I saw a nurse removing the life-support machines that had been hooked to the girl.

The mother and the father, both in their late twenties, were wailing beside the lifeless body of the little girl. I put my right arm on the shoulder of the father and listened to him and his wife as they expressed grief over their loss. She was the second of two daughters.

In the typical Papua New Guinea style of wailing, they were talking to their daughter as if she could hear them.

The father said, "Why? Lisa, why did you leave us. I had never refused you anything. I have always given you everything you had asked for. Why, why did you go? You fell ill on Thursday and now you are gone. O, Lisa, I had big plans for you. Why did you leave us?"

By then, the distraught mother was sitting on the bed, cuddling the lifeless

little girl as if to nurse her back to life. "Come back baby. Please, come back baby. My beautiful baby please come back."

I wept with them.

The nurse returned to the room and advised the parents that the body would be taken away. I whispered to the father that I wanted to pray with them before they removed it. So we prayed.

We reminded ourselves of the power of Jesus to heal and save, but I don't know whether they believed it then, especially when the lifeless form of their beloved was lying before them. We also reminded ourselves of our hope that we will see Lisa at the resurrection.

As soon as we ended our prayer, the mother started wailing again. "Lisa, my Lisa, so many good people had gone on

the path you're taking. It's OK, but why didn't you say goodbye to me. This hurts me most, my Lisa."

There on the bed was the lifeless body of Lisa. The color of her body hadn't changed. She looked normal, as if taking a short nap. Three days earlier, she was normal when she had awakened in morning. Her father told me that he had taken her to the hospital later that day because her hands were stiff. In the hospital, she suffered from shortness of breath. She died that Saturday evening.

As I looked at the body, I reminded myself that it was the symbol of Satan's control in our planet. The parents' loud wailing was their way of protesting against death's control over their small family. But their protest amounted to nothing. It was powerless against the cold clutches of death. Their loud wailing could not bring Lisa back to life.

I come from a different culture. I am not familiar with the way you express your grief and sorrow at the death of loved ones. Allow me to share a bit more about our way of grieving in Papua New Guinea before I discuss the blessed hope.

You see, those who are not suffering—those who have everything—don't care about the return of Jesus. The return of Jesus is good news only to those not satisfied with this life. The return of Jesus is the blessed hope only to those who are hurting. They want something radically different from what this life offers.

In my culture, men and women grieve openly. Often, the body of the deceased will stay at home overnight before it is buried. Relatives will come from miles around and sleep in the house. Tarpaulins are usually put up to accommodate those who can't fit into the house. It is our way of saying farewell to the deceased.

During burial, people wail as if they had never seen death before. They openly wail and mourn as if death is a new horror. They grieve in a way that shows their hopelessness and helplessness in the face of death.

Because of sin, death has become a natural part of our six thousand years of human existence. We can't run away from it. It overshadows us from birth until we take our last breath. This situation is ironic. Even though death is a natural part of our human existence, somehow our whole being has not accepted it. Our wailing is our natural way of protesting.

Death is a horror that none of the world's cultures has conquered. All have come up with elaborate practices and rituals to cushion its blow, but

none has been able to solve it.

If we live for another million years, we will never accept death because it was never a part of God's plan. We were created to live forever in happiness with our Creator. Somehow, something somewhere deep within all humans—regardless of cultural background—protests that death is not part of our existence. Something within us longs for something better.

In some parts of my country, it is common to see older men and women with missing or mutilated fingers. These are tallies of death. When a child dies, parents in their grief will knock off a finger by hitting it with a stone against a rock. The number of missing or mutilated fingers indicates the number of children lost. It is a painful way of showing grief.

Death is a painful thing. Some weeks ago, I was talking to a friend who had a mutilated finger. He told me that his mother chopped it off to prevent him from dying. He said that his older brother had died in infancy, so when he was born his mother cut off his little finger with a sharp knife. That was her way of trying to prevent death.

The way people deal with death in my culture has taught me one truth. It has taught me that humans are protesting separation from their Creator and source of life. We don't realize it. But the way we deal with death is a loud and clear message to our Creator and to the entire universe that we are helpless and hopeless under the rule of Satan.

Heathens may turn their backs on God and deliberately worship Satan and his demons. They may offer him elaborate sacrifices, including their lives, but when death comes around, they bitterly wail. By their wailing, they unwittingly admit that they are not happy with things. They are, in effect, calling upon God to act quickly to eradicate sin and death.

In 1994, two volcanoes erupted in my hometown. The eruption destroyed the town and the surrounding villages so the people had to live in care centers further inland. My people are coastal people. They grew up with the sound of waves and seagulls, with the smell of dried seaweed and drift-



wood. They were restless away from home.

They yearned to return to their villages along the coast. They yearned to hear the sound of the waves, the cry of the sea gulls. They longed for the smell of the sea.

I worked in that area a short period at that time. During that period, I conducted and attended more funerals than I ever had before. The displaced people could not cope with the situation.

There are so many displaced people in the world today. There are thousands in Asia displaced by the

ous body." We long for the day when we will have new bodies immune to death, diseases, old age, and degeneration. We long to see Jesus, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will no longer respond to sin and evil.

But unfortunately, some of us are getting too comfortable in our land of exile, just as Jews in Babylon did who had no plans of going back to Jerusalem. The return of Jesus is not a blessed hope for such people. They see his return as an unwelcome disruption of their happiness and way of life.

**“Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself,
just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).**

tsunami of December 2004. There are thousands in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa, and South America displaced by political conflict and economic crisis. There are people from New Orleans displaced by the storm in September. These people yearn to return to their homes.

The apostle Paul tells us that we have all been displaced. We do not even belong to the place we call home.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like his glorious body. (Phil. 3:20–21)

Our hearts ache. We tremble at death and are uneasy about life because we do not belong here. We were made for intimate relationship with God. So, with the rest of creation, we “have been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time...[W]e groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:22–23).

We cry at death because we have been displaced by sin. We are restless and want the day to come soon when we will be reunited with our Creator. Many of us have learned from experience that the promise of the return of Jesus is sweeter when death takes away a spouse, a child, or a close friend.

We long for the day when Jesus “will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like his glori-



Like Lot's wife, they have become comfortable even though they live in a neighborhood of rape, perverted morality, and degradation. They do not want to leave modern Sodom and Gomorrah, and they are prepared to burn with it.

If we inwardly wish that Jesus will delay his coming, we are in danger of becoming like Lot's wife. We need to reexamine our relationship with Jesus. What is it that makes you to wish for Jesus to delay his coming?

If you have a problem with someone, you will not feel comfortable when that person is around. You will avoid contact. Or if you cannot avoid that person, you will avoid all eye contact. So why are we silently wish-

ing that Jesus will delay his return? What is hindering our relationship with him?

Some years ago, I attended a seminar organized by a government body. One of the presenters was a young woman. While we were having lunch, she muttered; "I wish Christmas would come quickly." The next day, I heard her say the same thing several times.

I was curious, so I asked why she felt that the days weren't moving fast enough. With a big smile she said; "I am getting married at Christmas and I can't wait to be with my future husband."

Anyone who is in love with Jesus can't help but anticipate his return. That person will truly see the return of Jesus as the blessed hope. They will be actively involved in preparing himself or herself to meet Jesus. As the apostle John puts it; "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3).

That is what Adventism is all about. When the spiritual ancestors of our faith heard that Jesus was returning in 1844, they took it very seriously. They preached it in such a way that it changed the hearts of listeners. The sermons exhorted people to repent and prepare to meet God in 1844.

Often during sermons, people would leave and seek out others they had wronged. They confessed their sins in genuine repentance and sought forgiveness of those they had wronged. They struggled long hours in prayer for forgiveness. They wanted to be right with God; they didn't want to be ashamed when Jesus arrived. They wanted to be able to say, "This is our God we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:9).

May the hope of the return continue to challenge and spur us on to attempt greater things for Jesus. May our eyes continue to focus on that grand event. And may our expectation for that event radically change our lives.

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