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### **1 Samuel 20:1–3, ESV.**

*20 Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan, “What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?”<sup>2</sup> And he said to him, “Far from it! You shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. And why should my father hide this from me? It is not so.”<sup>3</sup> But David vowed again, saying, “Your father knows well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he thinks, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.’ But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.”*

### **1 Samuel 20:1–3, NRSVue.**

*20 David fled from Naioth in Ramah. He came before Jonathan and said, “What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin against your father that he is trying to take my life?”<sup>2</sup> He said to him, “Far from it! You shall not die. My father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me, and why should my father hide this from me? Never!”<sup>3</sup> But David also swore, “Your father knows well that you like me, and he thinks, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, or he will be grieved.’ But truly, as the LORD lives and as you yourself live, there is but a step between me and death.”*

### **But a step.**

Today’s passage is from both the English Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version, updated edition. I’m going to get back to why I have included this passage from two different translations. It has to do with the Hebrew word *naḵ-še-kā*. First, let’s look at the story behind today’s quote. The two Samuel

Books, along with Joshua and Judges, tell of the Israelites entering Canaan, their promised land; the story continues on to describe their forced deportation by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. Saul was the first King of Israel and David was his successor. David is a small, faithful, poor shepherd boy who, armed only with a slingshot, kills the mighty giant Goliath. Goliath was a Philistine, and the term Philistine has become synonymous with any culture or individual that is uncouth, ignorant, or uncontrollably violent. The Philistines and the Israelites were longstanding enemies. The Philistines were an expansionist people, and they constantly clashed with the Israelites. The two nations fought a series of wars that stretched out for almost a century. At first, the Philistines proved more powerful, but ultimately, the Israelites pushed them back. However, later, the Assyrian Empire overwhelmed both Israel and the Philistine nation vassal states.

Let's look at David versus Goliath. Here is a quote from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, Chapter 17:

*The Philistines gathered their armies for battle. <sup>2</sup> Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me." <sup>37</sup> And David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you!"*

It would seem that Saul wasn't too worried about what might happen to David.

But this is what happened:

*49 David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground. 51 Then David ran and stood over the Philistine and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head with it. When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled.*

This led to the rise of David as a future king of Israel. Later, in Chapter 19, Saul plots against David. Jonathan is the eldest son of Saul. He befriends David and remains loyal to him. He will eventually be killed, along with Saul and Jonathan's brothers, by the Philistines. Jonathan is a heroic figure who gives the young David his own bow, armor, and robe. As David's name grows in minds of the People of God, Saul becomes envious, and he falls out of favor with God. Jonathan urges his father to not have David killed. Saul seems to relent, but later, he sends people to find David, and Saul himself goes hunting for David. Saul has become suspicious even of his own son, Jonathan, because of Jonathan's love for David.

*20 Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?" 2 And he said to him, "Far from it! You shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. And why should my father hide this from me? It is not so." 3 But David vowed again, saying, "Your father knows well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he thinks, 'Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.' But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death."*

We see that David flees. He asks Jonathan why his father wants to kill him, and David knows that Saul is aware of the friendship between David and Jonathan.

Knowing that he is in grave danger, David says: *“But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.”* He’s making a point about his own dangerous circumstance – but he is also making a point that pertains to all of us. We are indeed a step away from death. At all times.

My father was a great lover of dogs; over my childhood, our family owned at least ten dogs. When I was a little boy, my father took one of our dogs to be put down. It was old and sick, and on his way out, my dad found me outside playing. I can’t remember the dog’s name, but my father wanted me to have a chance to say goodbye. I believe it was a spaniel mix. As I put my hand on the dog’s head one last time, and nuzzled it with my face, I remember looking up and seeing my father’s eyes. He was very sad. He had led a tough life, with no father, a poor mother, growing up in a dangerous neighborhood, then serving as a Marine sergeant in World War II. But even he had trouble dealing with loss, with change. Naively, you might think that when we lose a fellow human, we’ll somehow be happier, knowing that that person is with God for eternity. But we simply feel a greater sense of loss. My father was one of the godliest and kindest people I ever met, and though he had lived a faithful life, when my father died years later, I was still very sad.

There are valid reasons why we fear death, whether it is our own, that of a loved one, or even that of a beloved pet. First, it is often a surprise, and we don’t

like having a sense of loss of control, of living with an unknown. Second, death threatens to take from us all that is familiar to us. We all know that we can take nothing physical with us from this world when we die. No matter how much we have collected or obtained or accumulated, it all disappears the instant we die. As a chaplain, I can say that often the people who take death with the greatest calm are those who have the least to lose in this world. Third, we're not born in paradise, and as Christians we know that there is a part of death that is a punishment, a penalty for humans being imperfect. We must wait, and we must die to get there. Fourth, and maybe this is the deepest reason for those of us who have faith: death ruptures the bond between our eternal souls and our physical bodies. It is a brutal reckoning. It marks the end of a relationship that has defined us our entire lives. We have always been both a body and a soul – but no longer.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, after Jesus foretells that Peter will deny Jesus three times, and just before the arrest of Jesus, Jesus declares the following:

**14** *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to where I am going.*

It has been a core Christian belief, since the earthly life of Jesus, that we do not have to fear death – yet we do. The truth is that much of what we think is not

under conscious control. We can't help but fear the most dramatic change any of us will ever undergo, given that we, as human beings tend to be afraid of change in general. We are all going to have to sever that relationship between our bodies and our souls, and it means that everything will change. Our control over our immediate environment will end. We will lose all that we seem to have on Earth. We will become what we were always meant to be and what we will be forever.

We must be prepared for death. There is a quote in the Gospel of Matthew that comes in a series of parables, before the plot to kill Jesus unfolds. Jesus says:

*<sup>36</sup> "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. <sup>37</sup> For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. <sup>42</sup> Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

Here is the context of this passage. Jesus has been talking about the End Times, when he will return for the final time. Intriguingly, he says that even he doesn't know when this will happen. Perhaps he only means that the human side of him doesn't know. But it does hammer home two things: first, most of us cannot predict our own deaths. Second, none of us can predict the dawn of the end of

time. In either case, we must be ready, *for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*. If the End Times is indeed a literal event, when one generation of humans will be alive when all human life comes to an end, then there will be people whose time on Earth will end at that time. For the rest of humanity, we will simply die in lone, individual events. Either way, we do need to be prepared. Yes, we are anxious about death because it is the greatest transition any of us will ever experience, one which forces us to let go of everything we have ever known here on Earth. But we should also be concerned about where we are spiritually when that event happens. It should be a far greater source of concern for us.

Let's get back to our Bible passage. I included two translations, one from the ESV which quotes the fleeing David as saying: *"But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death."* The other, from the NRSVue, quotes David as saying: *"But truly, as the LORD lives and as you yourself live, there is but a step between me and death."* Those are different. But what does the original Hebrew in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel say, *"as your soul lives"* or *"as you yourself live"*? In the first case, David seems to be focusing on one's eternal soul, and in the other, he seems to be focusing on one's physical life on Earth. Here's the answer. It is slightly ambiguous, because referring to a soul can be a mystical way of

referring to a person; we speak this way today. But the word is indeed soul. The ESV has it right. The word is *naḵ-še-kā*. In Hebrew it means “your soul”.

Maybe that’s the real point. Rather than being concerned about our physical deaths, we all do know that our focus should be on never dying spiritually. But I believe that God made us with a fear of physical death for a very good - and a very godly reason. You see, we’re not here with no purpose. We’re here to love God, love all people, and grow our own faith and the faith of those around us. We are here to be the hands and voices of God. Perhaps making us fear death is God’s way of reminding us that we have important things to do on this planet before we die. We should be joyous, knowing that God created us with such an important purpose, with a specific reason - that God wants us to be afraid of dying before we live out that reason. We are a brilliant light, lit by God – and yes, while we are here, we don’t just breathe and eat and sleep. Rather, we live out our glorious purpose.

When my father came back from putting that dog down – which he did personally, rather than paying someone with too much college education to do for him - he wasn’t sad. I remember being surprised. It wasn’t because he was callous. That dog did mean a lot to him. He did love it dearly. But he had given that dog a good life. That dog never worried about death. Most of us do not believe that

animals go to Heaven. However, in Isaiah 11, the author gives us a vision of the end of time. Here is a piece of it. It's written as poetry:

- 6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,  
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;  
and a little child shall lead them.*
- 7 The cow and the bear shall graze;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*
- 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,  
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.*
- 9 They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.*

This strongly suggests that there are animals in the afterlife. So maybe my father is in Heaven right now, with a beloved dog. But while animals don't worry about death, we do. For a reason. God has created us in God's image, and this is an extremely powerful and blessed gift. We should celebrate this every day we are alive – and yes, we won't always be alive, not here on Earth. When we die, our goal is to tell God that we did indeed live out that purpose given to each of us.

Please pray with me. *God, help us prepare for death. We will never learn to not fear it. That is part of being human, part of being alive. But when the day comes and we leave this temporary home, please help us to ensure that at that time, we are very much spiritually alive. Amen.*