

Requiescat in Pace ~ Jacob Austin Howell
May 16, 1996 ~ August 9, 2022

Isaiah 52:13—53:12
Ephesians 2:1-10
Luke 5:17-32

Death is not a toothless enemy. Death is ugly, harsh, cruel. God created us to live. God is the living and life-giving Lord of life. Death is a robber, a felon, a merciless tyrant who knows only how to take. Too many are becoming nihilists in this late age. A nihilist is one who rejects all religious and moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless. That is a dark place; a twisted and dark philosophy is gaining ground in the minds of many. Satan is the lord of all that is dark and empty and hopeless. Satan is a real enemy. His weapons are not growing rusty. He uses them with too much regularity for them to grow rusty. There is evil in this world and evil is perpetually hungry.

Tragedy has befallen the Howell family. It is heart-breaking. Loss; tragic and senseless loss has come like a tsunami; first Mistee and now Jacob. And here we are, in a church, attempting to find consolation, hope, perspective. Timothy and Teena are the most beleaguered. But don't all of you want answers? Doesn't every single one of you need to frame your mind in light of this loss to become stronger, wiser, more capable of navigating this broken world? Let's start with how you are feeling. The question has likely come into everyone's mind: "What more could I have done?" It's a good question. If you have asked yourself this then it shows that your heart is more than a granite slab, cold and indifferent. "What more could I have done?" is a question of love, a question that is born of a desire to intervene, a desire to save. Cain killed his brother Abel in the field. God asked Cain a rhetorical question: "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain, the possessor of a granite slab for a heart, replied in a snarky fashion: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

Could any of you have kept either Mistee or Jacob from death? Addiction is a nightmare, a cruel affliction. Those who are close to those who are addicted, who love them and are tied to them experience radical deceit, senseless choices, and a wide assortment of attending psychological pathologies. Addiction is a hole that often spurns a helping-hand. The addicted know their condition; they sometimes deny it but deep down they can't. Self-recrimination is regular and harsh. We are our brother's keeper. Pity, love, allegiance – those are remarkable gifts that we extend to those in the grip of addiction. Allowing them to face the repercussions of their choices while loving them and showing them a better way, is that not what we all aspire to? We need each other. Our families are to remain in solidarity with each member; no one is excluded.

All this stems from something greater than any of us; something that is true and solid and lasting and beautiful and good. If you are going to frame your mind around this tragedy then I invite you to follow me down this simple path, a series of questions that has this day, your family and both Mistee and Jacob in view. Who does Christ save and why does He save them? Who does God love and why does He love them? For whom did Christ die and why does He die for them? God knows what death is. He, more than any other, is familiar with it. The Lord Christ knows

the gravity of death, its potency, its reach and its limits. You need saving from death; you and every other human that has ever taken a breath. Only One can save you. God became man for this express purpose – to intervene definitively, to save you from death, eternal death. Do you know why? Do you know why Mighty God would humble Himself and take on the form of a servant? Because His heart compels Him to act; because He loves you, He loves me and every other sinner on this planet.

God loves the troubled, the lost, those stuck in their own sin and their own lostness. He comes for them. The Lord Christ was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger 2000 years ago to save Jacob and Mistee from death and the grave. An active love, Jesus lived the perfect life for all of us who so clearly can't. Christ saves sinners; not the mildly dysfunctional or the religiously pure, whatever that is. Jesus saves those who are majorly sick and can't fix themselves. That's you and that's me and that's Jacob and Mistee. Grace; He gives us something we don't deserve and could never earn. He takes the initiative and draws us out of our hole. Do you know why? Because He loves us. He loves us with a tender, Fatherly love – not because we are so lovable but because He is our Father and will always be our Father. His love gives us His Son.

Jesus knows what death is. He wept at His friend's tomb; Lazarus, a man who was dear to Him. Jacob was dear to Jesus. Christ died for Jacob Austin Howell. Jesus' death was horrific. Nailed to a cross, mocked, spit upon, cursed and whipped, and crowned with thorns. And all of your sin was put on Him because in order to save you He had to bear it. Love does that. Love lays down His life for His friends. Look at Jesus on the cross and tell me that God is not committed to us. A dead Messiah is God's solution to us being lost. And then He rose. Alive and reigning over earth and heaven, death is defeated, heaven is open, life is the victor. On the deepest of levels, evil is vanquished. That's the world we live in. That's the love that is all around you now. That is the word of truth that brings meaning to everyone who hears it, believes it, cherishes it. Jesus raised dead Lazarus. The Son of God died and rose again for Jake Howell. That is the truth!

Do you know that the word of the Gospel creates faith? Did you know that the word of the Gospel brings hope? Those people you love, tell them of Christ. Tell those you love about the love that *God has*, the love that *God gives*, the love that died and rose again. What more could I have done? Do you remember the question? Give to others the hope that never disappoints, the hope that animates the heart and lifts us above our circumstances. Whatever Mistee went through at the end must have been horrific but Christ was there; He knows. Whatever happened with Jacob on the night of his death, Christ was there, with His death and resurrection, with His love and His grace. It is true and it needs to be said. It is true and it needs to be heard. It is true and it needs to be believed. It needs to be acted on in our lives. We are our brother's keeper. We bless them by turning their attention to One who created us in His image, who shed His royal blood to make us holy, and who longs to take care of us like a shepherd takes care of his sheep.

I beg you, have your children baptized. Teach them to pray, especially the Lord's Prayer. Show others that men who are truly strong confess their sins and humbly walk with Christ. Show others that women who are deeply feminine are those who look to Christ as their head and don't imitate a vulgar culture that is hypersexualized. We are here only a short time. Life is fleeting and none of us knows the day or the hour when our time on this earth will end. What we do know is that the Son of God is His brother's keeper – that means you and me. When Jesus saw

the paralytic brought to Him by the man's friends what He saw was faith, a faith that God Himself had breathed into them by His Word. "Man, your sins are forgiven you." That forgiveness is the greatest treasure any of us could ever have. To see the reality of His authority to forgive sins into the minds of His detractors, Jesus healed the paralytic. "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home."

On that dark road, on that lonely and tragic road, Jesus was bringing Jake to Himself. Come to me Jacob and I will give you rest. Rise and come home, Jacob, for I have prepared a place for you. Your pilgrimage on earth is over and death has no sting. Rise and come home, for you are loved, you are forgiven and you have my life. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." In my mind's eye I see the Lord saying this to Jake and then asking: "Do you believe this?" And Jake, full of faith, replies: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." Trust that! Believe that for it is most certainly true.