

A Christian View of Death and Dying

A tsunami kills 200,000 people around the periphery of the Indian Ocean. A hurricane cuts a path of death through the Caribbean. An earthquake kills 75,000 men, women and children in Kashmir in a single minute. Millions perish from preventable diseases. AIDS grips nations. A child steps into the path of a car reversed down the driveway by her parents; the court rules “accidental” but it cannot bring back the loved one. A teenager slams his car into the only tree on a stretch of highway. A politician takes his life amid scandal. A drug trafficker dies on the gallows amid calls for clemency. Cancer strikes the rich and famous, as well as the poor and obscure. Advances in medicine mean that human existence can be prolonged, but only marginally; if not cut short prematurely, eventually the body simply wears out.

All this talk about death sounds gloomy and depressing. Many people don't like to talk about it. However, death is an inevitable part of life. As Christians we need to have Biblical responses that are both empathetic and realistic (Romans 12:15). Only then will people listen and consider opening their hearts to the message. If we are to be relevant, as Christians, we must have sensible answers for those who want to know what we believe about our mortality and how it affects the way we live. Everyone needs hope.

Death is everywhere

Death is all around us. In Western cultures we tend (or prefer) not to think about it much, until it touches a loved one, or a doctor or official delivers pessimistic news like, “the tumor is growing and medical intervention is no longer viable”. Spades of talent, decades of education, shared life experiences, accumulated knowledge and wisdom, hopes, dreams, plans, carefully cultivated friendships and loving extended families, fantastic (and mediocre) relationships, possessions and debts, achievements, good people, caring people, bad people, happy people, sad people all extinguished in a moment. Are you ready for it to happen to those you love? To you?

For millions, life is pointless. Shakespeare (*Macbeth* Act 5, Scene 5) said:

“Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

To some people, life is just like a bad play, a lousy plot and then we die. Is that how you feel at times? (There are also highlights to celebrate.)

Benjamin Franklin said that two things are certain: death and taxes. Even the most skilful tax evaders cannot prolong their lives. Wealthy, busy, famous, talented people experience death; we all do; often when it is most inconvenient. I worked with a colleague who had “no time” to rest, until he died of a heart attack at work. (No job is worth a person's life.) Another made elaborate plans about how he would spend his retirement years, but died within months of leaving the workforce. Ancient redwoods, and giants in the rainforest, eventually fall and decay. I have stood and mourned them, once dwarfed by their grandeur, sobered by the reality that even giants die.

Death strips us of our busy schedules, dignity and earthly possessions (Job 1:21; 1 Timothy 6:7). A friend of mine says that “No one, at the end of his (or her) life, lies on their death bed wishing they had spent more time in the office”. Death puts an end to our pet projects (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

In some cultures, death is unavoidably visible. I have spent time in villages in Latin America where the infant mortality rate is among the highest in the world. It is hard not to notice lines of short mounds of earth in places of burial. In the West, we are largely removed from death; it is hidden; mortality is swallowed up in façades. However, only a couple of generations ago, the likelihood of dying in infancy in relatively developed societies was much higher. My grandfather was one of twenty-four children, two of whom died as babies. Several of my family’s women friends would have died in childbirth, through hemorrhaging, shock and other complications less than a hundred years ago. Work places are more dangerous than the jungle in many countries. Parents in the West grieve deeply when they bury their children, but such an order is not uncommon in any countries. Married people expect to grow old with their spouses, but that is a luxury afforded to relatively few.

Civil war, international conflict, genocide, pandemics, homicide and accidents at home remind us of the transitory nature of life. It is a one-way journey. Hieroglyphic stories that festoon the walls surrounding mummified bodies in the Egyptian Museum tell of death, judgment and the afterlife. Wealthy officials used to be buried with their servants and supplies of food to sustain them during their journey to the supposed afterlife. (This may have given comfort to those facing death, but definitely not their slaves.) Hoping for reincarnation, Hindu woman in India used to be encouraged to leap into the cremation flames of their husbands (suttee), in the hope of sharing the next stage of life with them – some still follow this practice.

Life expectancy in many parts of the world has increased out of sight in the past decades, but this is no guarantee we will be given “overtime”. If only we could forever remain young, or slow down the aging process. Spanish explorers in the New World (among them one Juan Ponce de Leon) sought in vain for a fabled “Fountain of Youth”, said to be located somewhere in Florida. Modern quacks selling elixirs designed to preserve youth make fortunes from those for whom aging and death are the worst enemies of all. Others refuse to accept that the “real them” will cease to be, so they seek genetic options for ensuring they exist through others in perpetuity. We cannot defer death.

Families of the dying seek to prolong their existence through elaborate life support systems. (Who wouldn’t?) Optimists talk about preserving their bodies in conditions that will allow them to be brought back to life if and when medical science discovers how to do so. Wishful thinking. Medical science is limited. The giving of life is God’s prerogative alone (Job 1:21).

People respond differently when confronted with death. Some joke about it. The Irish have a reputation for turning funerals into parties. Others give the impression they think they are immortal, or, accepting death is inevitable, become hedonistic. “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die” (cf Isaiah 22:13b; 1 Corinthians 15:32).

Others are escapists, submerging the inescapable fact of death in busy lifestyles or mausoleums. Many cultures have elaborate rituals to cope with the reality of death and to honour or placate the dead, particularly ancestors.

The late Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (who was not writing from a Christian world view but was nevertheless exploring issues everyone was asking) wrote a number of books about coping with death. The best known, "On Death and Dying" (1969), has sold millions of copies and is still popular. In all walks of life people want to know how to "get ready".

Christians and the inevitability of death

Christians experience death just like everyone else. I vividly recall attending the funeral of a church member in Peru. I had never before seen a dead person. The lid of the coffin was raised and we all stood around, watching, reflecting on the body of the church elder lying there. He had gone from our lives. Whatever he originally wanted to do, it was now too late. Around the same time, I met a drug user who had fallen from one of Lima's cliffs to the sea level. He wore coloured badges. "I thought I was in Morocco", he intoned, his eyes glassy, "I decided to walk into the water and I fell off the edge." He was carrying a book entitled "Death on the Cliff". Life is unpredictable. We will all die, regardless of our station in life (Job 30:23; Psalm 49:10).

Jesus wept at the graveside of a friend (John 11:25). Christians weep at funerals, just like most other people. We experience the anguish of loved ones who have "passed on", the sense of loss, sometimes meaningless when those who die are young and had their futures ahead of them. Go to any cemetery and walk along the rows of graves. You will see from the headstones (3 months, 96 years, 42 years, 9 days) that death is no respecter of age. Christians have euphemisms for death, just like everyone else. Terms like "kick the bucket" or "snuff it" are changed to "gone to be with the Lord", "promoted to glory", "with Jesus". When it has been my melancholy duty to organise funerals for family members or conduct services for church people I have been surprised at the number of options available. (Not to mention a vast array of coffins and associated funerary paraphernalia "for your loved ones" – death is big business.)

Whatever non-Christians think of our theologies, they know death is the great leveler (cf Job 1:21, 3:17-19). When confronted by a death sentence (whether medical or judicial) non-believers often find themselves praying. Self-assurance is not enough. It is not uncommon for people on Death Row to "find religion". But every death is tragic. Every life is cut short. Denials, such as "There is no God", dissolve as reliable refuges. For many people the proximity of death gives rise to fear. For others, profound sadness and regret remain, regret for lost opportunities, for loss of future, for what remains undone and unsaid. We love life so much it is hard to let go. But the end of life is too late in the day to start regretting. There must be something else.

Life is likened to the seasons. "Spring" speaks of youth, "winter" of old age, approaching the "setting of the sun". The future is soon in the past. *Time Magazine* ran an article about an aging Billy Graham, entitled "A Christian in Winter". When the evangelist was asked by the journalist what he thought was his life's biggest surprise, he replied, "How quickly it is over". Great men and women of God die; enemies of Christian faith do likewise.

My young brother died at 28 years of age. Working in the sun, unprotected from its toxic rays, he developed a mole that turned cancerous. By the time the doctors removed the melanoma that developed it had metastasized and triggered a tumor on his brain. Radical surgery failed to remove all of the growth and he was given six months to live. A few months later he slipped into a coma and died. As a Christian I agonized over why he had gone, so young. In principle, I knew he was in Heaven. I didn't blame God, but I had prayed sincerely for his healing and nothing had happened. My brother's premature death forced me to look more closely at what I really believed. I remember walking the street late at night, praying "Why, God?" People who knew him from his volunteer work in the church had gathered to ask God to remove the cancer, but it appeared that nothing good had come of that, there was no miraculous recovery. How was I to interpret God's "silence"?

I last saw him lying on a stainless steel stretcher in a cold hospital morgue. Strangely, the first thing I noticed was that "he" was not there. When doctors undertook an autopsy and discovered traces on cancer in every vital organ, they did not find "him". For the first time in my life I realized empirically that what the Bible said was true, in that the dead body is only a "shell". (I had long known that intellectually, as a statement of the church, but no death had struck our family for more than a quarter of a century. It all seemed to be happening "elsewhere".)

Paul, in the New Testament, calls our human bodies "tents" (2 Corinthians 5:1-4). Standing in the hospital, and later at the graveside, I felt great admiration for my brother; he had faced death and gone through the door. When his coffin was placed in the ground I grieved. Christians are not immune from sadness, however we are "not like those who do not have hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). He was not there. I had the same feelings when my parents died, a few years later. I felt, I knew, they were not there, as I stood looking down into the earth when their caskets were buried. Their hearts and brains had ceased to function, but they were not "dead"; their spirits had gone to be with Jesus. When my father, whom I loved more than any other man in the world, went to be with Jesus I felt an incredible sadness, but I knew he wasn't suffering any more and that I would see him again.

Muslims believe the deceased are judged in the grave. The Bible teaches that judgment follows death (Hebrews 9:27), though not immediately. However, for Christians, there is no fear of condemnation. That moment is not one of uncertainty, because Jesus took our sin and punishment when he died in our place, on the cross. Jesus came into our time and space, died on the cross, was buried and rose again to show us (among other things) that there is life beyond the moment of physical expiration, but that we don't have to fear it. He "destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). That's why the Gospel literally means "Good News". The Christian message is a message of life and hope.

Biologically, from the moment we are born we begin to die. Only two people in the Bible did not die (Enoch and Elijah were miraculously taken up into God's presence). Everyone else died, even those whom Jesus miraculously raised from the grave. When Jesus was crucified he died physically. He has been there; He knows what it is like. The Bible tells us that He tasted death for everybody (Hebrews 2:9).

The Bible warns us to “remember our creator when we are young”, before it is too late (Ecclesiastes 12:1). Death will follow, as surely as night follows day. After that, there is no going back. There are no opportunities for repentance or salvation beyond the grave. Concepts such as “a second chance after death,” and “baptism for the dead,” are without foundation in the Bible.

A Biblical theology of death

What is the Biblical view of death? How do we cope, as believers in Jesus? Do we blame God or hang onto Him? Do the Christian message and community offer anything more substantial than societies without faith? Does the support network of other Christians really work?

The Bible teaches that we are made to live eternally. Death is not the end; it is merely a portal from one type of existence to another. For Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, the certainty of physical, personal resurrection was what made Christianity different from every other religion. It gives hope and certainty. (The human story is filled with quests for hope.)

I have observed communities in Asia where relatives believe their departed family members come back in other life forms, going through a seemingly endless cycle of rebirths, or reincarnations, looking for perfection. Everyone hopes their accumulated acts of kindness will guarantee that the form in which they return is better, not worse, than the last time.

What does the Bible say about death? As to the reason for death, the record is clear. The first man and woman (and their descendants) were designed to live forever, in the presence of God, with His continual blessing. Sin in the Garden changed all of that (Romans 5:12). This, rather than the mere fact of death, is the great tragedy. “The world lies under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Death is one of the signs of a fallen human condition.

Since then, death and decomposition have held people in a grip of terror. The writer of the Psalms exclaimed: “The terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me. And horror has overwhelmed me” (Psalm 55:4-5). Fear of the unknown. Fear of suffering that results in death. Bildad, a friend of Job, spoke about death as the “king of terrors” (Job 18:14). Spiritualists try to communicate with the dead, to find out about the state of loved ones and to provide assurance about the unknown. Death is final. Without God, hope dies and despair reigns.

However, the Christian message offers a different outcome.

Jesus Christ said He was the “resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). He came to set us free from the fear of death and to give us hope (Hebrews 2:15). He has abolished eternal death for those who believe in Him and will one day destroy physical death (1 Corinthians 15:26). There will be no death in Heaven (Luke 20:26, Revelation 21:4).

The Apostle Paul wrote that, “to be absent from the body (ie deceased) is to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). That’s a different perspective. Most of us enjoy life; very few of us are eager to leave. Paul spoke of the “earthly tent being dissolved by death (2 Corinthians 5:1).

The Bible teaches us that this life is short and that we had better not become too attached to it. We need a permanent anchor. People without an anchor feel that life drifts from one tragedy to another, that life is “unfair”. Sure. Life is not fair. There is no equality. It is not our “human right” not to die.

This is not the way it was all meant to turn out. Suffering and death were not God’s original plan. That said, the death and resurrection of Jesus have made a new outcome possible. The Bible describes those who die in a right relationship with God as being “blessed” (Revelation 14:13). The physical death of a Christian is highly valued in the sight of God (Psalm 116:15). (The Good News for Modern Man version puts it in a different way: "How painful it is to the Lord when one of His people dies.") Good people do die, but when the Christian dies he or she goes straight to be their Heavenly Father. No detours, no probation (no purgatory), no conditions attached.

For the Christian, death is not “the end”, but the end of the beginning. Death is described in the Bible as “falling asleep” (John 11:11, 1 Corinthians 15:6). Jesus has taken away its sting and victory in His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55). Furthermore, God has given us the Holy Spirit in this life as a “deposit”, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 5:5). Instead of feeling lonely, we know he is with us; he will never leave us (Psalm 23:4).

One day you and I are going to see the face of Jesus and bow down and worship Him. Everything we have experienced and not understood is going to make sense. There will be no more cancer, AIDS, heart disease, malnutrition, or war. No more toothache, backache or heartache. No more funerals or separation. Death is part of the staging process. We belong on this earth as long as God wills it and there is work for us to do (Philippians 1:21-26); after that we will make the transition to Heaven. The clear message that should be coming from the church should be one of realism and hope, to counter the prevailing despair and speak life into hopeless situations. Let’s live in hope.

Celebrating life

My father had a friend who was a missionary. One day, as he returned home with his family, a great crowd waited at the passenger terminal. There were journalists and photographers and a press to reach the front and capture sound bites for television. What a reception! But the crowd was not waiting for them. Instead, a famous movie star stepped up to the podium and the onlookers hurried in her direction. One of the children turned to her father and said, “You have been working for God all your life. You’ve suffered and made enormous sacrifices. Why isn’t this reception for you?” Turning to his daughter the father smiled and replied, “We are not home yet.” Christians know that life is a gift from God and that every day can be celebrated as an opportunity to do something that will have eternal value. One day, we will reach “home”, where our Heavenly Father will recognise all that we have done in His name and where we will live in the presence of Jesus forever.

Let’s celebrate life, while we have it, making it count and using every opportunity for God’s glory, remaining informed and strengthened by God’s perspective. Let’s determine to fulfill His plan for our lives, enjoy His blessing and make a difference in our world. In the words of Jesus, let’s work while it is “daylight”; night will come soon enough (John 9:41).