

Dealing with death, in the Church

In the midst of life there is death. Death strikes unremittingly. It cannot be avoided. Man has always been puzzled by the riddle of death in life. Life does not need to be explained, but death needs to be accounted for. We experience life. Death seems so unnatural and irrational. Within us we feel that this life is not the whole story. The life we live in space and time must somehow continue on. Tennyson affirmed that man was not made to die (In Memoriam). The poet Yeats wrote:

Nor dread nor hope attend A dying animal;
A man awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all.
Some brave souls look into a lifeless future.

Bertrand Russell wrote *In A Free Man's Worship*,

No fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual beyond the grave... All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noon day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system.

A sad philosophy of life! These lines remind me of the ancient stoics who claimed that death "doesn't matter," that it is "kind nature's signal for retreat," and that we ought to regard it with indifference. But very few are indifferent to the prospect of death. Modern man, with wonder drugs to prolong life, and mortuaries which try so often the hardness of death with clever cosmetics and satin lined coffins, is not so aware of it. Even the many violent deaths seen on TV do not seem quite real. They happen on the screen. They are part of the show. Therefore, they don't touch the real self.

Lately ignore death? I believe that this is the reason: hope has been lost. Many no longer have their roots in historic Christianity. The ancient Greeks argued the pros and cons of immortality, philosophizing away their fears, the early church spoke words of hope and comfort. Christians witnessed to a future of physical resurrection. The resurrection is still a key doctrine of the Christian faith, but it tends to be downgraded in our days. A number of Biblical scholars consider the physical resurrection unacceptable.

But anyone who doubts the resurrection receives no support from the New Testament. The Christian hope is not fulfilled at death. The Christian does not merely live on. Death is unnatural. Christ shed tears when he stood at the grave of Lazarus. He saw the awfulness of death. Death is the last enemy. But this enemy has been conquered by Jesus Christ when He rose after His own death. The apostle Thomas doubted this historic happening and the Lord said to him: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." When Jesus appeared to the two men on the way to Emmaus He did not appear as a ghost, but as a real person. The disciples, when Jesus appeared among them at the beach, "gave Him a piece of boiled fish, and He took it and ate it before them."

Death is always tragic. But for the Christian there is hope. The resurrection promises a full orb'd life of radiant glory. Death has been conquered for those who are in Christ. The grave is a resting place until the dawning of the new and final day - the day of the resurrection. "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall v raised, and we shall be changed," There is more to life than death: The resurrection eases the pain and disperses despair. It brings the promise of a destiny far greater than the immortality of the soul. A Christian sorrows as he too is affected by the brokenness of a sinful world and the awful disruption caused by death - but he does not lack hope - that hope as found in the risen Christ.

In the past man knew that death can be expected in the midst of life; plagues, war and starvation were all too often his lot. Yet sudden death is just as common today. As a minister I have had to officiate at several funerals of those suddenly snatched away by death either through accident or heart seizure.

Western tourists in the Philippines often visit a Chinese cemetery. A cemetery as a tourist attraction? Yes! The grounds are well kept. Some vaults look like miniature model homes, complete with furniture. The architecture of some of the structures on grave sites is just splendid. More money is often spent on the dead than on the living. Non-Christian Chinese safeguard life by making rich provisions for their deceased relatives.

The Chinese form a sizeable part of the Philippine population. After having lived here for centuries, they still keep many of their customs and beliefs. In many homes, where secularism has destroyed the ancient worship of the Chinese gods, ancestral worship is still practiced.

Ancestral worship influences the ways of the living. The dead must be pacified lest the living become harmed. If the deceased is properly looked after and provided for by the living, he will reside in three places - one part will ascend to heaven, one part will remain in the grave to receive the sacrifices, and the third will reside with the spirit of the ancestral shrine placed either in the house or in the temple.

Ancestral worship is based on the merit system. Merit is gained for the deceased through what is done for him by his living family members. The Chinese believe that life in the hereafter world parallels the life on earth, i.e., they still live in the same way as we do, and have all the same needs. The living, therefore, must take care of the needs of the deceased. If they don't do so, the deceased will be in want. "To prevent this, silver paper, a pillow of paper money, a mirror, five cereals, jewelry, are placed in the coffin. Food is offered continually for the deceased to eat., wine is poured to quench his thirst, paper images of houses, servants, cars, etc. are made and burnt. All his clothing and possessions are burnt too. This act of burning indicates that it is now in the possession of the deceased.

Preparations for the funeral begin when the parent reaches his 60th birthday. On that ominous day, the coffin is bought and the gravesite obtained. In ancient China, elderly Chinese had a coffin in their home. This was their comfort. They wanted to be well looked after at death.

A Chinese cemetery may be an interesting tourist attraction, but it does tell the story of the non-Christian's fear for the mysterious fact of death. Pagan religions try to ward off evil and safeguard life by many rituals and sacral ceremonies. When I visited a Chinese cemetery, I thought about all who are living in spiritual darkness, who seek comfort in ancestor worship, and who are without the gospel and without hope.

We all know that life has no rhythm. It is full of the unexpected. Sometimes the very young are snatched away at the commencement of life; they will never have the chance to taste life. Others may have life drastically cut off at a later stage. Life is not a smooth flowing river. Death does come and destroys the inner circle of friends and family. At death, everything falls away, including social and racial distinctions. The poor must die, but so do the rich and powerful. In a small town in Germany, there is a picture of four skulls side, by side, with under them the words: "Which was the fool, which the wise man? Which the beggar, which the emperor?" Death is the leveler of all men.

Occasionally, I have talked with some friends about death. And I have been told, "I don't want to discuss it." We seem to think others die, but we will be the exception. Whether it is gloomy or not, death is a fact to be faced. You cannot think or wish it away.

When I speak about death, I am not morbid. What is so gloomy about death as a Christ-believer? Because Christ has overcome our enemy death, we can live! Life is not a mockery. What we do today has eternal value. Martin Luther said that only He who inflicts and permits the wound of death can heal it. No other in the risen and ascended Christ - we can have hope. We are the companions of the Lord, journeying towards the new Jerusalem. Paul Gerhardt expressed this hope in his resurrection hymn:

I cling and cling forever,
To Christ, my Lord and Head:
There's nothing that can sever Us on the paths we tread.
Yea though through death He go,
Through world, through sin and woe.
Though He may walk through hell,
I'm His companion still.

The words of the apostle Paul cannot be excelled: "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast,

unmovable, always abound in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Cor. 15:55-58).

If a man die, shall he live again?" This question was already raised by the sufferer Job in ancient times (Job 14:14). The same question is asked today. Man is born to live. Death is feared a man's natural enemy. "It is a poor thing for anyone to fear that which is inevitable", so wrote Tertullian, the third century church father, about death. And today, too, people seize on anything that seems to shed light on the dark subject of death. Even the ancient heresy of trying to prove life after death is still with us today.

Man's longing for life beyond the grave undoubtedly counts for the popularity of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published medical research on dying and Dr. Raymond Moody's best seller *After Life*, which even received a condensation in the *Reader's Digest* book section. Dr. Moody reports such experiences as "moving rapidly through a long, dark tunnel," after being pronounced dead, watching "the resuscitation attempt" from outside one's body, receiving glimpses of the "spirits of relatives and friends who have already died," and encountering "a loving, warm spirit - a being of light", resisting return to life as "feelings of joy, love and peace" are experienced. Dr. Moody reports that these experiences profoundly affect one's attitude towards death. "I used to dread dying. But those feelings vanished. I don't feel bad at funerals anymore. I kind of rejoice at them because I know what the dead person has been through."

What must we think about these reports? Do they prove life after death? No! The things people report experiencing while being resuscitated (revived) actually suggest no information at all about life after death. They have not come back from the beyond. No one interviewed reported any experience after death itself. But the Bible does. It proclaims that there is a life beyond life. The hour of our death is not the hour of our destruction. Death is not the becoming one with nature. The Christian view is that our whole life is a "constant death." We are banished from the tree of life. Man has been created for eternity, and through death and decay, he will reach his eternal home. Death is the judgment all of us must experience.

What happens at death? The Christian believer passes immediately into the glorious presence of God, while his earthly body begins to decay (2 Cor. 5:1; Phil. 1:23). He goes from death into life. The unbeliever too goes to his destiny, a conscious state in the presence of the prince of darkness. Jesus, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) taught conscious existence after death, the reality of the torment of hell, no second chance for salvation after death (the opportunity for salvation is only in this life), no opportunity of the dead communicating with the living to warn about the place of "outer darkness" and a call to repentance.

But what about the light which some reported seeing while facing death? The Christian needs to remember that Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). I am not saying that each such related experience is Satan inspired. There are no easy and simple answers that can be applied to each and every case.

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary made this pointed comment in his article "To be absent from the body." He said: "Whether or not Satan is directly (or through demons) involved in such experiences, the Christian needs to ask how Satan might be using all the publicity these reports (re: the experiences of the dying) have been given. He is undoubtedly delighted to have people think about existence after death as long as he can control and slant the content of their thinking. A being of light, the identification of which can be *adapted* to anybody's religious background; a review of one's earthly life with the assurance of forgiveness and acceptance for all; the absence of judgment and eternal punishment; all these factors - so prominent in the researchers' report fit perfectly with Satan's clear purpose to counterfeit the truth of God's Word." "If a man die, shall he live again?" The answer is found in Jesus Christ, the risen and ascended Lord. "He has ended the power of death and through the gospel has revealed immortal life." (2 Tim. 1:10).

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