

No Final Exit

The whole subject of death has become an uncomfortable topic in today's society. In the Victorian era, people talked openly about death but not about sex. The sexual revolution of the 1960s led to open and free discussions of what was once taboo. But now talk about death has become a taboo. Few witness the process of dying. Death is something you see on violent television shows. The dying are now in the hospital, isolated from their families. We find it difficult to cope with the terminally ill.

Herman Bavinck once said, "Life is strange, but death is even stranger." Death is mysterious. What happens when someone dies? Is death an absolutely conclusive end to life and a descent into nothingness? When does it occur? Our secular age tends to regard death as a natural event, the inevitable outcome of life, the irreversible loss of all mental and intellectual functions of the human brain, along with the loss of all involuntary mechanisms such as spontaneous breathing, blood pressure, body temperature, and the movement of the heart.

Death is horrible, and our spontaneous reaction to dying is repugnance. We now use the euphemism "passing away" for "dying." We try to hide death. By nature we repress it. For example, Hollywood has a cemetery where the reality of death is banished by operatic melodies from hundreds of loudspeakers hidden in the shrubbery, and where the graves are almost invisible. I believe that this camouflaging of death is a sign of a decadent culture. All concerns are for the present. Thoughts are oriented toward acting as though we will live forever on earth. But when death does come, it shatters illusions of security, because it is an inevitable reality. That's why we witness so much despair at secular funerals. Yet man alone, among all living creatures, is aware that he has to die. Throughout the ages, mankind has struggled with the meaning of death and the question of whether there is life after death; few in history believed that life ended at death. But many in our materialistic, mechanistic age have come to believe that death ends all. Worrying about what might follow after death is now regarded as medieval in our secular age.

Fear of death

Death is not a welcome friend. The very thought of it can be frightening. According to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) the fear of death is one of the two major afflictions of mankind, the other being the fear of the gods. He argued that the fear of death is irrational because death is something we cannot experience. Furthermore, he didn't believe in the immortality of the soul. He said: "Death, the most terrifying of all ills, is nothing to us, since as long as we exist, death is not with us, and when death comes, then we do not exist."

In Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*, Claudio is condemned to death for seducing his betrothed before marriage. His sister Isabella, a novice nun, pleads for his life. Then Claudio, in a moving speech, tells his sister how he really feels about his execution:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot.
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise To what we fear of death.

There is fear of not knowing what lies beyond death and fear of the process of dying, the pain and the anguish. It is a fear of losing individuality, identity, uniqueness. It is the fear of the mysterious unknown, of having lived in vain. And what many fear today is precisely what has been so lightly dismissed by Epicurus, that one shall exist no more after death.

The fear of death is cited as one of the reasons why patients ask doctors to assist them in their desire to have their life ended. In his book *Seduced By Death: Doctors, Patients, and the Dutch Cure*, Dr. Herbert Hendin claims that many of those who seek assisted suicide are in a state of terror. "They are mortally fearful of debility, dependence, or even death. Some are so afraid of death that they would rather die than live in such fear." Secular solutions to overcome the fear of death are constantly being tried, ranging from psychoanalysis to hypnosis. Russian psychiatrists claim to have had outstanding successes with hypnotic suggestion therapy to overcome anxiety over death. Experiments with LSD and other chemical-induced relief for the anxiety of dying have been used.

The fear of death has also been mocked. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) called the fear of death the "European sickness," and claimed the cause of this sickness is Christian belief in the hereafter, "the fear of what might happen to this life in and after death in view of what lies beyond it." For Nietzsche, natural death is a contemptible coward's death at the wrong time. Suicide is therefore an ethical act, a human privilege that distinguishes us from animals. Death is part of life; it is something to which we ourselves can give shape and meaning. Man is not under authority of any divine norm. He is the creator of his own norms.

Death and ancient beliefs

In ancient Babylonian and Greek mythologies, the afterlife had a sombre, hopeless and frightening nature. Typical is Achilles' complaint in Homer's *Odyssey* that it is better to be a slave on earth than a king in the realm of phantoms. The Greeks knew better than modern man that even in death and in the grave, man still exists.

Buddhism teaches that human existence is under the power of death as well as suffering. Death is an unavoidable feature of existence and causes anguish only when one attempts, in whatever way, to elude it. It is no use to speculate about it. One of the most striking ways to bring this point to mind occurs in some monastic disciplines in which monks are compelled to sit silently in the presence of a corpse in varying stages of decay. The purpose of this practice is to learn, after meditation for long periods of time on a corpse, that death is nothing in itself and neither is life. Neither life nor death

have permanence. Death is the gateway to a different form of life in another body, an existence which can be better or worse than the previous one.

In Hinduism death is not a reality. What is born and subsequently dies is not the real self, but an illusory one. Reincarnation, in which the unliberated soul is carried forward by its own deeds and their effect into successive births and deaths, is a key doctrine. The highest spiritual goal of Hinduism is to be freed from "the terrible wheel of death and rebirth." These Eastern views have become quite influential in the Western world.

Modern views of death

For the modern secular man, there is no God and no future. The devil tries to persuade mankind that everything ends with death so that the goods and the kingdoms of the world alone are of ultimate value. There is nothing beyond death. This materialistic view is powerfully expressed by Marxism. In his essay on "National Economy and Philosophy," Karl Marx describes death as a harsh victory of the species over the individual.

"Death is un-American," the historian Arnold Toynbee once remarked. Death denies the power to conquer the globe with know-how and muscle, with science and machinery, with the youthful vigour and hope that conquered the American frontier. Although violence is pervasive in America, it is death-denying. America worships youth. With new powerful drugs and medical technology, people want to have unprecedented dominion over the time of their own demise. The enormous popular success of assisted-suicide advocate Derek Humphrey's book *Final Exit* shows the struggle of our secular society with understanding the meaning of death.

Death denial, plus no longer being witnesses to the reality of death, have led to disastrous consequences for health care. In her book *The Hospice Movement: A Better Way of Caring for the Dying*, Sandol Stoddard observes that dying patients "are whisked away to the medical fortress where machines instead of human beings will be their companions at the last. Even nursing homes for the aged and incurably ill tend to maintain the myth that no one actually dies there." She notes that several generations of Americans have grown to adulthood without ever having had the experience of caring for the dying in their homes. An American professor complained that he could not discuss with his students the ancient Greek tragedies because they did not know anything about death. Even in modern funeral homes, death is camouflaged. Through the use of cosmetics, for example, an illusion of life is given.

Medieval view of death

Times, customs and beliefs have changed. In Christian medieval times death was no stranger. There was even a preoccupation with the thought of death. A frequently repeated refrain was "*Memento mori*," a reminder of death. The dying were seen as voyagers and pilgrims valuable to their community in many ways. They provided the caregivers opportunity for service and spiritual growth. The offer of hospitality and care

for the dying was based on Matthew 25:40: ". . . whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." The thought of death influenced life. Life and death were inseparable.

For example, the crusaders under Louis IX (1214-1270), king of France, desired to die in liberated Jerusalem. A participant in the first crusade, Lethbald of Autun, pleaded with the resurrected Christ for the privilege of dying in the land of His crucifixion. Many crusaders simply did not believe that they would ever return from Palestine. They wanted to die in the Holy Land.

Our own death

We know the reality of death; yet we find it difficult to imagine the end of our own existence and that the world can go on without us. Deep down in our hearts we don't believe in our own death. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger shrewdly observed that the proposition "all men are mortal" usually involves the implied reservation "but not I" But death exempts no one. This is a fact. The Bible says that man is destined for death (Hebrews 9:27). And we cannot grow spiritually if this truth is repressed. The psalmists prayed that God would prevent repression of this awareness:

Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life.

You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years as nothing before you.

Each man's life is but a breath (Psalm 39:4-5).

Death is a solitary event. The bond with the community breaks and we must cross the threshold of death alone. "We are all summoned to death and none can die for another," said Martin Luther, "but each must wrestle with death personally. . . . Each must be ready alone at the time of death; I will not be with you nor you with me."

No luggage

When we die, we can't take anything with us. The things of the world we must leave behind. No luggage can be taken along when we cross the bar of death. We come into the world with nothing and leave it with nothing (1 Timothy 6:7). As a pastor I have conducted many funerals; but I have never seen a safety deposit box in a coffin. A powerful illustration is Jesus' parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12:16ff). He decided to build bigger and better barns to secure his future. Then he could say to himself, "Eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

Meaning of life

if death ends all, what point is there to life? Why were all these experiences of pleasure and pain given to us, if life is only a fleeting moment? If we trust only in life's values on this side of the grave, we won't have anything of worth left in the end. Death leads to the

re-evaluation of all earthly values. It strips away all illusions and false security, and knocks down every idol. If we focus on this earth alone, life will be meaningless in the end. To know the meaning of death, we must discover the meaning of life. Rather than asking, 'Are you prepared to die?' we should ask, "Are you prepared to live?" The thought of death gives value to life. That's why the psalmist prayed: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). We need to give more thought to eternity to make life meaningful here on earth. If we are out to improve the earth through social and political activity without any concern for life beyond the grave, we have not understood the gospel. Our permanent home is not here. We do not desert this earth when we long for a new heaven and earth. We can't transform this world into a perfect harmonious abode. Only when we keep eternity in perspective will our deeds on earth have lasting value. Jesus made this clear when He said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

The Bible and death

The Bible is starkly realistic. It paints death in grim colours, demonstrating its awful nature in graphic detail on Calvary's cross. In Job, death is called "the king of terrors" (18:14). Since man was created for life, death is an abnormality. It is not just the natural process of ending a human life. It is not supposed to happen. It does not belong in God's good creation. It is a catastrophe. Life and death are enemies. The apostle Paul even called death "our last enemy" which must be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Death is a consequence of Adam's fall into sin (Romans 5:12), and a judgment upon his rebellion. Adam tried to take control of his life apart from God. In response God put a partition between Himself and Adam and his descendants. This boundary is called death (Romans 6:23). And this death has a physical and spiritual nature. As Helmut Thielicke perceptively wrote: "The terror of death, then, is that it is not just a loss of physical life but a forfeiture of living with God." Peace comes only when we have our spiritual house in order.

We have to give account to God of all that we have done and said. And by nature we have a natural tendency to hate Him and our neighbour (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 5). Christ came to bridge the boundary between us and God. The heart of the New Testament witness is therefore the cross. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, died for the deliverance of His people (Galatians 3:13). The Christ who died was also buried. But the grave could not hold Him. Death does not have the final word. After Good Friday came Easter. Christ stepped out of the tomb. And faith in the risen Lord removes the fear of death that plagues both the young and the old. In solidarity with Christ, they shall rise with Him on the last day. Death no longer has a hold on them; for them a cemetery is like a farmer's field. A body is sown into the earth awaiting the

harvest day (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44). Christians still have to die. But the grave has been deprived of power (see Colossians 3:3,5). It cannot separate them from God. Christians are citizens of God's eternal kingdom. They have eternal life now. They have passed from death to life (John 5:24). Their fellowship with Christ is unbreakable and cannot be interrupted or broken off by death (Romans 8:38). Physical death is the gateway for their journey with God.

Christians live with hope, even in the midst of suffering and persecution. There is no final exit. Death is a home-going. Our Lord has prepared a room in the Father's house for all His children. We shall forever be with Him (John 14:1ff). We don't flee life and its calling. We may live to the glory of Him who conquered death. We can be steadfast for our work for Him is never in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). These truths enable us to live securely in a very insecure world. And to make it personal, in our secular, materialistic "culture of death" society, I may confess:

In doubt and temptation, I rest, Lord, in You;
my hand is in Your hand, whatever I do.
You always are with me; You guide with Your word,
and soon into glory will take me, O Lord.
Whom have I, O Saviour, in heaven but You?
On earth for none other I belong but for You.
My flesh and my heart may be weakened and sore,
but God is the strength of my heart evermore. Psalm 73

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