

Food for Thought Article: “On Dying, Death and Resurrection.”

Although death continues to be a taboo subject in some cultures, even among Christians, it has always been an integral part of what many poets have chosen to write about, each with their own perspective.

For James Shirley, death was the great leveller:

“Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor, crooked scythe, and spade.”

For Ernest Dowson, death (and indeed life) was just a dream:

“They are not long the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while,
Then closes
Within a dream.”

For T.S. Elliot, death was something to fear:

“I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman
Hold my coat,
And snicker, and in short,
I was afraid.”

For Henry Scott-Holland, death was nothing at all:

“Death is nothing at all.
It does not count.
I have only slipped away into the next room.
Nothing has happened.”

The first time I really thought about death was when I was 21. I wasn't a Christian then, but two fellow students in the Hall of Residence at the College where we were studying, died suddenly. One had been drinking and fell out of his third-floor study/bedroom window; the other was killed in a motorcycle accident.

But at that time, I had also started to think about God and I remember saying that I could never believe in a God who hadn't done anything about death. Death, to me, seemed to be so final, so shocking, so unfair, so random, so unnecessary.

So, What Does the Bible Say About Death?

- 1) Death is indeed a **tragedy**; not part of God's original plan for us. This always comes home to me whenever I read the first and last verses of the book of Genesis. The first, wonderful, majestic, words are, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Glory! But the final words are, "And after they embalmed him [Joseph], he was placed in a coffin in Egypt." Tragedy.
- 2) Death is a **reality**. Read Genesis chapter 5 and you will find that the phrase 'and then he died' tolls through it like a funereal bell. Although the chapter is in the context of repeated birth, new and long life, death is also a repeated pattern, an inevitable reality.
- 3) Death is an **enemy**. It steals, instils fear, kills, and destroys. Perhaps this is why we find it so difficult to talk about.

Of course, not all religions regard death as an enemy. For Hindus, life and death are part of a cyclical process. They believe that the soul is immortal and takes on a new body in every reincarnation. So, death for them is not seen as an enemy but as part of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

However, from a Biblical perspective, death is a tragedy, a reality, and an enemy, and this is where we need to begin. But then we move on to remember that : -

- 4) Death is a **mercy**. God has prevented us from living forever in a fallen, painful, cursed state. Having made us from dust, God said we would return to dust. In our fallen state we were banished from the Garden of Eden and prevented from eating the fruit from the tree of life. This is a mercy from God (Gen. 3:22-24). I don't know any older people who would like to live forever in their old, aching, creaking, arthritic bodies!

5) Death is a **defeated enemy**. Even in the Old Testament we have God's promise. "I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?" (Hosea 13:14)

This promise is, of course, fulfilled supremely in Christ and his resurrection from the dead. On the Cross, Jesus died for our sins and God raised him from the tomb. Sin is the cause of death. Indeed, you could write 'sin' as the cause of death on every death certificate. But now, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" And God gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (See 1 Cor. 15:54-57).

What Will Our New Resurrection Bodies Be Like?

Firstly, they will be **material** bodies like Jesus' resurrection body, with head, mouth, hands, arms, legs, feet, etc. Not a 'spirit' or 'ghost' but a real body with flesh and bones. (Lk. 24:36-43)

Secondly, they will be **spiritual** bodies. This does not mean they will be non-material but will be differentiated from the 'earthly,' 'natural,' 'dust of the earth' type bodies we have had and become 'spiritual,' 'heavenly' bodies. (1 Cor. 15:44-49)

Thirdly, they will be **powerful** bodies. Do you sometimes feel tired? Once we have our new resurrection bodies, we will never feel tired again! Neither will we slumber nor sleep! Our new bodies will be fully empowered by the Spirit.

Fourthly, they will be **immortal** bodies, not subject to wear and tear, disease, injury, or death, but eternal, living forever.

Finally, they will be **personal** bodies. The new body you will have will still be the 'essential' you. I will be resurrected as 'me' and you will be resurrected as 'you.' We will still retain something (though not everything) of our original physical characteristics and personalities. And, for the first time, we will be fully like Christ and fully ourselves.

Jesus was very careful to point out to his disciples that he was back as himself, not as someone else: "See my hands and my feet, that I AM MYSELF" ('ego eimi autos') – Lk. 24:39. We are not talking about reincarnation where the spirit is said to be clothed with a different body and personality.

Two Metaphors to Help Us Grasp What Dying and Resurrection Are Like.

1. Falling Asleep and Being Woken Up

Jesus was remarkable in that he reframed 'death' as a person 'being asleep.'

When he went to the home of Jairus to bring back to life his 12-year-old daughter, all the crowd said she was dead; Jesus said she was sleeping and it was time to wake her up, which he did (Mk. 5:38-42).

When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going to wake him up." (Jn. 11:11)

All this led to confusion for the disciples who were never quite sure whether Jesus was talking about someone being 'dead' or just 'sleeping.' But for Jesus, the two words were synonymous.

The apostle Paul underlines this truth when he reminds the Christians in Thessalonica (who were agnostic about all this), that they shouldn't grieve as others do who have no hope, because those who had 'died' in Christ had only 'fallen asleep' in him. (1 Thess. 4:13-15)

Our English word 'Cemetery' (a sleeping/resting place) comes from the Greek word 'Koimeterion' translated 'fallen asleep' in this passage.



What, or who do you rely on to wake you up in the morning? Do you have a wind-up alarm clock, a radio alarm clock, a Teasmade (alarm plus a cup of tea/coffee), another family member, your mobile phone etc.?

Here is the Biblical alarm clock: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." (1 Thess. 4:16)

2. Sowing Seed and Reaping a Harvest

I love the Message version of 1 Cor. 15:35-38. It reads like this:

‘Some sceptic is sure to ask, “Show me how resurrection works. Give me a diagram, draw me a picture. What does this ‘resurrection body’ look like?” If you look at this question closely, you realise how absurd it is. There are no diagrams for this kind of thing. However, we do have a parallel experience in gardening.

You plant a ‘dead’ seed, soon there is a flourishing plant. There is no visual likeness between seed and plant. You could never guess what a tomato would look like by looking at a tomato seed. What we plant in the soil and what grows out of it don’t look anything alike. The dead body that we bury in the ground and the resurrection body that comes from it will be dramatically different.’



This was how it was for Jesus. His new resurrection body was very different from the one that had been dead and buried; it was a different kind of body.

Jesus’ new body is also spoken of as the firstfruit (singular, not plural) of those who have fallen asleep. For now, Jesus is the only one who has the new resurrection body, everyone else must wait their turn. Only when Jesus returns will all those who have died in him come back with him, their spirits clothed with their new resurrection bodies (See 1 Cor 15:20-23).

And for those who are alive on earth and in Christ when he returns, they will not taste death/sleep. Their bodies will be transformed in an instant/ a flash/ the twinkling of an eye (See 1 Cor. 15:51&52).

What Is Unique About Christianity Regarding Other World Religions and The Death of Their Founders?

In Yangon in Myanmar is the Schwe Dagon Pagoda. It is more than 300 feet high and is covered with gold plates. In the masonry at the base is a gold box said to contain 8 hairs and possibly some finger bones and teeth that once belonged to Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha, who lived about 560 B.C. He died, and bits of his body, apparently, are still around.

In Saudi Arabia, at Medina, is the Green Dome and the Mosque of Muhammad under which lies the body of the founder of the Islamic faith. Muhammad died in 632 A.D.

Near the city of ChuFu in Shandong Province in China, is a grass-covered mound in the beautiful Kung Forest. It marks the burial place of a man worshipped by millions of Chinese people ~ Confucius. He lived around 500 B.C. but he died and his remains are still with us on the earth.

In 1539 A.D., in the town of Kartarpur which today is on the India/Pakistan border in the Punjab province, Guru Nanak died. He was the founder of Sikhism and is followed and worshipped by Sikhs. His death is shrouded in mystery. No one found his body and controversy surrounds whether it was buried according to Muslim tradition or cremated according to Hindu tradition. Only flowers were found.

But the apostle Paul writes: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.” (1 Cor. 15:3-5)

In world religions, belief in the resurrection of the founder is unique. Jesus was dead, but now he is alive. All other religious leaders were alive, but now they are dead. **Jesus summed it up like this: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever!” (Rev. 1:17&18)**

When We Speak of Resurrection How Will People Respond?

Atheists. In general, they believe that when we die, that is the end, we are snuffed out like a candle. Richard Dawkins, in his book ‘The Blind Watchmaker’ writes: “Natural selection is the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and is the explanation for the existence of all life.....it has no plan, purpose, mind, vision or foresight.”

Theists. These people believe in God but they don’t believe that God is actively involved in the world today. They would say that God **is** a watchmaker but **not** a blind watchmaker. He has created and wound up the world, like a watch, and left it to run itself. Darwin was a Theist. The Sadducees in Jesus’ day were Theists. They believed in God but not in anything supernatural or miraculous and certainly not in resurrection.

Polytheists. They believe in many gods. Paul met some of them in Athens. If you speak to these sorts of folk about the resurrection, it will seem ‘strange’ teaching as far as they are concerned and some of them will sneer and mock. The philosophers in Athens said Paul was an ‘ignorant plagiarist’ and an ‘announcer of foreign demons!’ (See Acts 17: 18,20,32)

Agnostics. These are people who don’t know or who aren’t quite sure. People who, like Thomas, have quite a lot of doubts. But Paul writes to such folk: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance (‘agnoias’), but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof (‘pistin’ = a ‘guarantee’) of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30 & 31)

Believers. By the grace of God, however, some people will consider the evidence, respond, and believe. “Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” (Acts 17:34)

And the wonderful thing is that in one sense we don’t need to wait until we die to experience this new resurrection life. Through repentance, believing in Christ, through being baptised in water and through continuous filling with the Holy Spirit we can enter this new life now.

“We were therefore buried with him [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also by united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rms. 6:4&5)

What a wonderful assurance this is!

The Challenge of Two Resurrections.

However, we should also be aware that the Bible speaks of two resurrections and that our decisions and behaviour now in this body on this earth will determine which of the two resurrections we will experience.

Daniel 12:2 says this: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Paul writes: “I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.” (Acts 24:15)

And these are the words of Jesus himself: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his [God’s] voice and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.” (Jn. 5:28&29)

The Challenge of Two Roads, Two Trees, and Two Houses.

In these days of inclusivity, it is sometimes difficult for us to appreciate and accept how Jesus’ teaching divides, judges, and separates. But as Jesus approaches the climax of his Sermon on the Mount, he holds out before us two roads, two trees and two houses (Mt. 7:13-29).

There is the broad road that leads to destruction and the narrow road that leads to life. There is the good tree that bears good fruit and the bad tree that bears bad fruit. And there is the house built on rock and the house built on sand.

So it is that there are two roads and we must travel one of them; two trees and we must be one of them; two houses and we must build one of them. Of course, all this teaching, so amazing and authoritative to its initial hearers, is sadly different from what some are teaching today, so discernment is required.

And we know from other parts of Scripture that it is only by grace through faith in Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit that we can partner with God in making these right choices throughout our lives.

The Challenge of Death.

Finally, I return to another poet’s reflection on death. Philip Larkin (1922-1985), who is regarded as one of Britain’s finest 20th century poets, writers, and librarians, had a lifelong fear of death.

He believed he would die at the same age as his father and from the same disease (oesophageal cancer). His fear was fulfilled, on both counts. Although he was an atheist, he has a floor stone memorial at Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey. He talks about his fear of death in his poem ‘Aubade’ where he describes death as: -

“The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
 Created to pretend we never die,
 And specious stuff that says No rational being
 Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
 That this is what we fear - no sight, no sound,
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
 Nothing to love or link with,
 The anaesthetic from which none come round."

I believe that the only effective antidote for this depressive fear of death, shared by so many, yet so often hidden, is the unique Jesus and the unique Christian faith, summarised by these words, this reality, this victory: -

"Jesus shared in our humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Heb. 2:14&15)

George Irving – April 2025

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