

ON DEATH AND DYING

*It is not death to die, to leave this weary road
And join the saints who dwell on high
Who've found their home with God
It is not death to close the eyes long dimmed by tears
And wake in joy before Your throne
Delivered from our fears*

*O Je - sus, conquering the grave
Your precious blood has power to save
Those who trust in You will in Your mercy find
That it is not death to die*

*It is not death to fling aside this earthly dust
And rise with strong and noble wing
To live among the just
It is not death to hear the key unlock the door
That sets us free from mortal years
To praise You evermore*



Death is not ultimate! God is! I used these words to open my eulogy to honor the life and mourn the death of Specialist Koran Pulido Contreras, born on December 15, 1989, in Redondo Beach California and died on September 8, 2011 in Kandahar, Afghanistan, of wounds suffered when enemy forces attacked his unit with an improvised explosive device. This man's grief stricken family sadly experienced what awaits everyone one of us and belted out wails I had never before heard. This last week, both the Lamay Family and Sovereign Grace

Fellowship Church suffered the death of our Matriarch Pat Lamay, or Grandma Pat as many of us called her.

Too often the fact of death and the loss of loved ones are unbearable, even for Christians. The loss of a father, a mother, a spouse, a child, even our pets can be utterly debilitating.

Such an emotionally charged event, with its finality rocks our world that often reason can't console. Thus, we inebriate in a variety of ways and still our own death looms ever near.

Death is universal for humans. Scripture denies that it's part of our natural existence, but sees death is an enemy.ⁱⁱ What death is and when it actually occurs is considered medically, theories abound, philosophic views abound from denying it to dreading it. There's even an emergence in death's study called "thanatology"—Greek for the study of death.

In America, we tend to sterilize death rather face it. Most of us being "city slickers" can't relate to death as farm folks necessarily are forced to confront. Instead we ignore it. Sometimes we put people difficult to care for in "rest homes", don't visit them in the hospital, or even in their homes because it's very difficult to face. I'm not passing judgement on anyone if that has been your experience with a loved one (friend or family). What I am stating is my observations that we have great difficulty with it.ⁱⁱⁱ So how *ought* we approach the issue of death, especially Christians?

HOW OUGHT DEATH BE APPROACHED BY CHRISTIANS?

I don't think we should not deny that death occurs (a-la-Monism with its view of reality that is illusory). Nor should we have a "Spock-like" cold indifferent approach to it (a-la-naturalism's view that we're meaningless accidents). Nor should we approach death mindlessly (a-la-Que sera sera). Instead, our approach to death, especially followers of Christ, should be careful and humble (a-la-creatures contemplating the Creator and their inevitable end).

Specifically as Christians we want to understand; what death is, how it came to be, and what its remedy is. But before this, I think it's important to understand the big ideas from the Bible in order to get a historical chronological perspective of where we're at in human history and particularly where we stand in relationship to death itself and what Christ has done to deal with it.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR IDEAS/THEMES IN THE BIBLE?

If I were to ask the average Christian to succinctly describe the Bible's main themes, answers could rightly include: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life", to "Go into all the world and make disciples of the nations", to "To know God and make Him known", etc. While these are true, they leave us still in the dark concerning an overarching understanding of the big unifying ideas contained in Scripture.

The following is the understanding I've come to appreciate in my years of studying and applying the Bible's teachings to my life. First, there's *CREATION*. This is where the self-existent, all-wise, all-powerful, all-knowing, and fully benevolent God decided to create out of nothing all that exists, and upon its completion the text says, "*God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*" (Gen.1:31) We thus have a good creation.

Second, there's the *FALL*. This is where God's image bearers (Adam and Eve) rebelled against His command that promised death if violated: "*The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.*" (Gen.2:16-17; 3:1-7). Here image bearers committed high treason against their sovereign and they along with their progeny (all of us) were plunged into death, alienation.

Third, there's *REDEMPTION*. This was prophesied immediately after Adam and Eve received their due judgement. It was promised that through Abraham's seed this alienation from God and each other would be remedied by Christ Jesus, "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*" (Mk.10:45) Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the master secured salvation from God's wrath for those who trust in Him now. But death still remains until the consummation (1 Cor.15:54-57)

⁵⁴ But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. ⁵⁵ O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; ⁵⁷ but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Lastly, there's the *CONSUMMATION*. In this event God will bring about the new heavens and the new earth where Christ's people from all time will rule and

reign with him with new resurrected bodies never to die again, never to mourn again:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

*⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He *said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.”⁶ Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. ⁷ He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. ⁸ But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (Rev.21:1-8)*

“Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, ² in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; ⁴ they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever...

12 “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.” (Rev.22:1-5, 12-15)

If you can keep these big ideas in mind, I think you will be you’ll be able to more readily connect the dots of Scripture’s big ideas as you contemplate their meaning and consider their application. But what is death?

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF DEATH?

Whenever we ask the question of *what* a thing is, we are delving into a metaphysical reality; we are delving into knowing the *nature* of that thing. There are many ways to explain the nature of death. I have three reasons for rejecting physicalism's premise (i.e., that matter is all there is, was and ever will be), they are; philosophic, theological and scientific.^{iv} Thus, as a substance dualist^v, I first see that *Death is the separation of the soul from the body.*

It is the pinnacle of alienation; between the creature and the Creator; *alienation* between the creature and his neighbor; *alienation* between the creature and the rest of creation. Things are not the way they *ought* to be.

Second, Death is the promise of judgment God fulfilled. This occurred when Adam and Eve in the Garden partook of the forbidden fruit (Gen.3). Here God's goodness was challenged by Satan, "surely He does not want you to know what He knows...He's keeping you from having fun...etc.," was the gist of the well placed question, "*has God said...*" And God was faithful to keep His promise that if the violation occurred, death would result.

Third, Death is the result of idolatry. This occurred when our first parents made much of themselves by defying God, by "De-goding" God of His God-ness. That is, the word of the creature (Satan, Adam's own thinking) trumped the word of the Creator. The finite needy creature wanted to become like the infinite self-existent One and the result was catastrophic.

Fourth, Death is a reminder that God is faithful. He is faithful to keep the promises given. When everything has all been said and done, God's word alone will absolutely rule and be obeyed. God assured Adam in (Gen.2:17), "¹⁷ *but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.*" And when His word says in (Heb.9:27) that; "*...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,*" it is a reminder that we all will die and not miss *that* appointment. This includes; the rich and poor, the strong and weak, the believer and non-believer.

Fifth, Death is thus physical, spiritual and eternal. It's physical and is attributed to the first Adam: "¹² *Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—*" (Rom.5:12). Thus all mankind became and remain mortal.^{vi} *Death is also spiritual:* for it reveals that our separation from God makes Him our enemy as Paul notes in (Eph.2:1-3) even while we walked about as zombies: "*you were dead in your trespasses and sins, ² in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of*

disobedience. ³ Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”

Finally, *Death is eternal*: for it is the just judgment of God on all who don't bend the knee to Jesus. It's referred to as the second death in (Rev.20:13-15) “death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

And while death's nature results in the aforesaid, we must not forget that death is not ultimate, *God is!* We see this through what Christ did to death by his life, death and resurrection.

WHAT'S DEATHS' REMEDY?

God is ultimate by virtue of His ontological status of *aseity*. This means that God exists from Himself necessarily, and is thus ultimate, because He is the self-existent One. Nothing else that exists can make that claim and back it up, but *God can and has and forever will*. Now when I say that God is the remedy for death, I mean God the Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus the Word became Flesh. Jesus' name means “Yahweh saves” and is the covenant name God gave to Moses at Sinai. In John's Gospel (1:1, et. al.) the “Word” is God's own “peer” and God's own “self”.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word **was God**. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”*

We know that God reveals himself to the prophets through his word, that God creates through the spoken word in (Gen.1; Ps.33:6), that God transforms his people through the word (Ps. 107:20), and now Jesus is God's self-revelation, His *self-expression; God's own agent in creation; and he comes to save and transform his people.*^{vii} As the Tabernacle in the Old Testament was the meeting place between God and His people, now in Jesus the ultimate meeting place between a holy God and rebellious sinners is realized. He “*tabernacle among us*” (Jn.1:14) and thus, the *meeting place* where peace with God can only be found is in Jesus Christ, the God/Man.

Jesus' Obedience compared to Adam's Disobedience. Jesus is known as the 2nd Adam whose life, obedience and righteousness are credited to those who trust in Him alone for salvation. The two Adams acted, the first disobeyed and thus death reigned. But the second Adam obeyed and thus life came to reign in Christ. The former brought condemnation to all men, the latter wrought justification for many (Rom.5:15-19)

*“¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, **much more** did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. ¹⁶ The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. ¹⁷ For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ So then as **through one transgression** there resulted condemnation to all men, even so **through one act of righteousness** there resulted justification of life to all men. ¹⁹ For as through the one man's disobedience the many were **made sinners**, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be **made righteous.**”*

Thus, Jesus the 2nd Adam's act of obedience secures the believer's justification before a holy God whose wrath was satisfied through the free will sacrifice of God the Son on Calvary's cross. Yet, his life of obedience and righteousness could never have been credited to those who believe unless Christ had risen from the dead.

Jesus' Resurrection Vanquishes the Power of Death. In (1 Cor.15) Paul argues for the Scriptural grounds of Jesus life, death, burial and resurrection of when he says;

“³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,”

This text is rife with historical eyewitness accounts as Paul mentions the many witnesses of the risen Lord (over 500 most of which were still alive at his penning the events) and lastly he too saw Jesus (1 Cor.15:5-11). The importance of this *historical event* is monumental for it ties directly *truth* to a believer's *faith*. Here, Paul affirms four things. First, if Christ has not truly been raised from the dead the first witnesses are all liars. Second, if Christ has not truly been raised

from the dead we are still in our sins. Third, if Christ has not truly been raised from the dead our faith is useless. Fourth, if Christ has not truly been raised from the dead we are to be pitied more than anyone else because we've been deeply "hood-winked".

Conversely, if this actually is true, then all others rejecting the truth of these claims are sadly under the wrath of God and the "joke" is on them. Paul continues in (1 Cor. 15:20-22):

*²⁰ But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. ²¹ For since by **a man came death**, by a man also **came the resurrection of the dead**. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.*

Here we have Adam's work contrasted to Christ's work, where the former's life brought death but the latter's death brought life. So, we've considered what death is, how it came about, and how in Christ, God remedied it. Now, let's peer into how Jesus personally dealt with the death of his friend Lazarus and what we should learn.

The Gospel of John 11:1-5 reads:

***11** Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. ³ So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." ⁴ But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*

Raising Lazarus was the seventh and final sign in John's Gospel. It was not just a mere miracle but a demonstration of his true identity (the Christ and Son of God) and as one author put it, "*A more powerful sign of Jesus' messianic identity could not be given*".^{viii} As John writes;

*"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ **but these have been written** so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." (Jn.20:31-32)*

¹⁷ So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them

concerning their brother. ²⁰ Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. ²¹ Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." ²³ Jesus *said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha *said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world."

Jesus in this account is doing several things worthy of note. First, *Jesus focus in death was God's glory* (V.4) (Rev.20:13-15). Here God is glorified as the Son's true identity is revealed and the Son as a result is revealed as the "I Am"; "*I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?*" Here the light of the world unveils the truth that death has a master—it's Jesus of Nazareth! He's ultimate not death!

Mary absolutely trusted in Christ's identity but was still in the dark. For she thought her brother would rise in the general resurrection. Jesus can't be saying that believers won't physically die, for Lazarus will also eventually physically die. He is saying that those who trust in Him for salvation, whose names are written in the book of life, will not experience the second death which is eternal damnation in the lake of fire (Rev.20:13-15).

Secondly, *Jesus is debunking the debate of his times* where some (Pharisees) believed in the resurrection of the dead and others (Sadducees) did not.

³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. ³¹ Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Therefore, when **Mary** came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "**Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.**" ³³ When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, **He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,** ³⁴ and said, "Where have you laid him?" They *said to Him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ **Jesus wept.** ³⁶ So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?"

Third, Jesus' humanity is on display. He does not deny there's been a real death, it's not an illusion, it is a big deal, and it is the source of deep pain. *He's angry.* When the text says that he was “deeply moved in spirit”, the Greek term literally means “to snort like a horse” which connotes anger.^{ix} Many believe that it's his anger against what the effect of sin has for so long done to his good creation—it has ravaged it! He's feeling the pain, not denying it, not inebriating himself. Jesus is in the moment of truth like no other.

He's troubled. This word in Greek means to shake, to be disturbed, and to shudder.^x The NT scholar Lightfoot put it like this: “He now voluntarily and deliberately accepts and makes His own the emotion and the experience from which it is His purpose to deliver men”^{xi}

Jesus wept. This is the shortest verse in Scripture but it's packed. It exposes the God/Man and simultaneously discloses how the Father feels about death; it brings Him no pleasure, but rather pain. The Greek word for *wept* means to “burst into tears”^{xii}, he's overcome by emotion. Jesus gave way to weeping. And even though he knew what he would actually do, he nevertheless felt the pain of the effects of the Fall while being the *Redeemer*—the one who would by his blood sacrifice, “buy back” what was rightly his.

³⁸ So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, *came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus *said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the deceased, *said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.”⁴⁰ Jesus *said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. ⁴² I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.” ⁴³ When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” ⁴⁴ The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus *said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Jesus Resuscitates Lazarus. The difference between resurrection and resuscitation is when the former is experienced that person can never die again. They are forever with their new glorified body. But with resuscitation, the person will die again...as Lazarus and all who have gone before us did. When Jesus commands them to *remove the stone*, he's accentuating the reality of Lazarus' dead corpse, “...dead for four days”.

In this context the reason for why Lazarus had to die was for *the Glory of God*. He is glorified by illustrating His mastery over death because He's the master of life—life swallows up death! This was a foretaste of the future reality that awaits believers.

Eternal life is not just a future state that awaits those who bend the knee to Jesus now, but it is being in actual relationship with this amazing God who created all things for His pleasure. Eternal life is a person—God. Remember in the beginning that I mentioned the importance of understanding where we are *chronologically in relation* to Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation?

It seems to me that we're between *redemption and consummation*. All of us will die if Christ doesn't return in our lifetime. Scripture says that to be absent from the body equals being present with the Lord for Christians (2Cor.5:1-11). For those outside Christ it seems that a tormenting abode is prepared for them until the final judgement (E.g., Lazarus and the Rich Man: Lk.16:19 and following).

Death is not ultimate, God is! Jesus demonstrated it through his life, burial and resurrection. And yet, Jesus understands if we fear death. That's why he had to become our high priest:

"Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.¹⁶ For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.¹⁷ Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.¹⁸ For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." (Heb.2:14-18)

So run to him saints! Pour out your hearts before Him! If you are not his own, repent and turn to the author of life who will come back to judge the living and the dead. Solomon wisely noted that there is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—

² *A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.* ³ *A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up.* ⁴ *A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance.* ⁵ *A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.* ⁶ *A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away.* ⁷ *A time to tear apart and a*

time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak. ⁸ A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace. (Ecc.3:1-8)

This time includes the time of our last breath where we will come face to face with the living God. Christ looked at death first and foremost as a way to glorify God; we ought to do the same, even if we're not raising someone from the dead. We ought to champion the reality of the resurrection, for in it Christ's claims are verified. We also ought to be angry and weep when someone dies. It's not the way things ought to be, it's the last enemy and the gospel of Christ is the remedy. God have mercy on us all. (SDG)

ⁱ Original Words by Henri Malan (1787-1864). Translated by George Bethune (1847). Music, chorus and alternate words by Bob Kauflin. © 2008 Integrity's Praise! Music/Sovereign Grace Praise (BMI)

ⁱⁱ RK Harrison, *Encyclopedia to Biblical Ethics*, Pg.101, © 1992 Thomas Nelson Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Pg.101-102.

^{iv} J.P., *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987 by Baker Book House). In this book, Moreland provides philosophical, theological, and historical proofs for the faith and argues rigorously against naturalism and its' grounds.

^v The belief that we are metaphysically body and soul, not just matter.

^{vi} The list of three that follows is from Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Pgs.611-615

^{vii} Idea from: D.A. Carson, *The God Who Is There*, Pgs.101-119

^{viii} *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Pg.467-8, © 2007 Beale and Carson, Baker Academic

^{ix} *Expositors, The Gospel of John*, Pg.119

^x Reinecker & Rogers, Pg.245

^{xi} *Ibid.*, Pg.245

^{xii} *Ibid.*, Pg.245