

“Where Then Is My Hope?” (Job 15–21)

March 5, 2017

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Louis CK, a comedian, was interviewed by *Time* magazine a few years ago. He was asked why he spoke so often about death in his stand-up acts. He said it’s because we’re all going to die. He made this analogy: it’s like we’re all getting on a bus that’s headed to Pittsburgh. The bus says “Pittsburgh” on the front, but when we get on the bus, no one is talking about Pittsburgh. Then, when someone starts to talk about that city, people get uncomfortable and they ask, “Why are you talking about Pittsburgh.” And you say, “Because that’s where the bus is going. It says it right on the tickets!”¹

We can’t help but acknowledge the reality of death, but we don’t like to dwell on it, and we don’t like to think of our own inevitable deaths. That’s not something that only Louis CK observed. The French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), noticed the same thing. This is what he wrote over three hundred fifty years ago: “Not having been able to conquer death, wretchedness, or ignorance, men have decided for their own happiness not to think about it.”² Since we cannot avoid death, and since the human condition is ultimately so depressing, it’s best not to think about it. Pascal brought out the horror of death in his writings. Elsewhere, he wrote: “The last act is bloody, however wonderful the rest of the play. At the end, earth is thrown on the head, and that is the last of it.”³ Again, he describes the human condition in bleak terms: “Imagine a number of men in chains, all condemned to death, some of whom every day are slaughtered in full view of the others. Those who remain see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other in pain and without hope, await their turn!”⁴ If we’re all on death row, it’s understandable that we don’t like talking about death, but it’s also a bit crazy, as Louis CK points out.

Death is unpleasant. So are many things within life. Since unpleasant things will happen to us, where can we go for hope?

¹ James Poniewozik, “Louis CK Interview, Part 2: Money and Mortality,” *Time*, June 23, 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/06/23/louis-ck-interview-part-2-money-and-mortality/>

² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #166, trans. Honor Levi, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 44.

³ Pascal, *Pensées*, #197, 59.

⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, #686, 168.

Many things in life offer temporary fixes. You can pursue education to fix your ignorance. You can pursue a better job to get more money or a better vocation. If you're health isn't what you want it to be, you can diet, exercise, and seek the help of modern medicine. But none of these things will handle the issue of death.

This past week I read a great book called *When Breath Becomes Air*.⁵ It's the memoirs of a young neurosurgeon named Paul Kalinithi. Kalinithi died in March 2015 after battling lung cancer for twenty-two months. He died just three weeks before his thirty-eighth birthday. The book is one part autobiography, one part meditation on modern medicine, and one part the story of his cancer diagnosis and treatment.⁶ This book was printed just over a year ago and became a *New York Times* #1 bestseller, so obviously people were interested enough in the story of a brilliant young man who was dying. So, it seems that people do want to know something about death. Perhaps they were looking for wisdom about how to die, and what to expect when death finally knocks on our door.

What's interesting is that while Paul Kalinithi writes about his career and his cancer, and even about death, he doesn't ever talk about what's beyond death. He does tell us, however, that science is not the ultimate answer. Apparently, he was raised in a Christian home and returned to Christianity when he was older, though it's not really clear that he actually possessed a Christian worldview. He said that he had been an atheist in his twenties, but he realized that science doesn't cover all of human experience. He writes "to make science the arbiter of metaphysics [reality] is to banish not only God from the world but also love, hate, meaning—to consider a world that is self-evidently *not* the world we live in."⁷ So, if the only reality is the one that we can measure and experiment on, the realm of science, then there is not only no God, but also no meaning to this life. Perhaps death isn't a pressing concern for you, but everyone wants to have a life that is worth something. We all want our lives to be meaningful.

So, if the best that modern medicine can offer can't save a brilliant doctor and scientist from cancer, and if it can't provide us the answer to the meaning of life, where than can we find hope?

⁵ Paul Kalinithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016).

⁶ Kalinithi chronicles his experience up to a few months before his death. In an epilogue, his wife continues the story, recounting his last few months and his death.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

The reason I'm a Christian is because I know that Christianity provides answers to these questions. Christianity teaches us the meaning of life. It gives us a reason for why we love. And it gives us an answer to death. In short, Christianity gives us hope. I wouldn't be a Christian if Christianity didn't offer these things, and I wouldn't be a Christian if I didn't believe these things were true.

Over the last month, we've been studying a book of the Bible that wrestles with some of the great questions of life, ones that involve evil, pain, suffering, God, Satan, sin, death, and hope. That book is the book of Job. Today, we'll be talking about Job 15–21.

Before we start to look at those chapters, I want to give us a brief recap of where we've been. The story of the book of Job is set somewhere in the Middle East, probably near Edom, roughly four thousand years ago. Job is a righteous, wealthy man with a large family. He properly worships the one true God. He fears God so much that he even offers up sacrifices for his children in case they have secretly sinned against God. The reader of Job is then given access to something that Job does not know. We are told about a scene in heaven, in which God and Satan talk. God asks Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him." Satan says, "Job only worships you because you've blessed him. Take away all of those good things and Job will curse you." So, God allows Satan to take away those things. His only stipulation: Don't touch Job.

In the next scene, back on Earth, Job finds out that all his thousands of animals were stolen or killed. He finds out that many of his servants have died. Worst of all, he finds out that all of his children died together in an accident. Job mourns, but Job does not curse God.

That's the first chapter of Job. The second chapter is somewhat similar. Back in heaven, God asks Satan, "Have you considered my servant, Job? I have no one like him." Satan says, "Job didn't curse you because it wasn't his skin that suffered, only the skin of his animals, servants, and family. But if his life is on the line, and his body is hurting, then he'll curse you." So, God says, "Fine. Do what you will. Just don't kill him."⁸ So, Job then develops a horrible skin condition. He is covered with sores. His skin turns black. It's infested with worms and it smells. We get the sense that Job is wasting away. But Job still doesn't curse God.

Then three of his friends come to comfort Job. They sit with him for a week as he mourns silently. After Job begins to lament his situation, wishing he had never been born (chapter 3), the

⁸ Of course, I'm paraphrasing in this summary.

three friends start to speak. Last week, we looked at the first cycle of speeches (chapters 4–14). First, Eliphaz spoke and Job responded. Then, Bildad spoke and Job responded. Third, Zophar spoke and Job responded. The three friends more or less say similar things. They assume that Job is reaping what he has sowed. They assume that he is paying for some sin that he has committed. They tell him to turn to God, accept his discipline, and he will be fine. But Job insists he hasn't done anything wrong. He even thinks God is out to get him. He wants to have an audience with God. He wants to go on trial to prove he is innocent. He wants God to go on trial to explain himself.

And that brings us to today's passage. We'll get a glimpse of what the three friends say, but since they're speeches are repetitive, we'll spend more time looking at Job's responses.

First, Eliphaz speaks in chapter 15. Here are verses 1–6:

- ¹ Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:
- ² “Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge,
and fill his belly with the east wind?
- ³ Should he argue in unprofitable talk,
or in words with which he can do no good?
- ⁴ But you are doing away with the fear of God
and hindering meditation before God.
- ⁵ For your iniquity teaches your mouth,
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.
- ⁶ Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;
your own lips testify against you.⁹

Eliphaz is saying that Job isn't wise. He's speaking foolish words. He's full of hot air. He doesn't fear God. Instead, his sins are informing how he speaks. Or, to put it the other way around, how he speaks shows that he's guilty.

Then, Eliphaz repeats some of what he says in his first speech. Look at verses 14–16:

- ¹⁴ What is man, that he can be pure?
Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?
- ¹⁵ Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not pure in his sight;
- ¹⁶ how much less one who is abominable and corrupt,
a man who drinks injustice like water!

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Eliphaz wonders again how any human being can be righteous. Even angels are not pure in God's sight (cf. Job 4:17–18). How much more impure, then, is a corrupt man like Job. That's what Eliphaz thinks, anyway.

Then, Eliphaz describes the plight of the wicked. Look at verses 20 and 21:

- ²⁰ The wicked man writhes in pain all his days,
through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless.
²¹ Dreadful sounds are in his ears;
in prosperity the destroyer will come upon him.

In other words, the wicked will suffer. Even if they prosper for a time, they will get theirs.

Eliphaz ends his speech with these cheery words in verses 34 and 35:

- ³⁴ For the company of the godless is barren,
and fire consumes the tents of bribery.
³⁵ They conceive trouble and give birth to evil,
and their womb prepares deceit.”

In other words, “Job, you're a wicked, godless man who has brought this upon yourself!”

How does Job respond? Look at chapter 16, verses 1–5:

- ¹Then Job answered and said:
² “I have heard many such things;
miserable comforters are you all.
³ Shall windy words have an end?
Or what provokes you that you answer?
⁴ I also could speak as you do,
if you were in my place;
I could join words together against you
and shake my head at you.
⁵ I could strengthen you with my mouth,
and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.

Job says that his friends are “miserable comforters” who have “windy words.” If the tables were turned, Job would speak to them with words that would comfort. But his friends only provoke bring him pain.

In the next several verses, Job says that God is against him. Look at verses 7–17:

- ⁷ Surely now God has worn me out;
he has made desolate all my company.
⁸ And he has shriveled me up,
which is a witness against me,

and my leanness has risen up against me;
 it testifies to my face.
⁹ He has torn me in his wrath and hated me;
 he has gnashed his teeth at me;
 my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.
¹⁰ Men have gaped at me with their mouth;
 they have struck me insolently on the cheek;
 they mass themselves together against me.
¹¹ God gives me up to the ungodly
 and casts me into the hands of the wicked.
¹² I was at ease, and he broke me apart;
 he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;
 he set me up as his target;
¹³ his archers surround me.
 He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare;
 he pours out my gall on the ground.
¹⁴ He breaks me with breach upon breach;
 he runs upon me like a warrior.
¹⁵ I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin
 and have laid my strength in the dust.
¹⁶ My face is red with weeping,
 and on my eyelids is deep darkness,
¹⁷ although there is no violence in my hands,
 and my prayer is pure.

Job claims that God is attacking him. He calls God “my adversary” (v. 9). He says that God has “worn me out” (v. 7), “shriveled me up” (v. 8), “torn me in his wrath and hated me” (v. 9), “broke me apart” (v. 12), even though Job has done nothing wrong.

Job knows he is innocent, he knows that he is suffering greatly, and he knows that God is in control of the universe. He can’t understand why this is happening. What he wants is to be vindicated. He wants someone to prove that he is in the right. That’s why he says this in the next few verses:

¹⁸ “O earth, cover not my blood,
 and let my cry find no resting place.
¹⁹ Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
 and he who testifies for me is on high.
²⁰ My friends scorn me;
 my eye pours out tears to God,
²¹ that he would argue the case of a man with God,
 as a son of man does with his neighbor.
²² For when a few years have come
 I shall go the way from which I shall not return.

Job doesn't want this injustice to be swept under the carpet. So, he doesn't want the earth to cover his blood (cf. Gen. 4:10; Heb. 12:24). But then he says something interesting. After accusing God, he says that his witness is in heaven. The one who testifies for him is "on high." Who else can this be but God? How can God be his enemy and also his defender? Job wants God to "argue the case of a man with God." How can God argue a case against himself?

If you're not familiar with the whole of the Bible and you read only these words, you might assume that because of all the stress he is under, Job is going crazy. How can he blame God and then turn to God for help in the very same speech? Job may be under duress, but he's not crazy. He's trying to sort out his different beliefs. He knows that, somehow, God is behind what's happening, and he knows that God is the only one who can vindicate him. Of course, he doesn't know that Satan is involved, and he doesn't understand why he's suffering. So, he's processing what is happening to him and he says, simultaneously, "This is God's fault, and God must defend me to God!" Even after he says that God will be his witness, he says, in chapter 17, verse 6:

He has made me a byword of the peoples,
and I am one before whom men spit.

That "He" is God.

Job also thinks, given his view of death, that he must be vindicated before he dies. He feels that he is about to die, which might very well be true given how bad his health is (17:1). He thinks that if he dies in this condition, without his righteousness being vindicated, there will be no hope for him. He mentions descending to "Sheol," what would be translated into Greek as Hades, the realm of the dead. Look at chapter 17, verses 13–16:

- ¹³ If I hope for Sheol as my house,
if I make my bed in darkness,
¹⁴ if I say to the pit, 'You are my father,'
and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,'
¹⁵ where then is my hope?
Who will see my hope?
¹⁶ Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
Shall we descend together into the dust?"

If he dies without being vindicated, where can he find hope? His children are already dead. There's no one to carry on his name. As we saw in the book of Ruth, which we studied in

December, that was an important issue for people in the ancient world.¹⁰ If he dies, his only family would be the grave. There's no hope there.

After Job finishes, Bildad speaks in chapter 18. Bildad isn't helpful. First, he indicates that he is frustrated by Job (vv. 2–4), and then he gives a bleak description of the wicked. There is no hint of hope in his speech. He implies that Job is a wicked person who has suffered because of his sin. As in his first speech, he is insensitive. He says that “calamity . . . consumes the parts of his skin” (vv. 12–13). In other words, “Job, you have this horrible skin condition because that's just what happens to wicked people.” Then, in verse 19, he says,

He has no posterity or progeny among his people,
and no survivor where he used to live.

In other words, Bildad says, “The wicked man has no children or survivors. Hey, Job, didn't your children die? Well, you must be wicked!”

Look at how Job responds in chapter 19, verse 2:

How long will you torment me
and break me in pieces with words?

Job clearly states his friends' words are wounding him. Then, Job says that they are wrong. He's not suffering because he has done something wrong. He's suffering because “God has put me in the wrong and closed his net about me” (v. 6). Then read verses 7–12:

- 7 Behold, I cry out, ‘Violence!’ but I am not answered;
I call for help, but there is no justice.
- 8 He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass,
and he has set darkness upon my paths.
- 9 He has stripped from me my glory
and taken the crown from my head.
- 10 He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,
and my hope has he pulled up like a tree.
- 11 He has kindled his wrath against me
and counts me as his adversary.
- 12 His troops come on together;
they have cast up their siege ramp against me
and encamp around my tent.

Job feels like God isn't answering. God has shut his way in, stripped him of his glory, and is pummeling him. God's wrath is against him. God's army has surrounded him.

¹⁰ See <https://wbcommunity.org/ruth>.

While Job feels that God is attacking him, he feels that others have abandoned him. Look at verses 13–14:

- ¹³ “He has put my brothers far from me,
and those who knew me are wholly estranged from me.
¹⁴ My relatives have failed me,
my close friends have forgotten me.

Job goes on to say that his breath is offensive to his own wife (v. 17), which might be a way of saying she isn’t sticking next to him in his anguish. Look at verses 18–20:

- ¹⁸ Even young children despise me;
when I rise they talk against me.
¹⁹ All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me.
²⁰ My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.

Little children are probably afraid of how Job looks. They hate him. Job’s best friends abhor him. The ones he has loved have rejected him. This is probably just as bad as his physical pain. And as for his health, he is barely alive. You may have wondered where the expression “by the skin of his teeth” comes from. It comes from the book of Job!

One of the most important passages of the book is found in verses 23–27:

- ²³ “Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
²⁴ Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!
²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
²⁷ whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

Job wants his declaration of his innocence to last beyond his life. That’s why he wants his words written in a book. Of course, his friends couldn’t say, “Job, they’re written in the Bible. Just turn to the end of the book to see how everything works out.” But Job’s request has been answered. We have his words written down for generations to read. But he didn’t know that would happen. He thought he might die and be forgotten.

The key thought here is that Job knows his Redeemer lives. The Redeemer must be God. He believes that God will meet him. And Job will see him. He says this three times (v. 26b, v. 27a, b). It's one thing to talk to God and to hear from him. But Job is confident he will see God. God will vindicate him. Though he doesn't have any family members who can carry on his family name, God will come to his rescue and cause his memory to live on.¹¹ If you're a Christian, you have a deeper understanding of these words than perhaps even Job meant. Job might have said more than he even realized. For Job, it seems that he thought God would descend and appear on the dust, which is how "earth" could be translated. In other words, God would appear on the ash heap Job was sitting on (2:8).¹² Since Job seems to think that when he dies, it would be too late to see God, he must be thinking that this Redeemer will appear to him before he dies. Again, we have to realize that Job lived roughly two thousand years before Jesus' resurrection, and well before the Old Testament made it clear that there would be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of human history (Dan. 12:2).

The key idea is that Job's only hope is if God appears to him, explains why he's suffering, and vindicates him. His only hope is if God declares his righteousness and rescues him. His only hope to have his name live on forever, to have his reputation be cleared of guilt, is for God to do the work.

Job's speech is followed by Zophar's speech in chapter 20. Zophar adds little to the conversation. He says that the wicked won't enjoy life for long (v. 5) and that the wicked man will perish (v. 7). He claims that the wicked man will be forced to give back what he took in this

¹¹ For the concept of a kinsman-redeemer, see <https://wbcommunity.org/ruth>. The key thought is that the carrying on of one's name and lineage was thought to be a way of having eternal life. According to John E. Hartley (*The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988], 292),

Job is saying that there is a "kinsman-redeemer" (*gō'ēl*) who will come to his defense. With the term *gō'ēl* Job is referring to an ancient Israelite custom by which the nearest of kin guaranteed the security and rights of his fellow kinsman. The purpose of this custom was to preserve each family's life force. There were specific situations that required the next of kin to act on a brother's behalf. Whenever a member of the clan was murdered, a kinsman had the responsibility to avenge his brother's blood (Num. 35:19; Deut. 19:6–12). If a brother was himself taken captive or sold into bondage to pay off a debt, his nearest relative redeemed him by securing his release, either by payment of a price or by an act of force (cf. Lev. 25:23–24, 39–55). Whenever a member of the clan was forced to lease or sell his property to pay a debt, his kinsman paid off the debt to secure his family's title to that land (cf. Lev. 25:25). If a kinsman died childless, his brother took his widow and raised up children in the name of his deceased brother in order to preserve his heritage (Ruth 2:20; 3:9; 4:1–17). The kinsman-redeemer also had an obligation to initiate a lawsuit to win back or redress the rights of a brother who had been wronged (cf. Ps. 119:154; Jer. 50:34; Lam. 3:58–59; Prov. 23:11). In so doing he would restore his kinsman's honor by removing all doubt as to his integrity.

¹² Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 294.

life, what he earned by exploiting the poor (vv. 18–19). The wicked man’s sins will be revealed and everything he has will be lost in the day of judgment (vv. 27–28).

Job’s response in chapter 21 is that the wicked seem to prosper in this life. He says, in verses 7–9,

- 7 Why do the wicked live,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
- 8 Their offspring are established in their presence,
and their descendants before their eyes.
- 9 Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.

In other words, he claims that the wicked don’t seem to be judged in this life. They don’t seem to suffer. So, if Job is suffering, it is no proof that he has done something wrong.

Now that we’ve come to the end of today’s passage, I want to reflect a bit more on Job’s hope for a Redeemer. Job knew his Redeemer was his hope, but he didn’t know how he would be redeemed. But when I read this passage, I can’t help but think of Jesus, and not just because Jesus is the one who redeems us from slavery to sin, from death, and from eternal condemnation.

I also think of Jesus because Jesus is the true righteous, suffering servant of God. He is the Son of God who, from eternity past, experienced unbroken, perfectly loving fellowship with God the Father. But when he was on the cross, dying to pay for the sins of the world, he felt abandoned by God. He famously cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). He was experiencing God’s righteous, holy, just wrath against sin, which is rebellion against God and the destruction of his creation. Jesus was absorbing the penalty for countless wrongs. Think about what Job says in chapter 16, verse 10:

Men have gaped at me with their mouth;
they have struck me insolently on the cheek;
they mass themselves together against me.

That verse and the surrounding verses could be spoken by Jesus. Think also of chapter 17, verse 6:

He has made me a byword of the peoples,
and I am one before whom men spit.

That, too, could have been spoken by Jesus. Compare those words with the words of the “Suffering Servant” prophesied by Isaiah. This is Isaiah 50:6:

I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

And that is what happened to Jesus. He was betrayed (cf. Job. 19:19). On his way to the cross, he was beaten and flogged. He was mocked. People spat on him. His friends abandoned him (cf. Job 19:14). Then he was stripped bare and crucified. He was killed. Indeed, he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3).

Unlike Job, Jesus never did anything wrong. Job refers to the sins of his youth (13:26). Jesus didn't have any sins, ever. And unlike Job, Jesus endured great suffering willingly. He volunteered to be betrayed, mocked, beaten, and killed. He did this to pay for the sins of people like you and me, so we could be reconciled to God. And Jesus rose from the grave. He is truly the Redeemer that lives, the one who will stand on the earth, the one we will see in the flesh. We don't know when that will happen. It will likely happen after we die. Maybe not. But it will happen, and everyone will see it. The dead will be raised back to life and everyone will know that Jesus is the King of the universe.

Jesus is the way that God can argue man's case against God. He is the way that God is both just and the justifier of sinful people (Rom. 3:26). God can deal with sin without being unjust. God can crush sin without crushing all sinners. For Christians, Jesus is our witness in heaven. He is our High Priest who continues to plead our case before the Father. He indicates that we are forgiven of our sins. He prays for us.

So, my question for us all today is: Where is your hope? Think of being on your death bed, at the end of your life, struggling to breathe. In that moment, where is your hope? Who will vindicate your existence? Who will provide meaning for your life? Will your life have any ongoing meaning and value? Or will you be forgotten forever? Who will remember you? Who will prove that you are righteous? Who will declare that your life was a good one, one that mattered?

The truth is that without God, there would be no meaning in life, just as Paul Kalanithi said. If God doesn't assign meaning to our lives, there isn't any. And if God doesn't cause our names to live on forever, they won't. As Pascal said, no matter how great your life is, the last act of your play will be bloody and then they'll throw dirt on the box that contains your body. Or they'll incinerate your remains and turn you to ash.

But that's not the end of the story. What happens after death? Is it just lights out? Do we simply cease to exist? Or will we stand before a perfect, holy, righteous, and all-powerful God? Will we stand before the God who made the world for his purposes and who controls the world and who determines the fate of every living soul? What will we say to him? What will *you* say to him? What will be your defense? How will you explain your neglect of him? How will you justify your existence? How will you make excuses for every wrong thing you've done when God knows everything?

The truth is that our only hope is Jesus. If we are united to him by faith, if we trust that he is who the Bible says he is and that he did what the Bible said he did, then we are credited with his righteousness. Though we have done wrong, we will be declared innocent. And because he died on the cross to bear God's wrath, our wrongdoing has been punished. God is just and he is the justifier of sinful people. That is, God makes sure every crime is punished and he can release the guilty without making them pay. But only those who come to Jesus receive that. Anyone can come. You can come to Jesus today and find forgiveness and redemption and hope. All you have to do is trust that Jesus is God, that he's good, that he's the only King and the only Savior who can rescue us in this world of death.