

On Death

Introduction

When death penetrates our humdrum existence—when it bursts the bubble of our daily routine of work, errands, chores, diversions, entertainments, eating, and sleeping—we start to think.

But we try not to think about death much at all. There's no time for such thought. We're a click away from another channel to view, another site to surf. Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher, once wrote,

As men are not able to fight against death, misery, ignorance, they have taken it into their heads, in order to be happy, not to think of them at all.

Despite these miseries, man wishes to be happy, and only wishes to be happy, and cannot wish not to be so. But how will he set about it? To be happy he would have to make himself immortal; but, not being able to do so, it has occurred to him to prevent himself from thinking of death.¹

Additionally, though we are surrounded by the news of someone's death, by violent digital simulations of gore and explosions, we don't really see death all that much. How many of us have seen someone take their last breath? Unless you're a doctor, a nurse, a police officer, a soldier on the front lines, an EMT, or an undertaker, you probably don't have contact with dying people and corpses, do you?

Yet when someone we know dies—whether that person was beloved or simply who lived and breathed in the same circles we inhabit—we must think of death. We think of the loss of that particular life, but we invariably think about our own looming death—unless we distract ourselves from thinking that long.

There's an interesting book by a French philosopher, who happens to be an atheist, named Luc Ferry. The book is called *A Brief History of Thought*. He begins by saying that the great problem for humanity is death. He says we're different from animals because "a human being is the only creature who is aware of his limits. He knows that he will die, and that his near ones, those he loves, will also die. Consequently he cannot prevent himself from thinking about this state of affairs, which is disturbing and absurd, and almost unimaginable."² He asks, "what do we desire above all else? To be understood, to be loved, not to be alone, not to be separated from our loved

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 168-169, in *The Harvard Classics 48: Blaise Pascal: Thoughts, Letters, and Minor Works*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, trans. W. F. Trotter, M. L. Booth, and O. W. Wight (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 63-64.

² Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York: Harper, 2011), 2-3.

ones—in short, not to die and not to have them die on us.”³ He says that the fear of death keeps us from really living, because we’re anxious about the future.

These thoughts of death give rise to troubling questions: Why do we die? What is the meaning of death? What, if anything, happens after death? Where can hope be found? I intend to answer these questions here.

Why Do We Die?

Whatever your own personal experience with death is, if death has come close to you, you surely recognize that death is a damned thing. I don’t say that lightly. Death is literally part of condemnation, the price to pay for sin. It hurts. It stings.

Christianity claims that we die because of the presence of sin in the world. God first made a perfect world, a world without death, disease, and pain. But when the first humans turned their backs on God and disobeyed him, the presence and power of sin entered into the world. There is a power at work within us—the power of sin—that gives us disordered hearts. We often desire things that are contrary to what God wants. And part of God’s judgment on sin involves our physical deaths. God told the first human after he sinned, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:17–19). In other words, life is going to be difficult; work will be hard; and eventually you will die. Unfortunately for us, we will all face that same fate. As Ecclesiastes 3:20 states, “All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.”

I realize that some people don’t believe this is why we die. Some people don’t think there is a God. They think we are the products of chance. We just happen to exist, and we have evolved from animals, and, like all animals, we die. Yet if this is so, why does death bother us so much? Why do we fear it? Why do we often avoid talking about our own deaths? If death is such a natural part of the world, why does it feel like an alien intruder? Why does the news of someone’s death produce such indignation and grief?

Many individuals place their trust in science. But science can’t tell us *why* we die. Science can tell us *how* we die. Science can tell us what happens at the cellular level, but it can’t tell us the *meaning* of death. We need someone to reveal the meaning to us, or else we’re just guessing.

³ Ibid., 4.

What Is the Meaning of Death?

If you assume that after death lies nothing but nonexistence, you may not be bothered by your own death. I'm not sure I've ever met someone convinced that death is nothing but a long, dark sleep from which you will never awake. If that were so, our own deaths might not seem so bad. It would simply be nothing at all. It's hard to say whether nonexistence is better or worse than existence. What would it be like to cease to exist? Whatever it is, we wouldn't know. But there would be no pain, no agony, and no memories of any kind.

However, even if someone were to hold consistently to such a position, it does make sense to mourn the loss of those we love. After all, we're still alive, and even if the deceased cease to exist, and are therefore not in pain, we still miss their presence in our lives. To mourn the loss of a relative or friend is understandable, regardless of what you believe regarding the possibility of the afterlife.

But we also respond to the deaths of strangers with a bit of indignation. This is certainly the case when there's a shooting at a school, some terrible natural disaster, or a terrorist act. Now, if death is nothing, and those people are essentially nothing to us because they were not a part of our lives, why do we care? It makes little difference to our lives. Are we worried that something similar could happen to us? Is that it? I think there's more to it.

If we're honest, we fear death. Most of us try never to think about it. We distract ourselves with work, family obligations, hobbies, or frivolous entertainment in order not to think about death and the big questions that are often associated with death. Those big questions include: What is the meaning of life? What is truly important? What happens after death? Why are we here? I think most of us don't have a philosophy that can answer such questions, so we don't ask them.

But the way we react to death—the specter of our own death, the deaths of loved ones, and the deaths of strangers halfway around the world—indicates that we know death is wrong. It's evil. It is simply not the way things are supposed to be. There is something very unnatural about death, even though we know all living things die.

I think the biblical view of death is the one that matches our experience. Like I said before, death is a damned thing. That is, the reason why we die is because of the presence of sin in the world. Sin is not just doing something "bad," though it is that. Sin is a power. It is at work in our hearts and our minds to make us desire and think things that are contrary to what God has commanded and what he desires. Because of this power, and because we act on these urges and thoughts, the result is everything bad we experience: disease, decay, fighting, a lack of peace, natural disasters, and, yes, death. Part of the punishment for our rebellion against God is death.

Rebellion? Yes. “But I don’t rebel against God; I don’t even believe he exists!” Exactly. God made us to worship him, to know him and love him and make much of him. That is the purpose of our existence. That is what is meant when we are told that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). But many of us go around acting (and even believing) like he doesn’t exist. If we aren’t fulfilling our purpose, we are in rebellion.

Imagine a hammer refusing to drive nails into wood. You would say that’s a rebellious hammer. Okay, a hammer isn’t a person and can’t do that. But you get the point. It would be like a person dressing in a US Postal Service uniform, collecting a pay check from the government, driving around in a little white vehicle with a bunch of letters and packages in it, and refusing to actually deliver that mail. That’s a mailman (or mailwoman, of course) in rebellion. You may or may not think he is a “bad” person, but refusing to do the very thing you were made to do is indeed very bad. And that’s the state we all find ourselves in.

So, though God made people who initially were not created to die, death came as a judgment against our rebellion. This is seen in Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve, the first human beings disobey God. And it’s quite famously stated in Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death.” Death is something we’ve earned because our sin. (Likewise, James 1:14–15 tells us that our own twisted desires give birth to sin, which, when fully grown, brings forth death.)

So, that is why we die.

What Happens After We Die?

Scientists can never tell us what happens to our souls after we die. By definition, whatever existence we may or may not have after death is beyond observation and experimentation. Science cannot tell us whether we have souls or not, or whether there is a heaven or a hell. Science has its limits. Not all truth is confined to the natural world of observation and experimentation.

It is therefore necessary for someone to reveal to us what happens after die. We need to hear from someone who knows what does and does not happen, or else we could never know with certainty. Some people put a lot of stock in what they hear from people who have been clinically dead for a few minutes and then are revived. Personally, I’m a bit skeptical about that. I’m just not sure I trust that those people weren’t experiencing something in their minds that may or may not be true. What if they were dreaming or imagining something that was based only on their hopes or what they had heard from others? What if their experience of the afterlife was only a projection of what was already dormant in the recesses of their minds?

The exceptional experiences of those people aside, for the rest of us, death is an “outside the box” issue. Imagine that all of our experiences—everything we can observe and touch and discover—are enclosed in a box. Our planet, our galaxy, and our universe—these are all “inside the box” things. True, most of us will never explore all the contents of that box, but the point is that everything that we could possibly know through the greatest human discoveries fits inside that box. But there are “outside the box” issues, such as whether God exists or not, what the meaning and purpose of life is, and what happens after death. Those are things that we can’t discover on our own. Of course, we can speculate. But our speculation could very well be wrong, and those are issues that are too important to get wrong.

But this is where Christianity gives us great hope. God has revealed the truth of those issues to us. God is outside the box, but in no box of his own. God made the box. God sustains the box, keeping its form and shape and structure intact. And God works within the box, sustaining everything in it, too. God has sent messages into the box, by means of the Holy Spirit, an invisible, divine person who directed God’s messengers to say and write what he wanted them to. And here’s the most amazing thing of all: God became man and stepped into the box. And what happened after that gives us great hope.

Where Can Hope Be Found?

The Bible describes death as an enemy. This shouldn’t surprise us. As I said earlier, we already have this sense. If death is an enemy that conquers all human beings, our only hope is if someone—no mere mortal—can defeat this enemy. Can death ever be defeated? That sounds too good to be true. But it is true.

Our hero, the one who will defeat death, is Jesus. Jesus is God who became man. That’s what we celebrate every Christmas: the miracle of the incarnation, when God took on human form. He didn’t cease being God, but he added a human nature. This is like William Shakespeare entering into one of his own plays. Why would God enter into a world of death, of disease, and scores of other wrong, painful things? God entered into his creation in order to rescue us. He entered into his creation in order to pay the penalty for our rebellion. Every crime deserves a punishment, and because God is a perfect judge, he must punish the crimes. But if we were all punished for our crimes against God, there would be no hope for us—certainly no life after death.

Yet Jesus came to live the perfect life that we don’t live and to die the death that we deserve. In other words, as God the Son, he always obeyed the God the Father. Yet he died on a cross—an instrument of torture—in order to pay the penalty for us. God was satisfied to take the penalty that we deserve and to place it upon his Son. And the Son willingly came to take on that penalty himself.

But there's something else: Jesus didn't just die. On the third day, he rose from the grave. His resurrection from the dead shows that he has power over death. It shows he paid the penalty for our sin. He walked out a free man, and his empty tomb says that he paid the penalty for sin in full.

“O Death, Where Is Your Sting?”

Jesus later returned to heaven to be with the Father. But one day he will return and he will destroy the death.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul, when talking about Jesus' resurrection, says that Jesus' work isn't done yet. When he returns, he will deliver “the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (vv. 24–26).

Death is an enemy to be destroyed! And it will be destroyed. Remember, this message that Paul is relaying to us comes from God. Jesus commissioned Paul to be his representative, his apostle. Here, Paul is giving us this “outside the box” message regarding death. One day, Jesus will defeat it.

What does that mean for us? Those who have put their hope, their trust, their faith in Jesus, will one day have their own resurrection. We will all die—unless Jesus returns before we die. But those who have put their lives in the hands of Jesus will come back to life, in perfect bodies that can never die again. Here is what Paul says about that:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:51–55)

One day, death will have no victory. Death will have no sting. When death dies, there will only be life. But this promise only holds true for those who have put their trust in Jesus.

What is Faith?

What does trust, or faith, in Jesus look like? Faith in Jesus must agree with a certain set of facts, a bare minimum, so to speak: there is one true God who created us; we have all gone astray (we have sinned against God); we therefore deserve judgment; Jesus is the God who became man, lived a perfect life, died a death in the place of sinners, and rose from the grave; therefore, it is only through Jesus that one can be saved.

But faith is more than believing a set of facts to be true. Faith is a relationship. In this context, faith in Jesus means loving Jesus, humbling one's self before him, and possessing a willingness to follow him by obeying what he says. No one is saved by being good, by being obedient. One is saved from judgment by God's grace, which operates through the instrument of faith. But real faith results in a transformed life, one marked by doing good. (This can be seen in Ephesians 2:8–10, and also James 2:14–26.)

Contrary to what some may believe, not everyone goes to heaven after death. Not everyone is in paradise, with God and with their loved ones. Only those who have true faith in Jesus will be in heaven. Only those who trust him for salvation and submit to him as Lord will be spared the wrath that is to come.

We Can Trust Jesus

If you read the four Gospels—the biographies of Jesus—you will find that Jesus is the most amazing figure that ever walked this earth. There are many good reasons to believe that these accounts of Jesus are true, that the Gospels themselves come from God. But perhaps the greatest one is this: Who would make up a story about God becoming man and dying for you? And if this story is true, who better to trust than the God who became man to die for you?

There's one more passage I want to share. The book of Hebrews has much to say about Jesus. It tells us that Jesus is greater than angels and Moses and any other priest. He is truly the great High Priest, the one who mediates between God and human beings. And one of the works of Jesus was to destroy the power of evil, Satan himself, and the power of death. Hebrews 2:14–15 says that Jesus became a human being and died so “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

All of us fear death. I don't know an honest person who says he or she isn't afraid of death. Therefore, we are slaves to that fear. We like to think of ourselves as free, but we're not. We're enslaved to all kinds of things—addictions and fears chief among them. And we're enslaved to

our fear of death. But if we put our hope in Jesus, we don't have to fear death. Jesus came to deliver us from death and the fear of death.

Do you believe that? Do you believe Jesus died for you and rose from the grave? Do you believe he will return to put an end to all evil, including death? If you trust Jesus, you have a hope that cannot be shaken, that can never be taken away. You will live a perfect life without end in a perfect world with God and every other person who trusted in the one true God. What a great day that will be.

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