

Dear Friend or Dark Intruder? A Theology of Death

1. Introduction: The Matter of Death

Christian theology would have no meaning were it not dealing with the matter of death. Highly concealed in human affairs is the fact that the race is deeply concerned about death. Bruce Rumbold, in a Zadok Reading Guide (Death and Bereavement, No. 9, Canberra 1978), speaks of the sudden and modern preoccupation with death. He says that in 1964 there were 400 items listed bibliographically, and by 1974 2,600. By 1974 American publishers were turning out two or three full-length books each week. A new discipline had arisen – Thanatology (the study of death), and the spate has by no means ceased to this date in 1979.

Doubtless there are many contributing causes to the interest, and seeming honesty in the facing of death. Rumbold points out that this generation, and especially the last couple of decades, has seen a whole new thing happening, in that death as most people encounter it is reasonably restricted to people who die in old age and of degenerative diseases, whereas in earlier decades large numbers died of infectious diseases, and death was often encountered in families, after this fashion.

Whatever importance man attaches to death, and however he may seek in modern techniques to come to terms with the subject and the experience, we must seek in our study to develop a Biblical theology of death. Without this basis Christian attempts to translate the meaning and significance of death will be pointless. An attempt to develop a genuine and helpful approach to bereavement will also be thwarted. We must be nothing, if not honest, however much we may feel called to ameliorate the impact of what has been called by St. Paul ‘the last enemy’.

Our mode of study will be, then, to examine the nature of death as described in Scripture, and so determine whether death is indeed a friend or a dark intruder. It may be that it is neither or both, or something other than these suggested alternatives.

2. The Nature and Meaning of Death

Paul’s famous statement, ‘O wretched man that I am!’ Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ portrays the exasperation Paul feels with a body¹ which is doomed to death, and in which sin is an ever-present problem. His cry is for

¹ In all fairness it must be stated that ‘body of death’ is understood by some commentators as referring to the body of sin, that is as sin as a mass, or all sin en masse. Even so, the end result is the same, since the body houses this evil, and so must be radically changed in order to be rid of sin

deliverance from a daily tasting of death. In Philippians 3:21 he speaks of ‘this body of humiliation’ and anticipates its transformation into a body of glory. The same writer also speaks of the domination of death whilst a man lives (Romans 5:12–21) In other words, he sees death as an ever-present problem in life. His cry, rightly placed in its context, also has an answer, in fact the answer, namely that Christ will deliver him, eventually. In this sense the ever-present problem is not, in the ultimate, any problem. Hence the many cries of victory in the N.T. which ascend in regard to deliverance from death.

We will seek, now, to trace the development of thought, in the Scriptures, in regard to death.

(i) Ideas of Death in the Old Testament

(a) Creation Without Death.

In Romans 5:12 Paul says, ‘By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and death passed upon all men in that all (men) did sin.’ Paul is insisting that death as we know it, did not exist prior to Adam’s sin. The vexed question of whether or not man is mortal needs to be discussed, in which case terms need to be defined. In Genesis 2:17 Adam is warned against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ‘... for in the day you eat of it you shall die’. Eve tells the serpent that this is the case, only to be met with ‘You shall not surely die.’ Jesus later refers to Satan as being a liar from the beginning.

Man eats and dies. This death must be primarily a relational death, i.e. man dies to God whilst he comes alive to himself. To be alive to oneself (and not God) is the nature of death. II Cor. 5:14–15 speaks of the action of dying to one’s self and coming alive to God. Romans 1:20–32 makes it clear that death is rejection of God as He is and so rejection of the true order of things, that is of the creation and man. Hence the state one lives in is death or deathly. Elsewhere Paul describes it as being ‘dead in (or through) trespasses and sins

Whilst death is relational it is also actual. Man ultimately dies in the material sense. Yet, as Paul puts it, a person is ‘dead even while she lives’ (I Tim. 5:6). Man is dead wholly, and not just ‘spiritually’ as some people phrase it. His physical death is obviously related to his sin (Romans 5:12ff) but from God’s point of view, whether his body is dead or not he is dead until regenerated, i.e. given new life

This raises the question of whether man is immortal. Some understand by ‘immortal’ that man will never cease to be an entity. By ‘immortal’ others mean that he lives for ever. It is a matter of definition of terms. To have existence does not mean to be immortal in the Biblical sense, for Paul says, ‘God... – alone has immortality’ (I Tim. 6:16) – He means intrinsically God alone has immortality. God, in creating man, may accord unending existence to man, whether that be mere existence or abundant life, but whichever element man has is dependent continually upon God. As we will see, the debate of conditional immortality involves the argument as to whether God succeeds as God if He simply terminates existence, even though that existence be of a hopeless order. We need continually to be aware of the meaning of our terms

In Genesis 2:9 we read that God placed the tree of life in the garden. No prohibition was placed upon man eating this. The question is whether man could have lived for ever had he not eaten of that tree. Presumably not. This would then presuppose at least the limitation of the time a man would live. Even so the connotation of 'death' would be entirely different from that death against which God warned man. There is partly a parallel in Christian death which is said to have no sting, for the grave has no victory (does not tyrannise man). It is a passing from one form of existence to another, without, apparently, there being any radical change in the identity of the personality.

Much of what we have said may be speculation. Nevertheless there are some grounds even for this, for God said that man, having sinned, might eat of the tree of life and live (exist?) for ever (Gen. 3:22).

The questions we have raised are not merely academic. We need to know (a) What is the nature of created life, and (b) What is the nature of death for fallen man.

(b) Created Life.

Man came to be a living creature when, having been formed of the dust of the earth, God breathed into him the breath of life. The term 'living being' must mean not only insufflation of air into a formed being, but also the kind of life which resulted from the insufflation of God. It concurs with man being made in the image of God which presupposes that 'everything that God is, man was like that, and anything that God is, man was none of that.' Man was given human form, human life, human ways of being a human. Genesis 1:28ff (cf. Psalm 8:3ff, Eccles. 3:11, 7:29) shows that to be truly human is to relate to God in His commands and purposes. Genesis 2:15–20 shows that it is for man to relate to the creation in which, and over which, God has placed him.

Created life, then, is primarily relational. Man relates to God and his fellow-beings, and in relating fulfils the functions for which God has placed them (humanity) upon the earth. Any departure from these functional and purposeful operations is departure from true life.

Created life is primarily dependent upon the life of God. An examination of Jer. 2:13 and Proverbs 4:23 shows us that God is life of Himself, whereas man's life is dependent upon God. This is often reinforced by such statements as Psalm 104:29, 'when thou takest away their breath they die'. John 5:26 says, 'For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also, to have life in himself.' Such a statement is never made of man.

(c) The Nature of Death for Fallen Man.

Whilst we will need to examine this at greater length we can say that the death of fallen man is relational. Man has ceased to relate authentically to God, fellow-man, and the creation. In this sense he has ceased to live, that is live properly. Paul's masterful treatment of sin and death in Romans 5:12–21 shows us that death reigns over man because of sin, and sin reigns over man because of death. Doubtless this means that impending physical death deeply affects the existence of sinful man, who is already radically affected by his relational death to God. Romans 1:20–32 shows the experimental nature of this death, as experienced. Other passages show that the fear of death is, so to speak, a very component of that death itself.

In both Old and New Testaments, thoughtful writers see the physical aspects of death as demeaning to the dignity of man. They do not see the body as something wrong, evil, or inferior, but only the body as it is doomed to death.

Hence being 'subject to corruption' is an undignifying bondage. Hence distaste for the physical experience of death is expressed. It is part of the 'vanity (emptiness) spoken of in Ecclesiastes (cf. 12:1–8). In Ecclesiastes 12 the indignity of growing old, becoming decrepit, querulous and fearful, and finally exiting from life is well-portrayed. There are also other mentions of the indignity of death, the seeming uselessness of man in face of his mortality, such as, '... you are dust, and to dust shall you return' (Gen. 3:19), '... I who am but dust and ashes' (Gen. 18:27), 'They die and return to their dust' (Psa. 104:29), '...we are but dust' (Psa. 103:14)

At the same time, man's mortality must be seen from two vantage points:–

- (i) He is in the image of God, and God, so to speak, is reflected in this 'animated dust', and
- (ii) Man does not have to soar beyond his humanity. No demands are made upon him which can only be fulfilled by celestial creatures or God Himself. Man can glory in his humanity, his creatureliness, his sonship, his servanthip.

The tragedy of man's 'deathness' is that in the Fall he has denied his limitations. He has sought to exceed them, and has, in fact, failed to fulfil his true potential, and to wholly exercise his given powers and gifts. Fear and guilt have constricted him from being a free creature. Failure to relate to God has taken away his life (John 17:3, Isaiah 59:2). All of this constitutes his 'deathness'.

(d) The Bondage of Death in Life

Man is in bondage through death. This is seen in such passages as Romans 5:12–21, Hebrews 2:14–15 (cf. I John 4:18), Job 18:14, Psalm 55:4, I Cor. 15:50–57. The first aspect of direct bondage is seen in Ephesians 2:1–3 where man is dead in trespasses and sins. He feels – so to speak – the death-impact of his sins. He is denied life. He has to go through motions which are not life but death. Every sin is a form of death, and death, in this sense, compounds itself. The second aspect of bondage is that man is caught in a net of evil which imprisons him. He is in a doomed age (Gal. 1:4, I John 2:17) and under the powers of the age (Gal. 4:3), especially under the power of Satan (I John 5:19, II Cor. 4:4), who is the god or prince of the age (aeon or kosmos – 'system'). Caught in the grip of these powers (Col. 1:13) he is bound to obey evil. This is an indignity, even to rebellious man (cf. John 8:44). The third element of bondage is that through fear of death man is under Satan's power. Fear of death is really fear of judgement. I John 4:18 says 'fear relates to punishment'. Jude 9 (cf. John 14:30–31) indicates that Satan acts in some way as 'Devil-Advocate' against man. Revelation 12:10 speaks of him being 'the Accuser'. In any case Hebrews 2:14–15 shows that Satan keeps man in bondage through fear of death. We may note, incidentally, that the passage indicates man lives in this fear of death from the cradle to the grave, and this is also the message of Romans 5:12–21.

If man could legitimately be released from the fear of death, and so from the bondage of Satan, then he would be a brilliantly free person. This liberation would have to be radical, total, and without the trace of doubt.

(e) The Death Beyond Death,, i.e. Beyond Life.

This is the most difficult of all aspects to cover. The deathfulness of sin, the bondage of evil powers, and the fear of death are all 'felt' things in our earthly existence. However the matters of judgement, death beyond this life, eternal suffering and eternal bliss are all things on which we are informed by

the Bible, and because they are beyond the dimensions of this world, but treated in the language of this world, must present problems when we seek fully to understand them.

Another difficulty we have when we face matters of judgement and punishment is that we ourselves are sinful. Sin itself cannot be understood by a sinner. Sinful man may feel sin's impact, but sin is spoken of as being deceitful. That is, it deceives the sinner as to its true nature. Likewise man-under-judgement cannot be objective enough to view death, judgement and punishment in their true light. Directly linked with this disadvantage is man's assessment of God. Man does not understand properly the nature of God's holiness, righteousness, truth, goodness, and love. Sin has made this impossible. Man could not bear the confrontation of the total nature of God. In fact one of the things which troubles him is the dread of being confronted, ultimately, by God. Were such to happen after death, then man could not accuse God, rationalise His actions as wrong or excuse his own doing and false understanding. This is why it is imperative that the revelations of the Bible be approached humbly, and accepted wholly. We have a number of problems to resolve.

The Problems of Universalism and Conditional Immortality.

Universalism is the teaching which says that all human beings will ultimately be saved from the effects and due penalty of their sins. They will not die eternally, but will be accepted by God, and live eternally. There are many forms of this teaching. Some see a period of probation and purgation as being necessary. Others see the work of the Cross as being universalistic, i.e. that Christ has borne the sins of all, whether or not they have had faith in that fact and work. Universalism denies the teaching of eternal punishment. It may even embrace a period of punishment, but denies that any person will suffer eternally.

This teaching raises more serious problems than the one it claims to resolve. The nature of the holiness of God, and His righteousness and justice are in question. It is not enough to say that love transcends holiness and righteousness, for just as holiness and righteousness must be loving, so love must be holy and righteous. Law must not be regarded as a mere partitioning men off from evil, a fence which may be removed once the human living is completed. It must not be seen as temporary. It must be understood as the outshining and true expression of the nature of God. Forgiveness must in no way bypass the demands of law. A superficial understanding of God means a superficial understanding of His holiness, righteousness and justice. It must mean equally a failure to understand the true nature of law.

Humanity naturally draws away from contemplating the utter holiness of God, because an experience of it would seem deadly. The prophet in Isaiah 6 was shocked by the revelation of God's holiness, since it gave him the equivalent revelation of his own unholiness. In Luke 5 Peter pleads with Christ to depart from him, once he sees his own sinfulness in the light of Christ's holiness. Something must be done to take the guilt and pollution of sinners from them, and this was done in the work of the Cross. Rejection of that work, or failure to have faith in it means the faithless one is bereft of its benefits. When we truly understand the nature of God and (fallen) man, then we understand that by nature of the case he who refuses the gifts of repentance and faith, has refused the only grace which can redeem him. For this reason the judgement of sin cannot be staved off.

The depths of sin, rebellion, and moral pollution of man cannot be understood except by the facts that man's sin will find him out, sin's wages is death, and that the soul who sins must die. These can only be seen in the light of

- (a) The holiness and righteousness of God, and (b) The fully justifiable wrath of God.

The question then is whether by nature of the case universalism is possible. The dilemma of man is that God's holiness cannot admit evil into eternity – not in any form (cf. II Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:27). Man cannot become pure except by the Cross (Heb. 1:3, 9:14, Acts 22:16, I Cor. 6:11). He cannot be washed over, above, and apart from his will. The will is the deepest part of man. It must decide its 'Yes,' or 'No'. By reason of God's nature, and man's nature, God's demands, and man's refusals to respond, universalism is ruled out in the prima facie evidence.

One of the problems which faces us is that certain Scriptures seem to indicate that 'all things' will be unified, reconciled, and harmonised. Ephesians 1: 10, 4:10, Colossians 1:20 and 3:14 are quoted in this regard, and they are indeed powerful statements. However, when one defines 'all things' it is seen that these are 'authentic things', i.e. things which have true being. We have seen that man-as-dead is not an authentic being. Romans 8:18ff shows that creation has been subjected to futility (inability to function fully and properly) but will be released into fulness, i.e. essential functionality. Thus the true 'all things' do not include the evil, the wrong, the negative, the unauthentic. When Paul says, 'In Adam all die. In Christ shall all be made alive', he means that all who are in Adam ultimately will die, whilst all who come into Christ will be made alive. On this score, then, universalism is discounted.

Conditional Immortality. This is the teaching that only the redeemed shall live. Those lost will be destroyed. It may be looked at from various angles. Man is by creation mortal, so in death he ceases to be, which is normal. Doubtless sin has made this kind of death more stringent, but then man is mortal and must die. God gives to some – the redeemed – immortality because of the work of Christ. It is argued that man is an entity – body, soul and spirit – and all elements must die together. Likewise, if God should grant immortality, then He will grant it to this whole entity.

There are problems here. The main one is whether God, having created, will annihilate anything which He has created. This especially applies to man who is made in God's own image. He reflects God. The question is whether death really means annihilation of the personality, or simply deprivation of full and authentic existence. The denial of true existence is really the most terrifying form of suffering – by nature of the case! Man is in fact (being an unrepentant sinner) dead while he lives, and this here, on earth. Is there any reason to think that this is necessarily changed when he enters into the future forms of existence?

The vital question is, 'Does, indeed can God – by reason of His nature and man's – destroy man by annihilation?' So much, then, hinges on the actual nature of destruction.² The term 'destruction' as used in Romans 6:6, Hebrews 2: 15 and other places simply means 'to put out of action' or 'to render useless', 'to paralyse'. It does not suggest annihilation, obliteration, or cessation of being. Death, so far as we trace it in Scripture, means loss of true life, that is of authentic existence. It does not mean loss of existence or being, but being cut off from the source of true life and being. It is separation from its true life source, but not necessarily cessation of existence.

The Question of the Term 'eternal'.

From passages such as Matt. 25:46 (where 'eternal punishment' and 'eternal life' are mentioned in the one breath), Jude 7 and 21 ('eternal fire', 'eternal life'), Matt. 19:29 and 18:8 ('eternal life', 'eternal fire') we gather that

² See LFS. No. 31, 'The Doctrine of the Last Things: Eschatology'

rightly speaking the word ‘eternal’ has the same value for fire as for life. That is neither ever ceases. The word *aionios* (adjective) and *aionos* (noun) means literally ‘the ages upon the ages’, indicating perpetuity on the one hand, and indestructibility on the other. Those who hold to conditional immortality concede that the fire may be eternal, but that man does not suffer in it eternally. This makes nonsense of the term ‘eternal destruction’ unless destruction is going on eternally. Likewise the term ‘eternal punishment’ presupposes a continual action. At the same time there are other possibilities. That which has been accorded continual existence is being destroyed and punished. It is denied true (eternal) being. It is continually denied this.

In discussing death–beyond death (or beyond–life) we cannot afford sentimental arguments such as ‘How can God be a God of love and make people suffer eternally?’ If, by nature of the case the finally impenitent have to suffer, then sentiment has no part in the matter. For example, it might be said that since God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29) and since He is love (I John 4:8 and 16) that in fact the impenitent suffer in the fire of His love, the fire which is love (cf. Rev. 19:20, 20:14–15, 21:8). This would be true psychologically, that those who were impenitent would find the fire of His love an immense torture.

Questions have to be examined carefully, especially when they have an accusatory note. ‘How can God make people suffer?’ might be entirely wrong. It may need to be recast, ‘Why do people refuse the way out of suffering, and let themselves in for the judgement?’ The question, ‘How can God let His children suffer?’ may need to be recast, ‘Why do men refuse to become the children of God when He offers them Fatherhood and salvation?’ ‘Why then do they refuse to be children, and choose, virtually, the suffering they are warned against?’

Finally we must insist that human understanding is open to so much error that in these matters of eternity it cannot be the judge of what is right and wrong. God needs no vindication, although time will vindicate Him. It is not possible that He is in error, for, ‘Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?’ Man may be allowed to challenge and accuse God, but that does not mean God is in error. His approach is beyond that of man (Isaiah 55: 8–9) and true humility will accept His revelation.

At the same time it is always possible that we have not understood sufficiently that which He has revealed sufficiently. A living revelation of His holiness may prove enough to make our arguments trivial and piffling. We may well be arguing on the insufficient premises adduced by us when we are in deficient states of knowing God in all His being.

Man in Death Here and There.

There are certain Biblical data which we need to examine, such as Life After Death, The States of Being After Death, including Soul Sleep, Resurrection, Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, the Second Death, Eternal Punishment, Paradise, Heaven, Eternal Life, and so on. We also need to see some of the events which happen prior to human death, and to the parousia (appearing) of Christ. These need to be examined closely in appropriate source materials.³ Scholars differ somewhat in their conclusions regarding some of these elements and events, but there is no doubt that there is general agreement that the Scriptures inform us reasonably on these matters. The church has always concerned itself with the things of the after–life. We certainly need to understand, so far as they are set out, these things of the end–time, and the life beyond.

³ See also LFS. No. 31, ‘The Doctrine of the Last Things: Eschatology’.

In returning to our theme of the death beyond death we are bound to say that Scripture sets out eternal life in very attractive ways and eternal death in strong and frightening terms. Fire, wailings, anguish and darkness are some of the terms used. Yet surely these are figures which are easily understood, and which in fact describe the suffering we know on earth, as we experience our own evil, and the evil of others. There are the burning fires in the conscience which are the flames of guilt, the heat of the curse. Spiritual darkness, intolerable loneliness, and unutterable groanings are parts of human experience.

The deepest anguish is that of us failing to be true existents within a world which God has created functionally. Our refusal to function according to the true and moral principles of creation brings us to deprivation of true being. This expresses itself in depraved actions. We are disoriented, dissociated, and dislocated in a creation intended for our joy, tranquillity and purposefulness of life. Were we truly oriented, truly associated and truly located we would live useful, peaceful and joyful lives. Instead we are malfunctional and dysfunctional in a genuinely functional world. The resultant anguish, tension, fear, distress, loneliness, confusion, anger, rage, rebellion are what constitute the suffering we know, and this is surely logical.

Romans 1:18 to 32 shows us the wrath of God as it is revealed upon men. When they persist in suppressing the true nature of their universe, and attempt to subvert both its nature and its goals, then they must inevitably suffer. God successively gives man up to his evil, which compounds his suffering, which constitutes his rebellion on the one hand, and God's wrath on the other. God, in insisting on being personally present to sinful humanity, alerts man to his state, sensitises him to his evil, and, in fact, exacerbates him in his sin.

This kind of existence is man's death-state – his deathness. God's true order is that His moral indignation personally touches every man in sin. The primary purpose is to bring him to repentance, faith, and (so) justification. Thus man comes to life. Where man is obdurate his own impenitence increases and accelerates his experience of wrath, that is death.

The finally impenitent, then, practise evil, develop habit traits and habit-tracks and so become people of hungers, passions, and lusts. The death-beyond-death is a state where these developed traits, habits, hungers and passions can find no correlates of fulfilment. This is exemplified in the story of the rich man in Hades who yearned for even the slightest suggestion of satisfaction, a drop of water on the tip of the tongue.

Our interest in death is not morbid, but evangelical. Christ himself was evangelical in his warnings.

3. The Fear of Death and Its Abolition

(i.) The Fear of Death.

We have seen that in the fear of death there are a number of factors involved. Some of them are ordinary, understandable and logical. The world is a good place in which to live. Living is agreeable to most people. Relationships are significant; we do not wish to terminate them. Life is what we have always known: we know nothing other than it. Hence we do not desire its termination. What is known is acceptable for the most part. What is unknown may be a cause for fear. It may bring discomfort, distress, and other things. We are structured to resist death. We value our bodies. We are not attracted by threatened decay, corruption, and dissolution of our physical elements. All

these fears or distastes are experienced, and understood.

There are, however, other elements. These are fears which may be related to those above, but which are centred upon the nature and consequences of death. Some modern research is making the point that there may be life beyond death which is not to be feared, and in fact death itself need not be terrifying. We will seek to deal with similar points in the second half of our study. Nevertheless the fear of death seems inbred. It is variously stated that it is not death itself which is feared but the manner of passing into death, e.g. pain of terminal sickness, impending separation from loved ones, separation from the known, but the fact remains it is death that is feared since these things cannot be rightly separated from it.

The Hebrew was frank. He said, 'My heart is at anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.' David talked about the sorrows, the cords, and the snares of death, as though he were being trapped into death. 'The cords of death encompassed me, the torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me.'⁴ Death is linked with the sin of man. Romans 5:12–21 is a grim reminder that death bedevils man in every part and time of his existence. We have seen from I John 4:16f, and Hebrews 2:14–15 that man is in fear of death because he is in fear of what lies beyond it, that is the logical conclusion of judgement. His conscience tells him he is a creature not only of time but beyond-time, and the issues of his conscience matter much. Somehow beyond time is the situation where there will be a reckoning. As Hebrews 9:27 has it, 'It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that comes judgement...'

This fear of death is highly exacerbated by Satan, who thus keeps humanity in bondage (Heb. 2:14–15, cf. Jude 9). We refer to the guilt of man as giving Satan power to accuse and so to alarm man up to judgement. Such negative use of fear increases man's terror and loathing of God, distorting the glory of God into petty cruelty, vengeful intents, tyrannical judgement. Thus evil distorts in order to increase fear, add to man's existential anguish, and to increase his terror of life. Hence Satan, his accusing principalities and powers, conscience, law, the curse and God's wrath are all wrought into one strong force to keep man in misery, fear, and rage. These manipulate him within the fear of death.

(ii) The Abolition of Fear.

Something quite objective in history must happen which will remove man's guilt. We speak not so much of his subjective feelings of guilt (which may or may not correspond to his actual objective guilt) as of his actual (objective) guilt. We cannot here enter into the precise nature of guilt, but we can certainly link it with violations of the law, and rebellion against God. Such wrong warrants (and demands) punishment. However, the corrosive nature of guilt demands some action which will play out the dynamic of guilt and exhaust it, so that sin is no longer effective in its depredations of the human spirit.

All of these Christ effects on the Cross. The statements 'He tasted death for every man', 'He poured out his soul unto death', 'Obedient unto death', 'exceeding sorrowful, even unto death' are all deeply significant. They must mean what Paul indicates in II Cor. 5:14 when he says, 'We are convinced that when one died for all, then did all die.' He means surely that every death was taken up into and encompassed by the death of Christ. The death of sin was

⁴ Psalm 55:4–5, Psalm 18:4–5, cf. Psalm 116:3–4.

experienced by him, and indeed was played out to the end, so that death as such was obliterated. Romans 6:10 has it, 'In that he died, he died to sin, once for all.' Romans 6:9 says, '... death has no longer dominion over him.' Temporarily, on the Cross, it did have dominion over him, but not ultimately. He destroyed death in his death. Thus the N.T. speaks of all believers having been taken up into that death (of the Cross) and so dying with him, their sins having been neutralised and destroyed so that death's sting has been borne and thus withdrawn. Death has no sting and (so) grave no victory.

One hymn expresses this well:–

'We have been crucified with Christ, Now we shall live for ever.'

The penalty of sin has been borne, the evil of sin has been expended, the power of sin has been broken, and the pollution of sin has been expunged. All the elements of death, then, have been banished. Hence Paul's statement (II Tim. 1:10),

'He has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light.'

He means we are confident that death's fear is removed, its indignity destroyed, and that life is known, and views of immortality are breaking upon the eyes of the redeemed.

(iii) The Abolition of Indignity.

The passage of Romans 5:12–21 shows man suffering indignity of death. Sin reigns by virtue of death: death reigns by virtue of sin. Romans 3:23 depicts man having lost his created glory, as the passage of Romans 1:18–32 depicts him as having lost the true meaning of God, man and the creation. Man lives in a state of anguish, deprived of God and true life. Ephesians 2:1–3 depicts him as dead, debased, rebellious, and forced into the slavery of evil. Man's dignity is gone. John 11:33–38 more than hints that Jesus is angry – 'He trembled with indignation' – at man's bondage to the fear of death. The obscenity of a human help–less in uncontrollable grief which is in effect a state of no faith, deeply disturbs him.

In other situations Jesus is angry at no–faith, and wrathful at the sight of humanity under the bondage of demons, sickness and death. It is man–in–the–image–of–God which is his understanding of true man. He comes to abolish death and bring man to immortality.

Paul's cry, 'Who will deliver me from the body of this death (or, this death–body)?' finds an echo in every human heart, Christian and atheist alike. The constant rape of sin, the physical corruption and dissolution of the flesh is sickening to man. The overtones of doom bring him to hate the state in which he finds himself. Research is yet to be done fully on the state of inferiority man evinces universally. Its root cause surely lies in death. Paul Tillich's statement is apt,

'Man lives in fear of death, not simply because he has to die, but because he deserves to die.'

This indignity Christ came to obliterate, and this is what happens when his cry of truth and hope is truly heard,

*'I am the resurrection and the life,
He that believes in me, though he die, Yet shall he live.
And he that lives and believes in me, Shall never die.'*

We will examine this statement more closely in our study, but it is the true evidence that the indignity of death is, at the most, temporary. The things which pertain to true dignity of being have come to man through Christ's death and resurrection.

4. The Hope of The Redeemed and The Restoration of Life and Dignity

Let us first note that the endeavours to bring peace to men and women who are dying cannot but be commended. Where, however, the motivation is simply humanistic sympathy and pity, then the action is not good enough. If the Christian Gospel does not contain true comfort it must be abandoned. The Gospel, however, does contain the comfort that is needed. Other comforts must be false. The Gospel, of course, can only give comfort to those who accept it, and so place their trust in Christ and the Father.

The positive way of accepting death, and even rejoicing in it, is to see, accept, and use the gifts of God. These gifts must be seen in their true light. In I Cor. 2:12 Paul says, 'Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit of God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.'

(i) The Gift of Life.

'Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift!' cries Paul. 'The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,' he also says. He asks, 'What do you have that you have not received? And if you have received it, why do you boast as though it were not a gift?' (Cf. II Cor. 9:15, Rom. 6:23, I Cor. 4:7). Everything comes gift-wise to the redeemed. The greatest gift is life which is eternal, and which in fact is the very life of Christ (I John 5:12). This gift is currently in use and operation. Hence a man who has it will never die in the sense that he will lose life and face separation from God.

Within the gift are many other gifts. Preceding the receipt of the gift of life were given the gifts of faith and repentance, of forgiveness and cleansing. These, too, when exercised, take away the fear of death and bring man into current regeneration. He thus becomes a new creation. He possesses spiritual life. He receives the gift of love. Satan may come to steal, and kill and destroy (John 10:10a) but Christ comes to give life (John 10:10b).

'He that believes on me shall never die,' brings us to the true triumph of the gift of life. Whilst man experiences the death of the body as a fact seen by others, he does not personally experience it as a felt fact himself. We mean that others see his (physical) death but he does not! He goes on in the life he has known (as eternal) and goes into the life that is eternal. There is transition as he crosses some unseen line, but no bump (so to speak) as he does this. No wonder he needs not to fear death. Death has no sting. Stingless death is his, but even more glorious life already possessed which is thus fully realised by the transition.

Paul anticipated this fact when he says, 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain!' He speaks of remaining to serve his brethren whilst he is drawn to 'be with Christ which is very much better by far.' He can say, in essence, 'Absent from the body, present with the Lord.'

The New Testament points us to current experience of eternal life as the negation of death's fear and indignity. One is not merely not going to be in death, but one is now living in life. Hence the passages which point to crucifixion with Christ and being raised also with him in this life (e.g. Rom. 6, Col. 3:1–11, Galatians 2:20) all speak of the defeat of sin and deathness, here, in this life. Life, then, is not only the absence of death, but the presence of the true experience of God and His Kingdom.

(ii) The Gift of What is Beyond.

One of the key words of the N.T. is hope. Romans 8:18–30 is the locus classicus of this truth. We have hope of many things such as glory, resurrection, holiness, inheritance, justification and eternal life.⁵

Paul makes the point that hope that is seen is not hope. Christian hope is simply a fixed certainty of what is to come. One already has the earnest or first-fruits of what will be as an assurance and seal of ultimately possessing it, but then one has not seen it wholly or one would not have to hope for it. True pastoral ministry for the dying is to foster and feed hope by the precious truths of God's Word, hence the hymn,

‘My hope is built on nothing less,
Than Jesu's blood and righteousness.’

Hope is based on the objective facts of what God has accomplished in Christ, in his life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming again. Of course hope is linked with faith, for one must believe in, as well as trust upon the events as true and significant. In this sense hope is based upon faith. Since all these events constitute the active love of God then ‘hope is not ashamed’ (Romans 5:4– 10). What then are the elements or components of hope, the things for which we hope?

(a) The Hope of Resurrection, of Eternal Life.

For the Christian believer the hope of resurrection is the hope of rising to eternal life. One cannot help commenting that seeming ‘comfort’ which is given to people who are dying or who are bereaved is insubstantial and of the cosmetic kind. The solid hope of resurrection and eternal life can alone give peace to mind and soul. In Titus 1:2 Paul speaks of ‘the hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised before times eternal.’ In Titus 3:7 he says, ‘that we might become justified by his grace and becomes heirs in hope of eternal life.’ In II Tim. 1:1 he speaks of ‘... the promise of eternal life which is in Christ Jesus.’

Peter speaks of being born to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (I Peter 1:3). The mode of Christ's resurrection must be significant. Both Peter and Paul point with energy to Psalm 16 in support of Jesus' death–resurrection happening. ‘Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced: moreover, my flesh will dwell in hope. ‘ They quote, ‘Thou wilt not suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.’ Does this mean his flesh did not corrupt? For the believer it means the corruption of the flesh is not the end. Why not? Paul says that the same (Holy) Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, now dwells in the saints, and will raise their (hitherto) mortal bodies! (Romans 8:9– 11) Only the hope of resurrection can kill the fear of death.

⁵ For a survey of these see LFS. No. 26, ‘The Biblical Doctrine of Hope’.

This hope of resurrection is no minor matter. Paul calls it ‘the hope of Israel’ and majors upon it. (See Acts 23:6, 24:14f, 26:6, 28:20.) In his writings – especially I Cor. 15 – he speaks of the glorious nature of the resurrection of the body. In Phil. 3:10–14 he sees the current manner of life as relating to the fullness of such a resurrection.

Practically speaking the hope of resurrection must dispel current fear of death and add immensely to one’s manner of life. Nowhere is this better said than in I Cor. 15:51–58. In showing the glorious and beautiful nature of rising, Paul then shows that the modes of our life are determined by the nature of our hope. He exhorts, ‘Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.’ One’s daily living is in the dynamic of hope. We may add, incidentally, Revelation 14:13, ‘And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!"’

Jesus tells the woman at the well that the fountain in her will be one ‘springing up to eternal life.’ The believer therefore has life daily, but that life will culminate also in eternal life. The more grisly aspects of physical death and bodily dissolution therefore do not hold the human spirit in bondage or disgust. The shame of death is taken away. (C. S. Lewis quotes Sir Thomas Browne as saying, ‘I am not so much afraid of death as ashamed of it!’)

(b) The Hope of Glory.

Paul says of the body, ‘It is sown as that which is perishable, but raised as that which is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body’ (I Cor. 15:42–44). This thought is very powerful. Man, made in the image of God, is in considerable shame, inferiority and insecurity because of his sinful fall. To know (a) That he will be glorious and eternalised (Rom. 8:18ff, Phil. 3:21) is both stunning, and rehabilitating to him as a person, and (b) To know that the process is currently taking place (cf. Rom. 8: 17f, II Cor. 3:18, 4:16ff) is to make present life intelligible, purposive, and contributory to the ultimate end. Death then receives its death-knell in the light of anticipated glory.

Romans 8:18ff deals with the full glorification of the sons of God, and so, of the creation itself. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. God’s glory will be outlined by that of His children (Isaiah 43:6–7, Ephes. 1:11–14, etc.). Paul says we will actually share in the glory of God Himself (Romans 5:2). In I Cor. 2:6–10 he says this glorification is beyond anything man has ever envisaged. On the personal level it means ‘We shall be like Him’ (Romans 8:30, I John 3:1–3). Glory, then, will more than cover the transitory shame of bodily dissolution.

(c) The Hope of Inheritance.

The meek – the sons of Abraham – will inherit the world (Matt. 5:5, Romans 4:13). History will have a sensible conclusion. The heavens and the earth will be renewed and we ‘shall reign upon the earth’ (Rev. 5:10). The inheritance will be ‘of all things’ (Rev. 21:7), and indeed of very God Himself (Rom. 8:17). The ‘hope of Israel’ will also be the ‘hope of the Gentiles’, for they will be fellow-heirs (Ephes. 3:6). Such inheritance is of major importance as Paul points out in Ephes. 1:16ff., for he wishes the readers to have such a spirit of wisdom and revelation that they will truly know the hope of inheritance (amongst other things).

The inheritance of course includes glorification, resurrection, eternal life, and the attaining to one's true and full identity (cf. Rev. 2:17, 3:12). It is also the inheritance of one's home (John 14:1ff, cf. Eccles. 12:5), for the entire household of God will meet there in re-creation of personal and family being. Inheritance implies participation with Father, Son and Family. It implies purposefulness in eternity (cf. Rev. 7:15, 'serve Him day and night'), and the fullness of man as an operative son and creature of God.

(d) The Hope of Holiness.

One of the shameful things about death is physical corruption and bodily dissolution. We can only speculate that had man not sinned his body would not have corrupted, but the evidence certainly seems in that direction. Death as a simple transition from mortality to immortality would have had no connotation of corruption, so far as we can envisage. However, what is guaranteed is that glorification through resurrection will not allow flesh to see corruption. Better still, the glorified will be pure, without unholiness.

The choice of God 'that we should be holy and without blame' (Ephes. 1:4) matches the holiness of 'Holy Father', and the renewed creation. The intense joy, bliss and peace of a pure conscience can only be envisaged in this life. There it will be total, and, of course, inexpressible. Indications of this are seen in Heb. 12:14, Rev. 21:27, II Peter 3:10ff, I John 3:1-3.

(e) The Hope of Justification.

All things we now possess by faith. Even justification remains in the realm of faith. Likewise forgiveness. Hence in Gal. 5:5 Paul says, 'For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of justification.' He means that whilst we are justified we see this necessarily by faith, but then by sight. A person in this world who has no hope in justification must therefore fear death (i.e. judgement), and even where faith wavers, some fear of death will be experienced. Hence through the Spirit, by faith, we await the sure verdict of 'Acquitted for ever!' Nevertheless faith believes now, for 'As he (Christ) is (i.e. in regard to judgement) so are we in this world!

(f) The Hope of Sonship.

Doubtless man's deepest dread of death is that he will lose his body, lose his identity, face unknown elements, and be confronted by the Creator-God. His conscience tells him moral elements have eternal reference. Yet deepest of all, man's shame lies in not being what God created him to be. The highest of these is to be a child of God (see Acts 17:28, cf. Luke 3:38). His highest goal is to relate to God as Father (John 14:6, Gal. 4:4-6). His highest utterance must be, 'Abba!', i.e. 'Dear Father!'

The hope of Sonship is one of the brightest elements of N.T. teaching. Romans 8:18-30 speaks of 'the glorious liberty of the sons of God' and says that we too, are being conformed into the image of His Son that he (the Son) 'may be the first-born among many brethren.'

Sonship relates to total glorification, and to sharing in full familyhood. In the O.T. the saga of family always meant that death did not take one merely to the grave so much as it united the dying one with the family which had gone before. Through death the patriarchs would be seen, and indeed all who had gone before. Hence a man 'slept with his forefathers'. Yet the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Jesus pointed out, was not the God of the dead but of the living, i.e. the dead are not dead, but living.

(g) The Hope of Seeing God.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ Doubtless all who are of pure heart see God. Nevertheless in the new age God shall be seen. I Tim. 6:16 speaks of Him dwelling in ‘light unapproachable’. Yet in the Revelation He is seen on the throne. In Revelation 22:4 it is said, ‘They shall see His face.’ To know as one is known will be experience of the highest order. This is what creation is designed for, and this is the fulfilment of man.

Conclusion.

We conclude at this point that hope is a great dynamic. It takes away the shame and fear of death in that such is transcended by the hope of the things of glory. When we know the gifts of God, then we see that within the total gift of life all the gifts are included, and that man need know no poverty of Spirit or fear the future. True, he may be tempted to fear but he is not bound to fear. As he lives in perfect love he may approach death with equanimity.

5. The Ultimate Defeat of Death

John Owen talked of ‘The death of death in the death of Christ.’ Doubtless he means that Christ abolished death by dying. From our point of view Christ’s death drew the sting of death which is sin, and broke the power of sin which is through guilt of sin. Nevertheless death obtains. For the Christian believer it is stingless. Wonderful as this is the people of God look forward to the day when it will be banished for ever. I Cor. 15:26 says, ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death.’ This means that death will have no part in heaven or earth. Hence Revelation 21:4 says, ‘... death will be no more’. Revelation 20:14 says, ‘Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.’ This, of course, by the one who has ‘the keys of Death and Hades’ (Rev. 1:18).

What is comforting to the believer is to know that death cannot invade the realm of his life. For him there is no ‘second death’, i.e. the lake of fire (cf. Rev. 2:11, 20:6). Death, then, is not deathless. It, too, must ultimately die.⁶

6. Death: Dear Friend or Dark Intruder?**(i) Dealing with the Matter of Death.**

As our bibliography indicates, a vast volume of literature has recently come into being, dealing with the subject of death. The subject is approached from varying angles, such as the psychological, theological, pastoral and personal. Some treatments are secular, some humanistic, some medical, and some pastoral and theological. Naturally enough the value of their insights and methods varies greatly. All, however, have the excellent aim and desire to assist the dying person to a helpful approach to, and acceptance of, death.

Prominent amongst these are the insights and experiments of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler–Ross. She has developed what is called ‘The Five–Stage Approach’ in which she lists progressive emotions the person experiences who has been informed of his or her impending death. These are (a) Denial, (b) Anger, (c) Bargaining, (d) Depression, and (e) Acceptance.

⁶ For a fuller treatment of life beyond death and the last things see LFS. No. 31, ‘The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)’, N.C.P.I., 1978.

These stages of emotions are painful to the person until the stage of acceptance is reached. The person who is dying seems to need the time of denial so that he may withdraw from the reality and become composed enough to relate to others in regard to his impending change of living. The anger is directed primarily against God or fate or circumstances and often is also directed to other persons. It would appear to be the anger of insecurity and the frustration which arises from impotence. Bargaining is often an attempt to effect good behaviour in the hope that somehow this may alter things. It is often bargaining with God in order either to change His mind or find acceptance with Him. Depression is, of course, understandable. Some see depression as suppressed rage, others as arising from guilt and fear of the outcome of life and death. Depression is followed by acceptance of the fact of death. This may be the acceptance of resignation or the true agreement with what is to happen. The dying person may in fact be glad to discuss the coming event with deep interest, although his friends or family may be reluctant to share his interest.

A number of problems arise when the prognosis is death. Should the fact of death be communicated to the dying person? How should the dying person be placed – kept at home or cared for in a hospital? Should the matters of eternity be discussed or should a person be left to make his own pilgrimage, alone?

Sharing the Saving Gospel.

The answers to these and other questions are not always simple. Christian medical personnel generally feel the patient should be informed of his impending death. They look to special pastoral care and help at such a time. The fact that a person does not have Christian faith should not deter the information. However, it highlights the fact that Christian people should have a knowledge of death, and the matters of present life and the eternity to come. It is not so much telling a person of his coming death, as the manner in which he is told. The truths of the Cross, of forgiveness and the gifts of repentance and faith are wonderful for such persons who are in need. The fact of impending death has often given a new humility, a deepened desire to listen, and a yearning to come to terms with God, life and death. Sadly enough all too few Christian pastors, teachers and lay-people are equipped with the ability to communicate lovingly and helpfully, for often they have not themselves come to terms with the fact of death. As we have seen in our study, there is a great wealth of glorious truth which can help in time of need.

Caring for the Dying Person.

Each of us needs to take a fresh look at the whole matter of family care in our present society. Family structures have greatly changed over the past two hundred years. Our former custom of caring for the aged in the family such as parents or grandparents has given away to provision of villages for the aged, geriatric wards in hospitals, and other hospices. It is assumed that aged people ought not impede the life of families. Modern geriatrics has developed much that is helpful, not the least of which is that aged people are still people in their full pursuit of life where given the opportunities for self-experience and self-expression. Acceptance within the life and warmth of the family allows many to live richly up until the last.

When death is very near it may be that medical help will be needed. Even so, domiciliary care is available. Death in a hospital, among strangers, where relatives may only visit and not remain can be a lonely and even frightening thing. Surely death is a wonderful event, rightly understood, and death in the bosom of the family most comforting as well as educative for the ones who live with the dying person?

The history of the amazing triumphs of dying people who are Christians is a matter of exceptional interest and beauty. Paul's view of ageing is most interesting. He says, in effect, 'Though the outward man is being worn down, day by day, yet the inner man is being renewed'. He means, 'The older we get, the newer!' (II Cor. 4:16ff). With this wonderful truth in mind we are thus assured that every detail of life is significant for the future. We are building here what shall be there. This is seen in such Scriptures as I John 3:3, Galatians 6: 8, I Cor. 3:12ff, II John 8, Phil. 3:10–14, II Peter 1:10–11. Man, no matter how young or old, can be building for eternity. His life, to the very end can be rich and purposive. Death alters nothing of his personality. It simply releases him into richer experience of the life already begun in Christ and God's family.

For this reason death must not be looked upon as terminal, and so preparation for it must not contemplate it as terminal. The best way to die is to live fully until the end. Hence caring should be, as far as possible, within the family, and within the context of rich relationships.

The Meaning of Suffering.

One's attitude to suffering determines the modes of living and dying, and attitudes towards those who are living and dying. Whilst we cannot here attempt a rationale of suffering, certain principles concerning it are clear from Scripture. There is a suffering and a sorrow which is destructive. Paul speaks of this in II Cor. 7:10. He says one suffering leads to true repentance, the other to death. Suffering may be punishment in some cases, or helpful chastisement in others (cf. Deuteronomy 28, Hebrews 12:3ff). One may suffer for his faith and godliness (Matt. 5:11, 44, 10:22, etc.). Suffering rightly received is for personal enrichment. Peter gives almost all his first epistle over to the subject, showing Christ's example of receiving suffering without reaction, and indeed suffering for the sake of others. Paul's passages of Romans 8:17ff and II Cor. 4: 16ff are remarkable. His thesis is that suffering of the true kind always leads to glory. He cannot envisage true life and faith which does not entail suffering. Suffering is not the cost of glory, but the way to it, and the way of it, and the preparation for its ultimate reception.

One of the questions that confronts the friends of the dying is whether or not they should – in any way – subject that one to suffering, i.e. suffering the suffering of knowing of the coming death. Some would save the person from the five emotional stages. This saving from suffering will surely accomplish nothing of value. Persons must be given the opportunity to face reality and learn to cope with it, and mature through it. It surely is the right of a person to face eternity, especially where the resources of God's Fatherhood, Christ's redemption, and the family of God's people are available to that one.

The Caring Team.

We have already spoken of the need for caring, and whether or not the dying person should be kept at home, or be taken to a hospital or hospice. Doubtless the circumstances of the sickness, the age and state of the patient, and the nature of the person's family will determine where that one should die. Whatever the case, a caring team can be built up. If at home the family can provide conditions of security, love and care. The family can enlist the ministry of pastor and friends. In hospital the same thing can obtain. Hospital nurses, doctors and ward-workers must grow to know how to care. Personal relationship must be established. At the same time the family of the church must relate intimately. Prayer for the dying, and expressions of love such as visitation, gifts, reminders of love, are all helpful. Such caring is itself a learning experience for the ones involved. One of the problems with this sort of care is that all human beings, when subjectively involved in death, are likely to shy away from deep

participation in the experience of the one who is dying.

At the same time the caring team must learn to share the great eternities with the dying person. Overmuch sentiment, shielding from the fact of death, and misplaced sympathy may reduce the event to proportions that are mediocre, and deny the greatness of the experience – entrance into eternity, into the presence of God, into the fullness of eternal life, leading to resurrection, glory, and the full knowledge of God Himself. Our own subjective involvement in the pleasures and interests of life may make us cold towards the rich eternal realities. Such involvement will communicate itself to the dying one, and not help to relate to the truth of death which leads to eternal life.

Let us repeat: the ones caring should have some practical theology of death, and of the life beyond. The dying person will often eagerly desire to know every possible detail concerning the things beyond death such as life with Christ, resurrection, the judgement, the state of eternal glory, the heavenly Family, and the heavenly Father. Likewise the completeness of Christ's work to deliver from sin's power, penalty, pollution and (ultimately) presence, must be understood so that the person may have assurance and confidence and understand the love of God. Ideally a team which has this knowledge can take the person into a state of serenity, joy and tranquillity, and ultimately, acceptance of death, and peace in dying.

(ii) Conclusion: Dear Friend or Dark Intruder?

As we have seen, the true believer has passed, through faith in Christ, from death into life. Daily he sees himself as dead to sin and its penalty, and alive unto God. He has been raised above death. He will never see the second death, the death of judgement. He has no condemnation resting upon him. Instead he has eternal life.

The great statement of Christ is 'He that believeth on me shall never die.' Death – the physical aspects of death – must not hoax him into believing that he is dying essentially. Others see his death. He himself never sees death. Death, then, is no dark intruder. Especially when the dying one sees his death as entrance into a fuller experience of the life which is already his, then death is a dear friend. He welcomes it. Death brings no sting, no fearful accusation of sin's doom, but rather it ushers him into the presence of God. If this person has made himself acquainted with the great eternities, then he is eager to participate in them. His great yearning is to see God and know Him fully as a man may know Him. He also desires the things for which he now hopes. Death – so called – is then his dear friend.

Recent research into the experiences of people who have died and come back to life have proved interesting, and caused some to come to certain conclusions about death. In one sense these people have not died, for to us death is an uninterrupted cessation of relationship with this world we know. Partial interruption cannot be called death in the fullest sense. Conceding, however, that a temporary death has happened, then what are we to conclude?

Thanatologists conclude that for the most part the experiences of those who have died temporarily have been surprisingly pleasant. Talk is of a great light, and especially of a tunnel either in light or leading to light. Generally folk have passed through this tunnel tugged or impelled by some power, not touching the sides of that tunnel, but urged towards some place which appears to be good and acceptable. It is thus concluded that believers and atheists, Christians and persons of other religions have a regular experience of these pleasing elements.

This is not necessarily the case. Atheists have been converted by this temporary death because they have been convinced of continuance of life beyond the grave. Dr. Maurice Rawlings, a specialist in cardiovascular diseases at the Diagnostic Hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has written a book, *Beyond Death's Door*, in which he describes the terrifying experiences of some who passed from life and returned again. Some actually saw hell. The point we need to observe is that the patient who experienced these terrifying elements forgot them almost immediately. Thus the pleasant elements only remained for recounting to those who research this material. For this reason, Rawling claims, little of research has any value unless it happens at the point of the temporary death. It is wrong to conclude that such experiences are always, necessarily, pleasant and encouraging. Often they are otherwise.

One man at least was converted because he saw what he called hell.⁷ Dr. Rawlings likewise was also converted by this incident. In this case, as in many history affords, death is a dark and monstrous intruder. Where men and women have been attached to this world, and their passions and desires have been linked with the sensible and the sensuous, they feel the parting. Guilt terrifies, and only deceit brings them to any acceptance of impending death. Confronted nakedly by death they may react in fearful ways.

Over many years there has been a reaction within the Christian community against the so-called 'hard-things' of the Gospel. Some impressions of God's love have omitted the rich truths of His holiness, His righteousness and the unremitting demands of His law. These impressions are to the exclusion of a message which will quieten and calm the conscience. Hence the doctrines of man's sinfulness, hell, and the judgement, have been rationalised to conform to the so-called teaching of God as love. A wholesome view of death, and the attractiveness of the life beyond, are impossible where the judgement of God and the redemption of the Cross has been ameliorated. The deceit of sin will take away, at the last, the joyful view of death. Unmasked death will be a dark intruder to the person whose conscience was never completely set at rest. How can one know the love of God except he sees it in the immense sacrifice and the complete work of Christ – at the Cross?

We conclude, then, that death is a dear friend only if one has come to reconciliation with the Father. He is a dark intruder if guilt and sin's defilement remain. All warm desires of sympathetic human hearts will be weak substitutes for the reality that the dying person must know in order to be free to die, that is, to be free to live again. The rich treasures of comfort, assurance, preparation and timely aid are contained within the Gospel, that is within the heart of the Father who sent His Son to share them with a world in which sin and death are its tragedies, but in which also the love of God counters these tragedies and gives beyond them eternal life, and participation in the eternal glory and the loving Family of God the Father.

The truth of the matter, at core, is that death is defeated, and no dark intruder to the believer. Its fears have been quenched in the overwhelming love

⁷ In this case we refer to Dr. Rawlings' patient who actually found himself in hell. This led to the conversion of Dr. Rawlings. There are more than a few examples of similar happenings. A poignant story is told by Dr. Cicely Saunders in an article 'Is Death the End?' included in *Simple Faith* (Lion Publishing, 121 High Street, Berkhamsted, Herts. Eng. 1978), a compilation of the BBC-TV Series. She records, 'A friend of mine told me of her atheist uncle who was dying. Just at the moment he died, she said, the most extraordinary expression, a mixture of anger and chagrin and "I was wrong" came over his face, and at that moment he died. This was enough to change her at least from an atheist into an agnostic.' (Dr. Saunders is the Founder and Medical Director of St. Christopher's Hospice, London.)

of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, that love which casts out all fear. Fitting words to close our study are those from the Te Deum,

‘When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death Thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.’

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–APPENDIX –

The Matter of Grief

The Scriptures give us many examples of grief such as Jacob in sorrow for his lost sons, David in grief because of Absalom’s death, Jeremiah in lamentation over the ravaged Jerusalem, and Jesus weeping over the same city at the graveside of Lazarus. The Psalms abound in honest expressions of grief. Grief is a legitimate emotion and experience. Stoicism is not a Christian teaching, although self– control is.

The subject is one wide enough to deserve a study of its own, and not a mere appendix. Readers are therefore directed to wider treatments.

Facing Suffering by Herbert M. Carson (Evangelical Press, Welwyn, England 1978) is recommended.

Confronting Death (W. H. Griffin, Judson Press, Valley Forge 1977) is a useful practical book on the elements which relate to grief and its treatment.

Watch with the Sick by Norman Autton (SPCK, London 1976) has prayers for folk in various conditions of bereavement and suffering.

Good Grief, by G. E. Westberg (Fortress Press 1962, Aust. Edition 1973) has a slim treatment of the subject. Its chapter headings, however, are indicative of the stages of grief, and are here listed:– We are in a State of Shock. We Express Emotions. We Feel Depressed and Very Lonely. We May Experience Physical Symptoms of Distress. We May Become Panicky. We Feel a Sense of Guilt About the Loss. We Are Filled With Hostility and Resentment. We Are Unable to Return to Usual Activities. Gradually Hope Comes Through. We Struggle to Readjust to Reality. Westberg’s treatment is oriented to those who are more or less the objects of their grief.

The believing person, then, should become the subject of grief (and not its object), directing it towards good goals instead of either fighting it or seeking simply to cope with it. Grief, as Westberg points out, is a good and natural emotion and experience of man. There is, as Paul shows, a sorrow of the world which works death. Grief which is the pure expression of love’s sorrow at separation is essential to honest experience. This grief is the other side of the coin of love. However, grief becomes destructive when it is not for the separation, and the loved one/s but is for the person who is grieving, i.e. is self– pity. Self–pity is most unhelpful. The positive knowledge that the Lord and Judge of all the earth does right should help in time of grief. Where the loved one is with Christ there is no genuine cause for grief that destroys.

A reading of the Psalms should convince us that true grief expressed in emotion is a right and helpful thing. However there is no grief which cannot be healed. We do not grieve as those without hope. Also we know there is always balm in Gilead. This can heal the hurts. Hurts themselves may be maximised and fostered where self-pity obtains, but for the believer sorrow obtains for the night, but joy cometh in the morning. Through the Cross all wounds are healed.

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