

OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Study Two

WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

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WHAT CAN TAKE AWAY SIN?

We have begun to see that human sin is so serious that it cannot be dismissed lightly with a mere wave of the hand, nor by some arrangement we can come to ourselves. Forgiveness must be something more than being able to say, 'Oh, that's all right, forget it, don't worry about it'. We cannot really ever say 'that's all right' to sin, because it is not all right—that is its offence. Nor can forgiveness be the same as saying, 'Well it wasn't really all that bad, and you've got a good excuse for what you did'. That is not forgiving—that is condoning or going along with sin to some extent, and where does that leave us? Compromised by evil? Is that where we want to be? No such 'forgiveness' will finally settle our consciences, or bring us to peace. No: the forgiveness we are talking about—if such a thing is possible—is that which actually removes the sin, and makes the person free of it.

We saw that not even God—for whom forgiveness lies at His very heart—can bring forgiveness of sin as long as human guilt persists:

The LORD is slow to anger but great in power,
and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty (Nahum 1:3).

God is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin', yet it is not in His nature to 'forgive' simply by 'clearing the guilty' (Exod. 34:6, 7). If God is to effect forgiveness, it will involve doing whatever is necessary to take the guilt away. We have begun to sense that to rescue us from the abysmal depths of sin will require God to act out of some matching or even greater depths of love on His part.

We also realised that, because of our subjective involvement, and our tendency to justify ourselves, we cannot come to a right estimate of sin apart from God's revelation in Scripture—unwelcome as that may be. Likewise, if we are to discern rightly the way forgiveness comes, again we must be reliant upon the biblical revelation, whether in the first

instance it makes ‘sense’ to us or not. So we ask: what does it take, according to the Scriptures, to effect the removal of sin to bring forgiveness to the sinner?

Questions for Discussion:

- *What do we know of various ‘rational’ attempts to explain forgiveness—or to explain it away?*
- *Why would the biblical revelation be different from these?*
- *What is guilt, and what is its significance in relationship to forgiveness?*

THE DEATH OF CHRIST

At the heart of the biblical revelation is the claim that sin is removed and forgiveness comes (only) through the death of Jesus, the Son of God. This is offensive to the religious instinct, that is seeking some way of self-atonement by means of some ritual performance, or at the hands of some victorious ‘holy’ medium of pardon and favour. Paul the apostle said the proclamation of a crucified Messiah is ‘a stumbling block to Jews’ who ‘demand signs’.¹ Similarly it makes no sense to those of an intellectual bent, who seek to sort life out and gain advantage by means of mental prowess. For such, the nonsensical notion of salvation for all through a grisly human sacrifice made at a particular time and place is so repugnant as to be unworthy of consideration: it is ‘foolishness to Gentiles’, particularly to the ‘Greeks’ who ‘desire wisdom’ (1 Cor. 1:22–23). This covers pretty well the gamut of normal human responses. Yet, in spite of this, Paul claims, ‘God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation [of ‘Christ crucified’] to save those who believe’. For, ‘to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks’, this is ‘Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Cor. 1:21, 23, 24).

That forgiveness from God comes by means of his death is testified to by Jesus’ own words, at a moment of crucial significance shortly before he went to his death:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt. 26:27–28).

It is in this way, Jesus projected, that he would be able to enjoy the company of his disciples in the feasting ‘in my Father’s kingdom’ (Matt. 26:29).

In speaking of ‘the covenant . . . for the forgiveness of sins’, Jesus is making reference to the prophecy given to Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31–34).

¹ Is the marked interest in the ‘canonisation’ of Sister Mary McKillop, and the requirement for authenticated miracles, of this order?

We note that this was directed to Israel, and relates to the original covenant made with Israel at Sinai. Lest we should think then that this has nothing to do with non-Jewish Gentiles, we recall that the primary calling of what became Israel was to ‘be a blessing’, in whom ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Gen. 12:2, 3). Paul saw this blessing—of having God’s righteousness reckoned to us through faith—as coming to the Gentile nations by means of the death of Christ, where ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us’ (see Gal. 3:6–14).

This matter of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins is taken up in the letter to the Hebrews, chapters 8–10:

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant (Heb. 9:15).

Forgiveness, by which God says, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’ (Heb. 10:17–18), comes because ‘a death has occurred’. Forgiveness comes by virtue of the death of Jesus.

Whether we can make any sense of that or not, we cannot deny that this is what is claimed, and joyfully proclaimed, by the apostles. We will look elsewhere throughout the Scriptures to examine why this might be so. But this must be our starting point.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What might we find offensive, or nonsensical, about the death of Jesus being the means for our forgiveness of sin?*
- *What might be the connection between that death and our forgiveness?*

SIN AND DEATH

From the beginning of the Bible, a direct link is made between sin and death:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Gen. 2:15–17).

In defiance of this directive from God, we are told that the woman and the man ‘took of its fruit and ate’ (Gen. 3:6). As a result, God says to the man:

By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

Paul summarises the consequence for the whole human race:

... sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned (Rom. 5:12).

In the context, the implication is that the whole human race participated in that original sin in solidarity with the ‘one man’—a corporate perception of our belonging to one another that contrasts with the present-day more disconnected individualistic understanding.

Is death, then, God’s ‘punishment’ for sin, as is often claimed as self-evident? This notion does not figure so powerfully in our society where the death penalty is no longer imposed, as it used to be for a number of crimes.² The laws of the Old Testament imposed the death sentence for a range of offences.³ In particular, for premeditated murder (see Exod. 21:12–14; Num. 35:16–21); yet this is seen not so much as punishment upon the murderer as a reckoning required by God for a life taken (see Gen. 9:5–7), and the purging of a guilt that defiles the land where God dwells (see Deut. 19:13; Num. 35:33–34). Many other sins do not carry the sentence of death.

Paul says that ‘sin . . . leads to death’, interestingly in contrast to ‘obedience, which leads to righteousness’ (Rom. 6:16). He says that ‘the end’ of ‘the things of which you now are ashamed . . . is death’, which is of no advantage, in contrast to being ‘freed from sin and enslaved to God’ for which ‘the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life’ (Rom. 6:21–22). Here death is presented as the inevitable consequence of sin: ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:23).

This is not to say that the imposition of death is not a direct action of God—it is:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:29–30).

I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
and no one can deliver from my hand (Deut. 32:39).

It is worth noting that, in both these cases, God takes life away with a view to restoring it again. The reason why God withheld eternal life from the man and woman in the beginning would appear to be a great mercy rather than a punishment: so that the monstrosity they had become by their sin be not perpetuated for ever, and to put a limit on how long a human being’s rivalry against God should continue:

Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken (Gen. 3:22–23).

God’s inflicting of death, however, is also seen as an act of vengeance and retribution, particularly on any who have harmed God’s own people:

Praise, O heavens, his people,
worship him, all you gods!
For he will avenge the blood of his children,
and take vengeance on his adversaries;

² Seen in a ‘Wizard of Id’ cartoon: the king says to the monk: ‘What do you think of the death sentence?’ The monk says to the king: ‘I think we’re born with it!’

³ The offences included ‘murder (Gen. 9:6; Exod. 21:12), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), incitement to idolatry (Deut. 13:5ff.), fornication (22:20–21), violation of the Sabbath (Exod. 35:2), kidnapping (21:16), striking one’s parents (v. 15), and sexual intercourse with animals (22:19; Lev. 20:15–16)’. See Allen C. Myers, ed., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 273.

he will repay those who hate him,
and cleanse the land for his people (Deut. 32:43).

And there is a death that is very final (perhaps equivalent to what is called ‘the second death, the lake of fire’ in Rev. 20:14):

The LORD watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy (Ps. 145:20)

Even so, this is enough to show that the equating of death as punishment pure and simple does not stand up. Death is an instrument in the hand of God. He uses it in personal freedom to accomplish His purposes.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the connection between sin and death?*
- *What difference does it make to us to know that ‘Death is an instrument in the hand of God’?*

DEATH AS THE END OF EVERYTHING

Death does bring life into perspective—by putting a stop to it:

When we look at the wise, they die;
fool and dolt perish together
and leave their wealth to others.
Their graves are their homes forever,
their dwelling places to all generations,
though they named lands their own.
Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
they are like the animals that perish (Ps. 49:10–12).

Certainly death is the great leveller. It brings to an end all pretension and distinctions in life:

Do not be afraid when some become rich,
when the wealth of their houses increases.
For when they die they will carry nothing away;
their wealth will not go down after them.
Though in their lifetime they count themselves happy
—for you are praised when you do well for yourself—
they will go to the company of their ancestors,
who will never again see the light.
Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
they are like the animals that perish (Ps. 49:16–20).

Jesus made the same point when he told of the rich fool:

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with

those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God (Luke 12:16–21; compare Eccl. 2:18–19).

Death also puts an end to the damage that the violent can do to the oppressed. Ezekiel was told to lament over Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt who would be defeated in battle. The picture is of Pharaoh arriving in the world of the dead, and there are all the other tyrants and oppressors—Assyria, Elam, Meshech and Tubal, Edom, the princes of the north and the Sidonians—as if to say: ‘Oh—you’re here now too, are you? Well, that’s it, then, isn’t it’:

When Pharaoh sees them, he will be consoled for all his hordes—Pharaoh and all his army, killed by the sword, says the Lord GOD. For he spread terror in the land of the living; therefore he shall be laid to rest among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword—Pharaoh and all his multitude, says the Lord GOD (Ezek. 32:31–32).

Death is also the end of all our troubles. Job prayed to God that he might die—it would be better than staying alive with the kind of suffering he was enduring:

There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest
(Job. 3:17; see 3:11–26; also 7:1–16; 10:18–22; 17:11–16; 30:23).

That is the attraction of suicide, for someone who is suffering intense emotional pain, and sees death as the way out. Job never succumbed to that temptation—he knew his times were in God’s hands and he was content with that—but he still longed for it to be all over. We can understand that.

Questions for Discussion:

- ‘We brought nothing into the world’—it is certain ‘that we can take nothing out of it’ (1 Tim. 6:7). What is distressing about this? What is comforting about it? What makes the difference?
- ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’ (Job 1:21). How does death confront us with the personal sovereignty of God?

DEATH AS THE END OF SIN AND SINNERS

Death, in the Bible, is also the end of sin and of sinning. Paul makes the statement: ‘whoever has died is freed [justified] from sin’ (Rom. 6:7). Peter also: ‘whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin’ (1 Pet. 4:1)—the context, of comparison with the suffering of Christ, makes clear that this means suffering in the flesh to the point of death. Paul speaks in Romans 7:1–3 of a situation where the law—and by implication its condemnation—is negated by death. In each of these cases, however, death is being spoken of in connection with our participation in the death of Christ. None of them can be extrapolated into a general principle that stands on its own.

Can our death actually take away sin and its guilt? Guilt lies in the fact that the sinner has sinned, and so is guilty of the sin. That cannot be changed: ‘What’s done cannot be undone’.⁴ Death can draw the curtain on it. Certainly Hebrews 9:22 says: ‘without the shedding of

⁴ *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 1, W. J. Craig (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Oxford, London, 1943, p. 866.

blood [that is, without a death occurring] there is no forgiveness of sins'. That is actually talking about not our own death but the death of another on our behalf. Even if our own death brought about our forgiveness, could we really call that forgiveness? Because, by the time that happens, we are dead. And there is really no way out of it. Psalm 49 tries to estimate what it would cost to clear a person's life so that they do not need to die, and gives up on the attempt:

Truly, no ransom avails for one's life,
there is no price one can give to God for it.
For the ransom of life is costly,
and can never suffice
that one should live on forever
and never see the grave (Ps. 49:7–9).

Thus, while death may be a merciful release from further sinning, no way could the taking of a sinner's life be considered a full payment or reparation for sin. What kind of gift is a sin-riddled life, and what would it be worth? Death does not resolve the issue of sin, in a way that can bring total forgiveness. Many people die with sin still unresolved, work not yet finished, and broken relationships still unreconciled. Death only tends to leave all that set in concrete.

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer urges people before they die to be at peace with God and other people, and to set their affairs in order:

Then shall the Minister examine whether he repent him truly of all his sins, and be in charity with all the world; exhorting him to forgive, from the bottom of his heart, all persons that have offended him; and if he hath offended any other, to ask them forgiveness; and where he hath done injury or wrong to any man, that he make amends to the uttermost of his power. And if he hath not before disposed of his goods, let him then be admonished to make his Will, and to declare his Debts, what he oweth, and what is owing unto him; for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his Executors. But men should often be put in remembrance to take order for the settling of their temporal estates, whilst they are in health.⁵

Apart from the receiving of God's forgiveness, this seeks to make sure we die in as tidy and considerate manner as possible. But it is still making the best of an unsatisfactory situation. Death remains an inglorious thing. It is part of the mess.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What have we seen of people dying a 'good' death? Or a messy death?*
- *How prepared are we for our death, whenever it may come, to be as tidy and considerate as possible?*

DEATH AND JUDGEMENT

The death of a sinner under guilt is more than inglorious. It is a thing to be feared. It is what brings judgement to bear on the whole of our lives. People who have been in a near-death situation say that they saw their whole lives flash before them in that instant. Death is the moment when our lives are locked into what they have been, and there is nothing more that we can do about it. This is something that God brings us to:

. . . it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662, The Order for the Visitation of the Sick.

If we had lived sinless lives, then our death—if we were to face it at all—would be relatively peaceful. But this is where the deadly pain of sin—of going against and falling foul of God’s law—is brought to bear most keenly:

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:56).

The devil, as our accuser, makes the most of this. We are told that he ‘has the power of death’—he can make us fearful of this judgement against us—and so there are ‘those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’ (Heb. 2:14–15).

If we die with the unforgiven guilt of our sin hanging round our necks like a millstone, and we are locked into it at that point, unable to change a thing about it, and are doomed to carry that with us out into eternity—is that not hell? Along with the even greater torment of being able to see what we could have become, that we have renounced and rejected, and to know there is no way back to it forever (see Luke 16:19–31: ‘a great chasm has been fixed’).

In the light of all these things, Paul calls death an ‘enemy’, which is ‘to be destroyed’. Indeed, it is ‘the last enemy to be destroyed’ in the reign of Christ during this age, as ‘all his enemies’ are put ‘under his feet’ (1 Cor. 15:25–26).

We have seen that Psalm 49 despairs of us ever being able to ransom ourselves, or anyone else, from the judgement of death. The amazing thing is that Psalm 49 also goes on to say:

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,
for he will receive me (Ps. 49:15).

Here is a faith-relationship with God that believes that God will actually bring us out even from death—from death that comes as a consequence of sin and a judgement on it. Furthermore, God says:

I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live (Ezek. 18:32).

God would not say this unless He had somehow made provision for this to be so.

Questions for Discussion:

- *How aware are we of the power of the fear of death—and so the fear of judgement—in ourselves, or in our community?*
- *What could spare us from the fear of death and judgement?*

DEATH AS SACRIFICE

No consideration of forgiveness in connection with the death of Christ can bypass the extensive matter of the Old Testament sacrifices. Here is one instance:

If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the LORD. You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. The bull shall be slaughtered before the LORD; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall

turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD (Lev. 1:3–9).

The elements are as follows:

- The animal to be sacrificed is to be ‘without blemish’;
- By an act of the laying-on of a hand, the offering is identified with the offerer, ‘and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you’;
- The animal is then ‘slaughtered before the LORD’, and its blood is thrown against all sides of the altar—its life is brought to God as acceptable; and
- The offering is cut up, and its parts appropriately washed and laid on the altar, where they are burned as ‘an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD’.

The offerer, in need of atonement in relationship with God, is identified with one without blemish; blood is shed and life is taken, all in the presence of God; through the sacrifice the offerer becomes acceptable and pleasing to God and God comes to be in a favourable and propitious relationship with the offerer.

There are several variations on this, suited to different situations and occasions. Not all the sacrifices focus on sin and guilt—some are simply thankful enjoyment of fellowship, or cleansing rituals—and those that do relate mainly with breaches in certain ritual and legal performances. None of the sacrifices remove the requirement for the sentence of death where this applies, though there are certain situations where a person’s life that is required by God may be ransomed by the life of an animal or payment of a certain amount.⁶

There is one sacrifice, offered solemnly once a year, ‘to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins’ (Lev. 16:34). This is quite unique. Here we are also shown the principle that underlies the whole of Israel’s God-given sacrificial system, as distinct from other pagan sacrifices. God says:

... the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar ... (Lev. 17:11).

The sacrifice is not primarily given to God. God Himself gives the sacrifice for us. It is His provision for the forgiveness of His people that they themselves could never supply.

There are other instances of death in sacrifice that figure earlier in the Old Testament, before the tabernacle and temple systems were instituted: the sacrifice offered by Abel, that was pleasing to God on account of his faith (Gen. 4:4; Heb. 11:4); Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac—‘you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me’ (Gen. 22:12, 16; compare Rom. 8:32)—for which God provided a substitute sacrifice; and the sacrifice by Moses to ratify the covenant at Sinai (Exod. 24:1–11). Each of these has particular elements that point to aspects of God’s forgiveness of sin.

But the Scriptures are also very aware of the limitations of these sacrifices. Even though unblemished animals are used, the offerers themselves are still sinners, and God says:

... bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me ...
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity (Isa. 1:13; compare Amos 5:21–24).

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6; compare Matt. 9:13; 12:7).

⁶ For example: Exod. 13:13, 15.

The inadequacy of the sacrifices to bring total and lasting forgiveness is shown in their need to be constantly repeated:

. . . the law . . . can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year . . . And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sin (Heb. 10:1–3, 11).

Hence at best they are ‘only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities’ (Heb. 10:1). In the end, they can amount to little more than play-acting, not the real thing: ‘For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins’ (Heb. 10:4).

It was by means of ‘a live coal that had been taken from the altar’—where the sacrifices were offered—that Isaiah could be told: ‘your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out’ (Isa. 6:6, 7). But John the apostle tells us that the one Isaiah saw at that time was Christ: ‘he saw his glory and spoke about him’ (John 12:41).

Questions for Discussion:

- *What have we known of dependence upon ritual performance to obtain the forgiveness of sin? What critique do the Scriptures offer of such an approach?*
- *What elements point to what might be the real thing?*

THE LAMB OF GOD

It is clear that none of these things we have looked at—death as a consequence of sin, death as the end of everything, death as the end of sin and sinners, death as judgement or even death as sacrifice—can be used to determine or explain how sin is to be removed, since none of them can actually remove sin. The best they can do is highlight our need for forgiveness; indicate the enormity of what it might take to remove sin altogether; and point, however partially and indistinctly, to the reality that they presage. All of them, and much more, were gathered up into the staggering and unprecedented announcement made by John the Baptist when he first saw Jesus: ‘HERE IS THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD!’ (John 1:29).

In him we will find a human being without blemish, totally identified with the sinful human race, and substituted for them, blood that is shed and a death that is died that takes up all the elements of finality, incalculable cost, searing judgement, cleansing consolation, unstoppable love and favour, and unshakeable reality—all as the gift sent directly from God—that none of these ‘shadows’, nor all of them together, could ever pretend to.

We will examine this person and God’s mighty action in him more closely in a future study. For the moment, however, can we pause to look towards him as we are directed? ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’

DEATH AS WELCOME FRIEND

Lest we be left with a nasty taste in our mouths with regard to what we have seen of death in this study, let us also note what it has become for us once its fear has been removed. Jesus said:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

Here is something of what it now means for death to approach us in him:

Death comes so gently.
I hear the quiet footfalls,
Not light pattering—as though inconsequential,
Nor heavy padding as foreboding,
But gracious unintruding suggestion
Of one coming purposefully.

Often when long shades have fallen
Over the obsessive busyness
And the compulsive accomplishing
I have paused in the sudden quietness
Wondering why I am visited
By this soft stranger.

Never in these visitations
Has there been fear.
Nor has the bland confronted me
As though of no point (blank guilelessness),
But a clement spirit has met me
And grown into me as a dear friend
Accepts the welcome but does not invade . . .

Death is not death, but God
Coming for His own, His Father's arms
Reaching to His beloved. His quietude
Surrounds where fear might invade
And Love gently claims
That which was always His.⁷

⁷ Geoffrey Bingham, *Dear Death or Dark Devourer?* NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, pp. 50–51.