

Defining Death

Death is one of the few universal experiences of mankind. While we may have different experiences in a lot of other areas we can be assured that absolutely everyone will share in that one great experience.

The Psalmist asks in Psalm 89:48, “What man can live and not see death?” Obviously no one is exempt. Death is for everyone whether young or old, rich or poor, educated or ignorant, sinner or saint, native or foreigner. It doesn’t make any difference; death is for all.

Whenever I preach sermons I am always fearful that the topic will not apply equally to every listener. Such is not the case when the topic is death!

We fear death. This is part of the reason we go to such great lengths to cover it up with hospitals, nursing homes, fancy mortuaries and substitute terms such as “passed away”, “gone home”, “laid to rest” and so forth. We want to cover it up. We don’t want to face its starkness.

We also hate it. Arnold Toynbee went so far as to say, “Death is un-American, an affront to the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” But we all must face it. Individually, for ourselves.

Do you remember when you first became aware of death? For me there are some hazy memories as a child. I think I was four or five years old when Granda, my grandfather, died. I don’t remember very much about it. I do remember the hearse parked outside. I remember that I was kept away from it all. I remember that nobody said much to me about it. I did not go to the funeral. I wasn’t included. He wasn’t there, but I didn’t really ask what had happened to him. I guess it was assumed that I was too young to really understand.

When I was eight years old Nana, my grandmother, died. They thought she had had a heart attack and so she was taking it easy at home; she had not been hospitalized. One night she asked me to read the Bible to her. I picked up her Bible

and she asked me to read the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah. I read it and put the ribbon marker in its place and said good night to her.

The next morning my mother said, “Why don’t you go in and wake up Nana and tell her that it is almost time for breakfast? Tell her we will be bringing it in for her.” But I couldn’t awaken her. I didn’t think too much about that. I went and told my mother that I couldn’t awaken her and she went to check on her. I remember her walking down the stairs and picking up the phone in the hallway, dialing the doctor’s office and fighting back the tears as she said to the receptionist, “I think my mother has died.”

It was a more graphic memory when just a week before high school graduation a group of classmates borrowed the wrestling coach’s car and went to a boxing match just outside of New York City. They tried out that sports car in excess of one hundred miles an hour and lost control of the car, hit a tree and rolled the car. One of my classmates died there on the road. It was a stunning experience for all 146 of us left in that graduating class. Jimmy’s name was still on the program, but it was skipped over when the diplomas were handed out.

It’s funny the things that you remember about learning about death. I think one of the most

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stunning for me is one that may seem silly to you. It was while I was in grade school. One day on the way home from school I walked through the park at the end of our

street. In one of my favorite places underneath a pine tree I saw a dead squirrel. Without fully understanding I decided to help that squirrel. I stroked him and I rubbed him. Then I went and got some water and forced his mouth open so I could put a drop of water into it. I tried to somehow resurrect it.

It seemed impossible to me that no matter what I did he could not be fixed. To me as a child growing up in middle class America any-

thing could be fixed. All you needed to do was work on it. Just try a little bit harder, be a little more concerned, and you could fix anything. But death was different; it was permanent; there could be no repairs. As a child I had faced death.

Do you know that psychologists indicate that worry about death is often extensive even for preschoolers? As adults we sometimes assume that awareness of death doesn't come until adolescence or adulthood. But that is because we have forgotten what it was like to lie in bed at night as a child and wonder about things like life and death.

As Americans we are ignorant when it comes to death. There are five thousand deaths every day in the United States, yet few of us have seen someone die. We all know that someday we must die, but few people are ever fully ready. We think and talk about death a great deal, but even scientists find it difficult to define death.

The dictionary defines death as "the act or the fact of dying; the cause or occasion of loss of life." How cold and inadequate a definition that is when we relate it to ourselves or when we try to apply it to those we care deeply for.

What is death? Let me share with you three definitions from three perspectives that weave together into a Biblical concept of death. The first is an historical definition. Historically death may be defined as "the consequence of sin". God created man without sin and without death. Sin and death are abnormal for humanity; they aren't supposed to be there. But God gave man a free moral choice . . . and man chose sin! And with sin came death.

The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:12, ". . . sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned . . ." The human race was polluted with sin. The human race was infected with mortality. When Adam sinned he effected the entire human race just as much as the single seaman effects the entire submarine crew when he opens the hatch under water.

We need to remember that we are not just innocent bystanders. We are not simply the innocent recipients or victims of an ancestor's error. The Bible clearly teaches that while we are sin-

ners by heredity we are also all sinners by choice and that we are doomed to death as a consequence of sin.

The Bible indicates that we are all spiritually stillborn. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1 that we are "dead in our transgressions and sins." That means that we live in a world that is full of sin and we live in a world that is plagued with death. Death is everywhere; death is inevitable; death is dreaded . . . all because of sin. The apostle Paul said in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death."

Modern medicine can keep bodies functioning even when everyone seems to admit that the person is really dead. But these machines do not change the fact of death. They merely delay the full effects.

Because of sin every human being is born and lives a living death. As far as the Bible is concerned we are born into a race of dead men. Natural men are already dead. The activity called life merely delays the full effects of death; it does not change the fact of death.

Physically, death is the separation of body and soul. In Genesis 2:7 we read, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

Man is a living unit. When I speak of myself as "I" that is not a reference to just my body. It is not just a reference to my soul or spirit. It is a reference to the total me!

In the Old Testament God views man as being a unit. He may be described as having material and immaterial parts - - - body, soul and spirit - - - but this really describes different functions. Basically man is seen as a unit. Any separation of man's physical being (body) from his spiritual being (soul) is unnatural and temporary. That is not the way God created mankind. That is not the way God intended it to be. So then death is the abnormal and temporary and unnatural separation of the physical from the spiritual. The physical body may continue many life functions and will not lose an ounce at death, but the separation of the spirit from the body is a humanly irreversible event.

Now, I know that people tell of experiences

where they claim that their spirit separated from their body. They say they could observe the surgical procedures in the operating room. They say they died. But they forget that the Bible says that it is appointed unto man once to die.

You ask me for some psychological explanation of what has happened and I do not deny or counter people's experiences of what they tell. But I do know that once the spirit leaves the body, unless God in some supernatural instance reverses that, once that spirit leaves and death has occurred, that is it. It is irreversible. It is over.

One of the interesting stories of the Bible takes place in the fifth chapter of Acts. It is the story of Ananias and Sapphira. You may remember that they were involved in a lie before the early church and they died. In Acts 5:10 as it appears in the King James Version of the Bible there is a literal rendering of the Greek text and it says there that Sapphira "gave up the ghost". Another way to put it is that she "gave up the spirit". It left. That is physical death. It is the tearing apart, the pulling out, of the spirit leaving the body.

The Greek word that is used there comes from the word psyche from which we get our English term psychology. Anyone who dies a physical death experiences the abnormal, unnatural and temporary separation of body and soul.

What happens then? The body returns to the dust, but even that is temporary because the salvation that God provides is for the body just as much as it is for the soul. The Bible teaches that salvation is for the whole man. The body goes temporarily to the dust; the soul or spirit goes into the presence of God where it dwells until the time of resurrection when God provides a new body.

The point here is that we have no control over death. The Psalmist says in Psalm 68:20, "Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death."

Then how should we respond? Should we fear death? As Christians death is fearful only as a new and unknown experience like flying in an

airplane for the first time. Without Christ death marks an aspect of God's punishment for your sin. It is a token of worse things to come!

Peter Marshall was a Scottish Presbyterian pastor in Washington, D.C. He became famous as the chaplain for the United States Senate. He once told the story of a little boy who was terminally ill. One day the boy asked his mother, "What is it like to die?" She was stunned. She turned her head away, choked back her emotions and prayed for God to give her wisdom to somehow answer that question.

Maintaining her composure as best she could she said, "Son, remember those times when you have been out playing all day long and you are

tired and hot and sweaty and you come in and fall asleep on Daddy's bed? When you awake up in the morning you are in your own bed with clean pajamas on. That is what it is like to die."

Death for the Christian is like going to sleep in this world with a body that is fatigued, tired, worn and dirty and waking up in heaven all clean and refreshed.

But there is one last definition and that is spiritual death. Spiritually, death is separation from God. Non-Christians are already spiritually dead. They have not really experienced life. That is why Jesus said in John 3:36, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

Without Jesus Christ a person experiences two deaths (or maybe more accurately two aspects of the same death): physical death and spiritual death. The apostle John wrote in Revelation 20:14 and 15, "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Spiritual death, that second death, is the final culmination of sin's effect. Many people have tried to depict hell as a place of agonizing physical torment, scorching flames and horrible

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screams of anguish. Perhaps these are all accurate. But the worst part of hell is the horror of eternal separation from God!

The Bible makes many contrasts. The Bible tells us that physical birth is for everybody, but spiritual birth is only for those who believe. The Bible tells us that spiritual life belongs only to those who are born spiritually. The Bible tells us that just as physical birth is for everybody so physical death is for everybody; but the Bible also teaches that, just as spiritual birth is only for those who believe, spiritual death is only for those who do not believe. Spiritual death is for those who have never been born spiritually.

We all will face physical death, but the only way to avoid spiritual death is through spiritual birth. Spiritual life now removes the possibility of spiritual death in the future. Jesus said in John 5:24, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ have already passed from death to life.

Gladys Hunt writes in her book The Christian Way of Death, "Psychiatrists are now saying that death is the most important question of our time and that fear of death fosters a variety of psychoses."

Are the questions of death hounding you? Do you worry about it a lot? Then I encourage you to put all of your fears and all of your worries into the hands of the One who already has experienced death and won the victory over it. Entrust life and death to Jesus Christ who said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

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