

Death as “Frenemy:” Beating the Grim Reaper’s Scythe into a Plowshare

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We spend a lot of time in the church talking about what it means to *live* like a Christian. But what does it mean to *die* like a Christian? If we are to follow Christ in life, what does it mean for us to follow him in death as well? How do we prepare ourselves for death, and ultimately for the day of judgment? Even though we like to pretend otherwise and ignore one of the most obvious facts in the universe, the truth is that we are all going to die. Every day the moment of death draws nearer for each of us. How should we live today in light of what a future tomorrow is sure to bring?

More specifically, how should Christians view death? Is death friend or enemy? In one place, Paul describes death as our enemy – indeed, the last (and therefore greatest) enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). In another place, he expresses his own willingness to embrace death because it would be a “gain” (Philippians 1:21; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:2-7). So what is the proper Christian attitude towards death? Do we fight against death or surrender to it? Do we hate it to the end or do we prefer it to the present life? Do we despise it or desire it?

Certainly, death as we know it is the result of the fall and the curse. But that’s not to say there was nothing *analogous* to death prior to the fall. We see something like a death and resurrection pattern built into each day of the creation week. In the sequence of days in Genesis 1, the “death” of evening gives rise to the new “life” of morning’s light, followed, yet again, by the “death” of darkness falling over the creation. Each day “dies,” but then is resurrected as a new and better day throughout the creation week. Had been there been no fall a kind of “good-death” would apparently have still been a part of the rhythm and order of creation, so, for example, it’s likely that seeds still would have been buried in the ground in order to bring forth new life and abundant fruit (cf. John 12:24, which speaks of a grain of wheat “dying” when it is planted in the ground, surely a process that would have taken place even if sin had never entered the world). Likewise, even before the fall, Adam is put into a death-like sleep. When he awakes, he enters into a new world situation, now with a bride at his side to be his companion. Adam died to his singleness, and arose more glorious than before, with a glorious woman to complement and complete him. Finally, if we put together Genesis 1:29 (“Every tree shall be food for you”) and Genesis 2:17 (“In the day you eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, you will surely die”), we cannot help but conclude that if Adam and his wife had been patient and faithful, at some point God would have given them access to the Tree of the Knowledge, and they would have “died” to their state of immaturity and entered into a new and more glorious phase of kingly rule over the creation. Of course, all of these forms of pre-fall death/resurrection are rooted in the dynamic Trinitarian life of God in which each person of the Trinity has been “dying” (note the quotes!) in self-giving, self-sacrificing love in order to glorify and serve the others from all eternity. There is a very real sense in which death and resurrection is the rhythm of God’s own life, and that pattern was reflected in the created order from the beginning.

But of course, we know how the story goes. Adam and his bride did not wait for God's permission and promotion to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. They seized the fruit of that tree prematurely, and immediately began to experience death manifest itself in a variety of forms, just as God had promised (Genesis 3). They experienced the Spiritual death of exile from the presence of God. They were cut off from the source of all life (including the sacramental Tree of Life) and alienated from their Maker, as they were banished from the Garden of Eden. They were dead to one another, and this relational death was seen immediately in the way Adam blamed his wife for the fall, when in reality it had been his responsibility to teach and guard her. Finally, the human couple was alienated from the creation. Their dominion over the world died. No longer would creation serve man, but rather the creation would serve to prosecute the curse against man, bringing forth thorns and thistles. Because Adam and the woman hearkened to the voice of the serpent, putting the creature in the place of Creator, they were enslaved by the serpent and other beasts (Romans 1:22-25); their idolatry led to dehumanization and the darkening of the minds. Ultimately, of course, man would experience physical death, and his body would return to the dust of the earth from which it was made.

Death has now become the consummate enemy. Death is now the chief weapon the devil wields -- the scythe the Grim Reaper carries to keep men in fear and bondage (Hebrews 2:14). Because of Adam's sin, death reigns (Romans 5:12-21); indeed, man's sin plunged the whole of God's good and beautiful creation into suffering and torment. Death spreads and casts its dark shadow over everything, humans as well as the creation they were given to rule in wisdom. Death is now the curse we cannot escape. Death surrounds us. Death makes time an enemy because we eventually run out of it. Death brings grief and heartache and pain. Death fills us with worry and dread. Death means suffering and agony, physically and emotionally. Death separates soul from body, husband from wife, friend from friend, parent from child, brother from sister. Death divides what God had once joined together. Death rips and tears and breaks. Death is a cruel monster that tyrannizes us all. Death is the bitter fruit of man's sin and rebellion. While each of us will face a moment of death, our lives are filled with death-like moments of pain and death-anticipating experiences of anxiety. Life has become a kind of living death, as we are all stalked by death's specter every day.

But the gospel assures us death will not have the last word. The good news of the gospel is precisely this: Jesus, as the Last Adam, has taken on death and defeated our greatest enemy, redeeming the whole creation. As he prayed in Gethsemane, Christ approached the curse of death with his eyes wide open. He knew he would engage death in the ultimate cosmic showdown. Christ knew he would defeat death precisely by letting death do its worst to him. In dying on the cross, Christ suffered alienation in all its forms for our sake. He was alienated from his closest friends, from his own creation, even from his own eternal Father, as seen in his cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34). In his death on the cross, Christ compressed an eternal hell into three hours of agony. In so doing, he defeated death, conquered Satan, obtained blessing in place of curse, and brought life to the dead.

Now that the devil has been defeated by Jesus, we no longer have to fear his weapon. Indeed, his scythe has been beaten into a plowshare, so to speak. The beast of death has been tamed. The reign of death has been broken. Death has been defanged. Death's stinger has been pulled. Death was once master but is now servant. While death is certainly still an enemy – it still tears apart what ultimately belongs together – its power has been nullified. Now, Christians can approach death with confidence and peace. Death, once our greatest foe, has become a friend. Death, once Satan's curse, is now God's blessing. Death, once a weapon wielded against us, is now a doorway for us into a better place.

We have to be careful when we talk about death as friend. Platonists and Gnostics have always viewed death as friend because they see it as an escape from the evil matter of the physical world and from the prison house of the body. But, of course matter is not evil. It's good because God created it, and the defeat of death ultimately means we will receive resurrection bodies and live forever in a perfected and glorified material creation. Denial of a bodily resurrection is just another way of saying death wins. May it never be!

Likewise, some in the modern hospice movement have tried to "naturalize" death. Of course, the hospice movement itself is a great blessing and the outworking of a Christian approach to medicine that seeks to minimize suffering in legitimate ways, while providing as much true comfort as possible to the dying. But some in the secularized hospice movement seek to provide comfort outside of Christ; in other words, the comfort offered is not given on the basis of Christ's defeat of death, but assurances that death is natural, that it is part of the cycle of life, that it is an intrinsic good. But such comfort is empty. We cannot make peace with death on death's terms.

Of course, scientists also want to tell us that death is good and natural because it is an intrinsic part of the process of evolution. In an evolutionary worldview, death serves to bring about ever higher forms of life; indeed, millions of years of death brought about the abundant diversity and beauty of life that we see throughout the world today. But again this is a lie. It makes the curse of death part of the creation from the beginning, rather than the result of the fall. It makes death good in and of itself. It gives death a creative power it does not have. It means God would have had to have pronounced the bloody struggle of evolutionary viciousness "good" over millennia and millennia, a view which could never be squared with Genesis 1-3. Nothing could be more at odds with the biblical description of creation and the entrance of the curse of death into the world than evolutionary theory.

How, then, should we as Christians look at death now that Christ has died and risen for us? How do we prepare for death, and die, as Christians? What does it mean to die in Lord?

On the one hand, we must continue to view death as an enemy. When a loved one is terminally sick, we continue praying for healing and fighting against death right up the bitter end. We don't stop asking God for a miracle. We seek medical means of staving off death as long as possible, until the physicians tell us that nothing profitable is left to

attempt.

At the same time, there is certainly a sense in which a timely death can be a “good death” — not in these sense of “mercy killing” (what is commonly called “euthanasia,” or physician-assisted suicide, is murder) but in the way C. S. Lewis described it to a woman who wrote him for advice because she thought she was dying. Lewis wrote back to her these stunning words of comfort:

What in Heaven’s name is “distressing” about an old man saying to an old woman that they haven’t much more to do here? I wasn’t in the least expressing resentment or despondency. I was referring to an obvious fact and one which I don’t find either distressing or embarrassing. Do You?...

Pain is terrible, but surely you need not have fear as well? Can you not see death as both friend and deliverer? It means stripping off that body which is tormenting you: like taking off a hairshirt or getting out of a dungeon. What is there to be afraid of? You have long attempted (and none of us does more) a Christian life. Your sins are confessed and absolved. Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave with regret? There are better things ahead than any we leave behind...

Remember, tho’ we struggle against things because we are afraid of them, it is often the other way round—we get afraid *because* we struggle. Are you struggling, resisting? Don’t you think Our Lord says to you “Peace, child, peace. Relax. Let go. Underneath are the everlasting arms. Let go, I will catch you. Do you trust me so little?”

Of course this may not be the end. Then make it a good rehearsal.

Lewis again:

Tho’ horrified at your sufferings, I am overjoyed at the blessed change in your attitude to death. This is a bigger stride forward than perhaps you yourself yet know. For you *were* rather badly wrong on that subject. Only a few months ago when I said that we old people hadn’t much more to do than you make a good exit, you were almost angry with me for what you called such a “bitter” remark. Thank God, you now see it wasn’t bitter; only plain common sense. Yes: I do wonder why the doctors inflict such torture to delay what cannot in any case be very long delayed. Or why God does! Unless there is still something for you to do, as far as weakness allows, I hope, now that you know you are forgiven, you will spend most of your remaining strength in forgiving. Lay all the old resentments down at the wounded feet of Christ.... You say too much of the very little I have been able to do for you. Perhaps you will soon be able to repay me a thousandfold. For if this is Goodbye, I am sure you will not forget me when you are in a better place. You’ll put in a good word for me now and then, won’t you. It will be fun when we at last meet. (excerpts taken from *Letter to an American*)

Lady, 115-119)

So, on the one hand death is an enemy we fight because death as we know it results from sin (1 Corinthians 15). Death is not the way it's supposed to be; it is a violation of the life and shalom God intends for us. That's precisely why redemption has to take the shape of resurrection, namely, a reversal of death.

But on the other hand, in Christ, death can also become a friend, and can be embraced as a stepping stone to a better place, and thus a "gain" (Phil. 1:21). For the Christian, death is losing one's life...but as Jesus said, he who loses his life finds it (Mark 8:35). Death need not provoke fear or haunt the Christian because death has died in the death of Christ. Death has been humbled, as John Donne put it so eloquently (and triumphantly) in his famous sonnet:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Another great Christian poet, George Herbert, captures the same theme of death as a powerful-but-defeated foe in his "Dialogue Anthem," written as a conversation between Death and a Christian:

Christian: ALAS, poor Death! where is thy glory?
Where is thy famous force, thy ancient sting?

Death: Alas, poor mortal, void of story!
Go spell and read how I have killed thy King.

Christian: Poor Death ! and who was hurt thereby?
Thy curse being laid on Him makes thee accurst.

Death: Let losers talk, yet thou shalt die;
These arms shall crush thee.

Christian: Spare not, do thy worst.

I shall be one day better than before;
Thou so much worse, that thou shalt be no more.

Or as Herbert put it elsewhere: “Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener.” In other words, death was once our mortal foe, but through the death of Christ has become a friend who delivers us into the glorious presence of our heavenly Father. For the Christian, death no longer serves Satan’s purposes, but God’s.

To be sure, depending on the circumstances in which death hits, it may seem as more an enemy, or more a friend. We tend to relativize the degree to which we treat death as an enemy. If an 85 year old who has lived a full life passes away in his sleep, death seems relatively tame. But if death invades the life of a 5 year old with a painful and incurable form of cancer, death appears as the most gruesome of enemies. In one sense, this is perfectly understandable. We measure the tragedy of death by the degree to which life’s great joys have been missed. But in another sense, we should question our calculus. The death even of the old man is tragic in some sense; why after all, should life be limited to a mere eight and a half decades when there is so much more in God’s world to experience and explore? Surely 85 years is not nearly enough time to mature in the faith to the degree that we would like to! At the same time, the death of the young boy can be an occasion of joy, from a certain angle, when we consider that his suffering is over and he has gone to be the Lord. When the old die, death is still a separation of what ultimately belongs together. But even when the young die, there is an undeniable gain. That’s why Christians grieve when death strikes – but it is a grief bounded by hope, not the like the hopeless grief of those who do not know God (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

James 5:14-15 describes a sick believer calling for the elders to pray and anoint him. This text sheds helpful light on how Christians approach death precisely because it isn’t about death. To be sure, the Roman Catholic Church has taken this text to be referring to the sacraments of “last rites.” [As Peter Leithart has shown, that’s not the true meaning of the text](#) (though as he also points out, John 12:1-8 could be used to develop a Protestant – that is, explicitly biblical – practice of last rites that involves an anointing with oil as preparation for death and burial). Certainly, the language of healing and salvation here refers, in an ultimate sense, not just to bodily healing in this life, but to the final resurrection of the body at the last day. Thus, the believer is *always* saved and healed in the end. But the *intention* of the sick person in the this text – and the intention of the elders who come to pray for him and anoint him with oil – is to drive the threat of death off, bring physical healing, and preserve bodily life. In other words, the reason the sick in James 5 calls for the elders and for anointing is precisely because he is not yet ready to die. And so the prayers and anointing oil are ways of fighting against death (rather than simply preparing for death as in the Roman Catholic reading). God may choose for his own wise reasons to not answer that prayer for healing – or, perhaps it would be better to say, he may choose to heal in a different way than the ones praying wished. But note the lesson: whether the Christian lives in this world or goes to the next, he will experience the Lord’s healing and salvation. But that means James 5 suggests that there are times to fight death, primarily treating it as an enemy, to be beaten back with the means of prayer and anointing oil; but there are also times to let go of life in this world (that is, to forgo

calling for the elders and their prayers/anointing aimed at healing – though obviously it is wonderful to have pastoral care at one's death bed). When that time comes, we simply fall into the heavenly arms of the Father. Either way, the Christian can know God's peace and love. As the wise preacher in Ecclesiastes might say, there is a time to call the elders and ask for anointing-unto-healing, and a time to call friends and family to say good-bye; a time to live and a time to die; a time to fight death and a time to acquiesce to death.

Bach wrote music for an anonymously produced text that includes these words:

Come, sweet death, come, blessed rest!
Come lead me to peace
for I am weary of the world,
O come! I wait for you,
come soon and lead me,
close my eyes.
Come, blessed rest!

Come, sweet death, come blessed rest!
It is better in heaven,
for there is all pleasure greater,
therefore I am at all times
prepared to say "Farewell,"
I close my eyes.
Come, blessed rest!

Come, sweet death, come blessed rest!
O world, you torture chamber,
oh! stay with your lamentations
in this world of sorrow,
it is heaven that I desire,
death shall bring me there.
Come, blessed rest!

Come, sweet death, come blessed rest!
Oh, that I were but already
there among the hosts of angels,
out of this black world
into the blue, starry firmament,
up to heaven.
O blessed rest!

Come, sweet death, come blessed rest!
I will now see Jesus
and stand among the angels.
It is henceforth completed,
so, world, good night,

my eyes are already closed.
Come, blessed rest.

It would be wrong to present this perspective as the whole of the Christian view of death, even after Christ's cross and resurrection. But it is certainly an aspect of the Christian perspective on death, and one we must have.

In the end, the whole Christian life may be seen as an extensive preparation for death. We trust Christ to forgive our sins; likewise, we trust him to bring us through the doorway of death safely. We trust Christ with a million things everyday of our lives as we move through this danger-filled world; likewise, we trust him to bring us through the passageway that leads from this world to the next. The way to die as a Christian is to live as Christian: We entrust ourselves into the loving embrace of our Savior, confident that he is with us and will protect us in life and in death, in history and in eternity, in this world and in the world to come. He is our comfort, our joy, our salvation. He is the Resurrection and the Life. His death does not exempt us from the burden of having to die, but it does transform our death. Because he died for us, we shall live in him. Because he died for us, even in the moment of our death we are victorious.

When early Christians were being persecuted, they taunted death (and therefore their persecutors). By laughing in the face of death, they were simply following the model of the apostle Paul, the trash talking apostle who mocked death as a toothless dragon, a stingerless wasp, a defenseless enemy, a powerless tyrant (1 Corinthians 15). Christians are people who fight death in all its forms, and we do so in the utter confidence that death is already defeated. At the same time, precisely because death is already beaten, we can lay down our lives when the time comes, surrendering to death and entering the sweet sleep that comes with entrance into God's heavenly glory, where we await the resurrection of the body so death can be humiliated one last time. In imitation of our Savior, we are free to enter death serenely and peacefully, knowing our work in this world is finished, as we give up our spirits to the Lord (John 19:30) who calls the death of his people "blessed" and "precious" in his sight (Psalm 116:15; Revelation 14:13). We die knowing that death is dead; we die knowing that we shall rise from the dead because we have entrusted ourselves to God who raised Jesus from death. We need not fear death because the Last Adam has already defeated the Last Enemy and made him a friend.