

## Appendix B—In the Valley of the Shadow

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
Your rod and your staff they comfort me. (Ps. 23:4).

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity  
so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that, the devil—  
and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Heb. 2:14-15)

**King of Terrors**—When the doctor suggested that my wife might be in a late stage of ovarian cancer and that I should prepare myself, I caught a glimpse of the domain of the king of terrors. I felt numb. My mind went blank. Did I hear that right? Could it possibly be so? Why us? We're so young! There is so much left to do, to see, to be. The spectrum of death is often accompanied by such heartfelt questions: Why me? Why now? Why this? Yet it is the final certainty of every person. As George Bernard Shaw once quipped “The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die.”

Modern attitudes toward death are quite curious. Death is something of a taboo. The more advances we make in medical science, the more we fear and deny death's reality. For many, death has become lonely, mechanical, and dehumanized. The dying are removed from their familiar surroundings and rushed to some institution where they are treated more like a thing than a person.

In past centuries, death had a certain ritual, its own protocol, if you will. In our time, discussing death is seen as morbid, and moving its reality to the margin as the thing to do. It has become forbidden topic in proper conversation, a private affair that even the family is excluded from with the widespread hospitalization of the terminally ill. Death seems as unmentionable in our age as sex was for the Victorians.

Most people delay thinking about death until it is upon them. Then there is denial, even to the point of refusing to think about it. Irrational fear freezes our hearts and cripples our spirits, leaving us intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically drained. Some find refuge in humor that seeks to hide fear with a chuckle. Some see death as a transitory state, insisting that it is merely a crossing over to some mystic, cosmic eternity, perhaps in a reincarnated reality.

**Jesus' own agony and aversion to death**—The terror of death is very real. The psalmist writes:  
My heart is in anguish within me;  
the terrors of death assail me.  
Fear and trembling have beset me;  
horror has overwhelmed me. (Ps. 55:4-5).

Hebrews 2:14-15 conveys the idea that the evil one exercises his terrifying power in the realm of death. The King of terrors was with Jesus in the Garden. Jesus' aversion to death is clearly seen in the suffering in the Garden (Mk. 14:32-42; Lk. 22:44). The author of Hebrews describes our Lord's experience as follows:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (Heb. 5:7).

The wheel of humiliation, supposed defeat, and death would grind Jesus to the point of his greatest personal agony. He was facing the terror to end its reign.

This same aversion, even anger, can be observed in the scene at Lazarus' tomb (see Jn. 11:32-38). The Lord's deep emotion and compassion at the death of his friend is expressed by three descriptive words: "deeply moved" (11:33, 38), "troubled" (11:33), and "wept" (11:35). "Deeply moved" (*enebrimesato*) is literally "to snort like a horse" and connotes anger. Jesus was angry at the ravages of death that characterizes the human condition because of sin. "Troubled" (*etaraxen*) implies a deep agitation of spirit over the loss of a dear friend that gave way to weeping. The idea of "wept" in John 11:35 is that Jesus burst into tears. It was uncontrollable grief.

**Theology of death**—Let's start with a biblical understanding of what we're facing in death. Death is separation, physically from this world, and spiritually from God unless redeemed.

- After the fall (see Gen. 3), human beings still bear the image of God, but that image is marred and defaced by sin. Death enters a fallen world by sin. The fall serves as the basis for the biblical understanding of death.
- Death is an enemy—Death was not part of the original creation, it results from sin. Death is an enemy, indeed the last enemy to be destroyed with Christ's redemptive restoration (1 Cor. 15:26). The origin of death is divine punishment for disobedience (see Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:27). Humanistic attitudes about death being "natural" or "part of human nature" are false. Death is unnatural, it flows from sin, not part of life as created. It is a time of profound sorrow, not an "Oh well, it comes to us all", shrug your shoulders experience.
- Death is a defeated enemy (1 Cor. 15:54-57). Death no longer holds ultimate power over us (Rom. 5:17; 8:1). The problem of death is resolved in Jesus' resurrection and the promise of resurrection his followers will share (1 Cor. 15:20-28). It is a reality that will be done away with, not something that will always be here. The Scripture testifies to this: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:4). The resurrection shapes our attitudes toward aging and death, affirming God's faithfulness to redeem what he has made (Rom. 8:22-23) and proclaiming God's triumph over the power of death (Heb. 2:14-15). After redemption, people are both image-bearers and redeemed sinners, children of God, and heirs of the cosmos.
- Death is the passageway to receiving our reward. Nothing that is truly of God ever perishes. We can confidently anticipate the day when we will be reunited with our believing loved ones and enter his peaceable kingdom. Be inspired by Paul's words in Philippians—"to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). What we cling to in this earthly tent is really the Shadowlands, a prelude to glory.
- Death leads to receiving a resurrected body. The body is an eternal aspect of self. While we pander and powder our physical bodies, we only have a distant glimpse at the consequences of the Fall on our physicality. Our resurrections will restore to us what it means to be truly human and equip us for God's glorious presence.
- And yes, death leads to judgment. The fall had spiritual as well as physical consequences (see Heb. 9:27).
- The Bible teaches two truths that we must hold in dynamic tension. One is that human life is

sacred and we naturally want to preserve it. The other is that we will not experience the fullness of life until we are in the Lord's presence. Death is a defeated enemy and a passageway for the believer.

**Making a Good End**—Dying well is a morally significant act in that it bears witness to our most profound convictions. We follow in the train (in the victory parade) of the Lord Jesus: in his life, death, resurrection (glorious hope!), and destiny (heirs with him in the heavenly place—an unimaginable inheritance).

We have dealt with a number of practical aspects of dying well in other meditations (e.g. *Is Your House in Order*). This entire book is really addressing the spiritual aspects of a good death. In this meditation, I'd like to focus on the physical and psychological aspects of making an exit to the honor of God and the benefit of those you leave behind.

A very famous study by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, prefaces most modern discussion of this topic. Her view of the stages of death has come to be regarded as the accepted roadmap of death and dying in our time. In this study, she identified the five stages leading to the acceptance of an approaching death.

- Denial—The first stage discussed is denial. Candidly, this was my immediate response to the doctor's initial assessment of my wife's condition. Denial is self-protective, shielding us from the full impact of emotional pain. For the believer, denial thwarts the onset of Christian hope. Hope begins by taking a good, long look at the facts, reminds us of the truth of the gospel, and gives us wings to soar above the difficulties. Denial is actually denying the providence of God, never a healthy response to trials.
- Anger—The next stage, the author identifies is anger. The voice inside us announces that this isn't fair. There is so much left undone. The idea that we deserve better populates our thoughts. This anger ultimately derives from viewing our lives as our own possession and not as a gift. Lord, forgive me for thinking that what was yours to start, ever became mine.
- Bargaining—The author suggests that this stage is particularly the preserve of religious types. Your mind goes immediately to Isaiah 38, where Isaiah brings a word to King Hezekiah of Judah to get his house in order because he was not going to recover from the illness that was upon him. Isaiah 38:2-3 records Hezekiah's bitter tears and his bargaining prayer to the Lord to remember his good deeds. He does get a reprieve. However, in all due respect to the eminent author, bargaining in a non-sectarian phenomenon. At death's imminent prospect, we all desire a reprieve. A famous comedian, who had shown no religious interest during most of his lifetime, was found reading the Bible on his death bed. His honest and humorous reply to various bystander's skeptical queries was that he was looking for loopholes.
- Depression—This is an all too human response. Once again, it's time to preach gospel hope to ourselves. Hopelessness is hell's chief lieutenant. We must meet the terror trusting in God. This trust will not magically take away all pain, grief, and the sorrow of separation, but trust in God makes any situation more “get-through-able”. This end is a passageway, we are going home.

William Cowper writes:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

His purposes will ripen fast  
Unfolding every hour  
The bud may have a bitter taste  
But sweet will be the flower

- Acceptance—Grief must first come to accept the reality of loss and that it's painful. C.S. Lewis writes: “If we really think that home is elsewhere and that this life is a 'wandering to find home,' why should we not look forward to the arrival?”. Prayerful personal presence with the dying person is a powerful aide in helping someone grieve through to acceptance.

The above is a secular roadmap adapted. One key to that adaptation is that we don't travel that road alone. The more the Christian community is involved the better our transition. Earlier Christians had the practice of what was called the Celtic “happy death”. The key idea here is the practice of the “soul friend” who walked the death path with the dying believer. Dying rituals and liturgical prayer populate this tradition. In addition, we focus on the Passion of Christ and on his victory over death in his Resurrection. The Cross and the empty tomb beckon us on. By his wounds, we are healed. By his Resurrection, we have hope for glory.

**Dregs at the bottom of the cup**—As he neared the end of his days, Benjamin Franklin remarked that those who live long and who drink from the cup of life to the bottom must accept that they will run into some of its dregs. It is good to be aware of, and prepare for, the physical changes that will come upon us as death approaches.

On this front, there are elements of the fear of dying: of pain, of progression of deterioration and inability, of a loss of control, of dying and the levels of separation that entails. Early physical signs and symptoms include—

- Sleeping more and eating less.
- Food and fluid decrease—this may sound harsh, but dehydration is a dying person's friend. It is one of the most peaceful ways to exit the world.
- Disorientation.
- Incontinence.
- Restlessness.
- Urine decrease.

There are often early emotional signs and symptoms—

- Withdrawal.
- Restlessness.
- Decreased socialization.

And as the grim reaper approaches, signs and symptoms of its immanence—

- Change in breathing patterns.
- Increased congestion.
- Vision-like experiences.
- Significant changes in vital signs.

**Advice for peaceable exits**—

- Maintain faith—We place ourselves in the hands of a faithful God. We will be assailed with

numerous doubts focused on attacking our weaknesses and our undeserving state. Our focus needs to be on the faithfulness of God not on our fickle selves.

- Maintain hope in Christ and in your eternal reward. Avoid desperation and do not let your thoughts run wild. This is best done by preparing for what we will go through. You are a child of God. The sun is behind the cloud and it still shines. Extrapolating upon the possible pains and dangers of your condition is not a profitable. Our faith teaches us to hope in a way that makes desperation appear useless and very foolish.
- Avoid impatience—As followers of Christ, we are to practice watchful waiting on God across the span of our years. That should categorize our final days as well.
- Complacency must not rule. We must live faithfully unto God. The good death ushers forth from a faithful life.
- Temporal concerns must not dominate. Get your house in order early. This is the time for farewells to those you love and meditation on the lover of your soul to whom you are going.

### **Death shallowed up in the victory—**

**Death has been swallowed up in victory (referencing Hos. 13:14)**

**“Where, O death, is your victory?**

**Where, O death, is your sting?” (referencing Isa. 25:8)**

**The sting of death is sin, and the power of death is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Cor. 15:54-57)**

My father-in-law, long an agnostic though raised in the faith, came to Christian faith near the end of his days. There were those, including a very persistent pastor of my mother-in-law's church congregation, who witnessed faithfully to Pop. However, I sincerely believe that the single decisive factor in Pop's conversion was his memory of the serene and peaceable death of his mother. He was there for her death and was greatly affected by it. She modeled “making a good end” for her son. Her passage into the sunrise of eternity gave eloquent testimony to the lyrics of the old hymn:

Teach me to live that I may dread  
The grave as little as my bed;  
Teach me to die, that so I may  
Rise glorious on the Judgment Day.

The good death and the lead up to it is a Christian community event. The elderly are to gift the younger with their acquired wisdom and stories of the journey that morally frame us. The younger are to become the kind of people who love and respect the elderly and understand the significance of their lives for our own. The young offer the old their presence as death approaches, sharing, as they can, in suffering and fear of their elderly loved ones. In return, the younger receive a preview of how to die well, an example that they, one day, will be privileged to pass along. In dying well, the old teach the young the truly valuable lesson of how to conclude this earthly journey.

O Love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in thy ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.  
O Joy that seeks me through the pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;

I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not in vain  
That morn shall tearless be. (Elaine Hegenberg)

I pray that my life may end with a peaceable exit, a melodious Amen. Could Christ's death actually break the endless cycle of sin and death, sickness and disease, and roll back the curse under which all creation groans? Could a God-authored utopia really be the end game? I pray for the grace to sing through whatever pain I may encounter a loud and unequivocal yes; the faithful Amen at the end of the journey.

Surrounded by your glory  
What will my heart feel  
Will I dance for you, Jesus  
Or in awe of You be still  
Will I stand in your presence  
Or to my knees will I fall  
Will I sing hallelujah  
Will I be able to speak at all  
I can only imagine. (Lyrics from Mercy Me)