

THE TERROR OF DEATH: CAUSES AND CURES

Death has been depicted as the "king of terrors." Such was the descriptive of Bildad, one of Job's erstwhile friends (Job 18:14). His sentiment has been shared by countless others.

The psalmist once lamented: *"My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me"* (Psalm 55:4-5).

Again, David will say: *"The cords of death have compassed me, and the pains of Sheol have come upon me: I found trouble and sorrow"* (Psalm 116:3).

In a terrific passage in the book of Hebrews, the inspired writer discusses the incarnation of Christ and the various blessings that result from the Savior's death. The author says Jesus died that he *"might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"* (2:15). Note these significant points:

1. There is a "fear" of death.
2. It virtually is a "lifetime" dread.
3. This fear is so intense that it holds us in a state of "bondage" (literally, slavery).
4. The Lord wants us "delivered" from that slavish fear as much as is possible.

We need to believe, therefore, that there can be considerable relief from the horror of the grave - though we may never become totally comfortable with the ultimate appointment.

Without doubt it would help in dealing with this emotion if we would inquire, with a degree of self-analysis, exactly why we have such a dread of death, and then, with due diligence, seek for answers within the sacred Writings. It seems to me that there are some very obvious factors as to why death holds us in the grip of fear. Let us reflect upon these matters.

One of the factors which surely contributes to our fear of death is that the phenomenon is so alien to our personal experience. We have never died before; we have no empirical data as to what it's like beyond the veil of death.

While there were exceptional cases in biblical days, when people were raised from the dead (John 11:44), these had a redemptive purpose, and such supernatural events are not being duplicated today. The general rule is, "*it is appointed unto men once to die*" (Hebrews 9:27). Moreover, no one raised from the dead in those biblical examples ever uttered a word of testimony as to the nature of the experience.

Perhaps this sense of the "unknown" lay behind David's trepidation. He did allude to the valley of the "*shadow of death*" (Psalm 23:4). The Hebrew expression suggests intense darkness. While David may be employing the figure of passing through a dark ravine (common in Palestine), with, perhaps, enemies lurking nearby, it is an appropriate illustration of the experience of passing into the darkness of death.

The same promise prevails. "*I will fear no evil; for you [Lord] are with me.*" It is as if we can hear the Master whisper, "*It is I; stop being afraid*" (cf. John 6:20). We do not know what the experience will be like; we do know who will be there with us (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8).

We are painfully aware of the fact that death is a persistently stalking "enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26), which we cannot resist indefinitely. Possibly it is this feeling of helplessness, at least in part, that strikes such terror in the soul. But this very feeling of weakness can be used to drive us closer to the One who has consummate power. I have reflected often upon the fact that "death" is an event that actually points to God.

The Bible explains the purpose of death. It is a judgment for sin (Romans 5:12). Death is a divine appointment (Hebrews 9:27).

Perhaps, therefore, some of our anxiety can be allayed if we think of death, not so much as a stalking, skeletal "reaper," but as an event, allowed by God, to accommodate the transition from the physical realm to the spirit realm. It is but a journey - an "exodus" (2 Peter 1:15 - Grk. text), a departure, for the Christian - to some place very far better (Philippians 1:23). It is an inevitable joy!

For many, the perception is that the grave is an eternal destiny. Job wondered: "*If a man die, shall he live again?*" (14:14). He certainly despaired that there might be no return to earth. "*As the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away, so he that goes down to Sheol shall come up no more. He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more*"

(7:9-10). The idea of that sort of perpetuity can be frightening.

And yet, humanity worldwide - both past and present - have lived in hope of a future existence. Job reasoned that if there is the possibility that a tree stump can spring to life again, why is there not a similar hope for man? (See Job 14:7ff; cf. 19:25ff.)

While death superficially may be perceived as final, that is not reality. There is both continued existence following the death of the body, and the eventual promise of a resurrection.

When the beloved Lazarus died, Jesus, after an intentional delay, made his way to Bethany to be with Mary and Martha, his friend's sisters. When Martha mildly complained that had the Lord been there, her brother would not have died, her Teacher replied: *"Your brother will rise again."*

She conceded that there would be a resurrection "at the last day," but that hardly ameliorated the pain of the moment. Jesus then proclaimed: *"I am the resurrection, and the life: he who believes on me, though he die, yet shall he live"* (John 11:25).

Two points are very important here. First, the verb "live" suggests continued existence - even though the body dies (cf. John 8:51). The believer who dies lives on - with the Lord! Death is a transition, not a termination.

Second, there was, resident in the Son of God, the power to raise the dead body of his friend. He would raise Lazarus immediately; eventually, all of the dead will come out of their graves (cf. John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). "Death" is on the Lord's "hit list" (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Death is difficult to deal with because "this life" is all we've known. And, in spite of its heartaches, we fear leaving it. When Satan challenged God with the possibility of loyal Job's apostasy, he asserted: *"All that man has will he give for his life"* (Job 2:4). There is many a wealthy man who would part with his millions for a little longer lease upon his earthly home.

In a context that particularly addresses hardships, an inspired writer proclaims: *"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to usward"* (Romans 8:18).

"How can I bear to think of leaving my loved ones behind?"

"I am afraid of going into an environment where I do not know anyone."

These honest sentiments have been expressed countless times, or at least entertained in the recesses of the mind - even by devout people. There are several thoughts, we believe, which may help put this issue into clearer focus.

First, relationships in heaven will not be based upon physical ties. Jesus made this clear when he declared that "*in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage*" (Matthew 22:30). We do not fully understand that. We cannot. It's totally alien to our current experiences.

But if we believe that human relationships are rich and rewarding, and we have confidence in the love of God and his interest in our eternal contentment, we can confidently believe that what he has in store for us will be even more rewarding. Can we not be thrilled just contemplating that eventuality?

Second, the Bible does teach that we will know our beloved who share the joys of heaven with us. When Abraham died, he was "*gathered to his people*" (Genesis 25:8), which cannot refer to the interment of his body, for his ancestors were buried in a distant land.

Jesus promised that in the future phase of "*the kingdom of heaven,*" the faithful will "*sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*" (Matthew 8:11), which not only suggests that we will know these Old Testament worthies, it also implies that these men - father, son, and grandson - will know one another.

Third, the evidence seems to be that we instinctively will know everyone in heaven. On the mount of transfiguration, Peter, James, and John recognized Moses and Elijah though these saints had lived centuries earlier (Matthew 17:3-4). We can probably safely surmise that there will be no need for an "adjustment" period in the celestial realm. Everything will be comfortable, joyous, exhilarating - truly our cup will "run over."

Fourth, a problem for many is this: "How could I be happy in heaven if I discover that precious loved ones are not there?"

The question assumes that family emotions will be the same then as they are now. And that is very unlikely. It is virtually certain, in fact, that in the final state of glory our sense of holiness and goodness will be so far transcendent to our current

perceptions of these qualities that all human relationships will be viewed in a different light.

Rational people recognize that unless there is ultimate human accountability, there is no basis for ethics among men. And when men and women have lived their lives in total disregard of God's law, and they are, deep down, aware of that reality, they are terrorized of death - as well they should be.

Many, like Belshazzar of the old Babylonian regime, know that they will be weighed in the balances of divine justice, and be found wanting (Daniel 5:27). For the unprepared, "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Hebrews 10:31), because retribution will be certain, just, and eternal.

There are good people, who are attempting to serve God with sincere hearts, who, nonetheless, tremble at the prospect of dying. They are ever thumbing through the pages of their hearts with too much anxiety, asking: "Am I really prepared for death?" They cannot be joyful, day by day, because of this uncertainty. Is this the attitude God would have us harbor? I am confident it is not.

First of all, such a fear defies logic. For example, Jesus taught that if God feeds the birds and clothes the grass, does not it stand to reason that he will take care of his people (Matthew 6:26ff)?

In view of that, consider this: if the Father has loved the human family to the extent of providing his blessed Son as a sacrifice for sin, is it reasonable to believe he wants us to tremble in fear of death, bereft of a confidence regarding our hope?

Paul employs a form of this argument in Romans 8. "*He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?*" (v. 32).

Second, Bible truth concerning how to be "right" with God is so very clear that there is no need for the sincere believer to have trepidation regarding his future. As he enters the "in Christ" relationship, the believer who determines that henceforth he will not walk "after the flesh," is assured that he need not fear "condemnation" (Romans 8:1-4).

Have you faith in Almighty God, and in his Son, Jesus?

"And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Have you acknowledged your faith before others?

"[F]or with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:10).

And genuinely repented of (turned away from) your sins?

"The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent" (Acts 17:30-31).

Have you expressed your confidence in the Savior's resurrection by submitting to God's command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sin?

"We were buried therefore with him through baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

Are you sincerely attempting to walk in the light of God's objective revelation, the Scriptures?

"Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

"[B]ut if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

If the answers to these queries are in the affirmative, why should you fear the prospect of disapproval at death? If we examine ourselves in advance, and bring ourselves into conformity with the will of Heaven, there need be no fear of death and judgment (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:31). Besides, our Advocate is pleading our case (1 John 2:1).

Third, the New Testament challenges us to thrust aside our fears and live the confident life. The apostle John admonishes us to abandon self-condemnation, and enjoy boldness toward God (1 John 2:21). Again, the apostle promises that as our love (devoted

service) to the Lord matures, fear of being unprepared will dissipate (1 John 4:17-18).

The book of Hebrews literally rings with a sense of confidence that is the antidote of the fear of dying lost (cf. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19,22; cf. Ephesians 3:12). Surely such admonitions work to calm our spirits. They would hardly have been given if they were impossible to achieve.

Fourth, how does one explain the astounding fact that saints of old were able to face death, even under the most trying of circumstances, with calm peacefulness? Not with mere passivity; but with baffling joy!

The supreme example of courage in the face of death, of course, is Christ, who, "*for the joy that was set before him endured the cross ...*" (Hebrews 12:2). Does this conflict with an earlier reference which takes note of Jesus' "godly fear" as he approached the cross (5:7)? Surely not. The "godly fear" of the pre-crucifixion trauma almost certainly had to do with the association of that death with the consequences of sin - not the experience of dying itself (cf. Matthew 27:46).

Danger was such a constant companion of Paul, the apostle could say, "*I die daily*" (1 Corinthians 15:31; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9; 11:23). In spite of looking death in the face virtually every day, such did not rob the apostle of the joy of life (cf. Philippians 4:4). He could say of death that it is "very far better" than remaining alive, for such would introduce him into the very presence of his Lord (Philippians 1:23; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8). Read 2 Timothy 1:12 for a glimpse of the apostle's thrilling hope.

We believe the information suggested above can help us to analyze why we have such a fear of death, and then, more importantly, encourage us to cultivate a more positive outlook relative to our demise. Death truly will be the greatest experience ever - for the faithful child of God.

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GOSPEL MEETINGS

<u>DATES</u>	<u>PLACE & TIME</u>	<u>SPEAKER</u>
Nov. 6 - 11	Hopkinsville Church Hopkinsville, OH	J.D. McDonald (Woodbury, TN) & Joe Hill (Hager Hill, KY)
Nov. 11 - 13	West Broad Street Church of Christ Wedowee, AL	Allan Daniel (Woodland, AL)
Nov. 11 - 13	Dowell Hill Church of Christ Columbus, IN	Danny Abercrombie (Gay, GA)
Nov. 11 - 13	Cullman, AL Friday -- Saturday 7:00 p.m. CST Sunday afternoon 2:00 p.m. CST	Gerald Carter (Eubank, KY)
Nov. 18 - 20	Antioch Church of Christ Greenup, IL Fri. – Sat. 7:30 p.m. CST Sunday 9:30 a.m. & 4:00 p.m. CST	Ronnie Scott (Bloomington, IN)
Nov. 18 - 20	Hokes Bluff Church of Christ Hokes Bluff, AL	Sam Dick (Cave City, KY)
Nov. 18 - 20	Napoleon Church of Christ Woodland, AL	Bill Prince, Jr. (Oxford, AL)

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

1. Who did the Lord instruct to carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites?
2. For how long did Jeremiah prophecy that Judah would serve the king of Babylon?
3. Of what were the jars made that held the water that Jesus turned to wine?

4. At whose house did the Jews of Thessalonica think that Paul and Silas were?
5. According to 2 Chronicles, who were the only ones permitted to enter the temple of the Lord to guard the new king?

ANSWERS NEXT MONTH . . .

and remember last month's questions?

1. Because of whom did Pharaoh give Abram many gifts? SARAI (Gen. 12:16)
2. In the tabernacle, where was the place where the Lord would meet the priests? AT THE ARK OF THE COVENANT (Exodus 30:6)
3. According to Lamentations 3, what attribute of the Lord never ceases? HIS LOVINGKINDNESS (Lam. 3:22)
4. To what reptile does David compare the tongues of evil men? SERPENT (Psa. 140:3)
5. What happened to the idol beside which the Philistines placed the ark of God? IT FELL ON ITS FACE, AND ITS HEAD AND HANDS WERE BROKEN OFF (1 Sam. 5:3-4)