

A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF LIFE AND DEATH

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INTRODUCTION

Issues of life and death are among the most fundamental of all human concerns. Since the beginning of recorded history, human life has flourished all over the face of the earth. However, it has also been inevitably marked by the death of every individual member of its species. In traditional societies, life and death are accepted givens of everyday living. However, in modern culture, death has increasingly come to be viewed as an anomaly for which a solution must be found, or if that is not possible, then managed. Charles Taylor has astutely noted that “modern humanism tends to develop a notion of flourishing that has no place for death.”¹ Our contemporary world regards death as the very antithesis of human flourishing and to be resisted at all costs until the final moment. Such resistance may take the form of advocating technological advancements in medical science that not only delays death and prolongs life, but also increases the quality of life that one may enjoy.

Nonetheless, the death of every person remains an inescapable reality, and it is beyond dispute that as an event, it is one of the most shattering ones of all human experiences whether it is for the person or her family and friends who live on. This knowledge of the certainty of death is mingled with fear and apprehension of its coming, one that some scholars have argued comes from genetic programming. Hence, Dale Allison argues that due to man’s innate instincts for survival, fear of death is part and parcel of his being.²

For the Christian, it is appropriate to understand the fear of death not just biologically but theologically as well. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner asserts that this is because the human person was not created for death, therefore “he will always experience a mysterious horror of death which can never be explained by himself.”³ Therefore, death, as understood in the Christian faith, is an unnatural part of being human in the first place. It is an interruption of the divine plan which had originally meant for human beings to enjoy life and joy with their Creator and ultimately seen as the consequence of sin. This understanding means that the issues of life and death constitute the central components of Christianity. As Terry Eagleton asserts, Christianity is a faith

¹ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 333.

² D. C. Allison, *Night Comes : Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2016), 5.

³ K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 55.

that “places death at the centre of its vision, in the belief that there can be no flourishing without confronting it.”⁴

The Christian view hence is that life and death must be considered together by taking the scope of human existence in its entirety. Because of the inevitability of death as well as the fact that human beings are living both in the present and for the future, there is a need for a Christian theology of life and death.

LIFE

The biblical view of life begins with the notion that God is the source and creator of all life. As the source of life, God exists by himself and does not require any other auxiliary means for his continuation. Classical theologians refer to this attribute of God as his “aseity,” which means he is the being whose existence is wholly nondependent on other beings. At the same time, God has created other life forms. The story of the creation of life in the book of Genesis distinguishes the Christian narrative from other accounts that either presupposes a pre-existent universe or one that was the result of many hands from multiple beings, or polytheism. Christianity’s monotheism means that all life (except God’s) is taken as a derivation of God’s own life.

The divine creation of life is seen as having its high point in the creation of human life, which in Gen 1:27, is described as God creating man “in his own image.” This “image of God” has historically been seen as encompassing a wide range of possible meanings. However, one fundamental idea that is common to the various interpretations is that the image metaphor means human life should be a reflection of who God is. As created beings in God’s plan, humans are to grow and embody attributes that are inherent in their Creator, including goodness, holiness, righteousness, and love.

An additional layer of the meaning of the term “image of God” suggests that human beings cannot exist and flourish apart from God. As described earlier, this is because only God can exist by himself. Life, therefore, in itself is a gift from God and which no human being can claim to have a right upon. This gift from God attests to the sanctity of life because the source from which life comes from is himself holy. In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II asserts that “human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God.”⁵ Roland Chia has also reasoned that for the Christian, the sacredness of life can be seen in that it is a gift from the Creator.⁶

⁴ T. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 143.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, “*Evangelium Vitae* : On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life,” (1995), Article 53.

⁶ R. Chia, *The Right to Die? A Christian Response to Euthanasia* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2009), 78.

The non-autonomy of human life suggests that humanity should see its existence always in the context of being derived from God's underived existence. In the Garden of Eden, the Tree of life lies in its middle (Gen 2:9) suggesting that created life needs a continual source of nourishment to maintain its inherent goodness. It is because life is not seen as one's own that the Christian tradition has always maintained opposition to the idea of suicide. As D. A. Jones has noted, behind the issue of euthanasia is always the more fundamental and profound ethical question of suicide.⁷

Thirdly, while God is the creator of all life, the Bible also presents him as the infinite source of goodness. Romans 12:2 describes God's own will as "good, pleasing and perfect." As the fount of goodness himself, any created life by God is of itself good. This is further shown in the first chapter of Genesis where God's work of creation is repeatedly described as "good." The accounts of the creation of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, are meant to illustrate this assertion; that life in itself is good.

We may sum up thus far that all human life, from the biblical perspective, is regarded as derived from the One who is good and sacred, and hence also good and sacred. The life of a Christian is one that recognizes her utter dependence on God for life and learning to orientate her life towards him.

If life was truly good in its original creation and quality, how then did death enter the human situation? If God is the living Lord, how can death have a place in his work? From the biblical perspective, the main reason for the arrival of death was human disobedience. Fundamentally, disobedience is a turning away from God such that the loss of life is inevitable. Just as a tree branch can only when it is joined to the tree, as long as humans maintain their union with the living God, they will not lose the gift of life. Tragically, the converse happened, and death ensued.

DEATH

In his analysis of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka's works, Jacques Derrida has described death as "the *mysterium tremendum*: the terrifying mystery, the dread, fear and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift."⁸ We could say that before the inevitability of death, all human pretence to self-sufficiency crumbles.

⁷ D. A. Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, ed. O. O'Donovan, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

⁸ J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans., D. Wills., Religion and Postmodernism Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12.

The Christian view of death is that it is a consequence of sin. Sin is primarily seen as disobedience to God who is the ultimate source of goodness. In the book of Genesis, the Tree of life is described as being planted with the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden. Adam was explicitly told that he should not eat from the fruit of the Tree of knowledge and also warned that the consequence of such disobedience was death. By juxtaposing both trees together in Eden, this suggests the possibility that Adam and Eve may have avoided the experience of death if they had chosen to partake only from the Tree of life. Nonetheless, we would never know if that is indeed the case since they chose the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The result was the entrance of sin and death into the world. Humankind became separated from the living God and became subject to death and suffering. Yet, in a sense, it is not as much as a punishment for sin but as an inevitable consequence of choosing to be separated from God who is the source of life. Hence, the Christian view of life and death is that death was not previously part of the human situation. Instead, human beings were created for life together with God, while sin and death are seen as aberrations.

The ramifications of Adam's actions extended beyond himself and humankind to all of creation. In Genesis 3:17-19, God declared that the ground from which he was created would no longer be as fruitful in its yield because it would be cursed. At the same time, death entered the realm of human experience, and as described in Rom 5:12, "death came to all people." Human death became a consequence of sin. We will further discuss the effects of sin on humanity in three points.

Firstly, because of sin, death becomes universal. Every human individual dies, either through accident, natural calamities, sickness, old age, or perhaps suicide. No member of the human race is excluded from visitation by the grim reaper who, as the scythe-wielding personification of death, will come for her life one day. The Bible has described the human condition as "living in darkness and the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79). From the Christian perspective, the universality of death is based on the belief that all humans are sinners, and since "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), death is a universal experience.

Secondly, the meaning of death requires more discussion. What is death? The traditional Christian description of death is more than the cessation of all physiological processes, but theologically as the separation of body and soul. This may raise some questions because belief in the existence of the soul is not universally held. However, that there is a non-material part (i.e., the soul) of a person has been a part of Christian belief since the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, death (as well as life) is regarded as entirely under God's sovereignty. Job attributed to God the ability to terminate his earthly life, "I know you will bring me down to death, to the place appointed for all the living..." (Job 30:23). At the same time, he affirms that all created beings come into existence

through God, “In his hand is the life of every creature, and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10).

Thirdly, death marks the final stage of a person’s journey in this life. When death happens to the body, a person dies. In death, something happens to her as a whole, which has significant consequences for her soul as well. Her ability to live has been curtailed definitively, and her life journey has come to an end. From a Christian viewpoint, death also means that one’s decision for or against God as reached during her lifetime becomes final and unalterable. The biblical view of life is that it can only be lived once. Because of the unrepeatable nature of life, it has to be taken seriously. The finality of death has been described as being “like water spilt on the ground, which cannot be recovered” (2 Sam 14:14) and a wheel broken at the well (Ecc. 12:6).

When one regards death as the separation of soul and body, this does not mean the soul has now entered a new state where it is freed from the encumbrances of the corporeal body. Instead, the Christian view of the person is a unity of body and soul. This assertion, however, is not meant to suggest there is no afterlife in which further developments could take place after death. Instead, it is meant chiefly to affirm that death does not mark the full stop of life but rather a new beginning. While this means that believers can look forward to an “afterlife,” Christians should value their current existence and rather than completely in the future. As Charles Taylor puts it, the Christian narrative of life “requires that we see our life as going beyond the bounds of its ‘natural’ scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond this life.”⁹ It is this trust and confidence in God that true faith is seen when faced with darkness and obscurity.

In short, the Christian understanding of death in the Bible refers to the assertion that what is usually called the soul assumes in death a different relation to the body. Because the body no longer lives, in that sense, the soul has separated from it. This separation can be seen as intrinsic to death itself, rather than a process that takes place after it.

Theologically, the natural shrinking from the idea of death by an individual demonstrates that she has not entirely lost an orientation to a supernatural goal in her life although she now has no way of attaining that. There remains an innate instinct for transcendence of sorts, whether in the erection of monuments or seeking lasting achievements, or the production of progeny to carry forward her memory and attain to some lasting existence. Nonetheless, all this fails in actual individual death. The fear of death is a reaction caused by an instinctual awareness that there could have been an immortal destiny for her. The outcome of physical death is separation from the realm of the living, and likewise, spiritual death results in separation from the living God. It is also generally regarded by theologians that death does not result in the extinction of the

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

individual. As Ray Anderson puts it, “death cannot serve as the ultimate limiting concept in this view. God himself is the limit, and Christian theology asserts the belief that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

In the following sections, we shall examine both the Old and New Testaments’ attitudes toward death, and especially how, through the latter, the death of Christ has transformed the understanding of life and death.

OLD TESTAMENT ATTITUDES TO DEATH

During Old Testament times, the Israelites saw life and death as daily realities. As mentioned in the earlier section, life was widely regarded as one of the highest good, and long life was seen as evidence of having received the favour and blessings of God. In Gen 15:15, God promised Abraham, the forefather of all Israel, that he would “go to [his] ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.” This sets the tone for much of the Old Testament’s view of one’s life – longevity as a sign of blessing. The Psalmist declares in Ps 63:3 that “your love is better than life,” which typifies the attitude of the Israelites that while life is superior to death, knowledge, and participation in the love of God is considered better than life. This is an acknowledgement that the source of life lies in God. As Jüngel summarizes, “as far as the Old Testament is concerned, man's life is a gift. It is not his possession.”¹¹ Life’s meaning, therefore, lies in knowing God.

There are some notable exceptions to this optimistic view of life. One Old Testament book that emphasizes death as its central theme is the book of Job. Job’s crisis of faith begins with a series of deaths—those had died caring for his possessions and cattle, as well as his children (Job 1:13-19). The narrative arc also ended with Job's death, and thus the book has been summarised as from “death to death.”¹² The losses suffered by Job and the grief he felt upon losing his offspring caused him to question the meaning of life, and finally, he “opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.”(Job 3:1). In the rest of the chapter, he enumerated the various reasons for wishing for death and even cursed the day he was born, culminating with the bitter observation that life has brought him “no peace, no quietness,” and “no rest, but only turmoil.” (Job 3:26) On the whole, we can say that this was a particular instance due to extenuating circumstances, i.e., the

¹⁰ R. S. Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, Signposts in Theology (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 12.

¹¹ E. Jüngel, *Death : The Riddle and the Mystery*, trans., Iain and Ute Nicol (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 63.

¹² D. Mathewson, *Death and Survival in the Book of Job : Desymbolization and Traumatic Experience*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 450 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 4.

testing of Job's faith, and was an exception to the usual positive view of life in the Old Testament.

If life was seen as a blessing by the Old Testament Israelites, naturally death was regarded as a curse. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses delivered a series of sermons to the Israelites before their entry to the Promised Land after forty years of wandering in the desert. He concluded these sermons with the admonition that obedience to the instructions he had given them constitute the difference between "life and prosperity, death and destruction." (Deut 30:15) In a later verse, he could contrast sharply again the difference between "life and death, blessings and curses." (Deut 30:19). From these descriptions, death was equated with both destruction and curses, and seen as the consequence of disobedience to God's word, the word of life.

The negative perception of death extends not only to the natural closure of human life, but also its premature termination, which was taken as the sign of a bad end. Jeremiah 17:11 states that those who seek riches by unjust means in this life will have their lives cut short, and "in the end, they will prove to be fools." While death is infelicitous, the only thing worse than it is an early one. The only and best time to die is that at a ripe old age because dying is a part of life. As King David said to Solomon before his death, that he was "about to go the way of all the earth." (1 Kings 2:2)

Another Old Testament book containing some of the most frequent references to death is that of Ecclesiastes. Dan Mathewson has analysed that this book contains death as its central theme and concern.¹³ Miroslav Volf also noted the book carries throughout the theme of one's awareness of death which is one of the dimensions of the human condition.¹⁴ Hence, Ecc. 3:19-20 asserts, "humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return." Its author Qoheleth however also expresses the view that there remains some hope in life even though paradoxically death should lead one to hopelessness. "Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing." (Ecc. 9:4-5). As Mathewson has concluded, the tone struck in this book about death is philosophical and how that poses problems for life.¹⁵

Finally, it is important to note that the Israelites' view of life includes more than biological naturalism. For the Jews, this material life was not all that matters. The Old

¹³ Mathewson, *Death and Survival in the Book of Job : Desymbolization and Traumatic Experience*, 3.

¹⁴ M. Volf, *Flourishing : Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 51-52.

¹⁵ Mathewson, *Death and Survival in the Book of Job : Desymbolization and Traumatic Experience*, 4.

Testament asserts that life includes a spiritual dimension and that is expected to outlast death. In the Old Testament, when people die, they go to a region described as the realm of the dead or Sheol. Various descriptors have been used to describe the condition of Sheol. Psalm 94:17 calls it the place where one dwells in “in the silence of death.” Job 26:6 regards it as not beyond God’s presence, and that “the realm of the dead is naked before God.” Unlike some ancient near eastern religions which suggest that the soul of the dead will return immediately to the divine, Sheol carries no such notion that the dead returns to God, but does regard it as signifying the termination of one’s relationship with God. Hezekiah, king of Judah, says in Isaiah 38:18, “for the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.” In addition, Psalm 115:15 puts it that “it is not the dead who praise the Lord.” So what happens to the dead after Sheol? For that, we have to turn to the New Testament.

NEW TESTAMENT ATTITUDES TO DEATH

As discussed in the section on death, the Christian view is that it is a consequence of sin. While the Old Testament sees death as inevitable and leading to Sheol, the unique contribution of the New Testament, in contrast, is that death should now be understood through the person and work of Jesus Christ, in particular in his encounter with death on the cross and his subsequent victory through resurrection. In the New Testament, God and death are depicted as opponents such that ultimately they cannot co-exist, just as God and sin cannot co-exist. The death of death itself is dealt with in the death of the Messiah, the chosen one, i.e., Jesus Christ. One might say that what the New Testament discloses about death is that it can only be seen through the death of Christ, and likewise, the resurrection of the individual should only be seen through the lens of the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection hope that believers share and proclaim is because in Christ, the frontier line between time and eternity has been overcome in his resurrection.

Undoubtedly, Jesus’ resurrection is one of the most startling claims of the Christian faith and has been questioned, debated and challenged throughout the centuries. This essay does not attempt to answer all these questions. The proper field of study that addresses them is the field of Christian Apologetics. Suffice it to note that the death and resurrection of Christ is one of the central tenets of the faith without which it cannot be properly called Christian. This is especially when one notes the history of the Christian church has always acknowledged this assertion, either through statements of faith such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed and also personal testimonies of faith and examples of martyrdom. Hence, for the rest of this paper, the death and resurrection of Christ will be presupposed.

One of the critical differences between the Old and New Testaments’ view of death is the latter asserts that the coming of Christ has brought about a transformation of one’s understanding of life and death. While Isaiah says that the living can praise God

while the dead cannot, the apostle Paul now says that Christ will be honoured in him whether in life or death. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21). The theologian Gary A. Anderson has reasoned that this transformation of the Old Testament attitudes towards death in the New lies in the belief that the death of Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for sin which was man’s rebellion and caused death to enter into the human sphere of life.¹⁶ The Swedish theologian, Gustav Aulén death also employs the concept of Christ as Victor over the forces of sin and death as a metaphor for salvation.¹⁷ Based on the victory of Christ over death on the cross, henceforth the meaning of life and death needs to be redefined by him who as Lord of life itself also becomes Lord of the living.

We also find some continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament especially about the sovereignty of God over life. While the ability to overcome and vanquish death is the main contributing idea of the New Testament to the theology of death, it does not stop there but reiterates the Old Testament idea that since life belongs to God, all life needs to be lived for God. Because of God’s ultimate victory over death through the death of his Son, the New Testament argues that believers in Christ should consider their lives to be submitted to God through Christ. As Paul puts it in Rom 12:1, Christians should offer themselves “as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God,” which is considered the “true and proper worship” of him, since not even death can separate them from the love of God (Rom 8:39).

At the same time, Paul took special care to dispel any misunderstanding that this hope for the future with God should lead to the complete relativization of this life on earth. On the one hand, Paul does seem to regard death as a preferable state since it will allow him to be united with Christ. As he famously states in Phil 1:21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” This gain that he notes of is due to his conviction that death will allow him to meet Christ immediately which is a preferable situation than anything this life can offer. On the other hand, Paul strenuously avoids the logical conclusion of such a deduction—that Christians should hope for death sooner than later—because he recognizes that being saved means a new life has already taken place, a life that he describes as “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal 2:20) For Paul, the lives lived through our human bodies must be allowed to take its course. At the same time, since our physical bodies are subject to death and decomposition, they are not suited to a spiritual and heavenly existence. That is why, as Gordon Fee noted, the living and the dead “must have transformed bodies to enter their final, heavenly existence.”¹⁸

¹⁶ G. A. Anderson, *Sin : A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 9.

¹⁷ G. Aulén, *Christus Victor : An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: S.P.C.K., 1970).

¹⁸ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987), 802.

Therefore, for the Christian, while death remains the consequence of sin, it is no longer considered the be-all and end-all of existence since the coming of Christ. Even death for a Christian is no longer seen as a punishment for sin given that the penalty for sin has been paid through the death of Christ. This means that the Christian does not fall under the judgment of God (Rom 8:1). In another sense, the Christian may be said to be in a state of dying to sin, such that it would result in the transformation of her life into one that is open to God and his will.

Because the apostle Paul has written the majority of the New Testament books, some biblical scholars have questioned if he may have unwittingly or even deliberately distorted the message of Jesus. As an on-going debate within New Testament scholarship, this is not the forum to adjudicate these claims and counter-arguments. It suffices for us to note that the non-Pauline writings of the New Testament, such as the gospels, also include similar arguments that the apostle has put forth.

According to Peter Bolt, the gospel narrative of Mark was explicitly about Jesus' defeat of death, and this accounted for the remarkable growth of early Christianity in the Greco-Roman world.¹⁹ This is because deadly epidemics and illnesses periodically struck Greco-Roman peoples as part of their daily life.²⁰ Raymond E. Brown in his magisterial survey of the gospels also concludes that Jesus himself understood his death as bringing about salvation for the people.²¹ Margaret King has studied infant mortality rates during Greco-Roman times and concluded it would at least have been 200-300 per 1,000 live births in Rome itself.²² In contrast, this is compared to the ratio of less than 2 in 1,000 infants for Singapore in 2008.²³ Stark who has studied the era of the Romans, has concluded that the Roman city "was a pesthole of infectious disease" and that urban mortality was only substantially reduced in most cities during the twentieth century.²⁴

Apart from Paul's appropriation of the death of Christ to construct a theology of life for Christians, the unknown author of the book of Hebrews also places fundamental importance to his death. For the early church, the death of Jesus was seen as a historical fact of fundamental importance. Scott McKnight noted that for these early believers, the author of the book of Hebrews argued for the end of the Old Testament Temple

¹⁹ P. G. Bolt, *Jesus' Defeat of Death : Persuading Mark's Early Readers*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

²⁰ Bolt, *Jesus' Defeat of Death : Persuading Mark's Early Readers*, 27.

²¹ R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah : From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels. Vol 1* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 25-26.

²² M. King, "Commemoration of Infants on Roman Funerary Inscriptions," in *The Epigraphy of Death : Studies in the History and Society of Greece and Rome*, ed. G. J. Oliver (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 123.

²³ Singapore Department of Statistics, Infant Mortality Rate 1980-2008. See <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/ssnsep09-pg18-19.pdf>

²⁴ R. Stark, "Epidemics, Networks, and the Rise of Christianity " *Semeia* 56(1992): 155

sacrificial system based entirely on the death of Christ which provided the required sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Therefore, the notion that the death of Christ carries meaning only within Pauline writings is unwarranted.

For the Christian church, within its long tradition, various commentators have built upon the New Testament and discussed the possible range of meanings for death. The Latin Church Father, Augustine, has discussed the issue of death at length in several of his works. David Jones has helpfully summarized that Augustine perceived three types of deaths in his writings.²⁵ Firstly there is the death of the body, which results when the soul abandons it. This abandonment, as described above, is seen then as punishment for sin. At the same time, sin also results in the second kind of death, i.e., the death of the soul, which means to be severed relationally from God who is the source of life. Augustine argues that both these happen together, and what he termed as the third kind of death is also what Scripture calls the “second death” (Rev 2:11). This refers to the end when the soul and body are combined, and while the body suffers in torment in hell, the soul suffers through its eternal separation from God.

Among the Greek Fathers, the Cappadocian Bishop, Gregory of Nazianzus, also regarded physical death as not correctly called death in its totality. Instead, he believes the term “death,” ought to be reserved for sin, “for it is the destruction of the soul.”²⁶ The medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas agreed to a distinction between spiritual and physical death and asserted that the human soul continues to exist as an individual after its separation from the body.²⁷ As to its state of being, Aquinas describes it as a form of strange and unhappy half-life; an existence without sensation, imagination, warmth, or colour.”²⁸ Ultimately he agrees with Augustine that hell is the worst kind of punishment for it is interminable and marks the death of the soul in being eternally separated from God.²⁹

To conclude this section, we have observed that the Christian view of life and death in the New Testament is inextricably linked to the life and death of Christ. One could even argue that to understand life, one now has to approach it from the end, i.e., the Christian view of death. While death in generic terms can serve as a means for individuals to gain greater clarity into the meaning of life, the Christ-event means that Christians have a more profound perspective to regarding the value of their lives; i.e., as redeemed by Christ and belonging to him. As Michael Jenkins puts it, the one who is

²⁵ Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, 39-43.

²⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Orations," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II. Translated by C.G. Browne and J.E. Swallow*, eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1989), Oration 18.42.

²⁷ Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, 103.

²⁸ Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, 110.

²⁹ Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, 138.

called to follow Christ as a disciple is the “one who looks death in the face.”³⁰ At the same time, the reality of death also means that disciple has to recognize that she belongs to Christ, and it is in facing of our death that Christ died for us and we die for Jesus. As Jinkins states succinctly, “to witness is to martyr.”³¹

In this light, we note further that in the New Testament, the term “death” does not only refer to physical death but has also been expanded to include figurative meanings for Christian living. This is while it possible in the Bible to affirm the mortality of human person and yet simultaneously to regard some who are alive physically to be considered dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). As Rev 3:1 puts it, among some Christians in the church at Sardis, there are some spiritually weak such that they “have a reputation of being alive, but are dead.”

THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

Thus far, we have explored the Christian view of life and death as explored through the lenses of both the Old and New Testaments. It is appropriate that we conclude our discussion on the theme of hope as expressed in the New Testament teachings. The Christian faith makes the bold claim that the hope of the resurrection ultimately overcomes the loss and pain of death. As the apostle Paul asserts in 1 Cor 15:54, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” Leon Morris has noted how in this text, “the apostle exults in the triumph Christ has won over death itself.”³² Similarly, according to Matthew Levering, Jesus’ resurrection “vindicates God’s justice and inspires the faith, hope, and love that unite the Church in history to Jesus’ passage.”³³

Therefore, death is not the final chapter. The biblical narrative concludes with the message that God has chosen to change the very nature of death so that it leads back to him and life. To effect this transformation, God sent his own Son into the world to be “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3) yet remaining sinless in himself. In this state of humiliation, the Son of God as a mortal man assumed a nature made subject to suffering and ultimately death by man's sin. Matthew Levering has called this “the demise of death,” while the Puritan John Owen calls this “the death of death in the death of Christ” in line with the apostle Paul’s teaching.³⁴

³⁰ M. Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death : Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16.

³¹ Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death : Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context*, 17.

³² L. Morris, *1 Corinthians : An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 226.

³³ M. Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death : Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 42.

³⁴ Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death : Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context*, 18.

The death of Christ was accepted by the Father who raised him from the dead in the power of the Spirit such that death became swallowed up in victory. With complete willingness and love, Jesus Christ freely accepted death in a spirit of loving dedication to the Father's will and transformed it. Death, which has been inaugurated into the life of humanity through disobedience and rejection, is rendered impotent in the submission and love of Christ. It no longer means man's rebellion against God; instead, it is now a pathway into the presence of God through the death of his Son.

Eberhard Jüngel further sharpens this understanding of Christians into a series of questions and answers about the nature of Christian hope. "Does Christian faith really live from the hope in a resurrection of the dead?" he asks. His reply was, "If we are to be more precise, then what we certainly can say is that Christian faith lives from the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ."³⁵ (Italics original) This means that Christians do not merely have a generic hope for the resurrection of the dead, but rather one that is concretely based on faith in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Therefore, our attitude towards death should be determined by our attitude in our encounter with the death of Jesus Christ.³⁶

For Christians, the resurrected life with God is the ultimate hope. Thus, Terence Nichols has pointed out that it is precisely this resurrection hope that sustains Christians from the very beginning; having hope makes all the difference in the face of death.³⁷ In our earthly lives, even the person with the most successes would have encountered heartbreak, disappointment, setbacks, and failures, personally and professionally. Resurrection means there is a greater reality than this life, and that death cannot claim final victory over life. It is for that reason that Paul boldly states, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15:19).

³⁵ Jüngel, *Death : The Riddle and the Mystery*, 38.

³⁶ Jüngel, *Death : The Riddle and the Mystery*, 40.

³⁷ T. L. Nichols, *Death and Afterlife : A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 14.

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