

Death Transcended

When we who are Christians wrestle with questions about evil and suffering, and in particular illness and death, it is important that we do not too hastily appeal to what used to be called "the hereafter." We struggle *here*, and much of the comfort and perspective the Bible offers has little to do with any appeal to the End. It would be tragic if all such comfort and perspective were lost because we fled immediately in our thought to "the hereafter."

Nevertheless, the Bible does on occasion encourage us to look at illness, bereavement, and death from the perspective of the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. The Bible does not encourage us to suppress our grief when loved ones die, but it does insist that we do not "grieve like the rest, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).

Anyone who has attended or officiated at many funerals knows the difference. I cannot describe the blank despair written large on the face and bearing of those who attend funerals where there is no gospel hope. In some traditions, the despair is magnified by unending wails and laments of mourners. But in decisively Christian funerals, where both the person who has died and those left behind to mourn know the Lord God in personal faith, the atmosphere is palpably different. The tears are still there; the grief is no less profound; the sense of personal loss may be devastating. But somehow, there is no grim despair. Indeed, some of the tears are shed because of the immensely moving impact of simple Christian witness standing up unbowed before the monstrous regimen of death. We grieve, but not "like the rest, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thess. 4:13-14).

Our ultimate hope is a new heaven and a new earth, where "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 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. 21:3-4).

Because death, as we have seen, is fundamentally God's imposed limitation on human arrogance, his stern "thus far, and no farther," the deepest terror of death is being cut off from him forever. But where there is reconciliation with God, where faith in the Son of God and his death on the cross has brought a man or woman into vital union with the living God himself, death no longer holds all its old threats. Death has not yet been abolished, but it has been stripped of its power. "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56); but where sin has been atoned for, and the curse of the law set aside by one

who died in our place, we respond, "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).

"Hence the real point of death is no longer parting from, but home-going to. As death is deprived of its sting and poison, as it is no longer a personal fulfillment of God's wrath, it is only a biological mask that has no bearing on fellowship with the risen Lord."⁷ Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in him will live, even though he dies (John 11:25).

This truth must shape not only our approach to bereavement, but our assessment of illness and of our own approaching death. The more that a Christian lives in the consciousness of God's presence here, the easier it is to anticipate the unqualified delight that will be experienced in God's presence there.

In the past two or three years I have had to deal with several people with terminal illnesses who have been actively discouraged from thinking about death by well-intentioned but poorly informed brothers and sisters who try to deflect them from thinking along these lines. These would-be comforters try to distract them, or hold out the constant hope of healing, or keep them so occupied with matters in this world that they have neither the time nor the energy to think about the next world. They succeed only in robbing their loved ones of the enormous comforts of the gospel. The sad fact is that far too few Christians and Christian churches in the Western world are actively engaged in helping believers to die well. Distractions are a poor substitute for the comforts only Jesus can give, for the comforts that only gospel comforts can secure.

These gospel perspectives provide comfort not only to those who are dying, but to those who are bereaved. When we are bereaved, even bereaved of a young child, a close friend, a lifelong spouse, our sorrow turns, rightly, on *our* loss and loneliness, on the wrenching separation, on the frustration of hopes and plans, on our personal emptiness. But we do not sorrow because we think the loved one has disappeared into nothingness, or turned up in purgatory, or been absorbed into cosmic consciousness.

In September 1542, Magdalene, one of the daughters of Martin Luther, lay dying, her father weeping at her side. He asked her, "Magdalene, my dear little daughter, would you like to stay here with your father, or would you willingly go to your Father yonder?" Magdalene answered, "Darling father, as God wills." Luther wept, holding his daughter in his arms, praying that God might free her, and she died. As she was laid in her coffin, Martin Luther declared, "Darling Lena, you will rise and shine like a star, yea like the sun. . . I am happy in spirit, but the flesh

7. Thielcke, *Living with Death*, 161.

is sorrowful and will not be content, the parting grieves me beyond measure. . . . I have sent a saint to heaven."⁸

We do not have to go so far back in the pages of history. I could tell you of the funeral service of a young woman, just twenty-three, herself the daughter of missionaries and already deeply committed to serving the Lord the same way. I could tell you of the memorial service of a pastor's wife who died suddenly in middle age, leaving her family utterly disoriented and distraught, but still able to sing:

My hope is in the Lord,
Who gave himself for me;

For me, he died; for me he lives;
And everlasting life and light he freely gives.

In fact, we begin to wonder if some pain and sorrow in this life is not used in God's providential hand to make us homesick for heaven, to detach us from this world, to prepare us for heaven, to draw our attention to himself and away from the world of merely physical things. In short, we begin to look at all of life's experiences, good and ill, from the vantage of the End.

But that is the topic of the next chapter.

Questions for Further Study

1. How are illness and death related to sin? List as many different connections as possible, giving biblical examples.
2. Why is death such a "taboo" subject of conversation for many Western Christians?
3. For a Christian, what things are worse than death?
4. Give illustrations of how people who have suffered have become richer, more compassionate, helping people?
5. What is needed to ensure that experiences of illness, suffering, and bereavement make us better people, not bitter people?
6. Does God owe us healing?
7. Is the consciousness of God's presence a growing delight for you, potentially of great importance in times of suffering? If not, why not?
8. Where is your "home"? In what ways do you live in the light of the new heaven and the new earth? What comfort does this prospect offer?

8. Cited in E. G. Rupp and B. Drewery, eds., *Martin Luther* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), 162.

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From the Vantage of the End

Christians remember that the Jesus who testifies to the contents of the book of Revelation promises, "Yes, I am coming soon," and the church replies, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). Christians live in the light of the End. Much of what we believe and much of the suffering we are prepared to endure derive their meaning from the prospect of vindication and resurrection. Without that prospect, without the reality that that prospect anticipates, Christianity does not make much sense, and neither do major planks in any Christian perspective on evil and suffering. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others" (1 Cor. 15:19).

The Kingdom Is Here! The Kingdom Is Coming!

Throughout the centuries of the church, it has proved difficult for many groups of believers to get the balance right between these two complementary truths: there is a sense in which the kingdom of God is here already, and there is a sense in which the kingdom has not yet come. Both facets of the truth have a bearing on how Christians should look at evil and suffering, though the emphasis in this chapter will be on the contribution made by the latter.

Perhaps I should begin by rapidly surveying the evidence. In various ways the Jews had looked forward for a long time to the coming king-