

Perspectives on Death in the New Testament

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"To lose a loved one is a natural part of living."¹

"The powers of death have done their worst,

But Christ their legions hath dispursed. . .

From death's dread sting thy servants free, . . ."²

Here are two striking, contrasting views of death. On the one hand, to be human is to be limited by, among other things, death; but on the other hand, death is the final and greatest enemy. There is nothing "natural" about it. Doubtless in our own ministries we have struggled with the ambiguity of death. "Death was a merciful friend, it brought the pain to an end." "Death is an intruder, it has destroyed everything. How are we going to survive now that she's gone?" Is death natural or is it the result of human sin, of some great, terrible distortion of human existence? The answer to that perplexing issue ought not to be shaped by the either/or stance of the question. The answer is that death is both and more. Death not only refers to the termination of bodily functions, it may function as a symbol of a way of living that fails to produce fulfillment, a sense of completion, or an obedient relationship to God. The evaluation made of death varies from situation to situation. It may function positively or negatively.

In each and every case Biblical resources can be brought to bear on the situation, but only if we are sensitive to the nuances with which death is treated in the Bible. There are, in fact, multiple views of death in both Testaments. That such is the case we take for granted with regard to the Old Testament. But the New Testament, too? Yes. There are multiple views of death in the New Testament. For Paul, it is the enemy *par excellence* (1 Cor. 15:54-57). And yet Jesus describes it as sleep (Mk 5:39), an idea which draws the laughter of ridicule. If this thesis is correct, then our use of New Testament texts requires exegetical precision lest we do violence to both the text and the situation in which we are attempting to speak a word.

The subject of death is treated in a multiplicity of contexts in the New Testament. There are nuances of meaning which we must not overlook nor hasten to subsume under some, one overarching concept, i.e. Paul's concept of death as *the* problem of human existence. That is not *the* New Testament perspective, as we shall attempt to demonstrate below. The richness of meaning exposed by such a process can only enrich our understanding of death itself, as symbol, power, or physical termination, and can lead us deeper into the resourcefulness of the New Testament in coping with and responding to the phenomenon.

TWO METHODOLOGICAL POINTS

First, a word about critical presuppositions is necessary. We must respect the nature of the New Testament data which is of two types. There are explicit statements about death, assertions that explore the relationship between death and the good news of the gospel at a number of levels. A majority of these are found in the letters of Paul. Either the topic of death is the focus of attention or it plays a more limited but critical role in the development of a theological or christological point (i.e. I Cor. 15:21,22). There are texts which contain an implicit view of death, an assumption unstated, but upon which the text builds. A number of texts in the synoptic gospels fall in this category, (i.e. in Luke 23:43 the emphasis falls upon the forgiveness of sins, but a view of death is assumed).³

Second, there is no unitary Jewish view of death commonly accepted and assumed in the first century C.E. That there is such a unified view is the faulty methodological assumption that lies behind the work of both Oscar Cullmann⁴ and Rudolph Bultmann.⁵ The latter asserts that there is no attempt in the New Testament to interpret death as a natural process and thus to neutralize it. Rather, death is set in total opposition to life. Such a position does justice to the Pauline view, but not to the other voices in the New Testament. The intertestamental period provided the New Testament with a number of articulated views of death, all basically Jewish. The wide spectrum of these views represents, among others, the Old Testament views adapted and modified to fit a multitude of contexts.⁶ The New Testament in turn represents but a selection among many such possibilities. To a description of those views and perspectives we now turn.

PAUL

For Paul death is the enemy, and not a part of the creator's plan. As such it poses the major problem that the gospel addresses. According to Romans 5:12ff death is an intrusion, the result of human sin. As a consequence of and a punishment for sin, every created thing dies. Thus, death is portrayed a power which destroys everything and which has placed its mark upon life in this world. 1 Cor. 15 proclaims the defeat of the tyrant death by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. What God created and pronounced good will be redeemed from the bondage of death (1 Cor. 15:22). That includes not only human beings but the creation itself (Rom. 8:19-22). Death, physical death, has to be faced by all, but it has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:54ff). Thus, in Phil. 1:21-24 Paul can accept death but only because it has been conquered and because it leads into the full presence of Christ, transcending the transitory character of this life. However, Paul's desire to die is checked by the opportunities for obedience and service in the present. The good news of the gospel is that those who are bound by death are not beyond the love and grace of God. The ultimacy of death is destroyed for those who through faith participate in the death of Christ.

Why is death such a problem for Paul? Because the mere existence of

death suggests that the creator created a flawed world. Why would God create life and yet make it subject to death?⁷ Paul drawing on the story of the fall of humanity answers that the creator did not so create. Human beings are responsible through sin for death flawing God's good creation (Rom. 5:18-19, 8:19-22). Is death the will of God? Paul answers with an unequivocal, No! God wills life; and what God created and called good, God will redeem. Hence, in Col. 1:18 a Pauline disciple can call Christ "the firstborn from the dead."

This confidence in God's power to conquer the power of death and to create life in the midst of death is the source of much of Paul's optimism. It is an optimism about the progress of the gospel and the redemption of creation and of Israel itself, and that in spite of much obstinancy (Rom. 11:26).

JOHN

Unlike Paul, death is not a fundamental problem in the gospel of John. Death becomes little more than a characteristic style of life without God, a style of life overcome by the gospel. Responding to the gospel enables the believer to experience the quality of eternal life here and now. The impact of death is minimal. The basic difficulty of human existence is not that human beings die, but that they may not experience the present reality of eternal life. What is of decisive importance is the quality of the Christian's existence here and now.⁸ To embrace the gospel is to pass from death to life, (John 3:36; 5:24).

Jesus' death is a conscious, studied deed by means of which eternal life becomes a possibility for his disciples (10:17-18; 12:23-24).⁹ And the love revealed in that event becomes a model which shapes our own new existence (1 John 3:14-18). In this context verses 23-27 of chapter 11 which describe Jesus' conversation with Martha about the resurrection assume primary importance. Jesus tells Martha that her "brother will rise again." She assumes that he is referring to the events of the end of time. "I know he will rise in the resurrection at the last day." What is of decisive significance is not what will happen then, but what is possible in the present. As the resurrection and the life, Jesus brings life out of death not in some future time, but now. "I am the resurrection and the life . . . whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (11:25-26) In John's "realized eschatology" physical death is not to be feared. As a symbol of life with God, it is neutralized in the present life, a life shaped by the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ (6:50). John's perspective draws upon those traditions in the Old Testament which emphasize the quality of life in the present not the fact that life ends.

THE SYNOPTIC TRADITION

Interpreting the synoptic perspectives on death is complicated both by the diversity of the materials found in the gospels and by the involved history of the materials themselves—the history of tradition. These materials have their roots in the ministry of Jesus, have been shaped in and used by the early

church, and utilized by the evangelists to form a carefully constructed theological and literary unity—a gospel. Such a careful analysis of the material is beyond the scope of this article. However, some generalizations about the understanding of death may be made in two areas: Jesus' teaching as it is recorded in gospels and his own death.

What is striking about Jesus' teaching is the relative paucity of references to death. What is not said is significant. Death is not a major problem for human beings. It is not the most significant factor in our present existence nor is it a hinderance to faith in God.¹⁰ Death of the body is not to be feared, only God is to be feared (Mt. 10:28). Ultimate allegiance is owed to God, and to nothing else, even if such commitment leads to death (Mk. 8:35). The willingness to endure death is the supreme test of faith.

The primary focus of Jesus' teaching is the kingdom of God, the rule of God over all he has created. The references to death function as sanctions in the proclamation of the kingdom. Death is the limiting factor in our existence. Present life is not endless, and in view of the fact that all human beings die, references to death underscore the necessity of a decision for the kingdom now. The thought of death prompts us to action. Luke 13:1-5 is crucial in this regard. The text severs the assumed connection between sin and death. Death is not always to be construed as a punishment for sin. Verse five counsels the use of such poignant experiences as the occasion for reflection upon our own transitoriness and for repentance.¹¹ What is of primary importance is decision now with regard to the kingdom especially in light of the fact that death comes to all.

Matthew 16:28 and par. and Luke 20:36 assume that death will be done away with. But it is not suggested that death is evil. Marriage, which is clearly good, will also be done away with in the future, complete reign of God (Lk. 20:34-36 and par.) Ultimately death has no place in the Kingdom of God. It is overcome by resurrection from the dead which is accomplished by the power of God who is the God of the living (Mk. 12:26-27). In the present, death and the fear of death are neutralized through the actualization of God's rule in human life.

When we turn to Jesus' death as it is portrayed in the synoptic gospels we find two divergent presentations. On the one hand Jesus resolutely moves toward his death: he predicts his own death (Mk. 8:31 *et al*) and is clearly in control of the situation, a control dramatically portrayed through his foreknowledge of events (Mk. 11:1-4; 14:12-15, 29-31). Death is accepted. But on the other hand, in Gethsemane Jesus is gripped by the emotional fear of death (Mk. 14:33, 36, 37, compare also Heb. 5:7), and prays that, if possible, he not endure it. There is no vast inconsistency here. Jesus remained true to the essence of his teaching: while death does arouse the emotion of fear that fear can be overcome by the fear (awe, ultimate regard for) of God,¹² which is precisely what is described as happening with that great "nevertheless" in Gethsemane.

A FINAL WORD

The roots of the multiple views we have described above is clearly the Old

Testament itself which does not present one view of death. Death can be described as part of God the creator's design for human beings (Gen. 3:19, 22; 2 Sam. 14:14). Death limits and therefore enhances and augments life (Ps. 90:12). Not even death can place a human being outside the limits of God's love and power (Ps. 239:7ff). Death can also be described as punishment for sin and certainly not a part of God's plan for his creation.

Subsequent refinements and developments of the Old Testament views in the intertestamental period increased the options. This wealth of interpretation is reflected to a limited degree in the New Testament as we have attempted to demonstrate above.

Such diversity is not a liability, it is an asset. But the benefits can be needlessly sacrificed if we do not rigorously practice exegetical precision and examine the presuppositions which shape our hermeneutical practice. Only so will these rich and diverse perspectives on death shape our preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Only so will these resources be made available to the Christian community.

¹ Grandpa Walton (Will Geer) on the television series "The Waltons."

² "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done," No. 203 in *The Hymnbook*.

³ L. E. Keck, "New Testament Views of Death," in *Perspectives on Death*, ed., Liston Mills (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), p. 33.

⁴ "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead," in *Immortality and Resurrection*, ed., Krister Stendahl (New York: Macmillan, paperback, 1965), pp. 9-53. There is a brief, good critique of the major presupposition behind the essay in George W. E. Nickelsburg, Jr., *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1972), pp. 177-180.

⁵ "Thanatos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 14ff.

⁶ Nickelsburg, *op. cit.*

⁷ Keck, *op. cit.*, pp. 75, 76.

⁸ Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr., *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 94.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁰ Keck, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹¹ Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹² Keck, *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 44.