

IN LIFE AND IN DEATH God's Omnipresence Explored in Dying

Heidelberg Catechism, #1:

Leader: *What is your only comfort in life and death?*

Congregation: *That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully paid for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; moreover, that all things must work together for my salvation, and by His Holy Spirit, Christ also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live for Him.*

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in the grave, you are there!...

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you....

in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

Psa. 139:7-8, 11-12, 16

How then would knowing God's presence in death change the way we approach death?

EMBRACING DEATH IN A DEATH DENYING CULTURE

What are some ways that we live in denial of death?

What are some ways we even deny death in the rituals of dying?

At a secularized funeral, mourners are comforted by thinking that the deceased enjoyed his or her days on earth...many rites of passage deeply rooted in the life of Christian community are being observed in secular settings, their content stripped of all reference to God and even the passing from this life to the next. These contemporary tendencies have moved us a long way from the historical roots of Christian funerary practices which understood that the passing from this world to the next was a journey—begun in baptism and strengthened through the Eucharist—where we left behind the old self and became a new creation in Christ. Just as those who accompanied the newly baptized on their journey were reminded and renewed in their own commitment as followers of Christ, so too, mourners who participate in the rites for the dead were challenged to assess the living of their own baptismal vows in light of our common mortality and God's faithful love.

THE NEED TO EMBRACE THE SACRED "RITE OF PASSAGE":

While we mourn the earthly separation of loved ones, we need to embrace the sacred "rite of passage" that carries with it many great lessons both in life and in death as especially related to our union with God in Christ. Notice in two instances how scripture treats death, as both a typological "curse" but one that is also a necessary "discipline" unto eternal life- God IS present in both life and in death!

- Embrace the Lessons of Sorrow

- **Psalm 39:4-13** *Lord, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state is but vapor. Surely every man walks about like a shadow; surely they busy themselves in vain; he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them. And now, Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in You!*
- **1 Peter 1:24-25** *"All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." That word is the good news that was announced to you.*

- Embrace the Joy of Mourning: (the Biblically sanctioned "days of mourning" and "weeping")

- **John 11:35**
- **Gen. 23:2** And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.
- **Gen. 37:34** Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. Jer. 16:7 No one shall break bread for the mourner, to offer comfort for the dead; nor shall anyone give them the cup of consolation to drink for their fathers or their mothers.
- **1Th.4:13ff**

"The Lesson taught in this second sorrow (speaking of the death of his second child) is the special grace reserved for a dying hour; which will subdue the fears of the most timid and enable them to depart in peace, if not in triumph. Many reasons can be assigned for this dread of death, styled by the Apostle "the last enemy." There is the natural instinct of life, which we share with the beasts of the field; a wholesome protection against the madness of despair which so often rushes its victim on to the guilt of suicide. There is, again, the awfulness of death as the penalty of the broken law. How unnatural the separation of the soul and body, is shown when the spirit lingers in its tenement of clay and escapes reluctantly at last with the gurgling breath. It is possible, again, to shake off the ties of life from which the soul has through the years been drawing the sweetness of earthly bliss, and not feel the pain?... Aggregate all these terrors in one single conception, and the wonder will be, not that death is an object of dread, but that Christian hope should be strong enough to overcome it at the last. The history just recited (his daughters death) is only one of many, going to show that with the most sensitive and shrinking of mortals this fear is quelled at the moment of passing into the presence of our King. It is a grace reserved for this precise moment guaranteed only then as the experience which is needed; and is possibly connected with the last acts of the Holy Ghost in completing the believer's sanctification.

B.M. Palmer, *Lessons of Sorrow* p.49-50

- Embrace the Hope of Resurrection and Eternal Full Sensory Heaven

- John 11:1-44
- John 14:1-7
- **1Pet. 1:3-5** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed*
- **Isaiah 25:6-10**
- **2Cor. 5:1** For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ...4 For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. ...8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

- WCF f32.2: *The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.*

E.g. The Assembly understood the scriptures to teach that salvation is not *from* the body but *including* the body such that the ultimate form of salvation is when the soul and body are reunited after the return of Christ. Thus the doctrine of “resurrection! And by “resurrection” it is meant the *same* body restored, not a different body. In other words, the key thing to observe here is the continuity between our body in this world and the next, even as this is very significant in terms of the way we think about salvation and the cosmos!

- Continuity:
Section 1--"waiting their *full* redemption of their bodies"
Section 2-- "last day... shall not die... raised up in the *selfsame* bodies"
- Discontinuity:
Section 2--"shall not die, but be changed"

1Cor. 15:42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

Heaven is a state of delightful activity. Every faculty and every affection will find appropriate exercise... Heaven is full of light; all darkness and doubt are absent. Knowledge will be clear, and will possess a transforming efficacy; still, knowledge in heaven will be progressive; the pleasure will partly consist of ever learning something unknown before. Heaven is a region of perfect love; all the heart and mind and strength will be exerted in love... Christ is the centre of attraction in heaven. From him radiate the rays of divine glory which enliven, attract, and beautify all the innumerable host of worshippers. Love in heaven is pure, perfect and reciprocal.... Heaven is a place of peace-- sweet peace and uninterrupted harmony; all disturbing elements will be left behind... Heaven is a place of song; high affections are expressed in celestial music. Oh how elevating, how delightful the melodies! Heaven is an unchanging state; or all change is advancement in knowledge, in dignity, in happiness.

Archibald Alexander

THE DYING EXPERIENCE

Each person approaches death in their own way, bringing to this last experience their own uniqueness. What is listed here is simply a guideline, a road map. Like any map, there are many roads arriving at the same destination, many ways to enter the same city. For some, it will take months to separate from their physical body, for others, only minutes. Death is as unique as the individual who is experiencing it. That being said, in general terms:

One to three months prior to death:

Withdrawal

- As the knowledge that “yes, I am dying” becomes real, a person begins to withdraw from the world around them. This is the beginning of separation, first from the world – no more interest in newspapers or television then from people – no more neighbors visiting: “Tell Aunt Jessie I don’t feel like company today,” and finally from the children, grandchildren and perhaps even those persons most loved.
- This processing of one’s life is usually done with the eyes closed, so sleep increases. This appears to be just sleep but know that important work is going on inside on a level of which “outsiders” aren’t aware.
- With this withdrawal comes less of a need to communicate with others.

Food

- When a body is preparing to die, it is perfectly natural that eating should stop. This is one of the hardest concepts for a family to accept.
- There is a gradual decrease in eating habits. Nothing tastes good.
- It is okay not to eat. A different kind of energy is needed now. A spiritual energy, not a physical one, will sustain from here on.

One to two weeks prior to death:

Disorientation

- A person can’t seem to keep their eyes open. They can, however, be awakened from that sleep. There is literally one foot in each world. A person often becomes confused, talking to people, and about places and events that are unknown to others.
- Focus is changing from this world to the next; they are losing their grounding to earth.

Physical Changes

- There are beginning changes that show the physical body is losing its ability to maintain itself.
- The **blood pressure** often lowers.
- The **body temperature** fluctuates between fever and cold.
- There is **increased perspiration**, often with clamminess.
- The **skin color** changes: flushed with the fever, bluish with the cold.
- **Breathing changes** also occur. Respiration may increase from a normal sixteen to twenty, to upward of forty or fifty breaths every minute, or decrease to nine or even six breaths a minute.

One to two days, to hours prior to death:*

- Sometimes there is a **surge of energy**. A person may talk clearly and alertly when before, there had been disorientation. A favorite meal might be asked for and eaten when nothing had been eaten for days. A person might sit in the living room with relatives and

visit when they hadn't wanted to be with anyone for quite a while. The spiritual energy for transition from this world to the next has arrived and it is used for a time of physical expression before moving on. The surge of energy is not always as noticeable as the above examples, but in hindsight, it can usually be recognized.

- The **one to two weeks' signs** that were present earlier become more intense as death approaches.
- **Restlessness** can further increase due to lack of oxygen in the blood.
- The **breathing patterns** become slower and more irregular.
- **Congestion** can be very loud.
- The **eyes** may be open or semi-open but not seeing. There is a glassy look to them, often tearing.
- The **hands and feet** now become purplish.
- Generally, a person becomes **non-responsive** (unable to respond to their environment) sometime prior to death.

***Somewhere during this period, if not before, is when the Christian ritual of "last rites" should be administered.**

- By a minister or the closest person to being the spiritual head of household.
- A frank "... you know you are dying don't you" kind of conversation.
 - ***Exploration of preparedness both in terms of what is being left behind and what lies ahead***

Typically, there is a transcending grace that allows a person to not only embrace death, but to actually be ready for it. It is a grace and perspective that alludes the living, which is why we need to be around the dying more to see it and to therefore help us to not fear death so much. We will get it only when we need it! Before we are called to die, we can't fathom this grace honestly, unless we have seen it. But with the calling comes the dying grace.

Possible Fear of what is left behind: There is also at times a last resistance, usually aimed at concern for what is somehow viewed as left undone behind. How we approach death is partly going to depend upon our fear of life that is behind us, Unexpressed fear or unfinished business are two big factors in determining how much resistance we put into meeting death. *Is there anything you worry about as you prepare to leave this life for the next?*

Possible anxiety/questions about what lies ahead: This is a time to reaffirm the promises of the gospel- to remind a person that the passage

from this life to the next by faith in Christ is NOT a passage from life in Christ, but only in how we experience the life of Christ—at once mediated through people and means of grace on earth, to immediate and in anticipation of our bodily and social reunions.

Phil. 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. 24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

- **Confession Sin, Absolution and Confession of Faith Reaffirmed**
- **Benediction**
- The separation becomes complete when breathing stops. The owner is no longer in need of a heavy, nonfunctioning vehicle. They have entered a new city, a new life.

O what a serious thing is it to die! It is a passage out of the swift river of time, into the boundless and bottomless ocean of eternity. They that did see the continual revolutions of days and nights, passing away one after another, will then be fixed in the perpetual NOW... Then how surprisingly glorious will heaven be to believers! For a soul to be now here in the body, conversing with people, living among sensible objects, and within a few moments to be with the Lord-- this hour on earth, the next in heaven, this moment viewing this world, the next among an innumerable company of angels and beloved ones now made perfect! O what a change is this. What, but wink and see God! To be lifted from a bed of sickness to a throne of glory! To leave a sinful, troublesome world, a sick and pained body, and be in a moment perfectly cured, and feel Yourself perfectly well, and free from all troubles and despair! John Flavel

AFTER DEATH:

The focus here is on the living and the grieving process. What is key here is

- 1) We need to respect that everyone grieves uniquely and personally.
- 2) What we all need is the closure of saying “good-bye” coupled with the encouragement of “I’ll see you later.”
- 3) Commonly known as the five stages of grief, was first introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*
 - Denial
 - Anger
 - Bargaining
 - Depression
 - Acceptance

4) The Importance of Christian Grieving And Embrace **1Th.4:13ff**

FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE?

Funerals and memorial services are both Christian services of worship in which a deceased member of the church is commended to God's eternal care. In a funeral, the body of the deceased is physically present during the service, while in a memorial service it is not. The theological perspective the physical presence of the body affirms a belief in bodily resurrection as to reaffirm the sacredness of "body" and "Spirit". It also serves as a reminder that as God's creatures we pass from "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." However, instances wherein the body is not available (perhaps being buried in another city), a memorial service is suitable.

BURIAL OR CREMATION?

In this matter there are clear differences among various strands of the Christian tradition, albeit in my opinion much ado about nothing. Some, especially those whose doctrines and teachings emphasize bodily resurrection, call for burial in all but the most unusual circumstances (while not limiting God's ability to accomplish bodily resurrection skeletal remains). Others, citing environmental stewardship among other concerns, hold a preference for cremation, and perhaps also motivated by the desire to more immediately honor "dust to dust, ashes to ashes." The key is to consider three things:

- 1) Whatever practice is chosen, there must be a respect for the body as expressed most appropriately through a Christian committal service, whether performed by minister or family members perhaps with as service provided by minister. We must never treat the "body" as anything less than as a sacred aspect of a person that will be restored, not destroyed, through the resurrection of the dead.
- 2) An associated need is for surviving family and friends to have a sense of "place" they can visit to commemorate the deceased: to pray, to remember, to give thanks. Regardless of burial or cremation, the issues of "place" should be considered as potentially important, even if in a place that is not readily available to the deceased family, but through memory remains meaningful.
- 3) And regardless, the less common practice of placing the ashes of the deceased in a container on the mantle or similar site is more problematic, suggesting an unhealthy desire to cling to the departed.

C.f. Attached:

Sample Funeral Service

CONCLUSION;

What is all of our religion ultimately all about anyway? What is the great story of redemption that is told in the Bible? How does it start? How does it end?

- Read Gen.2:8- 17.... Rev. 22:1-5,14, 19
- Note then the perspective of Heb. 11:13
- Notice also the emphasis upon "eternal life" in the gospel of John (3:3, 15-16; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39, 6:27, 40, 47, 54; 6:68, 10:28, 12:50, 17:2)