

Becky Bereans – Death and Resurrection – Session 1 - Death

Session 1 – Death

Before we launch into our discussion of this sobering topic, let's remind ourselves of the **good** news...

Psalm 103 [ESV]

Of David.

*¹Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!*

*²Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
³who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
⁴who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
⁵who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

*⁶The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

*⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.*

*⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

*⁹He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.*

*¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

*¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

*¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

*¹³As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*

*¹⁴For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.*

*¹⁵As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

*¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.*

*¹⁷But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,*

*¹⁸to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.*

*¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.*

*²⁰Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!*

*²¹Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!*

*²²Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!*

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The Certainty of Death

All of us live most of our lives with the knowledge of the certain death that awaits us. At any time out of a total population of N people who have ever lived, the probability of death is...

$$N - \frac{2}{N}$$

* – The 2 in this equation represents Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11).

As a coping mechanism, mankind has devoted an entire genre of jokes, art, and literature to the subject. In his book The Weight of Glory (1949), Christian author C.S. Lewis quipped, "...100 per cent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased."

In art and literature, death is often represented as a dark figure – “the grim reaper” – who carries a scythe used to cut down the living. In Charles Dickens’ story “A Christmas Carol,” death is represented as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. W. Somerset Maugham told this story about death’s inevitability.

"The Appointment in Samarra"

as retold by W. Somerset Maugham [1933]

There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, "Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Now lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me." The merchant lent him his horse. The servant mounted it, he dug his spurs in its flanks, and as fast as the horse could gallop, he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace, and he saw me [Death] standing in the crowd. He came to me and said, "Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?" "That was not a threatening gesture," I said, "it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

All of us become distinctly aware of our impending “appointment in Samarra” sometime in our early childhood. In 2006, while I was on R&R from Iraq, I met Sue and some of our family in Italy. One afternoon as we were enjoying a late lunch, my then 6-year-old nephew Alex suddenly started hysterically wailing and sobbing. My poor mother who had been sitting next to him at lunch had innocently asked him, “Will you remember this day after I’m gone?” In that instant, Alex suddenly realized in the depth of his heart the reality of his grandma’s mortality, and by extension his own mortality and the mortality of all his loved ones. This story is quite intriguing to me, since at the time Alex was a cancer survivor who had already come face-to-face with his own mortality through three devastating years of chemotherapy treatments. Somehow, he had pushed his way through that reality with an intellectual and stoic understanding of what he had faced, but without internalizing the continual threat of death in the depths of his gut.

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Speaking for myself as a member of the “duck and cover” generation, the imminent threat of global thermonuclear war was something I dwelt on almost daily throughout my childhood. Oddly, I never even thought twice about getting into a car with no seatbelts, climbing up into a tree to recover a lost balsa wood glider, goading my little friend to push me faster in my little red wagon filled with broken ceramic tile (a little foolishness that very nearly *did* cost me my life), wandering through desert washes while it was raining heavily in the surrounding mountains, or any of the many other day-to-day childhood activities that could have instantly killed me. Somehow, the prospect of a nuclear holocaust seemed to me the clearest present danger to my young life. As with the tragic day we first realized that Santa Claus is only a fanciful myth, if we cast our minds back to childhood and probe into our early memories, all of us can recall that moment when we first realized – as Alex did that day in Italy – the certainty of our own deaths.

Naturally, God’s Word has a great deal to say about death.

*¹“Man who is born of a woman
is few of days and full of trouble.
²He comes out like a flower and withers;
he flees like a shadow and continues not.”* Job 14:1-2 [ESV]

The Cause of Death

There are two simple reasons why death is part of life...

1. God’s love and holiness.
2. Makind’s pride.

Wait. **What?!** Let me explain.

The Bible attests that God created mankind to love, honor, and worship Him.

*He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8 [ESV]

Yet even God – the embodiment of love itself – **cannot** force someone to love someone else. We must choose to love someone, and then we must act on that choice by showing our devotion to them in such a manner that they can recognize and be assured of our love for them. Furthermore, God knows that in order for us to choose to love, honor, and worship Him, there must be an alternative. God’s loving gift of free will to us would be meaningless if we had no other options. Thus, when God created our world, He also created our great enemy – the embodiment of all that is evil. Even in this, God showed His love and holiness. God did not create Lucifer in his current fallen state. In his pride, Lucifer rebelled against God, and became our enemy satan – the current prince of this Earth.

NOTE – This begs the question whether Lucifer ever actually had free will himself or was merely God’s puppet in the vast spectacle of creation. That question – in turn – lies at the heart of the centuries-long debate over free will versus pre-determination. These are questions for minds much greater than mine, so I will leave them aside at least for the moment.

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God also knows that people are bears of little brain, so He made our choice whether or not to love and serve Him clear and simple.

15The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Genesis 2:15-17 [ESV]

That was where our human pride came into the picture. Having fallen into the trap of sinful pride and ambition himself, satan knew exactly what buttons to push to tempt mankind into rebellion against God’s simple single command.

4But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Genesis 3:4-5 [ESV]

At this point we might well ask the question, “If God does indeed love us unconditionally, couldn’t He just have given Adam and Eve a ‘do-over’?” After all, God knows our hearts. Surely God knew that they did not intend to do evil when they ate of the forbidden tree’s fruit. Quite the contrary. As we have just read, their desire was to ***“be like God.”*** It is rightly said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Shouldn’t God have been amused at His innocent children’s cute attempt to be like Him? As we noted in Psalm 103...

***For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.*** Psalm 103:14 [ESV]

But these questions reflect a fundamental lack of understanding about God’s perfect holiness and inability to abide the presence of any sin whatsoever, no matter how trivial we ourselves might consider it. Thus, God had no other choice but to carry out the promised punishment for mankind’s rebellion. So, death with all its various forms and associated suffering entered into the world, and has been mankind’s constant “companion” ever since.

Before we move on, we might consider the idea that death – which we regard as God’s punishment for sin – is actually a blessing and a reflection of God’s infinite love for us. Consider what God said as He banished Adam and Eve from the garden.

22Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” 23therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. 24He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. Genesis 3:22-24 [ESV]

Of course, this act of God can only be considered a blessing if our deaths are not the end of our existence, and if God made a way for us to be redeemed into eternal fellowship with Him despite our sins. But that is a topic for future sessions.

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The Course of Death

Any Christian who has witnessed someone's death can testify that the experience of death seems to be radically different for a Christian than for a non-Christian. To me, this in itself is a powerful testimony to the truth of the Gospel. For the atheist, death is a fearsome specter to be striven against with every last shred of our strength.

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"

Dylan Thomas

***Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.***

***Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.***

***Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.***

***Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieve it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.***

***Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.***

***And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.***

Yet for the Christian the experience of death is altogether different, for we carry God's Spirit in our hearts, and with Him the promise of redemption out of death by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Thus, when we face our inevitable bodily deaths, it is with great joy and anticipation of God's fulfillment of His promise to us at long last.

¹For 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.

²For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, ³if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. ⁴For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may

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be swallowed up by life. ⁵Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

⁶So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. ⁷For we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. **2 Corinthians 5:1-8 [NKJV]**

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Discussion Questions

1. Can anyone share your first realization of the reality of death?
2. Can anyone share your outlook about death prior to knowing the LORD?
3. How did your attitude toward death change after your re-birth in Christ?
 - a. ...Your own death?
 - b. ...The death of a loved one?
 - i. ...who professes Christianity?
 - ii. ...who disavows Christianity?
4. Is bodily death the end of the existence of our “selves?”
5. If we knew the exact time of our death, would that be a good thing or a bad thing?
6. If science could stave off bodily death indefinitely would that be a good thing or a bad thing?
7. If science could “can” our souls – e.g. in an artificial brain – after bodily death, would that be a good thing or a bad thing?
8. If you could buy a body “backup” clone would you do it?
9. If you could have your body “saved” against the possibility that whatever killed you might be curable in the future, would you do it?
10. If you had a certainly “terminal” disease or injury, would you fight it?
11. Is suicide ever morally right?
12. Is euthanasia ever morally right?