

DYING AND DEATH

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Getting Rightly Prepared for the Inevitable

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Dying and Death

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With heartfelt appreciation for
Cornelis (Neil) Pronk
by God's grace,
kind and encouraging friend,
brotherly and faithful mentor,
able and Christ-centered preacher for fifty years.
—JRB



With heartfelt appreciation for
All Saints
departed and departing; or rather,
who have arrived and will one day arrive
into the embrace of the glorified Second Adam.
“Advancing still from strength to strength;
They go where other pilgrims trod,
Till each to Zion comes at length;
And stands before the face of God.”
(Ps. 84:7, *The Book of Psalms for Singing*)
—CWB

Preface

Dying and death are profound, hostile, even terrifying. We all must experience an unspeakable, radical separation of our soul and body in which our soul will enter a realm fitting to its spiritual state at the moment of its final separation—that is, either heaven or hell.

Intellectually we know that dying and death are real and certain, but emotionally and spiritually we are often not able to face it. We postpone making our wills and preparing for our funerals. We find it challenging to stand beside a casket for any length of time to let the reality of death sink deep into us. Even our language betrays us: we speak of passing away or expiring rather than death. We speak of memorial parks rather than graveyards. Have you ever tried to meditate for even ten minutes on the fact that you are dying and on your inevitable death and afterlife? By nature that is nearly impossible to do. Even as Christians, it can be difficult. We can spend scores of hours planning a two-week vacation on another continent, but can scarcely spend one hour planning for a never-ending eternity.

Consequently, we do not expect this book to be a runaway best-seller! Who likes to read about dying and death? But the point of this book is that meditating on dying and death is actually profitable, even necessary, for us. We must be personally prepared to die—spiritually, ethically, and physically—so that our death will be “gain” (Phil. 1:21). To that end, Martin Luther (1483–1546) said,

“Every man must do two things alone; he must do his own believing, and his own dying.”¹

In this short book, our goal as authors has been to do three things: first, to consider the basic issues concerning our dying and death. Second, to consider Jesus’s dying and death and the comfort that He can bring to us by being our Savior, Lord, and mentor in this critical area. Third, since with the advent of modern medicine and its many options for treating the body, dying and death in our modern age have become very complex, therefore, we have thought it wise to provide some facts and ethical guidance about how to approach these options.

Heartfelt thanks are in order to several people: I owe thanks to Christopher Bogosh whom I requested to be my coauthor of this book as he is much more qualified than I am to address modern medical issues related to dying and death. Basically, the parts of this book that refer to these issues were first written by him and the rest was written by me, but we have worked as a team editing each other’s material. Thanks too to Misty Bourne, Ray Lanning, Gary den Hollander, and Paul Smalley for editing this book. Each of them has also made valuable contributions and suggestions. I particularly thank my colleague and Old Testament scholar, Michael Barrett, for his invaluable assistance on chapter 1. Finally, Chris and I wish to thank our dear wives, Robin and Mary, whose patience and love for our writing compulsion are appreciated far more than they know.

I dedicate this book to my good friend, Neil Pronk, who is commemorating his fiftieth anniversary of being ordained into the ministry on November 13, 1968. May God continue to abundantly bless you and your wife Ricky, Neil, as you climb in years, and grant you much continued fruitfulness in the preaching and writing work you are still being enabled to do. Thanks so much for your kind and gentle spirit, for your faithful friendship, and for being a wise mentor for so many younger ministers.

1. John Blanchard, comp., *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 135.

Dear reader, our prayer is that God will bless this little book to help you and your loved ones prepare better for death spiritually, ethically, and physically, so as to glorify Him in both your life and your death. We are hoping that after reading it, you will be motivated to do what should be done to prepare for your passing on from this world to the next. Also, that, as a genuine Christian, you will be able to say with more assurance than ever, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). We also pray that those of you who are not true Christians will not rest in preparing for your death and eternity until you can say that your “only comfort in life and death [is] that I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied 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; yes, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto him” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1).

—Joel R. Beeke

Part One

The Basics

DYING DEPICTED

Hope in the Old Testament

Most people do not regard dying, death, and what happens after death as pleasant subjects, but they do realize—at least deep down—that they are important. Dying, death, and judgment are the great levelers of the human race, to which we are all appointed: “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). We do not know exactly how or when we will die and enter into judgment with God, but we do know that, of all the things we think and plan about in our futures, these are “the inevitables.” No wonder the Puritans used to call death, judgment, heaven, and hell, “the four last things.”¹ “Appointed” in Hebrews 9:27 means *laid up* or *reserved*. This is an unavoidable appointment. It comes even to kings. Though they may live like “gods” on earth, yet the Lord says to them, “ye shall die like men” (Ps. 82:6–7).

Death comes for all of us, sooner or later. It does not ask if we are useful members of society, loving spouses and parents, obedient children, or pillars in God’s church, imbued with large doses of godly piety. Death takes no bribes; it knows no denials. The appointment book is in God’s hand. Your name and ours and the time and circumstances of our dying and death are all known to God (Job 14:5). He does not consult us about when we would like this appointment. Our appointment with death is unilateral not bilateral. We cannot wish this appointment away. We cannot postpone it like we can a

1. E.g., Robert Bolton, *The Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven* (1632; reprint, Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994).

doctor's visit. Scheduling conflicts do not figure in God's record book. In fact, we never know when it will happen.

God has a right to be in charge of your appointment with death for two simple reasons: first, because He is God; and second, because we are sinners who deserve to die. God has a right to send death our way at any moment, like a lightning bolt striking you or a thief coming to your home at night (1 Thess. 5:2). When we are young we may die; when we are old we must die. Whatever our situation at present may be, we need, therefore, to be always ready to die.

No one is so old that he does not think he has one more year to live. But none of us know whether we will live to see our next birthday; actually, we do not know whether we will see next month, or even tomorrow. All we know is that from the time when we were babies, we were sure to die. We are always moving toward death. There is but one step between death and every one of us. We are all dying people in a dying world. Many plans we make in this life never materialize, but God's plan of death will. It is the one certain thing that will happen to all of us.

Thus, two things are true of death: it is an unavoidable certainty and it will come at an unpredictable time. Pastors cannot fail to notice that even when people are close to death, their nearest relatives are still surprised at the moment when death comes.

All of this begs the ancient question: "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). The answer to Job's question is of great importance. The evidence of the Bible is that death is not the end of existence. The believer's hope is that being absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8).

Significantly, this is not uniquely a New Testament revelation. Though it is often denied by modern scholars, the Old Testament saints also had an awareness and confidence in the afterlife. Admittedly, there are not dozens of passages that deal directly with this hope in the Old Testament (as there are in the New Testament),²

2. Note that a separate chapter is not provided on the New Testament view of dying and death, as that is interwoven throughout the book.

but properly understanding some key Old Testament terms and direct statements reveals that the doctrine of life after death was a recognized truth already in Old Testament times.

Key Old Testament Words

Although it is a term associated primarily with death, *sheol* is one of the most important words in the Old Testament contributing to the doctrine of the afterlife. *Sheol* is not a happy place since it is so closely associated with death as the curse of sin. It is deep (Job 7:9), silent (Ps. 31:17), never satisfied (Prov. 27:20), associated with sorrow, distress, and anguish (Ps. 116:3), and marked by fierceness and cruelty (Song 8:6). The Authorized Version translates this word as “hell” (31 times), “grave” (31 times), and “pit” (3 times). Part of the difficulty in understanding the significance of the word is that everybody goes there, both the righteous and wicked. This is a general word that has three significant senses: (1) death in the abstract; (2) the grave; and (3) the abode or realm of departed wicked spirits. In every occurrence of the word, it is vital to identify which of the three senses is in view.

Some aspects of death do not distinguish one’s spiritual condition. Both the righteous and the wicked have experienced and will experience physical death; hence, sense 1 applies to both as life ceases. The bodies of both the righteous and the wicked will decay and return to dust; hence, sense 2 also applies to both. The question is what happens after life ceases and the body corrupts. *Sheol* does indeed designate the abode of departed spirits, but there is now an important distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Whenever there is awareness or consciousness in *sheol*, it is always the wicked (for instance, Isa. 14:9); hence, sense 3 applies only to the wicked. As such, it is a place of punishment. The spirits of the righteous are never conscious or active in *sheol* for the simple reason their spirits are not there. Therefore, whenever the Scripture speaks of the righteous being in *sheol*, it is referring solely to their bodies being in the grave.

The question is: Where do the spirits of the righteous go when their bodies are in the grave? Two texts from Psalms point to the answer. Psalm 49:15 says, “But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave; for he shall receive me.” Psalm 73:24 says, “Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.” The word “receive” is the clue. It occurs hundreds of times in the Old Testament, but it takes on a technical sense in the context of life after death. This sense is defined in reference to Enoch’s escaping physical death: “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took (received) him” (Gen. 5:24). The text implies that God received Enoch alive directly into His presence. Similarly, in 2 Kings 2:10 Elijah described his chariot departure in the sight of Elisha as his being taken (received). Again, the text implies that God transported him alive into heaven. That the psalmists use this word expresses their belief that they would experience the same deliverance. Although they may not escape the power of death in the same manner as Enoch or Elijah, they had the same hope and expectation that God would receive them into His very presence. Significantly, after Asaph declares that God would receive him to glory, he asked a question that identifies what he means by glory: “Whom have I in heaven but thee?” (Ps. 73:25). To put it in Pauline terms, the Old Testament saint’s hope was to be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8).

Another key word is the term for “life” itself. The word, for sure, refers to physical life in contrast to physical death, but its significance goes beyond the obvious, referring to both spiritual and everlasting life. It is noteworthy that God often offered life as the blessing or motivation for obedience (see Deut. 4:1; 6:24; 8:1). To assume that the Hebrews understood this only as a longer physical life is to regard them as an extremely naïve people. The truth of the matter is that for the righteous there often comes a point that a longer physical life is no longer attractive and hardly a motive for obedience (see Job for instance). But there is more to life than just physical existence. This is clear from Wisdom’s plea in Proverbs 8:35 that “whoso findeth me findeth life.” This must refer to

spiritual life in contrast to those who choose to remain in spiritual death (Prov. 8:36). Even more explicit is Proverbs 12:28, where the second line of the verse defines the significance of the first: “In the way of righteousness is life; and in the pathway thereof there is no death.” Here, “life” equates to “no death,” that is, to immortality. It is not true that the righteous are exempt from physical death, but they do possess a life that is everlasting. This was David’s hope when he confessed that he would dwell in the house of God (in His presence) forever (Ps. 23:6). It is indeed the hope of every believer when walking through that inevitable valley of death’s shadow.

Key Old Testament Texts

Understanding the key words expands the number of Old Testament texts that address the issue of life after death. We will focus on three passages that are explicit in expressing the hope of life beyond death.

Job 19:25–27 is one of those passages: “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.” There is some question as to whether Job’s confession refers to his confidence of life in the intermediate state or to his hope in the resurrection, but there is no question that he is sure that his present suffering life was not the end. His confidence was that his Redeemer would sooner or later stand upon the earth (literally, dust, most likely referring to his grave) for his vindication and that in his flesh he would see God. The statement “in his flesh” is open to interpretation. The Hebrew preposition is usually translated “from.” It could mean “apart from” his flesh he would see God, a reference to the intermediate state in which he would be without a body in God’s presence. Or it could mean “from the vantage point” of his flesh, a reference to a future bodily resurrection since his current body would be decayed in the grave. The

resurrection idea is better, but either way there is hope of continuing life for the believer.

Isaiah 26:19 is one of the most direct prophecies concerning the resurrection: “Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.” The pronouns suggest the prophet especially has in view the bodily resurrection of the righteous (note that Isaiah 24:22 may refer to the resurrection of the wicked). Significantly, the imperative “awake” also occurs in resurrection contexts, such as in Psalm 17:15: “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.” Packed in this verse is the hope of resurrection (awake), glorification (with God’s likeness), and eternal bliss (satisfied).

Finally, Daniel 12:2 predicts the resurrection: “Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” The language is explicit, revealing that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. Not only does the text express the certainty of the bodily resurrection, it also contrasts the eternal fates of the righteous and wicked. Some will be raised to “everlasting life” and some to “shame and everlasting contempt.” Daniel’s language anticipates what John designated as the “first resurrection” and “the second death” (Rev. 20:5–15).

Though abundantly clear in the New Testament, the sobering realization that man will live someplace forever is already clear in the Old Testament. It is a solid hope and living comfort for God’s people to know that death has lost its sting and is for them the doorway to glory and to being with God forever. It is a warning to unbelievers that death’s sting will only intensify as they are sentenced to that second, never-ending death of eternal torment. It is incumbent on the living to flee to the ever-living Redeemer, Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal (John 17:3). Where one lives in eternity depends on how one lives in time (John 3:36; 5:28–29; Rev. 20:12).