


From Death to Life

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When, as a child I laughed and wept.
Time crept.
When as a youth I dreamt and talked.
Time walked.
When I became a full-grown man,
Time ran.
When older still I grew.
Time flew.
Soon I shall find in traveling on,
Time gone.

We all have regrets. We all have not just one skeleton but several in the closet. On reading the verse "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing" (Ecclesiastes 12:14), the respected rabbi who wept was not that different from the members of his flock. After all, who enjoys going to court as the star figure?

Fear of Death

Then we have that other disquieting, intuitive conviction — that life is limited and death is certain. Here, again, we differ from animals. A dog may steal a string of sausages from the meat counter, but no thought of judgment prompts it to ever return the stolen goods. Neither do we have evidence that any creature other than man has its enjoyment of day and night lessened in the slightest by the fear of inevitable death. But for us, every question we have ever asked about life is multiplied by the fact of unrelenting death, despite the paradox that simultaneously man believes that he was not made to die.

The connection between our instinctive fears of death and judgment has been spelled out by many writers. After the bloody dissipation of the glory of the Athenian Empire, Epicurus wrote that "what men fear, is not that death is annihilation, but that it is not." Richard Niebuhr echoed these sentiments toward the close of World War II when he

reminded his readers that the fear of death was chiefly the result of that other fear — the premonition of judgment. Daniel Webster declared that the most significant thought ever to cross his mind was that of his personal accountability to God.

The marvel is that we are not more fearful than we are. Naked, defenseless, feeble, and alone, birth plunges us into the whirlpool of life. All kinds of evils foam and swirl about us — some of them certain, some of them probable, any of them possible. God, God's universe, God's messenger death, these are the facts of life. For "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb 9:27).

Turning a Blind Eye

There is, of course, a way of escape which the majority of men have embraced. Like Nelson who placed the telescope to his blind eye in order not to see the signal to retreat at the battle of Copenhagen, we too can refuse to acknowledge every signal from within or without regarding ultimate reality. Rare is the modern novel or play which discusses natural death. Brutal death is acceptable in large quantities, but not that which is the inevitable lot of all men. The experts in cosmetics are now doing their best for their toughest customer until the gullible almost come to believe that death is a passing through a door in an ivy wall separating one garden from another.

After Death, What?

But facts are facts nonetheless. Life is short and death is certain. Particularly is life short.

And what then? Ask Epicurus. Ask Richard Niebuhr. Ask the writer of Hebrews 9:27.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10).

Did you notice that we have now passed the peak of melancholy? The bad news has been sketched; now for the good news. Some of it, yes, most of it, was hidden in the verse just quoted. Who is this Judge of all the earth before whom we each must stand? The text referred to "the judgment seat of **Christ**." Did you ever think about that? Listen! "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son" (Jn 5:22).

The same story is found also in Romans 2:16: "God shall judge the secrets of men **by Jesus Christ** according to my gospel." It wasn't for nothing that Paul added, "according to my gospel." A major part of the Good News is that One with our human nature, the Son of man, our Elder Brother, is to be our Judge.

No Condemnation

The Crucified One is to be the Judge of sinners. Good News indeed! This is where the judgment differs from the tribunals of our day. It is not to be just an indictment because of sins committed. In fact, the real issue is not the sin question primarily but the Son question. The Judge himself has declared: "He that believeth on him [Christ] is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (Jn 3:18).

What right has the Creator of a moral universe to act so? On what grounds can He pass over the sins of men and give eternal life to the guilty?

There will be no flouting of right. God Himself, in one sense, is on trial at judgment day. Its outcome must lead all created beings to sing, "Just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints" (Rev 15:3; see also Rom 3:4). God is described in the New Testament as being both "just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom 3:26). How can that be?

The answer is the very heart of the gospel. God's judgment on sin, his wrath against it, has already taken place! Christ, "who knew no sin," has been made to be sin itself for us "that we might be made the

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righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21). "One has died for all; therefore all have died" (2 Cor 5:14, RSV).

God's law, being a description of his own character, could neither be flouted or revoked. Its penalty had to be paid. But who would have thought that God himself would pay it? This is the essence of those glad tidings which William Tyndale declared should make every believer sing and dance for joy.

The Good News

We were all ruined by Adam, our first representative. But Christ came as the second Adam, the second representative of the human race, and He redeemed us all. Legally it is so. Personally it becomes so as I believe it. Sang Charles Wesley, "Believe, believe the record true, Ye all are bought with Jesus' blood; Pardon for all flows from His side; My Lord, my Love, is crucified."

Only this can explain those mysterious sections of the Gospel narrative which tell us of the intensity of Christ's mental anguish when he sweat great drops of blood and later cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It was not fear of death that explains Christ's agony. It was the awareness that he was suffering for the sins of the human race. He was forsaken of God, or so it seemed, that we might not be. He cried, "Why?" in order that we might never need to cry it.

The lightning bolts of judgment struck the innocent Son of God in order that the guilty might find safety at the seared site of Calvary. It is no travesty of justice. The immutable law of God was more honored by the death of the infinite Son than if the whole guilty human race had perished. Furthermore, he who receives the blood-bought gift of righteousness cannot remain as he was. His look to Christ justifies, but his gaze sanctifies. The amnesty given to the rebel dissolves his spirit of rebellion.

And therefore it is written: "Herein is our love made perfect, that we [guilty but accepted sinners] may have boldness in the day of judgment," for Christ Himself has said, "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (Jn 4:17, Jn 5:24). □