

What About . . . *Death and Dying*

by Dr. A. L. Barry
President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Reprinted with permission

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Christians we have a unique perspective on death, a perspective that is radically different from the world around us. This pamphlet is intended to help you, or someone you know, face death and understand what death is, and how Christians face death and deal with grief.

What is death?

The Bible teaches that death is not an annihilation in which we cease to exist. The Scriptures teach that death is the separation of our eternal soul from our mortal bodies. Our bodies rest in the grave, awaiting the final day when soul and body shall be reunited. At the moment of death, our souls, and the souls of all those who die in faith, immediately are in the presence of Christ, and will enjoy His presence, peace and joy until the great day of the resurrection of all flesh.

Is Death Natural?

It is popular to think of death as something that is “natural.” Some people even are heard to say, “Death is a friend.” Nothing could be further from the truth! Death is a horrible reality. It is the enemy we each face at the end of our lives. Death is the awful curse that fell on creation through the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Through that sin, death came into the world and so death spread to all of humanity because all people sin.

God did not create human beings to die, but to live—to live forever and enjoy Him forever. Death was not part of our created nature, but only something that came about as a result of the sinful disobedience of our first parents—a sinful disobedience that has been passed down to every human being since that time.

Why must Christians die?

Scripture clearly indicates that Christians too must pass through death to life. We learn that our bodies are actually dead right now because of sin (“The body is dead because of sin” Rom.8:10). And so Christians too must die.

The sting of death and sense of God’s judgment are horrible punishments on those who have no faith in Christ as their Savior. They face, at the end of their life, only the prospect of an unknown future, or a terrifying vision of eternal damnation. However, the death of a Christian is not death in as full a sense as it is for the non-Christian. For the Christian, eternal life and joy follows death, for our Lord Jesus Christ is the One who walks with them through the “valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23).

What is the Christian's response to death and dying?

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." These familiar words of Psalm 23 chart the direction for a Christian individual or family facing the reality of death. Here God identifies our greatest enemy in such times—fear. Since none of us among the living has ever tasted death, we respond to the prospect of death (whether our own or that of someone we love) with fear. Fear is natural.

Now, if fear is the enemy, who is our ally? The Psalmist continues: "For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Jesus, our Good Shepherd, the One who laid down His life for the sheep, is our companion on the dark, winding road that leads through the valley of the shadow of death. The journey is not optional. Sooner or later each of us, no matter how old or young, will walk that path. This will happen until that day when Jesus comes again—when, at the last trumpet, the faithful will be changed in the twinkling of an eye (1 Cor. 15:51–52).

But here is the important part: I walk through the valley. The One who is with us in that journey, who leads us on, bears the scars of death in His living body. He was dead, but now He lives forevermore. All who believe and are baptized will be saved; they have a share in His victory over death. Christians, therefore, are able to see death not merely as an unfortunate reality to be endured, but as a defeated enemy. The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are the sure and certain realities promised to all who remain faithful unto death.

What happens after we die?

For unbelievers, there is the "second death" (Rev. 20:14) in which their souls are immediately in the presence of Satan and immediately begin to suffer the torment of eternal punishment in hell, from which there is no possibility of escape. On the day of judgment, their bodies join their souls in hell.

Those who trust in the redemption won by Christ our Lord pass from death to life. This is why the Bible uses so many comforting images to describe the death of the child of God. Here are some of the phrases the Holy Spirit uses to describe a Christian's death: being gathered to one's people; departure in peace; departure and being with Christ; a turning away from the evil to come; sleep; rest; passing from death to life; deliverance from all evil; and, finally, "gain."

Gain? How can death be gain? When a baptized child of God passes through death—a son or daughter of God who has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb of God—then death is gain. Through death the children of God pass into an eternity of joy and peace with their heavenly Father.

Each Christian, therefore, may rejoice in the life that Christ has won and gives to him or her through the Word and Sacraments. When we die, our souls await the final consummation of all things on the day Christ returns. We shall receive glorified bodies that are free from tears, pain, sickness and age—perfectly renewed and glorified resurrection bodies.

In these new and glorified bodies, we shall spend all eternity in heaven, enjoying the presence of God and all His saints, forever and ever. The overwhelming joy of this truth is almost too much for us to even begin to comprehend, but it is true!

How do Christians face death?

Christians face death as they face life—with their eyes fixed firmly on Jesus. We cling to the promises of His Word, which, when facing death, seem even more wonderful and powerful. One of the most beautiful promises our Lord gave to us is found in John 14:2–3 where He says, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

We realize that no matter how our lives may end, there is one thing of which we can be absolutely certain. We shall pass from death to life, from this life to the life beyond, with our Lord. And there we shall rejoin all of our loved ones and others who have gone before us trusting in Christ their Savior.

How does a Christian deal with grief?

Christians should not hesitate to cry. Our Lord wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus. We too find ourselves in tears at the pain of our loss. But we do not sorrow in the same way as those who have no hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep (1 Thess. 4:14). We look forward to a grand reunion with loved ones who have died in faith. Still, we miss them. The separation can seem overwhelming at times. This pain is part and parcel of grieving; it is to be understood, not resisted.

Grieving for most people is a journey. It is a journey from the initial pain of parting, toward healing and reconciliation with our loss. The pain gradually subsides, but the loss remains. Grief has many dimensions and may seem unpredictable in its ebb and flow; yet in Christ we find strength along the way. For in this journey we are not alone.

Christians find that family and friends are God’s gifts to help them bear the pain of loss, which at times seems unbearable. Such company is important in dealing constructively with grief. It must be consciously sought out by those who mourn. Most who mourn find it very helpful to tell the story of the death of those they love to family and to trusted friends. The repeated narrating of that story brings release and insight into the joy and sorrow of the parting. Friends and family will want to lend a listening ear and heart for such telling and retelling; it is a rare privilege to be entrusted with such treasures. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Above all, Christian mourners will turn to the worship fellowship of the church and the rich comfort of God’s holy Word and Sacrament for healing along the path of grief. For Jesus Christ abides within His church through His sacred means of grace. Through these channels He bestows the riches of His forgiveness, life and salvation now, and to all eternity. One day we too shall stand with that great multitude of heaven who hear these blessed words:

“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:3–4).

© 1998 The Office of the President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1333 South Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63122.

Printed copies of this tract may be purchased from Concordia Publishing House, 1-800-325-3040, www.cph.org. Ask for item number 10-1715.