

The Sting of Death

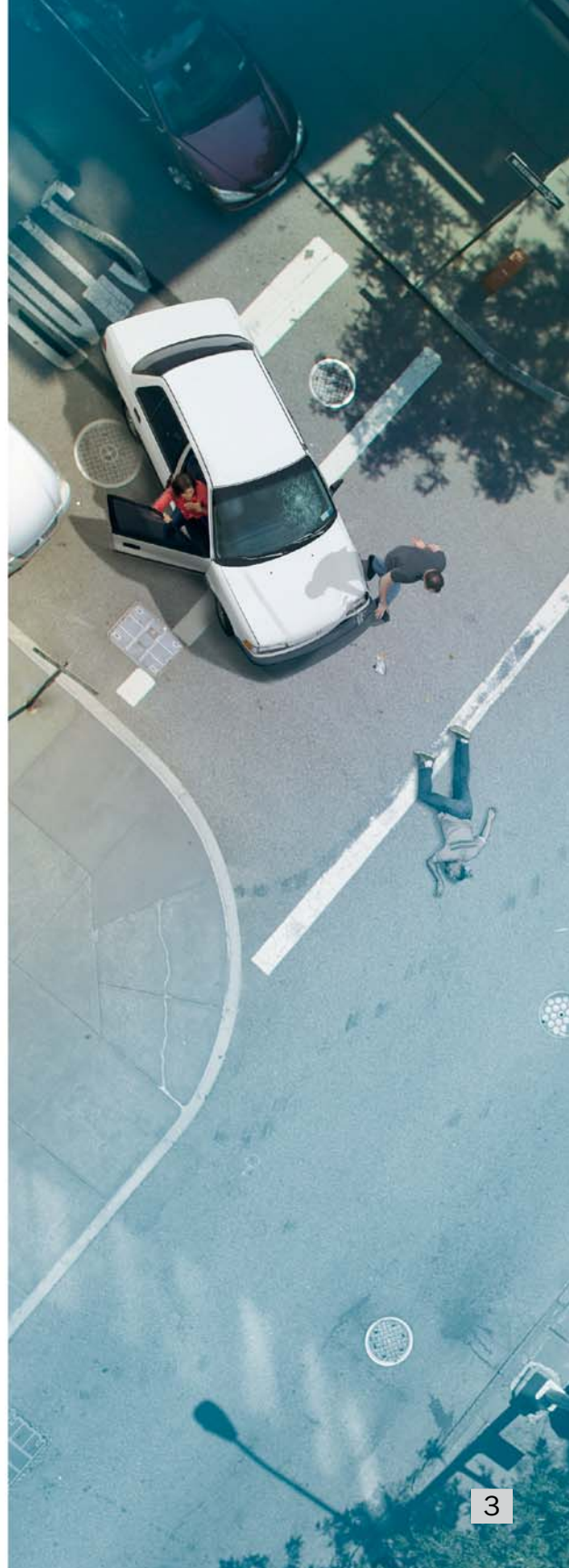
Death is an uncomfortable subject. Many people prefer not to talk about it. But sooner or later, we must confront it. And the sting of death is sharp and painful.

Nothing can fully prepare us for the loss of a parent, a spouse, or a child. A tragedy may strike unexpectedly or unfold relentlessly. Whatever the case, the pain of death cannot be eluded, and its finality can be devastating.

Antonio, who lost his father in a road accident, explains: "It is like somebody sealing up your house and taking away the keys. You cannot return home, even for a moment. You are left with only your memories. This is the new reality. Although you try to deny it—since it seems so unfair—there is nothing you can do."

When faced with a similar loss, Dorothy, who became a widow at the age of 47, resolved to find some answers. As a Sunday-school teacher, she never felt that death ended it all. But she had no clear answers. "What happens to us when we die?" she asked her Anglican minister. "No one really knows," he replied. "We will just have to wait and see."

Are we condemned merely to "wait and see"? Is there any way we can know for sure whether death ends it all?





PHARAOH KHUFU

EMPEROR QIN SHI HUANG

Mankind's Fight Against Mortality

Death is a fearsome enemy. We fight it with all our might. We may try to deny it when it strikes someone dear to us. Or, in the exuberance of youth, we may imagine that the enemy will never come to claim us—a delusion we cling to as long as we can.

Few thought more about immortality than the ancient Pharaohs. They spent much of their own lives—as well as the lives of thousands of workers—in an attempt to conquer death. The pyramids they built testify to their quest—and to their failure.

Chinese emperors followed a similar dream of immortality, albeit through a different route—that of the mythical elixir of life. Emperor Qin Shi Huang demanded that his alchemists find a magic potion that could keep death at bay. But many of their concoctions contained toxic mercury, and one of their mixtures likely killed him.

In the 16th century C.E., the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León sailed the Caribbean reportedly in search of a fountain of youth. He discovered Florida, U.S.A., in the process but died a few years later after a skirmish with Native Americans. And no fountain of youth has ever been found.

The Pharaohs, emperors, and explorers all sought to conquer death. And who of us would have belittled their goal, even if we disliked their methods? Deep down, practically all of us want to keep living.

CAN DEATH BE CONQUERED?

Why do we rebel against death? The Bible explains the reason. Regarding our Creator, Jehovah God,* it says: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has even put eternity in their [mankind’s] heart.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) We

Who you v. you?

* Jehovah is the name of God as revealed in the Bible.



EXPLORER PONCE DE LEÓN

would like to enjoy earth's beauty forever, not for a mere 80 years or so. (Psalm 90:10) That is our heart's desire.

Why did God put "eternity" in our hearts? Merely to frustrate us? That is unthinkable. On the contrary, God promises us that there will come a victory over death. The Bible repeatedly speaks about the elimination of death and God's promise of everlasting life.—See the accompanying box, "Victory Over Death."

Jesus Christ himself clearly stated: "This means everlasting life, their coming to know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ." (John 17:3) So the battle against death is not a hopeless one. Jesus confirms, however, that only God can win that battle for us.

Victory Over Death

"He will swallow up death forever,
and the Sovereign Lord Jehovah will
wipe away the tears from all faces."
—Isaiah 25:8.

"This is the will of my Father, that every-
one who recognizes the Son and exercises
faith in him should have everlasting life."
—John 6:40.

"The last enemy, death, is to be brought to
nothing."—1 Corinthians 15:26.

"[We have the] hope of the everlasting
life that God, who cannot lie, promised long
ago."—Titus 1:2.

"He will wipe out every tear from their eyes,
and death will be no more."—Revelation
21:4.

Death Does Not End It All!

Bethany was a small village that lay two miles (3 km) from Jerusalem. (John 11:18) A tragedy unfolded there a few weeks before Jesus' death. Lazarus, one of Jesus' close friends, unexpectedly became seriously ill and died.

When Jesus first heard the news, he told his disciples that Lazarus was asleep and that he intended to awaken him. (John 11:11) But Jesus' disciples did not grasp his meaning, so Jesus told them plainly: "Lazarus has died."—John 11:14.

Four days after the burial, Jesus arrived at Bethany and sought to comfort Martha, a sister of the deceased. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died," Martha said. (John 11:17, 21) "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus replied. "The one who exercises faith in me, even though he dies, will come to life."—John 11:25.

To demonstrate that those words were not an empty promise, Jesus then approached the tomb and cried out: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43) And to the astonishment of the onlookers, the dead man emerged.

Jesus had performed at least two resurrections previously. On one occasion he raised a young girl from the dead—the daughter of Jairus. Right

before Jesus resurrected her, he also described her as being asleep.—Luke 8:52.

Notice that regarding the death of both Lazarus and Jairus' daughter, Jesus compared death to sleep. That is a fitting comparison. Why? Sleep is an unconscious state and suitably conveys the idea of rest from pain and suffering. (Ecclesiastes 9:5; see the accompanying box, "Death Is Like a Deep Sleep.") Jesus' early disciples clearly understood the true condition of the dead. "To the followers of Jesus death was a sleep, and the grave



Death Is Like a Deep Sleep

"Give light to my eyes, so that I may not fall asleep in death."—Psalm 13:3.

"'Lazarus our friend has fallen asleep, but I am traveling there to awaken him.' The disciples then said to him: 'Lord, if he is sleeping, he will get well.' Jesus, however, had spoken about his death."—John 11:11-13.

"David, on the one hand, rendered service to God in his own generation [and] fell asleep in death."—Acts 13:36.

"Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep in death."—1 Corinthians 15:20.

"We do not want you to be ignorant about those who are sleeping in death, so that you may not sorrow as the rest do who have no hope."—1 Thessalonians 4:13.

"Lazarus, come out!"





The Dead Will Rise

“Your dead will live. My corpses will rise up. Awake and shout joyfully!”—Isaiah 26:19.

“Many of those asleep in the dust of the earth will wake up.”—Daniel 12:2.

“The hour is coming in which all those in the memorial tombs will hear his voice and come out.”—John 5:28, 29.

a resting-place . . . for those who had died in the faith,”* states the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*.

It comforts us to know that the dead are asleep in the grave and are not suffering. Death thereby loses its mystery and no longer needs to cause us dread.

“IF A MAN DIES, CAN HE LIVE AGAIN?”

But while we appreciate a good night’s rest, who wants to go to sleep forever? What hope do we have that the dead who lie asleep in the grave will return to life—as Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter did?

The patriarch Job raised that very question when he felt near to death. “If a man dies, can he live again?” he asked.—Job 14:14.

Addressing Almighty God, Job answered his own question, saying: “You will call, and I will answer you. You will long for the work of your hands.” (Job 14:15) Job felt sure that Jehovah longed for the day when He would resurrect His faithful servant. Was that mere wishful thinking on Job’s part? Not at all.

The resurrections performed by Jesus offered clear proof that God gave Jesus power over death. In fact, the Bible says that Jesus now possesses “the keys of death.” (Revelation 1:18) So Jesus will unlock the gates of the grave, just as he ordered that the stone of Lazarus’ tomb be rolled away.

The Bible repeats this resurrection promise time and again. An angel assured the prophet Daniel: “You will rest, but you will stand up for your lot at the end of the days.” (Daniel 12:13) Jesus told the Sadducees, Jewish leaders who denied the resurrection promise: “You are mistaken, because you know neither the Scriptures

nor the power of God.” (Matthew 22:23, 29) The apostle Paul said: “I have hope toward God . . . that there is going to be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.”—Acts 24:15.

WHEN WILL THE DEAD ARISE?

When will this resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous occur? The angel told righteous Daniel that he would rise up “at the end of the days.” Martha likewise believed that her brother, Lazarus, would “rise in the resurrection on the last day.”—John 11:24.

The Bible connects this “last day” with Christ’s Kingdom rule. Paul wrote: “For he [Christ] must rule as king until God has put all enemies under his feet. And the last enemy, death, is to be brought to nothing.” (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26) This is a powerful reason why we should pray for God’s Kingdom to come and for God’s will to be done on the earth.*

As Job well knew, God’s will is to resurrect the dead. When that day arrives, death will truly be brought to nothing. And never again will anyone wonder, ‘Does death end it all?’ ■

* The English word “cemetery” comes from a Greek word meaning “sleeping place.”

* To learn more about God’s Kingdom, see chapter 8 of the book *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* published by Jehovah’s Witnesses. Also available at www.jw.org.