

## LIVING AT THE END OF YOUR LIFE

Accepting the Things We Cannot Change: The Spirituality of Death and Dying

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(Genesis 3:19 NRSV) By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

I begin this morning with great fear and trepidation because most of us are rather anxious about this topic – we do not like talking about it, and I imagine that many of you really don't want to hear about it as well.

It is as if we hope that if we ignore it long enough, it will simply go away.

In my 11 plus years I have done over 150 funerals here in Munster. I am regularly visiting the hospital and the local nursing homes, and I have yet to meet anybody who has figured out a way to avoid death.

It is the one reality of life → you will die.

Surveys have been done in which people are asked what they fear most.

Death almost always comes out #2 on the list.

#1 → speaking in public

Like it or not, death is a reality

That is clearly articulated in the scriptures:

(Genesis 3:19 NRSV) By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The message puts it even more tersely:

you'll be working in pain all your life long.  
The ground will sprout thorns and weeds,  
you'll get your food the hard way,  
Planting and tilling and harvesting,

sweating in the fields from dawn to dusk,  
 Until you return to that ground yourself, dead and buried;  
 you started out as dirt, you'll end up dirt."

Bishop Spong has noted:

We alone, of all the living entities in the world know that we will die. We anticipate our death, seek to deny it, and even try to avoid it. We fear it, dread it and yet have to endure it knowingly. . . . More than any one of us seems to realize, or is willing to admit, death casts its shadow over our conscious lives, invades our every waking moment and penetrates even our dreams.

As I began wrestling with this topic, two themes jumped out at me.

First, death is a powerful and painful reality that hovers over life

Second, the words that religious traditions use are designed specifically to tame death, to domesticate death, to transform and ultimately transcend death.

Before I go any further, and your mind wanders down the many paths that we are going to explore, I want to make an important point. And that is NEITHER DEATH NOR LIFE SEEMS TO MAKE MUCH SENSE WITHOUT THE OTHER.

That is going to be the overarching thesis of this series: NEITHER DEATH NOR LIFE SEEMS TO MAKE MUCH SENSE WITHOUT THE OTHER.

Have you ever explored what the bible has to say about life after death?

Of course not --- because then you would have had to confront the reality of death!

When you examine the Hebrew Scriptures the amount of material is shocking - shocking because it is almost non-existent.

It seems that our Jewish fore-bearers were so busy being concerned over this life, that they scarcely had time to invest in life after death.

When you study the Hebrew Scriptures you come across a place that was called sheol. It is a word that is used only 65 times in the Hebrew Bible

Sheol is an interesting concept in Judaism.

It was the place where you went when you died.  
 It was neither a good place or a bad place.  
 It was just the place of the dead.

In ancient Jewish understanding – there was no hopefulness, no comfort, no joy of a destination when you died.

When you died, you died – simple as that. → and you went to sheol

James Tabor in What the Bible says About Death, Afterlife, and the Future writes "The ancient Hebrews had no idea of an immortal soul living a full and vital life beyond death, nor of any resurrection or return from death. Human beings, like the beasts of the field, are made of "dust of the earth," and at death they return to that dust (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). The Hebrew word *nephesh*, traditionally translated "living soul" but more properly understood as "living creature," is the same word used for all breathing creatures and refers to nothing immortal...All the dead go down to Sheol, and there they lie in sleep together — whether good or evil, rich or poor, slave or free (Job 3:11–19). . . . basically it is a kind of "nothingness," an existence that is barely existence at all, in which a "shadow" or "shade" of the former self survives (Ps. 88:10)."

But that all changed in the second century before the Common Era.

What caused that change to happen is the argument of much debate

Stephen Harris, *Understanding the Bible*

"The concept of eternal punishment does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, which uses the term *Sheol* to designate a bleak subterranean region where the dead, good and bad alike, subsist only as impotent shadows. When Hellenistic Jewish scribes rendered the Bible into Greek, they used the word *Hades* to translate Sheol, bringing a whole new mythological association to the idea of posthumous existence. In ancient Greek myth, Hades, named after the gloomy deity who ruled over it, was originally similar to the Hebrew Sheol, a dark underground realm in which all the dead, regardless of individual merit, were indiscriminately housed."

What is interesting is if you were to do a study of the various authors of the New Testament you would find that there is not any consistency among them when it comes to life after death.

Paul → Life in Christ is eternal

But life outside of Christ terminates in death

He does not define heaven and there is no mention of hell in Paul

Mark, the earliest gospel does not even include a resurrection story, and really doesn't deal with what we would call heaven and hell

John → eternal life is "knowing Christ" or "believing in Christ"

Heaven was quality of life not quantity of days

Luke → Kingdom of God is "inside you"

Matthew → Fiery punishment as hell is from here (with later additions by the author of Revelation)

Transforms valley of Hinnom (Joshua 15:8, 18:16) which was the town's garbage dump and burn pile → into Gehenna, which becomes the symbol of God's wrath

The simple reality is --- In the New Testament there is no coherent concept of heaven and hell

Our fascination with death and our doctrines of heaven and hell develop as the church expanded into the areas that were more and more influenced by the Greek/Roman culture and Zoroastrianism.

The great conservative Anglican New Testament scholar NT Wright has noted:

The word "hell" has a checkered career. In the New Testament, "Gehenna" [the term translated as "hell"] is the smoldering rubbish dump outside the southwest corner of Jerusalem. To be sure it has other, bigger resonances, but when Jesus talks about being condemned to Gehenna, the first thing it means is, "If you, Jerusalemites, don't come the way of peace, your entire city is going to be transformed into a large-scale extension of your own smoldering rubbish dump." That is the very sharp-edged warning in the gospels. Hell is actually something that happens on earth when people don't follow God's way of peace.

Morton Kelsey in his book *Afterlife* suggests that in Christianity we have seven problems in our beliefs on the afterlife.

- 1) We cannot truly know anything about heaven or hell
- 2) If one's eyes are focused on heaven, then they tend to forget about this life.

This is most clearly seen in the ascetic and monastic movements

Sigmund Freud, who some argue was anti-religious, but I would suggest that he was against particular applications of religion believed that a fixation (which Christianity seems to possess) on the afterlife will prevent people from achieving all that they can be in this life.

- 3) When we paint all of our earthly pleasures as evil or even sinful:

- Sex
- Alcohol
- Etc

Then heaven looks rather dull

(Sitting around on a cloud with a harp for all eternity has very little appeal to me!)

- 4) The Christian image of hell as torment

Jonathan Edwards famous sermon → "Sinners in the hands of an angry God"

Billboard I saw on way home from IU REPENT before you end up in Hell

Cause many people to simply reject the notion of hell

- 5) The idea that heaven is only a replica of this physical world – which the individual enters with a reconstituted body seems pretty silly

What if:      born with a deformity  
                 Lost a limb

- 6) The idea of a heaven & hell which rewards or punishes an individual for life in this world also has some big problems

Our morality thus determines what the next life will be

The book of Job disputes this notion → but it still keeps coming back in many Christian beliefs

- 7) This concept (reward or punishment) falls right into Karl Marx comment that “religion is the opiate of the people” because there is no need to elevate suffering in this life or on the earth because people will be rewarded in the future

At the end of the day – we can know very little about heaven from the biblical texts. As I shared with you a few weeks ago --- I take heart in the vision that the author of Revelation had – a vision of a New Jerusalem. But what that new Jerusalem will be like – trying to guess is at best a waste of time.

I think the challenge for us is not to let our fear of death keep us from living. We can't change the reality that we all are going to die – what we can change is how we let that influence our living!