

Death Has No Fear

Death is the most democratic institution on earth.

It strikes without respect of social status or age. With or without warning it fills us with lonely sorrow and awe. Man has always been puzzled by the mystery of life and death. Since death came into the world, men have searched for an explanation of the final event that brings down the curtain over life.

Like modern man, the ancients viewed death with mixed emotions. Catullus wrote: "Our brief light once extinguished, night is one endless sleep." The poet Lucretius preached a materialism that excluded all fears which the future might hold:

"But from this fate we are redeemed by death which denies existence to the self that might have suffered these tribulations. Rest assured, therefore, that we have nothing to fear in death. One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by death the immortal."

Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor, resigned himself to death with a spirit of fatalism.

"What means all this? Thou hast embarked, thou hast made the voyage, thou art come to shore; get out. If indeed to another life, there is no want of gods, not even there. But if to a state without sensation, thou wilt cease to be held by pains and pleasures, and to be slave to the vessel, which is as much inferior as that which serves it is superior: for the one is intelligence and deity; the other is earth and corruption."

The Roman Stoic philosopher taught a similar view: "If we have utterly conquered the fear of death, nothing else can daunt us. What is disgrace to one who stands above the opinion of the multitude? What was even a death of disgrace to Socrates, who by entering a prison made it cease to be disgraceful? Cato was twice defeated in his candidature for the praetorship and consulship: well, this was the disgrace of those honors, and not of Cato. No one can be despised by another until he has learnt to despise himself."

The man who has learnt to triumph over sorrow wears his miseries as though they were sacred filets upon his brow, and nothing is so bravely wretched. Such men inflict disgrace upon disgrace itself." Taking the hand of his physician at his bedside, when he was approaching death, Sigmund Freud said: "My dear Schur, you certainly remember our first talk. You promised me then not to forsake me when my time comes. Now it is nothing but torture and makes no sense anymore." Schur reassured his patient that he had not forgotten." When he was again in agony. I gave him a hypodermic of two centigrams of morphine. He soon felt relief and fell into a peaceful sleep. I repeated this dose after about twelve hours. He lapsed into a coma and did not wake up again."

J. Barton Babbage records the confession of C. G. Jung, when some of his patients expected him to provide a formula that would give meaning to life. "I, too, had no answer to give." The philosopher Bertrand Russell in "A Free Man's Worship," looked boldly into a lifeless future: "No fire, heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual beyond the grave... All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system."

But the Christian faith proclaims a joyous hope. To the Christian death is an exodus, a homecoming. The believer, who is united with Christ, has a glorious destiny. Death should hold no fear for the Christian. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. And for centuries now, Christians have witnessed to a future physical resurrection guaranteed by the historical fact of Christ's resurrection. Christians have always been the people of hope.

St. Augustine expressed this so long ago: "God has rewarded faith with so much grace that death, which seems to be the enemy of life, becomes an ally that helps man enter into life." The Christian hope endures. It eases pain and wipes out despair. It brings a promise of a destiny which is more than an immortality of the soul. When death comes, we sorrow, but not as those without hope.

Each new generation of Christians has been inspired through this hope and many have put their thoughts and feelings in writing, producing some of the great hymns and literature of the church. The following poem is based upon the words of St. Paul: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you."

Jesus lives! no longer now Can thy terrors, Death, appall me;
Jesus lives! By this I know From the grave he will recall me;
Brighter scenes at death commence;
This shall be my confidence.
Jesus lives! my heart knows well
Nought from me his love shall sever;
Life, nor death, nor powers of hell,
Part me now from Christ forever:
God will be a sure defence; This shall be my confidence.
Jesus lives! henceforth is death
Entrance-gate of life immortal;
This shall calm my trembling breath
When I pass its gloomy portal:
Faith shall cry, as fails each sense,
"Lord, thou art my confidence."

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