Death, Dying, and Grief

Introduction

Death and dying are a bitter part of the reality of

life, in general, and a particularly

common experience for those called to health care.

The nature and meaning of death is

not simply biological or scientific, but rather inv

olves deep philosophical and religious

questions. Once again, medical technology has chang

ed the scope, quality, and

experience of death (or at least the dying process)

. It has even prompted a changing of

the very definition of death.

Death in the 21st Century

One of the incredible benefits of modern science an

d its application in medical

technology has been the ability to extend physiolog

ical life. In the 1960s, the

development of CPR, ventilators, and the like allow

ed never-before-seen intervention in

the process of dying, such that a "millennia-old ge

neral understanding of what it meant

to be dead" was transformed (Veatch, Haddad, & Engl

ish, 2010, pp. 390-391). In the

field of biomedical ethics, the very definition of

what it means to be dead is a

controversial topic. In continuing with a fundament

al theme running throughout this

course, it should be noted that while the pathophys

iological and scientifically detectable

signs of death are crucial in this debate, they sho

uld not be taken to be determinative or

comprehensive. This debate still crucially depends

on the philosophical background of

one's anthropology (i.e., view of personhood) and i

n the resulting interpretation of

these scientific and physiological signs. The medic

al definition of death is not a purely or

irreducibly scientific question.

Worldview and the Meaning of Death

Two of the more controversial issues in bioethics a

re euthanasia and physician- assisted

suicide. As you read and research the ethics surrou

nding these issues, consider how the

Christian worldview would analyze the ethics of suc

h actions. On a worldview level, the

question of the medical definition of death is just

the tip of the iceberg in terms of the

broader significance and ultimate meaning of death.

Whether or not there is any

meaning to death and what it might be is a question

of one's worldview. Questions

regarding whether or not there will be ultimate mor

al accountability for the way one

lived life and whether there is an afterlife are ke

y questions in this regard. The very

phenomenon of the loss of (at the very least) physi

ological and perhaps conscious

integrity and activity is a fact of life that calls

for explanation.

Once again, an accurate understanding of religion a

nd worldview is required.

Furthermore, the distinctions among each religion m

ust be appreciated and not

collapsed into one another. The way in which both t

echnology and religious background

color the experience and meaning of death (both in

dying and grieving) must also be

appreciated. Whatever rituals or practices a religi

ous or cultural group engages in are

informed by a view regarding the nature and meaning

of death that fits within an

overarching worldview narrative.

Death in the Christian Worldview

Death takes on a particular meaning when seen withi

n the Christian narrative. It is, in

fact, not the greatest evil that could befall a hum

an being and is furthermore

transformed in the light of the resurrection of Jes

us Christ. The Christian teaching that

"God died" essentially transforms the way in which

death is seen and experienced

(Sanders, 2007, pp. 6-8). Death is certainly a trag

edy and an evil, but it is now a

conquered enemy. It is a conquered enemy because in

the Christian biblical narrative,

death is a perversion of God's original design plan

. And yet, the Christian God constantly

redeems that which is broken.

Loss and Grief

Death is a particularly traumatic and difficult exp

erience for both family and caregivers.

Understanding the process and stages of grieving is

immensely beneficial for caregivers

to assess the well-being of patients and families.

There are numerous resources that can

be of tremendous benefit for both caregivers and fa

mily. One of the most influential is

the work of American psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-

Ross. Perhaps the most influential

insight of her work was to notice certain patterns

or stages in the human experience of

grief, especially after the loss of a loved one in

death. She called these the five stages of

grief. Briefly, they include the following: (a) den

ial, (b) anger, (c) bargaining, (d)

depression, and (e) acceptance (as cited in HealGri

ef, 2016).

Expectations regarding an afterlife will in large p

art determine the manner in which

patients and families welcome or spurn the prospect

of death. Furthermore, the way in

which a person experiences the stages of grief will

be in the context of his or her

worldview. Christian theologian Nicholas Wolterstor

ff's (1987) memoir,

Lament for a

Son

, is a personal reflection of his own personal grie

f after losing his 25-year-old son in a

mountain climbing accident. As he engages with his

own grief and experience, it

becomes clear that everything is ultimately seen in

the light of God's loving control and

the ultimate hope found in the life, death, and res

urrection of Jesus Christ.

Why Did God Become Man? Incarnation, Atonement, and

Resurrection

Jesus was the Son of God before he was born into ou

r world. The event of God taking on

flesh and dwelling among us—the incarnation—is amaz

ing and is celebrated all over the

world at Christmas. The incarnation is proclaimed c

learly throughout the New

Testament (Luke 1:35; John 1:14; Phil. 2:5-7).

So why did God become man? The most famous verse in

the Bible clearly tells us, "For

God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,

that whoever believes in him should

not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

And Jesus knew what this would

require of him. He stated in Matthew 20:28, "The So

n of Man came not to be served but

to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many

."God is both holy and just, so although he created h

umanity to be immortal, he could not

accept them into his holy kingdom in their sinful s

tate. So from the beginning God

enacted and unfolded his plan for humanity, to rede

em a people for himself (Titus 2:11-

14), requiring that justice be upheld and sin punis

hed. Therefore, a sacrificial lamb was

needed—one that could atone for the sins of the wor

ld. Only the perfect and sinless

Lamb of God would be sufficient. Yes, God himself w

ould have to be the sacrifice

somehow.

So the incarnation led inexorably to the cross, the

torturous experience that had been

prophesied nearly a thousand years earlier by David

in Psalm 22. All four Gospels give

vivid accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, the mos

t unjust execution ever to be carried

out, as testified by the centurion there who said,

"Certainly this man was innocent!"

(Luke 23:47). But as unjust as the crucifixion was,

Jesus willingly accepted it, for as the

Son of God he could easily have been rescued (Matt.

26:53). Instead, Jesus bore the sins

of the world on the cross. This is called the atone

ment—the reconciliation of humanity

with God through the sufferings and sacrificial dea

th of Christ.

It is interesting that the clearest account of the

atonement is found in the prophecy of

Isaiah 53: 5-12 (NKJV) where the atonement is speci

fically stated seven times:

He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crush

ed for our iniquities...and

the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...str

icken for the transgression of

my people...when his soul makes an offering for sin...a

nd he shall bear their

iniquities...yet he bore the sin of many.

God went out of his way to make the extent he would

go to bring about reconciliation

clear.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is by far the clim

ax of his life. .All four Gospels provide

vivid accounts of this amazing miracle that conquer

ed death. There have been many

who looked at the history of the times, read the ma

ny accounts of what happened both

in the Bible and in other sources, and came to the

inevitable conclusion that there is no

other explanation for what happened except that Jes

us surely rose from the dead. After

the crucifixion, the disciples gave up and went bac

k to fishing—the 3 years of

exhilarating ministry were over. But then the resur

rection changed everything. It was

not long before the disciples were accused of turni

ng "the world upside down" (Acts

17:6). This world-changing event was not just a his

torical miracle, it was a sign of the

promise that God gave to those who put their faith

in him. Death is a conquered enemy

because Jesus's resurrection from the dead made a w

ay of salvation, and also was a sign

of the future that God has for those that have died

"in Christ."

The phrase "in Christ" is very common in the New Te

stament and crucial to

understanding the gospel. To be "in Christ" means t

o place your "hope in Christ" (Eph.

1:12), or in other words, making Christ the object

of your faith. Paul expresses the

gospel message most succinctly in Galatians 2:16 wh

ere he says, "a person is not

justified by works of the law, but through faith in

Jesus Christ."

Conclusion

Christianity is unlike virtually every other religi

on in the world. Other religions show you

what they believe is a way to God by living in a ce

rtain manner, praying certain prayers,

and many other religious customs. Christianity teac

hes that people are not capable of

being good enough, which is precisely why God sent

Jesus to be the Savior of the world.

Other religions offer good advice, whereas Christ o

ffers good news, the gospel—which is

that by trusting in what he has already done for yo

u, you are restored.

Other religions offer possible salvation (eternal l

ife in heaven) through trusting in one's

own good works, while Christianity offers certain s

alvation through trusting in Christ's

good works. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 2:8-

9, "For by grace you have been saved

through faith. And this is not your own doing; it i

s the gift of God, not a result of

works, so that no one may boast" (ESV). The final c

hapter in the biblical narrative will

involve a restoration of all creation, and those th

at died in Christ will be resurrected and

receive imperishable bodies.