

THE LAST ENEMY

In some traditions, death is personified as the Grim Reaper, a human skeleton, bearing a scythe. Death is a dreadful thing. For some, the fear of death is so great that it is a phobia, a disorder, called *thanatophobia*. For others, it is cause for despair. Ernest Becker, in his book, *The Denial of Death*, explained fear of death this way:

What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food?

Mortician Caitlan Doughty, inspired by Becker's work, founded the Order of the Good Death, a death acceptance organization. Doughty wants to remove from death any stigma, so that people may speak of it openly, and without shame or fear. Others would go farther, however; they would make peace with death. Concerning Death Positivity, Robert Neimeyer, Director of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition, says, "It's a way of moving toward neutral acceptance of death and embracing values which make us more conscious of our day-to-day living." The Christian does not have a neutral acceptance of death. He does not regard death as a nuisance to be ignored, but a formidable enemy to be destroyed. He does not fear death, however, because He believes that Jesus has, in principle, defeated it, and that now death is, in fact, the way to life.

God gave man the gift of life. When God made the first man, Adam, He formed his body from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. (Genesis 2:7) He put Adam in the garden of Eden, and gave him freedom to eat of every tree in the garden, except for one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned Adam that, if he ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, then he would die. God permitted Adam to eat from the tree of life, and, if Adam would continue eating from this tree, then he would continue to live. God made from the man, and for the man, a woman, and together they lived in harmony with God and with each other, until the tempter came. The serpent tempted the woman to eat the forbidden fruit, and she did eat. She gave the fruit to her husband, and he ate. Adam rebelled against God, and so God, true to His word, sentenced Adam to death. He expelled Adam and Eve, his wife, from the garden of Eden, and assigned cherubim to guard the entrance, so that Adam might not return and eat from the tree of life.

When Adam sinned, mankind sinned, and so mankind paid the penalty for that sin. So, every man enters the world under sentence of death. In fact, every man comes into the world in a state of death. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Romans 5:12) Every man comes into the world in a state of spiritual death. He comes into the world "dead in trespasses and sins," "alienated from the life of God." (Ephesians 2:1; 4:18) Every man comes into the world a sinner. From Scripture, Saint Paul proved; to the Romans that there is no man who is not a sinner:

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of

cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Romans 3:10–18; Psalm 14:1–3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Proverbs 1:16 Isaiah 59:7; Psalm 36:1)

Separated from God because of the original sin, every man comes into the world with no spiritual vitality, no ability to do good. It is not possible for a man separated from God not to sin. A man may do good in a formal sense. He may give to charity, or fast, or pray. However, no man separated from God can do good in any substantial sense. For God to count a man's work as good, the man must do a work according to the right standard, which is the law of God; he must do the work with the right motive, which is faith in God; and he must do the work with the right goal in mind, which is the glory of God. (Romans 14:23; 1 Corinthians 10:31) If a work lacks any one of these qualities, then it is defective. In fact, any work not done with all three qualities is a sin.

Men are sinners, and so they sin against God. Adding insult to injury, they refuse to acknowledge God. They not only rebel against Him, but they pretend not to believe in Him. Saint Paul wrote, "When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful." (Romans 1:21) All men know God, however much they may deny it, and they know that the penalty for their sins is death. Saint Paul wrote that sinners, although, "knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them." (Romans 1:32) Sinful men know that they deserve death for their sins; yet, they are so sinful that even knowing the penalty, they sin, and they approve of others doing the same.

If men were naturally good, then there would be no need for God to command them to be good. God gave His law to Israel because men are inclined to sin. Because men are sinful, they do wrong to God, and to each other. They worship other gods; they worship graven images; they take the Lord's name in vain; they do not keep the Sabbath; they do not honor their fathers and mothers; they kill; they commit adultery; they steal; they bear false witness; and they covet. When God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, He promised them life for obedience, and death for disobedience. He said to them, "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD." (Leviticus 18:5; Galatians 3:12) God gave Israel His law because it is holy, and just, and good, and Israel, if they would have kept the law, would have had life. (Romans 7:10–12) All men are sinful, however, and the Israelites were no exception. Because they were sinful, they did not keep the law of God. The law revealed just how sinful they were. (Romans 7:13) Therefore, the law of God, which should have been an instrument for their life, became an instrument for their death. (2 Corinthians 3:7–11) He wrote to the Corinthians, "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law." (1 Corinthians 15:56) Saint Paul described his experience as a devout Jew living under the law: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." (Romans 7:14, 15) He knew that he deserved death for his sins, and he cried out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24)

Whether Jew or Gentile, every man is a sinner who deserves death, and every man knows it. So, every man has reason to fear death. Even Jews under the law lived in bondage to fear. (Romans 8:15) Men feared death, and the power of death was in the hands of the devil. Jesus said that the devil was a murderer from the beginning. (John 8:44) The devil is a murderer. He is a mass murderer. He has committed murder on an incalculable scale. After God made mankind, the devil designed to destroy them. If he could not destroy God, then he would destroy man who is made in the image of God. He approached the woman, and tempted her to sin against God. She succumbed to temptation, and in turn tempted her husband, who also succumbed. When Adam sinned, mankind died. Because of Adam's sin, untold billions of people have died. Adam was not the last man the devil tempted. He has tempted men ever since. The Scriptures say that Job "was perfect and upright, and one

that feared God, and eschewed evil.” (Job 1:1) The devil asked God to permit him to tempt Job, and God gave him permission. He even used Job’s wife to tempt him to curse God. When Jesus was fasting in the wilderness, the devil tempted him to sin. Since Adam’s original sin, the devil held the keys of Hades and death. He not only tempts men to sin, but he accuses them before God. Saint John, in the Revelation, wrote that the devil accused the brethren before God day and night. (Revelation 12:10)

When Adam sinned, God justly punished mankind with death. God is ever merciful, however, and would not leave all mankind in a state of death. He would undo what the devil did. He said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

God sent His own Son into the world to destroy the world of the devil, and it pleased the Son of God to do so. (1 John 3:8; Hebrews 12:2) The Son of God became incarnate so that He might die as a man, and rise from the dead. He did this so that He might atone for the sins of men, and raise them to new life. By His death and resurrection He neutralized the devil. He took away from the devil the keys of death and Hades, and He is now the keeper of the keys. He has given men hope of forgiveness and resurrection, and so taken away their fear of death. Men still die, yes, but the Son of God will raise them from the dead to live forever in joy and happiness. Saint Paul wrote to the Hebrews:

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:14, 15)

Because Adam sinned, all men come into the world spiritually dead, and eventually they die physically. So, there are two corresponding resurrections: one spiritual, and one physical. Jesus said:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” (John 5:25–29)

The Son of God makes some men alive spiritually; He gives them new life in Himself. One day, there will be a final judgment, and the Son of God will raise all men from the dead, and judge them according to their works. Those who have done evil, along with their father the devil, the Son of God will cast into the lake of fire, where they will be tormented forever. (Revelation 14:11) This, Saint John writes, is the Second Death. (Revelation 20:14) Those whom the Son of God has made spiritually alive to do good works will not die the Second Death, but will live forever with Him in bliss. Saint John wrote, “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power.” (Revelation 20:6)

Saint Paul summarized the history of redemption this way:

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death,

by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith, all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:19–28)

If there were no resurrection, there would be no profit in believing in Christ. Worse, the Christian would be the most miserable of men because he would give up his entire life only to die and remain in death. Christ has risen, however, and He is the first in a great harvest of resurrection. By one man, death came into the world, and by one man life came to the world. Adam sinned and died, so every man dies; Jesus obeyed and lived, and so everyone in Him shall be raised from the dead. God raised Jesus from the dead, because Jesus, never having sinned, did not deserve to die. After God raised Jesus from the dead, He gave Him dominion over all things, including life and death. Jesus is even now reigning and subduing all His enemies, by giving them new life. He will continue conquering until the whole world confess Him as Lord, and then, having conquered the world, He will destroy the last enemy, death itself, by raising the dead. Then, having defeated the final enemy, death, and so having established perfect dominion in the world, He will deliver his kingdom to God, His Father, and so all things shall be subject to Him.

God will for His people abolish death, and so abolish all sorrow that accompanies death. Through Isaiah the prophet, God said:

And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isaiah 25:6–9)

Unbelievers fear death because they fear the end of life, and they fear God's judgment. They grieve over death, and their grief is hopeless. They will die, and they will face God's judgment. The Christian is different. The Christian grieves over death because it is punishment for sin, and that is tragic. The Christian grieves over death because it means separation of loved ones, and that is sorrowful. The Christian grieves over death, but he grieves as one who hopes for resurrection, and who has no fear of judgment. He grieves, but he does so knowing that he will be raised to be with the Lord, and with the saints, in joy forever.

Let us understand that death is the punishment for sin. Let us thank God that Jesus has defeated sin and death. Let us rejoice in the hope of resurrection.

Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.