

HAPPY DEATH-DAY!

“A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth” [Eccl. 7:1]

“So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” [1 Cor. 15: 54-55]

The recent terrorist attacks on New York and Washington [11 September 2001] have sharpened people’s consciousness about the reality and inevitability of death. In a twinkling of an eye and in an unexpected manner, Manhattan’s main tourist attraction, the twin towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) that attracts over 50,000 visitors daily, collapsed. Almost 300 people are reported dead and close to 6,500 missing. Virtually every nation in the world has lost some citizens, thereby making the mourning a global affair.

On such occasions, tears flow quite easily and freely. I should know so because, within the last 12 years, I have lost a younger brother (23) and sister-in-law (36), in vehicular accidents, and my father (75). I can, therefore, empathize with family, friends and colleagues who have recently lost a parent, spouse, child, sibling, friend or colleague. It is good to shed tears because they have a therapeutic effect for “blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted” [Matt. 5:4]. Moreover, we are enjoined to “rejoice with them that do rejoice and weep with them that weep” [Rom. 12:15]. In spite of the fact that Jesus planned to raise Lazarus from the dead, He still wept in sympathy with Martha and Mary [Jn 11:35]. However, no matter how long we cry, our tears cannot fill even a small glass! Moreover, death will not stop striking. Sooner than later, it will be our turn and we won’t be able to weep for ourselves.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” [Ps. 30:5]. Therefore, believers need to review their attitude to death for as the Preacher has said the day of death is better than the day of one’s birth [Eccl. 7:1]. So, if we can celebrate our birthdays with so much fanfare, why can’t we also celebrate death better? If we can say “happy birthday!” why can’t we also say “happy death-day!” That is the subject of today’s lesson.

1. What is death?

Death can best be understood in relation to how God created life from the beginning:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul [Gen. 2:7]

Thus, the living human being is a union of a physical body (the dust of the ground) and a spiritual body (God's breath of life). In turn, when the human being is united with God, he becomes a living soul. The physical body without the spiritual body is nothing but mere compost, which can deteriorate rapidly. That is why we are reminded that "the body without the spirit is dead" [**Jam. 2:26**].

After creating Adam and Eve, God put them in the Garden of Eden "to dress it and to keep it" [**Gen. 2:15**]. They were given permission to eat of every tree in the garden except the one of knowledge of good and evil for "in the day that thou eatest thereof **thou shalt surely die**" [**Gen. 2:17**]. So, what followed when they disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit? First, man died a spiritual death, i.e., he became spiritually separated from God. He was driven away from the Garden of Eden [**Gen. 3: 24**]. Second, he would consequently die physically "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" [**Gen. 3:19**]. When, where and how it will finally come is beyond man's control.

How do we know that somebody is physically dead? This is how the Preacher puts it:

*Or ever **the silver cord be loosed** or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, **then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it** [Eccl. 12: 6-7]*

So, when God's breath of life departs, what is left of us is mere vegetable which is put in a casket and buried (or cremated in some cultures). Interestingly, because of the legal and political implications of pronouncing somebody dead (who is not!), medical practitioners are very careful. The UK definition of death admits that breathing and consciousness are the two signs of life. Therefore, when they are both absent, a person can be pronounced medically dead.¹ That is exactly what the word of God has said above.

2. So, when is death mature?

We do hear of "premature death" which suggests that there must be "mature death." In general, when somebody lives up to a "ripe old age" we say that that is not a premature death. But how old is "old"? After all, a one-year old infant and an 80-year old woman are both referred to as old!

¹ David Albert Jones OP, "The UK definition of death," <http://www.linacre.org/death.html>, p.6

God’s promise is longevity of 120 years [Gen. 6:3] and the Psalmist says “the days of our years are three score years and ten {70} and if by means of strength they be fourscore years {80}, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away” [Ps. 90:10]. So, if death occurs after 70 years of age, that is a “mature death.” When David died at 70, he was said to be “old and stricken in age” [1 Kgs 2: 10-11; 1 Kgs 1:1]. All the early Bible figures lived beyond that age [see box]. However, should any of our loved ones die at that age, we would still weep. So, what is wrong with us? Are we weeping for the dead or for ourselves?

Longevity of the early Bible figures	
1. Adam- 930 years [Gen. 5:5]	5. Abraham-175 years [Gen. 25:7]
2. Methuselah-969 years [Gen. 5:26]	6. Isaac-180 years [Gen. 35:28]
3. Noah-950 years [Gen. 9:29]	7. Jacob-147 years [Gen. 47:28]
4. Sarah-127 years [Gen. 23:1]	8. Moses-120 years [Deut. 34:7]

3. Why death makes us sad

The following may be some of the reasons why we mourn our dead:

1) To show our love

These are people with whom we may have shared so many things in common over time, such as parents, spouse, children, friends, etc. Their death means that we will never see them again in human form, and that leaves a painful void. When the widow in the city of Nain lost her only son, “much people of the city was with her” [Lk 7:12]. When Jesus wept at Lazarus’ grave, the Jews who had come to comfort Martha and Mary said, “behold how He loved him!” [Jn 11:36]. When Jonathan was killed in battle, David lamented his death, saying, “I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant has thou been unto me; thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of woman” [2 Sam. 1:26].

2) Loss of breadwinner or pillar of stability

We have come to depend on some people (husbands, wives, children, benefactors, mentors, etc) to provide our material and physical needs, advice and guidance. After Naomi lost her husband and two sons, she was stuck with two daughters-in-law. She said to them, “go, return each to her mother’s house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead and with me... Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept [Ruth 1:8-9]. After Jesus had died on the cross, “all His acquaintance and the women that followed Him from Galilee stood afar off, beholding these things” [Lk 23:49]. In other words, they were sad, confused and disoriented. When Jacob had died, his sons who had earlier sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt became afraid, saying, “Joseph will

peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him” [Gen. 50:15]. The source of their earthly protection was no more. After Samuel’s death, Saul was stranded spiritually because the only prophet who could speak to him boldly was gone [1 Sam. 28:3].

3) Fear of the unknown

When we are young, strong and healthy, it hardly occurs to us that we shall one-day die physically. Then, suddenly, somebody close to us dies. It jolts us because we are vividly reminded that sooner or later it may be our turn. Saul spent the greater part of his reign pursuing David to kill him. Then, one day, he saw death face-to-face when the Philistines closed in on him and his troops in Gilboa. “And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart greatly trembled” [1 Sam. 28:5]. He died in that battle [1 Sam. 31:1-4].

Part of our fear may come from our uncertainty whether the departed has gone to heaven or hell. Could we have preached the gospel to others and neglected those close to us? How would we account to God after our own death? “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” [Eccl. 12: 14].

4. The believer’s attitude to death

To some people, there is no life after death. The Saducees believed that there was no resurrection, angels or spirit [Acts 23:8]. Atheists (those who believe that there is no God) and evolutionists (those who teach that man evolved from animals) will certainly belong to this group that holds the view that life ends with physical death. If that is the case, then, the longer you can remain on earth, the better. Life expectancy (the average age at which a given population dies) becomes an important measure of a nation’s human development.

Of course, long life is God’s blessing as a reward for those who obey Him [Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:2-3]. Some evil people may live long but that is because God “is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” [2 Pet. 3:9]. Good people may also die young and that does not mean that they are not blessed of God! In order to understand what should be our attitude to death, let us examine a few Biblical examples:

1) People who died in infancy

The major killer of infants as they try to adjust to life outside of mother’s protective womb is infection. That is why immunization against common ailments is a fundamental requirement for young children. When children die, it may be due to either carelessness or negligence on the part of their parents or infection. It could also be due to famine, engendered by poverty of the parents, or war conditions.

During the time of Moses' infancy, the Pharaoh ordered that Hebrew male children be killed (by throwing them into the Nile) so as to slow down the growth of the Hebrew population [Ex. 1: 15-22]. Similarly, in his attempt to get rid of the infant child, Jesus, Herod ordered all the children in Bethlehem aged two years and below to be put to death [Matt. 2:16]. In both cases, the children were innocent. On the other hand, the forty-two children who were killed by two she bears had been cursed by Elisha for laughing at him and calling him a "bald head" [2 Kgs 2:23-24]. The son born out of an adulterous relationship between David and Bathsheba died on account of his parents' sin [2 Sam. 12:13-18].

2. Those who died in their youth

Young people (18-35) are among the most active human beings. They are strong, aggressive and ambitious. They have visions and dreams and can't wait to make them come true. They are hardly sick, except it is due to stress or STD (sexually transmitted diseases) or drugs and alcohol. Therefore, the major killer of young people is accident-related. But, look at the young people in the Bible.

Job's children were killed in a storm on account of a contest between God and Satan [Job 1:18-19]. Jonathan was killed in battle along with his father, Saul [1 Sam. 31:2]. John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod for condemning his adulterous marriage to his brother's wife [Matt. 14:3-10], and Stephen was stoned to death for preaching Jesus [Acts 7:54-60]. Even Jesus Himself was around 33 years old when He was crucified. All these were God-fearing people and yet they died young.

3) Those who died at old age

As we grow older, our physical body begins to deteriorate. Like Isaac [Gen. 27: 21] and Jacob [Gen. 48:10], the eyes may have grown dim. Simple chores, like even walking and eating, become an ordeal. At 120, Moses' eyes were not dim "nor his natural forces abated" but he himself told the Israelites "I can no more go out or come in" [Deut. 31:2; Deut. 34:7]. Obviously, in old age, death (by natural causes) becomes an expectation. Yet, Peter was martyred as prophesied by Jesus [Jn 21:18-19]. Church tradition holds that he was crucified upside down while Paul, being a Roman citizen, was beheaded.

Lessons for believers

From the foregoing review, we note that the only right death is the one that glorifies God [Jn 21:19] for "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" [Ps. 116:15]. So, we should not be concerned about when, where or how we die because on Judgment Day, even the sea will give up the dead, so will death and hell [Rev. 20:13].

5. Conclusion

There is life after death and it is lived either in hell or heaven. Man first died spiritually when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Physical death followed because “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” [**Rom. 3:23**], and “your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear” [**Is. 59:2**]. Thank God for His infinite mercy and love. By sending His Only Begotten Son to come in flesh and to die for our sins, man is once more a living soul. But, *only those who have accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour can enjoy this enviable relationship to call God “Father” or “Abba”* [**Jn 3:16-17; Rom. 8:14-16**].

Death can occur at any time, at any age and in any form. That should not worry us. All we need to do is to be spiritually reunited with God through Jesus **before** we experience physical death. Once we have achieved that, we could, like Paul, boast, “for we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle [physical body] were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. *For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven*” [**2 Cor. 5:1-2**]. So, as we look forward to presents and cards on our birthday, we can now more earnestly look forward to our death-day, the day that we shall be taken to heaven. When it occurs, the mourning will be short-lived. Instead, we can say to our departing brother or sister, “happy death-day!”