

A Death to release you

It has been dryly said that there are only two certainties in life – death and taxes. What is therefore surprising is that most of us are reluctant to talk about either of them, especially death. Sometimes we are even afraid to mention the word, preferring to speak of someone's 'passing'. Of all people, Christians ought to be the most comfortable in discussing the topic, for death, though an unwelcome intruder, can bring multiple blessings, which this study will attempt to explore from the Book of Romans.

Icebreaker



Throughout history, many witty epitaphs have been written on gravestones. For example: "I told you I was sick!" Or this one:

*Remember man, as you walk by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so shall you be,
Remember this and follow me."*

How would you like to be remembered by passers-by in the future? Try and write your own epitaph starting with: "Here lies....."

Read: Romans 8:18-27

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

Introduction

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he spoke of how he wished to depart this life and be with Christ:

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

His of course was not a “death wish” in the popular sense in which that phrase is used. But his view on death is refreshingly positive and welcome. There is an absence of fear. There is a longing for something better.

Paul expresses the same sentiment here in his letter to the Romans. Cognizant of his present trials and troubles, he anticipates the glorious future that is the hope of all Christians.

Question 1

(v18) By the term ‘present sufferings’, Paul means the trials associated with living the Christian life, including our imperfect condition, which he describes in the seventh chapter as feeling ‘wretched’ (7:24,25). What are some of your present sufferings?

Question 2

(v19) The ‘children of God’ are Christians. The world does not recognise us yet. There are no halos or shining faces or special marks (apart from love). But one day we shall be so revealed, and creation will be finally set free (v21). (Of course this freedom does not mean to be totally autonomous from God, but for all of creation to enjoy its rightful place under God, and to relate rightly to God.)

(v20) God’s response to the Fall was to impose on this world a law of frustration, where everything is subject to disorder and decay. The Book of Ecclesiastes explores this very phenomenon in the realm of human activity. (You might be interested to know that Greek word Paul uses here, translated as ‘frustration’, is the same word used by the Greek translation of the Old Testament to translate the word ‘vanity’ that dominates the Book of Ecclesiastes. In other words, Paul and Solomon are speaking about the same thing.)



Make a list of five things in this world that you recognise are subject to the inflexible and unrelenting law of frustration. Think of how these things might look like in a new world?

1. earthquakes & tsunamis perfect weather systems
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Theological Reflection 1

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon (who is understood by many to be the author) assembles a gallery of pictures to depict the law of frustration, like this description in the twelfth chapter of growing old:

- ¹ Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them”—
- ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
- ³ when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;
- ⁴ when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint;
- ⁵ when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire
no longer is stirred.
Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets.
- ⁶ Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is
broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well,
⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God
who gave it.

Can you grasp some of the colourful word pictures that Solomon is using to describe the process of aging? (eg The ‘grinders’ in verse 3 are teeth.) Can you relate to any of the word pictures? Can you see in verse 6a how he describes the ‘act of death’? (Picture an ornamented clay bowl bearing oil and a flame, being suspended from the ceiling by a silver cord. Think through what happens to the bowl when the cord is cut.)

In verse 7, death is described as the separation of body and soul.

According to Solomon, where do each of the component parts go?

Why does he advise young people to think about these things in the days of their youth?



Question 3

(v22,23) When Paul speaks here of ‘adoption’ and ‘redemption’, he is speaking of salvation in its *future* tense. In a very real sense, we have these graces now of redemption (being bought with the blood of Christ) and adoption (being welcomed into the family of God). But Paul is speaking about the glory of the resurrection. At present, even as Christians, our bodies are still subject to disease and decay and death.

(v24,25) How are we told to wait for that Day of glory? What makes it so hard to wait?

Quote from Spurgeon

“Half the people in the world are afraid to die. There are some madmen who can march up to the cannon's mouth; there are some fools who rush with bloody

hands before their Maker's tribunal; but most men fear to die. Who is the man that does not fear to die? I will tell you. The man that is a believer. Fear to die! Thank God, I do not. The cholera may come again. I pray God it may not; but if it does, it matters not to me: I will toil and visit the sick by night and by day, until I drop; and if it takes me, sudden death is sudden glory. And so with the weakest saint; the prospect of dissolution does not make you tremble. Sometimes you fear, but oftener you rejoice. You sit down and calmly think of dying. What is death? It is a low porch through which you stoop to enter heaven. What is life? It is a narrow screen that separates us from glory, and death kindly removes it!"

Where are you on the spectrum of "fear of dying"? Petrified >>> Hesitant >>> Phil 1:21-24

Theological Reflection 2

Paul in his great letter to the Romans speaks of many deaths. In fact, five of which are of vital interest to the Christian. Firstly, the 'death of sin's guilt' (5:1), where we are released from the punishment due to sin. Secondly the 'death of sin's control' (6:2), where we are released from the grip and bondage to sin. Thirdly the 'death of sin's presence' (7:24,25), where in heaven we are released from all indwelling sin. Fourthly the 'death of sin's legacy' (8:21), where in heaven we are released from all the fallenness of the world like disability and disadvantage. Fifthly the 'death of sin's power' (8:23 & 1 Corinthians 15), where at Christ's return we are released from the condition of either being separated from our body, or living in a mortal body.



- A. Release from the guilt of sin (Romans 5)
- B. Release from the control of sin (Romans 6)
- C. Release from the presence of sin (Romans 7)
- D. Release from the legacy of sin (Romans 8)
- E. Release from the power of sin (Romans 8 & 1 Corinthians 15)



Why do you think that God chooses not to remove all the effects of sin at once, e.g. at conversion? (Hint: How does a Christian grow in their understanding of God's grace?)

Prayer

As you leave this study and move into a time of prayer, read and reflect upon these comforting words by Henry Baker 1861 in his great hymn, *There is a Blessed Home*:

There is a blessed home
 Beyond this land of woe,
 Where trials never come,
 Nor tears of sorrow flow;
 Where faith is lost in sight,
 And patient hope is crowned,
 And pure and everlasting light
 Its glory throws around.

Look up, ye saints of God!
 Nor fear to tread below
 The path your Saviour trod
 Of daily toil and woe!
 Wait but a little while
 In uncomplaining love!
 The Father's own most gracious smile
 Shall welcome you above.