

THE ANSWER TO DEATH

by Ray C. Stedman

I have always been glad that, in California, Easter comes at the most beautiful time of the year. I have just left wind-swept Kansas, with a stopover at the Denver airport where I found myself in the midst of a howling late Spring blizzard. Snow was falling heavily, the ground was covered with it, the landscape was bleak and wintry and barren. And it was cold! We left there and flew west into the beautiful sunshine and glorious springtime of California. In some such way, the resurrection of Jesus confronts us with a Springtime of hope and life, in contrast to the darkness and coldness of death.

One of the strange phenomena of our day is the way that we, in this latter part of the 20th century, are returning to the fashions and activities of the late 19th century -- going back to the Gay Nineties. We men are growing beards and mustaches, and dressing in the fashions of nearly a century ago. When I first wore the outfit I now have on, somebody told me I looked like a Mississippi riverboat gambler! Another of the 19th century practices which is returning today is an interest in and preoccupation with the theme of death. Someone has pointed out that in the 19th century sex was a taboo subject, one which was not to be mentioned in public, nor even in private. Not much was published on sex. Death was the theme which occupied people then. There were many books written on the subject and a lot of studies about it. Of course, in the 20th century sex has been the theme, and death is something which one doesn't discuss in public. But in just the last year or so we are seeing a return to the subject of death. We have satiated ourselves with the subject of sex -- hardly anything is left to be said about it which has not been said. Perhaps for that reason men are returning once again to an investigation of the theme of death. This was highlighted by the publication in the past year of six serious studies by secular writers on the theme of death. Perhaps feeling the lessening force of religious faith in America, these secular writers are seeking to come to terms with death -- apart from revelation.

Everyone knows that there are only two inevitabilities in life: death and taxes. The supreme question today, it seems, is not so much what you believe about Easter, but whether or not you have filed your income tax return. At least that is what many think. And so on this day before the IRS filing deadline, it is surely appropriate to consider the more inevitable of those two -- not taxes, but death. For resurrection has no meaning if you do not view it against the background of death.

I once saw an artist's painting of the "descent from the cross" -- the taking down of the body of Jesus from the cross. I was struck by the way he had captured the fact of death in the body of Jesus: the gaping mouth, the protruding teeth, the glazed eyes -- he was indeed dead. One day I stood by the naked body of a teenage boy who had taken his own life. As I stood looking at that body, dreading the moment when I had to go back upstairs and try to give some comfort to his mother, I felt what the disciples must have felt as they took the body of Jesus down. I was angry. I felt the stupidity of it, the waste of youth and beauty which death represents. What an insult to the human spirit death is! How we fight it in our thinking! How senseless and stupid it appears to be to cut off all the worth of life. Yet how frustrated and helpless we are before it.

Tom Howard, who is a professor at Gordon College of Theology and Missions in Boston, Massachusetts, has captured something of the way humanity feels in the presence of death, in these eloquent words:

Like a hen before a cobra, we find ourselves incapable of doing anything at all in the presence of the very thing that seems to call for the most drastic and decisive action. The disquieting thought, that stares at us like a face with a freezing grin, is that there is in fact nothing we can do. Say what we will, dance how we will, we will soon enough be a heap of ruined feathers and bones, indistinguishable from the rest of the ruins that lie about. It will not appear to matter in the slightest whether we met the enemy with equanimity, shrieks, or a trumped-up gaiety -- there we will be.

Something of that sense of inevitability, of helplessness, of hopelessness grips us all when we confront death, whether it be our own or that of a loved one. I want to share also with you the words of a distraught father who is telling us of his reaction to the death of his son. He says,

The rays of a late morning South Carolina sun struck me full on the face as I stepped through the door of the hospital. The squint of my eyes, however, was not occasioned by the rays of the sun; it was the visible display of the anguish and despair that wracked my very life. I had spent several hours with my sobbing wife. Now I was about to keep the appointment that would prove to be the emotional climax of the day my world collapsed. On my way to the appointment I stopped at a diner to have a cup of coffee and to bolster my courage. I was oblivious to everything except the appointment that awaited me. Leaving the diner, I made my way to a large white house, located on a corner in Columbia, South Carolina. I followed the owner into a large room, where he soon left me alone. I slowly made my way across a thick rug on the floor to a table on the far side of the room. Upon that table was a white box. I stood before that white box for endless eternities before I finally summoned enough courage to look over the top and down into the white box, at the lifeless body of my son. At that sight my world collapsed. I would have given up all of my academic and athletic awards. I would have given up the prestigious executive training program that I was engaged in with one of the largest international oil companies. I would have given anything. For the first time in my life, I had come to a hurdle I could not clear. My world collapsed.

Surely that was something of the feeling which possessed the hearts and minds of Mary and Martha when they were facing the death of their brother Lazarus. John tells us in the eleventh chapter of his Gospel that they sent for Jesus at that moment, but that he, in some strange way, did not hurry to their rescue but waited for two days, until he was sure that Lazarus was dead. When he came, he saw them weeping and mourning, and he caught the sense of anguish and heartbreak in their lives. John tells us that as Jesus watched them, he wept with them. Twice in the account John says that he was greatly moved as he felt the hopelessness and the anguish that death causes. But it was there that he said to Martha those words which have been quoted at a million gravesides ever since:

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" {John 11:25-26 RSV}

And Martha, unable to rise to the full revelation that he had given, said, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world," {John 11:27 RSV}. That is as far as her faith could go. But those words of his have stood as a lighthouse in the midst of the darkness of death for all the centuries that have followed. Many have clung to them as they themselves have come to the hour of their death. "I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." There is great mystery in those words. I do not think anyone fully understands them. Indeed, they sound a bit contradictory. How can Jesus say "if he die," and at the same time say "he shall never die"? How does one die, and yet not die? We do not fully understand. Our Lord seems to intimate that death can come, and still not really be death. He also seems to indicate that some will never die. Perhaps scholars are justified in feeling that here he was suggesting what Paul later states will be the experience of those who are alive and remain when the Lord shall return. But whatever he means, there are two things very clear in what Jesus said at that moment:

First, he himself is the total master of death in all its forms. "I am the resurrection and the life," he said. Death, in the presence of Jesus, is no longer death. As Paul would later say, it loses its sting; the grave loses its victory. Death, in the hands of Jesus, is robbed of all its terror. And though it may take an outward form, it is no longer death as we think of it. For in the presence of life, death can no longer be death.

Jesus, you remember, most often called it merely "sleep." When Jairus' daughter lay dead, and Jesus came, he looked at her and said, "She's asleep," {cf, Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52}. They laughed at him. But he called her back to life. And when word reached him that Lazarus was dead, he said to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep," {John 11:11a RSV}. They said that was good, for then he would recover. Jesus said plainly, "No, Lazarus is dead," {John 11:14b}. But just as we do not fear sleep, those who are trusting him do not need to fear death. And within moments, Lazarus himself, dead four days and already stinking, as Martha bluntly put it, was restored to them and was walking, talking, and living among them again. Jesus, the

master of death, says, "I am the resurrection." What he points out is that the answer to death is not the resurrection, but Jesus. Jesus himself is the answer. It is not merely the fact or the hope of a resurrection. "I am the resurrection and the life." What he means is that no one can hope to escape death unless he is related to the conqueror of death, Jesus of Nazareth.

All through the centuries, men have tried to penetrate the veil of death, have tried to guess at what lies beyond. Not only Christian writers, but secular writers, and members of other religious faiths have tried to set forth what lies beyond death. Even the most pagan have tried to find at least some hope. For the human spirit resists the idea that all we are will be cut off and ended -- annihilated, exterminated -- at death. Somehow it does not make sense. It insults us. And so the human spirit is always ready to grasp at the slightest straw of hope that there is something beyond the grave. Perhaps it is described as a kind of nirvana, as an experience apart from the body, as some mystical, "spiritual" experience. There are many guesses at what lies beyond the grave.

But Jesus points out that, though there is resurrection beyond the grave, unless it is resurrection in relationship to him, it is not worth experiencing. For he himself tells us that there is a resurrection unto life, and there is one unto judgment. There is a resurrection of the just, and a resurrection of the unjust. The Bible seems to indicate clearly that after death we are all resurrected in one way or another, that surely no one ceases to exist at death. That is the clear and unequivocal statement of the Scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testaments. But the point our Lord is making here at the tomb of Lazarus, and which comes to us with such sharp significance on this Easter morning, is that only in Christ does death lose its sting. Only then does the grave forego its victory. Death has spread its slimy fingers over our race from the very beginning, from Adam right on down to the present day. Like many others, I have stood beside many graves, have seen the heartbreak and anguish that death causes. I have stood beside the beds of those who were dying. And only in the case of those whose faith was fastened upon these words of Jesus, and upon him as a person, have I ever seen light and victory and trust and confidence in the hour of death. Every individual awaits the certain coming of death. That is something no one else can do for us; we have to do it alone. Earth is rapidly becoming one vast graveyard, as generation after generation slips away. But there is one place where death has been met, and grappled with, and driven back, and it is that great theme which we celebrate today. If, by faith in the promise of Jesus, you, or I, stand with him in that place where he defeated death, then death need have no terrors for us.

I could recount for you many instances of those whose faith has triumphed in the hour of death:

- D. L. Moody, the great evangelist of the past century, said on his deathbed, "Earth is receding; heaven is approaching. This is my crowning day!"
- Many have felt that way, as they have come to the place of death. I have been at funerals which were so triumphant that people went away with spirits lifted up and faces radiant, as they sensed the triumph over darkness and gloom and despair and hopelessness of death, through the words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life."
- And when Martin Luther's daughter, Magdalena, was fourteen years old, she was taken sick and lay dying. Luther prayed, "O God, I love her so. But nevertheless, thy will be done." He turned to his daughter and said, "Magdalena, would you rather be with me, or would you rather go and be with your Father in heaven?" And the girl said, "Father, as God wills." Luther held her in his arms as she passed away, and as they laid her to rest, he said, "Oh my dear Magdalenachen, you will rise and shine like the stars in the sun. How strange to be so sorrowful, and yet to know that all is at peace, that all is well." It is this hope in the hour of death which the resurrection brings before us.

Now, there are many other truths which gather about the theme of Jesus risen from the dead. There are many other aspects of it which touch us while we are still alive. I have always regretted that the world at large oftentimes seems to see and hear the gospel as though it is a message of hope only in the hour of death. But, of course, it is far more than that. Jesus died in order that he might:

- Live in us now,
- Govern and control our life, and
- Release to us that remarkable manifestation of power to live, and act, and do, and be --

which, in the Scriptures, is called "resurrection power." Paul speaks of it in many places: In Philippians 3 he

says, "... that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;" {Phil 3:10 KJV}. And all through the New Testament you find that the resurrection of Jesus means something tremendous to us while we are alive. It is not something merely for the hour of death. Nevertheless, I do not want to minimize the great truth that when you come to death, as all of us must -- the inevitable occurrence which awaits us, every one without exception, when, alone, you have to face that hour -- then the only place of hope is in these marvelous words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life." There is no hope apart from that.

I know that this may sound like a morbid subject. But I also know that there is nothing which will make the resurrection of Jesus more real to you than to contemplate it against the background of your own soon-coming death. For you cannot escape, and neither can I. One day we must face this realistic fact which breaks into our existence whether we like it or not. And in that hour, the only hope is that you already have established, by faith, a relationship with the Lord of death, the Prince of life, and in that hour you are trusting in what he has promised to do. If you have established that relationship, you can face death, as many hundreds and thousands and millions have, without any terror at all -- in fact, with a gentle anticipation, as Paul himself put it: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better," {Phil 1:23 RSV}. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and death has no terrors at all. As you look forward to that time, I would urge upon you that you establish now the relationship which will rob that moment of its sting and take away the terror of death. The Lord Jesus said that he has made himself available by means of his resurrection to all who are open to him. He put it in these words: "Behold, I stand at the door [the door of your life, of your heart] and knock; if any one hear my voice and open the door [You must do that; no one can open it for you.], I will come in to him," he promises, "and will live with him [and more, die with him, and be risen again with him]." That is his promise. "I will live with him and eat with him, and we shall be one." {cf, Rev 3:20}.

That is the great promise of Easter. This day has no meaning if it does not mean that (at least that) to you, if it is not the means by which you find the answer to the terror of your own death. But, if you have come to that place of faith and trust, how wonderful it is! As the old song puts it, "There's a light in the valley of death now for me, since Jesus came into my heart."

I trust that any who have not yet come to know Jesus Christ as their living Lord and Savior will open the door of their life to him. By just a breathed word of prayer you can say, "Lord Jesus, come into my life. Be my Lord. Take me through the valley of the shadow of death."

And he will answer, as he promised to do: "I will come in to him."

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for the promise of your Word. How many millions today are resting in perfect confidence and faith that this Word is true, and will carry us through all the darkness of death. Thank you for the support it gives in the hour of the deaths of others whom we love, for the comfort you can give to every aching heart in that time. And may those who have not yet passed from death unto life do so, even now. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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