

Death Isn't Terrible



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By:

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THE Letter was indignant and at the same time entirely honest. It sailed into me with clenched fists, for the writer was angry, puzzled, annoyed with me, and perplexed with God.

I had recently written a little piece about the big earthquake in Chile. I mentioned the horrible fact that the great Catholic country had been torn open by an earth tremor that was less a tremor and more a convulsion and that, as a consequence, churches had been destroyed and some thousands of people killed. All this I used as prelude to an appeal to American Catholics to play good neighbor to our Catholic fellow-Americans below the Isthmus.

The letter, it seems, was written after that piece had been read. But the writer paid little attention to my appeal for charity. He picked out quite another factor.

“Oh, yes,” went the letter, after a preamble, “I’ll be happy to contribute to suffering Chilean Catholics. But what puzzles me is how a good God can wipe out thousands like that in a frightful earthquake. Men can be charitable—are in fact obliged to be—but God can shake the earth and hurl thousands headlong into their graves. It doesn’t make sense. Death like that is a terrible thing.”

Back to Egypt

I read this letter with a sharp throwback to another letter I had received some years ago. That letter came from a non-Catholic young woman. She had for some time been flirting with the idea of becoming a Catholic and, though personally I knew her but slightly, our correspondence had assumed considerable bulk as back and forth we argued the claims of God and the position of the Church. Finally, I got a brief note from her. It simply said, “Maybe I would be more interested in religion and the Church if it were not for Pharaoh’s soldiers.”

That stumped me. What in the world had the soldiers of the long-dead kings of Egypt to do with this girl's finding faith in God and His Church? It sounded as silly as if she had said, "I'd be a Catholic except for the fact that grass and Easter eggs are such a funny shade of green," or "I'd accept God if it weren't for my worries about the neglected penguins of the South Pole." Pharaoh's soldiers?.....Faith?.....Whatever was the connection?

My answer was a politely phrased demand for further enlightenment. That came very promptly.

"God is Cruel"

I can't accept a God," she stormed, in too flippant a form, "who would do the cruel thing that your God did to the poor Egyptian army. Oh, I'm perfectly willing to admit that the Pharaoh was probably a bad 'un. He was a tyrant and an oppressor and a villain. He treated the Jewish people like dogs, and he deserved everything God did to him. So, when he got himself nicely right in the midst of the Red Sea and God blanketed him under the waves, God did the right thing!

"But what about his soldiers?

"They probably had no resentment or grudge against the Jews. They got their orders to pursue the fleeing Israelites, and they had to obey—or else. I'm sure it never occurred to any of them that they were doing wrong. They probably were entirely guiltless of any sin. And what happened? They get into the midst of the Red Sea, and suddenly God drowns them all along with their king. I could see why God drowned the guilty Pharaoh. But I can't believe in a God who wiped out a lot of soldiers whose only crime was that they obeyed orders and who were plunged into death in the prime of life and with not a chance to save themselves. Frankly, I don't like your God."

Resentment Against Death

You see though they were very differently phrased, the two letters really were much alike. In substance they both maintained that death was a terrible thing. But God is the author of death. Therefore, God is a sort of mass killer, to put it in gangster language.

Of course, the letters interested me chiefly because they are typical of a widely held point of view. A popular novel, "Grapes of Wrath," describes the attitude that a certain group of poverty-stricken Americans have toward death. If an old man died, they did not much mind his resting in a pauper's grave in a potter's field. After all, he had known the joys of life; he had tasted some of its good things; he had at least lived. But when a child died, everyone, friends and neighbors and chance acquaintances, contributed to pay for a real funeral. The poor child, they thought, had gotten nothing out of life, so at least they would give him a fine funeral. Since he had been cheated of everything else that life could offer, they were determined that he would not be cheated of a coffin, a marked grave, and the pomp and circumstance of a dignified burial.

Angry with God

Sometimes one is amazed to find how many people have given up God simply because of the death of a person they loved. A young husband loses his wife. He lifts his fist and curses the cruel God who snatched this girl in her beauty he kneels to Him no more. A mother holds her dead child against her heart and feels that heart turn bitter in hatred. She can no longer love the God who killed her baby.

That note runs through much of modern literature. Death is a cruel, vicious, relentless enemy. It stalks the human breed and, in the end, with one last hyena laugh, claims its victim; a God responsible for so ugly an enemy must Himself be ugly.

So, you walk through cemeteries that are supposed to contain the bodies of buried Christians, and you find there the most frankly pagan of death the

destroyer. Death is symbolized by a broken column; life has been smashed and ruined by the blow of cruel death. Death is an extinguished torch—the light and warmth and brightness of life ended. At the tomb stands a weeping angel, his—more frequently her—head bowed in hopeless grief. Death is presented snatching the chisel from the hands of the great sculptor. Death binds the eyes that once were bright in love and anticipation. Death is the grim reaper, who cackles in the back of his skeleton throat as he swings his scythe. Wheat and weeds and summer flowers all fall as his cruel blade swings through the once-golden fields.

The End

That note of hopelessness in the face of death runs right through the words of modern writers. Another novel of a few years ago, “And Tell of Time,” is concerned with upper-class people in the southern United States—all of them, or most of them, Episcopalians—of Civil War days. The book is sufficiently long to make it necessary for a fair number of the characters to die. They die, and that’s pretty much that. Their days are done. Their story is sealed when the spade gently pats the last black clod of earth on the grave. They lived richly or poorly, splendidly, or cheaply. But the outstanding fact is that they have lived, they have died, and with death their story is cut short, a history without a real conclusion.

Man is always going to think about and be troubled by death. He will always look around for reasons that will make death perhaps a little less terrible. Thornton Wilder did this in his very successful play, “Our Town.” The last scene is in a graveyard, the sad little cemetery of Grover’s Corners in New Hampshire.

Hope Speaks

The stage manager, who is really the principal character of the play, leans against the proscenium and, after telling us what people are buried there, says, with an obvious effort at reassurance:

“Now I’m going to tell you some things you know already. You know them as well as I do. But you don’t take them out and look at them very often. I don’t care what they say with their mouths—everybody knows that SOMETHING is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars everybody knows in their bones that SOMETHING is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people who ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it.”

That is consoling. But once Mr. Wilder lets the dead in the cemetery take over, we begin to think less highly of that eternal existence that follows death. His dead are a little too like the pale, flitting ghosts of a spiritualistic seance. They don’t seem to be able to get away from the cold earth of the grave. They certainly are taking a lot of time to find the Christian heaven.

Some Reassurance

Still that play is just one modern attempt to prove that death isn’t terrible. One might expect it from the author of “The Bridge of San Luis Rey.” You remember that novel was the record of what seemed a horrible catastrophe. A group of people on a bridge were plunged to their death when that bridge fell. The onlookers and the relatives cried out, “How cruel of God!” But a little probing into the lives of those people proved that God had chosen precisely the right moment for each of them to die. They had had enough of life. They had reached or passed life’s climax. In each case, death was merely the crowning of a life quite completed, an existence nicely rounded off.

Kindly Death

Another attitude taken to convince us moderns that death is not terrible is the one found in those successful plays “Death Takes a Holiday” and “On Borrowed Time.” If death stopped short his operations, runs the dramatic thesis, the world would be a horrible place. Death is not really terrible; death is merciful, gentle, kind. The earth is full of misery and unhappiness, and death, dear and benevolent death, releases men and women. If death stopped, went on a holiday, or got caught in the branches of some magical tree, the poor old woman struggling in the last stages of cancer would have to continue on in her torture; the man smashed in the machinery at the plant couldn’t find merciful release in death but would be obliged to continue in the agony of pain; the old man tired of the load of his years could not lay down his load in endless rest; the beautiful girl along whose path lie a thousand ugly, vicious things would have to walk that path from which death might chivalrously have snatched her.

In other words, death is kindly, not because what he gives is dear and beautiful, but because like some black-armored knight he rescues men and women from the dragons and racks and dungeons and torture chambers of earth. Death is merciful because death is the end of this annoying, oppressive, wearisome, agonizing life.

Personally, I find all those reasons sadly poor for thinking of death as a great benefactor. Release from life is often an apparent blessing. But mere release from life is a turning out of the light, and I’m not one to think that darkness is charming or beautiful or warm.

An Old Fear

Now, no real Christian ever thinks that death is terrible.

The modern viewpoint on death is not modern at all. It is as old as paganism. It’s a viewpoint that would have been understood by the ancient Babylonians, who clung to life because it was warm, and dreaded the grave because it was

cold, and looked forward to the future with troubled eyes because it was so vague and uncertain. It's a viewpoint with which a Roman Emperor could have sympathized entirely. Death was a mighty enemy, the one enemy his sentries could not drive away from the palace door, the one foe who would snatch the laurel wreath from his forehead and tumble him down like an unbalanced sack of grain on to the mosaic floor of his throne room. A pagan mother holding her dead child in her arms, certain that she would never see that child again, would understand the bitterness in the heart of the modern mother who had lost her child. Dead love was, for a pagan, a love finished and done with.

Oh, there was something behind the grave. They were all sure of that. They knew that they would live. But how? In what form? What assurances had they that life was worth having? What certainty of seeing their beloved again, of caring and being loved, even should there be in that misty land of the shades such a reunion?

The unknown, the uncertain, is almost always terrible. What lay beyond death's felling stroke was unknown and uncertain. So, the pagan looked on death and turned away to forget, if possible, the unforgettable, to brush aside with war or work or pleasure or money or friendship or love the gaunt figure that finally caught and pulled with relentless insistence the nervous hand.

Only Earth

The pagan only knew this earth. And death took all of that. So, the poets sighed wistfully as they looked upon the calm, gorgeously beautiful woman and thought of her inevitable decay. The rich man sat among his treasures and watched each opening of the door that might admit the beckoning figure of death, who would snatch him away from all this comfortable, reassuring wealth. The scholar tried to crowd his days and nights with learning as there would be no further learning when his brain chilled at death's icy touch. The mother held her children in fiercely protective arms afraid that, if death once caught them, they would be gone from her forever.

And all the time around the pagan the flowers wilted and died, summer went down into the symbolic death of winter, bells tolled for the passing soul, the face of the young bride became the withered mask of death--expectant age, the strong man stumbled for the last time and dropped out of sight into the earth, the slaves stood above the master before whom lately they had cowered and knew that they were now the strong ones—for they had life, and he was now a slave to death.

All the phrases that paganism has constantly associated with death are phrases of horror. Death was inevitable. They hated it. It took away from them the dear richness of earth. Be they the pagans of yesterday who craned their necks at newly-erected pyramids or walked back from the funeral of Alexander or the assassination of Julius Caesar, or the pagans of to-day who ride in eight-cylinder cars or mount the lecture platforms of great universities—pagans have always seen in death the enemy, the robber, the relentless foe of man's happiness.

The Important "IF"

Well, obviously enough, IF earth were all, then death would be terrible. Or, IF the future held only the wraithlike existence expected by paganism, death would be cruel.

Christ caught that viewpoint when He said that death comes like a thief.

Christ was thinking of the unexpectedness of death. Certainly no one ever expects the arrival of a thief. Certainly no one ever expects the arrival of death. The thief prowls around the darkened house. He finds a slightly open window. Noiselessly he slides it upward. Quietly he throws a leg over the sill, pauses for a moment above the quiet room, and drops like a cat upon the carpet. He has come, and the family sleeps on—unconscious of his arrival.

Christ, master of words whereby a compressed sentence would give an entire picture, could have selected no more perfect figure of speech to describe the unexpected coming of death.

The Great Thief

As far as the earth is concerned, Christ was quite in agreement with the pagans. Death was and always will be a thief. He steals from the rich their riches and from the poor their poverty. He strips the strong of their strength and the weak of their last faint struggle. He tears away the mask of beauty and the shield of power. From the famous he steals the fame of which they were so sure. He erases names from tombs and records from history. He asks the householder for his newly erected house. He forecloses his mortgage on the factory. He takes skills from the artists and voices from the singers.

Simple Consequences

Trite? Stale? The sort of thing that everyone has said because everyone has known it from repeated experience? I quite agree.

But all this I merely repeat because if earth were all then death would be terrible, as all thieves are terrible when no bars can keep them out and no law can clap them into safe confinement and no vigilance is strong against their skillful depredations.

But the simple reasoning of the man who has belief is very different. There is God—God, Who is Our Father.

That God has placed in our soul the desire for perfect happiness.

He has guaranteed that we will find that perfect happiness in the immortality that is ours.

For we shall find that death is only the beginning of life.

Our real life starts when death, having opened briefly the black door that is the grave, has ushered us into the presence of Our Father Who is in heaven.

The Ugly Obverse

All that of course is the exact opposite of what the pagan believes and the doubter cherishes as the truth about man's destiny.

The unbeliever, the pagan of today who has given up all faith and hope of anything beyond the horizon of this life, has a reasoning process that is brief, ugly, and terrifying.

There is no God.

Hence for man there is no immortality, no life after death.

Therefore, death is the end. It is the full stop. It is the last chord in the unfinished symphony of man's discordant existence. It is the period placed at the conclusion of one installment of a serial story that has no final chapter. It is the cutting of the fragile thread by which man hangs suspended between two places of blackness. It is the dropping of a man's body into a deep cut in the earth. It is the dropping of man's personality into the swift quicklime of human forgetfulness.

If this is true, then death is terrible.

Fear Without Reasons

I am alarmed to think that some people who have faith share the horrible pagan idea that death is terrible, when their faith and their reason should lead them to such an entirely different conclusion.

Let's look at the Christian viewpoint once more. I say "once more" because I am frank enough to admit that there is nothing even slightly new in what I have to say. I am repeating what civilized man has known for almost two thousand years—Christ's revelation about death—and what the Jewish people knew for twice that long, though in less perfect form and without the added clarity that came from Christ.

I repeat it simply because I know that we Christians live surrounded by pagan foggy thinking and emotional despair. We hear pagans call death terrible.

We unconsciously echo their bleak hopelessness in the depths of our baptized souls. Catholics, incredibly enough, do just this. As for non-Catholics, ...

Turning From Death

Well, just the other day I had what I felt was a tragic experience. Nothing external happened. It was just a case of running suddenly smack into a state of mind that left me a little sick. The lady is charming. Occasionally she attends a protestant church. She is, of course, a Christian.

Said I, suddenly, in the course of the conversation, "May I ask you a question?" She was graciously willing. "Do you ever think of life after death?"

She looked frankly puzzled.

"Don't you ever," I persisted, "think of the day when this life of yours will end and your life beyond this life will begin?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No," she said, with quiet emphasis. "I don't like to think of death. I never do."

So, we turned to a subject that was less unpleasant to her than the subject of death.

Christ Looks at Death

The whole Christian viewpoint should be colored by the sunrise of Easter. The thing that made death cease to be terrible was the most terrible death the world has ever seen. That was of course the death of Christ, the death that was meant to end forever the terror of death.

Christ's prophetic words about His own death are important and impressive.

"I have," said He, "a baptism wherewith I am to be baptized; and how am I straitened until it be accomplished?"

That word straitened meant literally to be torn apart. Christ looking forward to His death saw it as a baptism of blood. His blood would pour over His body as the waters of baptism flow over the body of a penitent. He would actually be washed in blood. Yet He was torn apart with eagerness for that death. It was as if He could hardly wait for it.

Now the death of Christ was meant primarily to be the means of freeing us from sin. But most importantly Christ knew that His death could be the means of taking the horror out of death. He had to die for love of us—His guilty brothers and sisters. He had to stand at the place of execution, disguised as the criminal who should be suffering capital punishment. But He was also the brave adventurer facing the enemy death and disarming him of his fearsome weapons, changing him from a dreaded foe into the beautiful messenger from God to His exiled children.

Death at Its Worst

So, Christ quite deliberately died by the most awful kind of death. He chose to share our common fate of death. But He chose the sort of death that mankind could rightly regard as particularly terrible. He was to die as a rejected failure. In dying, He was to suffer the most excruciating pain. His death was to be a major catastrophe. It was to be like a horrible drowning only He would be drowned in His own blood and sunk deep in that hatred that would sweep Him up and strand Him on the cross in a tidal wave. He was to die in the midst of a frightful storm. The earth was to split and the heavens grow black and angry around Him—symbol of the storm of human passion and resentment and ingratitude that broke in full fury over His body.

Might any man pray to be delivered from such a death. History, writing that page into its record, was to regard that particular death as uniquely terrible in all human experience.

Victory Over Death

Yet, Saint Paul, looking at that death as he moved with conscious certainty towards his own martyrdom, could cry out in triumphant joy. Yes, Christ had died. Yes, His death had been indescribably terrible. But, because of that death, all death was swallowed up in victory. The enemy death was conquered. “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”

The most terrible death in history ended forever the terror of death. The most frightful human catastrophe proved that death is not a catastrophe. Christ walked up the hill of Calvary, paused for a few hours on its top to struggle with death and bend death to His will, and then walked straight on into the sunrise that is Easter.

He passed through the fiasco of a criminal's death and emerged the glorified Savior of the world. He lay briefly in the tomb of cold death, to emerge into the radiant glory of the Resurrection.

We Follow His Way

The entire Christian world from that day to this has known that the path He trod was the path He prepared for all His followers. They too might walk the abbreviated road of their Calvary. They would certainly stand face to face with black death. They would know the cold dungeon of the tomb. But they had the Christlike certainty that immediately beyond all that was their own Easter. They would follow the risen Christ into the full joy of their own resurrection.

Death was no longer terrible. Christ had laid all its terrors. The grave was no longer ugly. it was the short subterranean passageway that went down by shallow steps into the earth only to mount in steep incline up to the throne of God.

The Martyr's Smile

That was the reason why the martyrs smiled when the lions, their jaws lathering and their claws unsheathed for the kill, bounded into the arena. That is why they rushed eagerly towards the stake as if it were a bright torch lighting their way home. The swift descent of the executioner's sword served only to cut the chains that tied them to the earth of their exile. They smiled at the judge who solemnly pronounced their death sentence, thanking him for this short cut to their Father's mansion.

They listened with understanding and relish to those mysterious words of Christ, "He that shall lose his life for Me shall find it." They were to lose a life that was bound by a few brief months to find a life bound by the eternity of God. They were to lose the uncertain loves of life to find the immutable love of God's angels and saints. Perishable beauty might be snatched from their dying eyes; those eyes would shortly open on beauty that was divine. They might lose the life of their body yet they were winning the glorious and immortal life of their soul.

If anyone had suggested that their death was terrible, they would have laughed in happy amazement. Somewhere behind the form of the executioner they saw the waiting Christ, His arms extended in welcome. The door of their opening dungeon led, not to an arena, but across a narrow strip of bloody sands to the steps that mounted to the opening gates of God's eternal city.

A Thwarted Thief

Christian belief knows that death is a thief, but a clumsy unskilled thief that cannot steal anything worthwhile.

The ages have never forgotten that honestly dull, old morality play, "Everyman." Season after season it is repeated in some theatre somewhere—sometimes in shambling, amateurish fashion, sometimes under the skillful direction of a Max Reinhardt. According to our modern standards, the creaking morality play lacks movement and dramatic punch. It is wordy. It

drags. It is not clearly concerned with any defined person but with symbolic characters—Wealth, Pleasure, Power, Good Deeds, and a universal person called Everyman.

But the play tells the truth about death. And audiences—whatever the degree of their sophistication, whatever their background—drink in that truth with wistful eagerness.

You may recall in the play, Death steals from Everyman everything to which he clings. Wealth goes, and Power and Pleasure, and Youth and Beauty, and Strength. But Death cannot take Everyman's soul. Death cannot take his Good Deeds. They go with him through death into the land that lies ahead.

Going Home

To a Christian, death should be a beautiful thing. Death is the trumpeter who stands on the battlements of God and sounds the call that summons the Christian home. Death is the messenger who comes to the son and the daughter that have been long absent from their Father's house and says, "It is time now to return. Your Father is waiting."

The lovely story of Cardinal Wiseman's death is typical of the way Christians regard death. His biographers tell us that the old cardinal, surrounded by his ecclesiastical family, lay dying. Apparently, the deaf old gentleman did not realize that he was near the end so a whispered consultation made the watchers decide that they had better break the news gently but emphatically.

They whispered, as soothingly as possible, "Your Eminence, all men must die. Your time seems to be drawing near."

The cardinal turned shining eyes upon them. "Yes," he cried, with sudden strength, "I know."

They looked at one another in shocked surprise. Was the old cardinal perhaps out of his mind? This was a solemn moment, with death lifting his hand to knock at the door. They were worried. Could it be that he was already delirious?

“Your Eminence,” they whispered, “how do you feel?”

“Feel?” How strong the voice sounded! How full of resurgent youth! “I feel like a schoolboy going home for the holidays!”

This was a Christian facing death.

Comparisons

Life is a journey, says the tritest of comparisons. Correct. But says Shakespeare, journeys end in lovers’ meetings. Life would be horrible indeed if it were a journey that ended with lovers’ parting and eternal separation. But the journey doesn’t end that way. It ends in the greatest of lovers’ meeting—the meeting of God and His beloved sons and daughters—the meeting of Christ the Bridegroom with the souls He loves unto death and means to love throughout eternal life.

Life is a battle, says another trite comparison. Still correct. Wouldn’t it be hideous if paganism were right and the end of the battle found us all—victor and vanquished, hero and coward, commander and private—dead on the field of battle? But the battle doesn’t end that way. Death is the victorious soldier’s glorious entrance under the triumphal arch. Death is the final step in the parade, the step that brings the fighter directly into the presence of Christ, his grateful king and leader.

Victory is Crowned

To me death has always seemed a vivid drama of ultimate victory. The brave soldier of Jesus Christ, faithful to the commission given him in Confirmation, fights the good fight to the very end. He has had plenty of wounds. Though he has driven back the army of evil, often the army of evil has had him with his back against the wall and his arm wearily warding off what threatened to

be a death stroke. He has known the privations that come with a campaign He has felt in the pit of his stomach the sickening convulsion of cowardice. He has known moments when it seemed that his cause was lost and the enemy was sweeping on to complete victory.

But he kept on fighting that only fight for which there is neither treaty nor armistice, the fight that every man and woman wages on the battlefield of their secret soul.

Then the brave soldier falls. But the blow is the blow of death and not of mortal sin. And over his head sounds a trumpet blowing, not the Last Post, but Reveille. He is dead, yet he is on his feet. His body lies cold and motionless, but his soul swings along paths of glory. This is no grim trudging back to the trenches, to some position that he must hold at whatever cost to himself. This is no stolid marching into another battle. This is the triumphant parade that follows victory.

Welcome

The gates that are the grave swing open. The bright light breaks about him. Palms of victory wave over his head. But he has no time, no attention to waste on that. For on the steps of the throne, arms outstretched, a smile on His royal face, stands his waiting King. The soldier of Christ becomes sharply conscious of his wounds, of his torn uniform, of the moments when he was not brave in battle, of the times when he was a coward at heart and ready to go over to the enemy. He hesitated, but only for a second. How can he hesitate in the face of the welcome that he sees before him.

He falls on bended knee. A sword swings through the air and touches his shoulder in the blow of knighthood. He rises, lifts his head, and stands stiffly at attention, and the arms of Christ the grateful Leader hold him close.

This to me is the reality of death. The symbolism is perfect. The comparison limps painfully. For death, victory though it be, is far, far more glorious, than any description could possibly paint it.

All Begins

Death is not terrible to Christians, for the simple reason that, for Christians, death is not the end but the beginning. I have never quite recovered from the joy that swept over me when, for the first time, I learned that the Church refers to the day on which a saint has died as his birthday. That is the day that the Church always celebrates. The day on which a saint was born into the life of earth is relatively unimportant. Why celebrate the start of a life of trial and experiment?

The day that is important is the day on which he died, the blessed day on which he entered the life that really matters—the life of endless joy and complete fulfilment.

Many religious communities have kept that spirit of Joy in the face of death. In many a monastery and religious house special wine was served on the day when a religious was buried. Lift your glasses and be glad, brother monks! Toast the new saint who has entered heaven. Down your wine to honor the glorious happiness that is his.

Just Beginning

Death the end? Death is just the beginning—the beginning of that supernatural life that Christ won for us by His death; the beginning of happiness that neither enemy nor the passing of time can take from us; the welding of the human being and God; our entrance into our heritage, in virtue of which we rightly possess a mansion set aside for us in the blessed city by God; the opening of our hearts to love such as poets faintly envisage and lovers vainly surmise; the releasing of our minds from doubts and mistiness and the agonizing struggle to gain some slight glimmers of truth; the rushing forward to dip endlessly into the inexhaustible fountain of the truth and reality that are God Himself; the clasp of hands in the companionship that is the Church Triumphant; the meeting with God's angels and saints, who are to be our happy companions in eternity.

There on the streets of heaven comes the reunion with those who preceded us in the journey with the messenger of death. We know them. We love them. They have never been really lost to us. They have waited for our coming. And now they clasp us to their hearts.

And we in turn shall wait to welcome those who will come after our arrival. They are ours in a love and friendship and companionship that are safe from fickleness or weariness or boredom or misunderstanding or separation.

Release

Death simply releases the soul to the real life of the soul, the life for which man was created, the life for which life on earth is but the preliminary trial and experiment. We lose the shadows of earth to find the substantial reality in God's presence. We close our eyes on the foggy twilight that is our earthly existence to open them upon the full glory of light and warmth that shines from the sun of justice.

Of course, for most of us there may be the purifying interval of purgatory. But compared with eternity, purgatory is just a flickering flame against the wall. For the reality that all eternity will not change is the life that opens with the opening of heaven.

Back to Egypt and Chile

Now let's go back to Pharaoh's soldiers and the victims of the Chilean earthquake. God flung those men and women to their death. That is one way of putting it. Another and more accurate way of expressing it is to say, "God called them home. God chose that day—their birthday." Or as the Roman martyrology repeats in happy monotony, "This day they entered into life."

All men must die. But God did not originally intend death to be our common fate. If our first parents had not defied Him and rebelled, He would have transferred them straight into His presence without the humiliation of death.

But since they flung away the immortality of the body, death has been the fate of all mankind. Death is now God's means of bringing His sons and daughters into His presence.

So, if among the armies of Pharaoh there were soldiers who had according to their lights served their conscience and done good, these soldiers were borne by that wave that swept down from the walls of the Red Sea into God's happy presence. Their death was not terrible. It was their entrance into life.

Happy Death

Among those thousands of Chileans—most of them were good Catholics—many, we may be sure, had recently returned from Mass and Communion. Death summoned them swiftly and peremptorily. They probably knew one moment of blinding fear. For a second, they heard the roar of the earthquake and knew the paralyzing terror that comes when the very earth under one's feet grows as unsteady as the sea. That was all. In a second it was over. The period of trial living was at an end. Death had taken them home to their Father.

The little child dies. Perhaps we may rightly wonder whether, had he lived, the child might have been another Francis Xavier or Vincent de Paul or Little Flower. Yet in our honesty we must confess that very few children reach such levels. For most, life is prosaic. For many, it is a fierce and disillusioning struggle.

Why then should we be other than happy that the little one has in his baptismal innocence gone home to his Father? If there be any feeling besides joy in our hearts, it is a twinge of envy that we ourselves were not swiftly carried to God before we tasted the bitterness of sin and knew the ugly embrace of evil.

Sad for the Living

I am perfectly willing to admit that, for those who remain behind, the death of a loved one may mean loneliness. We cannot without pangs be separated for even a few weeks from those we deeply love. A train journey sometimes means tears of parting. So, it would be inhumane if we did not feel lonely and sad when we are parted from those whom we love, particularly when we realize this is a separation that will last for the remainder of our mortal life.

The death of those who “die in the Lord” should not make the living sad. Even with the certainty we have of their happiness and the reluctance we feel to call them back—if that was in our power—and our conviction that they are well out of the welter and bickering of this present existence, parting is sad, and we return to houses and days empty and lonely because of their departure.

All this is simply natural. Death finds us glad for the happiness of those who have passed through death to life. Death leaves us lonely for the dear physical presence that has gone.

When Death is Terrible

Only three things make death terrible for the person who dies. One is a lack of faith. The second is a tense, greedy clinging to earth and the people and things of earth. The last is mortal sin on the soul of the dying.

A lack of faith makes death a terrible thing—to face the end with the feeling that it is really the end; to look back on the inadequate, incomplete life that is running to its close; and to know bitterly how little it has satisfied the endless yearnings of our thirst for knowledge, our longing for love; to face our pitiful accomplishments and to realize that we have done nothing and now can do nothing; to feel our hands slipping from the hands of those to whom we cling and to know that when our hands fall away in death never again will we know the touch of friendship or the union of love—that makes death terrible.

That is why the poor pagan finds death so horrible and cries out against it in wild protest.

Too Close to Earth

If a man or a woman is madly in love with the earth and its furniture, death may be terrible. Dying misers in melodramas and short stories always scream as they are torn from their barren gold. The ruler of some commercial empire bribes doctors to wrench out of his exhausted body a few more years of power. The man who lives for passion clings to his body, the instrument of that passion, and howls like a dog when he knows his body can no longer give him the only kind of satisfaction he has cared to find. Even the wise old Diogenes felt sorry for men like that and tossed away his drinking gourd to drink henceforth from cupped hands. He did not want death to tear savagely from his vacuum grip a lot of trifles that he could not take with him into the next world.

Death and the Sinner

Sin? Yes. To the sinner death must necessarily be terrible. It is terrible to know that just beyond the gate of death is the King one has betrayed, the Father whose love one has flung back with a blow of rejection. It is terrifying to enter eternity with hands stained with murder, a body soiled with lust, a mind clogged with impure pictures, or a heart already yielded up to the devil.

I cannot pretend that for people like that death will ever be anything other than terrible. But that is not God's fault. God gave them this life to use splendidly. They took it from His hands and used it for treason and cruelty, for the betrayal of their brothers and sisters, for crimes that reeked of filthiness, and sins that ground tears and blood from fellow men. No guilty man has ever wanted to walk into the presence of his judge. No traitor has found happiness in the prospect of facing the commander whose armies he betrayed.

Pagan Horror

Paganism has done and always will do all in its power to make death terrible. It strips faith and hope from men's shivering souls, until they feel the blasts from the tomb in chill horror. It bids them to cling to earth—since there is nothing more. It bids them to bury their faces in roses, their hands in gold, their hearts in heaped-up rubbish. It makes easy the sin and applauds the sinner. Yes, paganism makes death terrible. Once more however may I protest that we who have none of paganism's reasons for fearing death are singularly stupid if we copy its tremors and imitate its gasps of revulsion?

Death to the Onlooker

I can remember very well the ghastly experience of seeing my grandmother die. She had been ill but not, everyone thought, dangerously so. A youngster in my very early teens, I was standing in the doorway of her bedroom, talking with her. Suddenly she twisted in sharp agony. A blood clot, we later learned, had struck her brain. I stood transfixed with horror as she writhed in the bed, her face growing black, her groans strangling far back in her throat. I found myself unable to move, until my mother rushed in and pushed me aside, and I flung myself down on a couch, burying my face in the futile hope of erasing from my memory that gruesome picture of death at work.

Later as she lay in her coffin, I marveled at the sweet calm that was her face. It seemed incredible that the grotesque face I had seen gasping in the agony of dissolution was that of a sweet old waxen saint and that the hands I had watched writhe and twist upon the coverlet like small tortured snakes now gently and peacefully clasped the well-worn rosary.

At that time, I decided that, while death clearly is followed by beautiful peace and the calm acceptance of life eternal, the blows of death must be excruciating torture.

Strangely Merciful

During the years since that time, I have watched death and thought about it, always with a growing conviction that even the blows of death are tempered and softened by a merciful God. Most deaths by catastrophe are remarkably swift. Usually, the illness by which a person dies is short indeed compared with the entire length of his life. The actual struggle with death is often a matter of minutes.

The lightning strikes, and the victim is knocked unconscious and, in unconsciousness, dies. The blows of an earthquake seldom last for more than thirty or forty seconds. Death has come and gone within so short a space of time. Death by drowning is a matter of a few brief minutes. Death by freezing, if tradition and the story of the little match girl are correct, is almost pleasant.

But twice I had the opportunity to measure the strength and fierceness of death's actual blows, and each time I came away feeling that God's hand made the stroke of death wonderfully gentle.

Personal Experience

The first experience was my own, and though I hesitate to use myself for example, still one's own experiences are certainly the experiences one knows best.

I was thirteen years old and the doctors who stood over my bed had little hope to offer to my mother. Outside, the ambulance was waiting while the doctors held their last consultation. I was not even mildly interested. Their voices floated to me as if from a great distance. I was not concerned enough to try to make out their words.

What they had decided was this: If they tried to move me from my bed to the ambulance, I would undoubtedly die in transit. So, it was better to allow me to die in peace. The last sacraments had already been given. Between me and death there stood only the prayers and the nursing of my mother.

The only point I mean to make with this personal incident is this: I was so close to death that I should have been able to see death's lifted arm and catch the preliminary, testing swish of his scythe. As a matter of fact, no slightest thought of death entered my young mind. My mind was pleasantly busy with a variety of things. It was wondering how soon I could coax them to let me have the funny papers. I was annoyed because the morning was wearing on and I had had no breakfast. I was a little pleased at being the center of such highly professional and concentrated concern. Death? That was a million miles from my thoughts and expectations. The doctors saw it in the room. I felt not the slightest interest, concern, or discomfort about it.

From that moment death has always seemed to me a very gentle friend.

Watching the Agony of Death

The other experience was one entirely outside myself.

On and off for a matter of almost a month I attended the deathbed of a dear old lady of whom I was sincerely fond. She would be conscious for a few days and then would lapse into a sort of coma. During the periods when she seemed to be in a coma, we who stood around her bed watched her struggling with death. It was a horrible thing to see. Her gasps were torturing. Her body seemed torn, with physical pain. She swung her head back and forth on the pillow in a rhythm of agony. Day and night she seemed to us to be locked in a physical struggle with an unseen adversary, and we all suffered in her apparent suffering.

Out of her penultimate struggle she emerged into full consciousness. We gathered round her bed and, in a blend of curiosity and sympathy, I asked her, "How could you bear your suffering? We could hardly stand it ourselves.

She was completely surprised.

"What suffering?" she asked. "I haven't been suffering, have I? If I suffered, I surely wasn't conscious of the fact."

We had watched death struggling with its victim. We had seen and listened to the agony of her resistance. And all the while that we at her bedside had suffered, the victim had been suffering not at all.

Swift and Easy

Now I am certainly not such a fool as to maintain in absurd fashion that death cannot be frightfully painful. Cancer is bad. Rheumatism is an internal rack.

And man-made death has a way of being especially painful. The deaths of soldiers in hospitals, deaths brought about by war, are horrible things. Man has made death far more torturing than God ever meant it to be. The awful burns inflicted by modern industry are preludes to lingering deaths.

Yet, even in its coming, death is usually swift and easy. Most people pass into death through the merciful anesthetic coma. Nature's upheavals strike swiftly with death following immediately.

We who watch at the deathbed may suffer more than does the dying. The newspaper accounts of people trapped in a fire and children killed in an exploding school may harrow our nerves and torture our imaginations. The accidents themselves were probably over in a matter of seconds. When the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago was over, scores of the dead were found sitting peacefully in their places. They had died of the fumes before they had been jolted into the realization of their peril.

Two Viewpoints

So, it is possible to look on death in two ways—as the pagan does or as the Christian should.

To the pagan, death always has and always will be terrible. The candle is snuffed. The strong column is struck by lightning and split from capital to base. The flame of genius has ceased to burn. Some ugly disease has

destroyed a flower-like beauty. A flood or a mountain slide has buried hopeful lives in the blackness of oblivion. If this pagan viewpoint were the complete story, death would surely be terrible. I marvel that people choose to believe that is the entire story.

God, Our Father, cries out that it is not the whole story. Christ died to prove that any such ideas are ridiculous, cruel, and without meaning or value. Our inner common sense clamors in protest against such purposeless waste of human lives and powers. We know that death is not the end but the beginning. We know that through death we hurry into the loving arms of our waiting Father as truly as did the prodigal son when he ran up the slope of the last hill. We have seen Christ conquer death on Calvary. We have watched Him renew life eternally in the rising sun of Easter.

For us, death is not horrible. It is one of the beautiful things that God has carefully prepared for His children. It is not really death at all—it is the shadowy prelude to life. It is not senseless agony and suffering—it is our share in the Passion, which guarantees the resurrection.

Let pagans, if they will, see death as a bleached skeleton riding his white horse across the bodies of his victims.

We see death as an angel of light, an angel that takes us gently by the hand and leads us happily home.





This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

**8528 Kenosha Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

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