

HEBREWS 9:27, 28

DO THE GOOD DIE YOUNG?

“Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”¹

“Only the good die young!” This old saw was commonly quoted when I was a mere lad. Usually, the sententious quote was delivered at a time when I was complaining of fatigue, injury or pain. My dad would insist that because I was a man, I was to laugh off whatever problem I faced and keep on doing whatever it was that I had been doing. I wouldn’t die, he assured me, because only the good die young.

Candidly, the answer to the question is that people die, regardless of character; moreover, people die at every stage of life. Nevertheless, the question deserves a response, which I shall attempt to provide at this time.

THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH — Let’s establish an uncomfortable, though undeniable, truth. Death comes to all mankind. The Word of God is quite pointed in stating this truth. We read in the Word, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” [**HEBREWS 9:27**]. The Apostle to the Gentiles makes a dark statement that applies to all mankind when he wrote, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” [**ROMANS 6:23**]. Paul also affirmed the universality of death when earlier he penned these words, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come” [**ROMANS 5:12-14**]. James, the brother of our Lord, also spoke of the inevitability of death. “Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” [**JAMES 1:15**].

When New Testament writers speak of the universality and inevitability of death, they echo the writers of the Old Covenant. God warned our first parents that disobedience would bring death. Early in the account of man’s creation, we read God’s command. “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” [**GENESIS 2:16, 17**]. God richly provided for man, and gave him all that was necessary for life, placing but one proscription on man’s activity—he must not eat from one particular tree.

Apparently, the man whom God had created understood this prohibition and had in fact communicated the divine proscription to the woman whom God gave him for companionship. When she was tempted, she repeated this proscription with the attendant statement of consequence. “The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die”’” [**GENESIS 3:2, 3**].

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Of course, our first parents did sin, eating some of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As He had warned, God pronounced a curse on mankind.

“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

[GENESIS 3:19]

From this point forward, the theme of our existence is that we toil and labour until we die. In fact, this becomes a recurring statement throughout the Old Testament.

Elihu cautions Job and his comforters that should God withdraw His Spirit,

“all flesh would perish together,
and man would return to dust.”

[JOB 34:15]

It is the Spirit of God that gives us life. The statement accords with what we learn concerning the Master when Paul writes, Christ “is before all things, and in him all things hold together” [COLOSSIANS 1:17]. A similar statement can be found in PSALM 104:29.

The Wise Man concerned himself with man’s frailty; and in light of mankind’s frailty, he provided excellent advice for all who would honour God. You may recall that Solomon wrote, “All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return” [ECCLESIASTES 3:20]. People are moving inexorably to their long home, if the physical is all that matters. If this is all there is, we had better make it count. However, there is more to life than the mere physical.

Solomon cautioned mankind to think of his end when he concluded with this soliloquy. “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” [ECCLESIASTES 12:1]. It is a mark of wisdom to recognise our frailty and to prepare for what is inevitable.

DEATH FOR THE WICKED — Death does not “end all.” Remember, man was created a “living soul” [GENESIS 2:7 KJV]; and because he is a living soul, he continues as a conscious being throughout eternity. Man is a tripartite being—he has a body, he is a living soul and he possesses a spirit. The body is wearing out due to the effects of sin. The soul is dead in trespasses and sin; and the spirit will return to God who gave it. The ultimate destiny of an individual is determined by choices he or she makes now. That is the basis for Solomon’s admonition, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come” [ECCLESIASTES 12:1].

One of the startling warnings for all mankind is that provided in the Letter to Hebrew believers. “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. It is startling precisely because it reminds us that we must die, and then we shall face judgement.

Jesus told a story. “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side” [LUKE 16:19-23]. Death did not end all for this man. One vital piece of information is that the language of the Master tells us that he continues in torment. When Jesus says of the rich man, “In Hades, being in torment,” He uses the present tense. This indicates that the torment continues to this present time.

Jesus continued. The rich man “called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead’” [LUKE 16:24-31].

The account lends force to the warning Jesus issued concerning our choices. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” [MARK 9:42-48].

DEATH FOR THE RIGHTEOUS — That text serves as a warning to the lost. However, that same statement is a source of deepest comfort to the redeemed. For the judgement in which the saved shall stand is not a judgement to determine whether they are good enough to enter into Heaven; the judgement they face is designed to reveal the perfection of Christ’s work in their lives.

Each Christian is encouraged by Paul’s statement as he begins the Letter to the Philippians. “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” [PHILIPPIANS 1:23, 24]. This affirmation of faith is built upon the clear statement of the Master. “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” [JOHN 12:26].

Again, the Apostle encourages the people of God when he writes of what is coming for those who follow the Master. “We are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10].

Reading his words, one must be struck by the lack of terror in what is said. Paul anticipates that for the child of God, standing before the Judgement Seat of Christ is a positive prospect. In an earlier letter to this same congregation, he had spoken of that judgement as consisting of a stripping away all that defiles and dishonours the One who redeemed us, while expressing the elements that glorify the Master eternally [see 1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-15]. The impermanent will be torn down so that that which is permanent may remain. I am convinced that what is written in the Hebrew Letter refers to this same truth. “Now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” [HEBREWS 12:26-29].

I was used of God to tell a dying man of life in Christ. The man was dying of AIDS, but God graciously delivered his soul during his final days. As we talked on one occasion, he asked what the transition would be like. I used a story that I had heard of an old country doctor. A patient had asked the old doctor what would happen. As the physician considered how to answer, the man’s dog was whining at the door, wanting to come into the room. The doctor opened the door, and the dog immediately ran to the bed of its master.

“Why did your dog whine and want in?” the doctor asked.

“Well, because he knew I was in here,” the dying man replied.

“Why did he not run away?” the doctor asked.

“Because he knows me,” the man said.

“That is what it is to enter Heaven,” said the wise doctor. “There is a familiar friend waiting on the other side of that door. He eagerly waits to welcome you to the place He has prepared for you.”

After I had told Jim the story, he was greatly comforted. It was but a few days until he was hospitalised for the last time. On our final visit, I asked how it was. He was weak and failing quite fast. “Mike,” he rasped, “it’s all right. I have a friend waiting for me. He will welcome me home very soon.”

That is the issue in a nutshell. Christ our Saviour waits to welcome His own. I pray that you have this faith. I pray that your hope is founded on Him, on His mercies and on His grace that is extended to all who have faith in Him. He died for our sin, and He was raised from the dead to declare us right with the Father. I urge any who have yet to receive this gracious Master and the gift of life that He offers to His own, to accept Him today. Believe Him and receive His life. Amen.