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Journal Title: Christianity today.

Volume: 29
Issue: 3
Month/Year: 1985
Pages: 20-25

Article Author: Helmut Thielicke

Article Title: The mystery of death: at the highest moments, we are overtaken by the dread of mortality

Cited In: EBSCO:ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials

Call #: BR1 .C6418 (v.29, no.3)

Location: Cudahy Library Periodicals

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The Mystery of Death

At the highest moments,
we are overtaken
by the dread of mortality.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." The Lord God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all cattle,
and above all wild animals;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."

To the woman he said,

"I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;

in pain you shall bring forth children,

yet your desire shall be for your husband,

and he shall rule over you."

And to Adam he said,

"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,

and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you,

'You shall not eat of it,'

cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;

and you shall eat the plants of the field.

In the sweat of your face

you shall eat bread

till you return to the ground,

for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,

and to dust you shall return."

Genesis 3:8-19

HELMUT THIELICKE

THERE IS PROBABLY NOT ONE among us who has not now and then had the experience of being suddenly confronted by the dark enigma of life.

For long stretches, of course, we go on living our lives fairly innocuously, with no particular problems. Life simply pursues its course. We observe that evil does not pay, that success comes to the diligent, and that idlers finally come to grief.

But suddenly something happens that sounds like a broken axle in this smoothly rotating machine of life. We are confronted with a contradiction we simply cannot explain. We read in the newspapers that an airplane has crashed with 90 persons aboard, fathers, mothers, and children. Among them is a great musician, an irreplaceable scholar. Some ridiculous little bolt or screw that came loose—it may perhaps have cost only a dime—was capable of silencing beautiful music, annihilating the promise of increased knowledge, destroying human happiness, and shattering the ties of love.

Are we not surrounded on every side with these dark enigmas, which are so hard to shake off once they are discovered? Why is it that just when life reaches its supreme moments we should suddenly be overtaken by the dread of mortality and the fragility of life? Why do folk songs always link love and death?

Is nature an exception to this rule? A lovely, wooded valley with a stream running through it may strike us as idyllic, but we have only to look a little closer or fetch a microscope to see that

here too there is devouring and being devoured, the dread of death, and the groaning of creation. Ecclesiastes and Job, and you and I too, each in our own way, have wrestled with this enigma. Everyone of us bears wounds and scars inflicted by the claws of this enigma.

The text from Genesis, which concludes the story of the Fall, paces the whole area of this enigma: Why should toil and the drudgery of labor exist at all? (On my trip to the Far East where I saw thousands of Egyptians on the Suez Canal and later Chinese coolies toiling in the scorching sun, I suddenly realized how immediate and real this question remains and how very superficially it is covered up by certain technological and social facilities.) Why should death exist? Why should the fate of men be like that of the beasts (cf. Eccles. 3:19)? Why cannot even the strongest love hold on to another when his hour has come? Why do thorns and thistles encumber the fields? Why should the horror of infantile paralysis exist alongside of the miracle of new life? Always, always the question: Why? Why?

THIS GENESIS TEXT DEALS WITH THESE HARD HARASSING QUESTIONS of life. It points to the background of it all, to the rift in the framework of the world and the contradictions we cannot reconcile. Many of us, perhaps, may say that it is useless to think about why life is as it is. They may advise us not to bore too long in the depths but rather get busy and stick to what is given to us to do each day. Goethe repeatedly counseled himself in this way and summoned himself to "action" whenever he was appalled by the fathomless depths of life.



But would not this be escape? After all, it is possible not only to be a coward physically—when a person fails, for example, to jump in to save a drowning man—but also a coward about certain thoughts and, as Goethe once expressed it, to “blink” them. But it will not be so simple to evade the Genesis text by

blinking it, once it catches us and has us in its clutches.
To begin with, these primordial words of the Bible do something that is really tremendous. They take all these riddles of existence—from the mystery of death to the throes of a young mother and the misery of toil—and set them down with-

in one mighty key signature, and then interpret them according to this one signature, which declares that all the contradictions and absurdities of life are manifestations of the creature’s disobedience to the Creator. They reveal that the world is no longer whole and sound and that it has lost its peace

because it has lost its peace with God.

In other words, the Bible does not simply say: "Well, that's the way life is!" Nor does it say: "Nature is cruel and that's all there is to it." Nor does it simply fall back upon the natural law of mortality, polarity, or the struggle for existence. Nor does it belabor the tragedy of contradiction. It says very simply, and with an almost shocking straightforwardness, that back of the suffering and back of the death in the world lies human *guilt*, and that therefore the only way I can come to terms with my lot is to come to terms with this *guilt* or else learn to know a court of judgment that will relieve me of it.

All this is, of course, a tremendous, breathtaking assertion. It is a good thing that the Bible does not express this assertion in philosophical propositions. This would only result in endless discussion. It simply sets before us a few monumental facts of life and says, "Just look at these for a moment. Don't withdraw from the affair by saying that they are just myths. No, look at them for once!"

The greatest of these facts is *death*. And by speaking of it, this primordial story confronts us with nothing less than the thesis that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Let us recall certain details of the story of the Fall.

God said to Adam and Eve, "You shall die if you eat of the forbidden fruit." And when they wickedly ate of it nevertheless, God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever," God sent him out of the Garden of Eden.

So the curse of mortality settled down upon man.

The disobedience of man consists—we are given to understand—in the fact that he wants to be *superman*. He wants to "be like God." He is the notoriously Unbound One, and by no means only in certain peak examples and high fliers, like Prometheus or Napoleon or Hitler. No, he is *always* the Unbound. He establishes the welfare state and abolishes—or at least thinks he abolishes—the misery of human existence. He undertakes to provide for every life situation and plays the role of the divine father of all.

But is it not utter folly that he should

imagine that he can really burst the bounds of afflicted humanity? Does he not merely shift the misery from outward poverty to inward poverty? Does he not cause men to be debauched inwardly with excessive prosperity, comfort, and boredom by inculcating the illusion that the peace of his soul is to be found in cars, television sets, freezers, and other miracles of civilization?

MAN ALSO DESIRES TO BE UNBOUND in this technology. He breaks the bounds of this ancient earth and reaches for the stars. And as he launches cosmic expeditions



and grasps at realms which earlier generations considered reserved to God, he takes with him into the universe his peacelessness, his anxiety, and his hunger for power; perhaps he may still upset the stars.

So, since that dark hour in the Garden of Eden, this has been the story of us all. We want to be untrammelled. We want *more* than God the Lord has allowed to us. We want *more* success, *more* power, *more* money. If we are workers, we want higher wages. If we are employers, we want higher profits, if we are publishers, we want larger printings. Expansion must never cease. The first limit we encounter—it may be the limit of our physical strength, the limit our heart trouble allows us, the limit of some sudden disillusionment with people we trusted—stagger us. For we no longer take any limits into account, simply *because* we are unlimited. "If gods exist," said Nietzsche,

"how could I bear not to be a god?"

Therefore I must also prolong my life; I believe all the humbug that any magazine blathers about some new hormone or cosmetic product that will make me live to a hundred and preserve the appearance of youth.

And then what happens—and this is the dramatic point in our story—is that this arrogant man who wanted no limitations put upon him, this man who wanted to snatch God's eternity for himself, who wanted to be immortal and like God, *has his limitations cast into his teeth*. "The man has become like one of us," the story says, "knowing

good and evil." After he has nibbled at the tree of knowledge, he will also reach out for the tree of life and plunder the fruit of immortality. He will want to be unlimited in time, he will want to be eternal.

And therefore he is driven out of paradise, and the burden of mortality is placed upon his back. In other words, the unlimited one is shown his limits, and the chains of time come clanking down upon this man who wanted to snatch eternity. He is hurled back to the realm of the finite, where there is such a thing as *finis*, where one day my last hour comes and it's all up with me.

The fact that we must depart and that our life has a terminus is therefore a reminder that we are *only* men and not God. The fact that we must die and leave everything behind that we have made and loved and perhaps also idolized is a part of judgment. In this judgment there flames the reflection of a

divine flash of lightning that says: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed."

In Japan one can always see from tremendous distances the majestic, snow-capped pyramid of Fujiyama. And so it is with us: the death we are approaching stands like the landmark of Fujiyama above the landscape of our life and makes life a "being unto death."

THIS "BEING UNTO DEATH" is far more and also something different from our last hour, which we Christians talk about perhaps far too much. For death is present not only

The fact that we must depart and that our life has a terminus is therefore a reminder that we are only men and not God.

at the end of our life but is there long before, in every moment of our life.

Why do we keep hastening at our work? Why do we say: I must make the most of my youth? Why do we think: Now we are in our best years, now is the time to get it done? Why do we use calendars and clocks? Behind such very ordinary phrases and facts stands the appalling circumstances that hour by hour we realize that we must die, that we have only a limited time. Today will never return again. Even the physician who struggles to preserve life fights this battle in the shadow of death. He may fight a delaying action but he cannot conquer death, and in the end he himself will be snatched away.

So it is indeed; we see the Fujiyama of our death wherever we stand. This flaming barrier, at which the cherub stands with his flashing sword, cannot be overlooked. Arrogant, unlimited man, who would seize eternity, is hurled back

behind the barrier of time.

Only now that we have spelled out the text to this extent dare we come forward with our doubts and objections. Let me repeat these doubts once more quite boldly and revert once more to the questions we asked before. Is what we have just said sheer mythology or perhaps even very sinister mythology? Is not death, instead of being a judgment, a purely biological process? Is it not caused by the dehydration of our cells and the natural wear and tear of the organism? Are not birth and death expressions of exactly the same rhythm of life which we observe in spring, summer, autumn, and winter? And is not death merely the final beat in this rhythm of life?

At first sight this looks very plausible. And yet it must strike us as significant that a physician hardly ever dares to tell a dying man that he is now facing a very natural process. If these things are really so terribly "natural," why not call a spade a spade? Is there perhaps something more than—and something quite different from—this natural process behind the act of dying?

NOT LONG AGO I READ AGAIN the following account in the diary of a young flier who fell in the war.

He was gathering a bouquet of lilacs. As he parted the branches he saw beneath the flowering bush the half-decayed body of a soldier. He drew back in horror—but not because he had never seen a dead body before. On the contrary, in his young life he had seen far too many. He recoiled because of the screaming contradiction between this dead man and the flowering bush. If he had only come upon a withered lilac bush he would not have been horrified. After all, a blooming lilac bush sooner or later will become a withered lilac bush—this is really an expression of the rhythm of life. But that a *man* was lying there in a decayed state, was something that would not harmonize with blooming nature. That's why he recoiled. He sensed that this dead comrade was something contrary to the Creator's plan of life. He felt that this dead man was a foreign body in God's flowering world. There came over him the feeling that the death of man is an unnatural thing. And this young flier with his shock of

horror was certainly nearer to the world of the New Testament and its message than the people who are always driveling about the "naturalness" of human death.

When Jesus Christ heals the sick and raises the dead the fundamental thesis behind these acts is that sickness and death should *not* exist. These things are physically unnatural—in a deeper sense than the purely biological sense; they are contrary to the intention, the conception of Creation; they are not order but *disorder*.

So for the Bible death is not simply a part of nature. Rather, the natural processes—which, of course, the Bible does not deny—are only the vehicle in which the "last enemy" drives about. Therefore all this unnaturalness, this disorder, this "wrongness" in the world must give way when Jesus Christ comes and lays our hand again in the hand of the Father.

Then, of course, the biological processes of death still go on. But the judgment is gone. Then death acquires, so to speak, a different quality; it ceases to be a hostile barrier let down between time and eternity, which violently hurls us back into our finitude. Now death becomes a bridge, a transition.

This is what is meant by the statement that death has lost its sting. Then death is no longer a judgment that compels us to leave all; then it becomes the joy of going back home, for now my Lord awaits me on the other side of the dark grave and he heads me from faith to sight, from this world where we see in a dim mirror to the table of the Father.

"Could the Head / Rise and leave his members dead?"

That's the way it is with death now.

When I say "I have to depart," then the values and the things of my life—my house, my garden, my stamp collection, my vocation—are the standard by which I measure the departure. But when I can say, "I am going home," then there is a point in my life where even the greatest things become an insubstantial shadow and I see only the shore of home where I am awaited.

TRUE, THIS PRESENTS MANY QUESTIONS, and here I cannot even attempt to make the roads of thought any easier to follow. The power

of this truth is so great that there is no way to approach it except by bowing in reverence before the mystery of it.

And yet I might ask: even when we look upon death as being primarily a natural event that we can reduce to biological formulas, do we not perceive that this leaves an insoluble remainder, a mysterious unknown factor? Must we not agree with what Alfred E. Hoche, the psychiatrist, says in his well-known autobiography—and he certainly is not saying this in defense of any biblical texts: "Man cannot understand his death. To him the thought is intolerable that this whole world of love and friendship, this world of work and devotion should be simply wiped out, intolerable simply to fall by the wayside, while others go on, chattering as if nothing had happened. . . . This mocks all logic."

As a matter of fact, it cannot be reconciled with any biological categories either, for here we encounter the unknown factor of which the Bible speaks when it points to the judgment which constitutes the background of our finitude.

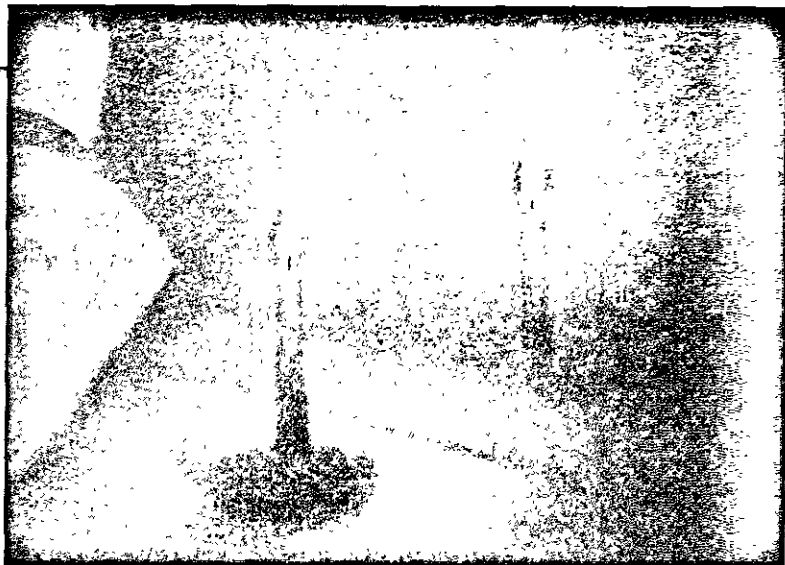
Always, when I stand at the grave of a person whose life was filled with meaning, who loved and was loved in return, a rebellious feeling descends upon me. Here is a person who was bound to human fellowship with every fiber of his being; he may also have been at peace with God, and here he must depart hence "like a beast." Must death be? *Must* this limit, *must* this abyss, continue to exist if one is in the hands of a living God? This is the protest against death that rises up within us, if we have any conception of what man was *really* destined to be. We can understand Hölderlin's complaint in *Hyperion*: "May God pardon me, but I cannot understand death existing in his world."

None of us can understand the exultation that rings in the New Testament accounts of raising from the dead and of the Resurrection; none of us can comprehend the splendor that hovers over the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, if he has not seen this dark foil in the background.

To be sure, even here in this story of the beginnings we can already perceive the first flickering of the promise, which the message of the Resurrection will later make explicit, and we find it in a very discreet, almost hidden thought. God had forbidden man to eat of the

tree in the midst of the garden, with the threat: "In the day that you eat of it you shall die." And now man *had* eaten of it, and the lightning bolt of judgment struck beside him in the ground that would henceforth bear thorns and thistles, and it also struck the serpent. Thus the sentence of death did *not* overtake man on the spot. Instead of dying at once, the fate of mortality was imposed upon him. He is thus allowed to go on

to live. Today I can still answer the question whether I am content with my filled barns, my success, my comfort, my reputation and prestige—until suddenly it all forsakes me!—or whether I shall make my peace with God and set the whole course of my life toward homecoming. Today I can still watch for him to whom one day, when I shall have to depart and yet will be going home, I shall be permitted to say: "If one day I



So we are surrounded on every side by signals and beacons. They keep flashing the message that there is One who is determining the course of our life, that he is guiding us home, and that we shall never be left alone in the fog that veils the coming day in the storms we dread.

living, though in the *shadow* of death. He was granted a reprieve.

So in the midst of judgment the hidden mystery of grace is at work.

And again the promise arches over to the New Testament, where all this is enlarged and where it becomes more graphic and vivid. The barren fig tree is not immediately hewn down, but is given another year of probation. The clock of our life is turned back once more, in order that even today we may "know the things that make for peace." "This night your soul is required of you," says the Lord in the story of the Rich Fool. Who am I, where do I stand? The point is: In the *coming* night will my soul be required of me? Today I am still allowed

must depart, depart thou not from me. Thou art he who came into this passing world of mine and endured for me the powers of sin and suffering and death. Thou wilt be my comrade and brother now that my time is up and I must go through the gate, alone and without any baggage, where not even my most beloved can pass, except thee, who art the Lord of both time *and* eternity."

So Adam must leave paradise. For every one of us, that is in the past. And only fools think that it can be reestablished on this earth. As a rule, those who have promised men a heaven on earth have made of life a hell. No, the cherub stands behind us, and there is no road back. We were never promised

that the burden of mortality would be removed from us.


But Adam, and all of us, is permitted to go on living for a space. In the midst of the darkness of suffering and death, which we ourselves have conjured up, God will let his sign of grace shine, to proclaim to us: "Behold, I have not forgotten you; I have loved you with an everlasting love, and I will be the star for you to gaze at, the spring from which you may drink, and the peace that will cover you like a protecting mantle in all the strife of earth." So he made the rainbow of reconciliation to shine above the storms. So he gives to us the laughter of a child, the encouraging word of a friend, the healing of an illness, the return from prisoner-of-war camp. Again and again the towers of the Father's house suddenly light up as we tread the dust of the far country. The Savior walks beside us on the refugee's road, for he himself was homeless and had nowhere to lay his head. He lies beside us in the hospital ward, for he too was stricken and smitten. And yet at the same time he is the Physician who heals us.

That's the way God's judgments always are when they bring hardship and darkness into our lives and we "have to depart." Even in the deepest darkness the kindly, beckoning hand that is calling us home can be seen.

The other judgments of which our text speaks point to the same mystery, for the question of death slumbers in every experience of life. When a child is born this is accompanied by pain; these are sore moments and death is not too far away. What was once wrapped in the Creator's blessing of fruitfulness and a symphony of joy, this too has become an ambiguous thing, shifted to the boundary of darkness. Whenever new life comes into being there is pain and dread, and the beating of the wings of death is heard. This Eve is told: "In pain you shall bring forth children." And in the symbol of the subjection of the woman there is also a reference to the servitude and slavery that will prevail in our world.

But here too there slumbers a hidden blessing wrapped in darkness. The pangs and oppressions of our life keep reminding us that "this poor earth is not our home" and that we are waiting for a new heaven and a new earth in which there shall be neither mourning nor

crying nor pain any more, and every tear shall be wiped from our eyes and the last enemy has been robbed of its power. How many of us would give up the darkest hours of suffering in our lives, now that we look back upon them; the hours of utter hopelessness as prisoners of war, the hours of failure in our work, the hours of painful farewell? Would we ever have learned how God can comfort, how faithfully he remembers us, and how punctually he fulfills his promise? ("When comes the hour, comes help with power.") God's stars are seen only from the deepest wells, and we learn that he hears us only when we cry to him from the depths.

 **OW WE ARE SURROUNDED** on every side by signals and beacons. They keep flashing the message that there is One who is determining the course of our life, that he is guiding us home, and that we shall never be left alone in the fog that veils the coming day in the storms we dread.

Often we do not know the meaning, but we believe in him who does know the meaning. This is the secret of our Christian life. And with it we walk straight through the enigmas of life.

Never can we say: "Because certain conditions are such and such, certain things happen to me." We'll never get by with that answer. It sticks in our throat, doesn't it, when we think of the millions who die in war, the subterranean terror in the cellars and bomb shelters, the stricken women and children? The fact is that we do *not* know why this had to be; but now we can say: "I will abide with Thee."

Just as our own death is not merely a biological process, so the great mass deaths are not mere historical processes that mechanically unfold according to pitiless, eternal laws. No, there is a heart that watches and cares, and everything must pass in review before that heart before it comes to me. There is a secret censor, and no stroke of fortune which would strike us can get past without being examined to see whether it will be for our good.

Therefore *what* we meet with in our life is not so terribly important; the *only* important thing is whether we accept it as coming from God's hand and whether we dare to trust that it was made to measure—your measure and mine—and

therefore is exactly right.

Is it not strange that Christians on the sinking *Titanic* sang, "Nearer, my God, to thee," and so lost their fear of drowning in the icy Atlantic? The point is that they did *not* sing, "Farther away are now the golden jewelry in my cabin, the precious documents in the ship's safe, farther away are my loved ones at home, farther than thousands of geographical miles—for now I must leave you forever." No, this is not what they sang or thought. It was not sad leave taking and passing farther away; it was a coming nearer: "Nearer, my God, to thee."

It is not necessary to go down with a ship or to be mortally sick or to find ourselves in a "boundary situation" or to be on our last legs in order to make this avowal, "Nearer, my God, to thee." We still live in the light; perhaps life still lies before us. We rejoice in our home, the splendor of autumn leaves, a beautiful picture, the sound of music. It would simply be pride and pious snobbery to want to brush all this aside as "worldly pomp." This would be not to honor the Giver of all good gifts but rather to offend him.

But we must not cling to these things and get caught in them. Instead, we must find our way through the things that can be so fascinating and delightful in life—but *also* through the burdens and trials we have to bear—to him who gives us all things, both good and hard, and in both is saying: "I know you. You no longer need to depart hence "like a beast"; you can come home "like a child."

So he blesses the flush and flower of youth and comforts the loneliness of age. He lays his hand upon the little ones, and upon us too when the end draws near. He sends us the happy, starry hours of life, but he is *also* beside us in the dark valleys with his rod and staff and the marvel of his consolations. He always blesses. He is always near; and he changes everything—everything. □

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