The Nature of Death [1]

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The 1964 James Bond film *Goldfinger* contains the iconic line “No, mister Bond, I expect you do die.” In the scene, James Bond has been captured by the villain Goldfinger, and is set up to be killed by a laser slicing him in half. Bond is trying to stall for time, but Goldfinger isn’t interested [2]. The line has been voted the most iconic moment in the James Bond franchise [3]. It has also parodied several times, including on The Simpsons [4], and xkcd [5].

Goldfinger’s expectation is foiled (unlink Hank Scopio’s), as Bond manages to escape the death trap set up for him. But if God pronounces someone’s death—and it doesn’t come to pass—then that is a far more concerning outcome. If it is the will of the Almighty, surely it *must* happen?

But “failed” predictions by God, and the person of Jesus, might point to something far more profound.

God’s Claims

The Death of Adam

In Genesis 2, as God is completing creation, He instructs the man that He created (Adam) that

> You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.
>
> Genesis 2:16b–17

Famously, Adam, and his wife Eve, fail to obey this command. They are punished, not by death, but by having several curses brought upon them, and exile from the Garden of Eden1. While they seemingly do become mortal (Genesis 3:19), Adam lives, after the Fall, for at least 800 years more (Genesis 5:4). Although this is a finite amount of time, many people think it is too long to live [6].

Yet, God’s warning was emphatic: in the Hebrew, the word for “death” is emphasised by being doubled: “for in the day that you eat of it, *mût mût*.” What is being said literally is “you will *die die*.” The punishment of death is stressed2.

The Death of Lazarus

The opposite happens when Jesus learns that His friend, Lazarus, is sick. He assures His disciples

that “this sickness is not to death” (John 11:4b). Yet, two days later, He admitted to His disciples that “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:14b). Jesus predicted to His disciples that Lazarus would not die, yet two days later, by His own admission, Lazarus had died.

The Death of Jairus’s Daughter

In Mark 5:21–43 and Luke 8:40–56, Jairus begs Jesus to go and heal his dying daughter. Jesus is delayed in arriving, and when He reaches the house, the girl has died. Jesus insists that she is not dead, but only sleeping. However, it is obvious to all present that she is dead—to the point that claiming otherwise is laughable to them. One does not make callous claims of a child being dead in the house of her parents if there is a possibility that it isn’t. As with Lazarus, Jesus raises the girl back to life, thereby “waking” her from her death.

The Dead Burying the Dead

Echoing what God told Adam in Genesis 2:17, when an aspirant follower asks Jesus for time to first bury his father, Jesus replies with “let the dead bury their own dead.” (Matthew 8:22) From our point of view, Jesus here clearly uses “the dead” metaphorically. But what does *He* mean by “the dead”?

Death as Sleep

Jesus’s claims that Lazarus and Jairus’s daughter were only sleeping echoes a common euphemism for death. In the Bible, “resting” or “sleeping” with one’s fathers (ancestors) refers to having died, just as the person’s ancestors had done. An example is in 1 Kings 2:10, where David dies and is said to “sleep with his fathers”. This expression is repeated throughout Kings and Chronicles, which describes the kingly dynasties of Israel and Judah.

Are euphemisms and metaphors all that are going on in the passages that we have considered thus far?

Different Perspectives on Death

I am continually amazed by the depth and the profundity of the story of the raising of Lazarus. I find myself reflecting on it more and more; finding comfort there, as well as truths about God, and humanity. We have already touched on this passage, but taken together with Genesis 2–3, I believe it offers a key insight into what is happening. Although Jesus calling Lazarus back to life out of the tomb is the climax of the story, (the shortest verse in the whole Bible) John 11:35 is incredibly profound. Jesus weeps, not so much for His dead friend (whom Jesus knows He will momentarily restore back to life), but seeing the sadness and hopelessness of the people who are mourning for Lazarus (John 11:33). Although Martha believed at an intellectual level that Lazarus would day be resurrected from the dead at the end of days (John 11:24), the misery of life corrupted by sin made this reality a distant, almost unreal, hope for those mourning Lazarus. Jesus was angry[3] at how sin and corruption—the effects of the Fall—blinded those people whom He loved to this reality (John 11:33, 38). As the Messiah who came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth, part of His mission was to make these ancient promises real for His hearers. He did this through His miracles, and in this instance, raising Lazarus from the dead.

Our universal existential anxiety is that we must all one day die. We will ceased to exist. We’ll breath our last—whether in peace or pain. That will be, in a sense, the end. Shortly thereafter we’ll turn into dust or bones, and after that, forgotten. We have no memory or experience of anything that came before us, and, perhaps, won’t have of what comes after us. All our ambitions, experiences, labours, and desires will come to an end.

(Writing these words seems so trite. They are cliches. The reality of what I am trying to convey, won’t come from reading these words, but from quiet reflection, alone, in a quiet space, late at night,

when the walls begin to close in, and each ticking of a wall clock signals another moment of life, of experience, of sensation, of being, which has passed.)

My daughters are often playing with a toy and, finding it difficult to share that toy, end up in floods of tears. They love each other, but in that moment, they are blinded by grief and self-pity. They can be resentful of the other. Meanwhile, I can look at them, and see beyond that moment. I see their good-morning hugs, and the times that they do play together with laughter and goodwill. I foresee (by God's grace) a lifelong friendship. Rivalry and jealousy at times, sure, but also support and encouragement. I anticipate mutual reminding of good memories, and the truths which I hope my wife and I will impart on them. And that they will comfort and console each other when they are otherwise left alone, without a mother or father.

Because they are immature and consumed by the moment they are in when arguing over the toy, they cannot see the big picture stuff that I do. While I do not dismiss their tears and sadness as unimportant, *I* am comforted and excited for what lies ahead in the future for them, far beyond the current moment.

I think this is vaguely similar to what happened that day outside of Lazarus's tomb. The instance of my daughters arguing over the toy is like the whole of our lives, and our existential angst. What I see beyond that moment, is what God sees of us beyond our death. We must undergo the horror that is physical death, because that is the consequence of the Fall. But (again, I risk straying into cliches), that is only one step in a much larger journey. The finality of death isn't as final as our anxieties make it appear. The evidence of this (and that is what Martha, the disciples, and the other Jews outside of Lazarus's tomb needed), was Jesus's own resurrection.

> Death, where is your sting? Hades, where is your victory?
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:55

The corollary to all of this, of course, is that those who reject God and His Kingdom, won't inherit His promises, and the life that comes after mortality. They will be cut off from the source of life. That is already true in a certain way, hence the reality of physical death, suffering, and "divine hiddenness". It is like being undead: "alive" in some sense, but dead and decaying in another. God sustains in the meantime (Matthew 5:45b). But, with the Kingdom underway, and it having been proclaimed by Jesus, all are called to leave that decay behind and embrace the life that is to be found in the source of all life.

Conclusion

The phrase "a fate worse than death" is itself a cliche [7]. But when we read passages where God and Jesus speak of death which does not align with our everyday experience of what death is, God's meaning is, in our terms, a fate worse than death. We need to remember that, to the original audience of the Bible books (who in the everyday likely were more exposed to death than we are in the modern world), it was a shocking paradox that God spoke of living people as being dead, or that (before the stories of the Bible became commonly and culturally known), speaking of the dead as sleeping seemed little more than a euphemism. We cannot appreciate God's meaning

1. without fully immersing ourselves in the dreadful reality of physical death,
2. without an understanding that, although God is not indifferent to our suffering,
   that He doesn't regard physical death as the same terrible and hopeless horror as we do,
3.

that life (whether in this mortal existence or in the resurrection) is found in obedience and love towards Him, and

4. rejecting Him—as the author of life—is embracing death, even while alive physically.

Changing our perception of death to align with God's meaning isn't supposed to cause us to live callous and reckless lives. It should free us from one of the anxieties that can incapacitate us (Matthew 6:25–34), and allow us to proceed fearlessly in obedience and faithfulness to the Kingdom work to which Jesus called us.

- 1. Despite cursing Adam and Eve, God shows care for them by providing them with clothing (Genesis 3:21).
- 2. The fact that God emphasises that Adam would die if he eats from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, rather than just state or explain that Adam would cease to live, seems to me to indicate that Adam (contrary to what many people commonly believe), was familiar with the concept of (bodily) death in the Garden of Eden.
- 3. The Greek word often translated as "groaned" in this passage, is ἐμβριμάομαι, which means [8] "to have indignation" and "to sigh with chagrin".

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