

An Urgent Plea

by Rev. Tom Aicken

The death rate has remained constant throughout history: it is one per person. Despite this incontrovertible fact, however, and that death could strike any one of us at any moment and when we least expect it, is it not remarkable that the vast majority of people rarely talk about death, scarcely even think about it, have no idea what is going to happen to them when they die, and fail to plan for it except to redistribute their property to others in a last will and testament?

Oh, many people have ideas of what *might* happen to them at death. Some hold to the idea of annihilation, or simply ceasing to exist. Others embrace the notion of reincarnation, endlessly coming back into the world in other forms. Still others, like the Gnostics, think of death as a spiritual resurrection to ultimate freedom, an opportunity to escape the confines of the body. And there are those, too, who latch onto the biblical teaching of heaven – though not what the Bible says of how to get there, if indeed they have learned anything at all about that – thus they simply presume that they themselves are on their way to that “better place” (as the call it) when they die.

One might think that annihilation would be a frightening prospect, and at the very least that someone would want to research whatever evidence he thinks he can find for it before jumping to such an unwelcome and unwarranted conclusion. And what attraction is there to reincarnation, going on forever not as a human being anymore but now having repeatedly to exchange his existence from one lower life-form to another? Is there any evidence for that? If so, what is it, and is not some verification needed to adopt such a bizarre cycle of life and death?

There is no reason to think that death is merely a resurrection of the spirit to freedom. The Gnostics promoted such a view based on nothing more than wishful thinking, assuming that, if the body disintegrates at death – that was all they could see, after all – the only hope for anyone is that his intangible spirit through knowledge gained in this world will find a new lease on life in the world to come. And what good reason could anyone possibly have for believing what the Bible says about heaven – about God and His angels and the unspeakable joys of that yet unseen world – if he will not accept (or even bother to learn) what it says about how to get there?

People hold surprisingly divergent views of what is to happen to them at death, but what is most disturbing is the lack of study and critical thinking by which they come to those views and adopt them to the exclusion of all others. There are those, too, who just do not know where they are going, and frankly do not *want* to know. Is this not even more surprising? How many there are who will plan meticulously for a six-week vacation to some exotic place, and be open to every suggestion they might encounter in order to make the most of it, yet think nothing at all (and not ask even the most basic questions) about where they will spend eternity. No, their minds are made up; they do not want anyone to confuse them with any ideas which might conflict with their own or open any door they wish to keep locked up tight.

I remember very early in my ministry an older woman, an atheist, whose family attended our church though she did not. I tried to visit her in hospital, but she mocked the faith and made it clear that she wanted no part of it. When she was on her deathbed some months later she called for me to see her. I was delighted for the opportunity to speak with her at last, having already concluded that such a day would probably never come. Now, as I stood by her bed, she exhibited the most horrifying expression of fear I have ever seen and gripped my hand with such force that I wondered if circulation would ever come back to my fingers. She wanted to know what awaited her beyond the grave and if there was anything I could say to comfort her. I shared with her the simplest presentation of the gospel that I knew to give, told her that Christ is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him (Heb. 7:25), but she must seek the Lord while He may be found (Is. 55:6), and that He will never cast out any of all who commit everything they are and have to Him (John 6:37). When I had finished, however, I could see that it meant nothing to her – she wanted to hear things that made God real to her but did not call for any commitment on her part – and within a few hours she died. Now, fifty years later, what haunts me as I reflect on it is that no other unbeliever has ever called me as she did to inquire about the hereafter or to ask anything about it. As I say, people do not want to hear about death, especially their own, and about how inevitable and imminent it is.

If you are an unbeliever, my friend, I plead with you by the mercies of God to think about death – your own death. If it helps you to do so, drive over to the local cemetery and consider the countless graves you see before you. These are all people who are not coming back to this world, and many of their names have already been forgotten by those neighbours among whom they once lived. You are not far behind any of them!

Consider also how death came into the world as a result of Adam's sin (see Gen. 3), that we have inherited this sinful nature and are therefore subject to the wrath of God. What this means is that we are born in sin – that is, we come into this world as people who are spiritually dead, who are already unresponsive to the things of God and at enmity with Him (see Eph. 2). As sinners, and we all are, we will die physically, too – and, unless we are born again, after death comes God's judgment upon us and eternal condemnation. There is no point in skirting the matter; apart from the grace of God, this is the end of every one of us!

Ah, but there is hope, a marvelous hope, because there is forgiveness with God (Ps. 130:4). All have sinned, and the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:21-23). Jesus came into the world, fully God and fully man, to do what Adam failed to do, to fulfill all righteousness. And more than that, as the righteous One He also came as the Substitute for sinners in order to redeem them from their unrighteousness. He was not only obedient, then, but obedient unto death – even the death of the cross – and, as the spotless Lamb of God who was sacrificed in the place of others, He gives everlasting life to all who believe in Him (John 6:40). God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Oh, but how does a sinner lay hold of this gift, this free gift of eternal life? It is ours by faith in Christ – not by works, take note, but by faith – a faith which looks to Christ, finds Him precious, takes hold of Him and seeks to serve Him. Is this not what you want, unbeliever, everlasting life? And is not this One who offers it to you fully deserving of your total commitment and endless devotion?

You may wonder if I have any proof for all this. No, I cannot prove any of it; I can only tell you what God Himself has made known to all humanity in His Word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. You can test it for yourself,

however, as many generations of God's people have done before you. Taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8). Are you anxious and worried? He gives peace to the minds and hearts of those who are stayed upon Christ Jesus, for they trust in Him (Is. 26:3; Phil. 4:6,7). Are you weak and afraid that you will lose your grip on Christ, and so have to forfeit everything through your own inability to hang on? Believers are kept safe and eternally secure, not in their own strength but by the power of God (Is. 49:16; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). These are all things that you may find out for yourself, unbeliever, through personal discovery, and that is what waiting on the Lord with experiential faith gives us.

Are there any other Saviours on whom you might rely and still be saved? No, and the Scriptures are very clear, certain and final in regard to this. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6; see also John 3:35,35 and Acts 4:12). Come to Christ, unbeliever, come today before it is too late (2 Cor. 6:2), and be assured that this gospel call, all of grace and full of mercy, is freely and sincerely offered with all its attending promises to everybody – including you (Rom. 10:11-13)!

I told you earlier of one deathbed visit which I once made; I want to close by telling you now of another. This visit was far more recent and it ended on an altogether happier note. One of the elders of our church at the time, a godly man whom I had the pleasure of working with for eighteen years, was dying and he called for me to see him if I would do so before the end came. As I stood by his bed, I saw no terror in his eyes and felt no grief that permeated the room. I witnessed only the peace that passes all understanding, the joy of the Lord which was his strength in every trial, and that hope which served as his anchor and kept him firmly fixed on Christ. He looked up to heaven, and, with his arms extended, he prayed, "Receive me, O Lord." We talked for a short time, read from Scripture and prayed, and then, as I was on my way out of the room, I heard him singing a song of praise to the Lord – something he often did at the end of pastoral visits which we had made together. A few hours later he passed from this life into glory, from being though absent from the body yet present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8).

Unbeliever, I put before you an urgent plea: Do not put off seeking refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:27,28). "For to me," said the apostle, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).