

A Theology of Death

1. We must embrace the groaning and the glory.

Death is God's judgment of sin. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), spiritual death was put on mankind and physical death was irreversibly set in motion. Romans 8:20-23 reminds us that it is not just humanity, but all of Creation, that longs for the day when redemption comes and it is released from the life marred by sin. We carry death with us, but we also carry glory in us as believers. Even in God's judgment, he is merciful—sending his son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for sin on our behalf and giving us the Holy Spirit as a foretaste of our future glory. To embrace the hope and the curse keeps us from ending up bitter due to our sense of entitlement and unrealistic expectations.

2. Death is a discipleship issue.

We cannot continue to ignore death as we have in the past. Both individually and as a community, there is work for us to do to incorporate a proper perspective and a proper living around the process of dying and our response to it through grieving and mourning. If you wait until you start dying to contemplate death, it's too late—there is work to be done now. Death and dying are spiritual disciplines that we must cultivate now.

3. If Life = Christ, then Death = Gain.

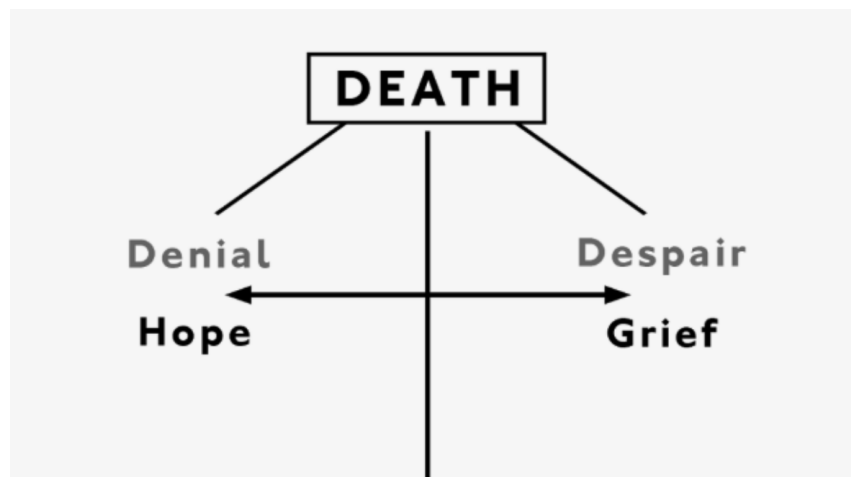
In Philippians 1, Paul's perspective helps us see that for the Christian, death should be gain. For many of us, though, our lives are more centered around our family, our job, and our comforts, so that when we think about death we truly do see it as a loss. But that idea is foreign to Paul. The good things we have amassed for our own comfort and pleasure here are but a dim shadow of what God has for us on the other side of death. We cannot hang onto those things and still have the comfort Christ offers us at the same time. Death is only gain for those who love and spend their life on Christ.

4. Aging and suffering are meant to shift our hope.

There is an embracing of physical brokenness (in aging and suffering) that shapes our soul and shifts our hope. The loss and pain we suffer in this life are not wasted—they are meant to awaken us to the work that God has for us to do. God has work for each of us to do as we get older. As we embrace suffering and death, we begin to release control and loosen our grip on the idolatry that marks our lives. Aging and suffering are God's means of preparing us to die well and set our hope on Jesus.

5. Grieving and hope are not opposites.

We do not deny the sting of death—because death is painful, and the sting is still very much real for us—nor do we fall into despair. Paul's words in his first letter to the Thessalonian church remind us that we do not grieve as those who have no hope—which means we do grieve, but we grieve as those who do have hope. We must engage in a lifestyle of grieving, learning to grieve well the minor losses as we anticipate the certainty of death. If we can't grieve the small things well, how will we rightly grieve the big things?



6. We are called to live in light of future death.

Is it possible for us to think of death in a way that helps us live now? When we think about living in light of death, we remember the apostle Paul, who said at the end of his life, “I have fought the good fight.” The certainty of our future death should shape the way we live now in various seasons and situations as we engage the mission of God. Paul viewed his life as a drink offering, which begs the question—does it feel like a waste to us that God might “pour out” our lives in whatever way he sees fit? It doesn’t strip our lives of significance, but rather enhances the significance of our lives as the fact that we will someday die drives us further into the mission God has for us. This means that our lives, our family, our resources—everything we cherish and have at our disposal—are all meant to serve the purposes of God rather than our self-centered agendas.

7. Death will be swallowed up by life.

It is right that the groaning causes us to long for the next world because we look forward to the day when death meets its own death. Death itself will have a dying day. Our present experience may lead us to believe that death has the final victory, but it does not. First Corinthians 15 tells us that the last enemy to be destroyed is death and that there will come a day when the following prophecy rings true:

“Death is swallowed up in victory,
O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?”
- 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

8. The way out of death and dying is through death.

Death is replete with paradox in that it is through death that we get true, eternal life. Jesus himself used death to accomplish his goal of destroying death. In the wake of that, we believers can look upon death as the entryway to our secure, eternal inheritance—forever living with God in the new heavens and new earth where there is no suffering, death, or dying to be had. In the end, it will be the very thing that has taken everything from you that will be the way to liberation from sin and brokenness and into the eternal home in which God will dwell with his people.

