

Encountering The Last Enemy

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[Printed in Dialog 11. Summer, 1972: 190-194. Reprinted with permission.]

The expression comes from St. Paul: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” It is found in his great chapter on resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter that also spells out his view of the span of human history from Adam to the second coming of Christ. He says: “Then shall come to pass the saying that is written. (Isaiah 25.8) ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ (Hosea 13.14) ‘O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

How might that ancient word from St. Paul illuminate for us our encounter with death?

1. The Forensic Fact

One fundamental premise that surfaces here about human life is what I shall label THE FORENSIC FACT. Human life unfolds in the forum, in the market-place of encounter and response, of challenge and reaction, of opposition and defense, of offense and withdrawal, facing adversaries larger or smaller. And my own death is an event in that forum. Even though all encounters in the forum are by no means adversary-encounters—thank God!—the encounter with death is.

But is there more to the forensic fact than that which an existentially-tinted psychologist or sociologist might also notice? Indeed there is. Fundamental to the forensic fact is God. The nature of human creaturehood is not exhausted by illuminating the varied encounters I have with other creatures—human, non-human, and inhuman; adversary, neutral, or benign—for even more important, in my creaturely life I keep on encountering the Creator himself.

And that encounter is more than just the initiating encounter that pops me into existence in the creation—even though Christians make that confession about themselves implicitly when they recite the first article of the Creed (wherein they are also confessing: “I believe that God created *me*”). The on-going contact that God keeps me with his human creatures is twofold: sustaining (keeping that creature going whose existence came to be) and evaluating. If man is a moral being, the root of his being lies in the Creator from whom he comes, who also does moral evaluation and judging and takes action appropriate with that evaluation and judgment.

Whatever else the Creation stories in the early chapter of Genesis say, they do throw light on the word of God not only as creator, the one who says: “Let there be...”, but also on God the evaluator, God doing a second action: “It is good.” God both creates and evaluates, especially with his human creatures, his images. As Adam and Eve soon found out after fellowship with the creator was broken, their new dilemma was precisely

that, although the garden-forum encounters with the Creator continued, the evaluative words from God in those encounters were adverse.

Under these conditions life in the forum with God is bad news; worse still is the awareness that even if you move out of Eden (whether by virtue of eviction or your own decision), the forensic fact of having to live in evaluative encounters with God is inescapable. Death enters the conversation in Genesis as an event of this forum. Even though we scientific westerners are overwhelmingly impressed with the “naturalness” of death—and envision absurd situations arising if human death had not been natural in the history of the race—death is not natural in the vision of the Genesis author. At least not human death. Death of images of God is not part of the original blueprint. It is an *ex post facto* event inflicted by the creator as new physical fact, new judgmental fact: “And the LORD God said: “Because...to dust you shall return.”

II. *Death Is My Enemy*

In the phenomenon of death God himself has a hand, and that hand is not benign. In the Corinthians text Paul does not come out and say: “In death God himself is my enemy,” although there are other Pauline passages which draw this conclusion when Paul is discussing God’s regular response to sinners. His rhetoric about the “Wrath of God” has this as its fixed point: God is the sinner’s opponent, his critic: not one who affirms him, but one who says “no” to him. The most comprehensive “no” is my death. Committed as Paul is (and we too) to monotheism, death cannot finally be traced back and rooted in something other than God the Creator. In the ancient history of Israel this was apparently a constant temptation provided by the non-Israelite religions: positing two Gods, one of life and another of death.

At one level di-theism is more reasonable for coming to terms with the experienced antithesis of life. There is goodness and affirmation, on the one hand, and death, evil, conflict and negation on the other. In the face of this constant tempting alternative, the Deuteronomist cites God as saying: “See now that I, even I, am the one, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (32.39). Although the Old Testament picture of death is variegated, Jahweh’s finger in the phenomenon is an item of which ancient Israel is constantly aware. (Read Psalm 90.3-12.)

It is worth noting that death is not “explained” in any casual description by such a passage. The Psalmist apparently would not have bridled at saying: the patient died from a massive coronary. God is not brought into the picture by the Psalmist as the fundamental and final factor in a line of tracing cause and effect. Instead, speaking with some of our own terms, God exercises his criticism of sinners via the biological medium which can be seen to have its causal connections completely comprehended in biological cause/effect grounds.

The focus here, of course, is not primarily on the death of *man*, but on the death of man who is *sinner*, who for whatever reasons is outside of Eden. Thus the same biological sequences can be observed in operation in a man’s dying as in the death of a horse; but man’s death is more than the horse’s death; just as his life is more than the horse’s life. His life is a life in divine forum with God as the relational partner; and so is his death. It makes ecological sense that the human creature, like horses and trees, should

finally pass away. And yet it does not make sense—especially when I contemplate my own death.

III. *The Enemy-Quality of Death*

In Kubler-Ross' book *On Death and Dying* (Macmillan, 1970, p. 2), a comment is made about humanity's fear of death that points at the awareness of death as enemy: "It is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the outside by someone else. In simple terms, in our unconscious mind we can only be killed; it is inconceivable to die in a natural cause or of old age." My unconscious thus perceives death as the onslaught of an aggressor.

At the level of our physical facticity, death is destroyer: "In the disintegration of the body our destruction becomes physically manifest and leaves no room for the delusion that anything of a biological nature survives" (Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957, p. 167). Is there anything more that does escape destruction?

Frequently at this point conversation among Christians switches to discuss the soul. Yet precisely at this point Christians in the western tradition must proceed cautiously. It is easy to slip into a Platonic perspective that sees the soul *ipso facto* as death-proof, and thus as destruction-proof. This will not suffice as designation of the "something more" about man as he lives in the forum and faces death there. For there is nothing about me which is death-proof, if death-proof means judgment-proof in the forum of God's creation. "Rather fear him," says Jesus, "who can destroy both body and soul (vis., God himself)."

When death comes, it comes as total death. How can the nature of God's verdict be more clearly demonstrated than by that fact? Yet, in one sense it is even worse than that: it is not merely that we *do* die, but that we *have* to die. We have no choice in the matter. And that observation leads to another: death is not simply the phenomenon which man meets on the last day of his life-span. No, death has a feed-back quality, from my end backwards, shaping my life now, long before my own personal last day. St. Paul specified this with such terms as "death ruling, dominating, reigning." Man's fear of death shapes his life long before the fact of death destroys it. Here is another apparent difference between the death of a human and the death of a non-human living being. Awareness of death, consciousness of death shapes the line of our lives as it apparently does not that of the animals.

Heidegger gives expression to this insight with his terrible Teutonism: "Sein-zum-Tode." This is his label for the sort of *being* human beings have. My own mortality is a present-tense reality. Long before I die, death is exercising a regime in my life. That leads to a fundamental awareness of helplessness too: even though I win one battle with a particular sickness, I know already that I'm going to lose the war. You can cure meningitis in certain cases, but you cannot cure mortality in any case.

With that we now come back to St. Paul's equation about "Death as enemy; Sin as death's sting; Law as Sin's power-source." All three of these terms are partners in the dilemma of man according to Paul's theology.

Without going into extended treatment of them, I can perhaps focus them as follows: Sin is Paul's designation for the Adamic solidarity of the whole human race. It pinpoints the fractured relationship between man and creator as the root quality of inescapable on-going life of man in his forum with God. Men everywhere are naturally Adamic. They do not trust the Creator as beneficent father; they do not honestly acknowledge the forensic fact that they must live with God as donating partner; they have a "yen" to run their own show with little or no reference to the divine creator/judge.

Sin is Paul's label for the fact of this ethical fracture, this operational fact. Thus when man the sinner dies, sin is the *sting* in his death, the "ouch" quality which reminds him that it is the death of a sinner, one whose demise is not only a biological coming to an end, but the creator's judgment of a creature who is guilty of bad faith with his God. That's the ouch, the sting, in the death of man.

But where does the sting get its power, its "clout"? Paul's word for that is "the law." What's that? In Paul's rhetoric it's a big word. It designates the "whole bag" of rubrics whereby God regularly relates to his creation. When we are focusing on death, the impact of law comes to surface as God himself attributing our culpable deed to our bodily person. The connecting link between my sin and my death is the decree and sentence of the judge in the forum where I stand. All of this is a legal procedure with God acting as judge and eventually also as executioner. All this is encompassed with the term LAW.

Death is a consequence of sin, but not mechanical consequence. It is rather a consequence of guilt, of adjudged culpability. Elsewhere (Romans 6.23) Paul can say: "death is the wages of sin." The fair-and-square, legal and legitimate pay-off for a sinner is death. Man does not die merely as man, but as rebel-man, God's own adversary in the forum. His death is the death of a culprit, i.e., a culpa-carrier. It is this quality of his death, arising because he is a sinner, which is the unique character of his death. Were he no sinner, he would not have to die this kind of death. The question of what the death of a non-sinner is like, though tantalizing, is empirically unanswerable because there is no such man. Even Jesus by willingly dying a sinner's death gives us no hard data on what the death of a non-sinner might be like.

IV. *Encountering the Enemy—With and Without Christian Resources*

The last enemy is death—the last enemy in my own biography, the last enemy in the biography of the cosmos. That is what Paul is discussing in 1 Corinthians 15: death as my individual enemy, and as the total enemy of the whole cosmos—by virtue of the fracture of sin and God's fair-and-square lawful operations with sinners in that cosmos. Of course, resurrection, Christ's, ours, is the major theme of that chapter, but you don't see what a victory you've really got in Christ unless you see the full enemy for all he is. The fullness of the enemy is that he is invincible, because in encountering him we encounter the creator's own operation. So any alternative to that death will have to come from the same source. Paul's doxology expresses both the focus for the source of victory in the face of the enemy, and his apparent surprise that the victory came from that source at all, given the full truth about the enemy. "Thanks be to God, Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Of course, there are other options used for coming to terms with death. Our contemporary age is consistently criticized for its attempts at repression or suppression: hiding death under the sweet funeral culture of the “American Way of Death”; treating death pornographically because it is a taboo; constructing procedures which do not seem deliberately intent on hiding death, but which nevertheless do so, for example, hospitalizing dying persons so that their death is removed from the “public view.”

Helmut Thieliicke (*Death and Life*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) has come up with a model of non-Christian “world-views” (“*Weltanschauungen*”) used in manifold concretizations for coming to terms with death. In this model, death is managed by dividing the human “I” into the “real me” and a sort of “fellow-traveler me” (eigentlich / uneigentlich Ich”). The fellow-traveler admittedly dies, but survival of death comes by positing immortality to the real me. Plato does this with his immortal soul. Idealism and Romanticism each in its own way posited in each man the universal “x” of which he then became the bearer; and the universal survived when the individual carrier finally died. Thieliicke shows how the myth propounded by National Socialism in Germany followed the same patterns. Here are Thieliicke’s words on the operation of such a model today in what he calls “Two Stop-Gap Solutions” (Ibid, pp. 12-13):

On the one hand men may attempt to relieve the relentless pressure of the problem of death (which is also the problem of life) by positing one particular value as absolute and then, by a conscious act of the will, refusing to inquire whether there is any other reality which might still transcend it in meaning. Such an attempt is precisely what is involved in all the talk about “our nation” as something eternal and indestructible. Here the act of absolutizing is especially obvious. And then it is but a logical consequence when imperceptibly and by degrees the ultimate criterion of good and evil become simply whether or not something is useful and beneficial for the nation so understood.

On the other hand, men may attempt to see the meaning of life not in some single, supposedly absolute aspect which they have posited for themselves, but in the infinite parade of life’s finite realities, each one regarded as a fragmentary parable for that totality of life which, though hidden in the background, is nevertheless symbolically present to determine the meaning of the whole procession. To fulfill the meaning of one’s life then, is to wander like Faust from one entity to the next, in a diligent and unending search, never coming to rest at any absolutized and supposedly achieved goal.

In either case a man’s mortal life is absorbed into an ever-arching higher configuration of meaning. In the first case man thinks of this configuration of meaning statically as a particular, concretely posited telos (e.g., ‘nation’ or ‘Humanity’). In the second he thinks of it in dynamic terms as that totality of the universe which discloses itself only as he struggles and wanders.

Either way, if he could succeed, he would demonstrate that death belongs integrally to life. Death would no longer be something alien, contradictory, or puzzling. As ultimate and terminal finality death would be rendered impotent, null, and trivial, just as God himself is rendered important, null, and trivial when he is accommodated to us, made to conform to our human notions of reality. Vis-à-vis both of these—death so conceived and God so conceived—man no longer dies

completely; he remains essentially intact while undergoing transition into that manifestation of life which is indigenously authentic for him.

The fallacy which Christian theology detects in the variety of ways which people in our day seeks to come to terms with death is that basically all the modes are “sub-gospel.” And if sub-gospel, they finally won’t work. They won’t work to give humanity victory over the last enemy. God’s own criticism won’t stay repressed by any immortality scheme other than that immortality which has been brought to light in the resurrection of Jesus himself from the dead.

And that bring us back to 1 Corinthians 15, for the fundamental fallacy inherent in any sub-gospel alternative to the gospel is that it amounts to distrust in the gospel. In that one good word which God himself gives us for us to be victorious over the last enemy. Of course, distrusting God’s gospel is but another enactment of “bad faith” on our part in the forum—and the cycle of events that that engenders makes us once more vulnerable to the last enemy.

I did not take it as my assignment to describe this victory over death—the main theme of 1 Corinthians 15—nor how it might (yea, *does*) work realistically as resource for our encountering our own last enemy and coming out winners instead of losers even though we “go down” in the struggle. I sought in my presentation rather to reconnoiter the enemy and see what the fuller truth (if not yet the *full* truth) about him really is.

The fuller truth about death—fuller at least than those pictures which by-pass the fact as they seek to illuminate what’s *really* happening as death occurs—is that my creator encounters me as an adversary in a situation that I cannot handle. But although that is the fuller truth about death, it is not the full truth about God. God’s last word to me and about me is Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. With that last word and full truth about the Creator, I am liberated not only from death’s sting and clout, but also from hang-ups that might inhibit me from admitting the fuller truth about death.