
An Introduction to Thanatology

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Abstract: Death has a prominent place in Scripture, from the Edenic scene early in Genesis to its final removal at the end of time. Scripture does more than simply acknowledge the existence of death; it provides guidance about the nature of death and the necessary response to the inevitable coming of the end of one's life. This paper serves as a relatively brief introduction to "thanatology" — the doctrine of death — and how it should be understood in connection with life and with the need for salvation in Christ.

"Jesus, who changed the accursed tree into the cross, and made chief sinners into saints, hath out a fair face on death, so that it becometh only His dark disguise as He returns to receive us home" - John Watson (1767-1839).

"Death's but a path that must be trod if man would ever pass to God" - Thomas Parnell (1679-1718)¹

Death as reality. While there may be those who try to deny death's reality, such as the Christian Science cult,² both Scripture and the plethora of graveyards dotting various countrysides testify death is very much a reality for the human condition. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, they died — not immediately in their physical existence, but

¹ Both statements taken from R. E. O. White, ed., *You Can Say That Again* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 67.

² J. H. Townsend, "The Christian Science Folly", *The Churchman* 16.158 (November 1901), 84. Most evangelical treatments of Christian Science classify it as a cult. The founder, Mary Baker Eddy, tended to dismiss Biblical truth when it contradicted what she personally believed. See Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1983) 123-130, here 125.

immediately so in their relationship with God, and spread that death throughout all of their descendants (Romans 5:12-14).

Paul does not provide detailed accounts on the the origin of sin³ beyond Romans 5; he is more concerned with the truth sin is the catalyst of death, a condition that spreads over the whole of creation.⁴ The New Testament speaks of the inevitability of human death in this dispensation, where physical death serves as the gateway to accounting before God (Hebrews 9:27). Even a cursory glance through the Bible shows the pervasive presence of physical death — sometimes in old age, sometimes in battle, sometimes through violence, sometimes through disease. The antediluvians, the patriarchs, the monarchs, the prophets, priests, Levites, warriors, common people — while there may have been division socially or economically, all shared one thing in common: they all died (Psalm 89:48).

Scripture shows only two who escaped the pain of physical death. One, Enoch, is described in the Bible as walking very closely with God (Genesis 5:24),⁵ so much so that “God took him”, while the other, the prophet Elijah the Tishbite, was taken out of the world in a chariot and horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11-12).⁶ The uniqueness of these events shows they are divine

³ “Paul has as little thought of comparing the mode in which death entered with that of its diffusion” - Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistles to the Romans* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1881) I:344.

⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), I:181.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 115, see in Enoch a divine promise that those “walk with God” will “experience life, not death, as the last word.”

⁶ T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13) (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 21, offers the possibility the image of chariot and horses of fire were symbolic of “holy war”. Certainly Elijah was engaged in “holy war” against the Ba’al cultus promoted by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and the imagery may suggest Elisha as successor to Elijah was called to continue the war against the godlessness. But Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (NIBC) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 174, suggests the image of Elijah and the fiery chariots is not a settled scene; was the “taking up” another way of showing Elijah’s death or was it simply a translation from one reality to another? Since the narrative allows for no other information, the situation remains a mystery that does not “allow us easy answers.”

exceptions for the sake of divine purposes.⁷ Outside of these two individuals, physical death is a foregone conclusion for all humanity, up until the time of the catching away of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-55, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). Death — the cessation of life on earth — is the ultimate end for all who now live,⁸ barring the “rapture” of the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, 1 Corinthians 15:51).⁹ The theological term for the study of death - thanatology - is a compound of two Greek words: *thanatos* - death, and *logos* - word. This paper will very briefly introduce thanatology.

William E. Phipps rightly points out how “we now reveal the facts of life but conceal the facts of death.” He notes how the word “death” winds up replaced by what some might consider “softer” terms, such as “leave taking” or “called upstairs”, or the widely used “passed away”. Phipps believes it is emotionally unhealthy to attempt to avoid the subject of death.

Some Americans are beginning to face up to their anxieties over death and are distinguishing between realistic, rational fears and neurotic, irrational fears. Thanatophobia, the fear of death, is positive when it causes people to take safety precautions. It is both unreasonable and self-deceptive to claim to have no fear of death.... Mental health can be jeopardized when irrational superstitions are not exorcised by the light of reason.¹⁰

The late psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was recognized as one of the foremost authorities on the relationship of human thought and reaction to the inevitability of death. To her own question, “why is it so hard to die?”, Kübler-Ross insists

⁷ Desmond Alexander, “The Old Testament View of Life After Death”, *Themelios* 11.2 (1986), 44, writes: “In both instances it is implied that God has the power to take to himself those who have an intimate relationship with him (cf. Psalm 73:24).”

⁸ Physical death is not the end of one’s existence, however. It is a transition to the afterlife, where those who received Christ as Savior will enter into His presence, while those who refused the offer of salvation in Christ will find themselves in hell.

⁹ Given that no one knows when the return of Christ will happen, the normal course of life prior to His return will involve physical death.

¹⁰ William E. Phipps, *Death: Confronting the Reality* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 8.

Western society has not learned “to cope better with the reality of death” than other societies apparently have done.

Dying is an integral part of life, as natural and predictable as being born. But whereas birth is cause for celebration, death has become a dreaded and unspeakable issue to be avoided by every means possible in our modern society. Perhaps it is that death reminds us of our human vulnerability in spite of all our technological advances....

It is unlikely that any group has ever welcomed death’s intrusion on life, but there are others who have successfully integrated the expectation of death into their understanding of life. Why is it so hard for us to do this? The answer may lie in the question. It is difficult to accept death in this society *because* it is unfamiliar. In spite of the fact it happens all the time, we never see it. When a person dies in the hospital, he is quickly whisked away; a magical disappearing act does away with the evidence before it could upset anyone.¹¹

Death is not restricted to old, infirm, broken souls who have lived out the vigor of their lives and now find themselves incapacitated and decrepit. For example, Scripture tells of the death of David’s first child by Bathsheba, a pregnancy conceived in lustful adultery (see 2 Samuel 12:13-18).

As a consequence of David’s sin, the child born to him did not survive. Some may wonder why David was forgiven and the innocent child was not given the opportunity to live beyond one week. As Bill T. Arnold explains:

The answer lies in the Bible’s distinction between punishment and consequence. The child’s death is a result of David’s sin, but it is not the same as punishment. It is a fundamental principle of life that God may forgive and cleanse us of all wrongdoing, but we find the consequences of our sin may, and in fact often, remain. The innocent suffer for the crimes

¹¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1975), 5.

committed by someone else, but such suffering is not punishment for those crimes. A crack baby may die soon after birth because the mother used crack during pregnancy. The child dies, the mother lives. The child's death is not the punishment but the consequences of the mother's sin.¹²

Nothing is said in the text about Bathsheba, the mother. The Bible does not tell us if this is her first child or a subsequent birth from her marriage to Uriah the Hittite. David mourned for the child but in vain. It is highly probable Bathsheba experienced deep emotional trauma over the death of her child, regardless of how the baby was conceived. The pain of losing a child, an infant, is a pain which is often overlooked.¹³ Stillbirth claims about 24,000 babies every year in the United States alone; the parents are in shock, grieving the loss before they ever had a chance to rejoice having a baby. One man, "Earl", a staff minister in a suburban church, and his wife, experienced a stillbirth three decades ago. He noted the church where he worked did nothing for him or his wife; the only "recognition" of their baby girl's passing was a card from their district superintendent that had been taped to his office door. He and his wife still mourn that death.¹⁴

King Herod's vengeful slaughter of male babies under the age of two in Bethlehem and the immediate area concludes with a prophecy from Jeremiah 31:15 - "Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Matthew 2:16-17). The Bible unhesitatingly acknowledges the reality of death even in infants. Scripture gives indication that each and every person's days are numbered; "Yahweh knows all the psalmist's days, the period of his life (Psalm 139:16)."¹⁵ No guarantee as to length of life is

¹² Bill T. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 536.

¹³ For guidance on the grieving process from the loss of a pregnancy through either miscarriage or stillbirth, see Maureen Rank, *Free to Grieve* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2004).

¹⁴ Kay Lyn Carlson, LSW, "How to Develop and Effective Reproductive Loss Recovery Ministry", in Timothy Clinton and Jared Pingleton, eds., *The Struggle is Real* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2019), 235.

¹⁵ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC 21) (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 262.

ever given in the Scripture, yet when death invades a family, the age of the departed can lead to the conclusion “he (she) left us too soon” (or similar). Phipps points out age has much to do with the grieving process; a elderly grandmother who quietly dies in her sleep is said to have had a “timely” death, while a child who perishes through a drowning accident is mourned as having died too early, “cheated out of the chance to make her full contribution to humanity.”¹⁶

But whether the death is that of an elderly individual or of an infant after only a few hours of life, the common connector is that in both, life has ceased and the survivors are left to grapple with their feelings over the loss. And the pain of the loss is apparently most pointed when it is the death of a spouse.

Research has shown that the highest grief stress in American culture is over the death of a spouse. By means of social readjustment, it was found that the impact of conjugal bereavement was twice that of being fired from a job. An accountant without a job, for example, still thinks of herself as a professional, but a wife without a husband is immediately transformed into a widow. Spouse loss hits harder than a term in prison or than the death of a sibling, parent or child. Those who are happily married function as two halves coupled together; losing part of the larger self is then felt to be a dismemberment.¹⁷

Roy and Jane Nichols tell of their outreach to a young couple, ages twenty-two and nineteen, whose two year old son drowned in a neighbor’s pond. Despite the cold fact of their son’s death, this couple “sat in stunned shock staring into a cup of coffee and watching smoke curl from a cigarette.”

We were aware that a great deal of the time during that initial meeting with (the boy’s parents), their minds drifted. They were not with it; they could not believe it; they wished to be

¹⁶ Phipps, *Death*, 134.

¹⁷ Phipps, *Death*, 136.

somewhere else.¹⁸

Why does death, even among Christians, cause such emotional trauma and pain? The inevitability and the unpredictability of death is no surprise, and those who hold to Biblical faith know that when a believer in Christ is away from the body - a metaphor for death - that individual is “with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). The apostle Paul found himself “hard pressed”; he wanted to be with Christ, which he believed was better than remaining here on earth (Philippians 1:23). He knew that what awaited believers would far, far outweigh whatever he might experience here on earth.¹⁹

Phipps suggests the emotional trauma and pain of experiencing the death of a loved one is akin to “being cut deeply in an accident, or, in the case of a spouse loss, is like having an amputation.”²⁰ The sense of loss — even abandonment — is a painful thing. Someone who was once a source of companionship and conversation is gone, irretrievably so, and the emotional emptiness is often cavernous.

When someone you love dies, you have a feeling of numbness; a yearning; and a protest. You have lost part of yourself; you feel disorganized; and you do much crying. You’re restless and you may feel guilty. Perhaps you could have helped the one who died but you do not know how. You are angry because the person died, and you are angry at the world. You feel so alone, and loneliness is one of the biggest problems of grief.²¹

Theologically, it may well be that the pain, sorrow and trauma of experiencing the death of a loved one is directly attributable to the fact that death is the result of sin. Sin brought about alienation from the Giver of life. Sin occasioned the appearance

¹⁸ Roy and Jane Nichols, “Funerals: A Time for Grief and Growth”, in Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, 90.

¹⁹ Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 252.

²⁰ Phipps, *Death: Confronting the Reality*, 140.

²¹ Edith Mize, “A Mother Mourns and Grows”, in Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, 100.

of shame and guilt into the human condition. Death is an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). “The sting of death is sin” (1 Corinthians 15:56); death maintains its power because of sin.²² Death comes because humanity lives in a fallen world; Christians are not exempt from the effects of living in this fallen world, in that they experience illness, aging, natural disasters, and, of course, death.²³ Sin brought sorrow into the world, and sorrow affects the whole of one’s earthly life (cf. Psalm 90:10).

Death was not part of the original creation. Death is an intruder, stealing the “good” of creation and replacing it with pain, loss, anger and whatever else is contrary to God’s original intention. Phipps notes some caregivers of terminally ill individuals had less of a deep emotional reaction to the passing of that person when the caregiver has had the time to process what is coming. He cites Richard Kalish, another writer on death, who tells of a nurse who at first was very disturbed over discovering her father had terminal cancer. She cared for him in her home until the day he died. When the nurse was asked about how she was coping, a year after the death, she admitted she did not cry at all when her father breathed his last: “I think I’d finished with crying by that time.”²⁴

As painful as it is when a believer dies, there is comfort in the Biblical assurances of the next steps in the afterlife. But in the case of an unbeliever’s death, there is more than just the loss of companionship and love.

When unbelievers die, the sorrow we feel is not mingled with the joy of assurance that they have gone to be with the Lord. This sorrow, especially regarding those to whom we have been close, is deep and real.²⁵

²² F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 394.

²³ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 618.

²⁴ Phipps, *Death: Confronting the Reality*, 139.

²⁵ Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 627. Williamson, however, takes a mediating position, saying the Biblical texts on hell, pain, suffering and the like, cannot be pressed too much: “So is hell the ultimate holocaust? Not in

A 1986 study in Ireland tracked terminally ill individuals and their responses to their known impending deaths. Most of the patients in the study had feelings of uncertainty, mostly as to the process of dying; they also demonstrated depression, guilt and anger. Some felt guilt at the prospect of abandoning their families, or that in the course of their illness they had become some kind of burden on their loved ones. Some chose to project their anger onto the doctors attending them, to “fate”, or onto God. The study also showed the growth of denial as a coping mechanism.²⁶ The study apparently did not explore the effects of having faith in God. But it seems that the anxiety, uncertainty and other negative emotional reactions in those in the group study is very reflective of the emotional state of the unbeliever. From a Biblical perspective, people who die without a saving knowledge of Christ are those who are without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Many are the preachers who are asked, just before the funeral begins, to “preach” the deceased into heaven. The families who request this are generally deeply involved in grief, and find it difficult to accept their departed loved one might have a destination other than heaven. It seems it is more about the *place* - heaven is surely a more acceptable end than hell — than the *Person*, meaning Christ. Paul emphasizes being with Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8, Philippians 1:23) exclusive of locale; his declaration in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 describes Jesus as descending from heaven to gather both those who have died “in Christ” and those saved who remain alive.²⁷

As sentimental as a request to “preach (a loved one) into

any literal sense; that would involve taking some of the biblical imagery at face value. Nor is this description appropriate in an analogically sense; that would obviously imply a place of unjust suffering and devilish torturers. The Scriptures portray neither hell nor God in this way. But what about the argument that hell *is* the consuming fire of God that annihilates or destroys? ...while she texts at first glance support the idea of terminal punishment, others stubbornly suggest otherwise” (*Death and the Afterlife*, 161-162) (italics in original).

²⁶ R. K. Shelley, “Thanatology in a Liaison Psychiatry Setting”, *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists* 10 (December 1986), 352.

²⁷ For a discussion on the Biblical evidence concerning the afterlife for the believer, see Ben Witherington III, “Waiting for Kingdom Come”, *Evangel* 17.3 (Autumn 1999), 76-81.

heaven” might be, the Bible clearly points out those who leave this world without salvation in Christ leave without hope for other than judgment for having died in their sin.²⁸ Christians may grieve — should grieve — when a fellow believer who was loved expires; that is emotionally healthy. But the grieving must be mixed with Biblically based assurance, hope and joy; a believer who has died is in the presence of Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:10).

Therefore, though we have sorrow when Christian friends and relatives die, we also can say with Scripture, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). Our mourning should be mixed with worship of God and thanksgiving for the life of the loved one who has died.²⁹

A 2013 study explored reactions to the prospect of hell versus heaven. The authors tended to disassociate from theological concerns, even though previous studies on the same idea tended towards connecting a sense of well-being to having a religious belief. Their conclusions included questioning the benefit of a belief in hell; aside from the possibility such belief may encourage “rule following” in that hell serves as a deterrent, they question the value given their findings on the

²⁸ Hebrews 9:27 points out that for all people, at the time of death, will face judgment. Revelation 20:11-15 indicates the timing of final judgment for the wicked dead will be at the close of the eschaton. Luke 16:19-31, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, seems to point to an immediate destination upon death. Bock sees this unit as a parable with strong implications: “I have already argued that this unit is a parable, but that does not mean that it should be read as mere story. It depicts a tragic and serious reality. The coming judgment is permanent for those rejected by God. Eternal torment is in store for those who know that God exists but have failed to respond to him in this life. Christians debate, however, whether to take the afterlife imagery literally (as if Hades is a place of fire) or more metaphorically (as a picture of a place of discomfort and torment)” (*Luke*, 434).

²⁹ Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 626.

negative effect on well-being which a belief in hell fosters.³⁰

In a secular situation, concern will be towards a “well-being.” In a Biblical setting, well-being is not assumed by or through the removal of a “negative” such as a belief in hell but in accepting the reality of hell and the opportunity through Jesus Christ to be delivered via salvation from the prospect of an eternity in hell.

Four uses of “death” in the New Testament. Murray J. Harris identifies four “senses” in which the New Testament presents “death”.³¹

1. *Physical death*. Paul understood eternal life was not a reality while here on earth. He spoke of that which is “perishable” (*phthartos*) becoming “imperishable” (*aptharsia*) and that which is “corruptible” (or, “mortal” [NIV 2011, ESV]) (*thnēton*) becoming “incorruptible” (or, “immortal”) (*athanasia*) (1 Corinthians 15:42-43, 53). It is in the grave that the body experiences corruption or decay (cf. Psalm 16:10). Death came to the whole of the human race when sin entered the world (cf. Romans 5:12) — a spiritual death as well as physical death.

Harris points out physical death in the New Testament is “a process as well as an event”.³²

- It can speak of the loss of physical ability (2 Corinthians 4:12, 16).
- It can speak of situations where the result is the cessation of one’s earthly life (1 Corinthians 15:31, 2 Corinthians 4:10-11).

³⁰ Azim F. Shariff and Lara B. Aknin, “The Emotional Toll of Hell: Cross-National and Experimental Evidence for the Negative Well-Being Effects of Hell Beliefs”, *PLoS One* 9:1 (January 2014) (e85251). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0085251, accessed September 5, 2025), 1, 3.

³¹ Murray J. Harris, “The New Testament View of Life After Death”, *Themelios* 11:2 (January 1986), 47.

³² Harris, “The New Testament View”, 47.

- It can speak of the actual ending of one's earthly life (Romans 6:23, Hebrews 9:27).

2. *Spiritual death.* Joseph Kyle many years ago explained about spiritual death.

The life of the soul is dependent absolutely upon fellowship with God, and separation from the life that is His at once brings death to the soul. The sentence involved eternal death as well, if judgment should not be averted, for this must follow if spiritual life be not restored.³³

Romans 6:23 insists the wages paid by sin is death, both spiritual and physical³⁴ (cf. Matthew 8:22, John 5:24-25, James 5:20). Spiritual death is such that "that no clear or unambiguous trace of the original order of creation in which his life reflected the image of God has been left."³⁵

3. *Second death.* Some years ago a brief aphorism summarized the need for salvation in Christ: "Born once, die twice; born twice, die once." Those who experience only a physical birth remain alienated from the presence of God, without relationship with Him; they are enemies of God (cf. Colossians 1:21). Such persons will "die twice" — once in the physical when their earthly lives conclude, and then in the second death, that "permanent separation"³⁶ from God. At the time of the Great White Throne judgment, those who were never in a regenerated relationship with Christ by faith will be cast irretrievably from the "lake of fire" which is the "second death" (Revelation 20:14-15).

4. *Death to sin.* Only those in relationship with Christ by grace and through faith experience this happy "death". Being dead to sin is Paul's description of the result of salvation; those who have so died to sin no longer live to themselves, but to and for

³³ Joseph Kyle, "The Doctrine of Sin", *BibSac* 79:315 (July 1922), 250.

³⁴ Harris, "The New Testament View", 47.

³⁵ R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), 106.

³⁶ Harris, "The New Testament View", 47.

Christ (Galatians 2:20) are no longer to live as if that sin is still in control (Romans 6:2); having been spiritually “crucified with Him”, believers no longer exist in slavery to sin but have been “freed from sin” (Romans 6:6-7). Having been set free from sin and the spiritual death it inevitably brings, believers have an obligation to orient their thinking towards Christ (Colossians 3:1-2), to count or to reckon themselves “dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” no longer allowing sin to be in control of one’s life (Romans 6:6-7).

While each of these four uses of “death” are found in the New Testament, Harris notes “the most common use of ‘death’ and ‘die’ is in relation to the end of physical life”.³⁷

Hermeneutics and death. Scripture’s presentation of death cannot be approached casually or haphazardly. As Robert Morey has written, discerning the Bible’s meaning when using the word “death” and associated words, such as heaven, hell, fire and judgment, requires certain interpretational foundations.³⁸

Morey’s first principle is the *clarity of Scripture*. He argues “the Bible was written to be understood by the normal person who would take the words of the Bible in their simplest and most natural meaning.”³⁹ However, there is some thought in the field of hermeneutics that such a reading of the Scriptures may not be quite so simplistically accomplished. William Klein, *et al*, in discussing the science of Biblical interpretation, note the following aspects of seeking to discover the meaning of the Biblical text:

- While the divine message in the text must in itself be clear, there are those passages which carry a sense of ambiguity to

³⁷ Harris, “The New Testament View”, 47.

³⁸ Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1984), 21. The hermeneutical principles which Morey presents are included here, not to draw the conversation away from death into a basic class in Biblical interpretation, but to provide a context for how “death”, however it is presented, is to be interpreted in the Scriptures.

³⁹ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 21.

them.

- Scripture seems to invite a literal, historical reading; however, at times there are figurative elements and “nonhistorical” texts (i.e., parables).
- Biblical text objectivity is essential but such objectivity is influenced by the presuppositions of the reader doing the interpretation.⁴⁰

Morey believes the intent of the Scripture was one of a “natural and most obvious meaning”; he rejects any notion the writers of the Holy Word were “willfully deceptive in teaching the opposite of what their words imply.”⁴¹ Rodney Decker argues the meaning of the Biblical text is meant to convey the exact message God desired to have conveyed.

Inspiration is the direct result of inscripturation - the work of the Holy Spirit by which he so guided the minds of the human authors and writers that they chose the precise words necessary to accurately reflect the exact truth God intended, all the while reflecting their own personality, writing style, vocabulary, and cultural context, thus guaranteeing that this truth is accurately, inerrantly, and infallibly recorded in writing.⁴²

“Death”, whether spiritual or physical, cannot be pulled out of any standard hermeneutical principles. God intended, as Decker noted, “precise words” to communicate to humans what truth was meant to be communicated “accurately.”

While the cautionary aspects of hermeneutics noted by Klein, *et al*, are important and not to be casually overlooked, Morey’s emphasis is less about any particular fine points of Biblical interpretation and more about the clarity of expression in the

⁴⁰ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 3.

⁴¹ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 22.

⁴² Rodney J. Decker, “Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation”, *DBSJ* 11 (2006), 27-28.

Bible concerning such vital issues as conscious unending torment for those who die without Christ,⁴³ as opposed to the “universalists”, who believe all people without exception will eventually arrive in heaven,⁴⁴ or the “annihilationists”,⁴⁵ who advocate for divine total extermination of the wicked dead.

...the biblical authors used those words which were the only ones available to them which would indicate endless punishment to the average person of their day. To think that they would use the Greek and Hebrew words which would mean endless punishment to the common hearer in order to teach annihilation or Universalism is to label them either deceptive or ignorant.⁴⁶

The second principle Morey advocates is *progressive revelation*. The whole of Biblical truth comes through a “gradual unfolding” of God’s revelation; what may have been vague in its first appearance will, as one works through the Scripture, be revealed in much further depth the more of the Bible which is considered. Thus Morey rightly argues that a present understanding of death and the afterlife must not, indeed, can not be based on that which is exclusively found in the Old Testament,⁴⁷ referring to Hebrews 1:1-2.

S. Lewis Johnson understands a fuller revelation comes through the Son than was ever possible through the Old

⁴³ “...the New Testament says a great deal about the eschatological fate of the wicked and the topic of hell, using a varied terminology and fairly graphic imagery — particularly in the Synoptic Gospels and the book of Revelation. A primary motif is fire, which arguably derives from the concept of Gehenna - the term in the Synoptic Gospels most commonly associated with the fate of the wicked” —Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife: Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions* (NSBT 44) (London: Apollos and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2017), 148.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the theology of universalism, see Graham J. Watts, “Is universalism theologically coherent? The contrasting views of P. T. Forsyth and T. F. Torrance”, *EvQ* 84.1 (2012) 40-46.

⁴⁵ For a discussion and critique of annihilationism, see Andy Saville, “Arguing with Annihilationism: An Assessment of the Doctrinal Arguments for Annihilationism”, *SBET* 24.1 (Spring 2006).

⁴⁶ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 22.

⁴⁷ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 22-23.

Testament.

That which was "partial and piecemeal" became final and complete in the revelation that came "by His Son." And, it should be added, amid the diversity of the Old Testament and New Testament revelation, there was continuity and unity, for the same God who spoke through the prophets has continued to speak in His Son.

All the prophets and authors gave their listeners and readers a part, a small fragment, of the truth given to them to proclaim, but the whole remained for the Son to unfold and the New Testament writers to celebrate.⁴⁸

Thus, what may be learned about death and the afterlife in the Old Testament is not the complete story; there must be a continuance to the further, progressive unfolding in the New Testament ushered in through Jesus Christ.

Morey illustrates the need for progressive revelation in a brief discussion of the tendency of some New Testament authors to "read the New Testament meaning of Hades into the Old Testament concept of Sheol." Apparently these authors equate the meaning of Hades in the New Testament to the meaning of Sheol in the Old. Morey objects to this approach, which

...ignore(s) the principle of progressive revelation and actually assume that the Bible is one book given at one time with word which admit of one meaning from the beginning to the end of the book. They assume that if the Old Testament teaches something which is not exactly like what the New Testament teaches, the Bible would be contradicting itself... (The Bible) must be viewed as progressive in nature. But this does not mean and indeed cannot mean it is contradictory.... The integrity of the Old Testament and the New Testament is preserved only by the principle of progressive revelation, and, we must point out, the principle of progressive revelation does

⁴⁸ S. Lewis Johnson, "God's Last Word to Man", *RefRev*2.2 (Spring 1993), 30-31.

not lead to biblical contradictions, but *solves* the problem of apparent contradiction.⁴⁹

Progressive revelation sheds additional light on what the Old Testament may present in shadow. As Douglas Oss has affirmed:

The nature of progressive revelation is such that the meaning of the Scriptures became deeper and clearer as the literary corpus of the canon increased. Earlier portions of the canon were understood more clearly in the light of Jesus Christ and the expanding canon. Try to imagine interpreting the OT without the light of the NT. The conclusions would be quite different from those reached with the NT in view.⁵⁰

While the Old Testament makes the direct connection between the presence of sin and the inevitability of death (cf. Ezekiel 18:30-32), the fullness of that reality comes later from the apostle Paul. The apocryphal *Ecclesiasticus* 25:24 makes a point somewhat similar to the apostle Paul's in 1 Timothy 2:4: "From a woman sin had its beginning and because of her we all die."⁵¹

Morey further argues against any idea that the Old Testament's understanding of the afterlife, and such terms as "soul", "spirit", and "sheol" will need more revelation in order to be understood with any kind of precision.⁵² He also objects to any eisegetic reading of the New back into the Old Testament, as well as forcing the Old's vagueness as the control of the interpretation and understanding of the New Testament.⁵³ Paul R. Williamson argues the ANE did not have any defined "systematic theology" about death and what happens

⁴⁹ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 24.

⁵⁰ Douglas A. Oss, "Canon as Context: The Function of *Sensus Plenior* in Evangelical Hermeneutics", *GTJ* 9.1 (1988), 110.

⁵¹ E. C. John, "The Old Testament Understanding of Death", *IJT* 23.1-2 (January-June 1974), 124.

⁵² For a detailed examination of "Hades" outside of the New Testament, see Kim Papaioannou, "Motifs of Death and Hell in the Teaching of Jesus: Part 1 - An Examination of Hades" *MJT* 32:2 (2016), 104-110

⁵³ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 24-25.

thereafter; the thinking across the various cultures developed over time and the developments were not necessarily uniform with contemporaneous cultures.

For the most part, the ANE concept of the afterlife was rather gloomy. Their netherworld was filled with monsters and demons; negotiating through this to a better after life entailed various difficulties; it also required significant assistance from the living.⁵⁴

Later New Testament material gives a much different picture of the afterlife than a gloomy, monster filled existence, much difference than what was in ANE thinking, and with a better prospect for those who die as believers in Christ. The New Testament presentation of death is much different than the stream of thought in the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 6, which is traditionally attributed to David, has a plea for deliverance from death and the grave.

For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise? (Psalm 6:5; cf. Psalm 88:5).

Evil people were humiliated as they went “wailing” to the grave (Psalms 31:17 NET). The wealthy took nothing with them when they died (Psalm 49:17); death renders people helpless (Psalm 88:4 NET). There is shame in “going to the Pit” (Ezekiel 32:24).

Peter C. Craigie points out that for Old Testament writers

...the state of the dead is not differentiated with respect to good and evil persons; there is no clear distinction here between heaven and hell. *Sheol* was conceived as kind of an underworld; the word is translated in (another OT ms) as *hades*. In Sheol, people were believed to exist in a form of semi-life, at rest, yet not in joy, or they had not the fullness of life which made possible the richness of relationship with...God.⁵⁵

By the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, Jewish thinking on the

⁵⁴ Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 7.

⁵⁵ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19) (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 93.

afterlife had become more defined; the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) identifies “Abraham’s bosom” as the destination of the righteous dead, while “Hades”, a place of unremitting torment, was the destination of the wicked. The rich man in torment is able to converse with Abraham in the blessed place, and the story reveals a “chasm” between the place of the righteous and the place of the wicked.⁵⁶ There are some who think that this account, as a parable, is meant to illustrate certain truths and not necessarily provide any definitive information on the condition of the dead in the afterlife.⁵⁷ Others see it as a continuation of Jesus’ earlier teaching on how one uses wealth in this life, with the parable of the prodigal son and of the unrighteous steward preceding this one.⁵⁸ Darrell Bock has argued this parable, while probably not an “historical interchange”, but is instead a “picture” of the reality of accountability before God.⁵⁹ Even if this account is a parable and the elements are meant to be symbolic, they are still progressive revelation in that Jesus speaks of a place for the righteous dead and a place for the unrighteous dead, the former in peaceful repose and the latter in conscious, active torment.⁶⁰

Morey’s third principle concerns the *importance of Biblical languages*. He strongly advocates for study of Hebrew and Greek words by those who are trained in those languages, recognizing the context and the effect of history, culture, economic situations and politics, for example, that might affect the use of a word from one setting to another. Morey believes the common meaning of the word in a Biblical text must “prevail” unless there are “clear and necessary reasons for abandoning the common meaning of a word.”⁶¹ Morey also

⁵⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 203.

⁵⁷ Norval Goldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 483.

⁵⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 252.

⁵⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 432.

⁶⁰ The “torment” for the wicked is debated much; a brief, very basic treatment follows below.

⁶¹ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 25-26.

sounds a caution against those who are not properly trained in the languages trying to pass off their “knowledge” to sound as if they are “authoritative” in some way. William Mounce has authored various works for the study of the New Testament. One such tool, *Greek for the Rest of Us*, is designed to help non-experts understand the Scriptures better, but with that, he offered a warning.

There are limitations to our approach, or what I like to call “baby Greek”. You will not be learning the full language, and my concern is that you will forget that you know only a little. I’m going to give you the ability to sound authoritative by citing Greek and Hebrew words and grammar, and perhaps be completely wrong. I actually put off writing this book for several years because of this concern, but I finally came to the conclusion that it’s not a little Greek that prove dangerous. It’s a little bit of pride that proves dangerous.⁶²

Morey’s fourth principle is that of *context*. Whether any given text is to be interpreted literally or figuratively depends on reading the passage in its literary context.⁶³ David L. Baker explained context as vital to any hermeneutic activity.

...the meaning of an event or word is affected by its place within the context of a whole culture and way of life. In terms of biblical hermeneutics, this means that a text needs to be understood not only in its immediate context, but also in its wider context, which is the whole Bible.⁶⁴

Klein, *et al*, writes that basic to all biblical hermeneutics is “the intended meaning of any passage is the meaning that is consistent with the sense of the literary context in which it occurs.” This means the context of any given passage is “the material that comes immediately before and after it.”

⁶² William D. Mounce, *Greek for the Rest of Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), xviii.

⁶³ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 27.

⁶⁴ David L. Baker, “Interpreting Texts in the Context of the Whole Bible”, *Themelios* 5.2 (January 1980), 21.

The context of a sentence is its paragraph, the context of a paragraph is the series of paragraphs that precede and follow it, and the context of a chapter is the surrounding chapters. Ultimately the whole book in which a passage appears is its controlling context. In a further sense, the canon of all sixty-six books of the Bible provides the largest context in which every passage must be understood.⁶⁵

Folk religion or “we’ve always believed it this way” approaches must be set aside in favor of careful consideration of the contextual provenance of any text in Scripture, including any which deal with dying, death, and the afterlife.

“*Figures of speech*” is Morey’s fifth principle; he points out the Biblical authors would often employ figurative language to convey a truth in the Scriptures. He defines “figurative language” as that which “create(s) mental images or pictures to illustrate ideas.”⁶⁶

Charles F. Pfeiffer some years ago provided an introduction to the use of figurative language in the Scripture, explaining such common terms as simile, metaphor, metonymy and personification.⁶⁷ An exhaustive work on figures of speech in the Bible is E. W. Bullinger’s examination of 217 specific such figures found in the Bible. Bullinger underscores the importance of figures of speech, especially in translation, saying those who have failed to attend to the presence of figurative language have “made blunders as serious as they are foolish.”⁶⁸ Morey would probably concur with Bullinger, arguing the “failure to observe the presence and function of figurative language is perhaps the most common error in the literature on the subject (of death).”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Klein, *et al*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 156-157.

⁶⁶ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 29.

⁶⁷ Charles F. Pfeiffer, “Figures of Speech in Human Language”, *BETS* 2.4 (Fall 1959), 17-21.

⁶⁸ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898, repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), xvi.

⁶⁹ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 29.

One example is in the death of Jairus' daughter. When Jesus arrived at the house, He rebuked those who were wailing and mourning the child's death, saying "She is not dead but asleep" (Luke 8:52).

...our Lord uses the word "sleep" in a metaphorical sense. Death is often described in the Bible as sleep. In Christian times of course the expression is used to imply a belief in the resurrection but the word was used to describe each long before the time of Christ and even before there was any clear idea of a future life. Why does our Lord describe death as sleep especially without explaining His meaning? The answer is surely that it is a hint that He is about to raise the person to life, just as if it had only been a question of sleep. It is clear from the context...that He never intended His remark to be taken literally, though in fact some did.⁷⁰

Death in the human condition. Death, like many Biblical topics, is not sensationalized or necessarily given disproportionate attention; from its first appearance in the Garden of Eden to its demise in the eschaton (cf. Revelation 20:14), death is considered as it happens. Someone lives, that someone dies, the record is given and the story moves on to its next issue or topic. Death is part of the human condition and remains so throughout the present, created order (see Ecclesiastes 12:1-7).

Man is urged to live life to the full, knowing life is brief and the time to take advantage of opportunities is limited.⁷¹ Within the Psalm literature was an understanding of the brevity of life and that both life and death are in the hands of the Lord (Psalm 39:5-6). Peter C. Craigie thinks the ability of the psalmist to have any genuine reflection about the transitory nature of life is in itself a mark of righteousness; such "insight...was lacking in wicked persons."⁷² Those consumed by wicked lives apparently think only of the immediate, how their proclivity to

⁷⁰ R. C. Fuller, "Questions and Answers 5: The Healing of Jairus' Daughter", *Scripture* 3.2 (April 1948), 53.

⁷¹ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 212.

⁷² Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 309.

evil might be satisfied on this day at this time, while the righteous understand the need to see the presence and activity of God in every moment of their earthly existence.

Physical death was not included in the original created order.⁷³ Genesis 2:16-17 presents death as a conditional, a possible consequence, rather than as an already existent reality. The necessary contrast between the “good” of the Garden and the potential for “death” to sully the “good” is the work of the Creator who exists as a moral being.

The God of Creation is not at all morally indifferent. On the contrary, morality and ethics constitute the very essence of His nature. The Bible presumes God operates by an order which man can comprehend, and that a universal moral law had been decreed for society. Thus, the idea embedded in Genesis in one universal Creator has profound ethical implications. It means that the same universal sovereign will that brought the world into existence continues to exert itself thereafter making absolute, not relative, demands upon man, expressed as categorical imperatives - “thou shalt,” “thou shalt not.”⁷⁴

Genesis 3:19 speaks of returning to dust, a metaphor for death, as a consequence of having violated the proscription concerning the tree of life.⁷⁵ This no doubt is the basis for the oft-used funerary phrase, “from dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.” As mentioned previously, Ezekiel 18:4 and 18:20 are blunt: the soul that sins is the soul that dies. There is a direct causal link between sinning against God and death; judgment will come to all who choose their sin and thus reject the Lord.⁷⁶ Since “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23) and the “wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), as long as sin is connected in any way to the human condition, death must be seen as a necessary and a

⁷³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 1170.

⁷⁴ Nahum Sarna *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 17.

⁷⁵ John, “The Old Testament Understanding of Death”, 124.

⁷⁶ Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 238.

natural aspect in the created order.

It is for this reason that Desmond Alexander has argued death as it is in the Old Testament was not viewed as no more than a “natural phenomena” of life but as a consequence of having sinned against the Creator. He points out several Old Testament examples where death “is presented in negative terms: death, like sin, defiles and pollutes.” If, he asks, the ancient Hebrews saw death as nothing other than “natural”, then why was it linked with “ritual defilement and uncleanness?” Rejecting the idea that death to the ancient Hebrews as nothing other than “divine intention in creation”, Alexander concludes “death was indeed perceived by the Hebrews as a punishment for man’s rebellion against God.”⁷⁷

Death is universal. The apostle Paul wrote, “In Adam all die...” (1 Corinthians 15:22).⁷⁸ Man’s sin moved him from the state of innocence to a new state; instead of the life enjoyed in the Garden, man now found himself in a place where death controlled his life.⁷⁹ Physical death as well as spiritual death was the consequence of having chosen the way of disobedience to the commands of God.

While the death which was threatened must have been at least in part spiritual death, it appear that physical death was also involved, since the man and the woman had to be driven out of the Garden of Eden lest the also eat of the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:22-23).⁸⁰

As the psalmist asks rhetorically, “What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?” (Psalm 89:48). To say “all have sinned” is to say “all are

⁷⁷ Alexander, “The Old Testament View of Life After Death”, 42.

⁷⁸ “The whole of mankind is viewed as originally existing in Adam. Because of his disobedience, however, Adam is mankind in alienation from God, under sentence of death” (F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* [NCBC] [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971] 146).

⁷⁹ Paul Hamar, *The Book of First Corinthians* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing, 1980), 144.

⁸⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1170.

separated” from God because of sin, and in that separation from the Author of Life came the reality of death.⁸¹ Until the return of Christ and the transformational event where the earthly and mortal is replaced by the heavenly and incorruptible (1 Corinthians 15:42-44), physical death will remain a stark, unrelenting reality.

A person’s socioeconomic standing exerts no influence over death’s universality. Both the destitute beggar and the sumptuously rich man eventually died (Luke 16:22). Paul the apostle was sent by God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2) but this did not stop his eventual martyrdom (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Herod was a ruler, appointed to his position by Imperial Rome, but the day came when he too died (Acts 12:19b-23). One’s socioeconomic position in the present may allow for access to medical and technological advances which if used may appear to lengthen one’s life. Having access to such resources may well be part of why people in the modernized nations tend to develop “biolatry”, an obsessive clinging to life, desiring the “here and now” so assiduously that when death comes, such people feel they have experienced “a grave injustice” which imposes on their humanity.⁸²

Hebrews 9:27 is plain: it is “appointed” (ESV) (*apokeimai* - “to be laid away”) or “destined” (NIV) for every human to die physically. Death is what is “laid up” for every human barring the translation of the Church at the coming of Christ. No amount of medicine, physical training, or “clean” diet will grant an exemption from death.⁸³

“Good” and “bad” death. Jennings argues for a necessary “bifurcation” in any attempt to comprehend why death is humanity’s lot. He sees an “evil of death instigated by the

⁸¹ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 40.

⁸² Toby Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait of Death as the Qualifier of Both the Ethic and Value of Human Life* (unpublished Ph.D dissertation; Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 5.

⁸³ Cf. Psalm 139:16, which seems to indicate that every person’s time on earth is of a set or predetermined number of days. See Jim Elliff, “Natural Disaster and Pastoral Comfort”, *JBTM* 4.1 (2007), 36-44.

murderer Satan” as necessarily separate from “the good holiness of death as instituted by the Sovereign of both life and death.”⁸⁴

Man’s highest goal in life is not in the pursuit of a continuous life on earth. Such a desire is ultimately futile. The highest goal required of humankind is obedience. As Wayne Grudem has observed:

Our obedience to God is more important than preserving our own lives. If God uses the experience of death to deepen our trust in him and to strengthen our obedience to him, then it is important that we remember that the world’s goal of preserving one’s own physical life at all costs is not the highest goal for a Christian; obedience to God and faithfulness to him in every circumstance is far more important.⁸⁵

Jennings argues that since God gives and sustains life for His purposes, “death is a good and preferable thing when contrasted with disobedience to God who sustains life for his purposes rather than those of any other.”⁸⁶

Death is simultaneously a warning against disobedience and a promise of a superior existence than what is available in the created order. God is not a macabre deity who slathers over anyone’s death; He pleads with people to choose obedience rather than their own disobedience against Him (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

God finds no joy in death. It is the consequence for sin, which has polluted the whole of the human race. Rather than death, God encourages repentance and obedience instead of what He has purposed to allow to those who fail His invitation to salvation.⁸⁷ Death to the unrepentant is an evil thing; they are

⁸⁴ Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 5.

⁸⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan and Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1994), 813-814.

⁸⁶ Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 71.

⁸⁷ William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19* (WBC 28) (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 220.

removed forever from any opportunity of relationship with God.

When the orthodox speak of eternal punishment being administered by the justice of God to rebel sinners, they are referring to an ultimate and irreversible alienation and separation from God, the benefits of common grace, and the good gifts of God which result in perpetual grief, misery and remorse.⁸⁸

Compare, then, with Psalm 116:15 — “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His faithful servants” (NIV 2011). The use of “precious” is perhaps not the best rendering, given the almost consistently negative view of death in the Old Testament; some of the personifications of death in the Old Testament include “death the hunter”, “death the king of terrors” and “death the robber.”⁸⁹ W. Dennis Tucker and Jamie Grant think a better rendering would be “costly”, in that death takes away the preciousness of life; “death is costly because it takes a life away.”⁹⁰

Death is costly; it is also the line of separation between an infinitely holy God and sinful man.⁹¹ Paul Ferguson has proposed that within the Old Testament are glimpses of death which are not completely negative. Death, while being a “shepherd which leads...into the grave”, did not erase the hope of God’s own involvement in bringing a “release from the power death” (Psalm 49:15). The chaos of Genesis 11 - “death, indecision, barrenness, old age, confusion” - is what God uses as a “stage” where He begins the revelation of redemptive life, the first “act” found in Genesis 12:1-3 and God’s covenant with Abraham.⁹² Jennings, following the same basic line of reasoning, argues the necessity of death and the certainty of

⁸⁸ Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 101.

⁸⁹ John Barclay Burns, “Some Personifications of Death in the Old Testament”, *IBS* 11 (January 1989), 23.

⁹⁰ W. Dennis Tucker and Jamie A. Grant, *Psalms* (Volume 2) (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 663.

⁹¹ Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 73.

⁹² Paul Ferguson, “Death, Mortality”, *BTDB*, 155.

divine judgment to follow is to

provoke the wise man to live in such a way that what awaits him after death will not be despair, lamentation and wrath in infinitely greater magnitude than he has experienced in his worst earthly day.⁹³

In the Gospels, Jesus emphasized maintaining right relationship with God when it came to matters of death and of the judgment to follow (Luke 12:4-5). The punishment from the “one who has the authority to throw you into hell” (Gehenna) is a punishment of the entire bodily existence, not as a mysterious “disembodied soul”.⁹⁴ There is little in either testament which specifically details what “punishment” entails; most of what is given tends towards the symbolic and the metaphorical, if not the slightly vague. For example, in Matthew 8:12, Jesus speaks of the “outer darkness”, where the inhabitants will be “weeping and gnashing their teeth.” These terms are thought to be common means by which the Jews of Jesus’ day spoke of hell/Gehenna.⁹⁵ Matthew 13:42 adds “fiery furnace” to the idea of weeping and teeth-gnashing. “Cut in pieces” in Matthew 24:51 may draw from the way cruel masters dealt with slaves to evoke an image of “excruciating pain and frenzied anger.”⁹⁶ Perhaps the longest description about the fate of those who die as unbelievers is in Mark 9:43-48. Two specifics about this afterlife are mentioned. In verse 43, Jesus speaks of “the unquenchable fire”, and in verse 48, He says in that place “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (cf. Isaiah 66:24). What is probable is, as Ezra Gould observed some years ago, the idea of the worm and the fire is about “the permanence of the retribution...expressed in these material figures.” Neither the worm which chews or the fire which burns inwardly is

⁹³ Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 73.

⁹⁴Kim Papaioannou, “Motifs of Death and Hell in the Teaching Of Jesus. Part 2: An Examination of Gehenna”, *MJT* 33.1-2 (2017), 23-24.

⁹⁵Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 343. See also Papaioannu, “Motifs of Death”, 15-31, for a detailed discussion on the development of Gehenna in Scripture.

⁹⁶ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (NTC) (Gand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 874.

limited by any external force; “they propagate themselves.”⁹⁷

Despite the lack of details beyond darkness, weeping, teeth-gnashing and fire, the picture of the fate of the unrighteous dead, at least in the Gospels, ought to serve as motivation enough to choose obedience to God over rank and callous disobedience. Hebrews 10:26-29 is a strong warning against rejecting salvation in Christ; the consequences are necessarily severe, emphasizing both the necessity of receiving salvation and the foolishness of rejecting it.⁹⁸

Of course, the post-mortem existence of believers is much different.

For the Christian, however, just as the penalty for sin has been both remitted and vanquished by the perfect Christ, such that “it was impossible for death to hold him” (Acts 2:24), so death will not be able to hold any of those who are *in Christ*. Holy God ordained death because of sin. The same sovereign also ordained life through Jesus Christ the Lord (Romans 6:23).⁹⁹

That believers are delivered from the terrors of teeth-gnashing, weeping, wailing, worms and fire, and most importantly, separation from God, is more than sufficient cause to praise and thank God for His deliverance from death through the sacrifice of His Son.

Death and the effects of the first human sin. Adam and Eve did not immediately physically die when they transgressed God’s

⁹⁷Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (ICC) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 180.

⁹⁸“Thanks to Jesus’ blood, believers can now enter God’s sanctuary with a good conscience (Hebrews 10:19). The blood of the covenant has sanctified them. No one should despise that blood or deem it unholy (Hebrews 10:29). The people who do that will bring God’s judgment upon themselves” (P. R. Rob van Houwelingen, “Faith Means Perseverance”, *JECS* 3:1 [2013], 106). It is essentially unimportant to know the details of the kind of judgment God will bring post-mortem to those who reject the blood of Christ; it should be a sufficient warning against such rejection to know “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

⁹⁹ Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 90 (italics in original).

command in the Garden of Eden. The death they experienced at the time of the act was their spiritual death. Their “eyes were opened” to the knowledge of good and evil.

This knowledge of good and evil is not a neutral state, desired maturity or an advancement of humanity, as is commonly argued. God desires to save humans from their inclination for ethical autonomy. Because Adam and Eve have attained this sinful state, they must not eat of the tree of life and are consigned forever to the forbidden state of being inclined to choose their own code of ethics (Genesis 3:22).¹⁰⁰

“Their eyes were opened” - this was an inculcation of shame at their now realized nakedness, which they attempted to remedy through their feeble and futile sewing together of fig leaves as a covering. Their also feeble and futile attempt to hide from God (Genesis 3:8) adds to the pathos of their newly discovered shame. Genesis 3:10 records Adam had become afraid of God, something the first man had never before known. He was fearful of his Creator. Sin brought shame; shame indicates death of relationship with God.¹⁰¹ Adam and Eve’s sin was not confined to them, however. The whole of the human race was affected by their sinful choice (Romans 5:12).

Biblical faith also confesses that sin is inherent in the human condition. We are not simply born into a sinful world, but we are born with a propensity towards sin.... Church tradition speaks of original sin, but this is intended to convey not a biological trait or a physical deformity, but a spiritual infection that in some mysterious way is transmitted through reproduction. Sin does not originate from human nature, but it corrupts this nature.¹⁰²

Sin brings on death because sin separates the individual from the Creator and Author of Life. Sin seeks to be independent of God; Adam and Eve thought they would be made to be “like

¹⁰⁰ Waltke, *Genesis*, 92.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (NAC 1A) (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 240.

¹⁰² Donald G. Bloesch, “Sin”, *EDT*, 1013.

God”, a desire for their whole being, when in reality, their whole being fell into death - separation from God - because of their sin.¹⁰³

The effect of sin bringing death into creation brought alienation from other humans, alienation from creation (Genesis 3:17-18), guilt,¹⁰⁴ punishment (Isaiah 63:10), and loss of freedom.¹⁰⁵ “By-products” of sin include egocentricity, deception and the aforementioned shame.¹⁰⁶

Death and the atonement. The Scriptural understanding of “atonement” (*hilastērion*) is someone/something dying in order to provide life for someone else.¹⁰⁷ In the Old Testament, atonement generally indicating a covering of sin “by an expiatory sacrifice.”¹⁰⁸ An expiation is “the removal of guilt by means of an atonement or satisfaction offered to God.”¹⁰⁹ The death that is in the world and the death of Christ “cannot be considered in isolation.”

Clearly, if the Bible message means nothing at all, it means that the death of man is somehow related to his standing before God. It means too that the death of Christ is organically related to that alteration in the standing of man before God which we call the atonement. The significance of the death of Christ cannot

¹⁰³David L. Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1994), 345.

¹⁰⁴Theologically, guilt is “the state of a moral agent after the intentional or unintentional violation of a law, principle or value established by an authority under which the moral agent is subject.... The word ‘guilt’ carries with it the concept of deserved punishment or payment due, or even payment by punishment” (W. G. Justice, “Guilt”, *EDT*, 489-490).

¹⁰⁵Smith, *With Willful Intent*, 349.

¹⁰⁶Smith, *With Willful Intent*, 349.

¹⁰⁷For a helpful work on the Biblical sense of the atonement, see Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Leicester, UK and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983). For a shorter but also helpful study on the atonement see Gregg Allison, “A History of the Doctrine of the Atonement”, *SBJT* 11.2 (Summer 2007), 4-19. My presentation of atonement here is restricted by space considerations.

¹⁰⁸A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 401.

¹⁰⁹Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International and Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ambassador Productions, 2002), 173.

be understood apart for the significance of death in general. The death of Christ has meaning because it was a deliberate and voluntary entry into a human experience which also has meaning.¹¹⁰

Evangelical theology generally positions atonement as “substitutionary”,¹¹¹ in that Christ bore the death meant for humans, so that atoned-for humans might be reconciled to God.¹¹² This understanding of atonement is based on the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah 53. The atoning work of Christ against death is not a partial work; whatever was needed to achieve victory over death came through Christ’s finished and complete work on the cross. As Michael Bird explains:

When Jesus cried on the cross from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34), it was not a cry of defeat as one who had pinned his hopes on the advent of God’s kingdom only to be disappointed at the end. Rather, it was a cry of abandonment. Jesus was abandoned by God because he bore the sins of others and God could no longer look upon his Son with love. Jesus made that cry of God-forsakenness so that no child of God would ever be God-forsaken. Jesus became a cosmic sponge that absorbed the evil of humanity and the wrath of God against it. He absorbed the wrath with such perfection and such finality that no wrath remains on those for whom his sacrifice is effected.¹¹³

Bromiley argues that sin as an alienation from God is also an alienation from life. Man chose to tear asunder the relationship he had with God, and chooses now to ignore the call of God to find life in Christ. Man thus lives in a fallen world; it is fallen

¹¹⁰Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Significance of Death in Relation to the Atonement”, *EvQ* 21:2 (April 1949), 122.

¹¹¹The idea of a substitutionary atonement is still debated among theologians. For a well-reasoned defense, see Simon Gathercole, “The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement”, *SBET* 21.1 (Spring 2003), 152-165.

¹¹²John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 7.

¹¹³Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 405.

because sin, which is implacably destructive, causes alienation from God and His life, resulting in the reality of death. And physical death cannot be artificially separated from spiritual death; sin was and is the vehicle through which death came into the world and continues its heinous act. God through Christ's atoning work made it possible for God to "receive the sinner again *qua* person where once he must be rejected and destroyed *qua* sinner."¹¹⁴ He further notes the irony in the divine economy to recognize death as so destructive and so opposed to the gift of life which is in Christ and at the same time see death as the instrument by which sin and death itself is defeated.¹¹⁵

Jesus' death is a necessity to deal with the fundamental human problem of death, for it is through his death that Jesus deals with sin and defeats death.¹¹⁶

Jesus' resurrection and its effect on death. Two statements in 1 Corinthians 15 demonstrate the inherent importance of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The first is in 1 Corinthians 15:14 - "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." Paul's reference to "our preaching" is probably not limited to his ministry but to the whole of the Christian message, everything about Christ and the cross and salvation, everything the church beginning in Jerusalem had been proclaiming since the Day of Pentecost.¹¹⁷ If Christ remains in the grave, then all the preaching about hope and release from sin is useless (or, "vain", as in ESV); the Greek Paul used, *kenos*, can mean "empty, having nothing, empty handed": by metonymy, "fruitless, void", and is also translated in the New Testament as "hollow, fallacious, false".¹¹⁸ The weight of this cannot be missed. If Christ was not resurrected, then the whole

¹¹⁴ Bromiley, "The Significance of Death", 125, 126.

¹¹⁵ Bromiley, "The Significance of Death", 126.

¹¹⁶ Tony Wright, "Death, the Dead and the Underworld in Biblical Theology - Part 2", *Churchman* 122.1 (Summer 2008), 108.

¹¹⁷ See Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity and Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010), 226f, for a discussion on the tradition in the preaching and its relationship to Jerusalem.

¹¹⁸ William D. Mounce, ed. *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1188.

of the Christian message is a lie, giving false hope and deliberately deceiving people.¹¹⁹

The second statement is in 1 Corinthians 15:17 - “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” Remaining in sin is to remain in death, to exist with no hope for any other than the hopelessness of the grave and the darkness of the afterlife. If Christ is not raised, those who were “in Christ”, when they died, “simply perished.”¹²⁰ The hope of something more than just the grave and the dismal afterlife rested then and rests now on the reality of Christ resurrected from the dead (Romans 6:8-10). Christ’s physical resurrection gives assurance of the coming spiritual resurrection; death’s loss of power over Jesus will be the power that keeps those who believe in a state of both spiritual life and eventual heavenly life.¹²¹

The end of death. “Death” will ultimately be cast into the lake of fire in the eschaton (Revelation 20:14). Some take the apparent fact that since death does not itself die in the lake of fire it is a reinforcement of the truth that all of the necessary dealings with sin have been completed in Christ, and so death can be no more.¹²²

The vision of “death and hell” being cast into the lake of fire probably should not taken in a rigid literalism; neither death nor hell are sentient creatures, which means the idea of conscious eternal torment of either one has no genuine meaning. The “otherness” of the lake of fire, separate from the new heavens and the new earth, is thought to represent a place of non-existence; nothing will stand in the way of the

¹¹⁹ Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, 146, argues Paul’s emphasis is on those who have died “in Christ”, not in any way those who are the “wicked” or unregenerate dead.

¹²⁰ Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians* (NIBC) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 327.

¹²¹ Godet, *Romans*, 245-246.

¹²² Bruce L. McCormack, “What is Non-Negotiable in Any Theology That Wishes To Be ‘Reformed?’” (Part 1), *SBET* 40:1 (Spring 2022), 38.

triumphant life-visions which follow.¹²³ The fullness of Christ's life given to the redeemed will never be dimmed by the specter of death. For the believer, the "death of death" occurs at the time of the Parousia, as Donald Guthrie explains from 1 Corinthians 15:50-58:

Paul uses three expressions—'moment', 'twinkling of an eye' and 'sounding of the last trumpet' to show that he is not thinking of a gradual change. The 'moment' is a particular point in history, i.e. the moment of the parousia. Paul does not appear to draw any distinction between the raising of the dead, the transformation of the living and the last trumpet. He does not discuss the question of the intermediate state.

For this reason he sounds the note of victory. The 'perishable' and the 'mortal' are transformed into the imperishable and the immortal. It is no wonder that the apostle Paul rejoices over such a hope as this—everything which hampers will be instantaneously removed.¹²⁴

In John's next vision after the last judgment, he hears "a loud voice from the throne" declare "there will be no more death" (Revelation 21:4). Jesus said that "in the age to come", that is, in the eschaton, those who believe will receive "eternal life" (Luke 18:30). With the permanent removal of death from human existence, those believers who receive eternal life will "enjoy the fullness of divine life forever as a state of well-being or process"; they will also reign with Christ "forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5).¹²⁵

Christ's victory over sin is made complete in the eschaton; the

¹²³J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (IVPNTC 20) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 233. "Non-existence" leans towards those who hold to annihilationism. I would argue that "non-existence" is held in tension to the new heavens and the new earth of the eschaton; once the devil, beast and false prophet, along with the unregenerate and unrepentant dead as well as death and hell are cast into the lake of fire, it is as if all have gone into "non-existence" compared to the marvelousness of that which awaits those who are "in Christ".

¹²⁴Donald Guthrie, "Transformation and the Parousia", *VoxE* 14 (1984), 44.

¹²⁵Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 134.

goats (“the cursed”, v. 41) are sent away, out of the presence of the Lord (Matthew 25:33, 41-46), suffering the “second death” in the lake of fire, while the sheep (“blessed of [the] Father”, verse 34) are brought into the presence of the King. The eternal Kingdom of God will be sin-free, and without sin, there is no basis for death.

Contemporary issues in thanatology. The material on dying and death, whether religious or secular, is impressive, and an effort to consider in any detail the enormous plethora of literature would be a Herculean effort, certainly far beyond the intent of this paper. In contemporary discussion on thanatology, some issues have become mainstream:

- *Abortion/infanticide*. Those who are against abortion are generally referred to as *pro-life*, while those who favor “reproductive choice” are often known as “pro-choice” or “pro-abortion”.¹²⁶

There are some who claim Christian faith nonetheless advocate for a “pro-choice” position. One such example is Anne Eggebroten’s edited work, *Abortion: My Choice, God’s Grace*¹²⁷ which recounted stories of Christian women who chose abortion. Dónal P. O’Mathúna’s review asserted the position Eggebroten takes is postmodern, which allows for multiple interpretations of Biblical texts and for personal experiences to “validate” her contentions.¹²⁸ Recalling Morey’s hermeneutical guidelines when examining texts on death, Eggebroten’s experiential reading of Scripture does not hold to the authority of Scripture as the primary and ultimate guide for living as a Christian.

Stories are certainly useful teaching tools. Eggebroten’s stories clearly show the pain experienced by many women with crisis

¹²⁶ For a Biblical response to abortion as well as euthanasia, see Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Abortion, Euthanasia, and the Dignity of Human Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

¹²⁷ Pasadena, CA: New Paradigm, 1994.

¹²⁸ Dónal P. O’Mathúna, “Abortion: Biblical Considerations”, *ATJ* 28 (1996), 60.

pregnancies. However, stories cannot be the primary source of moral teaching. Even biblical stories must be filtered through the ethical principles and guidelines given in the rest of the Bible. Otherwise, experience becomes our authority, not God's revelation. In spite of her use of biblical themes, Eggebrotten has shifted to a post-modern reliance on experience as the primary source of guidance. Instead of solid biblical exegesis, she encourages women to find guidance, by listening to "the spirit of God in my heart," or to the "wise woman" within themselves, or to the "special tribe" of good and strong women. Different stories commend women for changing their beliefs based on new experiences. She claims we form our values and beliefs through grappling with our experiences, not through rational analysis. In spite of her stated desire to be biblically based, her position is, in fact, experience based.¹²⁹

Eggebrotten's postmodern thought and praxis is nothing different from basic liberal ideas, where "fulfillment of individual desire is the highest good" and where freedom is conceived as having "capacity to pursue the chosen good."¹³⁰ Typically that "chosen good" centers on the life of the mother; seldom is there consideration of the developing, growing life in the womb; liberal rationalization reduces the human being in utero to "product of conception" or other dehumanizing verbiage in order to shift the attention to the perceived "needs" of the mother.

Instead of relying on fallible human experiences and feelings, it would be better to seek the wisdom of God (James 1:5) and place full trust in His ability to guide especially when the situation is as life-affecting as abortion (see Proverbs 3:5-6).

- *Suicide*. The ethics/morals of suicide have no consensus; how the practice is viewed is often thought to be culturally

¹²⁹ O'Mathúna, "Abortion: Biblical Considerations", 60-61. For an essay on the sanctity of human life, see C. Everett Koop, "The Sanctity of Human Life: An Appraisal of Trends in Medical Ethics", *ERT* 5:2 (October 1981), 68-74.

¹³⁰ Bruce J. Clemenger, "Faith, The Church and Public Policy: Towards A Model of Evangelical Engagement", *ERT* 27.2 (2003), 156.

influenced. In the introduction to a collection of essays and religious writings from various cultures on suicide, Margaret Pabst Battin writes:

Is suicide wrong, always wrong, or profoundly morally wrong? Or is it almost always wrong but excusable in a few cases? Or is it sometimes morally permissible? Is it not intrinsically wrong at all, though perhaps often imprudent? Is it sick? Is it a matter of mental illness? Is it a private or a social act? Is it something the family, community, or society should always try to prevent, or could ever expect of a person? Could it sometimes be a “noble duty”? Or is it solely a personal matter, perhaps a matter of right based in individual liberties, or even a fundamental human right?¹³¹

For some, any discussion against suicide is “regrettably found at all levels”, even when death as an escape from despair may itself be a good thing.¹³² But such predominantly secularist views fail, probably deliberately, to consider divine claims on life itself, and in the context of Judeo-Christian theology, the place of God as the giver of life and of death.

While there are clues and indicators that someone is intent on self-destruction, and recognizing those clues/indicators may well enable intervention and help, not even those clues “do not fully answer the question why.”¹³³ While the Bible does not specifically say, “Thou shalt not commit suicide”, we believe the Scriptures are very much opposed to the practice of choosing to kill one’s self.¹³⁴

Nevertheless, Scripture does record instances where individuals chose suicide. The earliest instance in Scripture is that of Samson, whose destruction of the Philistine temple

¹³¹ Margaret Pabst Battin, ed. *The Ethics of Suicide* (New York: Oxford University, 2015), 1.

¹³² Mary Rose Barrington, “Apologia for Suicide”, in Battin, ed. *Ethics of Suicide*, 702.

¹³³ Bill Blackburn, *Suicide* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 19.

¹³⁴ For a recent study on issues in suicide and the Biblical response, see Matthew Sleeth, MD, *Hope Always: How to be a Force for Life in a Culture of Suicide* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020).

caused him to die as well (Judges 16:26-30). King Saul, seeing that Israel had been defeated in battle by the Philistines, and himself severely wounded, used his own sword to impale himself so as to avoid abuse at the hands of the Philistines. His armor bearer, who had refused to comply with Saul's request to kill him, also then committed suicide (1 Samuel 31:1-6).

During Absalom's conspiracy against his father, King David, one of David's counselors, Ahithophel, chose to join with Absalom (2 Samuel 15:12). David, informed of the betrayal, prayed that Ahithophel's counsel be turned into foolishness (2 Samuel 15:31). Absalom asked for advice from both Ahithophel and Hushai, a friend of David who the king sent to Jerusalem, perhaps to frustrate the turn-coat counselor's advice (2 Samuel 15:32-37). Absalom took Hushai's advice over Ahithophel's, even though the latter's advice was highly esteemed in those days (2 Samuel 16:23). God determined to intervene through Absalom rejecting Ahithophel in favor of Hushai (2 Samuel 17:14), which led to Ahithophel going to his home and hanging himself (2 Samuel 17:23).

In the New Testament, Judas Iscariot, remorseful for having betrayed Jesus to the Temple authorities, chose to hang himself (Matthew 27:5). The jailer at Philippi, supposing the earthquake which had occurred in response to the prayers and worship of the imprisoned Paul and Silas, prepared to kill himself, thinking all the prisoners in his care had escaped (Acts 16:27).

Exodus 20:13 forbids murder; suicide is self-murder, and would be therefore a transgression of God's law. Within the covenant community in Israel, personhood finds its focus, making Exodus 20:13 a necessary prohibition against ending anyone's participation in that personhood and community.¹³⁵ Suicide destroys participation in community; it ends an individual's personhood and assumes the role of God by making a self-determination as to the time of one's death (cf. Job 10:9-

¹³⁵ See the discussion on personhood by Deryck Sheriffs, "Personhood in the Old Testament: Who's Asking?", *EvQ* 77.1 (2005), 21.

12; also Exodus 23:25-26, Isaiah 42:5).

• *Euthanasia/Physician Assisted Suicide*. The practice of choosing to die with medical intervention has grown in popularity, especially here in the United States. At this time, nine states allow for “physician-assisted suicide” (PAS) ; eight have legalized the practice (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont and Washington, while one state, Montana, allows for euthanasia because of a court ruling). The District of Columbia also provides for PAS.¹³⁶ Clemenger points to Canada’s pro-euthanasia/assisted suicide situation.

The pro-euthanasia and assisted suicide movement is growing quickly in Canada. Recent polls indicate that the majority of Canadians now favor legalizing assisted suicide when the patient is terminally ill. The arguments for changing the law invoke the freedom of the individual to control their own life (self-determination). In the case of assisted suicide, some disabled or terminally ill persons have argued that since suicide is not a criminal offence (*sic*), and since disabled persons do not have the ability to kill themselves the way able bodied persons do, the law against assisted suicide prevents them from doing what able-bodied persons can do. Religious arguments advanced to oppose euthanasia are rejected as an imposition of one’s beliefs on another and as unsuitable for sustaining law and public policy.¹³⁷

Some non-religiously focused voices object strenuously to PAS on the grounds the whole of the PAS movement is at its core an illusion.

(Euthanasia/PAS) is a dangerous direction to go in the search for a peaceful death. This path to peaceful dying rests on the illusion that a society can safely put in the hands of physicians the power directly and deliberately to take life, euthanasia, or

¹³⁶ Britannica [ProCon.Org](https://euthanasia.procon.org/states-with-legal-physician-assisted-suicide/), “States with Legal Physician Assisted Suicide”, <https://euthanasia.procon.org/states-with-legal-physician-assisted-suicide/>, accessed September 1, 2021.

¹³⁷ Clemenger, “Faith, The Church and Public Policy”, 170.

to assist patients in taking their own life, physician-assisted suicide. (I see no moral difference between them—just as the law in most places would see no difference between my shooting someone and my giving a gun to another so he or she can do it.) It threatens to add still another sad chapter to an already sorry human history of giving one person the liberty to take the life of another. It perpetuates and pushes to an extreme the very ideology of control—the goal of mastering life and death—that created the problems of modern medicine in the first place. Instead of changing the medicine that generates the problem of an intolerable death (which, in almost all cases, good palliative medicine could do), allowing physicians to kill or provide the means to take one’s own life simply treats the symptoms, all the while reinforcing, and driving us more deeply into, an ideology of control.¹³⁸

A conservative reading of Scripture will typically view PAS as contrary to God’s intents and purposes for human life. As Beth Spring and Ed Larson have argued:

Euthanasia is not a solution to the health-care challenges of contemporary society. It emerges out of an orientation to life that downplays God’s sovereignty, diminishes the importance of sustaining relationships, and cuts short the search for creative, life-affirming answers for people in distress.¹³⁹

Rejecting euthanasia as a solution to terminal illness requires other options to be explored, particularly on what the Scriptures may say about one coming to the end of their earthly life. There are secular sources addressing terminal care and its implications from an ethical basis, involving such as palliative care and do-not-resuscitate directives.¹⁴⁰ However, secular sources do not consider the authority of Scripture, and should

¹³⁸ David Callahan, “Reason, Self-Determination and Physician-Assisted Suicide”, in Battin, ed., *Ethics of Suicide*, 707.

¹³⁹ Beth Spring and Ed Larson, *Euthanasia: Spiritual, Medical and Legal Issues in Terminal Health Care* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), 199.

¹⁴⁰ Rafael Nogueira Furtado, “The Dying Process Across Human Life Cycle: Ethical Considerations on Terminal Care”, *Open Journal of Medical Psychology* 9 (2020), 141. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojimp.2020.94011>, accessed August 15, 2021.

not be the primary source of information for making decisions about end of life issues.

Similar to the reasoning against suicide argued above, PAS/euthanasia place the individual into a place of decision-making which ultimately belongs to the Lord God. God oversees all things in creation, including the course of life. Choosing to end one's life, even with medical assistance, is colloquially a "permanent solution to a temporary problem." It could be argued the more humane approach is to provide a gateway to escape terminal suffering.

A physical decline threatens to be accompanied by an inevitable decline in the quality of important human relationships—human relationships, it is worth repeating, not superhuman ones. Given superhuman love, patience, fortitude and all other sweet-natured qualities in a plenitude not normally present in ordinary people, there would be no problem. But the problem is there, and voluntary termination of life offers a possible solution that may be better than none at all.¹⁴¹

From a Christian context, however, a society that enables voluntary termination of one's life has lost the ability to become a community of genuine trust as well as compassion, a light that "does not dim even when the challenge seems overwhelming."¹⁴²

Ultimately, Christians who suffer discover in their trials an opportunity to draw closer to Christ and become more dependent on Him¹⁴³ (see 2 Corinthians 1:8-11).

Responses to these issues from a distinctively Biblical position is necessary for informed evangelical witness in this world. I would go so far as to say that the only legitimate response Christians have to issues such as abortion and suicide is on

¹⁴¹ Mary Rose Barrington, "Apologia for Suicide", in Battin, ed., *Ethics of Suicide*, 705.

¹⁴² Spring and Larson, *Euthanasia*, 133.

¹⁴³ Spring and Larson, *Euthanasia*, 131.

that is firmly based on the Scripture. Otherwise, responses can become subjective and even compromising. It is not any person's individual opinion which will "penetrate even to the dividing of soul and spirit...(judging) the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). That is the privilege of Scripture and Scripture alone. Thus, I would argue it is disingenuous to claim to hold to an "evangelical theology" while advocating for abortion, suicide and euthanasia on the strength of secular sources and arguments.

There is a great need to develop and sustain a biblical way of thinking as a solid foundation for a significant Christian impact on contemporary culture and society. To that end, we need, on the one hand, to be constantly engaged in promoting a responsible biblical interpretation, done not simply in an isolationist and abstract scholarship, but in dialogue with, and sensible to, the life of the church and her engagement with the world. On the other hand, we need to bear witness to the lasting power of Scripture to speak afresh to every person in every generation, and especially to its lasting power to transform human lives. One specific aspect of this revitalization of the place of Scripture in the life of the individual Christian and of communities is the issue of the authority of the Scriptures.¹⁴⁴

Abbreviations

ANE Ancient Near East

ATJ *Ashland Theological Journal*

BETS *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*

BibSac *Bibliotheca Sacra*

BTDB Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible (Walter A. Elwell, ed.)

DBSJ *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*

EDT Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (Walter A. Elwell, ed.)

ERT *Evangelical Review of Theology*

ESV English Standard Version

¹⁴⁴ Corneliu Constantineanu, "The Authority of Scripture as the Word of God", *KEJT* 4.1 (2010), 14.

EvQ *Evangelical Quarterly*
GTJ *Grace Theological Journal*
IBS *Irish Biblical Studies*
ICC International Critical Commentary
IJT *Indian Journal of Theology*
IVPNTC InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary
JBTM *Journal of Baptist Theology and Ministry*
JECS *Journal of Early Christian Studies*
KEJT *KAIROS Evangelical Journal of Theology*
MJT *Melanesian Journal of Theology*
ms manuscript
NCBC New Century Bible Commentary
NET New English Translation
NIBC New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT New International Commentary New Testament
NIV New International Version
NIVAC NIV Application Commentary
NSBT New Studies in Biblical Theology
RefRev *Reformation and Revival*
SBET *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SBJT *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*
VoxE *Vox Evangelica*
WBC Word Biblical Commentary

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