

Death & Afterlife

Session 4: Living with Death in Mind

Worldly Thinking Re-Visited

1 Corinthians 15:55, RSV

"O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

Grief without Despair

1 Thessalonians 4:13, RSV

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

John 11:33,35, RSV

When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled....Jesus wept.

St John Chrysostom, Homily 62 on John, 4

“What then?” saith some one, “Is it possible being man not to weep?” No, neither do I forbid weeping, but I forbid the beating yourselves, the weeping immoderately. I am neither brutal nor cruel. I know that our nature asks and seeks for its friends and daily companions; it cannot but be grieved. As also Christ showed, for He wept over Lazarus. So do thou; weep, but gently, but with decency, but with the fear of God. If so thou weepst, thou dost so not as disbelieving the Resurrection, but as not enduring the separation. Since even over those who are leaving us, and departing to foreign lands, we weep, yet we do this not as despairing.

Mindfulness and Preparation

Met. HILARION (Alfeyev), *Orthodox Christianity* Vol. 2, p. 495

The non-religious person fears death, fears thoughts of death, preparing for death, mortal disease: the widespread view that a sudden death is the best death comes from this fear. The faithful, on the contrary, prepare themselves for death, and at the same time pray for deliverance from a sudden death. In Christian tradition, a mortal illness is looked at as a test possibly bearing spiritual benefit, and death, as a passage into another world.

St Gregory the Theologian, Letter 168, To Photios

Our cares and our attention are concentrated on one thing only – our departure from this world. And for this departure we prepare ourselves and gather our baggage as prudent travelers would do.

St John Chrysostom, Homily 5 on the Statues 11

What then, I pray you, is death? Just what it is to put off a garment. For the body is about the soul as a garment; and after laying this aside for a short time by means of death, we shall resume it again with the more splendour. What is death at most? It is a journey for a season; a sleep longer than usual! So that if thou fearest death, thou shouldst also fear sleep!

Philippians 1:21-24, RSV

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

St Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* 5.3

Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil – let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!

St Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homily* 49

The first thought that by God's loving-kindness descends into a man, that enters into his heart and guides his soul to life, is the thought of his departure from this nature. This thought is naturally followed by disdain for the world...If he does not quench this thought by involvement in the affairs of life and by vain talk, and if he increases it in his soul by continual concentration within himself and by contemplating it, this thought will lead him to profound divine vision that no man can express.

Satan greatly abhors this thought and makes war with all his might to expunge it from man's heart. And if it were possible, he would give man dominion over the whole world, could he but by this distraction erase this thought from his mind.

St Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homily 62

As long as a man is negligent, he fears the hour of death; when he draws nigh to God, he fears to stand before the judgment; but when he proceeds forward with his whole heart, both fears are swallowed up by love....The carnal man fears [death] as a beast fears slaughter; the rational man fears the judgment of God; but the man who has become a son is adorned by love and is not taught by the rod of fear; he says, "But I and my father's house will serve the Lord."

Motivation to Live Rightly

Wisdom of Sirach 7:36

In all your thoughts remember your end and you will never sin.

Nikolaos Vassiliades, *The Mystery of Death* 265

Whatever we see daily around us easily deceives and misleads us and because of this we formulate false opinions, which lead us to wrong judgments.

St Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homily 1

Let whatever good or evil things that befall the flesh be reckoned by you as dreams. For it is not only with death that you will have release from them, but often before death they retire and leave you alone.

St John Chrysostom, Homily 5 on the Statues 4

[T]here is nothing of human ills to be dreaded, save sin only; neither poverty, nor disease, nor insult, nor malicious treatment, nor ignominy, nor death, which is accounted the worst of all evils. To those who love spiritual wisdom, such things are only the names of calamities; names which have no substantial reality. But the true calamity consists in offending God, and in doing aught which is displeasing to Him. For tell me, what is there in death which is terrible? Is it because it transports thee more quickly to the peaceful haven, and to that life which is free from tumult?

2 Peter 3:10-13, RSV

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Matthew 6:19-20, 33 RSV

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal....

“[S]eek first His kingdom and His righteousness....”

St Gregory the Theologian, Homily 40.24, *On Holy Baptism*

It is frightful when life's market-place shuts down and one seeks to purchase essential goods. It is terrible for the manna to cease and then to come seeking food. It is terrible to procrastinate and to feel the loss when it will be irreparably too late; when you leave from this life and when the book of your present acts and deeds here is shut bitterly; when sinners will be punished and when those who were cleansed in this life will shine and be glorified.

Romans 14:12, RSV

[E]ach of us shall give account of himself to God.

Hebrews 9:27, RSV

... it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment....

Preparing for Death

St John of the Ladder, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* Step 7.50

On the day before his death, he went into ecstasy of mind, and with open eyes he looked to the right and left of his bed and, as if he were being called to account by someone, in the hearing of all the bystanders, he said: "Yes indeed, that is true; but that is why I fasted for so many years." And then again: "Yes, it is quite true; but I wept and served the brethren." And again: "No, you are slandering me." And sometimes he would say: "Yes, it is true. Yes, I do not know what to say to this. But in God there is mercy." And it was truly an awful and horrible sight—this invisible and merciless inquisition. And what was most terrible, he was accused of what he had not done.

St John Chrysostom, Homily 53 on Matthew, 6

Know ye not in the day of death how sins make the soul shrink? how they stir up the heart from beneath? At that time therefore, when such things are happening, the remembrance of good works stands by us, like a calm in a storm, and comforts the perturbed soul.

...most persons may be then heard relating horrors, and fearful visions, the sight whereof they that are departing may not endure, but often shake their very bed with much vehemence, and gaze fearfully on the by standers, the soul urging itself inwards, unwilling to be torn away from the body, and not enduring the sight of the coming angels. Since if human beings that are awful strike terror into us beholding them; when we see angels threatening, and stern powers, among our visitors; what shall we not suffer, the soul being forced from the body, and dragged away and bewailing much, all in vain?

Hymn from the Octoechos, Tone 5, Wednesday Vespers, Aposticha

In your unshakable resolve, you never denied Christ, O holy martyrs, as you endured the most terrible torments. You triumphed over the arrogance of the tyrants and kept the faith, whole and entire, as you passed from earth to Heaven.