

A Well-Known Pastor Struggles With His Own Death

In the News

For years, the Rev. Timothy Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, has counseled and comforted dying people. Not long ago he even wrote a book called, simply, *On Death*.

But last year, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, he learned he has pancreatic cancer, and he has just written in an essay in *The Atlantic* about having to confront his own death now, "I spent a few harrowing minutes looking online at the dire survival statistics for pancreatic cancer, and caught a glimpse of *On Death* on a table nearby. I didn't dare open it to read what I'd written."

Keller, in other words, discovered he was, if not a death denier, at least someone who, despite his deep roots in Protestant Christianity (his church is part of the Presbyterian Church in America), was initially unwilling to imagine that he could be dying at age 70. Facing his own death was a profound struggle: "One of the first things I learned was that religious faith does not automatically provide solace in times of crisis. A belief in God and an afterlife does not become spontaneously comforting and existentially strengthening."

What Keller was confronting was what each of us must confront, and that is the reality that each of us will die. We'll explore that in this lesson, but as Keller's experience shows, just being a Christian doesn't mean that our first reaction to news of our impending death will fill us with blissful anticipation of heaven. It may take some time to process all that and recapture the joy we first experienced when we committed ourselves to Jesus Christ and eternal salvation through him.

Part of that emotional and intellectual journey may require us to think again about what Christianity really teaches about death. It shouldn't surprise you to discover that there have been different and even opposing opinions about that. For instance, the late Shirley C. Guthrie, in his book *Christian Doctrine*, includes an eyes-wide-open look at how Christian theology approaches the subject of death and how the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body differs from the old Greek idea of the immortality of the soul.

First, says Guthrie, "no cheap talk will do about a happy ending to come ... But ... we Christians can still say that because we know about the resurrection of Christ we believe in the resurrection from the dead" But, he writes, we must avoid "false optimism, which does not take death seriously enough. [That false optimism] is the belief in the immortality of the soul. This doctrine was not taught by the biblical writers themselves, but it was common in the Greek and Oriental religions of the ancient world in which the Christian church was born ... If we hold to the genuinely biblical hope for the future, we must firmly reject this doctrine of the soul's immortality" because "God alone has immortality."

Theologian Thomas G. Long, in his book *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, makes a point similar to Guthrie's: "Christians ... do not believe that human beings are only bodies, nor do they believe that they are souls who, for a time being, have bodies. Christians affirm, rather, that human beings are embodied ... Take away the breath of God, and there is no immortal soul left over to make a break for it to freedom; there is just dust."

Still, the Greek idea of the soul's immortality can be found not only in chapter 32 of the famous Westminster Confession of Faith ("The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.") It's also found in Catholic teaching. As paragraph 6 of Article 1 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God -- it is not 'produced' by the parents -- and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection."

So those are some of the questions Timothy Keller had to confront and that also will face us. The point is this: To understand our own life, we must understand our own death.

More on this story can be found at these links: