

Hebrews 2:14-17

Hebrews 2:14 (NLT) Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could He die, and only by dying could He break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. ¹⁵ Only in this way could He set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying . . . ¹⁷ It was necessary for Him to be made in every respect like us . . . so that He could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then He could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people.

Here is a passage that speaks to one of our deepest fears – the fear of physical death. Even very young people sometimes experience terror at the prospect of their eventual deaths. But especially when our advanced age reminds us (in many ways!) of our mortality, this fear can dominate our field of vision and make us terrified or despondent. What answer does the God of the Bible give us to this universal problem?

The first thing to notice is that this passage affirms our instinctive sense that human death is abnormal – a weapon wielded against us by a terrible enemy. The Bible rejects the view that human death is natural – “the final stage of growth,” as one secular author calls it. No, God created us to live forever. Satan holds “the power of death,” and he uses our fear of dying to make us slaves. This enslavement takes different cultural forms:

- In animistic cultures, people live in fear of angering the spirits that control their lives. When I visited southeast Asia some years ago, a human stampede on a crowded bridge resulted in hundreds of deaths. The next day, shrines with fruit sacrifices sprang up all over the city – erected by poor people who were



terrified. When I asked about the sacrifices, I was told that this was their attempt to appease the angry spirits so that they would not kill the worshippers. How many billions of people live in this kind of daily bondage to the fear of death?

- In cultures dominated by the major world religions (except for biblical Christianity), people live in fear of being punished in the next life for their failure to live up to religious law in this life. Serious-minded religionists believe (correctly) that the purpose of this life is to qualify to spend the next life blessed by God. They also believe (incorrectly) that the only way to qualify is by obeying the religious laws. But how much obedience is required? How good is good enough? This question gnaws at sensitive consciences, inducing a growing fear of judgment. Others live in self-righteous denial of the divine condemnation that threatens them.
- In secular cultures like our own, people have less fear of divine judgment because they don't believe in God or the afterlife. Yet the certainty of their own deaths casts a terrible shadow over their lives. As an atheist in my teen years, I vividly remember the terrifying realization that my life had no ultimate meaning. I was going to die, and cease to know that I had ever existed. All of my loved ones would suffer the same fate. The sun would eventually burn out, and all evidence of our existence would be erased. In view of such an obvious and awful fact, how could I live the rest of my life without succumbing to despair? This is why secular people are often enslaved to *distraction*. The next purchase, the next form of entertainment, the next career advancement, the next romantic relationship, etc. – these provide the illusion of meaning and hope; they distract us from the meaninglessness of our secular lives.



God's solution to the problem of our mortality is profound indeed. His Son Jesus entered into our mortal condition and conquered the root problem. He took on our humanity and lived in this death-dominated world. More, He died a representative death. He voluntarily gave up His perfect life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. His righteous death satisfied God's justice and silenced Satan's accusation that we must be condemned to eternal death for our sins. His resurrection demonstrated His conquest of sin and death. The way to eternal life is now open to all who personally entrust themselves to Jesus as their Savior. Thus, John 3:16 declares that "God so loved all humanity that He gave His one and only Son, that *whoever believes in Him* might not perish, but have eternal life."

And having been delivered from the power of death, we who believe in Jesus can also be freed from the fear of death to live meaningful lives. I vividly remember the joyous sense of freedom I experienced as a new Christian in this regard. I was actually going to live forever with God! This fact put all of my fears and problems in a new and profoundly hopeful light. Even now, over fifty years later, as I face a life-threatening illness, I am strengthened and stabilized by the assurance that God will be with me forever. "The *eternal* God is a refuge, and underneath are the *everlasting* arms" (Deuteronomy 33:27).

Lord Jesus, thank You for entering into this death-dominated human condition. Thank You for delivering me from the power of death through Your own death. I cannot begin to fathom how great this sacrifice was for You. I will never understand how great Your love must be to voluntarily die for such a sinful person as I. I rejoice that I will live forever with You and Your people. Help me to live the remainder of this life as a light who draws others to You.

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