

Do you like art? Do you know much about art? While love of art was a vital part of Church History, it fell out of vogue during the last century. But in previous generations art permeated Christian culture. Today most don't realize the importance of art to communicate spiritual truth.

I said all of that to draw your attention to an interesting phenomena in art history, particularly Christian art that depicts church people; monks, ministers, saints. As you look at paintings of church people, you'll often find something very strange that shows up time and time again and time again. Have you ever noticed it? It's a skull in the painting with the church leader (**pictures**). You'll repeatedly find paintings that include a skull. What on earth is that all about?

It's connected to an ancient Christian practice that in the Latin is known as *Memento Mori*, which essentially means, "*Remember that you're going to die.*" Church leaders thought that it was important to remember that they were going to die, that this life was temporary, so it altered the way that they lived. So, they'd surround themselves with something like a skull to remind themselves death is imminent and all of us will someday die.

We don't like to think much about death, especially our own. But the last eight months have confronted us with the reality of our mortality. *Memento Mori* is true – we're all going to die. None of us gets out of this life alive, we just don't know when. For many death is the ultimate fear and ultimate confusion. That's what we want to work through today – ***the fear of death.***

Because we know we're going to die, rather than being paralyzed by this fear, we have the opportunity to prepare for it. If you're taking notes...

1. Death is inevitable. While most don't like to talk about death, the Bible doesn't hesitate to talk about death. Words such as *die* and *death* occur nearly 900 times in the Bible. Biblical terms for death are often graceful and poetic: "*gathered to my people*" (Gen. 49:29). "*Solomon slept with his fathers and was buried*" (1 Kings 11:43). Psalm 116:15 is one of the most beautiful verses about the death of God's people, "*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.*"

From the time of Adam's fall in the Garden, death is presented as the curse and part of our existence. The writer of Hebrews sums it up succinctly, "*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*" (Hebrews 9:27). Our countdown to death begins at birth. You and I are dying at this very moment. Given that fact, how is it also possible that the Bible can treat the death of born-again Christians so lightly?

The answer lies in a paradox. Though death begins at the moment of our birth, eternal life begins when we are born-again. Once we've committed our life to Christ, we're born-again by the Spirit of God through faith in Christ.

Eternal life doesn't begin the day we die. Eternal life begins the moment we trust Christ as our Savior. That's the next verse in Hebrews 9, "*So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.*"

If you know Jesus Christ, then you're experiencing eternal life right now even though you haven't physically died. Since you're experiencing eternal life now, death is little more than a brief interruption to that which you're already experiencing—life that has no end.

Scripture gives the whole truth about death. It's not something for believers to fear. It's a journey begun at birth, culminating in our final destination of being conformed to the image of Christ for all eternity (Romans 8:29).

2. It's normal and human to fear death at some level. Woody Allen (**picture**) said, "*It's not that I'm afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens.*"

In 1973 Ernest Becker (**pictures**) wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*. It was all the rage in the 70's. Humanity is enslaved by the fear of dying. So what humans do is deny, deny, deny and we find all sorts of ways, religious ways, addictive ways, amusement ways, work ways, family ways, surgery ways – to take the years off.

"*The main thesis of this book,*" Becker writes, "*the main thesis is that the fear of death haunts the human animal like nothing else. It is a mainspring of human activity, activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.*" But Ernest Becker has no answer. He's merely documenting this pervasive reality, a massive human effort to deny death's reality.

It's normal to be afraid of dying. But God doesn't want us to be consumed by the fear of death. And if this describes you, you aren't alone. Even David, the psalmist, a man who wrote much of the Bible sometimes was afraid of dying: "*My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me*" (Psalm 55:4). Our fear of death seems to center on ***five main issues.***

There is the fear of the actual dying process. Those who struggle with the fear of death are usually caught in the “what if” syndrome. They imagine the worst, even though over 99% of the time the worst doesn’t happen. For example, they’re afraid to drive across a bridge because they think, “What if the bridge collapses?” There’s usually no logical basis for their fear, so it’s very hard to reason them out of their mindset.

People afraid of dying in a violent or painful way often suffer from hypochondria. They’re obsessed with their health, often resulting in an irrational fear of being seriously ill. Web MD is their go to site.

For a normal person, a headache is annoying. For a hypochondriac, a headache is a sign of a brain tumor. Almost any symptom, no matter how innocuous can launch a hypochondriac into an emotional spiral of fear and morbidity. The primary battle is in their minds.

After diseases like cancer, some of the common fears of ways to die are plane crashes, car wrecks, poisoning, freezing to death or dying in a storm. Some fear being eaten by a wild animal. After *Jaws* (picture), swimming in the ocean was never the same. While you may not ever swim in the ocean, don’t forget there’s always *the Beast of Bray Road* (picture).

The fear of dying painfully has some basis in reality. There are real dangers out there. Some of us will die painfully or suddenly or tragically. But when we’re obsessed with these fears, we aren’t trusting God and His sustaining grace. We’ve allowed our minds to jump to every negative possibility instead of obeying Philippians 4:8, “*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*”

Pioneer missionary J. Hudson Taylor (picture) founded the China Inland Mission. During the terrible days of the Boxer Rebellion, when missionaries were being captured and killed, Taylor went through such agony of soul that he couldn’t pray. Writing in his journal, he summarized his spiritual condition this way: “*I can’t read. I can’t think. I can’t pray. But I can trust.*”

There is the fear of leaving loved ones behind. Every parent is confronted by this fear. Our lives are “*a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.*” We’re wise to prepare for the possibility that our deaths may precede our loved ones. Freedom from this fear comes from realizing that all things, even the time of our death, belongs to God. Life is a gift from God. He instructs us to be wise managers of what He’s entrusted to us.

There are some basics you need to plan for. If you’re married or a parent, you should have some life insurance and a will. If your children are minors, you need to make some decisions on who you will trust to raise them. You should plan out some of the basics for your funeral. Your funeral is the last time you’ll share your testimony with lost family and friends. Too often family members don’t have a clue on what a deceased loved one would want.

We need to be responsible people, yet it shouldn’t cause paranoia about things we can’t control. Our heavenly Father knows our needs. He watches over those He loves. Jesus warned His disciples that He wasn’t going to be physically on earth for long and neither are we. It’s why we must develop an eternal perspective on life.

There is the fear of loved ones dying. I have a dear friend in the ministry who lost his Dad at an early age. His fear of losing his wife was so intense that he wouldn’t let her drive.

The loss of a child or spouse are some of the most devastating experiences any of us will go through. The dread of losing a loved one can cause us to cross the line from being responsible and protective to being overprotective. When that happens, mothering easily becomes smothering...and the child is hurt. Vanessa Ochs (picture) rightly says that overprotection is “*an insidious form of child abuse. You are locking a child’s horizons in the closet. The difference is, this abuse is caused by an enormous amount of love.*”

Because we can’t bear the thought of how much it will hurt us to see our loved ones hurt or killed, we do everything we can to control life to avoid experiencing that pain. But in the process we end up feeding phobia in our children, ultimately producing children who are as fearful as we are. Finding the balance is increasingly difficult in a world brimming with danger. We must trust God that life and death are truly in His hands.

There is the fear of the unknown. Death is an unknown. None of us have experienced it. With a few exceptions, none who have experienced death have ever come back. For those who have come back, Scripture is silent about their experience. We don’t know what it’s like to die, so we fear the unknown. There’s a natural fear of death, even for the believer.

There is the fear of judgement. If you haven’t trusted Christ as your personal Savior, you should be afraid of death. You’re not prepared for death. Death is itself a judgment. Romans 6:23 says “*the wages of sin is death.*” There’s also a judgment that comes after death. Hebrews 9:27, “*It is appointed for man to die once and then to face judgment.*” Death means we can’t blow off God without final consequences. There will be an accounting. Judgement is coming so there should be fear.

The Bible is crystal clear. It’s not how many good works you do, it’s knowing Jesus. Do you have a personal relationship with Christ? The Bible says salvation is “*not by works, so that no one can boast*” (Ephesians 2:9).

Imagine some deceived Baptist or Presbyterian or Methodist, who all their life thought religion—doing lots of good things—would get them into heaven. They attended church, read their Bible, gave their money, served in civic organizations, tried to help hurting people and did all of those good works thinking it'd gain them acceptance with God. But they'll stand before God at the judgement and God will say to the angel. "Angel, is his/her name written in the Lamb's book of life?" The angel will say, "No Lord, it's not there." Can't you hear the deceived persons say, "Wait!! There's a mistake, you'd better check again. My name was on the roll at that church down there. I did all of these good deeds; I did all of these good works." But God will say, "Depart from Me! You never had a personal relationship with Me."

When you come to know Jesus personally, your name is written in the Lamb's book of life. It's not your bad deeds that send you to hell and it's not your good deeds that get you into heaven. The only book that matters is the book of life. Jesus said, "*Rejoice that your names are written in heaven*" (Luke 10:20) The moment you meet Jesus personally as your Lord and Savior, your name is written down into the Lamb's book of life.

3. Christians should have a different perspective on death. Recently, I read about a passenger on an airplane who was sitting in coach class and unexpectedly died. To help the family in their grief, the flight attendants brought the body up to 1st Class for the rest of the flight. When God calls us Home, we're taken up to First Class because of our faith in the Lord Jesus.

In John 11:25 Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, physically, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never, never die.*"

If you want to live forever in the presence of God, you must have two birthdays. You must have a physical birthday and you must have a spiritual birthday. If you're only born once, you'll have to die twice. But if you're born twice, you only have to be concerned about dying once. If you're a Christian, you shouldn't really be tormented by the fear of death.

There are only two ways you can face the future no matter what it is. You can face the future by *faith*, or you can face the future in *fear*. If you know the Word of God, you don't have to be afraid. There are several reasons why we don't have to be afraid of death presented clearly in God's Word.

Our Enemy who led us into death has been defeated. Hebrews 2:14-15, "*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*" That simply means that in the incarnation, when Jesus became flesh and blood, in His death, Jesus conquered death. And thus He has freed us from the fear of death. When by His own death, Jesus paid the penalty for all of our sin, He took the sting out of the devil's condemnation.

When Jesus stepped out of that tomb on Resurrection Sunday, Satan's defeat was absolutely certain. His weapon of death had been destroyed. While he's still alive and active, his failure is a foregone conclusion. He has to settle for winning little battles because the war he started has already been lost to him forever. When Jesus came out of the grave, victorious over death, He took death out of Satan's armory and he can't hurt us with it anymore.

Death's power has been destroyed. 1 Corinthians 15:55-57 asks, "*O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" In the book of Revelation, we're promised that death has no part in the future of the believer. In fact, the Bible says, when we get to heaven, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death. Satan has been defeated and death's power has been destroyed.

Christians know what happens when they die. People want to know what happens after a person dies. Lots of books been written by those with near death experiences. But it's one thing to have a near death experience and it's another to be dead and buried, and then come back to life. While they've been great for book sales, those individuals aren't dead. To quote *Princess Bride* (**picture**), they're only "mostly dead." We don't have to read some modern book to know what happens when we die because the Bible tells us.

Jesus told this story in Luke 16. It offers a penetrating view of what happens after death. In fact, it may tell us more about life after death than any other passage in Scripture. It's a parable Jesus told concerning two men, one rich and one poor. The poor man's name was Lazarus. We don't know the rich man's name, but we do know something about his lifestyle. Jesus tells us that this rich man wore the finest clothing, ate the finest food, had the best of the best and let everyone know about it, even the beggars who lie at his gates trying to get some of the crumbs he might drop to them.

The poor man, Lazarus, who hopes to be thrown a few crumbs from the bountiful table is not only hungry, but the Bible tells us, and this is pretty gross, that he's very ill, covered with sores. The town dogs lick the sores on his body. He is one miserable creature, living a miserable existence.

But Lazarus does possess one thing that no one can take away from him and that is his love for God. The rich man possesses one thing, he can't keep, his life. In the story Jesus tells, both men die, and on the other side of the gate that

separates this life from eternity, the beggar, Lazarus, is carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham. Now he's kissed by the angels, instead of licked by the dogs. The Bible just says that the rich man died.

Did you know that when a believer dies, the angels come and carry that believer to God? When a believer passes from this life to the next, it appears that our Heavenly Father dispatches His angels to convey us into his presence. We're not beamed up to heaven, we're carried there by the angels.

This passage provides one of the euphemisms we employ for death, when we say, "*the angels took him.*" It may sound like a cliché from some Victorian greeting card, but according to Luke 16, it's biblical truth and applied to believers in Christ. On the day when you wait for the curtains to be drawn on this life, God's messengers stand ready to carry you Home.

On that journey, Christians will experience none of the travel worries we often face. You won't get lost, (I'm thankful for that one). You won't miss the bus. There's no waiting for the next plane. God has angels assigned to bring you Home. In the face of such assurance, why should you be afraid?

Robert Morgan (**picture**) shared that he was called to the hospital room of a 95-year-old church member, Agnes Frazier, who was taking her last breaths. "When I entered the room, she was almost too weak to look up at me. Her words were indistinct at times, but soon it became clear what she was trying to tell me. This dear saint explained, 'These two men dressed in white are standing at the foot of my bed. What should I say to them?' I could not see anyone, but I told her, 'Tell them you belong to Jesus.' That seemed to satisfy her. Shortly after, she fell asleep in Christ and those two angels, I believe ushered her to heaven."

Our enemy has been defeated. Death's power has been destroyed and we know what happens to Christians when they die because the Bible tells us.

4. A Christian shouldn't fear death because it's a shadow, not a reality. Psalm 23 says, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*" Donald Grey Barnhouse (**picture**), a great preacher of another generation, was going home from the funeral of his first wife. He had his children with him and they were all overwhelmed with grief. As he sought for a way to comfort his children as they were standing at the corner, a huge moving van drove past them and its shadow swept over where they were standing. Dr. Barnhouse said, "Children, would you rather be run over by a truck or by its shadow?" Of course, they said, "The shadow, it's harmless." He said, "Let me tell you something, kids. 2,000 years ago, the truck ran over Jesus Christ in order that only the shadow would have to run over us".

Isn't that wonderful? The truck ran over Jesus. He suffered our death so that only the shadow runs over us. The Bible says for the believer, death is a shadow, not a reality. We don't have to be afraid. Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.*"

Though death is lonely, you're never, ever alone. Psalm 23:4 says, "*for You are with me.*" In the first part of Psalm 23, the psalmist is talking *about* the shepherd. "*He leads me, He restores me, He makes me to lie down in green pastures.*" But when you get to the fourth verse and very abruptly, the third person becomes the second person. He says, "*You are with me.*"

So, he quits talking about the shepherd and begins talking to Him. "You are with me." We never walk that road alone. The provision God has made for death is only applicable to those who have put their trust in Christ. If you want to go to heaven when you die, you must make that decision in the here and now. You don't get to heaven and then make a choice. Your choice must be made here. You must place your trust in Jesus Christ. If you believe in Him, He will give you eternal life as your free gift. "*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

Conclusion: If you've read *The Lord of the Rings* (**picture**) or seen the movies, you can't forget Gimli (**picture**), the surly yet lovable dwarf. With Frodo in grave danger, Aragorn suggests a diversionary tactic of attacking the enemy's front door, the Black Gate of Mordor. When Aragorn asks if his friends are willing to join him, Gimli, the heroic dwarf, responds, "*Certainty of death? Small chance of success? What are we waiting for?*" Unless Christ returns, we have no chance of getting out of this life alive. As believers, we know where we're going and we know that He's coming back for us and He will walk with us *through* the valley of the shadow of death.

Are you familiar with James Weldon Johnson (**picture**)? He's one of my favorite poets. Let me end today with his powerful poem, *Go Down Death*.

*Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband--weep no more;*

*Grief-stricken son--weep no more;
Left-lonesome daughter --weep no more;
She only just gone home.*

*Day before yesterday morning,
God was looking down from His great, high heaven,
Looking down on all His children,
And His eye fell on Sister Caroline,
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's big heart was touched with pity,
With the everlasting pity.*

*And God sat back on His throne,
And He commanded that tall, bright angel standing at His right hand:
Call me Death!*

*And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death!--Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.
And Death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hooves of his horses struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.*

*And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in My vineyard,
And she's tired--
She's weary--
Go down, Death, and bring her to Me.*

*And Death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
And out and down he rode,
Through heaven's pearly gates,
Past suns and moons and stars;
on Death rode,
Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
Straight down he came.*

*While we were watching round her bed,
She turned her eyes and looked away,
She saw what we couldn't see;
She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
Coming like a falling star.*

*But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
He looked to her like a welcome friend.
And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
And she smiled and closed her eyes.*

*And Death took her up like a baby,
And she lay in his icy arms,
But she didn't feel no chill.
And death began to ride again--
Up beyond the evening star,
Into the glittering light of glory,
On to the Great White Throne.
And there he laid Sister Caroline
On the loving breast of Jesus.*

*And Jesus took His own hand and wiped away her tears,
And He smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in His arms,
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
Take your rest.*

*Weep not--weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.*