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A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF DEATH

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A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF DEATH

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Benjamin F. Bruner

November 29, 2021

Chairman _____

Reader _____

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Dean _____

Date Approved _____

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Introduction

The exploration of death is not a new project for theology, but recent conversations at the intersection of Christianity and science have prompted a renewed perspective through a slightly different lens. While it has been widely known for centuries now that fossils reveal the historical reality of organisms that both lived and died eons ago, traditional perspectives in theology have tended to attribute the presence of death in the world to the sinful actions of humanity. Even in the last century with broader acceptance of the ancient nature of previous lifeforms, the death of humans was still considered categorically distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom. Over the last two centuries the field of evolutionary biology has been building a case for the biological continuity between humanity and the rest of life on earth and there is no longer any biological doubt that humans share a common ancestry with the rest of life on Earth. Still there was hope that if human ancestry could be traced to a pair of individuals, Adam and Eve, then there might still be hope for traditional views on the relationship between death and human sinfulness. However, in the last four decades modern genomics has determined that the human population at its smallest point still numbered in the thousands, making the proposal of a single progenitor pair for humanity untenable.¹

¹ For example, Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God : A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Daniel J. Fairbanks, *Relics of Eden : The Powerful Evidence of Evolution in Human DNA* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2010); Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome : Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2017); John C. Avise, *Conceptual Breakthroughs in Evolutionary Genetics : A Brief History of Shifting Paradigms* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, Academic Press, 2014); Graeme Finlay, *Human Evolution : Genes, Genealogies and Phylogenies* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Eugene E. Harris, *Ancestors in Our Genome : The New Science of Human Evolution* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). A recent laudable effort by S. Joshua Swamidass attempted to reconcile these modern findings with the traditional theological perspective, but I believe it falls short on both biological and theological grounds. See *The Genealogical Adam and Eve : The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* (Downers

Working under a new paradigm of human ancestry, Adam, Eve, and the complex, often cryptic, Eden narrative are being examined again through a new lens.² However, for many the question of ancestry is secondary to Adam and Eve's defining role as the first human beings to reject the will of God and suffer the resultant consequences.

Traditionally, the consequences for Adam and Eve's transgression has framed our understanding of death, how we understand our inept and often fickle human nature, and how we cope with pain and suffering in the world. With Adam and Eve's biological primacy for humanity in question, doctrines related to the fall, original sin, the depravity of human nature, and death, among others, suddenly appear to be boundaries of resistance for meaningful dialog between theology and modern science.³ Ultimately, all of these

Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019). See also, William Lane Craig, *In Quest of the Historical Adam : A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2021).

² For example, Richard Averbeck et al., *Reading Genesis 1-2 : An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013); M. Barrett et al., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson, *Reading Genesis after Darwin* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ronald Cole-Turner, *The End of Adam and Eve : Theology and the Science of Human Origins* (Pittsburgh, PA: TheologyPlus, 2016); C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? : Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam : What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012); Richard B. Gaffin, *No Adam, No Gospel : Adam and the History of Redemption*, 1st edition. ed., Westminster Perspectives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2015); Jerry D. Korschmeier, *Evolution and Eden : Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998); Gregory J. Laughery and George R. Diepstra, *From Evolution to Eden : Making Sense of Early Genesis* (USA: Destnee); David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors : Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ Press, 2011); Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin : Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014); Richard D. Phillips, *God, Adam, and You : Biblical Creation Defended and Applied*, First edition. ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve : Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2015); Ziony Zevit, *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

³ Evolutionary biology paints a picture of life beginning to form on earth around 3.5 billion years ago, and even in these very early stages of life, death was a biological necessity for the continual generation of new life. Arthur Peacocke argues that complex living structures can only survive "because of the finitude of their life spans, only by building preformed complex chemical structures into their fabric through imbibing the material of other living organisms. . . Plants feed on inorganic materials and animals have to feed on plants and some animals on other animals. The structural logic is inescapable: new forms of matter arise only through incorporating, imbibing, the old. Moreover, new patterns can only come into existence in

areas are intertwined but the project that follows will focus specifically on questions relating to a theological understanding of death and whether these views can be brought into alignment, or at least conversation, with a scientific understanding of death.

Significance of the Problem

While the last century saw interaction mostly between evolutionary biology and creation theology, the vast majority being focused on the interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis, attention is now shifting toward a critical evaluation of both theological and biological anthropologies. Scientific findings that displace Adam and Eve as the biological progenitors of humanity can present a challenging task for theologians, but the topic of death has a much broader impact across the different fields of systematic theology. The following chapters will not only explore our theological understanding of death, but also illustrate how changes in our perspective on death can influence our theological understanding of fields like theological anthropology, creation theology, theodicy, hamartiology, soteriology, and eschatology. Evaluating the impact of an evolutionary account of death compared to a theological or biblical account of death will truly be a systematic endeavor.⁴

a finite universe ('finite' in the sense of the conservation of matter-energy) if old patterns dissolve to make place for them. This is a condition of the creativity of the process, of its ability to produce the new which at the biological level we observe as new forms of life only through death of the old. For the death of individual organisms is essential for release of food resources for new arrivals, and species simply die out by being ousted from biological 'niches' by new ones better adapted to survive and reproduce in them. Hence biological death of the individual is the prerequisite of the creativity of the biological order, that creativity which eventually led to the emergence of human beings." In, Arthur R. Peacocke, "The Cost of New Life," in *The Work of Love : Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 34-35.

⁴ Several theologians in the last century have embraced the task and will be evaluated as a part of this project. For example, Ray S. Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, The Ray S. Anderson Collection (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); David Albert Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford

Beyond the theological significance of an evaluation of death, there is also a very important pastoral aspect to the work.⁵ For example, in what ways does physical death being a natural part of creation change our perspective regarding our own death or the death of those we love? How might it change how we counsel those dealing with the death of a loved one or those who may very well be in their final days? While I am keenly aware of the inadequacy of rational proposals in theology, science, or anything of the sort to console the heart of those mourning the loss of a loved one, I believe that some understandings of death allow us to cope with the reality of pain, suffering, and death

University Press, 2007); Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, Quaestiones Disputatae (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961); Helmut Thielicke, *Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); *Living with Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); Douglas James Davies, *The Theology of Death* (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2008); Lloyd R. Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Milton McC Gatch, *Death; Meaning and Mortality in Christian Thought and Contemporary Culture* (New York,: Seabury Press, 1969); George Kalantzis and Matthew Levering, *Christian Dying : Witnesses from the Tradition* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018); Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Life and Death in the New Testament : The Teachings of Jesus and Paul*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); Matthew Levering, *On Christian Dying : Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004); Liston O. Mills, *Perspectives on Death* (Nashville,: Abingdon Press, 1969).

⁵ The difference in perspective alone between fearing death and embracing death has a dramatic impact in how we minister to those who are dying. In my project, I will explore some of these pastoral questions drawing from works that, to varying degrees, integrate a theological understanding of death into their approach for counseling the dying or the families of those who have died. (For example, Eddie Leon Sharp, *Comfort When the Shadow Falls : Encouraging the Dying and Those Affected by Grief* (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 2019).) Additionally, there are a number of other important insights to be considered coming from those who work in palliative care (see Kathryn Mannix, *With the End in Mind : Dying, Death and Wisdom in an Age of Denial*, First edition. ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Company/Hachette Book Group, 2018).), and those who care for the bodies of those who have died (see Sue M. Black, *All That Remains : A Life in Death* (London: Doubleday, 2018). Our modern cultural response to death, namely an approach of denial and separation from those who are dying or dead, (as explored in Anderson; Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity : Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, First edition. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017); Paul Kalanithi and A. Verghese, *When Breath Becomes Air*, First edition. ed. (New York: Random House, 2016).) is quite often disconnected from a rich and hopeful theological understanding of death. A final brief discussion will be given regarding the treatment of funeral process and how that should reflect a positive theological understanding of death (drawing from Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing : The Christian Funeral*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

while strengthening a hope for the future.⁶ Additionally, our theological view of death helps frame important end-of-life ethical discussions ranging from euthanasia to the extraordinary measures taken to prolong life indefinitely.⁷

Finally, it is important to address death on both scientific and theological grounds for the sake of promoting healthy dialog between the two fields. To silo these two fields in isolation from one another cripples their ability to synergistically pursue truth at a level unattainable on their own. It is my hope that this project will be a constructive endeavor promoting further interaction between both science and theology by first attempting to understand how a modern scientific understanding of death correlates or conflicts with a biblical and theological understanding of death. Only once potential points of conflict are identified can an investigation begin to determine whether coherent proposals exist that account for both the biological and theological data.⁸

The Study's Relation to Other Inquiries

The work of David Albert Jones provides a key examination of death from the perspective of historical theology, following the progression of thought through

⁶ William Abraham provides a heartfelt example following the death his son in *Among the Ashes : On Death, Grief, and Hope* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017). Another example is the very personal testimony of Kelly Kopic found in *Embodied Hope : A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2017).

⁷ For example, Celia Deane-Drummond, "Future Perfect? God, the Transhuman Future and the Quest for Immortality," in *Future Perfect? : God, Medicine and Human Identity*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and Peter Scott (London ; New York: T & T Clark International, 2006), 172-78; Ulf Görman, "Never Too Late to Live a Little Longer? The Quest for Extended Life and Immortality — Some Ethical Considerations," *Ibid.*, 150-54.

⁸ It might be tempting at this point to imply that science is somehow taking dominance over the construction of theology. To the contrary, I will argue below that a vital assumption of this project is that both theology and science are epistemically vital in the pursuit of the truth established by God.

Ambrose, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Karl Rahner.⁹ Within my project, Jones's historical work, and the primary sources he examines, will set the stage for a presentation of Matthew Levering's contemporary theological perspective on death.¹⁰ Matthew Levering's theological understanding of death resonates his Roman Catholic convictions, but he does not shy away from critically evaluating his own position.

Levering's view of death is deeply connected with his perspective on Adam and Eve's original rebellion, which is in keeping with the Roman Catholic centrality of the doctrine of original sin.¹¹ He is clear to state that Adam and Eve's "first sin has a corruptive impact on all humans and brings about human death as we now experience it."¹² The phrasing here of "death as we now experience it," or later expressed "death as we now know it,"¹³ reflects Levering's belief that humankind was originally created free from this new, foreign form of death. This is not to say that he is oblivious to the scientific data showing that organisms have been dying for billions of years leading up to the presence of humans within life's history, but to the contrary, he argues that human death following Adam and Eve's transgression is distinct from the death of all other life.

⁹ See Jones.

¹⁰ I am drawn to Levering as a conversation partner for my project first because he actively engages with scholars working at the intersection of science and theology, and second because he provides a contrast to my position as will be seen below. Despite our contrasts, I ultimately share with Levering a distinctly orthodox position related to the relational or spiritual consequences of death.

¹¹ While quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Levering argues that the doctrine of original sin is "an essential truth of the faith," and states plainly that "the Church, which has the mind of Christ, knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ." As quoted in *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 233n21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 250.

¹³ Matthew Levering, *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018), 187n14.

To clarify he writes, “I distinguish human death, which involves an experience of alienation or of the cutting off of communion, from the death per se, which was already present three billion years prior to the emergence of rational hominids.”¹⁴ At the core of his argument is an insistence that human death is a punishment from God for the sin of Adam and Eve, but is it necessary to attribute our physical death to this punishment?¹⁵ Can we not suffer alienation and separation from God independent from our current or future physical status?¹⁶

In the project that follows, I argue similarly to Levering that the negative or even punitive consequences of sin are a relational separation or alienation from God and others.¹⁷ Contrary to Levering I make the argument that human mortality (the termination

¹⁴ *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 234n22. Levering here also hints at another important aspect of his position, that at some point in history there would have been a moment where pre-human ancestors became human, and thus set the stage for subsequent inheritance of an altered, sinful human nature. This appears to be an argument necessitated by his theological position on the transmission of original sin, but it conflicts with modern scientific understandings of speciation events. Evolutionary biology paints a picture of slow, almost imperceptible change over long periods of time that would produce a substantial gray area between the monochromatic extremes of pre-human and human. Furthermore, Levering, like many theologians, makes an excessively strong case for human exceptionalism relative to the rest of creation. While there are some important differences between animals and humans in relation to God, biologically animals and humans are more similar to each other than we are dissimilar. For contrast see, Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals : Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, The Paul Carus Lecture Series (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1999); Jeffrey Schloss and Michael J. Murray, *The Believing Primate : Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion*, Pbk. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ See Matthew Levering, "Original Sin and the Anthropological Principles of Humanae Vitae," *Nova et Vetera* 6, no. 4 (2008): 791-95; *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 250-56. Of note, I am not advocating any form of anthropological dualism wherein the discussion becomes one of the death of the body versus the death of the soul. Levering similarly argues, “Death therefore does not entirely destroy the human being; the just punishment of original sin is not annihilation.” "Original Sin and the Anthropological Principles of Humanae Vitae," 794.

¹⁶One example would be the condition which David Kelsey refers to as a *living death*. See, *Eccentric Existence : A Theological Anthropology*, 1st ed., 2 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 864-89.

¹⁷ A relational understanding of death, often referred to as spiritual death, is far from novel. What is surprising is how often a physical understanding of death remains tangled with this relational understanding of death. For example, C. John Collins writes “And what shall we make of the ‘death’ that God threatens in Genesis 2:17? I maintain that the primary reference is ‘spiritual death’ (alienation from

of our current embodied existence), is natural and continuous with the mortality we see in all other forms of life on our planet. Similar to Levering I advocate a creational theology that embraces natural order, including mortality, as a part of God's good creation, but disagree with his exclusion of human mortality.¹⁸ Rather than allow human mortality to be subsumed under our understanding of God's punishment for humankind's sinful behavior, I argue that we should separate the discussion of human mortality from our understanding of the consequences of human sin.

Systematically, a theological evaluation of death touches a number of sub-disciplines. Creation theology is deeply tied to death through the discussion of whether or not death is a natural part of God's originally created order.¹⁹ If one allows death to be a part of God's original creation, then one fear is that we trade one problem for another with the introduction of a theodicy problem.²⁰ Regardless, the issue of pain, suffering,

God and one another) as exhibited in Genesis 3:8-13. But that is not all: it would appear that this is followed by their physical death as well (v. 19). For now I simply observe that we should be careful about letting the distinction between spiritual and physical death, which is proper, lead us to drive a wedge of separation between the two kinds of death: it looks like the author presents them as two aspects of one experience. In other words, physical death is not any more 'natural' for human experience than spiritual death is." "Adam and Eve in the Old Testament," in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin : Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 18.

¹⁸ Levering affirms aspects of Michael Murray's proposal in *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* when he notes that "an evolving material universe, insofar as it contains living organisms, must include bodily decay and death absent a miraculous stability, which in my view could characterize only the eschaton." Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 129n65.

¹⁹My project and thought benefits greatly from the "good but not perfect" creation theology advocated by Terence Fretheim. See Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God : An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); *God and World in the Old Testament : A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); *Creation Untamed : The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010); Terence E. Fretheim, Michael J. Chan, and Brent A. Strawn, *What Kind of God? : Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim*, Siphrut : Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

²⁰ For instance, William Edgar concludes, "Putting into question the historical covenant head, Adam, while on the surface seeming to harmonize with various data from paleoanthropology, leads to very

and death resonates not only through the human experience but throughout other forms of life as well. Increasing attention has been given to the problem of animal pain and suffering, both as an inherent part of God's creation and as a result of the actions of humankind.²¹ Behind many of these conversations lies the deeper moral question of whether death itself is good, evil, or neutral in such regards. Since for many, biological death appears to be a punishment for sin, hamartiology and soteriology will to some degree be both relevant to the project and potentially impacted by the conclusions.²²

The most expansive, and regrettably neglected, inquiry related to my project is a thorough investigation of eschatology in relation to the various perspectives on death. Considerably more work has been done recently on death and the afterlife than on the questions that will ultimately be the focus of my project.²³ The brief interaction with eschatology is perhaps understandable given the nature of my particular work, since

serious obstacles in front of believing in a good and all-powerful God. For those who accept the Bible as the very Word of God, the exegetical basis for the historicity of Adam is sufficient to establish the view that our first parents were created specially and that they and their progeny share the image of God, even as they now share the sin of Adam. Without such a conviction it is difficult to see how God would not be liable for the introduction of evil into the world." In, "Adam, History, and Theodicy," in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin : Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014).

²¹ For example, Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw : Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ronald E. Osborn, *Death before the Fall : Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014); Bethany N. Sollereeder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering : Theodicy without a Fall*, Routledge Science and Religion Series (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

²² Based upon one particular interpretation of Romans 5:12.

²³ See for example, Jaime Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); Stephen T. Davis, *After We Die : Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life after Death* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2015); John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976); Christopher Jay Johnson and Marsha G. McGee, *Encounters with Eternity : Religious Views of Death and Life after Death* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1986); Terence L. Nichols, *Death and Afterlife : A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2010); Alan F. Segal, *Life after Death : A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2004); Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife : Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

science has nothing to contribute to an understanding of what exists beyond the threshold of death. The scope of my research project cannot possibly cover all of the tangential topics in systematic theology that are affected by any one particular view of death. Rather, I selectively draw attention to those core areas which appear as foundational elements for the presented doctrinal positions.

In the chapters that follow, I begin with an exploration of death from a scientific perspective and argue that death, in addition to being abundant throughout the course of billions of years of natural history, is a necessary element for the continuation and creation of new life. In chapter 2, I follow a progression of historical theological thinking on death and find support for a variety of literal, metaphorical, and mythological ways of understanding death throughout Scripture. In chapter 3, I continue to explore these categorizations of death before concluding with an evaluation of the interrelatedness of sin and death. Of critical importance to understanding the relationship between sin and death is understanding how Paul speaks of death, primarily in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. While I affirm the strong likelihood that Paul held a position on human origins consistent with the time and culture in which he lived, I also argue that it is possible to understand his argument without forcing contemporary readers to assimilate 1st century anthropological perspectives. On this basis I then show that reading passages like Romans 5 within a metaphorical rather than literal framework, is both consistent with Paul's abundant metaphorical use of death and also helpful in avoiding conflict with contemporary scientific views on death. With a more nuanced perspective on the ways in which death is discussed in Scripture and in the Christian tradition, in the final chapter I offer positive suggestions for dealing with the inevitable reality of our death from both

pastoral and personal perspectives. Ultimately, it is my conviction that it is only through open dialogue about death that we can transition from feelings of fear and anxiety to feelings of peace and hope for the transition that awaits us at the end of our current embodied existence.

Chapter 1

Modern scientific perspectives on death

One of the earliest tasks in undergraduate biology courses is to define what it means to study life. It is an entertaining first exercise to ask students to describe what characteristics an object has that justify the distinction of being called living. They tend to emphasize the object's ability to move, respond to a stimulus, or reproduce, only to realize that any one of these characteristics can also be used, in varying degrees, to describe non-living entities like a computer or rock crystals. Instead they learn that a complex combination of these elements and many more are required to synthesize anything close to a comprehensive definition of life. For the students, what initially appears to be an easy task turns out to be a quite complex endeavor.

Nevertheless, despite such a definitive emphasis in biology coursework on trying to understand life, we do not make it very far into the discussion, even in a first-year biology course, before we face the realization that for life to exist there must also be death. The realization feels foreign at first but as we explore topics as broadly ranging as prairie management and cancer formation, it quickly becomes clear that death has an important role to play in the maintenance and regeneration of life. As a Christian, it can feel even more disconcerting, as anyone who has given a serious thought to the presence of pain and suffering in the world can attest. While later chapters will challenge the predisposition to perceive death in a strictly negative sense from our Christian

perspective, the intent of the current chapter is to briefly explore how death is a necessary and natural companion to life in a biological sense.¹

The Basic Economy of Life

There is a basic economy in the midst of life on earth that is contingent upon both the biochemical needs of individual organisms and the constraints of resource availability within the environment. With a finite amount of chemical resources available on earth, we see an extraordinary amount of nutrient recycling throughout the biosphere. In fact, your body is almost entirely composed of matter that was previously part of some other living organism. For new forms of life to flourish, older forms of life must die to make room, and increase nutrient availability, for their replacements. From an evolutionary perspective, death is a necessary element to support continual biological change. Arthur Peacocke rightfully argues that complex living structures can only survive,

because of the finitude of their life spans, only by building preformed complex chemical structures into their fabric through imbibing the material of other living organisms. . . . Plants feed on inorganic materials and animals have to feed on plants and some animals on other animals. The structural logic is inescapable: new forms of matter arise only through incorporating, imbibing, the old. Moreover, new patterns can only come into existence in a finite universe ('finite' in the sense of the conservation of matter-energy) if old patterns dissolve to make place for them. This is a condition of the creativity of the process, of its ability to produce the new which at the biological level we observe as new forms of life only through death of the old. For the death of individual organisms is essential for release of food resources for new arrivals, and species simply die out by being ousted from biological 'niches' by new ones better adapted to survive and reproduce in them. Hence biological death of the individual is the prerequisite of

¹ While the following discussion on the necessity of biological death is notably brief, Sara Sybesma Tolsma wrote an exceptional book chapter on the subject. See "When Darwin Wept: Redeeming Suffering and Death," in *Jesus Loves You and Evolution Is True: Why Youth Ministry Needs Science*, ed. Jason Lief and Sara Sybesma Tolsma (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 167-92.

the creativity of the biological order, that creativity which eventually led to the emergence of human beings.²

One of the most basic ways that life is descriptively organized in biology is on the basis of how an organism acquires energy and chemical resources. Organisms need energy to fuel the activities that we associate with being alive, and chemical resources are required for the continual biosynthetic growth, maintenance, and reproduction of the organism. At one end of the bioenergetic spectrum you have organisms commonly referred to as producers, like many plants, that are capable of utilizing energy in the form of light from the sun to meet its energy needs and the ability to draw its chemical resources from the inorganic minerals in the soil. At the other end of the bioenergetic spectrum are the consumers, like animals, which acquire both their energy and chemical resources from organic material.³ Organic matter in a simplified biological sense refers to material that has its origin in living organisms.⁴ Organisms classified as producers can theoretically provide for their bioenergetic needs independent of the death of previous forms of life, but consumers are defined by the necessity of acquiring their resources from organic material, or material that was once part of a living organism that is now dead. Obviously, the broad characterizations given above are overly simplistic and hardly all-inclusive, but they point toward a very important conclusion as it relates to the

² Arthur R. Peacocke, "The Cost of New Life," in *The Work of Love : Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 34-35.

³ The term organic is being used in the more formal chemical sense of differentiating organic from inorganic materials and not in the more culturally popular use of the word organic so loosely utilized in the description of certain foods at the grocery store.

⁴ More specifically the term organic in the context of chemistry is used to characterize the carbon-based compounds associated with living organisms. As a result, living things are often referred to as carbon-based life forms.

biological necessity of death.⁵ Much of life as we know it is only capable of existing as a result of the death of some other previous living organism.

Broadening our perspective from individual organisms out to communities and entire ecosystems we face a similar reality. Attributing sub-classifications to the consumer organisms discussed above as being either herbivores, carnivores, omnivores, or detritivores further accentuates the necessity that some organisms must die for these others to survive. It is easy to see the unavoidability of death as it relates to carnivorous organisms, but even in the context of grazing animals, which feed off of plant life without necessarily killing the entire plant, all of the previously living plant tissue that is ingested by the animal is destroyed and dies. An example used by my colleague comically speaks to the herbivorous issue by pointing out that squirrels are violent murderers of countless baby trees in their collection and eating of acorns. It seems funny because a squirrel eating an acorn is a pretty harmless act in the grand scheme of the struggle for life that exists within nature, but even this act of destroying a single acorn is tantamount to destroying the entire lineage of trees that would have otherwise been offspring of that one seed.

Furthermore, a quick look at the fossil record of the flora and fauna during the time of the dinosaurs clearly illustrates that the bioenergetic hierarchy encapsulated by the designations of producer and consumer, herbivore and carnivore, or predator and prey have all been active elements in nature for millions of years. Death has been both a

⁵ For instance, these characterizations do not account for the broader community or environmental variables vital to an organism's survival.

characteristic and necessity of the economy of life long before humanity became a part of the equation.

Apoptosis: Biologically programmed cellular death

Shifting scale again, this time to the microscopic, we find a form of death that life is not simply subject to, but that living organisms actively use to promote life. Cells are the most basic unit of life. Some organisms, like bacteria, are single-celled entities where each cell represents its own distinct organism. In contrast, multi-cellular organisms like you or me are made up of trillions of cells contributing in a variety of different ways to the survival of the whole organism. It seems strange or perhaps even contradictory, but there are times when organisms need to initiate the death of certain cells to promote the wellbeing of all the remaining cells of a tissue.

The two primary forms of cellular death are necrosis and apoptosis. Necrosis is well characterized in the instance where a cell undergoes some form of trauma, say a cut on your hand, and is ruptured resulting in the death of the cell. When the blade cut the tissue of your hand it directly ruptured the membrane of those cells allowing all of the internal contents of those cells to be released into the surrounding space. The uncontrolled lysing of cells releases numerous cellular components that then trigger an extensive inflammatory response to try and clean up the mess left behind. Depending on the extensiveness of this initial injury, or the number of cells forced into this necrotic form of death, the inflammatory response itself can have negative rather than positive consequences for the damaged tissue. Ultimately, necrosis is a trauma where the body simply tries to minimize the unavoidable consequences.

On the other hand, apoptosis is a programmed form of cellular death that can be initiated intracellularly by the cell that will die or extracellularly by immune cells looking to initiate the destruction of abnormal cells.⁶ If we look at necrosis more as an uncontrolled explosion of the cell, then apoptosis would be a highly intentional deconstruction of the cell. Cells induced to undergo apoptosis devote both time and energy to deconstructing the cellular structure into digestible packets for the immune response to handle without inducing extensive localized inflammation. So, in contrast to necrosis, apoptosis provides a mechanism for cellular death to occur with minimal impact on the surrounding tissue. But what benefit would come from cells inducing this apoptotic death mechanism in the first place?

One vital application of cellular death by apoptosis is initiated by our immune system. The primary task of your immune system is to differentiate things that are you, *self*, from things that are not you, *non-self*, and respond accordingly. For example, when immune cells called cytotoxic T-cells encounter one of your cells that has been infected by a virus, these T-cells can initiate the apoptotic death of the virally infected cell in an attempt to prevent the tissue damage that would result from a viral rupture of the cell, a form of necrotic cell death, and to control further viral transmission within the tissue. Interestingly, there are also instances where the infected cell itself recognizes that it has been infected with a virus and initiates apoptosis independent of T-cell involvement. The

⁶ For a more technical evaluation of apoptosis see, S. Elmore, "Apoptosis: A Review of Programmed Cell Death," *Toxicologic Pathology* 35, no. 4 (2007).

virally infected cell effectively becomes a martyr by preventing further damage and death within the adjacent cells.⁷

Apoptosis also plays a vital role in the developmental process of complex organisms. Over the course of organismal development there are often tissues that undergo extensive cellular proliferation to meet the needs of specific developmental phases, only to find the increase in cell number excessive in a later phase. In these instances, apoptosis is used to allow for an ebb and flow of cellular expansion and atrophy as the developmental needs of the organism change. One particularly extensive example of this sort of change can be found in the development of the nervous system. The primary cells of the nervous system are referred to as neurons, and in the course of neurological development our body generates an extraordinary number of these neurons to facilitate the vast number of connections that will ultimately be found throughout our central and peripheral nervous systems. However, the final phases of the neurogenic process conclude by undergoing a phase neuronal loss where as many as half of those neurons induce apoptosis and die, leaving behind those that have formed the necessary neurological network.⁸ The process is not unlike a sculptor adding and removing clay as needed to arrive at the desired final shape of her work.

When teaching courses in cellular or molecular biology, I frequently point out to students that if you want to understand the importance of a structure or process to a cell, a common method of scientific experimentation is to remove the product or interfere with

⁷ Conversely, viruses capable of evading this sort of recognition by cells are deemed more infectious.

⁸ S. Cavallaro, "Cracking the Code of Neuronal Apoptosis and Survival," *Cell Death and Disease* 6 (2015): p. 1.

the process and see what happens. Preliminarily one might think that the inactivation of apoptosis might be the proverbial fountain of youth capable of prolonging cellular life and subsequently the life of the larger organism. In reality however, we find the inactivation of apoptosis to be a hallmark of cancer formation. Cells incapable of inducing their own death through apoptosis continue to accumulate abnormalities and pass those abnormalities on to all of their offspring. Before long, you have a mass of abnormal cells that are infringing upon the space and function of surrounding cells, impeding their proper function and generating the symptoms associated with cancers from that particular bodily location. Without apoptosis, an intentional programmed form of cellular death built into the very nature of our cells, cancer and a variety of other diseases become inevitable.

If we were to ask the question of when these apoptotic forms of death became an interwoven part of the biological nature of certain organisms, the answer stems from our understanding of evolutionary development as a whole. In evolutionary biology, scientists examine the molecular homology, or similarity, that exists between organisms as a potential measure of their relatedness. It is possible that organisms arrived at similar molecular structures and mechanisms completely independently of one another, and in some cases this does happen, but much more often the similarity reveals a degree of relatedness.⁹ If we apply this rationale to the question of identifying the origins of

⁹ When this unrelated structural or molecular similarity does occur, scientists refer to the structures as being analogous rather than homologous. In fact, the degree to which these organisms are homologous to one another is used as a relative measure of how recently their two family trees diverged in the larger tree of life. For instance, this is how scientists would conclude that two mammals, say a cat and a dog, are more closely related to each other than either one of them is related to some form of reptile. While all three organisms would share homologies with one another, the degree of similarity would be highest between the cat and the dog.

programmed cellular death, then we find the origins would easily predate the evolutionary origins of the animal kingdom and is found in various forms throughout the vast majority of multicellular life on earth.¹⁰ To put a point on it, programmed cellular death has been a part of biological nature of organisms for hundreds of millions of years rather than being a more recent addition to the nature of life.

Conclusion

As a result of the brief discussion above regarding the necessity of death in biological systems, two things should be clear. First, death plays a vitally important role in the development and survival of both individual organisms and their broader communities and ecosystems. Second, death has been engrained in the very nature of life as long as life has existed, and is experimentally identifiable as being present for hundreds of millions, if not billions, of years.¹¹ Whether or not these scientific findings create challenges with a biblical or theological understanding of death hinges primarily upon whether one sees death as a recent alteration of the nature of God's created life on earth following the sinful actions of humanity. Scientific evidence would strongly conflict with any view of death as a recent alteration of nature.

It is important for the sake of our larger discussion to note that humans share all of these aspects of mortality with the rest of life on our planet. Humans and their

¹⁰ C. M. Zmasek and A. Godzik, "Evolution of the Animal Apoptosis Network," *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Biology* 5, no. 3 (2013): p. 1.

¹¹ One study identified the fossil remnants of microbial life dating back 3.5 million years. See J. W. Schopf et al., "Sims Analyses of the Oldest Known Assemblage of Microfossils Document Their Taxon-Related Carbon Isotope Compositions," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115, no. 1 (2018).

evolutionary ancestors have all been faced with the same environmental threats and resource restrictions as all other life. From a biological perspective, there is no difference between the mortality to which humans and other animals are subject. One could argue that the personal experience of death is different between humans and other organisms on the basis of our heightened awareness of reality, but they are both subject to death nonetheless.¹² Ultimately, what differentiates death in humans from the death of other advanced organisms is more likely the result of metaphysical rather than biological distinctives.

¹² The perspective that death is somehow worse for us because of our advanced level of sentience is not particularly convincing. This perspective, more often than not, reflects a feeling of human exceptionalism more than meaningful differences between humans and other complex forms of life. Fear, pain, and suffering are all just as real for many other animals as it is for humans. Personal experience with family pets is often enough for many to appreciate the similarity.

Chapter 2

Traditional Theological Perspectives on Death

The next step in our exploration of death focuses on listening to a few select voices that represent a broad timespan of Christian theological reflection.¹ A *traditional* perspective on a given topic can be as slippery to grasp as an *orthodox* perspective amidst the diversity of Christian thought, but the stream of thought to be traced below has its roots in the early centuries following Jesus's death, continues through key formative figures for Christian theology, and finishes with the perspective of a contemporary Roman Catholic scholar. While to some degree my work represents a progression of Roman Catholic scholarship on a theology of death, there are many notable similarities throughout Protestantism, especially in modern conservative evangelical circles.²

Ambrose (c.340-397 CE)

All of the theological perspectives to be explored either reflect or are a response to the philosophical perspectives of their time. In the case of Ambrose this can be seen as Christian theology interacting with Platonic thought, especially as it relates to a dualistic human nature and, more importantly, a dualism where the soul is viewed in a positive

¹ I am deeply indebted to the work of David Albert Jones for an initial glimpse into the historical theology behind a contemporary perspective on death. See David Albert Jones, *Approaching the End : A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

² See for example, Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife : Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

light while the body is viewed more negatively.³ Ambrose makes regular reference to the body as a prison and a detriment for the soul reaching its full potential. With the body viewed as a prison, death is the means of the soul gaining its freedom from the shackles of our earthly existence. “And at last, in its departure, we see how the soul of the dying man gradually frees itself from the bonds of the flesh and, passing out from the mouth, flies away as if freed from the prison, the poor abode that is the body.”⁴ Connecting this Platonic philosophical perspective with a heavy theological emphasis of Phil. 1:21-24 leads to a position where Ambrose can reasonably propose that death should be seen as *good*, since our soul would be free from the wretched ills of our physical body to enjoy eternity with God.

In two of his works, *Death as Good* and *On the Belief in the Resurrection*, Ambrose provides more nuance to his perspective on death by identifying three different types of death.

There are three kinds of death. One is the *death due to sin*, concerning which it was written: “The soul which sins shall itself die.” Another *death is the mystical*, when someone dies to sin and lives to God; concerning this the Apostle likewise says: “For we were buried with him by means of Baptism into death.” The third is the *death by which we complete our life-span* with its functions – I mean the separation of soul and body. Thus we perceive that the one death is an evil, if we die on account of sins, but the other, in which the deceased has been justified of sin, is a good, while the third stands midway, for it seems good to the just and fearful to most men; although it gives release to all, it gives pleasure to few.⁵

³ For example, Plato refers to the idea that “humans are in a kind of prison,” and that the soul is bound by “the chains of the body.” See Plato, “Phaedo,” in *Euthyphro ; Apology ; Crito ; Phaedo*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 62b. and 67d. respectively.

⁴ Ambrose, “Death as Good,” in *Seven Exegetical Works*, ed. Bernard M. Peebles, The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 2.5.

⁵ Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, 2.3.

Physical death, the separation of body and soul, is understood in a more neutral sense as being good for those who are faithful believers and bad for everyone else. As to whether our physical death is natural, he argues that death is not an original aspect of human nature, but that it became part of our nature following the events in Eden. However, this change in human nature was not part of the punishment administered to Adam and Eve, rather death was given to them as gift to temper the punishment of an arduous and painful existence removed from the presence of God.⁶ Ambrose then makes a notable distinction between our physical death and death that is due to sin. “Spiritual death, then, is one thing, natural death another, a third the death of punishment. But that which is natural is not also penal, for the Lord did not inflict death as a penalty, but as a remedy.”⁷ Spiritual death, or mystical death as it was referred to above, which for Ambrose refers to a choice to “die to sin, and live to God,”⁸ is seen as *good* and a key aspect of the Christian life.⁹

Ambrose begins our discussion with a somewhat unorthodox position since he has a unique perspective on physical death being a gift from God. Death is only seen as a punishment when it results in the death of both the body and the soul. Nevertheless, his perspective emphasizes the need to evaluate death as more than simply a loss of physical life. A person’s perspective on human nature also has a substantial impact on how these

⁶ “Indeed, death was no part of man’s nature, but became natural; for God did not institute death at first, but gave it as a remedy.” Ambrose, “On the Belief in the Resurrection,” in *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1955), 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36. See also, “Death as Good,” 2.3.

⁹ Reflecting the ideas of Rom. 6:1-14. Great care must be taken here in understanding what is meant by the term *spiritual death*, since that same term is often used in our contemporary context for referring to the death of the human spirit or soul, which most people, including Ambrose, would consider a negative form of death.

various forms of death are then understood. For Ambrose's Platonic dualism, it meant first that death could be either physical or spiritual, and second that one could be viewed as good while the other as bad. Augustine's perspective challenges the Platonic aspects of Ambrose's position while emphasizing what would become a more traditional Christian form of anthropological dualism.

Augustine (354-430 CE)

In *The City of God* XIII Augustine identifies three types of death; death of the body, death of the soul, and the death of both in hell, which he refers to as the "second death."¹⁰ "Thus it can be said of the first death, the death of the body, that it is a good for those who are good and an evil for those who are evil. But the second death, since it happens to no one who is good, is obviously not a good for anyone at all."¹¹ This is about as positive a stance as Augustine takes toward physical death as he goes on later to denounce any form of physical death as being good since it is the separation of the God created union of body and soul.¹² Contrary to Ambrose, Augustine argues that there is a deep longing in the soul for embodiment, and that following our physical death we are

¹⁰ *The City of God : Books 11-22*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. William Babcock, Pocket edition. ed., vol. 7, *The Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990), XIII.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, XIII.2.

¹² "Thus, so far as the death of the body is concerned—that is, the separation of the soul from the body—it is not a good for anyone when it is suffered by those who we say are dying." *Ibid.*, XIII.6. He attributes part of this change in perspective to the anguish that one faces while dying. "For the very force that tears apart the two that were conjoined and intertwined in the living person produces an anguished feeling that is contrary to nature and that lasts until all feeling is gone, which was present precisely due to the joining of soul and flesh." *Ibid.*

incomplete in such a way that it is necessary for us to undergo a resurrection, at which point the soul will be integrated and completed with its new eternal spiritual body.¹³

Two major developments for Augustine, in contrast to Ambrose, are a more positive view of the integration of body and soul, and a clear vision of physical death as being a punishment from God for the transgressions of Adam and Eve.

Thus Christians who truly hold the catholic faith are agreed that even the death of the body was not inflicted on us by any law of nature, for God did not create any death for man in this sense, but rather was justly inflicted on us for sin. For it was in punishing sin that God said to the first man, in whom we were all then present, You are earth, and to earth you shall go.¹⁴

Augustine and Ambrose both insist on humankind being created by God without physical death being a part of their original nature and that death is subsequently added to their nature, but they arrive at this point in two very different ways.¹⁵ Their large divergence in positions exemplifies the diversity of thought throughout history on the physical nature of death.

¹³ “If the soul is made to be sent into a body, we may ask whether it is compelled to go though unwilling. But it is more reasonable to suppose that it has such a will by nature, that is, the nature with which it is created is such that it wishes a body, just as it is natural for us to wish to live” Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols., vol. 2, Ancient Christian Writers (New York, N.Y.: Newman Press, 1982), VII.27. Additionally, “[the soul] possesses a kind of natural appetite for managing the body. By reason of this appetite it is somehow hindered from going on with all its force to the highest heaven, so long as it is not joined with the body, for it is in managing the body that this appetite is satisfied.” Ibid., XII.35.

¹⁴ Augustine, *The City of God : Books 11-22*, 7, XIII.15.

¹⁵ “But here a question arises that we must not gloss over—whether it is really true that the death by which soul and body are separated is a good for those who are good. If this is true, how can we maintain that this death is also the punishment for sin? If the first human beings had not sinned, they most certainly would not have suffered this death . . . For why should there be any punishment for those in whom there is nothing that deserves to be punished? Consequently we must acknowledge that the first human beings were, in fact, so created that, if they had not sinned, they would not have experienced any kind of death.” Ibid., XIII.3. Also, “For first there is the animal body. It is the kind of body that the first Adam had, although it would not have died if he had not sinned. It is also the kind of body that we ourselves have now, although with its nature changed and vitiated, just as it was in Adam after he sinned, so that it is now characterized by the necessity of dying.” Ibid., XIII.23.

Augustine deeply integrates sin and death in his theology. One particular section from *The City of God* XIII illustrates the connection and his position well.

But we must also acknowledge that, as the first sinners, these same human beings were punished with death in such a way that whatever sprang from their stock would also be held liable to the same penalty. For what was born from them was no different than what they themselves were. In keeping with the sheer magnitude of their offense, their condemnation changed their nature for the worse, and, as a consequence, what first came about as punishment for the first human beings who sinned now occurs naturally in all people who are born. For man does not come from man in the same way that man came from the dust. Dust was the material for the making of man, but man is the parent for the begetting of man. Flesh is not the same as earth, even though flesh was made from earth, but the human offspring is the same as the human parent. Thus the entire human race, which was going to pass through the woman and become its progeny, was present in the first man when that couple received the divine sentence of condemnation; and what man became—not when he was created but when he sinned and was punished—is what man begot, so far as the origin of sin and death is concerned.¹⁶

As a result, part of what it means to be human is to be biological progeny of these first sinners so that we share both their sinfulness and their mortality.¹⁷ He continues in *The City of God* XIV to emphasize that human nature at its core has been altered.

God chose to give human beings their start from a single person. He did this, as we said, so that the human race would not only be joined in a society formed by likeness of nature but would also be bound together in unity and concord by the tie of kinship, mutually linked by the bond of peace. And the individual members of this race would not have been subject to death if the first two—one of whom was created from nothing, and the other from him had not merited death by their disobedience. So terrible was the sin of these two that, due to their sin, human nature was changed for the worse and was also transmitted to their posterity under the bondage of sin and the necessity of death.¹⁸

These two passages set the stage for an extraordinary amount of difficulty in integrating Augustine's theological anthropology with modern scientific findings.

¹⁶ Ibid., XIII.3.

¹⁷ A point further emphasized later, "For death is undoubtedly the punishment of all who are born in unbroken succession from the first man." Ibid., XIII.6.

¹⁸ Ibid., XIV.1.

Ironically, Augustine is regularly noted for his comments in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, wherein he warns Christians against speaking foolishly on matters such as science when attempting to expound on biblical matters.¹⁹ However, with an issue such as original sin, which is so deeply core to his theological anthropology, we are left to wonder whether any level of scientific findings would sufficiently meet his criteria for rejection of his most basic premises regarding human origins and human nature.²⁰

Ultimately, Augustine proposed a theological explanation for death, sin, and human nature that still resonates throughout Christian theology today. Death in every sense is bad and a punishment for the transgressions of Adam and Eve. Human nature was forever altered and all the subsequent generations of humanity suffer as a result. Future voices would lessen the emphasis on a distorted human nature, while emphasizing even further that death is a punishment for the transgressions of humanity.

¹⁹ “Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, . . . and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. . . . If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven,” *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols., vol. 1, Ancient Christian Writers (New York, N.Y.: Newman Press, 1982), I.19.

²⁰ One example would be his premise that we are all direct descendants of Adam and Eve, and that at one point in time humanity had a nature that is inconceivable based upon the current scientific understanding of the origins of humanity. A number of subsequent theologians have utilized an insistence on monogenism for the sake of promoting human equality and avoiding racial divisions, but realistically such an insistence has done very little to avoid division. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 149-50; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2016), 77-96; Benjamin B. Warfield, "On the Antiquity and the Unity of the Human Race," *Princeton Theological Review* 9, no. 1 (1911).

Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274 CE)

About mid-way between the time of Augustine and our current context, Thomas Aquinas made numerous contributions to contemporary theological perspectives on sin and death.²¹ First, Thomas echoes the importance of seeing humankind as having an embodied existence. Despite the soul being something completely other than our physical bodies, it is both good and natural for the soul to be in an embodied state.²² Death as a separation of body and soul is subsequently understood negatively, similar to Augustine, as the created union is violated. Where Thomas begins to deviate from Augustine is in considering whether death in any sense is natural.

A thing is said to be natural if it proceeds from the principles of nature. Now the essential principles of nature are form and matter. The form of man is his rational soul, which is, of itself, immortal: wherefore death is not natural to man on the part of his form. The matter of man is a body such as is composed of contraries, of which corruptibility is a necessary consequence, and in this respect death is natural to man. . . In the same way a saw needs to be of iron, this being suitable to its form and action, so that its hardness may make it fit for cutting. But that it be liable to rust is a necessary result of such a matter and is not according to the agent's choice; for, if the craftsman were able, of the iron he would make a saw that would not rust. Now God Who is the author of man is all-powerful, wherefore when He first made man, He conferred on him the favor of being exempt from the necessity resulting from such a matter: which favor, however, was withdrawn through the sin of our first parents. Accordingly death is both

²¹ For a thorough review of Thomas's views on original sin and death, see Rudi A. Te Velde, "Evil, Sin, and Death: Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuvenhove and Joseph P Wawrykow (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

²² "We must conclude, therefore, that the human soul, which is called the intellect or the mind, is something incorporeal and subsistent." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Kindle ed. (Coyote Canyon Press), I 75.2. "Now the soul has one mode of being when in the body, and another when apart from it, its nature remaining always the same; but this does not mean that its union with the body is an accidental thing, for, on the contrary, such union belongs to its very nature. . . to be separated from the body is not in accordance with its nature. . . hence it is united to the body in order that it may have an existence and an operation suitable to its nature." Ibid., I 89.1.

natural on account of a condition attaching to matter, and penal on account of the loss of the Divine favor preserving man from death.²³

In one sense Thomas sees mortality as a natural, original aspect of human nature that, prior to the sinful act of Adam and Eve, was overcome through God's grace and original justice. However, death is foreign in relation to the created nature of the soul, making the death of the soul evidence of God's punishment.²⁴

For Thomas, human nature is a dualism consisting of a body and a soul, or reason as he often refers to it, similar to what was proposed by Augustine. Originally God created human nature such that, "as a result of original justice, the reason had perfect hold over the lower parts of the soul, while reason itself was perfected by God, and was subject to Him."²⁵ The condition under which humankind was blessed with God's original justice, was not a result of any natural aspect of its existence, but rather it was a supernatural blessing from God.²⁶ Building upon Augustine's concept of divine grace, Thomas's proposal of original justice is a key element to understanding his view of death as punishment for sin, because for Thomas, "original sin denotes the privation of original justice."²⁷ At multiple points, Thomas laments the fact that it was Adam and Eve's

²³ Ibid., II-II 164.1 ad 1. See also, Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Richard J. Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.5.

²⁴ *On Evil*, 5.5. Rosenberg draws a similar conclusion in his analysis. See, Randall S. Rosenberg, "Being-toward-a-Death-Transformed: Aquinas on the Naturalness and Unnaturalness of Human Death," *Angelicum* 83 (2006).

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II 85.3; *On Evil*, 5.1.

²⁶ *Summa Theologica*, I 100.1; *On Evil*, 5.1.

²⁷ *Summa Theologica*, I-II 82.1; *On Evil*, 5.2. See also, Augustine, *The City of God : Books 11-22*, 7, XIII.13.

transgression that led to humanity's loss of God's gracious gift.²⁸ Death is then seen as a privation of the gift of life, because without the soul being perfected by God through original justice it can no longer maintain order in the body.²⁹ As a result, the body becomes subject to both illness and mortality.³⁰

Rather than human nature being dramatically altered, specifically as it relates to mortality, humanity has always been constrained by the limitations of the matter with which it is constructed.³¹ For Adam and Eve, it was only through their intimate relationship with God and God's gracious gift of original justice that they were able to overcome the natural decay of their physical bodies.³² Contrary to both Ambrose and Augustine the physical decay of our bodies can be seen as natural, while also epitomizing God's judgment of Adam and Eve. Such a distinction makes a dramatic shift towards being able to accommodate modern scientific findings.

²⁸ "Original justice, . . . was a gift of grace, conferred by God on all human nature in our first parent. This gift the first man lost by his first sin." (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II 81.2.) Then later, "original justice was forfeited through the sin of our first parent. . . so that all the powers of the soul are left, as it were, destitute of their proper order, whereby they are naturally directed to virtue; which destitution is called a wounding of nature." (Ibid., I-II 85.3.)

²⁹ Ibid., I-II 73.2; 74.4.

³⁰ Aquinas, *On Evil*, 5.4.

³¹ Thomas's argument here is somewhat strained. The analogy seems to imply that it was not possible for God to originally create mankind, or all life for that matter, out of a substance that was not constrained by the necessity of death. That if life could have been created immortal, then God would have done so. We will come back to this question later in the context of God's original creation being created mortal, a point to which Thomas would agree, but still being given the appraisal of being *good*. See Gen. 1:4-31.

³² Thomas also ascribed to the idea that the soul was a vital life force that maintained the life of the physical body, and that it was only through a corruption of the spirit that the body succumbed to death or disease. "For man's body was indissoluble not by reason of any intrinsic vigor of immortality, but by reason of a supernatural force given by God to the soul, whereby it was enabled to preserve the body from all corruption so long as it remained itself subject to God." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I 97.1. "It is therefore evident that as the rebellion of the carnal appetite against the spirit is a punishment of our first parents' sin, so also are death and all defects of the body." Ibid., II-II 164.1.

Karl Rahner (1904-1984 CE)

With Karl Rahner we encounter a more modern theologian who begins to respond to the findings of contemporary science, and like many of the theologians of his day, personally dealt with the gruesome reality of death in the midst of WWII in Europe.³³ In his most comprehensive work on death, *On the Theology of Death* written in 1961, he still struggles to believe that science might be able to provide a reasonable explanation for why things must die. As a result, he argues that the theological etiology for death is our best hope at understanding such a mystery.³⁴

Human nature is understood by Rahner as “a union of nature and person,”³⁵ where the body exists within the framework of the natural laws that govern it, but the soul or person still retains the free will to exert his or her will on the body. Death is seen as having both a natural and a personal aspect. “In the doctrine of the Church, the natural aspect of death for man is expressed [by saying that death is the separation of body and soul; its personal aspect] in the proposition that death means the definitive end of our

³³ E.g. Karl Rahner, "Theological Reflexions on Monogenism," in *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961); *Hominisation; the Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem*, Quaestiones Disputatae, 13 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965). See also, Helmut Thielicke, *Death and Life* (Philadelphia, : Fortress Press, 1970); *Living with Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001).

³⁴ “From a biological point of view, death might be looked at as meaningless or as a necessary part of the life process. The discussion whether, or to what degree, a necessary ending constitutes an element intrinsic to any biological process and what may be the biological cause of death (physiological senility, for example), has as yet reached no definitive conclusions. Until we can know adequately why all living things, composed of many cells, and man in particular, must die, the reason offered by faith (that is, the moral tragedy of mankind through its first parents) remains the only available explanation for the uncontested universality of death. Only in the meaning of the statement of faith and in the theological foundations from which its certitude derives can we understand that death will rule all future centuries and that its dominion will never be abolished.” Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, Quaestiones Disputatae (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 22-23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

state of pilgrimage.”³⁶ The view that death is the end of our pilgrimage takes Rahner down a path similar to Ambrose and Augustine, in that death can seemingly be viewed as good for those prepared to face judgment and bad for those that are not.

Death brings man, as a moral-spiritual person, a kind of finality and consummation which renders his decision for or against God, reached during the time of his bodily life, final and unalterable. . . . This doctrine of faith [that of death as the end of our pilgrimage] imposes upon us an attitude of radical seriousness toward this life. It is truly historical, that is, unique, irrepeatable, of irrevocable significance. Life is suspended between a genuine beginning and a genuine end.³⁷

Life is significant because it is our only opportunity to prepare for the judgment that will immediately follow our death.³⁸ Our goal should then be to die “the death of Christ,” rather than “the death of Adam.”³⁹ What is meant by dying the death of Christ, is that we should ultimately offer ourselves “fully and with unconditional openness to the disposal of the incomprehensible decision of God, because, in the darkness of death, man cannot dispose of himself freely and knowingly.”⁴⁰ Similar to previous expressions of dying to sin and living for God, he argues that we should freely give of ourselves not only in life, but also in death.

³⁶ Ibid. (It should be noted that the English translation of *On the Theology of Death* that I am using mistakenly omitted the portion of text shown in brackets. For the quoted section I utilized the translation provided by Jones, 150.)

³⁷ Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 35.

³⁸ This idea is of great pastoral significance and will be discussed further in chapter 4.

³⁹ Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 44.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 52. He goes on to say that “mortal sin consists in the will to die autonomously,” as might be the case when a person commits suicide.

To some degree it is the anxiety and uncertainty regarding our ultimate fate beyond death that makes death a punishment. Death is understood as a punishment by Rahner in a very similar way to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.⁴¹

Death, as it is in fact suffered universally by men, in the present economy of salvation, is in causal relation to sin, above all to the sin committed by the head and progenitor of the whole human race in his role as head. Man, according to the testimony of the Bible, was created with a possibility of immunity from death. Man, in the concrete, actual order, dies, because he has lost original justice in and through the first man, the sole head and progenitor, and lost it, to speak more precisely, in the first man's free rejection of God. . . . Man's death is the demonstration of the fact that he has fallen away from God.⁴²

However, he also clearly indicates that “not every aspect of death can be considered a consequence of sin that ought not to have been.”⁴³ Going back to his previous idea of death as the end of a pilgrimage, he sees the transition that is made at the time of death from this life to our new life with God as being a positive outcome of death. He even goes so far as to say that Adam too would have had “a death without dying.”⁴⁴

In some way, Adam would have died even in Paradise, in the sense that his earthly existence would have entered upon some final stage Adam's death would not have been hidden in darkness. His end would have been the perfection

⁴¹ e.g. Augustine, *The City of God : Books 11-22*, 7, XIII.13; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II 81 a2.

⁴² Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 41-42. Also, “We perceive death and its necessity only as an obscure, unsolved biological problem. The universality of death as accepted through divine revelation, however, is not based on any biological necessity, but on something proper to man as spiritual being and proper to his relationship to God. All men are sinners, therefore, all men must die; and, vice versa, precisely because all men must and do die, there is manifested in the most direct fashion for human experience the fact that we have all sinned. The statement of faith concerning the unavoidable universality of death and the reasons for it, is not at all affected by any possible outcome of the biological discussion (which still remains inconclusive) about the cause of death.” Ibid., 22. Based upon the scientific evidence presented in chapter two, it should be clear that Rahner too creates a difficult scenario for those hoping to engage both scientific understandings of death and his proposed theological approach.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

and preservation of the personal reality effected in life, an end undisguisedly and tangibly experienced.⁴⁵

God never intended humankind to exist in this world forever. The path that humans have taken in route to an eternal existence with God has certainly not been a direct one, but our journey here has always been transitory. What humankind has done through our sinfulness is make that transition an experience filled with anxiety, pain, and suffering. In the work of Matthew Levering below, it will be of utmost importance that we understand that humankind is responsible for the initiation of this pain and suffering rather than the good creator God. God's goodness must be protected from the seemingly senseless nature of death we see in the world.

Matthew Levering (1971-)

Matthew Levering, builds upon many of the historical positions discussed above to construct a distinctly traditional theological perspective on death.⁴⁶ Levering's view of death is deeply connected with his perspective on Adam and Eve's original rebellion, which is in keeping with the Roman Catholic centrality of the doctrine of original sin.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁶ Levering is an exceptionally prolific author who has written and edited numerous works in recent years, trying to understand death theologically. See, Matthew Levering, *On Christian Dying : Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004); "Original Sin and the Anthropological Principles of Humanae Vitae," *Nova et Vetera* 6, no. 4 (2008); *Jesus and the Demise of Death : Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012); *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017); *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018).

⁴⁷ While quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Levering argues that the doctrine of original sin is "an essential truth of the faith," and states plainly that "the Church, which has the mind of Christ, knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ." As quoted in *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 233n21.

He is clear to state that Adam and Eve's "first sin has a corruptive impact on all humans and brings about human death as we now experience it."⁴⁸ The phrasing here of "death as we now experience it," or later expressed "death as we now know it,"⁴⁹ reflects Levering's belief that humankind was originally created free from this new, foreign form of death. This is not to say that he is oblivious to the scientific data showing that organisms have been dying for billions of years leading up the presence of humans within life's history, but to the contrary, he argues that human death following Adam and Eve's transgression is distinct from the death of all other life.⁵⁰ To clarify he writes, "I distinguish human death, which involves an experience of alienation or of the cutting off of communion, from the death per se, which was already present three billion years prior to the emergence of rational hominids."⁵¹ Levering also hints at another important aspect of his position, that at some point in history there would have been a moment where pre-human ancestors became human, and thus set the stage for subsequent inheritance of an altered, sinful human nature.⁵² At the core of his argument is an insistence that human

⁴⁸ Ibid., 250.

⁴⁹ Levering, *Dying and the Virtues*, 187n14.

⁵⁰ While reflecting on Jonathan Edwards thoughts on death, Levering writes, "the death that humans experience is hardly coterminous with animal death." (*Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 252.)

⁵¹ Ibid., 234n22.

⁵² This is similar to the argument made by Rahner in *Theological Reflexions on Monogenism*, and appears to be an argument necessitated by his theological position on the transmission of original sin, but it conflicts with modern scientific understandings of speciation events. Evolutionary biology paints a picture of slow, almost imperceptible change over long periods of time that would produce a substantial gray area between the monochromatic extremes of pre-human and human. Furthermore, Levering, like many theologians, makes an excessively strong case for human exceptionalism relative to the rest of creation. While there are some important differences between animals and humans in relation to God, biologically animals and humans are more similar to each other than we are dissimilar. For contrast see, Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals : Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, The Paul Carus Lecture Series (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1999); Jeffrey Schloss and Michael J. Murray, *The Believing Primate :*

death is a punishment from God for the sin of Adam and Eve.⁵³ To explain how death is a punishment for human sinfulness, Levering draws upon Thomas's idea of original justice.

It is quite reasonable to suppose the existence of some first humans who commit a first sin and who thereby, by depriving human nature of the grace of original justice, shape the unfolding of human history. On theological grounds, we should embrace Genesis 2-3's teaching that the creator God is not responsible for sinfulness of humans, which can only be the case if humans brought their condition upon themselves by turning away from the grace God had given them in creating them good. Created in a graced state of justice, Adam and Eve committed the first human sin by freely rebelling against God's order, and the gift of original justice was lost both in them and in the whole of human nature, to which Adam and Eve, as befits their unique status in the human family, are related as "first mover." Disorder, alienation, and death as we now experience it are the punishment for this turning away from the Source of Life—not an extrinsic punishment by a harsh God, but a punishment rooted in the nature of the sin.⁵⁴

Levering, like Thomas before him, attempts to soften the perceived harshness of God in the punishment of humanity by arguing that the tragic elements we associate with death are all a result of our sin and not directly issued from God. Prior to humanity's rebellion, God had given us a gift, original justice, to overcome the physical, naturally

Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Reflections on the Origin of Religion, Pbk. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵³ See Levering, "Original Sin and the Anthropological Principles of *Humanae Vitae*," 791-95; *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 250-56.

⁵⁴ *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 271. Earlier he wrote, "I think that we can and, indeed, should read Genesis 2-3 as an account of a historical fall, since the stories of Adam and Eve make clear that the creator God was not the cause of human sin and death. What Genesis 2-3 shows is that God ensured that his rational creatures possessed full freedom, a freedom which the first humans the subsequently used to rebel against God, with consequences (disharmony, exile, alienation, death) for the entire human race that extend right down into the present. Thus, even though Genesis 2-3 does not offer a historical or scientific account of human origins, Genesis 2-3 does reveal something about these origins, namely, that God did not create humans in a corrupt and sinful predicament." (Ibid., 268.)

deteriorating, aspect of our nature. After our rebellion, God's favor was simply removed and humanity fell subject to the limitations of its physical nature.⁵⁵

In such a scenario, death can be seen as both natural and penal, rather than simply a material aspect of God's original creation.⁵⁶ As part of Levering's rebuttal to individuals who make arguments for mortality being a part of God's originally *good* creation, he responds that seeing "human death as we now experience it [as] a creational given rather than a punishment. . . undermines the goodness and justice of the creator, by implicating the creator in our sinfulness and by having no answer (other than our created condition) for why our alienation and death are so terrible."⁵⁷ Both here and earlier, there was a specific interest in defending the goodness of God against claims that either we were created as sinful beings, or that death is completely natural rather than a punishment resulting from humanity's free choice to sin.⁵⁸

"The question then is whether God made us in such a way that to be human is inevitably to fall into sin and death. Did God create the human race in such a way that it

⁵⁵ "It makes sense that the rebellion of the first humans vis-à-vis God's grace would affect the state of human nature in the generations of humans who follow them, not by destroying human nature but by removing grace." (Ibid., 270.)

⁵⁶ Thomas expressed it as, "death is both natural on account of a condition attaching to matter, and penal on account of the loss of the Divine favor preserving man from death." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II 164.1 ad 1.

⁵⁷ Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 234. He goes on to write that "if God built sin and death into the human condition from the beginning, there could not have been a real rebellion, let alone a just punishment by God. In such a world, we could account for the faultiness of human creatures, but there could not have been a truly free rebellion deserving of punishment." (Ibid., 269.)

⁵⁸ He makes a similar argument against Ian McFarland in *ibid.*, 270n142. He also appears to be supportive of Jonathan Edwards position when he argues that "if death is not a punishment for sin, then the horrible deaths of innocent infants that God permits would be indicative of a cruel, unjust God." *Ibid.*, 255.

was already broken?”⁵⁹ Levering’s answer would be no, because it is theologically imperative that humans be “free, rational, and innocent”⁶⁰ to ensure God is not perceived as being responsible for our sinful nature. Nevertheless, Levering and Thomas would agree that it was a supernatural gift from God which rectified the mortal deficiencies of human nature rather than a physical alteration of our nature. Stated a different way, God did not alter the natural tendencies of the matter used to construct our bodies such that the matter was no longer susceptible to decay, rather a means was provided through God’s supernatural gift to compensate for the frailties which continued to be a part of our natural existence. Therefore, even from the perspective that original justice completed or perfected human nature, the biological substrate upon which humans were created, remains *good* but not *perfect*.⁶¹

In Levering’s final analysis of death, it is not so much that he perceives the purely physical aspects of death to be bad, because he speaks more positively than most about the theophanic contribution of innumerable extinct organisms that contributed to the formation of life as we now know it.⁶² Instead, what troubles him about human death in

⁵⁹ Ibid., 248-49.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 234.

⁶¹ What is perhaps problematic here for both Levering and Thomas is the distinction between what is *natural* and what is *original*. It would appear both feel the corporeal part of our existence is bound by death and decay in a very physical sense. They would also claim that this vulnerability to death was not part of human nature as originally created by God, because at creation humanity had been blessed with God’s original justice. (See n55 above.) Therefore, since death and decay were not part of God’s original intention or gift for humanity, then death is perceived to be unnatural. (An idea only further complicated by inclusion of the idea that the soul is immortal compared to the mortal nature of our embodiment.) There is potentially hope if we are careful to separate these ideas of natural, as being subject to the limitations of our material nature, and original, as being consistent with God’s original intention. I would argue that conflation of the terms natural and original creates a certain amount of unnecessary conflict.

⁶² Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, 135.

particular, is the relational consequences of Adam and Eve's transgression. "Disorder, alienation, and death as we now experience it,"⁶³ are the punishment and burden placed upon all humanity, not the loss of a miraculous stability in the material universe, which in Levering's view "could characterize only the eschaton."⁶⁴

Summary

Despite the fact that Ambrose provides a theological view of death that is excessively Platonic and looks too negatively upon the good that is God's creation, he provides an important reminder that we should not hold too tightly to our current life since as Christians we have the hope of life beyond this existence. Augustine tempered some of the philosophical extremes of Ambrose and set the foundation for the traditional theological perspective on sin and death, but due to anti-Pelagian context of his theology we are left with a view that human nature is completely corrupt. Additionally, Augustine's words resonate through contemporary discussions on the role that Adam and Eve play in ensuring the universality of humanity's plight. Thomas Aquinas then argued it was not God's punishment to corrupt human nature, but rather to remove the grace which had been an impediment to the decay and destruction which humans are naturally subject. Rahner, similar to Ambrose and Augustine, provides a forward-looking approach to death, presenting it as the end of our earthly pilgrimage and the beginning of our new phase of existence. His view not only generates hope for the future but emphasizes an awareness of the importance of our current life.

⁶³ Ibid., 271.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 129n65.

Finally, Matthew Levering affirms many of the key elements included in the traditional perspective of death, while carefully interacting with contemporary scientific claims. He makes substantial progress in merging traditional doctrines of creation with scientific findings, but there is still a tension when it comes to reconciling aspects of theological and biological anthropology. He struggles to fully separate our physical death from the list of consequences for Adam and Eve's transgression, despite his own clear emphasis on the relational implications. There is also such a strong insistence on protecting the goodness of God that some traditional doctrinal formulations are given stronger bias despite contradictory evidence that would be sufficient under less threatening circumstances. Ultimately, I believe that rather than focusing on the purely physical attributes of death, we should lament the loss of a relationship with the creator God who loved humanity in ways that were truly unimaginable until the arrival of Jesus. With the life and sacrifice of Jesus we are given a new hope for order, communion, and life with God. It is from this perspective that the next chapter will consider some of the many ways death is understood theologically and how this understanding is often used metaphorically to describe other theological truths.

Chapter 3

Theological Paths Forward

Throughout the preceding theological review there was a noticeable trend toward a multi-faceted view of death. Our contemporary context in some ways is no different. We are comfortable saying that any number of things *die*, and for a disturbingly large number of people, having a battery die in a personal electronic device is only marginally better than actual physical death. Similarly, any number of things are commonly described as dying; fire, wind, dreams, and light are all said to die because there is a distinct termination of their existence. Within the human mind there is a deep and defining awareness of our ultimate death, and perhaps as a result there are few metaphors more powerful and as well understood as that of death.¹

Within the context of a theological understanding of death, the richness of this death typology is both illuminating and confusing. When we are called to die to sin and live to God, there is a clarity to this language resulting from our hyperawareness of death.² It is understood that we are to terminate our selfish, sinful behavior and act according to the will of God. However, just a few verses later when we are told that the “wages of sin is death,”³ suddenly, because of the great temporal and cultural divide between the original context of the passage and our more modern reading, we are

¹ Humankind’s awareness of our impending death is thought by many to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity compared to the rest of the animal kingdom. Furthermore, what I mean by well understood is in the sense that the metaphorical meaning is clear.

² Rom. 6:1-14

³ Rom. 6:23 [New Revised Standard Version]

tempted to abandon a metaphorical understanding of the passage in favor of a more literal reading.⁴ However, one of the questions we will address below is whether references like the passage in Romans 6:23, are being misunderstood because of the use of metaphor, or perhaps because we are focusing on the wrong point of emphasis within a passage.⁵ A classic example of this mistaken metaphorical understanding occurred in the Johannine telling of the Lazarus story, where Jesus attempted to use sleep as a metaphor for death.⁶ Jesus said to his disciples,

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.”⁷

Jesus’s graceful use of metaphor to illuminate both the death and subsequent resurrection of their friend Lazarus was initially completely lost on his disciples, but as they continued to witness the events leading up to and following Jesus’s death they gradually began to understand what he meant. Ultimately, the fullest understanding of what Jesus, or the rest of the biblical witness, means regarding death is perhaps hidden behind the veil of our own personal experience of death.

In the section that follows, I want to consolidate the historical perspectives we explored in the last chapter and explore several ways in which death is understood

⁴ The tendency towards an overly literal reading is completely understandable given that most of us are personally aware of someone who has physically died as a result of sinful behavior. Drug addiction, violence, and seemingly countless other abominations all have the capacity to result in a person’s death.

⁵ I do not mean to imply that a metaphorical and literal interpretation are mutually exclusive of one another, but rather want to impress an insistence on evaluating both options based on both their theological and epistemological merits.

⁶ Beyond the aforementioned reference, sleep is used as a metaphor for death elsewhere, for example, Ps. 13:3.

⁷ John 11:11-14

literally (or biologically), metaphorically, and even mythologically⁸ in a variety of scriptural contexts. In doing so, we are reenacting the theological practice of countless others across the millennia who have undertaken the task of reading and understanding Scripture through the philosophical lens of their day. In chapter two, the case was made on the basis of scientific findings that death is a deeply ingrained aspect of the natural order and has been a reality of the natural world for as long as there has been life. In chapter three we surveyed some of the major points that define a traditional theological understanding of death and noted some areas of potential discord with the aforementioned scientific data. What follows is a reexamination of a few traditional theological paths that show promise in resolving some of these issues.⁹

Physical death

In the next chapter, we will discuss how our modern culture attempts to distance itself from the realities of our physical death, but ancient cultures faced these realities daily in ways that our modern minds can scarcely imagine. The biblical narrative reflects this awareness most distinctly in reference to the violence of war and oppression. Despite

⁸ The three part classification of biological, metaphorical, and mythological mimics the work of C. Clifton Black, II in "Pauline Perspectives on Death in Romans 5-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 3 (1984). However, it is clear from his assessment of other work that he would find the more specific categorization that follows as anachronistic and inappropriate. (Ibid., 419n15.) Nevertheless, I find these categorizations to be more readily useful in a pastoral context than the terms he finds more appropriate academically. Whether I succeed in the task of making this work pastorally useful will be determined in the next chapter.

⁹ The task of providing a complete survey of theological perspectives on death is well beyond the scope of this work. Additionally, as Ray Anderson writes, "There is no clearly defined theology of death in the Bible. This is surprising to us until we look more closely at the way in which the Bible deals with death. While the Bible takes death seriously, it does not develop a theology of death. The theme of death is expressed descriptively (as history), poetically (as lamentation and complaint), theologically (as the outcome of sin) and eschatologically (as overcome through the resurrection of Jesus Christ). Yet, there is no single 'theology of death' to be found as a thematic development." *Theology, Death, and Dying*, The Ray S. Anderson Collection (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 38.

its centrality to the Christian faith, we fail to appreciate the physical torment that Jesus and countless Christians endured while being executed on the cross. However, it is only through acknowledging and attempting to appreciate this mortal reality that we can begin to appreciate metaphorical uses such as Jesus's call for Christians to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."¹⁰

The use of the term *physical death* is referent to the moment when we cease to exist in our current embodied form but does not necessarily imply that death is a purely physical event, nor does it imply that we cease to exist for all eternity.¹¹ Some biblical references to death are simply referring to the temporal or physical event without attempting to make a deeper theological point, such as the aforementioned statement of Jesus that "Lazarus is dead."¹² Jesus does not appear to be making any theological statement on the status of Lazarus's soul or on the nature of the life he was living, he was simply acknowledging that Lazarus had physically died.

It is an interesting case study to note how Paul speaks of his own impending death. Throughout his life Paul was no stranger to the presence or threat of physical death, both in his early life as a Pharisee where he actively played a role in the persecution of Christians and later in his transformation to Christianity where he faced his own death on a regular basis as a result of those same persecutions.¹³ His letter to the church at Philippi is particularly informative. "For to me, living is Christ and dying is

¹⁰ Mark 8:34. Also, Matt. 16:24 and Luke 9:23

¹¹ The more *spiritual* aspects of death will be addressed in subsequent sections.

¹² John 11:14

¹³ See Phil. 3:6, Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-2, 22:4-5, 26:9-11 and 1 Cor. 4:9-13, 2 Cor. 1:8-10, 6:4-10, 11:23-26 respectively.

gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 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 for you.”¹⁴ While Paul would have been rightfully afraid of the physical act of dying, whether by stoning, crucifixion, beheading, or otherwise, he was no longer fearful of physical death because he saw it as an opportunity to enter into the transformed, resurrected life with Christ to come.

It is this physical form of death that Ambrose, Thomas, and Rahner defined as being a common experience for all humanity and which bore no inherent moral verdict.¹⁵ Physical death can then be viewed as an unavoidable reality of our physical existence, even a necessity, based upon our previous analysis in chapter one, and is the form of death that is shared in common with all other forms of life on Earth.¹⁶ In the prior chapter, we noted Levering’s tendency to include the physical aspects of death into his concept of “death as we now experience it.”¹⁷ However, even in his view, physical mortality preceded human sinfulness. Ray Anderson describes the issue by saying that, “even the attribution of death to the first fatal sin by Adam is no explanation of death. This only states the theological relation between sin and death.”¹⁸ Levering’s attempts to

¹⁴ Phil. 1:21-24

¹⁵ See previous chapter.

¹⁶ Paul even compares our current existence to our future resurrected existence using the analogy of planting a seed to represent committing our earthly bodies to burial following our death. “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.” 1 Cor. 15:42

¹⁷ Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 250.

¹⁸ Anderson, 38-39.

construct a theodicy accounting for the presence of death falls short, because if the physical aspects of human death require moral justification, then the death of all organisms requires a similar defense. Several theologians have taken up this task of theologically exploring death in the non-human realm, especially as it relates to their death not being the result of Adam and Eve's transgression, but there is still much more to be done.¹⁹

Additionally, Augustine's perspective that physical death is inherently evil creates issues with being able to see nature as God's good creation. There are certainly instances where we feel like a person's death is tragic, violent, unjust, or otherwise evil but those adjectives are more in reference to the circumstances surrounding their death rather than death itself. In the same way, we feel justified in referring other deaths as being honorable, noble, or sacrificial to imply that there was something morally virtuous about the circumstances surrounding their death. We must be careful with the insistence that anything short of immortality here and now is somehow less than the goodness of God. Humanity's incessant reaching for the fruit of the tree from which we have been restricted, in an effort to make ourselves more like God than humans is simply the Eden narrative all over again. Why is finitude morally reprehensible? How is our insistence on immortality here and now anything less than the cries of impatient children who cannot

¹⁹ See Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw : Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ronald E. Osborn, *Death before the Fall : Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014); Bethany N. Sollereider, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering : Theodicy without a Fall*, Routledge Science and Religion Series (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019); Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation : God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

bother patiently waiting for the gracious gift that the divine Parent has in store for them?²⁰

Relational Death (A Negative Form of Spiritual Death)

In *The Godfather* series of movies when Michael Corleone finally had enough of his brother Fredo's complete ineptitude, he imposed a penalty that for the Corleone family was worse than death.

Fredo, you're nothing to me now. You're not a brother, you're not a friend. I don't want to know you or what you do. I don't want to see you at the hotels, I don't want you near my house. When you see our mother, I want to know a day in advance, so I won't be there. You understand?²¹

This scene provides a vivid example of relational death in a context where family is everything.²² Fredo's ties to his family are what keeps him alive and provides for his every need. Having benefited for so many years as a member of the Corleone family, this moment of being disowned brought with it the ultimate level of vulnerability, instability, and hopelessness.

I often wonder if our lack of intimacy with God, blinds us from the utterly disparaging position of alienation we find ourselves in as a result of human sinfulness. It seems as though many are quick to dismiss an interpretation of the punishment in the

²⁰ In contrast, Thomas Aquinas would argue that our desire for immortality is the soul yearning for an existence befitting its immortal nature. See for example, Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Richard J. Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.5.

²¹ Francis Ford Coppola and Mario Puzo, "The Godfather Part 2," (United States: Paramount Pictures, 1974).

²² Furthermore, the relationships built between the Corleone family and the community is one of family. In their relationship and service to the Corleone's, the community gains protection and prosperity so long as the relationship remains intact.

Genesis 3 narrative as relational death, in favor of the seemingly more relatable tragedy of physical death. The enormity of relational death is perhaps most recognizable in the sense of sorrow and despair that is felt following the death of a loved one. The loss of someone with whom we have a deep, meaningful, personal relationship, such as a parent, spouse, or child, can leave the survivor deeply distraught. Nevertheless, though it is hard to imagine, even these relationships fall short of describing the relationship that is lost in Genesis 3.

Another helpful example for understanding relational death is found in Jesus's parable of the prodigal son recorded in Luke 15. When the younger of the two brothers demands and receives his future inheritance, he chooses to sever the closest of ties and show the ultimate sign of disrespect for his father. After squandering all of his wealth and becoming destitute, there was a moment when he "came to himself" (Luke 15:17), effectively came to his senses, and realized that he would have a better life as his father's servant than where he had ended up.²³ The son decides in advance how he will approach his father. "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands'" (Luke 15:18-19). Part of the son's coming to his senses is an awareness of his transgression against both God and his father, and that he no longer has any legitimate right to be referred to as his son. In response to this realization the son acts to seek out his father and to effectively plead for mercy.

²³ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, 35b (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 783.

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The son does not have time to plead for mercy before his father rushes to the son to initiate reconciliation of the relationship. Despite the father’s generous welcome, the son still pleads for his father’s forgiveness. In response, the father honors his son with a celebration and a declaration reflective of the magnitude of the event. “The father said to his slaves . . . ‘this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’” (Luke 15:22, 24).²⁴ The relational death that the son had suffered has been overcome; he has been raised from the dead.²⁵ In this parable we see not only the depths of destitution that result from relational death, but also the glory of Jesus’s allusion to a resolution for such a pitiful state.

The context for this parable is situated in a discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees, initiated by their disgust that he would embrace and eat with sinners. Through parables on lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally the lost son, Jesus emphasizes the importance of regaining what was lost and celebrating its return. There is a notable progression in the intensity of these parables, culminating most severely in a loss of kinship that is intended to represent the lost relationship between sinners and God.²⁶ The more acute connection being made between sin and death here is somewhat distinct from the etiologic connection often attributed to the Genesis 3 narrative. In this new sense,

²⁴ The father repeats the declaration again at the end of his dialogue with the older brother. “This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” (Luke 15:32) It is ironic that the son’s early demand for his inheritance equated to a wish that his father was dead, but here the father acknowledges that it was the son who had died and not the father.

²⁵ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 582.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 578-79.

death is seen as the result of individuals choosing a sinful existence rather than living a life for God.

I consider relational death to fall under the broader category of a negative form of spiritual death. There is difficulty in using the term spiritual death, because over the course of time it has been used in contradictory ways.²⁷ Paul speaks to this form of being dead spiritually while still being alive physically in his letter to the Ephesians.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.²⁸

The walking dead that Paul describes are in their position of frustration and futility because of their sinful and selfish behavior. The pivot in Paul's discussion is crucial when he turns from the travesty of the Ephesians past, to illuminate the reconciling work of Christ Jesus to provide them with life once more. Similar to the previous example with the prodigal son, it is the restoration of relationship between God and humanity that offers life. It is also important to note that Paul does not say that God would make them alive at some point in the future as if he were referring to a life beyond their physical existence. Instead, he points to the fact that the work has already been done. God "*made*

²⁷ For instance, in chapter three it was mentioned that Ambrose, for instance, identified the term spiritual death in a positive light as a decision to die to sin and live for Christ, an idea we will return to in the next section.

²⁸ Eph. 2:1-10

us alive together with Christ,”²⁹ and further still, “created [us] in Christ Jesus for good works.”³⁰

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul further mixes his metaphors through the inclusion of spiritual circumcision alongside spiritual death.

In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses.³¹

While Paul reiterates the perspective mentioned above that those who are living according to their own selfish desires find themselves dead and in need of the life that only God can provide, he also adds a new metaphorical use of death. Alongside spiritual circumcision as the rejection of one’s selfish physical desires, baptism is proposed as a new, more positive form of spiritual death. What is presented then is both a positive and negative form of death. The relational spiritual death is meant to be avoided and is perhaps a precursor to the eternal death which will be explored below, and the more positive spiritual death, which I will refer to as a transformative spiritual death, is intended to be a self-initiated martyrdom of sorts to take on a new life as a precursor to

²⁹ Eph. 2:5, emphasis added.

³⁰ Eph. 2:10. The words of Jesus in John 5:24-29 resonate the same immediacy of effect, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life. Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

³¹ Col. 2:11-13

the eternal life that will one day follow. It is to this view of a transformative death that we turn our attention next.

Transformative Death (A Positive Form of Spiritual Death)

Transformative death offers an opportunity for those willing to concede their own selfish desires and offer themselves as a sacrifice to the will of God. I am not explicitly referencing a physical death wherein a person commits to following God despite the consequence it may have for their continued physical existence, though martyrdom in this sense has certainly occurred both in the first century as well as today. Rather, what is intended by the term transformative death is more spiritual in nature, a termination of one form of personal existence in order to commit oneself to another path. Again, the metaphor of death is particularly useful here because it emphasizes the intention for one form of existence, a state of sinful selfishness, to come to a definitive end, making way for a completely new form of existence. Ambrose referred to this form of death as a *mystical* death, that is best embodied through the sacrament of baptism. In baptism, we die to sin only to be raised again into an entirely new life.³²

In Romans 6, Paul rightfully places the emphasis of baptism in our joining in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . . For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from

³² Ambrose, "Death as Good," in *Seven Exegetical Works*, ed. Bernard M. Peebles, The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 2.3.

the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.³³

Remember from the last chapter that Rahner's view correlates strongly with this passage in his call to pursue the "death of Christ," rather than the "death of Adam."³⁴

Transformative death is then a precursor to the event that will take place at the end of our current physical existence. Our willingness to end a selfish pursuit of life and instead embrace a transformative commitment to life focused on the will of God is revealing of our existence to come. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, calls his readers to embrace a new way of life, a countercultural existence focused on God rather than self.

You must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. This is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.³⁵

A willing embrace of transformative death in our current existence also creates in us a state of preparedness for handling our inevitable physical death. The ritualized practice of handing our lives over to God every day prepares us for the day when we must do so with every last ounce of our being.

When we give ourselves to Christ (and to his dying) in baptism, we are saying (to God, to ourselves, and to the world) that we no longer wish to live (or die) under our own direction, but under Christ's. And in particular, we do not wish to take

³³ Rom. 6:3-11

³⁴ Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, Quaestiones Disputatae (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 35.

³⁵ Eph. 4:17-24

the matter of dying into our own hands because we see dying as an opportunity for us to be completely open to whatever God has intended for us.³⁶

Using Rahner's words, and echoing the sentiment of Ambrose and Augustine, only then can we fully embrace the end of our current pilgrimage and the promise that has been given to us that there is more and better yet to come.³⁷

Eternal Death (Death of Body and Soul)

The most dreadful and horrific state of death is understood as a final termination of the existence of our being in the most intimate sense. Quite often this is referred to as the death of the soul following God's final judgment and sentencing to hell or perhaps total annihilation.³⁸ As a final aggregation and culmination of the physical and spiritual forms of death discussed above, eternal death instills a permanence of effect previously absent. Physical death can be overcome through our resurrected life to come, relational death mended through the sacrificial forgiveness of the transgressor by those who have been transgressed, and spiritual death overcome through a transformative death and personal embrace of a life refocused toward God. The irreconcilable nature of eternal death has contributed significantly to our fear of physical death.³⁹

Similar to Karl Rahner's insistence that physical death brings "a kind of finality and consummation which renders his decision for or against God, reached during the time

³⁶ Fred B. Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying : Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 90.

³⁷ See, Rahner, 21 and 35.

³⁸ See Matt. 10:28 and Luke 12:4-5

³⁹ The metaphorical concept of eternal death is often viewed concomitantly with the mythological form of death which will be discussed below.

of his bodily life, final and unalterable,”⁴⁰ eternal death creates a point of finality after which there is no hope of redemption or reconciliation on the part of God. Once the permanence of God’s judgment has been reached, there would be no hope remaining for those who suffer such complete condemnation.⁴¹ If eternal death were the unavoidable result of physical death, then it would be reasonable to fear or dread the thought of our ultimate physical death. I have heard numerous stories of where godly and faithful Christians were trembling in fear on their deathbed unsure of whether their immediately impending physical death would also result in their eternal death as well. These faithful saints have lived a long, devoted Christian life and are facing the end of their current physical existence wondering if they have done enough to earn their redemption from the threat of eternal death. While for some the questioning comes from a deep sense of humility about whether they could ever be worthy of a future existence with God, it also represents an irrational insistence that it might actually be possible to do enough good to earn their salvation.⁴² Such an intense fear or anxiety of death begins to take on a life of its own. The resultant personification of death as an evil or even demonic power is the form of mythological death to which we now turn our attention.

⁴⁰ Rahner, 35. See also, the discussion of Rahner’s perspective in chapter three above.

⁴¹ Or as is written on the gates of hell in Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, “all hope abandon, ye that enter here.” *Inferno*, III.9

⁴² Nevertheless, there is room here for pastoral intercession to calm the fears and concerns of those facing death and some time will be devoted to some of these approaches in the next chapter.

Mythological Death

There are instances in both the Old and New Testaments where death is portrayed in mythological terms as a power or force that is often directly at odds with the will of God.⁴³ While death in this mythological sense is presented as an enemy of God, it is in no way an equally opposing force but rather a foe that will ultimately be overcome by the insurmountable power of God. The mythological form of death represents a deeply negative view of death that is notably influential to contemporary American perspectives of death.⁴⁴ Death in this mythological sense is a force that humanity attempts to oppose throughout the entirety of life and that creates fear, anxiety, and dread as we face the inevitability of our ultimate physical demise.

An important question to ask is where this form of death derives its power? First, we could say death's power stems from the inevitable nature of our physical death, which will one day come regardless of our best efforts. Our inability to ultimately control our mortality creates a sense that someone or something else is in control, hence the tendency to personify death in this way. Add that to our reluctance or complete inability to attribute an event like death to God and it is easy to see how death becomes a force for evil in some sense. Second, the mythological form of death would be empowered by a sense that physical death truly is our end. If the entirety of our existence is confined between the

⁴³ For example, Isa. 25:6-8, Job 18:13, Hab. 2:5, Heb. 2:14-15, 1 Cor. 15:26, Rev. 6:8.

⁴⁴ We will return to the idea more thoroughly in the next chapter but suffice it to say that death in our modern-day American culture is portrayed as an enemy to be fought at all costs. In many ways, the mythologizing of death found in Scripture is analogous to the language we use surrounding an encounter with cancer. Cancer robs us of our dignity, it frequently attacks unexpectedly so we have devised a plethora of routine diagnostic checkups (colonoscopies, mammograms, and the like) to catch the enemy at the gate, and ultimately the struggle with cancer is described as a battle that is won or lost with our life at stake.

points of our conception and our physical death, then we are right to fear the ultimate annihilation that our final moment of death would bring.

However, in contrast to such a deeply depressing thought, it is important to recognize that God has and furthermore will defeat this power of death. God has already done so in the sense that the faithful have been promised the future of a resurrected existence so that the point of our physical death no longer represents termination so much as a transformation in the continuation of our life. We are given the opportunity to live in hopeful anticipation of the life to come rather than living in dread of our coming end. Then, as the hope above expresses, in the eschaton God will raise us to a new life and the “last enemy” of death will finally be destroyed.⁴⁵ In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians he writes,

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.⁴⁶

He ends with the assessment that death will ultimately be destroyed and no longer deprive believers of the fullness of communion with God. There is broad agreement to the idea that Paul is referring here to the bodily resurrection event at some point in the future, since that is one of the central topics he is trying to address with his letter, but viewing this statement in the larger context of his view of death reveals that even the

⁴⁵ 1 Cor. 15:26

⁴⁶ 1 Cor. 15:20-26

hope provided by Jesus's resurrection provides an immediate newness to life on Earth here and now.

While the final victory over death may technically be deferred until Christians have been raised from the dead, to be able to live life now, free from the fear and anxiety of death, reinvigorates the current Christian life and mission. Richard Hays similarly echoes this idea when he writes, "The subjugation of Death, which will not be complete until the end of all things is already assured by the resurrection of Christ; therefore, as Paul contemplates the vision of the resurrection at the last day, he already sings a triumph song over the fallen enemy."⁴⁷ Hays refers here to the climactic moment in 1 Cor. 15:55 where Paul reaches the point of mocking death, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"⁴⁸ Hays then continues, "Death's victory will be snatched away when God raises those who belong to Christ, now imperishable, and Death's sting—its power to evoke fear and inflict suffering—is therefore already plucked out, like the stinger of a malevolent insect, by Christ's resurrection from the grave."⁴⁹ For Paul, there is no need to wait until we are raised again to rejoice in the victory that has been provided for us over death.

⁴⁷ See Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1997), 276.

⁴⁸ 1 Cor. 15:55. Paul here is loosely quoting Hosea 13:14.

⁴⁹ Hays, 276.

Summary

While to some degree these literal, metaphorical, and mythological forms of death have been presented independently of one another, there are important connections to be made. Ultimately whether physical death is perceived to be good or bad heavily depends on the spiritual wellbeing of the individual.⁵⁰ For those individuals who are relationally and spiritually dead, choosing to forfeit a relationship with God to pursue selfish interests, physical death becomes the gateway to eternal death. On the other hand, those who choose a transformative death, or rejection of self-interest and turning toward righteousness, not only find spiritual life in their current physical existence, but also see physical death as the gateway to a transformed, resurrected life. Therefore, a substantial variable in how Christian's view death relates to how they understand the connection between death and sin.

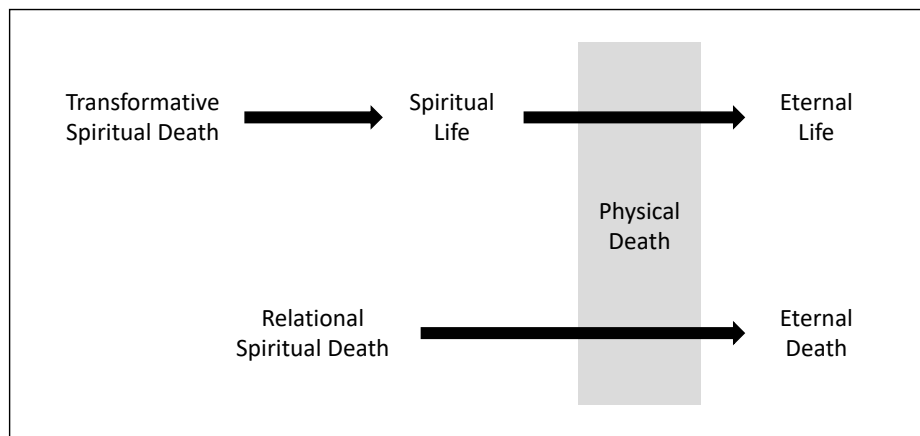


Figure 1. A visual summary of the types of death.

⁵⁰ Disagreement regarding this idea stems from differing soteriological views.

Death and Sin

Having explored a variety of ways in which we might theologically categorize biblical expressions of death, it is necessary to expand upon one of the most significant associations made with death. In fact, the association between death and sin is perhaps the theological crux of this entire project. I dare not say that sin and death is overemphasized because it is a crucial framework for understanding who we are and how we relate to God, but I would say that the relationship has perhaps been detrimentally oversimplified. Based on our examination thus far it should now be apparent that a blanket association between sin and all of the forms of death discussed would be inappropriate.⁵¹ Instead, it is important to look more closely because different perspectives on the relationship between sin and death can have far-reaching consequences on the construction of a coherent systematic theology.

Evaluating whether there is an association between sin and physical death is of primary importance to the project at hand, as this is the area of greatest overlap between the claims of contemporary science and theology on the subject of death.⁵² It appears the theological focal point of the discussion related to sin and physical death is most often focused on how to interpret Paul's message in Romans 5:12, and how it relates to the events recorded in Genesis 2-3. Some have seen in Paul's connection of sin and death a reason to conclude that sin is the causative element in regard to physical death, and that

⁵¹ Support for this statement could simply be found in the lack of consensus on the relationship between death and sin within the historical theological perspectives discussed in the last chapter.

⁵² Additionally, the metaphorical or mythological forms of death exist beyond the reach of critical evaluation by, or comparison with, science.

the physical aspect of this belief is necessary to hold together Paul's broader argument.⁵³ In Romans 5:12 Paul writes "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned."⁵⁴ Since Paul refers back to the narrative of Genesis 2-3, it will be worth our effort to look briefly back at the story of Adam and Eve's transgression and the subsequent penalty of death.

The stage is set in Genesis 2:16-17 when God commands Adam, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." As the narrative continues on through Genesis 3 Eve and then Adam violate the express command of God by eating from the prohibited tree, and then the punishments are issued. What is notably absent in that moment is their physical death. The warning established in 2:17 was not that they would become mortal or doomed to a future death,⁵⁵ but that they would die.⁵⁶ In the historical theological analysis of the previous chapter of this project, several instances were identified where it was argued that the loss of God's provision put Adam and Eve

⁵³ i.e. Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15. Such would be the cornerstone for theologically framing the *fall* and *original sin*. For example, C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? : Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin : Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014); Richard D. Phillips, *God, Adam, and You : Biblical Creation Defended and Applied*, First edition. ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015). Additionally, refer to the discussion in chapter two for several others that hold this position.

⁵⁴ Rom. 5:12

⁵⁵ E.A. Speiser argues that it simply means, "you shall be doomed to death." . *Genesis*, 3rd ed., The Anchor Bible, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 17. To the contrary, Claus Westermann points out that the common formula for the death penalty that is used here in 2:17 has a fixed meaning that does not allow for a delayed enforcement of the penalty like that proposed by Speiser. *Genesis 1-11 : A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1984), 225.

⁵⁶ In Gerhard von Rad's assessment of the situation he writes that the meaning of 2:17 was not "'on that day you will become mortal,' but rather, 'you will die.' But that did not happen at all." *Genesis: A Commentary*, Rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1972), 95.

on the path to their eventual death. However, the loss of God's provision reflects a change in the relationship between God and humanity more than the enforcement of a physical death sentence.

If Adam and Eve did not physically die, on that day, as a result of their transgression, then can it still be said that death is the penalty for sin and that the penalty threatened by God in 2:17 has been imposed?⁵⁷ One could still assert that the answer is yes on the basis that the penalty imposed corresponds to the categories of relational and mythological death rather than physical death.⁵⁸ As Genesis 3 concludes, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden and denied access to both God and the tree of life.⁵⁹ They are no longer privileged to enjoy such an extraordinary closeness of relationship with God as was portrayed in the garden.⁶⁰ They would also now be faced with death as a

⁵⁷ As to the question of whether or not the penalty is ever imposed, Hermann Gunkel writes, "This threat is not carried out later: they do not die immediately. This circumstance cannot be explained away, but must simply be acknowledged." *Genesis*, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 10.

⁵⁸ While this conclusion may not be justifiable from a direct exegesis of the Genesis 2-3 narrative (Ibid.; Westermann.), it is consistent with the broader theological narrative that Israel, and ultimately all of humanity, continually reject a righteous relationship with God. Nevertheless, there is precedence in the analysis of both Wenham and Moberly for a metaphorical understanding of the death imposed upon Adam and Eve for their transgression (see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, Old Testament Theology (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 83-86; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (USA: Zondervan, 1987), 74-75.).

⁵⁹ The denial of access to the tree of life functions in a twofold manner. First, for the couple to lose access to the tree of life further seals the certainty that they will one day physically die. The tree of life then functions as a symbol for the gift of immortality that is offered for those who submit themselves to an obedient relationship with God. Additionally, loss of access to the tree of life functions as a blessing in that humankind will not be forced to live forever under the miserable conditions laid out in the penalties for their transgression in the garden. Rad, 97. Remember also the proposal from Ambrose that physical death was a gift. "Indeed, death was no part of man's nature, but became natural; for God did not institute death at first, but gave it as a remedy." Ambrose, "On the Belief in the Resurrection," in *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 47.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that the relationship between God and humanity was not completely terminated, it simply changed into something dramatically different than what was originally offered by God.

mythological force as they contemplated their own ultimate death. Gerhard von Rad points out that in the revelation of the penalties in verse 19 Adam and Eve hear in the course of the narrative that “every living thing inevitably returns to dust and earth! That at least means that man now learns something of this end; it is forced into his consciousness, and he must let this knowledge overshadow his entire life.”⁶¹ Here then we have at least two negative forms of death resulting from the transgression that occurred in the Genesis 3 narrative.

The question to ask now is whether these metaphorical and mythological forms of death make sense as the punishment for sin in the context of Paul’s reference to the story of Genesis 3 in Romans?⁶² Here again the answer could be yes on the basis that Paul makes rich and continuous use of these and other metaphorical forms of death throughout Romans 5-8. Going back to argument being made by Paul in Romans 5 he draws upon the Genesis 2-3 narrative and uses Adam to not only reinforce the connection between sin and death,⁶³ but also to unify the plight of humanity and reinforce an etiology for our shared vulnerabilities. Paul’s intent here is to layout the enormity and inescapable ubiquity of sin in humanity, as is indicated in the verses that follow.⁶⁴ Using the figure of

⁶¹ Rad, 95.

⁶² The examination of the Genesis 2-3 narrative provided above is focused primarily on exegetical options that cohere with Paul’s conviction that some sort of putative action was taken by God following the transgression of Adam and Eve. While there are other potential interpretations, including the idea that God was gracious and chose not to impose the previously threatened penalty (see James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1-20; Gunkel and Biddle, 10; Rad, 95; John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 62.), I have chosen not to elaborate on these interpretations here because of their apparent incongruity with Paul’s thinking as expressed in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15.

⁶³ Perhaps even more strongly than was implied by the original Genesis 2-3 narrative.

⁶⁴ C.K. Barrett writes, “Paul does not think of sin as a *thing* which, like an heirloom, may be handed down from father to son. Sin is a living, active, almost a personal, agency, and all sin needed was a

Adam, be he historical or mythological,⁶⁵ Paul argues that if sin was a problem for the origins of humanity then it is a problem for everyone, “because all have sinned.”⁶⁶

The tragedy of sin characterized by Adam in v.12 can now be contrasted with the abundant blessing of the redemptive work of Jesus in vv.15-21. Paul continues, “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”⁶⁷ The initial emphasis Paul provides for the correction made by

means of entry into the race. Once this was found it did not need to be propagated – by sexual relations, or descent, or in any other way; it propagated itself.” *From First Adam to Last*, Hewett Lectures, (New York,: Scribner, 1962), 20.

⁶⁵ Paul undoubtedly held a view of theological anthropology and an understanding of Adam consistent with the Judaism of his time and it would be historical fallacy to suggest otherwise. “That Paul was familiar with many of the ideas concerning Adam to be found in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and in Rabbinic literature is probable; but the restraint and sobriety of his own references to Adam are noticeable.” C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B Cranfield, 2 vols., vol. 1, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Limited, 1975), 281. See also, Black, 414-16; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London,: A. & C. Black, 1957), 111. Ultimately it will be my assertion that we are missing the heart of Paul’s argument to insist that we must appropriate a first century biological understanding of anthropology, but it is still important to acknowledge the biological aspects of Paul’s anthropology in order to fully grasp his argument. Paul’s view of human origins, whether perceived as historical reality or mythology, allowed him to use Adam and Eve as a source for unifying humanity. While evolutionary biology provides considerable evidence against the claim that all of humanity is derived from an original progenitor couple, it very much supports the idea of a unified humanity thereby relieving some of the tension that at least initially appears to exist between this passage and contemporary biological anthropology.

⁶⁶ Rom. 5:12. This is not to make the mistake warned against by Dunn (*Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 272-73.) to portray Adam in this passage as an Everyman or to simply imply that through the mention of Adam Paul really means all of humanity, as evidenced by the mention of all humanity later in the verse. Contrary to the Adam typology that presented in passages like 1 Cor. 15, the contrast being made between Adam and Christ is more one of analogues than of broad typologies. See Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 112-13. Therefore, a conscious effort is being made in my assessment to retain Paul’s sense of Adam as an individual figure. Nevertheless, “Paul is primarily interested in the contrast of the universality of sin and death with the universality of life in Christ.” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 407.

⁶⁷ Rom. 5:18-19

Jesus's actions is to affect humanity's righteousness and justification before God. Only later in v. 21 does he mention the implications for our eternal life to come. In 6:13 he writes, "present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life." Rather than only seeing the benefits of being freed from sin and death as something Jesus's sacrifice and God's graciousness provides for us only in the future, Paul emphasizes the new spiritual life to be found now through the reconciliation of our relationship with God. A relationship which is embraced through our own transformational spiritual death as discussed in the first half of this chapter.

A common rebuttal to the proposal that physical death is not the result of sin asks the question: Is there not a parallel between the physical life being offered by Jesus and an implied physical death brought about by Adam? The argument stems from 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul is emphasizing the importance of Jesus's resurrection and trying to convince them of the glorious rather than morbid thought of their own future resurrection.⁶⁸ In versus 21-22 Paul writes, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."⁶⁹ In Richard Oster's analysis of these two verses he writes,

Even though there are general similarities between the Adam-Christ illustration here and in Rom 5, there are also some significant distinctions. As Calvin, among

⁶⁸ As Richard Hays puts it, "He is seeking to make the resurrection of the dead seem appealing rather than appalling to the Corinthians." Hays, 272. See also, William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians : A New Translation*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 347.

⁶⁹ In verses 45-49 Paul paints an even clearer picture of his point by comparing the nature of our bodies as they exist now with what they will come to be after the resurrection. Adam simply embodies the man of dust while Jesus embodies the man of heaven. *Ibid.*, 348-49; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1st ed., Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York,: Harper & Row, 1968), 376-77; Scott Nash, *1 Corinthians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2009), 421-22.

others, noted, the primary function of this Adam-Christ illustration in ch. 15 is to address the issue of physical death and the expectation of bodily resurrection, while the function of that illustration in Rom 5 is to deal with the issue of spiritual death and the nature of reconciliation.⁷⁰

Romans 5 contrasts sin and righteousness, which is key to distinction between spiritual death and spiritual life.⁷¹ To the contrary, 1 Corinthians 15 contrasts the physical death that is an inescapable reality for all of humanity, with the physical life that is offered by Jesus.⁷² 1 Corinthians 15 is not seeking an explanation for why physical death is the common lot of all humanity, it simply affirms reality. With no explicit connection between sin and physical death in 1 Corinthians 15, any connection to be made between sin and the death discussed in this passage must be justified through a particular interpretation of Romans 5 and not the other way around. Ultimately, my analysis of Romans 5 above does not support the conclusion sin is responsible for the physical death discussed in 1 Corinthians 15.⁷³

⁷⁰ *1 Corinthians*, The College Press Niv Commentary (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1995), 380. Furthermore, in Romans Paul uses analogy to contrast Adam and Jesus, maintaining the emphasis on two distinct individuals, but in 1 Corinthians 15 the contrast is made using typology to initiate a broader comparison. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 112-13.

⁷¹ Also, the heavy emphasis on sin in Romans is all but absent in 1 Corinthians 15. When sin is mentioned in v. 17 Paul writes, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." The comparison in this statement is still between Christ's resurrection and receiving righteousness, rather than saying that if Christ has not been raised, we will remain physically dead.

⁷² "Paul moves . . . to a contrasting parallel between Adam and Christ. The one is a human agent through whom death became the common human lot; the other a human agent of the resurrection of the dead. It is not possible to know precisely how Paul understood Genesis 1-2; certainly that is not to be pushed. Death existed before the sin of Adam (even if he was a vegetarian!). Perhaps, . . . death began with Adam as the penalty of sin; but the transmission is not automatic. The opposite condition is produced by Christ. . . . The result of belonging to humanity is death while the result of belonging to Christ is life. Death as the consequence of Adamic descent is patently universal; and even if Paul is referring to death as a sequel of sin, it is clear that he considers all humanity to be included in this state." Orr and Walther, 332.

⁷³ This is not to conclude that Paul did not believe there was a connection between sin and physical death, merely that such a conclusion is not necessary to understand the point he is trying to make in either of these passages.

In summary, while I would affirm that death has a close connection with sin, I see sin most closely related the metaphorical and mythological forms of death as opposed to literal physical death. An examination of Paul's thoughts in Romans 5, and his interpretation of the events of Genesis 2-3 held therein, appear to allow room for this interpretation and are further supported by the historical theological perspectives explored in the last chapter. Finally, with physical death throughout the cosmos not being contingent upon human sinfulness, we can also interact in an intellectually coherent way with the scientific evidence that death is both extensive and necessary.

Conclusion

Having now made the argument that physical death is not the primary form of death that we should associate with sin, it would be naïve not to recognize that sin *does* have an effect on how we *experience* our physical death.⁷⁴ A tragically negative experience of death may come at the hands of another's sin, as was the case for millions of Jews during the holocaust.⁷⁵ Or our own sins can influence the experience leading up to death as we are burdened with regret and guilt for wrongdoing we have done to others. To this point in the project, death has been overly simplified as a brief moment in time when life ceases to exist, at least in its previous form. However, as we consider the full experience of death, the act of dying, we are faced with a broader web of interconnecting

⁷⁴ In this sense, Levering's position presented in the last chapter that "death as we now experience it" is now somehow different following the intrusion of sin, perhaps begins to gain some clarity. Levering, 250.

⁷⁵ May they never be forgotten. More than 7 million Jews died during the holocaust. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Jewish Losses During the Holocaust: By Country," <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-losses-during-the-holocaust-by-country>.

concerns. While it is helpful to categorize different types of death for the sake of academic analysis, as has been attempted above, the reality is that the act of dying is more than simply a termination of biological life. The physical act of dying is joined by emotional and spiritual experiences that can contribute in a variety of positive or negative ways to the experience of death. The next chapter explores how we might apply the primarily theoretical discussions that have been explored thus far towards the construction of a meaningful Christian pastoral approach to death.

Chapter 4

Pastoral and Personal Implications

What might it mean to die a *good* death? From the Christian perspective I would argue that it means that you have fully embraced a transformative spiritual death while you are still physically alive so that you can take on a new spiritual life, which is a preview of the eternal life to come. Finding ourselves in a state of spiritual life rather than spiritual death in our current physical existence should provide us with the hope needed to cross the threshold from our current embodied existence into the embodied existence to come. As Terence Nichols writes,

If we want to die well, to die into God, so to speak, we need to start working on our relationship with God (and with others) while we are still young and healthy, rather than waiting until death is knocking at the door. Developing a relationship with God takes time and sacrifice, conversion and repentance, discipline and prayer . . . this means eliminating self-centeredness and moving toward God-centeredness.¹

With the newfound hope that our physical death is no longer the end, but rather a transition, we can become more comfortable talking about the eventuality of our death with those close to us.

Modern Cultural Perspectives on Death

As I speak of modern cultural norms surrounding death I cannot help but speak from a very specific American context, though I suspect many of the things that are true

¹ Terence L. Nichols, *Death and Afterlife : A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2010), 13. Matthew Levering emphasizes this same point in the introduction to his book, *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018), 4.

in the U.S. are also true among most other developed nations of our time. One benefit of this project, and the extended time it has taken me to complete it, is that it has made me attentive on a day to day basis to how our culture approaches the topic of death.

Tragically, the last year has accentuated that awareness with the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that, as of this writing, has caused millions of deaths and the numbers are still rising. While I am certain the psychological impact of the pandemic will be explored and written about for years to come, my immediate impression is that it has done little to change Americans' approach to the topic of death.²

At its core, much of our modern culture's approach to death could be summed up with the term *denial*, particularly as it relates to a personal view of death.³ What is amazing is that people manage to remain in such a state while constantly being surrounded by cultural reminders of death that fail to hit home as being personally relevant. Music, movies, video games, news, food, and the list goes on and on, are all providing us narratives regarding death that we either ignore, or more dangerously, passively accept as our own view of death.⁴ Much of the alternate reality provided

² For evidence to this fact we would only have to look at many people's response to pandemic social restrictions. Some were more concerned about the inconvenience that such restrictions place on their lives than they were concerned about the threat that such activity poses for themselves and others.

³ Stephen T. Davis notes, "Indeed, death seems to be the great scandal of human experience: we live, and then we die, and it seems that in death all our hopes, aspirations, achievements, and goals are negated. We believe in progress, in science, in human effort. We think that with the right application of human reason and technology, we can solve any problem. But not death. We can rationalize it away; we can ignore it; we can even deny it; but we cannot escape it." *After We Die : Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life after Death* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2015), 3.

⁴ "Whereas birth, love, and even bereavement are widely discussed, death itself has become increasingly taboo. Not knowing what to expect, people take their cues instead from vicarious experience: television, films, novels, social media and the news. These sensationalized yet simultaneously trivialized versions of dying and death have replaced what was once everyone's common experience of observing the dying of people around them, of seeing death often enough to recognize its patterns, to become familiar with life lived well within the limits of decreasing vigor, and even to develop a familiarity with the

regarding death centers around our attempts to somehow avoid it altogether. We expect modern medicine to constantly save us from the impending threat of death, and in the instances where it fails to do so we see it as a tragic, surprising failure. While as a biomedical researcher I have found great excitement and pleasure in making advances in medicine that improve the quality, and often the length of someone's life, I am under no illusion that life can be prolonged indefinitely. But for many others it is simply assumed that medical doctors will be able to remedy whatever afflicts them.⁵

Such a heavy reliance upon medical advances also contributes to an increasingly disconcerting trend in the process of dying, that being the institutionalizing of death.⁶ Whereas for countless generations a person's death might ultimately occur at home while surrounded by family and friends, today many people die in the cold and sterile environment of a hospital bed. Often times the family may well be rushed out of the room in the patient's dying moments for the sake of allowing medical personnel one last opportunity to save the person's life. Then after the person has died and the family has

sequences of the deathbed." Kathryn Mannix, *With the End in Mind : Dying, Death and Wisdom in an Age of Denial*, First edition. ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Company/Hachette Book Group, 2018), 1.

⁵ "It is astonishing that religious people in the United States seem to be the ones most enamored of extensive medical support in the last days of life. With such a promising new 'gospel' (good news) available, it is not surprising that Americans flock to a promise about which most of us knew virtually nothing prior to our illness. For church members, the 'conversion' to the Cleveland Clinic, MD Anderson Cancer Center, or the Mayo Clinic may be more fervent and disciplined than their original commitment to the gospel of God's forgiving, sustaining, and promising love." Fred B. Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying : Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 39.

⁶ "Here, technology is deployed in a new deathbed ritual that is a triumph of denial over experience. The death rate remains 100 per cent, and the pattern of the final days, and the way we actually die, are unchanged. What is different is that we have lost the familiarity we once had with that process, and we have lost the vocabulary and etiquette that served us so well in past times, when death was acknowledged to be inevitable. Instead of dying in a dear and familiar room with people we love around us, we now die in ambulances and emergency rooms and intensive care units, our loved ones separated from us by the machinery of life preservation." Mannix, 2. See also, Ray S. Anderson, *Theology, Death, and Dying*, The Ray S. Anderson Collection (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 143-57.

taken the time to say their parting words, they leave while the hospital and funeral home personnel tend to preparing the body for burial or cremation. The process is clean and convenient, allowing the family to avoid the awkwardness of handling the frail tendencies of a dying body. However, the cost of such convenience can be an impersonal and surreal experience devoid of the comforts of home and the contact of a community of people who wish to share their love and compassion with those who are dying. The transition from life, to death, to being removed from sight forever can happen within a few minutes, allowing very little time for the family to process the gravity of what has just transpired.⁷ The whole process has become so standardized that to propose something different just seems taboo in our modern culture.⁸ The way in which we approach a person's dying days can be improved, but it will require that we fight back against the tendency to try and provide life-sustaining intervention right up until the point that the person dies. There has been meaningful progress made in recent years in the acceptance of hospice care where the final stages of dying can occur at home alongside

⁷ Mortician Caitlin Doughty in her book exploring death and burial practices that counter our modern tendencies writes, "In America, where I live, death has been big business since the turn of the twentieth century. A century has proven the perfect amount of time for its citizens to forget what funerals once were: family- and community-run affairs. In the nineteenth century . . . no one would have questioned a wife washing and dressing the body of her husband or a father carrying his son to the grave in a homemade coffin. In an impressively short time, America's funeral industry has become more expensive, more corporate, and more bureaucratic than any other funeral industry on Earth. If we can be called best at anything, it would be at keeping our grieving families separated from their dead." *From Here to Eternity : Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, First edition. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 3.

⁸ For example, forty states have no laws requiring the use of a funeral home and forty-six states have no laws against the family burying the dead somewhere other than a cemetery. See, "How You Can Be Buried on Your Own Property in All 50 States," Rome Monument, <https://www.romemonuments.com/home-burials>. Nevertheless, it would seem to be an exceptional rarity that a family would take the time or effort to take their loved one's body home from the hospital, clean and prepare them for burial, and then in an intimate ceremony with family, friends, and the church community lay them to rest during a funeral ceremony on a beautiful section of land owned by a family member. Many today would simply be revolted at the thought of having to handle the dead body of a family member.

family with the aid of a hospice nurse. I should add that often these nurses are nothing short of an angel of God in their ability to guide both the patient and their family through such a trying time.

Pastoral and Personal Considerations

Having now explored some of the biological, theological, biblical, and cultural perspectives on death, the question now becomes a practical one. How do we now approach the idea of death on a more personal level? Further still, I would like to address this question from two different perspectives. First, how might we as a community of believers approach the reality of death. Then second, how might we approach death on a more individual level, since it appears to be something completely different to confront *my* death rather than the death of another.

Approaching Death as a Community

As we consider first how we might approach death as a community of believers we should take great comfort in the idea that we do not have to face such a great mystery alone. Like so many other aspects in our walk of faith, it is incredibly beneficial to rely upon the community when facing such a daunting subject. While I suspect the spiritual forms of death, both positive and negative forms, receive considerable attention in the life of the church, and rightfully so, I would argue that the church needs to do a better job of talking about physical death without requiring someone to be close to death to exacerbate

the discussion.⁹ In their book discussing how the church might go about speaking more of dying, Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith write,

The story offered in American culture is one that has little room for dying—at least for *my* dying. Dying is failure; death is the final enemy. It is a story in which death has not been considered an option and in which one is encouraged to pursue a particular strategy that rejects dying and seeks life at virtually any cost. That is, we just won't talk about it.¹⁰

While American culture tends to advocate the opposite approach, creating conversation with others about the reality of our own death, though a seemingly small idea, has an enormous amount of potential to ease the anxiety of the one who is dying as well as preparing those being left behind for the inevitable changes to come.¹¹

When a congregation does face a terminal diagnosis for one of its members, the response of the church should be distinct from the ever-present cultural narrative. Rather than embrace the *fight at all cost* mentality with no attention to the real likelihood that

⁹ However, if spiritual death is already a part of the collective focus of the church, it is not an extraordinary leap to tie a discussion of spiritual death with one on physical death. Another important opportunity to discuss death would be in the context of a richer creation theology that extends beyond the first few chapters of Genesis to the larger narrative arc that points towards the true goal of creation in front of us rather than behind.

¹⁰ Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith, 30. In their study, Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith examine the church dynamics surrounding the death of a congregation's minister. In nearly every circumstance where there was a negative health prognosis months prior to their death, there was denial by both the church leadership and the congregation regarding the inevitability of the minister's death. Rather than embracing the opportunity for fruitful dialogue, not to mention meaningful support for the minister, the congregation would embrace our cultural rhetoric of going to war and winning against the *evil* force that threatened to take them away. The authors' response was perfectly on point. "When the church outsources the answers to questions of how one shall face dying to a narcissistic, individualistic overreliance on science that is wasteful of mortally limited resources, the possibilities of sacramental, gracious, covenantal caring and love are compromised, if not derailed. If the diminishing personal resources of the dying one are invested in a self-focused fight, possibilities of mutual ministries are set aside in pursuit of an elusive and doomed goal of survival." Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Caitlin Doughty, speaking from her professional perspective as a mortician, writes, "One of the chief questions in my work has always been why my own culture is so squeamish around death. *Why do we refuse to have these conversations*, asking our family and friends what they want done with their body when they die? Our avoidance is self-defeating. By dodging the talk about our inevitable end, we put both our pocketbooks and our ability to mourn at risk." Doughty, 6. Emphasis added.

they may not survive, the church must reach into the deep history of suffering found within Scripture to reaffirm that despite the darkest of days, there are better days ahead. This is not to say that we should not pray to God and beg for healing and mercy for those we love, but simply to point out that we need to be attentive to our mortal nature and be grateful for the gift that each day represents.

As a congregation reflects on someone's recent death the emphasis must not solely be on the past, but also forward looking. While it is important for the church family to mourn, lament, and remember the life of the one who died, it is also important to remember what has been gained. For some this may be easier because they are now free of the chronic condition that caused them pain for many years, while for others we must simply remind ourselves that no matter how good we think our current life is, it fails to even come close to the glory that is to come. Since this physical existence is all we have ever known it is easy to want to remain attached to what we know and have experienced as opposed to that which evades both our perception and understanding. But in the spirit of Rev. 12:11, we should never love our lives so much that we are afraid to die.¹² A forward focused death and funeral allow not only for the congregation to usher the dying into God's presence in the midst of community, but also serve to remind the survivors of the promises and salvation at work in their life as well.

How then might the church approach those instances where death arrives unwelcomed? Earlier I mentioned the deaths that we perceive as simply being tragic, unjust, or evil. Children die of cancer, people are murdered, a mother or father leave

¹² Or as Paul writes in 1Cor. 15:19, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

behind a young family, natural disasters kill people by the thousands; these and countless other deaths evade all of our attempts at understanding. In these deaths we are simply left to mourn and lament their loss. Amy Plantinga Pauw writes,

When we lament, we acknowledge the truth that God does not remove all the pain and torment of dying, either for the sufferer or for the community. Lament needs to be an integral part of Christian practice in response to death and dying, precisely because we value so highly God's gift of earthly life.¹³

Pauw continues later, "Death is an irrevocable, wrenching loss for those the dead leave behind. But it is also a loss for those who die – a loss of the parts of creation they took delight in, the relationships they held most dear, and the possibilities they envisioned for the future."¹⁴ Along those lines, grief following the loss of a loved one is absolutely appropriate given the void that is created with the sudden termination of an intimate relationship. We must leave room for pain and suffering in those who are hurting rather than force them into an insincere facade that everything is fine. We lack simple answers to these difficult questions we must be willing to dwell in the mystery with a sincere silence.¹⁵ The words of encouragement that serve as consolation for the family of those

¹³ Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Dying Well," in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully : Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, ed. John Swinton and Richard Payne (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22. When trying to personalize relational death in the last chapter to try and provide a true sense of the depth of what is lost between humans and God, I likened it to the loss felt when we lose someone we love so dearly. We can draw upon the feelings of our loss in these situations because there is another type of relational death that occurs at the point of physical death between the person who dies and the loved ones who survive. While we can draw some consolation from the fact that we anticipate getting to see them in our resurrected life, for the survivors there will still be a significant portion of their life that will be lived with a void where the previous relationship had been. In that sense, for those who survive the death of a loved one, the sorrow of their relational death is a constant companion for the rest of their lives. As Pauw points out in this quote, the person who dies suffers the other side of this relational death, and anticipates its arrival as death approaches, but it is pure speculation as to whether or not they have any awareness as to whether there is any awareness between the point of death and the resurrection.

¹⁵ Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith point out that the same is true as it relates to conversations we might have with those who are dying. "We must learn to live with the kinds of questions that the dying ask, despite not being able to answer many of them.", 98.

blessed with a full and meaningful life can fall empty and flat at the feet of those that have tragically lost a loved one too soon. With a sudden loss there is an absence of closure that can only be overcome by the promise of resurrection providing hope that there will be an opportunity to see one another again.

Approaching Death as an Individual

It seems that thinking of one's own death is categorically distinct from thinking of the death of another. This perhaps contributes in some way to the ability of so many people to be surrounded by references to death in everyday life but fail to make the connection that they too are vulnerable to death. Over the last decade it has been common to hear the thrill seeker's battle cry of Y.O.L.O., or you only live once, as a call to live life to the fullest while often ignoring the risks or consequences of their decisions. I would agree that it should be our goal to live every day to its fullest as it is a gift from God that should not be wasted, but a cavalier attitude toward our ultimate death is merely another form of denial. We should instead be dedicated to living a full life *because* of our awareness of its delicate and tentative nature.

An indescribable glory awaits us beyond the threshold of death, but God has called us to the important task of contributing to the work of the kingdom here and now. Paul's words to the church at Philippi reflect a commitment to this important task, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 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 for you.”¹⁶ The transformative spiritual death discussed in the last chapter is a form of death that we must embrace individually, taking up our cross to follow Jesus.¹⁷ “What is different for those who have died in Christ and risen to a new life is that they have a new reality and a new understanding in which to experience dying in Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ In doing so, we are giving our life back to God and allowing God to define what a meaningful existence looks like.¹⁹

Once we have given our life to God, our ultimate physical death is not simply our loss of life, but God’s loss of our physical life as well. If God suffers loss in the midst of our physical death, then there should be comfort in the idea that God suffers alongside us when we lose someone we love. Unfortunately, the suffering of God in response to death is often overlooked in favor of the attempted consolation that our loved ones are now alongside God in the glory to come and that God is simply grateful for, or worse yet needed, their presence. This approach evokes the sense that God benefits from the death of our loved one while we lose, but since God’s will is of greater importance we should simply defer to the needs of God. Rather than seeing God as suffering alongside us, God is portrayed as distant and benefiting from our suffering and loss. Great care must be taken to ensure that our attempts to console those who have suffered loss do not

¹⁶ Phil. 1:21-24

¹⁷ Luke 9:23-24

¹⁸ Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith, 99.

¹⁹ Such a strong emphasis on deferring to God’s purpose in our lives is why Christianity looks so negatively upon suicide, which is effectively taking back control of one’s life and choosing to end it prematurely. As Ray Anderson writes, “So it seems it is not death itself, even death by one’s own hand, which places one outside of God’s grace: it is the intention which is the fatal sin.” Anderson, 132.

misrepresent God in this way and create more spiritual disorientation than they are already forced to endure.

As we anticipate our own death we need to be willing to discuss the inevitability of our death with those we love, those who will be forced to endure the loss of our presence. If you were to ask my two young children right now about what they should do with my body after I die, they would provide a surprisingly specific answer. They would answer that my dead body should be placed inside my newly constructed wooden boat along with scrap wood from my workshop, the boat should then be set adrift out into open water while someone on shore, my son has volunteered, fires a flaming arrow to light the funeral pyre.²⁰ I assure you I am not usually this dramatic, and it is at least partially a joke to frustrate any attempts to haphazardly toss my body in the ground somewhere, but more importantly, my kids and I have talked about the fact that one day I will die.²¹ That day might be tomorrow as a result of the pandemic, or it could be sixty years from now when my body finally gives out after a lifetime of use. Regardless, it is my hope that they will be comforted by my confidence that the sting of death has been removed, and that my physical death is not the end.²²

But where do we find such confidence in the face of death? First, through the recognition and acceptance that it is not a matter of *if* we will die, but rather *when* we will

²⁰ It started as an observation by the kids that due to the wooden lapstrake construction of my boat, it looks like an old Viking ship. One thing led to another and suddenly I am having a funeral that more likely reflects modern movies than Viking folklore.

²¹ Similarly, my wife and I have talked extensively about not only my eventual death but about the nature of our end of life care, which is a topic often neglected until the decisions are being made for us by someone else.

²² i.e. 1 Cor. 15:55

die. With no grand illusions of somehow being able to avoid physical death altogether we can focus our attention instead on trusting in God and living in hope that our physical death is not the end, but a transition to something new. Furthermore, the newness of life that awaits us is not a consolation prize that is somehow second rate compared to our current existence, it is instead the pinnacle of creation that God has destined for us all along, the goal of our good but not perfect creation.²³ Second, we must live each day with a new spiritual life that is graciously bestowed upon us following our commitment to a transformative spiritual death that focuses our attention on God's desire for our life rather than our own. The daily enactment of spiritual death and renewal allows us the opportunity to rehearse the acts that will reach their penultimate expression in our eventual physical death and resurrection. I greatly appreciate the perspective of Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith when they write, "Death is a condition, a state, but dying is a story."²⁴ Then later,

If we have practiced the Christian life, when the time of dying approaches, the whole experience of our past is at our disposal as a treasury of coping resources. That past is something on which to rely and from which to draw meanings. The story we live in the church can be the framework within which to experience a terminal illness. Remembering our story is to "re-member" ourselves, to be restored.²⁵

²³ A "good but not perfect" creation is a common way of describing a world that has been created to meet whatever standards or purposes God has for creation, but which still contains features that traditionally have been seen as imperfections. In the context of this project mortality would top that list along with pain and suffering. Though sometimes we have set our standard for perfection with what we perceive the coming eschaton will be like rather than focusing on the existence that was intended to precede the eschaton. However, if God had intended to make our current existence just like our final existence, then he most certainly had the capacity to do so if that was his purpose. For now, we are simply left to trust that these basic characteristics of nature are simply as God intended despite our desire for it to be otherwise.

²⁴ Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith, 23.

²⁵ Ibid., 85.

We should then make the most of every day of life to rehearse and remember the story to which we actively participate. The church too should ensure that the narrative of Scripture, and a meaningful understanding of death, are filling the spiritual wells of its members, as all will eventually need to draw from the richness of these narratives when their own death inevitably approaches.

Conclusion

Drawing now towards the end of our exploration of death, there are a few remaining pieces left to consider. Now that both the scientific and theological perspectives of death have been explored, it would be beneficial to step back and take stock of where we might find coherence and dissonance between these two views. With scientific research offering such consistent findings that physical death has always existed in parallel with life throughout billions of years of natural history, it is promising to hear from Ambrose, Thomas Aquinas, Rahner, and Levering that there is room for physical death to be perceived as a part of the natural order.

The greatest dissonance exists between scientific findings and Augustine's perspective, but it would seem that at least some of the concerns he was trying to address could be handled in ways that do not create such dissonance. For example, Augustine on multiple occasions argues for the importance of Adam and Eve as being the progenitors of all humanity for the purpose of establishing the universality of our situation.¹ He later uses the same point of emphasis in an attempt to unify humanity as being a single family capable of living in peace with one another.² These are both noble goals, but

¹ As mentioned above, Augustine writes, "Thus the entire human race, which was going to pass through the woman and become its progeny, was present in the first man when that couple received the divine sentence of condemnation; and what man became—not when he was created but when he sinned and was punished—is what man begot, so far as the origin of sin and death is concerned." Augustine, *The City of God: Books 11-22*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. William Babcock, Pocket edition, ed., vol. 7, The Works of Saint Augustine (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990), XIII.3.

² "God chose to give human beings their start from a single person. He did this, as we said, so that the human race would not only be joined in a society formed by likeness of nature but would also be bound together in unity and concord by the tie of kinship, mutually linked by the bond of peace." *Ibid.*, XIV.1.

contemporary scientific understanding helps to solidify the relatedness and unity of all humanity without relying on a single set of parents to accomplish this goal. Modern science speaks emphatically about the unity of humanity in the midst of its amazing diversity. Similarly, there is no need to rely upon a singular parentage to explain the universal human tendency towards sinful behavior. There is enough biological influence through our shared ancestry and social influence through our living in community with one another to provide the basic framework for a universal propensity to sinful behavior among humanity. The most problematic issue is Augustine's insistence that physical death is inherently evil, negating the possibility that it might reasonably be a part of God's good creation. It is notable, perhaps surprisingly, that this appears as a minority position among those included in this study, but the view that death is evil, and that it should be avoided at all cost, has a strong following in our current context.

Nevertheless, based upon the scientific observation that death has existed in parallel with life for billions of years on Earth, I find it reasonable to draw the theological conclusion that the physical aspects of death were an original part of God's good creation.³ Our brief examination of the early chapters of Genesis further support this possibility and retain coherence with Paul's references to Adam in Romans and 1

³ "We are not protected from pain or death, decline or decay. Occasionally, and falsely, there have been protests by some Christians that our primary problem lay in the fact that we are made of material that is physical and corrupt. That has always been false; God creates us good—no very good (Gen. 1:31). . . . We are earthen vessels and being Christians does not change that (2 Cor. 4:7)." Fred B. Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying : Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 99. For a more thorough examination of the proposal of God's creation being good but not perfect, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God : An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); *God and World in the Old Testament : A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); *Creation Untamed : The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010); Terence E. Fretheim, Michael J. Chan, and Brent A. Strawn, *What Kind of God? : Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim*, Siphrut : Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

Corinthians in particular. If we also draw the conclusion, similar to Ambrose, Thomas, and Rahner above, that physical death is not inherently good or evil, then we may proceed cautiously with the idea that our ultimate physical death should not necessarily be feared but could be embraced as the transition point towards God's ultimate goal for our existence. Our focus should be on a hope for the future that has been made available to us.

As for the nature of sin, while the narrative etiology of sin may very well fall in the early chapters of Genesis, there is no need to try and defend humanity's proclivity toward sin by establishing a heritable lineage through which it might be passed.⁴ I would ultimately argue, though it falls beyond the scope of this project, that the capacity for sinful behavior exists as a result of the free will provided by God to creation.⁵ We all universally, have the capacity to sin, but each of us as a combination of biological, social, and personal influences sin of our own accord. Hence the emphasis by Paul that "death spread to all because *all have sinned*."⁶ While humanity does transmit certain behavioral tendencies genetically, epigenetically, and socially toward sinfulness, each person's sin is ultimately their own. As such, the contrast between Adam and Christ by Paul is not to provide some heritable link between all of humanity and the first sin, rather his use of Adam was to create a universal scope to the abundance of sin in the world, to which only the redemptive work of Jesus could provide an answer.

⁴ It still remains arguable whether the etiology of sin in Genesis is with Adam and Eve's transgression in Eden or in the later murder of Abel by his brother Cain.

⁵ Thus, we are all universally susceptible to sinful behavior without requiring that all of humanity be the offspring of the first transgressor.

⁶ Rom. 5:12, emphasis added.

A Final Summary

Therefore, since both life and death have been present concomitantly on Earth for billions of years, and since humanity shares a common biological propensity towards physical death on the basis of our biological continuity with all of life, physical death should be seen as both natural and a part of God's *good* creation. Additionally, traditional theological perspectives on death provide the resources necessary to frame a theological understanding of death that is coherent with the aforementioned scientific data. More specifically, viewing the punitive consequences of sin as relational spiritual death, and the potential for eternal death, rather than physical death, both maintains interdisciplinary coherence and emphasizes the relational nature of God towards creation, and humanity in particular. With a better appreciation for the significance of relational spiritual death, the redemptive actions of Jesus provide a mechanism of reconciliation between God and humanity. To embrace the gracious gift of Jesus's salvific action we called to a transformative spiritual death, wherein we die to our own sinful and selfish desires and are born again into a form of spiritual life focused on the will of God. Pastorally, the importance of a transformative spiritual death is not only to reconcile our broken relationship with God, but also to rehearse daily the act of giving over our life to God in anticipation of doing so to the fullest extent at the moment of our physical death. As such, we can live confidently and empowered by the hope that our inevitable physical death is not the end, but a transition to a new creation as God intended for us since the beginning.

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