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**Changing Views of Death**

The confusion surrounding how we feel about the theology of death and resurrection stems from an underlying confusion about how Christians should feel about death. Philippe Aries, in his book The Hour of Our Death, points out that the early Christians viewed death very differently from other non-Christian cultures around them.[[1]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1) Non-Christian cultures, including Judaism, viewed death as unclean and wanted the dead as far from their daily lives as possible. Christians, however, wanted the dead to be at the center of their lives. They were able to claim their dead because of the victory of Christ over death in the resurrection. They built elaborate buildings to house their dead, and in some places buried them in the center of town. Many churches had adjoining graveyards so the loved ones of the parishioners could be nearby for visitation.

During the 18th century, however, the old familiar ways of treating the dead as unclean crept back into secular society. Cemeteries were moved back out of the city. Families in France went so far as to stop going to funerals. After World War II, new parish churches discontinued the practice of having adjoining graveyards. Bodies were no longer kept at home after death, and the coffins could not fit into the narrow doorways of new homes. Families no longer lived near each other. Slowly the state, and eventually the funeral industry, began sanitizing the old rituals of death and dying. The funeral home takes care of the body, dresses the loved one, and puts make-up on him or her, as if the person is not dead. The earth around the burial plot is covered over with artificial grass so no one really knows what happens to the coffin after the conclusion of the service.

**The Theology of Death**

There are three primary patterns of thinking which support the majority of thought regarding death: 1) immediate rewards and punishments of the Reformed tradition, 2) Purgatory from the Roman Catholic tradition, and 3) the eschatological pattern of the Anglican tradition. We will examine these patterns one at a time.

1. The **immediate rewards and punishments** **of the Reformed tradition** was a counter to the thought that after we died there was some period of waiting until judgment occurred. The Reformed tradition felt that, immediately upon death, you were either welcomed back into the arms of God or you were immediately sent to an eternal state of damnation. The scriptural support for this perspective is found in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19-31) and in Jesus’ last words to the thief on the cross next to him (Lk 23:42). The only change for the dead at the Second Coming of Christ would be an intensification of the state in which one already exists. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares that:

 *The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.*[*[2]*](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftn2)

1. **A second pattern one can draw from a negative reading of the intermediate state would be the idea of Purgatory**. It is never described explicitly in Scripture, but rather is most likely drawn from an extra biblical tradition of tours of the underworld to be found in Jewish apocalyptic writers more than two centuries before Christ’s birth. Possible passages in Scripture to which one could refer as descriptions of Purgatory are Luke 16, 2 Corinthians 12, and 1 Peter 3. “In the later classical period, Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great suggested that the souls of the righteous might be cleansed by purifying flames at the last judgment. Western theologians of the eleventh to the fifteenth century shifted this period of purification from the last judgment to the period of waiting, thereby developing the doctrine of purgatory.”[[3]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftn3) Purgatory becomes the place where one has to suffer for one’s iniquities prior to entrance into heaven or hell, unless one was so saintly as to go directly to heaven or so evil as to go directly to hell. Those somewhere in the middle were sent to purgatory, for a time to be determined by the Pope, to be cleansed from their sins.

Although this position was openly condemned by Article 22 of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, the idea of progressive cleansing crept its way into Anglican thought on the issue of the afterlife. Some have even gone so far as to suggest this progress could be granted to people who have been damned so that they might improve themselves to eventually earn a place in heaven – This can be generally referred to as the theology of Universal Salvation.

1. **The Anglican Church supports the pattern of the** **Day of the Lord**. This pattern is supported in Scripture in 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4 and Revelation 20. The life for which we hope after death is dependent upon the final victory of Christ. Christ returns at the Second Coming prepared to gather the living and the dead into God’s kingdom. There is no mention in Scripture regarding what actually happens to the person between death and the Second Coming. The idea of the dead being asleep can be found in 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians. Revelation refers to the dead as being in Hades, the sea and in death. This is typically referred to as the “intermediate state.”

This pattern has been the underlying theology of the Book of Common Prayer since 1549 with Thomas Cranmer. Anglicans have used the Apostles’ Creed in support of this pattern because of the explicit mention of Christ descending into hell. The 1979 BCP, Rite II service, is the first to print out the text of the Creed in the midst of the service. Prior to 1979, it was only a rubrical suggestion. Although this pattern is clearer with the use of the Apostles’ Creed, the prayers in the 1979 BCP have become less clear than the prayers from the 1928 BCP. For example, the committal at the end of the 1979 service was shortened to exclude the following: “looking for the general Resurrection in the last Day, and the life of the World to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose second coming in glorious Majesty to judge the World, the Earth and the Sea shall give up their Dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed and made like unto his own glorious Body.” In the 1979 BCP there is no longer an explicit reference to a resurrected life that begins at Christ’s return.

**The Current Dilemma**

The problem with which theologians throughout the century have struggled, which is still relevant for us today, is how to describe this *intermediate state*. We accept that we will be raised with Christ on the last day, but the real confusion enters into the conversation when we try to describe what will happen in the meantime. This confusion can even lead people to deny the reality of death. The sleeping metaphor is not helpful in this situation. **We want to be assured that our dead are comforted while they are waiting, not in some state of perpetual limbo.** But, ultimately, we cannot say what we do not know.

Members of the Standing Liturgical Commission, when reviewing the 1928 BCP, wanted to eliminate, whenever possible, the references to what that intermediate state might be like. Unfortunately, as a result of the changes, the theology of the current Prayer Book is even less clear than the prayer books prior to 1979. **The net result is an office that is open to some degree to any of the three readings that we have seen above.**

Ultimately, we need to focus on glorifying God in the face of death through the victory of Christ, commending our departed loved ones to God, comforting the bereaved and “bearing witness for the benefit of the living to the faith of the Christian community.”[[4]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftn4) Beyond that, I feel it is not helpful for us to speculate. What I have found most helpful in considering the intermediate state is the knowledge that God’s time is not our time. What may seem like an eternity to us, is mere seconds to God. While we recognize the grief of those left behind, we will be raised up on the Last Day through the ultimate power of Christ, and for that reason we can celebrate the joy of the resurrection in the pastoral office of the Burial of the Dead. But, until that day comes, we will be left in joyful anticipation.

“Our heart finds peace in knowing that death is not the end. Death opens the way towards a life where God welcomes us to himself for ever.” - Brother Roger of Taizé

[[1]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftnref1) Philippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death, Translated by Helen Weaver. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

[[2]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftnref2) John Lieth, Creeds of the Churches, 3rd Ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 229.

[[3]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftnref3) Robert W. Prichard, The Nature of Salvation (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 140.

[[4]](https://edod.org/theology-matters/theology-matters-theology-of-death/#_ftnref4) Prayer Book Studies 24, 19.

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(This is another article written by the Rev. Catherine Thompson)

### **What Should We Believe About the End of Life?** by The Rev'd. Catherine Thompson

Over the course of my ministry, I have walked with many people and their family members as they neared the end of life. What has become clear to me is the distinct difference between those who have faith in Jesus Christ and those who do not. This becomes a very important distinction as we move toward the end of our lives. What are the ways in which we, as faithful Christians, are called to approach our death as faithfully as we have lived our lives?

Statisticians have crunched the numbers and the results are clear. There is a 100% chance that we will die. Death is inevitable. However, many in our culture would have us believe otherwise. When illness strikes, we are encouraged, and in many cases expected, to reach for new medical technologies that will extend our lives well beyond the number of years our grandparents expected to live. Machines that breathe for us, modern pharmacological breakthroughs, organ transplants, and other life-extending measures help us to nurture a belief that we can avoid death at all costs.

As Christians, however, we know at a deeper level that the way in which our culture views death is flawed. We know that life does not end when we take our last breath. Death is only a single event, and does not have the last word. As we read in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 54 and 55, “’Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’”

Our faith is founded upon the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has won for us the ultimate victory over death. God does not abandon us at death. On the contrary, God raises us to new life. As Paul says, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39) When we internalize the truth found in Paul’s words, we can see our struggle is not to avoid death at all costs, but to approach our final days with the same degree of faith and trust in God as we hold in life.

Knowing that God does not abandon us can set us free from the fear and anxiety we might naturally feel surrounding our own deaths, or the deaths of those we love. Even though we will encounter difficult decisions, our faith can provide a critical support structure as we make those decisions. Modern medicine has advanced health care at a rapid pace, and we need to be prepared to answer questions regarding our medical care from a position of faith, not fear. It is important to remember that the best time to consider these questions is not when we are faced with an immediate health crisis, where emotions tend to run high, but in moments of calm and clarity before our health becomes a cause for concern.

To that end, we look to what we have learned through our faith in God. There are three theological concepts that can help us as we consider what we believe about the end of life. First, our faith is theocentric. We believe that God is one, the Alpha and the Omega, the “source of light and life.”[[1]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/#_ftn1) As William Temple writes, “Faith in God is faith in an ever-present, all-sustaining Power.”[[2]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2) If we believe that to be true, we recognize that God is the power and purpose behind all of God’s creation, of which we are a part. We honor God through our lives, and give thanks and praise for the goodness of God. One way in which we express our thanks and praise is to understand that we are a part of that creation, and a reflection of God’s goodness. To be welcomed into the arms of God beyond this life should bring us tremendous joy, not fill us with fear or dread.

Second, our faith is incarnational. Our theology of the incarnation is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Because we are sinful creatures, our relationship with God is broken. Jesus Christ came to restore that relationship and bring us back into communion with God. The restoration for Anglicans takes place in and through the Word and sacrament, as they draw us into the life of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. In his life and in his death, Jesus is one with God, and is raised into God. So, too, through the love of God and the love of neighbor, we are drawn out of ourselves and into the glory of God. We are participants in God’s design for all people, and are raised into new life in Christ. The presence of God becomes clearer through our lives, and even in our death.

Third, our faith is corporate. We live out our faith in community as it was intended from the earliest days of the church. In Eucharistic Prayer B, we pray that “in the fullness of time, [God would] put all things in subjection under your Christ, and bring us to that heavenly country where, with all your saints, we may enter the everlasting heritage of your sons and daughters.”[[3]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3) We are part of that everlasting heritage in the communion of saints: past, present, and future. We are made one body in Christ, and that body will support us in all phases of our life, even and especially at the end, as we move into that heavenly kingdom.

Because we need not fear the end of life, we are set free to appreciate the life we have now. James, chapter 4, verses 14 and 15, says, “You do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’” The Lord wishes you to live your life to the fullest, all to His honor and glory. Let your life be a witness to others that they, too, might be set free from their fears as they follow Jesus Christ. Spend less of your time and energy worrying about what tomorrow will bring, and more time praising the One who holds you in the palm of His hand.

As we draw closer to God, especially as we near the end of our life, we are given an opportunity to see the ways in which our sinful behavior has separated us from God. We can use what time we have left in this life to do all we can to repent of our sinful behaviors and return to the God who loves us. The petitions contained at the beginning of The Great Litany[[4]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4) are a great way to open our hearts and minds to the ways in which we might have offended our Lord in thought, word or deed. Not only do we have the opportunity to be set free from our fears about death, but we also have an opportunity to be restored to full relationship with Christ.

The note included in the rubrics for Burial[[5]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5) says that the “liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised. The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy.” While we begin and end our thoughts regarding the end of our lives with the resurrection of Christ, it is also important to recognize the grief we might feel. The note goes on to say, “This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death.” Anyone faced with a difficult diagnosis, or the loss of a loved one, will grieve. It is a natural and appropriate response. This is where the community of faith has an opportunity to surround those who grieve with love and care. This is the love of Christ incarnate in the hands and hearts of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is this love that will sustain us through the most difficult times. Eventually, we will move through our grief towards acceptance: acceptance of our mortality, acceptance of human limitations, acceptance of the care that surrounds us on every side, and acceptance of Christ’s victory over death on our behalf. As Jeremy Taylor once wrote in his work entitled The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying, “It is a great art to die well.”[[6]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6) We have the opportunity as Christians to witness to the power of Jesus Christ not only in our lives, but also in our death, as others see us end our life in faith and not fear.

[1]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 377.

[[2]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2) Temple, William. Christian Faith and Life. Edited by Susan Howatch. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994, p. 11.

[[3]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3) The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 369.

[[4]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref4) The Book of Common Prayer (1979), pp. 148-9.

[[5]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref5) The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 507.

[[6]](https://annunciationlewisville.org/article/what-we-believe-about-the-end-of-life/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref6) Taylor, Jeremy. Selected Works. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Edited by Thomas K. Carroll. New York: Paulist Press, 1990 p. 466.