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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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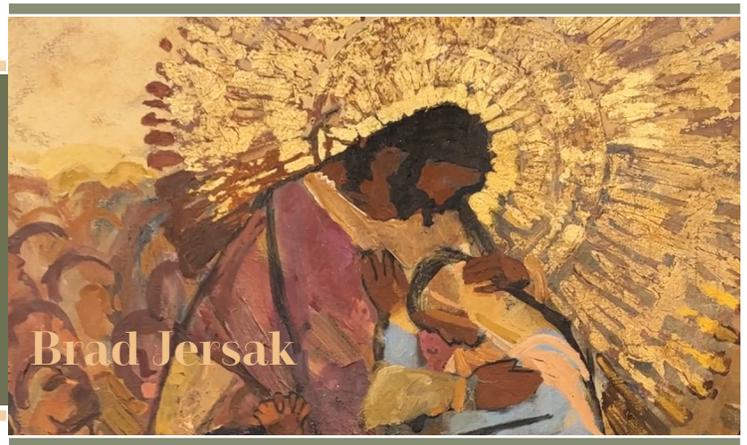
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Has Christ made DEATH our friend?



Brad Jersak

A reader asked if the gospel news, “Christ is risen!” has somehow made death our “friend”? I have reservations about calling *death* a “friend,” but it is well worth doing an autopsy on death to explore how Jesus’ death and resurrection fundamentally changed (1) our relationship to dying and (2) the nature of death itself.

We’ll find the mystery of death easier to parse if we begin by distinguishing the event of *dying* (passing from this life to the next) from *death* as an afterlife destination once feared but now conquered by Jesus Christ. So when I refer to *dying*, keep in mind the transition between worlds, but when I use *death*, I’m referring to what happens or where we go *after* we die.



Let us look first at **how death is *not* our friend**, then explore **how dying *may* become our friend** and finally, **how we might best *orient ourselves to death and dying***.

HOW DEATH IS NOT OUR FRIEND

Why is the statement “death is our friend” *not true*? Most obviously, in Paul’s “resurrection chapter” (1 Corinthians 15), *Paul calls death an enemy* and, in fact, the *last enemy to be destroyed!* (verse 26) Death is our enemy until the very end.

Second, the New Testament response to death is *not* described as befriending it. Rather, through his death and resurrection, Jesus *conquers* death—abolishes it (2 Timothy 1:10) and swallows it up! (Isaiah 25:8). On this, Paul is unequivocal.

Third, *the event of dying is still grievous*. Yes, we may imagine dying as natural, like “falling asleep” or “passing through” a gateway into the joy of Mount Zion (see Hebrews 12:22-24). But the causes of *dying* are usually unnatural, cursed experiences. For example, the following table lists by percentage the top 10 causes of dying globally:

Ischemic heart disease	12.8%
Stroke / cerebrovascular disease	10.8%
Lower respiratory infections	6.1%
Chronic pulmonary disease	5.8%
Diarrheal diseases	4.3%
HIV/AIDS	3.1%
Trachea, bronchus, lung cancers	2.4%
Tuberculosis	2.4%
Diabetes	2.2%
Traffic accidents	2.1%

Which of these ways of dying could we ever call our friend? None! So yes, we long for Paradise in

the presence of God, but if these ways of dying are the doorway, what shall we say? Are dying and its ominous causes inseparable? Or is dying perhaps a grateful release from those cursed causes?

Truly, death and dying are complex—a mystery! We're left asking, "What, in fact, is "death"? And how has the nature of death fundamentally changed through Christ's death and resurrection?

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? [Gone!]... Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

—1 Corinthians 15:55,57

HOW DYING MIGHT BE OUR FRIEND

We may not be ready to embrace death as a friend, but it's worth considering how the statement "*dying is a friend*" might be *partly* true. Three points bear considering.

If death is an enemy, how might dying be a friend? The answer hinges on (1) an altered relationship to death, (2) a change in the nature of death itself, (3) and Christ's denial of death as a reality.

1. Christ has forever altered our relationship to death.

While death is not our friend, through Christ, the scriptures say that it has "*lost its sting*."

This is *not* to say death causes no grief or that grief doesn't sting. That's another issue. The sting of death, in Jewish contexts, came

with the belief that death entails either *non-being* or worse, a gloomy afterlife in *Sheol*—the place of the dead. In Greek imagery, *Hades* was a fiery dungeon and personified as the god of death (similar to our "grim reaper").

When taken literally, death's sting is our bondage to *fear of death* ("death-anxiety"), common to humanity. Gratefully, Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that *Christ came to free us from death and the fear of death*. Although death remains an enemy, it is no longer a tyrant we need fear.

2. How Jesus' resurrection changes the nature of death

The victory of Christ has forever changed our relationship to death and fundamentally altered the nature of death itself. Death is no longer our terrifying destiny.

In Christ, *death itself has changed*. While death once meant "consigned to the grave," in Paul's view, to *die* is to be "present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). With Christ's conquest of *hades*, *death is no longer our final destination or inevitable destiny*.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever live believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

—John 11:25-26

In Christ, *death is defanged and reduced to dying*—it's no longer a *place you go*. Now, our mortality opens a *doorway* from this life into an entirely new reality—a destiny in God's care we can accept and embrace.



Whereas death was thought to be our descent into *hades*, *dying* becomes our promotion to God's throne of grace. That is the new reality, and if that reality IS *our* reality (everyone dies), we can reframe dying as our *rebirth from death to life*. Dying is much more than a trauma where our spirit is torn from our body, but instead, to be subsumed as the labor pains of our delivery to joy. ***In Christ, dying has become a birth canal.***

3. Christ's denial of death

Another prominent theme in the NT is *Christ's denial of death altogether*. While we all *die*, Jesus promises that *death* (or "perishing") is something we will *not* experience:

Clearly, Jesus didn't mean Christians won't experience the *event* we call dying, but rather, that *our destiny is not and*

never will be death in the “house of death.” Referring to our old notions of death, Jesus promises, “You won’t perish. That’s not going to happen to you! That’s not where you’re going!”

This may be why Jesus resists referring to dying as death. Rather, Christ usually calls that episode in our lives “falling asleep.” He won’t concede to calling it “death” because in the power of his rising, he holds the keys of death and *hades* (Revelation 1:18). Christ entered death to plunder it and forever end its reign.

This is how the NT deals with *death-as-destiny*. But this still leaves us with the reality of our personal journey *through* the event-of-death. Do we fight that tooth-and-nail? Do we embrace it without reservation? At the end, is it a grotesque curse that we resist to the end? Or can the gateway of our mortality become a friendly entrance to heaven?

HOW WE COME TO ACCEPT THE REALITY OF DYING

Once we see that death has been vanquished, we see it cannot be synonymous with three ongoing challenges:

- (1) the causes of dying
- (2) the experience of dying
- (3) the grieving process

These inevitable realities remain grievous and in need of God’s compassion and comfort. And we only welcome *dying* in light of our equally inevitable and more glorious *resurrection*.

Dying is no longer associated with death, but is seen as our transition into glory.

That said, when confronted with the cursed *causes of dying*, we fight them in every way—through prevention, medicine and prayer. But when the causes of dying have done their work, we enter an irreversible *end-that-is-not-the-end*. We can be assured

we’re bound for Paradise. Instead of fretting and thrashing against reality, we practice acceptance and surrender (to God, not to death). Thus, *dying itself becomes an occasion for an experience of God’s presence. Christ now stands at the door, and in a real way, IS the Door.*

SURRENDER: A POSTURE TOWARD MORTALITY

In our experience, the tension between fighting for a healing or accepting and processing the grief of dying can be unbearable and leave us doubleminded.

Those who want to maintain an atmosphere of healing may lapse into denial and try to approach healing faith through a sort of spiritual willfulness that we mistake for faith or authority.

In that case, the sick or dying person often feels emotionally abandoned, shamed, or refused permission to process the reality of their pain.



Our cover article features the art of J. Kirk Richards. Readers can visit the artist’s gallery at www.jkirkrichards.com

On the other hand, those who have simply despaired of life or are afraid to pray for healing may also leave the sick or dying with a similar sense of isolation. Their fate is prematurely sealed by fatalism, and they are abandoned to their disease and despair. **Either error can be worse than dying!**

But what if we *don't* need to discern when it is time to *surrender* a loved one *to dying* because instead, we can always surrender them *into the care of Christ*, both in life and in death?

As Christ-followers, we never need to surrender to disease, dying or death because our surrender is always, only to God. We don't need to calculate our transition from fight-mode against disease into acquiescence to dying. And we don't decide when it's time to despair because we never do.

Rather, we live in constant surrender. We offer our healthy children and our ailing loved ones into God's care *at all times*. We surrender dying friends and family into God's care—as we always have—with an openness and expectancy that “surrender to God's care” always gives them (1) the best odds of a divine healing or a medical success, while also (2) enjoying the peace of God's loving presence whether they battle disease or undergo dying.

PRESENCE: A MORE LIFE-GIVING PATH

A healthy path through life's “final portal” begins with “presence.” As caregivers, we begin with *our compassionate presence* in their situation, to their pain, to their needs. And we continue *embodying “God's felt presence”* throughout, whether the journey leads to healing or becomes the pathway of dying in God's arms. The way we practice this presence is through attention, openness and receptivity to the presence of Emmanuel—*God with us*.

When we have practiced that posture of surrender, presence and expectancy, we occasionally see a dramatic healing. But more importantly, if we can stay present and attentive to the sick and dying AND to God's nearness, *the dying don't feel abandoned*. We'll avoid heaping shame or striving onto the unhealed and their loved ones.

We need not flip-flop between fighting and despair, because *it's all about surrender to the embrace of both human and divine presence*. More than that, *we need not worry about whether death or dying are enemies or friends*. *Instead*, we focus on the presence of the living Christ with us through every experience. □

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Memory Albums

Bradley Jersak with Wm. Paul Young

Do you ever have trouble remembering good things about someone? You know there had to be some good in them, but it feels impossible to recall a single instance. This is especially true of someone we were close to after they hurt us. Maybe it was an abusive parent or a spouse who betrayed us. Remembering good things might even feel unjust, a self-betrayal in the shadow of harms they did. It's a sure sign that some part of us still needs healing.

Our friend, Paul Young (author of *The Shack*), shared a profound insight. When we experience repeated traumas from those we rely on, we begin to create a memory album—snapshots of their offences. Each episode is stored and accumulated in this “record of wrongs.”

Meanwhile, any kindness or service they do feels like a lie, so we set those memories aside in a second album and forbid ourselves from opening it. To do so creates confusion and double binds. Those memories threaten the consistent narrative we create for our offender. But the choice to close “the good album” imprisons us in the trauma of the pain album.

Paul had sincerely forgiven his fundamentalist father for the rage and violence he experienced as a child and they had reconciled to a great degree. But I don't recall hearing any good stories about him. To me, he just sounded like a monster. Then one night, as Paul surrendered his dad into God's loving care, something changed. He caught a glimpse of the other photo album and refused to turn away. He lay awake all night as our Papa God (as Paul calls him) flooded him with memory photos of dad—venturing into a snowstorm to help someone, being a good storyteller, praying constantly for those who betrayed him, and working hard to overcome his own history so Paul received these memories.

When Paul shared these beautiful stories with me, it felt like he was describing another man—virtually a saint! How was this possible? Grace flowed as Paul became willing to see that good doesn't erase evil, but it does overcome and redeem it! He didn't have to deny the sorrow of the first album, but the goodness of God in the second album offered the gift of cleansing tears and a redeemed memory.