

THE PARADOX OF LIFE AND DEATH: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

It is a matter of fact that life and death are inseparable phenomena in human existence. Both ensure an essential juxtaposition that seem to sustain mystical convictions across religions. Christianity traces the origins of life to God. Death is the end of all life's cycle such as birth, puberty, marriage, old age, among others. Historically, questions pertaining to life and death have troubled the minds of humans. The mysteries of life and death are unarguably the most contested of all mysteries in the world. Individuals have asked: "What is the meaning of life?" "Why must we die?" This paper attempts to answer these questions by examining the concepts life and death in Christianity from the stand point of the Old and New Testaments. Through an analytical study of these concepts, the paper posits that, according to Judeo-Christian eschatology, that life stems from God and death is the fate of all living beings. Christianity's understanding of life is fundamentally anchored on God's expression of his love and compassion for those who repent of their sin and his readiness to forgive them through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus. This paper evaluates how death, on the other hand, has been described as a road that leads to another life.

Introduction

The seemingly antithetical juxtaposition of life and death across religious domains has justified their historical inseparability in human consciousness, for one must be born in the first place for one to die. Life is highly cherished and revered by all humans because, fundamentally, as popularly argued, it could not be replaced once lost. Of all things in the world, human life attracts the greatest value and has been at the heart of most socio-economic and philosophical debates around the world. Discussions that border on geo-politics, bio-politics, sovereignty, world politics, climate change, among so many others essentially aspires towards the elongation of life on earth. Most religions situate life within the sacred realm such that "taking of life" is considered the worst form of crime in human existence. Death, on the other hand, is inevitable. If it were possible to prevent death, humans would have done so.

No direct evidence has authoritatively proved the origins of life. However, science and religion, which form avenues for continuous inquiry into 'origins' have been able to provide relative pointers to 'origin' of humans. Science and religion have helped humans to satisfy their yearning for meaning and purpose in life. According to Lygre (1979), the scientists discovered that the same physical and chemical laws of nature operated in organisms as in everything else. This suggests that life is largely mechanical, so it could be made by natural events. They devised the theory of chemical evolution which holds that the building blocks of life arose naturally on the primordial earth and then gradually formed more complex structures; from this life emerged. Religion does not share this view with science. It rather traces the origin of life to God. It is imperative to point out here that even among the religions of the world; there are divergent views as to how life stems from God.

THE PARADOX OF LIFE AND DEATH: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE... Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo

Stuart (1987) defines death as the act of dying, the end of life, the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organism. Osbourn (1967) in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* defines death in three ways that is: Semantic (bodily) death; death of a part of the organism is local death and molecular death. Semantic death occurs in man when breathing and the heart action stops and cannot be restarted. When such death occurs, not all the cells undergo molecular death at the same time and this explains why organ or tissue can be removed from dead bodies, transplanted and used in a living individual. For instance, we often hear about the transplantation of the cornea of the eye.

According to Chukwuedo (2015), death is a natural phenomenon which brings the physical life to an end. It is the last stage of all life's cycle like: birth, puberty, marriage and eventually death. Life and death are however important subject of discussion to all religions of the world. This paper examines the Christian view of life and death from the perspective of Old Testament and New Testament the Old Testament.

The Concept of Life in the Old Testament

In Christianity, the view of the Old Testament differs to some extent from the view of the New Testament concerning the origin and meaning of life. The Old Testament holds that life comes from God. In Genesis 2:7, God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the inert human organism. The writers of the various books of the Old Testament are in agreement that the relative length of life is determined by human virtues and vices.

Life in the Old Testament appears in three concepts according to Marshall (1996) in *New Bible Dictionary* 3rd edition. The first which is in Hebrew "hayyim" is the idea of activity. Life is that which moves (Gen. 7: 21ff; ps.69:34 cf Acts 17:28) in contrast to the relaxed, dormant or inert state of non life (cf. Rom. 7:8, James 2:17, 20). Life is associated with light, gladness, fullness, order and active being (Ps. 27: 1) and contrasted with darkness, sorrow, emptiness, chaos and silence which are characteristic of death and inanimate being (Eccl. 1:8; Ps. 115:17).

The second term is "nepes" which is soul, as 'being' or 'self' is common to man and beast, living and dead (Lev. 21:11; Rev. 8:9; 16:3). But its meaningful state is 'living soul' (nepes hayya, Gen. 2:7) and therefore may simply mean 'life'. To die is to breathe one's soul, and to revive is to have it return (Jer. 15:9, I Kg. 17:21, cf Acts 20:10), or seated in the blood, it is 'poured out' at death (Lev. 17:11, La 2:12, Isaiah 53:12) while the soul may continue in spilt blood (Rev.6:9; Gen. 4:10).

Thirdly Spirit in Hebrew (ruah) or breath (nesama), as to principle which distinguishes the living from the dead, often may be rendered life (Isaiah 30: 12). To die is to lose one's breath or spirit (Ps. 104: 29f). Life reveals itself through breath known as (ruah) in Hebrew as well as in blood. Hence, God is the prototypical living being whose life is eternal whereas the existence of all created beings and entities is fragile and perishable "like the grass of the field" (Ps. 103:15). God's life is manifested through action and creativity. He is the creator and therefore the word of life (Ps. 103: 15). Hence, to live in rebellion against his will is equivalent to experiencing death in the midst of life. Such an existence will be filled with misfortune and misery, however favorable the external circumstance may be.

The realization that death is the fate of all living beings brings into the question the ultimate value of life and its various aspects. In the final analysis, it is hoped that those who live in submission to God's will can expect to enjoy a long and happy life and, in the end, be gathered to the creator. All persons therefore face a choice between the way of life and the way of death.

The Concept of Death in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament thought, death is simply the separation of the soul from the body. The Old Testament holds that the principle of life is the spirit or breath given by God. Death is the giving up of the spirit or soul. Without the spirit, the body is dead. Death is characterized by the absence of breath; the dead person no longer has *neshamah* or *ruach nor*, according to some texts, *nephesh*, either because *nephesh* is used in the restricted sense of breath (Jer. 15:9) or because the fact of no longer being a *nephesh* is presented as a departure of *nephesh* (Gen. 35:18, Kings 17:21). Deprived of *nephesh* and *ruach*, man is left with the *basar* only and, as soon as this ceases to be animated, it is no way distinct from dust says Jacob (1958) in his book, *Theology of the Old Testament*.

The scriptural idea of death includes physical, spiritual and eternal death. Physical and spiritual deaths are naturally discussed in connection with the doctrine of sin, and eternal death is considered more particularly in general eschatology. This is to say that sin introduced death to the human race. The scriptural idea of death includes physical, spiritual and eternal death. Physical and spiritual death is naturally discussed in connection with the doctrine of sin, and eternal death is considered more particularly in general eschatology. This is to say that sin introduced death to the human race.

Marshall (1996) also divides death into two which include physical death and spiritual death. Physical death seems inevitable for bodies like ours decay. But the Old Testament speaks of death as the result of sin. God said to Adam, 'when you eat of it, you will surely die' Gen. 2:17). But Adam did not die physically on the day he disobeyed God. Spiritual death however, is a more serious death seen as divine penalty, the due reward for sin.

Jacob (1958) reveals that in the Old Testament, death assumes various aspects of which the truly biological one is not, perhaps, the most important. There is, in a contemporary author's phrase as revealed by Jacob, 'a realm of death which breaks into the realm of life, in such a way that man may be involved in it without ceasing for that reason to live'. He went further to point out that all parts of the Old Testament do not speak with the same insistence of the destructive power of death. It is, nevertheless, certain that the Old Testament never presents death as liberation or as a gateway, giving access to perfect felicity. Along with the Semitic peoples as a whole, Israel shares belief in the fatal and inevitable character of death which found classical expression in this passage from the epic of Gilgamesh highlighted by Jacob (1958) "when the gods created human beings, they made death the lot of humankind and life, they retained in their own hands" (p.299).

Jacob further states that man has never eaten any of the fruit of the tree, of which his mortal state even made him unaware; only after eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge did man, having acquired the possibility of becoming an *elohim*, find the tree of life expressly forbidden to him. In Jacob's view, death may be considered as a dissolution, as soon as they cease to be held together by the principle of life, the various elements comprising the human being are "as water which runs away which cannot be collected up" (2 Sam 14:14). Man reduced to dust is nothing; he no longer exists, and we must not be surprised that several texts speak of non-existence; at least that is the conclusion reached by Job and the psalmist (Job 7:21; Ps 39:14). Death is considered as a state similar to fatigue or sleep (Job 14:19ff) a state derived of what characterized the living being, the bond of community, the dead man is gone.

In order to be more specific, it is pertinent to examine the concept of death in the Old Testament from three perspectives.

a. Death as Related to Sin

THE PARADOX OF LIFE AND DEATH: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE... Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo

In his view, Purkiser (1977) says that along with the recognition that death is “something at variance with the inmost essence of human personality, a judgment, and whenever this personality has reached its perfect deal, it must at the same time be conceived as above death”. Human death is, however, the consequence of sin, “In the day that you eat of it you shall die” was God's warning to Adam and Eve. The relationship between sin and death is also seen in the fact that ritual defilement resulted from contact with anything dead (Num. 5:2; 6:6, 9). Throughout the Old Testament, godliness is equated with life “the path of life”, the fullness of life. Sin and folly, on the other hand, led to death.

b. Physical Death

There has been a great deal of debate as to whether man was born mortal or immortal, whether he would have died had he not sinned. Physical death was not original part of man's condition. Death was a threat should man sin, that is, eat and touch the forbidden tree (Gen 3:3). While the death which was threatened must have been at least in part spiritual death, it appears that physical death was also involved, since the man and woman had to be driven out of the garden lest they too eat up of the tree of life and live forever (Gen 3:22-23).

Erickson (1985) pictures some of the scriptural passages which have been offered as evidence that physical death is the result of man's sin as proving no such thing. A case in point is Ezekiel 18:4, 20: “the soul that sins shall die”. The reference here is to spiritual or eternal death, for the text goes on to say that if the sinner turns from his wicked ways, he shall live and not die (vv.21-22). Since both believer and unbeliever experience physical death, the reference here cannot be physical death. Since physical death is a result of sin, it seems probable that man was created with the possibility of living forever. He was not inherently immortal, however; he would not by virtue of his nature have lived on forever. Rather, if he had not sinned, he could have partaken of the tree of life and thus have received everlasting life. Erickson (1985) on this note asserts that death is not something natural to man. It is something foreign and hostile.

c. Death as Punishment

Death appears in some passages of the Old Testament as a punishment for sin. God is himself the giver of life: those who thwart his plan of life by shedding human blood must forfeit their own lives (Gen.9:6). Erickson (1985) believes that, God sending death is an expression of his disapproval of human sin, our frustrating his intention for us. This was the case with the flood which God sent to do away with all flesh (Gen. 6:13), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19), the punishment of Korah and those who rebelled with him (Num. 16), and the numerous other instances of the death penalty. In each case, those put to death had departed from God's intention for them.

The Psalmist vividly depicts death as an expression of God's anger: “Thou dost sweep men away: they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed, in the evening it fades and withers. For we are consumed by thy anger, by thy wrath we are overwhelmed” (Ps 90: 5-7).

Here the question arises as to why the believer is still required to experience death at all. If death, physical as well as spiritual and eternal, is the penalty of sin, then when we are delivered from sin and its ultimate consequence (eternal death), why should we not also be spared from the symbol of that condemnation, namely physical death?

Some theologians have attempted to show that death has certain beneficial results. One such attempt is that of Louis Berkhof (1670). He argues that death is the culmination of the chastisements which God uses to sanctify his people. While acknowledging that death evidently is not indispensable to the accomplishment of sanctification, since Enoch and Elijah did not die,

Berkhof nonetheless sees it as a means by which believers can identify with their Lord who also went through suffering and death on the way to his glory.

The Concept of Life in the New Testament

A true understanding of the New Testament concept of life rests upon an accurate grasp of the distinction between mere existence, or natural life and true life in Christ. The former is fragile, finite and mortal. It is dependent upon the continued presence of the soul or life breath; which is the gift of God.

Different terms and concepts depict life in the New Testament. According to Marshall (688), life (Greek. *Bios*), means 'course of life' or 'necessities of life maintenance' (Mk 12:44; 1Tim 2:2; 1Jn 3:17) while *Zoe* characteristically (and always in the Johannine literature) describes resurrection life. It also denotes 'course of life' (Lk.16:25, Phil. 1:20; cf Lk.15:13, Rom. 6:2), soul life or natural vitality (Acts 8:33; 17: 25; 20). Soul (*psyche*) and spirit (*pneuma*) continue their ambiguous role of 'self' and 'life'. As life, soul is simply 'being', natural life (Luke 9: 25; Mk. 8: 36). It may be preserved to resurrection life (Jn. 12:25), but at present it exists as natural vitality lost at death (Matthew 2:20; Jn. 15:13, Acts 20: 10; Jon. 3 16), or more importantly, as Adamic life, life of the Old age, life under divine Judgment (Lk. 12: 20; cf 1 Cor. 2:14).

Balz and Schneider (1981), state that *zoe* occurs 135 times in the New Testament. As in other ancient religions, "life" is used in early Christianity to characterize salvation. They went on to say that as in apocalyptic Judaism, which awaited resurrection, New Testament Christianity hopes for eternal life after the resurrection of the dead, the life of the coming aeon (the pre-Markan usage in Mark 10;17, 30 is typical). This term is found in almost all New Testament writings.

According to Apostle Paul, the life of redemption is available in the present as a consequence of the establishment of the new regime of faith through Christ's resurrection as the second Adam (1 Cor. 15: 20) and its complete realization must await the end of time, when Christ is to deliver the kingdom of God and, thereby put "all enemies under his feet", the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor. 15: 20). It is believed by the early Christians that life in its truest form lies in the future beyond the grave, in which case all present conduct is but a preparation for that eventuality. This indestructible form of life is the result of divine grace (John 3: 16) extended to those who repent and accept the promise of salvation.

According to Bultmann (1951) in *Theology of the New Testament*, freedom from the law and sin is also freedom from death, for death is the "wage" and the fruit of sin (Rom. 6 : 23: 7:5). He sees faith in the word as expressed by Paul as the power that determines his life. He now no longer lives, so Paul paradoxically says but in him Christ lives (Gal. 2: 19). Bultmann also notes that Paul differs from the view prevalent in the Gnosticism, in not understanding the "life" mediated by Christ as power, like those of nature, infused into man, a power of immortality which has become the property of the soul (or of the inner most self), and by means of which after the death of the body, the soul soars into the sphere of divine blessedness. On the contrary, for Paul life stems from Christ and those who are rooted in him live. The Christian understanding of life is based on God's expression of his love and compassion for the sufferings of humanity and his readiness to forgive and redeem those who seek his forgiveness through the life, death and resurrection of his only son, Jesus.

The Concept of Death in the New Testament

The Bible contains some instructive indications as to the nature of physical death that is cessation of life in our physical body. The Greek word for death is 'thanatos'. Balz and Schneider (1981) reveal that it appears 20 times in the synoptics, 8 times in Acts, 32 times in the Johanne literature (8 in John, 6 in 1 John, 18 in Revelation) 47 times in Paul (22 in Romans, all in Chapters 1-8, 8 in 1Cor., 9 in 2Cor., 6 in Philippians, 1 each in Colossians and 2 Timothy), 10 times in Hebrews and thrice in James.

In Matthew 10: 28, for example, Jesus contrasts death of the body with death of both body and soul. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell". The same idea appears in Luke 12:4-5: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell. Yes; I tell you, fear him!" Here the body is considered as a living organism, and the psyche is evidently the *pneuma* of man, the spiritual element which is the principle of his natural life. This view of natural death also underlies the language of Peter in 1Pet. 3: 14-18. In other passages, it is described as the termination of the psyche, that is, of animal life or living, or as the loss of this, Matthew 2: 20, Mk. 3: 4; Luke 6:9; 14: 26; John 12:25; 13:37, 38; Acts 15:26.

James 2:26 also speaks of death as separation of body and spirit: "for as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." What we are dealing with here is cessation of life in its familiar bodily state. Erickson (1985) purports that this is not the end of existence, however, life and death according to the scripture are not to be thought of as existence. He went on to say that death is simply a transition to a different mode of existence; it is not, as some tend to think, extinction. In addition to physical death, scripture speaks of spiritual and eternal death. In Erickson's view, physical death is the "separation of the soul from the body: spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God; eternal death is the finalization of that state of separation - one lost for all eternity in his or her sinful condition" (p.1170).

Scripture clearly refers to a state of spiritual deadness, which is inability to respond to spiritual matters or even a total loss of sensibility to stimuli. This is what Paul has in mind in Ephesians 2:1-2: "And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." When the book of Revelation refers to the "second death", it is eternal death which is in view. An example is found in Revelation 21: 8: "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." This second death is something separate from and subsequent to normal physical death. We know from Revelation 20:6 that the second death will not be experienced by believers "Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years." The second death is an endless period of punishment and of separation from the presence of God, the finalization of the lost state of the individual who is spiritually dead at the time of physical death.

It is pertinent to talk about the purpose of death in the Christian life. Why do Christians die? This question was raised by Grudem (1994, 811) in his work on Systematic Theology. He discussed four reasons why Christians die:

1. Death is not a punishment for Christians. Paul tells us clearly that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The entire penalty for our sins has been paid for. It is true that the penalty for sin is death, but that penalty no longer applies to us not in terms of physical death, and not in terms with spiritual death or separation from God. All that

THE PARADOX OF LIFE AND DEATH: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE... Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo

has been paid for. Therefore, there must be another reason than punishment for our sins if we are to understand why Christians die.

2. Death is the final outcome of living in a fallen world. The last aspect of the fallen world to be removed will be death. Paul says: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the father after destroying every rule 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" (1Cor. 15:26). But until that time, death remains a reality even in the lives of Christians. Although death does not come to us as a penalty for our individual sins (for that has been paid by Christ), it does come to us as a result of living in a fallen world, where the effects of sin have not all been erased.

3. God uses the experience of death to complete our sanctification. Grudem (1994) says, Paul thought about the way in which Jesus died, and made it his goal to exemplify the same characteristics in his life when it came time for him to die-that in what circumstances he found himself, he, like Christ would obey God, trusting God, forgiving others, and caring for the need of those around him, in every way bringing glory to God even in his death. Therefore when he went to prison, without knowing whether he would die there or come out alive, he could say, "it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20).

4. Our experience of death completes our union with Christ. Another reason why God allows us to experience death, rather than taking us to heaven immediately we become Christians, is that through death, we imitate Christ in what he did and thereby experience closer union with him. Paul can say that we are fellow heirs with Christ "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8: 17). Union with Christ in suffering therefore means union with him in death. On this note, the New Testament encourages us to view death not with fear but with joy at the prospect of going to be with Christ.

Conclusion

Every religion holds life at a high esteem. Christians see life as a gift from God and that only Him has the right and power to take it. God sometimes uses death to bring his purpose to accomplishment. Christianity upholds the view that death is the inevitable fate of all living beings. No man created by God is above death because death has no respect for anybody. In Christianity, however, it is believed that life which is eternal stems from the saving grace of God. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life". This everlasting life is only given to those who embrace Christ as they will live with Him forever. Death on the other hand comes in three forms: Physical death, spiritual death and eternal death or second death. Physical death is discussed in connection with sin. The question that is often asked is, would man have lived immortally on earth if he had not sinned? God warned Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for the day they eat of it, they must surely die. This implies that death came as a punishment for sin. Spiritual death occurs when one had separated himself from God through sin while eternal death is the second death which happens when one is lost completely in sin and cannot respond to spiritual matters. Christians believe that death cannot occur if God does not permit it. Furthermore, the choice to live forever lie in the hands of man if man can embrace God who gives eternal life.

Moral Lessons

1. Fear does not avert death. If anything, fear does more harm than good.
2. Death is not the end of life but a road that leads to another life.
3. The scripture promises eternal life when we live righteously here on earth. One cannot live a fulfilled life outside God.
4. All forms of oppression and domination should stop because the world indeed is not our home.
5. Religious leaders and all who are in the position to educate others should make them realize that God is the owner of life and he has the power to take it at will.

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