

Chapter 7:

New Life of Love

In the beginning of the course, we posed the question: “What is life?” In light of what we have covered in the past few weeks, we need to reconsider this question with the seriousness that it deserves. When we do so, we are faced with the reality of our mortality. We can ponder life seriously only in light of death.

THE OUTRAGE OF DEATH

There are two events in life common to every man: birth and death. Yet we experience death as shocking and unnatural. A philosopher once wrote that the one constant in life is death. The horizon of death colors all that we do in life.

If death is indeed the most natural thing, the one constant in life, why is it such an outrage when it happens? Children learn at a young age that all people die. Yet when we find ourselves sitting by the bedside of a loved one who crosses that mysterious line from the living to the dead, we experience it as an offense; it is an affront to the core of our beings. Our deepest intuition tells us that this is not how it’s supposed to be; that surely there must be something more to life.

Q. Have you experienced this bewilderment of death in your life? How did you feel?

We find ourselves oddly maladjusted to death; there is a part of us that cries out for continuity beyond the grave.

Death hits us as such an offense because there is a stamp of eternity in our souls. During our quiet moments, we sometimes sense traces of our own transcendence almost as if we have a mysterious memory of having been originally created to be eternal.



Almost the whole of Christian theology could perhaps be deduced from the two facts (a) That men make coarse jokes, and (b) That they feel the dead to be uncanny. The coarse joke proclaims that we have here an animal which finds its own animality either objectionable or funny.

Unless there had been a quarrel between the spirit and the organism I do not see how this could be: it is the very mark of the two not being "at home" together. But it is very difficult to imagine such a state of affairs as original - to suppose a creature which from the very first was half shocked and half tickled to death at the mere fact of being the creature it is. I do not perceive that dogs see anything funny about being dogs: I suspect that angels see nothing funny about being angels. Our feeling about the dead is equally odd. It is idle to say that we dislike corpses because we are afraid of ghosts. You might say with equal truth that we fear ghosts because we dislike corpses - for the ghost owes much of its horror to the associated ideas of pallor, decay, coffins, shrouds, and worms.

In reality we hate the division which makes possible the conception of either corpse or ghost. Because the thing ought not to be divided, each of the halves into which it falls by division is detestable. The explanations which Naturalism gives both of bodily shame and of our feeling about the dead are not satisfactory. It refers us to primitive taboos and superstitions - as if these themselves were not obviously results of the thing to be explained. But once you accept the Christian doctrine that man was originally a unity and then the present division is unnatural, and all the phenomena fall into place.

C.S. LEWIS, MIRACLES

Perhaps all of this is because the Bible is right when it records that death was not part of the original design. According to the Bible, death was an unwelcomed alien intrusion into God's plan.





THE TRAGEDY OF DEATH

Having cut ourselves away from God, we spend the majority of our waking hours pursuing ornaments to put on our Christmas tree lives. Hurried along by the rush of time, we hardly have the chance to stop and consider, “What is the point of all this? What’s the most important thing in life?” When faced with death, however, all the false things we chase after in this world fade away and the one thing that brings meaning to life is unveiled. Of what use are all the degrees, money, and accomplishments as you lie on the brink of death? Do they give you meaning? Do they confer on you the assurance that your life was well-spent?

Imagine the ridiculousness of a person who asks to see his degrees and bank statements for one last time on his deathbed because he’ll miss them so much. After all, aren’t those the very things that he worked so hard for? The reality is that when the time comes for us to breathe our last, we grieve for the love, not the possessions, we leave behind.

“When faced with death, however, all the false things we chase after in this world fade away and the one thing that brings meaning to life is unveiled.”

Yet the human predicament is that just when we try to hold onto love, death denies us the “happily ever after” that should surely follow. Love in this world seems hopelessly coupled with tragedy because it is so easily defeated. Love inherently demands “forever,” and all relationships seem to have a built-in requirement that they endure. It appears as yet another sign of fallenness that all our relationships are either ruptured by sin or severed by death.

Edgar Allen Poe conveys this quite poetically as he laments for his lost love in the 1845 poem, “The Raven.”



**Ah, distinctly I remember,
it was in the bleak December
And each separate dying ember
wrought its ghost upon the floor**

**Eagerly I wished the morrow;
vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow,
sorrow for the lost Lenore.**



**For the rare and radiant maiden
whom the angels name Lenore,
Nameless here forevermore.**

...

**Deep into that darkness peering,
long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams
no mortal ever dared to dream before;**



**This I whispered, and an echo
murmured back the word “Lenore!”
Merely this and nothing more.**

**But the silence was unbroken,
and the stillness gave no token
And the only word there spoken
was the whispered word, “Lenore!”²**



This is why the Bible calls death the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). Death was not part of God's design. Death entered as a consequence of sin, and it comes as an intruder into the circle of our families and friendships, putting an end to those relationships. It turns the lives of thousands into an unfinished fragment.

LOVE'S DEMAND FOR ETERNITY

If death is the end to all things, life is indeed a cruel joke. The transcendence of our souls is merely a mirage and love's demand for eternity ultimately goes unanswered. Death has the last laugh.


However, that is not the end, because at this point there's another whole story, the story of God's love for man.




"God's love story is not defeated by death."

1 John 4:8 and 4:16 say that God is love. It is the central feature of his character.

1 JOHN 4:8


 ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 JOHN 4:16


 ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Man's love may grind to a sudden, cruel halt at death, but God's love does not end at death. Our hold on our loved ones is only as strong as our mortality. However, God's love story is not defeated by death. The resurrection of Jesus is but one sign of this. Having defeated death, Jesus initiates a relationship with us that does not come to a sad end at the deathbed. God's love is forever.

JOHN 3:16

 ¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

ROMANS 8:37-39

 ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

Q. What is the message emphasized in the above Bible passages?

We can be comforted by this promise of God—the promise sealed with his own blood—that he will take us into his embrace no matter what happens.

THE RESURRECTION: A PROMISE

In light of the love of God that overcomes death, Jesus' mission on earth takes on a deeper, more personal meaning. The incarnation speaks eloquently about the nature of God, but the climax of the incarnation comes when God, after coming into this physical world where we reside, tastes death himself. God entered into the fabric of time and space and placed himself as a point in history, taking on a pinch of that fabric as his flesh.

Then he descended into death, and rose victorious. Jesus triumphed over death. Jesus became flesh and resurrected in the flesh, and ascended into heaven, and thus God forever changed this fabric.

Ever since the Fall, mankind has been going in a downward spiral toward death and decay. And just when we have lost all hope and strength, Jesus comes and resurrects, reversing the power of death. Jesus starts an upward spiral toward heaven, and all those who choose to trust him will share in this triumph as Jesus unites his destiny with ours. While the power of sin destroys and separates, the power of resurrection heals and unites.



But only a Man who did not need to have been a Man at all unless He had chosen, only one who served in our sad regiment as a volunteer, yet also only one who was perfectly a Man, could perform this perfect dying; and thus (which way you put it is unimportant) either defeat death or redeem it. He tasted death on behalf of all others. He is the representative “Die-er” of the universe: and for that very reason the Resurrection and the Life. Or conversely, because He truly lives, He truly dies, for that is the very pattern of reality. Because the higher can descend into the lower, He who from all eternity has been incessantly plunging Himself in the blessed death of self-surrender to the Father can also most fully descend into the horrible and (for us) involuntary death of the body. ...The whole Miracle, far from denying what we already know of reality, writes the comment which makes that crabbed text plain: or rather, proves itself to be the text on which Nature was only the commentary. In science we have been reading only the notes to a poem; in Christianity we find the poem itself.³

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1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-22



²⁰ A But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Jesus' resurrection becomes the "firstfruit" of our own resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:20-22). His resurrection issues a wonderful promise that we will likewise resurrect to be united with God.

JOHN 14:18-21



¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

Q. According to the previous two passages, what phrase links our own lives to Jesus' life?

Many experience the future with anxiety. But to Christians, the future isn't a rapidly closing window to be grasped and squeezed for all its worth. Instead, it's a never-ending love story with God. Our eternal life with Christ starts now.



HEAVEN: THE PROMISE FULFILLED

JOHN 14:1-4



¹“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to where I am going.”

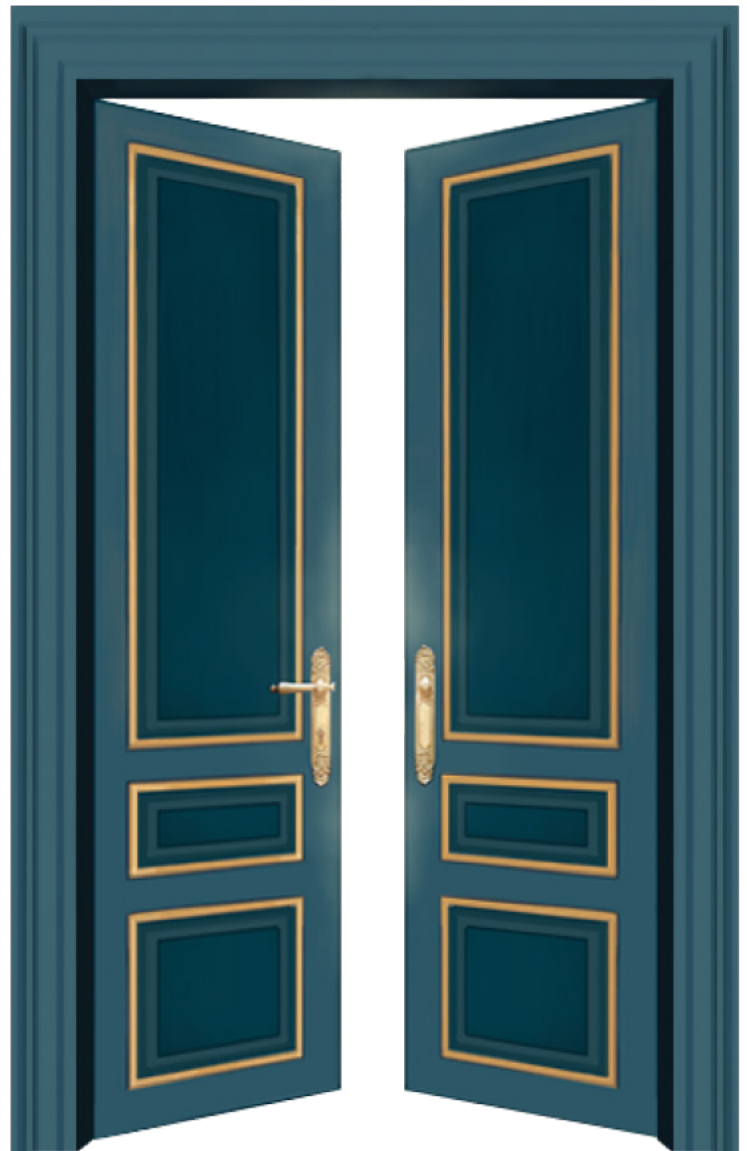
Q. What is Jesus’ promise?

Ultimately, our love story with God is continued in heaven. Jesus said that he is going to prepare a place for us, so that we can be where he is. The event of the resurrection is a promise of everlasting love, of eternal dwelling with God in heaven.

What will heaven be like? The image of baby angels flying around playing harps is a popular, but unbiblical, imagery that we have from old religious paintings. Parents experience a little bit of heaven every time they stare into the face of their child. They can stare into that face for hours, and it seems like only a couple of minutes.

Love seems to take us out of time. Heaven is like that. Worship and adoration of God is at the center of heaven. Worship is experiencing and expressing the worth of something truly worthy of worship. The closest experience of something like this might

be breathtaking scenery or a wonderful piece of music (or cheering on your favorite team and shouting in heartfelt approval of a worthy feat of athleticism). You experience being lost in that scenery or music; it is so wonderful that it takes you out of yourself. You might experience something like this in the midst of hilarious laughter. You don’t care how silly you look at that moment, because you are quite oblivious to yourself. These are clues to how we were made—God created us so that when we lose ourselves in adoration of something outside of ourselves, we experience life at its peak. That’s what heaven will be like. It is a place where we will finally be free from the bondage of self, and be lost in worship of God.





The problem is that we have been worshipping degraded, cheap things for so long that we don't know what it's like to be in awe of something truly worthy of worship. So when we try to conceive of heaven, we think of it in terms of its absences. C.S. Lewis said we're like a country boy who would prefer going on making mudpies in the dirt because he can't understand what is meant by the offer of a vacation by the sea. The problem is not that we desire too much; it is that we settle for too little. There is immense joy, a joy that we might have never known, in giving worship to God, the only one worthy of worship.

LIFE WITH CHRIST

LUKE 9:24

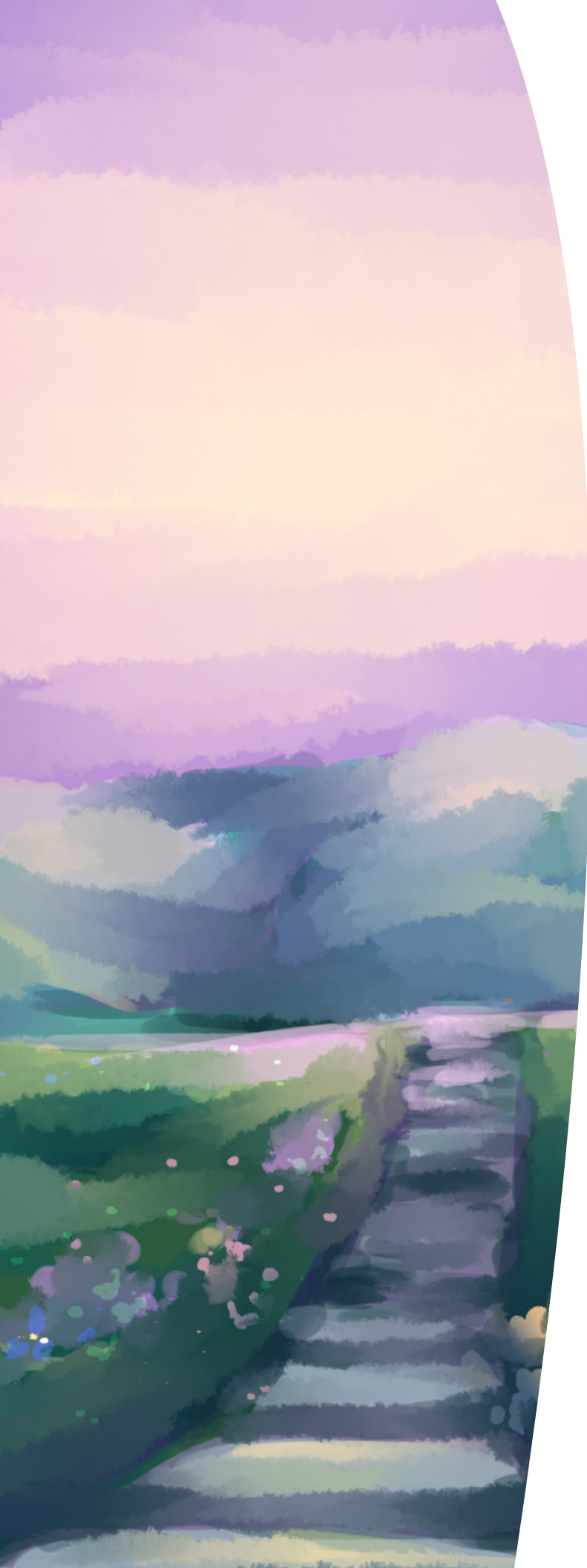


²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

An invitation to follow Jesus is basically an invitation to a relationship of trust and allegiance to Christ. It is an invitation to lose ourselves in love for Jesus, and ironically, in so doing, we find ourselves. Jesus is imploring us to let go of the tiring grasp we have on our lives that is causing us to bend forever inward. Instead, he calls us to experience life as it was meant to be lived.

We need not be afraid that we won't be able to live a life worthy of the gospel. So many people, especially those who have successfully avoided failing their entire lives, are afraid of "failure" as a Christian.


But that would be missing the point. We become Christians because we are fully acknowledging that we are sinners, and that means that we will fail.



But of course that's the case with anything worthwhile (e.g., marriage and child-rearing).

However, we are not left to our own efforts when we walk with Jesus. God will help us through the Holy Spirit and through the church.

JOHN 16:7-15

 ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

¹² "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Q. What are the things that the Holy Spirit, or the Counselor, will do?

FEAR NOT

“Fear not” is the command most often stated in the entire Bible. We can understand why: because to respond to the Living, Almighty God is terrifying. You might have initially approached this course with nothing more than a light curiosity, and perhaps you’ve been surprised to find many of your questions answered. Perhaps you’ve been disturbed by the truthfulness of the gospel. This can sometimes feel a little startling.

Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract and negative deity to the living God. I do not wonder. Here lies the tap-root of Pantheism and of the objection to traditional imagery. It was hated not, at bottom, because it pictured Him as man but because it pictured Him as king, or even as warrior. The Pantheist’s God does nothing, demands nothing.

He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away from His glance. If He were the truth, then we could really say that all the Christian images of kingship were a historical accident of which our religion ought to be cleansed. It is with shock that we discover them to be indispensable.

You have had a shock like that before, in connection with smaller matters—when the line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness. So here; the shock comes at the precise moment when the thrill of life is communicated to us along the clue we have been following. It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out!” we cry, “it’s alive.” And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity. An “impersonal God”—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all.

But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (“Man’s search for God”!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?”⁴

C.S. LEWIS, MIRACLES

It is at this point God comes to you and says, “Fear not.” God, whose presence we are terrified by and attracted to, comes with an invitation of reconciliation and love. This is the gospel.



Q. What is your personal response to this week's material?

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