

Creationist 2.0

Creating Is Dying

19 March 2023

Call to Worship – Psalm 130

From the depths of despair, O LORD, I call for your help.

Hear my cry, O Lord. Pay attention to my prayer.

LORD, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive?

But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you.

I am counting on the LORD; yes, I am counting on him.

I have put my hope in his word.

O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is unfailing love.

His redemption overflows.

When I survey

Isaac Watts

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession – Bethne Dodd

by Bethne Dodd (March 2023)

What a wildly wonderful world, God!
May everything that has breath praise the Lord!

Brillianted by the Aurora Australis
Back-boned by the Southern Alps
Blanketed by the Pacific
Braided by well-watered rivers
Blessed by crops and creatures alike
We are swathed in wonder.
We pause to breathe in Your glory...

Gloriously-robed God
Clothed in majesty
Draped in long white cloud
Dressed in sunshine
Apparelled in celestial light *
You bring new life to the earth.
We pause to breathe in Your glory...

Lord Holy Spirit - God's best gift
Wind-born messenger
Ambassador of fire and flame
You are our ultimate Comforter
Our ever-present Helper
You bring new life to us all.
We pause to breathe in Your glory...

Lord Jesus Christ of the open hands
Word become flesh
Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace
Giver of Resurrection and Life
You are Love-bearer, Stone-shifter, Way-maker
You bring new life to us all.
We pause to breathe in Your glory...

Forgive us the times we fail to appreciate the depth and beauty of God's
gloriously good earth - Your creation
And those You have created.

We bring our private confessions before You now... (Pause)

Remind us, what a wildly wonderful world this is, God.

Revive us by Your Holy Spirit

Renew us in Christ Jesus.

May everything that has breath praise the Lord!

Amen

** William Wordsworth - Ode on Intimations of Immortality*

The Peace

Reading Romans 8:6-11 (NLT)

⁶ So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. ⁷ For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. ⁸ That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

⁹ But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.)

¹⁰ And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. ¹¹ The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

Reflection

Nobody likes talking about death. There is of course the well-known saying that nothing is certain except death and taxes. But in spite of its certainty, in spite of the fact that it comes to us all, no-one likes talking about it. In many families we go so far as to shield our children from the unpleasantness of death. I have been at funerals where the children have been left at home, not because they are likely to cause a problem but because the parents don't want to talk about how someone has died. Of course, in a community like this with a predominance of farmers there is often a different attitude because animals frequently die on our watch and we have to get on and deal with it. But even here it is surprising how often people don't want to talk about the certainty of their own death. So, we use words like she has passed, or he has gone to a better place.

One of the ways we hide the grim reality that our time on this planet has come to an end is by talking about things like heaven and resurrection. I say this, not as a cynical way of destroying hopes and dreams, rather to open up opportunities for conversation. Take the idea of the Pearly Gates for an example. I can't pass up this opportunity for a joke...

Jesus is walking past the pearly gates one day when St. Peter asks him to fill in for a while so he can take a break. Jesus is a bit concerned and protests that he doesn't know the admissions procedure. St. Peter tells him it's easy, just look up the name in The Book and pass judgement, and that Jesus is well qualified to do that. Jesus agrees and sits down to wait for the next arrival.

Soon, an old man slowly walks up and sits down across from Jesus. He looks around, squinting, obviously having trouble seeing. He looks at Jesus and says "I'm looking for my son. I'll recognize him by the nail holes in his hands and feet."

Jesus gets wide eyed, looks at the old man and asks "Dad?"

The old man squints, looks closer at Jesus and asks "Pinocchio?"
I quite liked that one.

The reason I mention the idea of the Pearly Gates is that they are a part of a much larger set of myths about death and what happens when we die. Nearly every culture has some package of ideas of what happens after a person dies. Early Biblical thought seems to go for oblivion – a simple cessation of consciousness. Later, from Daniel onward we begin to see the forming of ideas around resurrection, although exactly what that implies going forward is not very clear. Even less clear are the ideas of heaven and hell.

Moving to Christian thought we have a more fully developed idea of resurrection, but even here it is difficult to define exactly what resurrection might look like and how it might work. Even Jesus seems more inclined to leave cryptic, hard to understand comments than to bring any clarity to the matter.

All of which means we are left with very little to go on. And being fully formed humans we are very bad at living in a vacuum. What is the answer? Why to fill the vacuum with our own ideas, no matter whether they make any real sense or not.

Here are some words from hymns that refer to heaven and or hell

He the pearly gates will open

In life's eventide, at twilight,
At His door I'll knock and wait;
By the precious love of Jesus,
I shall enter heaven's gate.

He Hideth My Soul

When clothed in his brightness, transported I rise
to meet him in clouds of the sky,
his perfect salvation, his wonderful love,
I'll shout with the millions on high.

When we all get to heaven

Onward to the prize before us!
Soon His beauty we'll behold;
Soon the pearly gates will open—
We shall tread the streets of gold.

I shall enter heavens gate. I rise to meet in clouds of the sky. Soon the pearly gates will open, we shall tread the streets of gold.

Now I get that in some ways this is aspirational. But these ideas that people sing about make very little sense. Yet we continue to sing them because they make us feel better about a very uncomfortable topic. It is true that the thought of simply ceasing to exist draws on primal fears of oblivion and futility. The simple fact is that for the most part we are afraid, either a little or a lot, of what happens next. What will happen to me? Will it be nice? Will I be OK? How will I be? Who will be there? Where, when, how, who, why, so many questions and no answers. No-one that we know has truly come back. Yes, we read about Lazarus and Jesus and various other minor characters in the Bible, but I've yet to meet anyone who has had a recent conversation with Lazarus. So we fill the vacuum with ideas that make us feel better about what we don't know.

How, you might wonder, does this get to Creating is Dying? I want to suggest that in our eagerness to feel better about death we lose sight of the wonder that surrounds our every day lives. In turn we forget so easily that God sent the Holy Spirit to give us life, and in the words of Jesus, to have that life more abundantly. When we have Jesus embedded in our lives we live better. It seems to me that death, and acceptance of death is necessary if we are to live our lives to their fullest. By accepting that death is inevitable and that what

happens after that is unknowable, we have a choice of two pathways to follow. Either we bemoan our condition, regretting that we have life only to lose it. Or we rejoice in what we have before us and make the absolute most of what we have. Perhaps that is why some of the happiest people I have ever met are those who seem to have very little to celebrate. It is easier for them to put down their little and rejoice in living. They create joy by being joyful in their moment. I find myself thinking that perhaps accepting death as our final lot, no matter what happens afterwards might lead to greater joy, greater hope and greater love – surely a most creative combination.

Amazing Grace (My chains are gone)

John Newton, Chris Tomlin

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed

My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Saviour has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace

The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow
The sun forbear to shine
But God, who called me here below
Will be forever mine
Will be forever mine
You are forever mine

Reading

John 11:1-16

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Reflection

I am hoping that you are not thinking that I am being morbid talking about death and dying. The thing is, I think it is an important subject. It may not be a subject full of levity and laughter, but that doesn't mean we pretend it doesn't exist and fail to talk about it. I'm also inclined to think the story of scripture is replete with new and often overlooked ways of thinking about death. Leaving the idea of resurrection aside, we find a fascinating insight into Jesus' insights into death in the story of Lazarus.

The first insight is how Jesus defines death. Notice how Jesus says to the disciples, 'This illness does not lead to death.' We know the story. We know very well that this illness did, in fact, lead to death. Then what is Jesus talking about? There are some who would say Jesus didn't know what he was talking about, or he made a mistake. That is possible, but unlikely given the rest of the story. So let's put that to one side and go onto another possibility. Jesus was

right about the illness, but something went wrong in the meantime and it suddenly got much worse. Again, plausible, but it doesn't fit with the rest of the story either.

Which leaves us with Jesus knowing that Lazarus was going to die, but his definition of illness and death is different to ours. I find this possibility fascinating because it creates branches to the familiar story that head in different directions to what we would normally expect. I am going into speculation mode here because I have no way of proving my thinking, but let's say for the moment that Jesus looks at death and sees something both subtly and profoundly different to what we see. Subtle because it is easy to miss and profound because it gets to the heart of how God understands death.

At this point I wanted to go on a deep philosophical and physical dive into theories around time and space and how they might relate to death. But I realised that it would likely end up confusing and unhelpful, although you are most welcome to ask me more later. So, instead, let's try for a more straightforward response.

How is God's view of death subtly different to yours and mine? Perhaps it might be easiest to imagine if you think of two people standing side by side looking into the distance. One person has their view blocked by a wall. All they can really see is the wall in the way. It is a boring concrete slab structure with little to identify it as interesting in any way. The other person can see past the building to a river and trees and in the far distance, snow capped mountains. They can see the wall too, but it doesn't block their view. We are like the first person. When we look to the future all we see is the wall that represents the end of our lives. God, as the second person, sees the wall, but also looks past it to see what is beyond. It is the same beyond for us, the snow-capped mountains are there, we just can't see them.

God's profound view of death is closely related. Because God sees beyond the concrete wall he is able to wrap us up and hold us close as we near the wall. Exactly like a parent holding a child close when they are afraid, God holds us close as we near the wall, knowing that the wall is not the end.

I think it means that God is profoundly affected by our fear, by our joy, by all our emotions as we move toward that wall. Whether we do our best to ignore it, or embrace it with all our hearts, God is right there with us. It doesn't change the fact that the wall is right there ahead of us. It means that we do not

approach it alone. And more, we approach it with the one who knows that the wall is not all that is there.

I will say that I don't think anyone apart from God, knows what is beyond the wall. As long as we get there with God it will be OK. And here is where I think that Creating is Dying. Finding ourselves in the arms of the One who truly loves us allows us to focus on what matters most. It's not the end that matters, it is the ending. It is not what is beyond that matters, it is with whom we greet the beyond. Is there fear? Of course there is. Is there uncertainty? I'm positive there is. There may be pain, there is likely doubt. In all of this we are not alone as Christ walks alongside us. That is truly the Creator creating in us.

We Pray

God, who died for us, we come to you. Thank you that we can rest in your loving arms, no matter what might seem to be ahead of us. For those who are not afraid we thank you for their strength and courage. For those who are afraid, whether a little or a lot we ask for your strength and courage. Gift us the ability to receive your comfort and to live in your hope. Open our eyes to see Jesus as he waits patiently for us. In Jesus, who sees beyond the wall, we pray. Amen.

A deleted side-note should you be interested.

I begin with the subtle. You and I see time as something that is linear. We look back into history, we look forward into the future, all from a fixed but moving perspective of NOW. Time is a tyrant in the sense that we have no control over it. We cannot, even at government decree step back a single millisecond in time, or forward beyond the normal progression of time for that matter. But for God, time is not linear at all. God sits outside of time and space and so can observe the past and the future together as a single event. Imagine a marble. Inside the marble is a world populated with tiny figures. They go about their business without any idea that on the outside we are holding the marble in our hand, rotating it, looking through it, moving it in space. If we think of the marble as time – we go about our affairs inside the marble, one step after the other. Meanwhile God looks at the marble as a whole object, able to see it and move it. And, yes, I know, I am getting into wild speculation now and maybe some people are completely lost but what I get from this is that perhaps God doesn't see death as an ending point like we do.

Open the eyes of my heart

Paul Baloche

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord

Open the eyes of my heart

I want to see You

I want to see You

To see You high and lifted up

Shining in the light of Your glory

Pour out Your power and love

As we sing holy, holy, holy

Holy, holy, holy

We cry holy, holy, holy

You are holy, holy, holy

I want to see you

Offering

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning>

Almighty and restoring God, we have been living through some difficult days, as churches and as individuals. We experience days when we rise, wondering if we will make it through one more day, whether the church will survive for another generation; and we feel like those dry bones in the valley. As we offer our tithes and offerings, help us to hear the word of hope the prophet shares, not just with our ears but with our hearts. May it call us back to life and service, out of the graves of despair in which we have buried ourselves. In Christ's holy name. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves – Joy Davis – Presbyterian Support

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, holy be your name

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

Blessed Assurance

Fanny Crosby

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Saviour all the day long.

Perfect communion, perfect delight,
visions of rapture now burst on my sight.
Angels descending bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest.
I in my Saviour am happy and bless'd,
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love.

Benediction and Grace

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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