

Origin of Death

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm so thankful to see so many of you returned after last week. I promise not every part of this series will be quite so depressing, but we are talking about death.

So, by nature, it's going to be a little depressing. We continue our study now on the study based on the book, Remember Death, by Matthew McCullough.

And if you will, go with me to Genesis chapter 1 in your Bibles. Genesis chapter 1. I was tempted to read the entire chapter, but I think I'll read only portions of it, starting at verse 1.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness he called night.

[1 : 05] And there was evening, and there was morning the first day. And God said, Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse.

And it was so. And God called the expanse heaven, and there was evening, and there was morning the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and then let the dry land appear.

And it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called seas. And God saw that it was good. And this pattern essentially continues throughout the remainder of creation.

God speaks, it happens, and God declares it good. Now let's skip down to verse 26. Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image.

[2 : 17] In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the heavens, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

Now, one of the struggles of humanity has been understanding our identities, understanding ourselves.

Who are we in the grand scheme of things? On the one hand, we appear to be like nothing else we can observe in all the universe.

[3 : 26] We are unique. We have a level of consciousness and self-awareness that no other creature can rival. We have superior intelligence. We have creativity. On the other hand, as many secularists have asserted over time, perhaps human beings are little more than clumps of cells made of stardust.

Regardless of one's view, science is science, right? Fact is fact. And while no one has been able to definitively prove such theories as evolution, one thing remains certain.

We can observe it. We can replicate it beyond all reasonable doubt. The science says we will die. That is absolutely certain.

Eventually, every last person will breathe his or her last breath. Eventually, every heart will stop beating. So where does this leave us?

Where does this leave humanity in our search for identity? You know, even someone who holds a secular viewpoint or a worldview instinctively knows that human beings are special.

[4 : 36] We know that we are not like rocks and trees and insects and we treat human beings differently than those things for a reason. We seem to naturally understand human beings do not belong in the same category.

We are, in fact, elevated above the rocks and the trees and the insects. There's just one glaring problem for us. We die.

We die. Here's Solomon's commentary on the matter in Ecclesiastes 3. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same.

As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath and man has no advantage over the beasts for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust and to dust all return.

The reality of death creates undeniable tension for us. Even a staunch atheist wants to believe we are unique, elevated above the animals and everything else in the natural universe.

[5 : 46] But death stands in our way. How can we claim to be special when the fate of man is no different than the fate of animals or any other living creature?

Let's take this concept down to a personal level. I want you to imagine. I want you to imagine you've died. Maybe a week or so has passed since your funeral.

You can close your eyes literally or figuratively and just envision the world without you. What do you see? Now, chances are you see family and friends grieving.

Maybe you see your spouse trying to adjust to life without you. You see people visiting your grave, perhaps. Maybe you left them a voicemail a few weeks ago and they are listening to it over and over again just to hear your voice.

Maybe they're staring at your picture with tears in their eyes. Maybe you see people erecting monuments in your memory and naming buildings after you.

[6 : 54] If so, I can probably recommend a few good books on humility. Regardless of what you envision, though, it's kind of an interesting exercise, which I'm about to ruin for you.

Whatever you think may happen following your death, it probably borders on narcissism. Whatever you envision, go back to that mental picture.

Who's the main character in the story? You are, right? Even after we're gone, we struggle to picture a world where we are not at the center of it.

By a show of hands, how many of you can tell me the full names of all of your great-grandparents? Well, I thought maybe I'd get one or two.

Goes to show you, the world has a short memory, doesn't it? Most people are forgotten within just a few generations. Even if you happen to be someone in whose memory monuments are erected, those monuments are just as perishable as we are.

[8 : 11] As the preacher in Ecclesiastes observes, I saw all the living who move about under the sun. Along with that youth who grew up to stand in the king's place, there was no end of all the people, all of whom he led.

Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. One could be the king of a great nation, but he'll still be forgotten.

Which rules out any vain notion we might have that we can achieve a semblance of immortality if only we secure our place in history.

You know what I mean? If we get our names in the history books, if we make a name for ourselves while we're still here, perhaps we can just live forever through our legacy.

Solomon disagrees. Ecclesiastes 9 says, In other words, achieving immortality through the legacy we happen to leave behind, that's not immortality.

[9 : 32] That's not immortality. The memory of them is forgotten, Solomon says. Plus, they have no more share in what is done under the sun.

So even if people do erect monuments in our memory and celebrate us when we're gone, we won't be here to enjoy it. We won't be here to see it. So this is the tension death imposes on us.

When we consider humanity in a broad sense, our gut tells us that human beings have greater value in the universe than any other creature, but death seems to call that notion into question, doesn't it?

If we return to the dust just like the animals, how can we suggest we're any better? How can we say we have more value? And when we consider humanity at a personal level, an individual level, we're prone to think of ourselves as the main character in the story of the universe, but death proves we're not.

Solomon says, There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things, yet to be among those who come after. The world, it moves on without us.

[10 : 44] It doesn't implode because we're no longer here to be the center of it. So who are we? In light of death, who are we? Are we significant?

Do we have the kind of value that we naturally feel we have? Or are we merely an insignificant speck in the universe, no better than the goldfish we flush down the toilet?

As one author writes, Man is literally split in two. He has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness, and then he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.

So who are we? And what are the implications of our identities? Well, let's consider what the creation story teaches us about ourselves. In the beginning, God created.

If you're taking notes, you may want to print that point boldly. In the beginning, God created. Natural creation, and this includes us, is not the result of a cosmic accident.

[11 : 59] The dilemma we face as mortal beings cannot be resolved until we understand and accept the world as God's intentional design and creation.

That is why Solomon's primary message throughout the book of Ecclesiastes to potentially secular-minded people is what? Remember your creator.

Remember your creator. Life can have no meaning apart from God. Without God, we have no reason to think we have value. Without God, we are just goldfish waiting to be flushed.

If you want to get really technical about it, without God, we're not here. But you understand my point. When I was living in North Carolina, I bought copies of John's Gospel by the case.

And I would take stacks of them and leave them in various public places like coffee shops and whatnot. And I would always write the same message on the inside cover. And I don't know how exactly I came...

[13 : 04] This came to be the message that I wrote. But here's what I used to write in those. I cannot make sense of the world or life itself apart from a sovereign creator who providentially rules the universe according to a wise, benevolent plan.

And if this God exists, it seems to me the most important pursuit of our lives is learning everything we can about him and his will. Perhaps this book will be a starting place for you.

And then I would sign my name and add my email address in case someone wanted to discuss further. Now, it's been years since I've left any copies of John's Gospel anywhere, but I recently received an email from a young man, very encouraging, who had found one and kept one.

And he told me that he got stuck on that first line, I cannot make sense of the world apart from a sovereign creator. The more he thought about it, he said, the more he realized he couldn't make sense of the world either.

Then after reading and meditating upon John's Gospel for the better part of three years, he finally reached the conclusion that God must exist.

[14 : 25] He could see no other possibility. This young man is right, of course. There is no other possibility. In the beginning, God created.

Keep that in mind as we continue. All of creation flows from God and his purpose. The second thing to notice in the creation story is the pattern, followed by an aberration of that pattern.

What's the pattern? God said, and it was so. God said, and it was so. This is a pattern throughout the first five days of creation.

God speaks, and the next part of his creation is formed. But things are a little different on that sixth and final day. Glance down again at verse 26.

Then God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heaven and over the livestock and so on.

[15 : 30] As God prepares to speak his final part of creation into existence, the text reads as though he seems to pause for just a moment to address, I believe, the other members of the Trinity.

Rather than God said, and it was so, it is God said, let us make man. Immediately, we see there's something significant about humanity in contrast to every other part of creation, five days of creation.

We see everything seem to roll right off the Lord's tongue. And then something changes here on day six. It's subtle. But if you flip over to Genesis 2, you'll see that Genesis 2 elaborates even further on the difference.

It says, in verse 7, the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. And the man became a living creature.

So God takes an additional, perhaps seemingly unnecessary step, when he forms the first man. And this is true when he forms the first woman. In verse 21, the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man.

[16 : 50] And while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man, he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

So even a casual reading of the creation story shows us that humanity is not quite like the rest of creation.

We're different. We're special. We are unique. How so? This is the crux of the matter. Verse 26 again, God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

Now, according to Romans 1, all of creation reveals certain attributes of God. But God designs only people to bear the image and likeness of himself, of his son, and of his spirit.

He weaves his attributes into the very fabric of man and woman, more than any other part of his creation. We are like him in a very real sense.

[17 : 59] We are intelligent, creative, moral agents equipped with a mind and a heart and a will. And he gives us the faculties to mirror him and his character.

He even grants us a measure of authority and responsibility over the rest of creation. You see that in verse 26 and beyond? And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heaven and over the livestock and so on?

So, God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. And God blessed them.

And God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Notice how God intends for us to expand his creation as sub-creators, if you will, and subdue it and have dominion.

So, clearly, there is something special about humanity. God gives us unique dignity above and beyond the rest of creation.

[19 : 11] In fact, it is only after the creation of both man and woman that we read and God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good.

Very good. According to Genesis 1, as you read the creation story, every part of creation was good. God declared each part of it good, but his creation of mankind, that's the apex here.

Everything fall, everything else, I should say, falls under man and woman. God intends for everything else to essentially serve man and woman. So, in short, we're not wrong to believe we have tremendous value as human beings because we do.

This is by God's design. Every one of us is an image bearer of God himself. Each and every one of us is, in fact, special and unique.

We are not replaceable parts in some big machine. Oh, no, the wheel fell off. Well, slap a new one on it, it'll be good as new. That's not the way it is for us.

[20 : 27] Instinctively, I think everyone knows this is true, too. We feel it. We sense it. And I'm not just talking about the church. I'm not just talking about believers. I'm talking about everyone.

We all sense it. If I were to lose one of my children, for instance, I could have a hundred more children, but I could not replace the one I lost.

We're not replaceable. Every human life on this earth has sanctity. By virtue of creation itself, we are made in the image of God.

God. But then we come to Genesis 3. Genesis 3. As it happens, man was not content to be God's image bearer.

He preferred to be God. Or at the very least, like God. He wasn't content to be a sub-creator. He acts as though he wants to be the creator. And all of this begins with a subtle question from the serpent.

[21 : 35] In verse 1, did God actually say? Did God actually say? This question creates an interesting contrast for me between Genesis 1 and Genesis 3.

Because in Genesis 1, God said, and it was so. His word was undeniable. The power and the authority of his word were abundantly clear.

And in Genesis 3, the serpent's first temptation is to call that power and authority of God's word into question. Did God actually say?

And I just wonder if there was any part of Adam that looked around the garden and thought, maybe, just maybe, we shouldn't question God's word. Just look at what it created.

regardless, Adam was well aware of what God had said to him. You may surely eat of the tree of the garden, of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

[22 : 48] Adam, if you attempt to subvert my will and define your life by your own terms, you will actually lose your life.

As the serpent continues his temptation, he directly contradicts God's word saying, you will not surely die. You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.

And as we know, Adam listened to the serpent rather than God. He ate from the forbidden tree and what happens? Immediately, Adam and Eve feel guilty, they feel ashamed, they're fearful.

We're told the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin cloths in what was a vain attempt to cover their shame.

they instantly feel themselves separated from their source of life, from their source of dignity.

[24 : 01] Verse 8 says, when the Lord God comes walking through the garden, where does he find them? Hiding. Hiding. As we continue reading, we discover the devastation of sin goes even further.

The hostility between humanity and the serpent increases. Our original call to be fruitful and multiply now comes with tremendous pain. Tension rises between men, women, husbands, and wives.

The work that we have to do on this earth has now become terribly difficult. And of course, we will die. Not to mention suffer the pain and the separation and every other horrible thing that comes with death.

You know, for us, sin is just a part of life, right? It's a part of life and death is normal. But the point is, that was not the case in the beginning.

That was not the case. Sin wasn't a part of God's good design. He did not create us to die. He did not create us to suffer. And that is why death produces tension within ourselves regarding our identities.

[25 : 29] So we try to think about who we are. You know, we feel that we should be special, but death comes along, it interrupts, and it argues, no, you're not. You're no better than that goldfish that gets flushed down the toilet.

When you think about it, death is a very appropriate punishment for sin. If sin comes from this desire to be like God, then death is a cold, hard reminder that we are not him.

Psalms 90 says, God is from everlasting to everlasting. everlasting. But humanity, because of sin, is like grass that flourishes in the morning and is renewed, yet in the evening it fades and it withers.

Matthew McCullough writes, death tells us we are not at the center of the universe. We are not indispensable. The world will go on without us.

We are not too important to die. Death makes a statement about who we are. And the Bible tells us that that's its whole purpose. The dignity we feel and the indignity of death aren't in absurd contradiction.

[26 : 45] The tension comes not from some mistake in an evolutionary code. The dignity we feel is real, but death shows it doesn't belong to us.

Now what does McCullough mean when he says it doesn't belong to us? Well we might say it doesn't belong to us any longer. It's obscured. Our dignity was a gift.

A gift we essentially tossed away when we sinned against God who gave us our dignity. We may still be image bearers of God but we have severely marred that image and death is the proof of it.

You see. Let's say I buy a brand new car and then I proceed to drive that car right into a tree. tree. Now that car had tremendous value but it wasn't designed for somebody to drive into a tree.

Right? The reason we feel ourselves to have value above the rest of creation is because that's how God made us. That's how he designed us.

[27 : 48] And the reason we feel conflicted about that is because we drove ourselves right into a tree. In a matter of speaking, we stepped outside of God's purpose and design.

You know, I'd still, after I crashed my car, I'd still like to think of myself as the owner of a brand new car and in a sense, I guess that's true. But the truth is, the car's ruined.

How does an atheist solve this dilemma? He doesn't acknowledge God as our creator, obviously, so he has no objection to the explanation for human dignity or the sanctity of life.

There's no reason for it. He doesn't believe in an existence outside of time and space, heaven that is, so death has the final word.

You don't leave here. You just die. The end. So he has no reason to think human beings have value and he can have no hope in any kind of salvation, so what does he do?

[28 : 56] Well, Albert Camus, I believe is how his name is pronounced, C-A-M-U-S, a 20th century philosopher, he was known for statements like this, knowing we all die makes life a joke.

He believed we may as well embrace the absurd. Embrace the absurd, and by absurd he meant the conflict between our tendency to seek meaning and life and, according to him, the impossibility of ever finding it.

You'll never find meaning in life, according to him. He says life is altogether absurd because we can't reconcile the conflict between the dignity we feel and the obscurity that death imposes upon us, so he offered two suggestions.

First one's a little dark. First, he said we could commit suicide. Did I mention this man won a Nobel Prize?

Rather than delay the inevitable, he says, you know, give yourself a measure of control. You can't give your life meaning, but at least you can determine when it will end.

[30 : 14] Now, he actually preferred a second option, and I'm not too surprised. He suggested instead that we simply live in denial. Simply ignore the fact that life has no meaning.

Why don't you just go about your day pretending like death is not the end? You know, I believe the Bible puts his philosophy this way. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

And I believe most of the world is partial to this approach. But how does God respond to that? According to Luke 12, God said to the man who said, I'm going to relax, eat, drink, and be merry, God said to him, fool, this night your soul is required of you.

It is appointed for man to die once and then comes judgment. There's a significant reason the church should not avoid talking about death.

There's a reason we should not avoid confronting people with the inevitability of death along with its shame and its horrors. Confronting our mortality can be a powerful catalyst for obtaining hope.

[31 : 32] That's why Moses prays, Lord, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. That's the motivation behind Solomon's words when he says it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting because this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart.

There's something to be gained by honestly facing death and not just the death of others but the death of ourselves which is inevitable.

Now what is that something? What's to be gained? Well listen to Paul in Romans 6 for the wages of sin is death but it's an important but but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Listen again to Hebrews 9 and I'm going to read a little bit more of it and just as it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment so Christ having been offered wants to bear the sins of many will appear a second time not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Bad news immediately followed by the good news. The good news is good news because you've just read the bad news. You see that pattern? McCullough says the gospel offers a liberating life-giving alternative to denial and despair.

[33 : 22] There is no need for denial. Death's implications for who we are provide a crucial backdrop for the work of Christ and there is no need for despair.

Union with Christ radically transforms who we are. We must hear and accept the statement death makes about who we are before we can fully rejoice in the message of the gospel.

Death says you are less important than you've ever allowed yourself to believe. The gospel says you are far more loved than you've ever imagined. You are not too important to die but you are important enough that God gave his only begotten son so that if you believe in him you will not perish but have eternal life.

you will not be defined by death. So we have a problem with identity but the gospel offers the solution.

Not only does the Bible explain the problem it gives us reasons for this conflict within us but the gospel further offers sinners brand new identities.

[34 : 39] Conflict resolved. If anyone is in Christ he is what? A new creation. The old has passed away behold the new has come.

Put off the old self Paul says and put on the new self. Thanks be to Christ life can have meaning and death does not get the final word. That's the gospel.

If we are in Christ everything changes. While we still acknowledge we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God we also realize that we are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

We are justified. We are not condemned. As we've heard over these last few weeks there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

None. God says we are innocent. As a result we are indispensable and we possess tremendous value because in Christ God has restored our dignity.

[35 : 50] If we are in Christ our identity is no longer in fallen Adam but in our life giving Lord and Savior. You know death it disoriented us.

It confused us about who we really are but Christ comes along and he reorients us. He sets us straight. He clears our minds. He assures us of who we are and who are we.

If we are in Christ who are we? We are children of our heavenly father. God I think one of my favorite passages in all the Bible certainly in John's first epistle throughout 1 John he's writing to people who maybe are a little shaky they need some assurance they need some confidence they've seen people fall away from the faith they're worried about their own salvation how can I know I'm saved and John is explaining things to them he's trying to give them some comfort and he comes to a point at the very beginning of chapter 3 1 John chapter 3 where he almost I don't know if the right way to put it is he surprises himself he says see behold what kind of love the father has given us that we should be called children of God and so we are he says what kind of love that we should be the children of God that's who we are in

Christ that's who we will always be in Christ Paul writes for I am sure that neither death nor life nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord nothing so it's not a shaky identity either it's firm but here's the remaining dilemma and I'll end with this thought until a person truly feels the sting of death until he or she truly embraces death as a serious problem and I mean his problem her problem my problem he or she may never seek a solution why would you if you don't think you have a problem you don't go looking for a solution in other words he or she will never turn to

Christ that he or she might find his or her identity in him consider Paul's words at the end of Romans 7 verse 24 he says wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death he knows he has a problem right he knows he's a dying man and he knows what dying ultimately means otherwise he wouldn't cry out like this wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death and because he knows his heart could be receptive to the solution he says thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord if we don't confront death the gospel really won't mean that much will it we're dismissed to help another time