

When We Glimpse the End of Things by Pastor Marty

In the 1999 film *The Mummy*, Imhotep comes back from the dead to try and remake the world in his image. At the end of this movie, he makes a rather foreboding statement: “Death is only the beginning.” This is a perfect set-up for the sequel, which features his second return from death. When he says this, he indicates that death does not “end the story” because there are always more chapters: eternity is much longer than a single lifespan, and there are infinite possibilities. From an exclusively technical perspective, there is truth in his statement. Often, the end of one thing is the beginning of something else; one type of death is the beginning of a new type of life. Reality really does, in certain ways, reflect *The Neverending Story*; there are stories within stories that we tend to miss because we are often focused entirely on our own story. Of course, these are both imperfect reflections of reality, but they do reveal that aspects of truth can be found in the most surprising places. As we approach Good Friday and Easter Sunday, this might be a good time to reflect on our own understanding and assumptions concerning life, death, and eternity. It is always possible we may discover something new.

As we examine our beliefs and assumptions, we might discover something unexpected.

I know two people who died in the last week: in the first case, a family member committed suicide; in the second case, a good friend I had known for many, many years from church passed away due to complications from a fall. These are very different circumstances, but the end result was the same in certain respects. The author of Ecclesiastes, commonly recognized as Solomon, struggles with understanding the world in which we live. Things are far from perfect, and bad things even happen to good people. Through the book, the Teacher describes the futility involved in considering this life to be the main story: bad things happen to good people, good things happen to bad people, and irrespective of whether a person is good or bad, everyone ends up the same way in the end. The book does not seem very encouraging on a surface level, and a reader can easily get the impression that Solomon is either depressed or bipolar as he is writing the book. However, a deeper look reveals there is more to it than meets the eye: he is actually advocating for his readers to recognize that the only practical and sensible perspective on life is to view it in the context of a much bigger picture: one that does not end.

The only sensible perspective on this life is to view it as merely a small part of a whole.

If we step back for a moment to look at the circles of life, we see that life itself involves several transitions from the end of one good thing to the beginning of something else. When a husband and wife experience the intimacy of the two becoming one, the end of a shared pleasure coincides with the conception of new life; what a hedonist would consider the end is actually the beginning of something much greater. When a mother gives birth to a baby, there is a great deal of pain, and the pregnancy comes to an end; however, this is not the end of life but a transition into a much greater form of life. Similarly, each stage of life involves the end of one good thing so that something deeper and stronger can emerge: the end of childhood brings the discovery of identity, the end of youth brings maturity, and so forth. In a way, each death leads to a new type of life. Nevertheless, the nature of evil is to try and make these transitions more harmful than beneficial. We often see this play out in our world. In the garden, the serpent succeeded in warping humanity’s transition from innocence to knowledge into something much more disastrous than it was ever meant to be. By convincing them to attempt to write the ending of their own story in light of their immediate limited perspective, he successfully led them, along with all who have followed, into the very thing they wanted to avoid: ongoing experiential death.

Taking things into our own hands often gives us the very thing we try hardest to avoid.

For people who are suicidal, we must recognize they are dealing with struggles related to pain, depression, and despair; however, we must never yield to temptation to affirm their idealized scenario. The problem here is that people often have a view of life that mimics theater more than reality. They see themselves as characters in a script where death is the glorified end of a tragic play. In reality, it is never an acceptable solution. Approximately 5 years ago, Robin Williams committed suicide. He was known for his humor and ability to make people laugh. People who did not know his situation would have thought his life was full of joy, but he struggled with serious and intense depression and despair. Immediately following, several memes appeared on the Internet saying, “Genie, you’re free.” Although people were attempting to honor his memory, they were actually elevating and idealizing a terrible lie: suicide is freedom. There is a famous story of a depressed man who entered a barn to end his life. After climbing to the ceiling, he hung a rope around his neck and jumped—only to land on the ground. Resigning himself to the fact that he could not even successfully kill himself, he got up and walked out. It was only at the last moment as he was leaving that he turned and saw his body hanging from the rope. The end of his physical life had actually changed nothing. The story, written by Charles Williams, is a parable intended to portray a truth: we cannot escape our problems by running away from them.

We cannot escape our problems by simply running away from them; they will follow us.

When someone we care about dies, whether it is peaceful or due to an accident, it is natural for us to miss them and go through the grieving process. Even in the best of situations, we may find a hole in our lives where that person used to be: there is no longer the opportunity for us to interact with the person in this life. However, the extent of the process is directly related to our understanding of life and eternity. If we view this life as primary, our despair worsens because we feel that we will never again have what we had. Even if we do believe that we will see them again in eternity, we think of it in terms of a dream instead of reality; we do not comprehend eternity as being tangibly real. However, if we recognize that this life is better compared to the first nine months of eternity, we grieve not for what is lost as much as for what is delayed—seeing them again. Our sorrow is then like that of a friend moving to another state: we miss their immediate presence but know the separation is temporary. If we know God, eternity really is moving from a small, run-down shack in the worst part of town to our dream house in the best place on earth next door to all the people we love most. It is the end of death.

If we know God, entering eternity is the final and total end of death in all its forms.

Apart the great rebellion in Eden, transitions from one stage of life to another would not have involved death. Instead of one thing having to end to become something else, life would be a series of transfigurations and transformations that transitioned from glory to glory and joy to joy with no sense of loss between them. It was only after the fall that health became interrupted with sickness, birth with pain, joy with grief, and life with death. The grief and sorrow we feel as we experience these things is a sign that at the core of our created nature, we know it is *not* natural and it should *not* be this way. As we consider what temporarily appeared to be death’s greatest victory more than 2000 years ago, we realize it was actually death’s greatest defeat. From that point forward and backward, death could only be a transition from the temporal to the eternal, from one type of life to another. This is significant because it shows us that reality is often the opposite of how it appears. Jesus told us we find eternal life by giving up those things that appear to offer us immediate life. What we discover is that there are two different kinds of death: one that offers an escape from our struggles and another that embraces an eternal perspective; the former leads to an ongoing death while the latter leads to an unending life.

If we do not die the right way, we will keep finding ourselves dying the wrong way.

In *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis gives one of the best examples ever written of the difference between a living death and a dying life. In it, Oruel becomes the queen of the kingdom of Glome. She hates the gods and considers them the source of all the sorrows of her life. Continually wearing a veil to hide her real face, she writes the book as an account of the wrongs done to her by the gods and her judgment of them. Almost the entire book is written from the perspective of a victim who deserves not only an apology but also reparations; it very much reflects the mob mentality visible in today's culture. However, the book does not end there. Suddenly, there is a new section, barely a tenth of the first part of the book. This is where Oruel suddenly sees the world from a new perspective, and she realizes how much she has remembered things differently than they really were. Her recognition of the truth comes when she discovers the results of her actions toward others and comes face to face with a true god. In the first, she learns that her selfishness has destroyed those she cared about the most. In her despair, she goes to the bank of the river to cast herself to her death. It is then that the true god speaks to her, saying, "Do not do it.... Die before you die. There is no chance after." Oruel learns the only way she can escape a living death is to die to the false narrative so she can actually experience life. She then retells her story more objectively. Notably, her real story can be told in far fewer words than the false one.

We have to die before we die if we are hoping to discover any chance for actually living.

In the next couple weeks, we will be celebrating Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. These are perfect times to evaluate our perspective on life and death. During Palm Sunday, the crowds were celebrating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This could have been a very positive experience. However, they were not celebrating Him for who He actually was; they were celebrating what they expected He was going to do. They believed His entry into Jerusalem that day meant the downfall of the Roman Empire was imminent. They could only see the immediate life in front of them. When it suddenly became clear to them that He was not going to overthrow their oppressors, they called out for His death. In less than a single week, the crowd that would not stop shouting His name called out for Him to be forever silent. On that Friday, Jesus did what Adam and Eve did not do: He resisted the temptation to take matters into His own hands to try and avoid death, and He gave Himself over to it. By doing so, He was able to undo Adam and Eve's failure, and death itself became temporary. Now, death is no longer the absolute end of life; now it can be simply the transition from one temporary life to a much greater eternal life.

Death can now be simply the transitional step from a temporary life to an eternal life.

Agnes Sanford was a healing minister who understood eternity better than most. At the end of her autobiography, she describes the veil between this world and the next becoming increasingly thin, and she knew she was ready to transition into eternity. Even at the age of 82, she was surprisingly active. The day she died, she had made plans to go gliding with friends. She called them to cancel the appointment, explaining that she was going on another gliding trip that day; she then quietly entered eternity that day. When we see life from the perspective of eternity, we no longer are afraid to face the ends of things because we understand that, for those who know God, the end of one thing always holds the potential to be the beginning of something much greater. This enables us to celebrate and enjoy life while having the freedom to see death as nothing more than temporary. We can avoid the despair that comes to those who have no hope. While we live, we recognize that every voluntary death to our false self enables us to be transformed more and more into our true self. As we start to develop this habit, we begin to see how real and tangible eternity actually is. For those who understand this, the end of this physical life is simply a change of location; it is moving from a run-down, imperfect, and temporary house into a brand-new, perfect, and glorious home where the joy and wonder never ends.