

In the Light and Shadow of Death

Although I don't plan on kicking the bucket any time soon, I've become increasingly conscious of the need to put my affairs in order. The world may not much miss me when I'm gone, but my family doesn't need all the hassle that would currently accompany my untimely demise.

You see, I'm the accountant, bill payer, tax filer, and asset manager for our household. Moreover, we have way too much stuff for my wife, let alone my children, to have to deal with. I hope to live long enough to leave my estate much more manageable. I have other hopes, too. I'd like to go fairly quickly when the time comes, without much pain or suffering, in the company of family and friends. I'd like to feel my work is done and appreciated. I'd like to be at peace with my lot, and confident that my loved ones will be able to flourish without me. I realize things may not turn out this way.

It has long struck me, as a Christian, that the "good death" I desire is wholly unlike the death of the founder of my faith, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was still in the prime of his life when he died. His was an unimaginably agonizing and tortuous death, in the company of criminals, sentenced as a traitor or insurrectionist, abandoned by his friends, betrayed by one, denied by another. His family was not at his bedside, but had to watch at a distance. His possessions were few, and were left to his executioners. By some accounts, he departed this world with a sense of utter despair and abandonment by God, who he felt had forsaken him. Could it get any worse than this?

Jesus' death was wholly unlike that of any other founder of a major world religion. Surely that holds some significance. I believe it tells us something about both the sort of world we live in and the ultimate nature of reality. Human lives often end tragically, painfully, unjustly, ignominiously, despairingly. Is that the last word? Or could it be there exists a transformative power in the universe capable of overcoming and somehow reconstituting all that defeats us, even death?

The central claim of the Christian faith is precisely this, that God will transform our grievous losses, for God is love. Nothing can separate us from this love. The last word belongs to God.

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