

CLASSICAL REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

The selected readings deal with a topic of tremendous importance concerning our human existence. If the human condition, at its most basic and fundamental state, is characterized by despair, suffering, sickness, and mortality, how is the cultivation of happiness truly possible? These readings attempt to illustrate, not offer an ailment to, the suffering that lies at the heart of humanity.

When compared with the stretch of time unknown to us, O King, the present life of men on earth is like the flight of a single sparrow through the hall where, in winter, you sit with your captains and ministers. Entering at one door and leaving by another, while it is inside untouched by the wintry storm; but this brief interval of calm is over in a moment, and it returns to the winter whence it came, vanishing from your site. Man's life is similar; and of what follows it, or what went before, we are utterly ignorant. [Venerable Bede, Ecclesiastical History]



Man, born of woman, has a short life yet has his fill of sorrow. He blossoms, and he withers, like a flower; fleeting as a shadow, transient. And is this what you deign to turn your gaze on, him that you would bring before you to be judged? Who can bring the clean out of the unclean? No man alive! Since man's days are measured out, since his tale of months depends on you, since you assign him bounds he cannot pass, turn your eyes from him, leave him alone, like a hired drudge, to finish his day.

There is always hope for a tree: when felled, it can start its life again; its shoots continue to sprout. Its roots may be decayed in the earth, its stump withering in the soil, but let it scent the water, and it buds, and puts out branches like a plant new set. But man? He dies and lifeless remains; man breathes his last, and then where is he?

The waters of the seas may disappear, all the rivers may run dry or drain away; but man, once in his resting place, will never rise again. The heavens will wear away before he wakes, before he rises from his sleep. [Job 14:1-12]

As a human being, you are born and you are destined to die. Where will you go to escape death? What will you do to escape it? So that your Lord might comfort you in your necessary subjection to death, of his own good pleasure, he condescended to die. When you see Christ lying dead, are you reluctant to die? Die then you must: you have no means of escape. Be it today, be it tomorrow; it is to be—the debt must be paid. What, then, does it gain a person by fearing, fleeing, hiding himself from discovery by his enemies? Dies he get exemption from death? No, simply that he may die a little later. He does not get security against his debt, but just a little respite from paying it. Put it off as long as you please, the thing so delayed will come at last. [St. Augustine, *On the Gospel of John*]

Now no more shall a glad home and a true wife welcome you, nor darling children race to snatch you first kisses and touch your heart with a sweet and silent content: no more may you be prosperous in your doings and serve as a defense to those you love; 'alas and woe!' say they, 'one disastrous day has taken all these prizes of your life away from you'.

But they do not add this 'and now no more does any longing for these things trouble you.' If they clearly understood this and were able to express it so, they would release themselves from great heartache and fear. 'As you dwell in the sleep of death, you will be so for the rest of the ages, severed from all weary pains; but we, while we watched you turn to ash on the awful pyre, groaned with unappeasable sorrow, and time shall never be able to rid our heart of anguish!'

Let us ask this of him: what is there that is so bitter, if sleep and peace be the end of life, to make one fade away in never-ending grief? [Lucretius]

"Oh, father Utnapishtim, you who have entered the assembly of the gods, I wish to question you concerning the living and the dead, how shall I find the life for which I am searching. Utnapishtim said, "There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragonfly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death. What is there between master and servant when both have fulfilled their doom? When the Anunnaki, the judges, come together, and Mammetun, the mother of destinies, together they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot, but the day of death they do not disclose." [The Epic of Gilgamesh]

Death is before me today
Like the recovery of a sick man,
Like the going forth into a garden after sickness
Death is before me today
Like the odor of myrrh,
Like sitting under a sail on a windy day.
Death is before me today
Like the course of the freshet,
Like the return of a man from the war-galley to his house.
Death is before me today
As a man longs to see his house
When he has spent years in captivity.
(Pyramid Text 3000 BC)

