

Introduction to the How to Find God Series

Life is a journey, and finding and knowing God is fundamental to that journey. When a new child is born, when we approach marriage, and when we find ourselves facing death—either in old age or much earlier—it tends to concentrate the mind. We shake ourselves temporarily free from absorption in the whirl of daily life and ask the big questions of the ages:

Am I living for things that matter?

Will I have what it takes to face this new stage of life?

Do I have a real relationship with God?

The most fundamental transition any human being can make is what the Bible refers to as the new birth (John 3:1–8), or becoming a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This can happen at any time in a life, of course, but often the circumstances that lead us to vital faith in Christ occur during these tectonic shifts in life stages. Over forty-five years of ministry, my wife, Kathy, and I have seen that people are particularly open to exploring a relationship with God at times of major life transition.

In this series of short books we want to help readers facing major life changes to think about

what constitutes the truly changed life. Our purpose is to give readers the Christian foundations for life’s most important and profound moments. We start with birth and baptism, move into marriage, and conclude with death. Our hope is that these slim books will provide guidance, comfort, wisdom, and, above all, will help point the way to finding and knowing God all throughout your life.

Foreword

As we age, Tim and I find ourselves encountering death, both pastorally and personally, more and more often. Our closest friends and family are now beginning to die. Over the last eighteen months, we have had three deaths in our family; in just the past three months we have talked to both a friend and a family member about how to face their impending deaths. Much of what we say in those conversations is in this book.

The foundation of *On Death* is a sermon preached by my husband at my sister Terry Hall's funeral on January 6, 2018. She died on Christmas Day, at home, surrounded by family

after a lengthy struggle with metastatic breast cancer. She knew she was dying and spent time leaving instructions for us on the hymns, prayers, and other elements she wanted for her funeral service. She was adamant that Tim should preach the Gospel at her funeral and not merely talk about her life (as much as we loved and admired her). She knew that “death tends to concentrate the mind wonderfully”¹ and she wanted those present at her funeral to be prepared for their own deaths.

This book is dedicated to her, and to her husband, Bob, and daughters, Ruth Hall Ramsey and Rachael Hall. The sermon that day was, by all accounts, moving and memorable. The request to have it published came from her sisters, Sue and Lynn, and her brother, Steve.

KATHY KELLER
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On Death

The Fear of Death

Conscience Makes Cowards of Us All

. . . that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

—HEBREWS 2:14-15

Death is the Great Interruption, tearing loved ones away from us, or us from them.

Death is the Great Schism, ripping apart the material and immaterial parts of our being and

sundering a whole person, who was never meant to be disembodied, even for a moment.

Death is the Great Insult, because it reminds us, as Shakespeare said, that we are worm food.¹

[We are] literally split in two: [Man] has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever.²

Death is hideous and frightening and cruel and unusual. It is not the way life is supposed to be, and our grief in the face of death acknowledges that.

Death is our Great Enemy, more than anything. It makes a claim on each and every one

of us, pursuing us relentlessly through all our days. Modern people write and talk endlessly about love, especially romantic love, which eludes many. But no one can avoid death. It has been said that all the wars and plagues have never raised the death toll—it has always been one for each and every person. Yet we seem far less prepared for it than our ancestors. Why is that?

The Blessing of Modern Medicine

One reason is, paradoxically, that the great blessing of modern medicine has hidden death from us. Annie Dillard, in her novel *The Living*, devotes an entire page to the astonishing variety of ways death snatched the living from the

midst of their homes and families without a moment's notice in the nineteenth century.

Women took fever and died from having babies, and babies died from punishment or the harshness of the air. Men died from . . . rivers and horses, bulls, steam saws, mill gears, quarried rock, or falling trees or rolling logs. . . . Children lost their lives as . . . hard things smashed them, like trees and the ground when horses threw them, or they fell; they drowned in water; they sickened, and earaches wormed into their brains or fever from measles burned them up or pneumonia eased them out overnight.³

Death was something that people used to see

up close. To take just one example, the prominent British minister and theologian John Owen (1616–1683) outlived every one of his eleven children, as well as his first wife. Since people died where they lived, at home, Owen literally saw nearly every person he loved die before his eyes. The average family in the United States in colonial times lost one out of every three children before adulthood. And since the life expectancy of all people at that time was about forty years, great numbers lost their parents when they were still children. Nearly everyone grew up seeing corpses and watching relatives die, young and old.⁴

Medicine and science have relieved us of many causes of early death, and today the vast majority of people decline and die in hospitals and hospices, away from the eyes of others. It is normal now to live to adulthood and not watch

anyone die, or even see a corpse except in the brief glance of an open coffin at a funeral.

Atul Gawande and others have pointed out that this hiddenness of dying in modern society means that we of all cultures live in denial of the inexorability of our impending death. Psalm 90:12 called readers to “number our days” that we may “gain a heart for wisdom.” There has always been a danger that humans would live in denial of their own death. Of course we know intellectually and rationally that we are going to die, but deep down we repress it, we act as if we are going to live forever. And, according to the psalmist, that’s *not wise*. It is the one absolute inevitability, yet modern people don’t plan for it and don’t live as if it is going to happen. We avoid doctors out of fear, denying the mortality of our bodies and assuming they will just go on forever. And yet in the face of imminent death

we then demand unrealistic and extreme medical procedures.⁵ We even find the discussion of death “in bad taste” or worse. Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, in his essay “The Pornography of Death,” argued that in contemporary culture death has replaced sex as the new unmentionable.⁶

If people three thousand years ago had a problem with the denial of death, as Psalm 90 attests, then we have an infinitely greater one. Medical progress supports the illusion that death can be put off indefinitely. It is more rare than ever to find people who are, as the ancients were, reconciled to their own mortality. And there are even thinkers now who seriously believe death can be solved like any technological “performance issue.”⁷ Many in Silicon Valley are obsessed with overcoming mortality and living forever. All this means that modern people

are more unrealistic and unprepared for death than any people in history.

This-world Happiness

A second reason that we today struggle so much with death is the secular age's requirement of this-world meaning and fulfillment. Anthropologist Richard Shweder surveys the ways non-Western and older cultures have helped their members face suffering.⁸ They all did so by teaching their members about the meaning of life, the main thing for which every person should be living. Many societies believe that the main thing to live for is your people and family—children and grandchildren—in whom you live on after you die. Buddhism and many other ancient Eastern cultures have taught that

the meaning of life is to see the illusory nature of this world and therefore to transcend it through an inner calmness and detachment of soul. Other cultures believe in reincarnation, or heaven or nirvana after death, and so one's main purpose is to live and believe in such a way that your soul journeys to heaven.

These all are quite different, and yet, Shweder argues, they had one thing in common. In each case the main thing to live for was something outside this material world and life, some object that suffering and death could not touch. It might be to go to heaven when you die, or to escape the cycle of reincarnation and go into eternal bliss, or to shed the illusion of the world and return to the All Soul of the universe, or to live an honorable life and be received at death into the company of your ancestors. But in each case, not only are tragedy

and death unable to destroy your meaning in life, they can actually hasten the journey toward it, whether it is through spiritual growth, or the achievement of honor and virtue, or going into an eternity of joy.

Modern culture, however, is basically secular. Many today say that, because there is no God, soul, or spirit, no transcendent or supernatural dimension to reality, this material world is all there is. In that case, whatever gives your life meaning and purpose will have to be something within the confines of this earthly time frame. You must, as it were, rest your heart in something within the limited horizons of time and space. Whatever you decide will give meaning to your life will have to be some form of this-world happiness, comfort, or achievement. Or, at best, it might be a love relationship.

But death, of course, destroys all of these things. So while other cultures and worldviews see suffering and death as crucial chapters (and not the last) in your coherent life story, the secular view is completely different. Suffering is an interruption and death is the utter end. Shweder writes that for modern people, therefore:

Suffering is . . . separated from the narrative structure of human life . . . a kind of “noise,” an accidental interference into the life drama of the sufferer . . . Suffering [has] no intelligible relation to any plot, except as a chaotic interruption.⁹

Modern culture, then, is the worst in history at preparing its members for the only inevitability—death. When this limited meaning horizon comes