

Death and Beyond

(A Lesson in Memory of Chris Traganos)

I. This Week - One Year Anniversary of the Death of Chris Traganos

- a. Enormous change and loss to our group; it has now been a whole year.
- b. To those of us present, he was a great husband, father, friend, and fellow worker. He was a bedrock member of our fellowship. He referred to himself as “the innkeeper” for our house church, which still meets in his home most of the time.
- c. Today we want to mark the occasion by remembering him, the mortality of life, and reflecting on the steps ahead for all of us.
- d. Outline of what I plan to talk about today:
 - i. Live with your last day in mind.
 - ii. Teaching on what happens after we die.
 - 1. What Jesus taught.
 - 2. How the apostles understood it.
 - 3. How it was understood from the beginning, by those closest to the time of the apostles.
 - iii. Some reflections on Chris’ life, one year after his departure.

II. Live with Your Last Day in Mind

- a. “A good name is better than precious ointment, And the day of death than the day of one’s birth; Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, For by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” (**Ecclesiastes 7:1–4**, NKJV)
 - i. Most people would prefer to attend a party than a funeral. However, in Ecclesiastes, it says that the wise will prefer the house of mourning, for death is the end of all men.
 - ii. Although we Christians mourn the loss of our brothers and sisters who die, we do not mourn *like others*. While we feel the pain of loss, we also have great hope.

- iii. “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.” (**1 Thessalonians 4:13–14**, NKJV)
- b. I heard a Bible teacher say recently that 150,000 people die *every day*. One day will be your last.
 - i. The only possible exception to that will be if Jesus returns in the near future, before you die. We know that His return will be “like a thief in the night” (**Matthew 24:43-44**, **1 Thessalonians 5:2**), taking everyone by surprise.
 - ii. Some have warning in advance (as Chris did, via an extended illness). However, many have little or no warning. Either way, Jesus said we should always be prepared.
- c. Read **Luke 12:13-48**.
 - i. The gospel is the message of the kingdom, not just personal salvation. However, those who do not heed the message of the kingdom (and remain vigilant) will pay a terrible price if they do not repent while they have the opportunity.
 - ii. Living for maximizing comfort and pleasure in this life is the life of a fool. We are here only a short time and can take nothing with us when we depart.
 - iii. Jesus said we need to be “rich toward God”. Go figure out what that means.
 - 1. Jesus calls us to “seek first the kingdom of God”. Not a group’s agenda.
 - 2. Be prepared for the bridegroom to arrive at any time. Lamps burning, waist girded.
 - 3. If you know what God wants you to do but refuse to do it, you will be punished even more severely.
- d. Read an extended passage from Richard Challoner’s book, *Think Well On It*, from chapter 7: On Death, pp. 18-21 (TAN Books and Publishers, 2006). Note that Challoner was a British bishop, Bible translator and writer who lived 1691-1781.
 - i. “Consider first that there is nothing more certain than death. ‘It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.’ (**Hebrews 9:27**). The sentence is general; it is pronounced upon all

the children of Adam. Neither wealth, nor strength, nor wisdom, nor all the power of this world can exempt anyone from this common doom. From the first moment of our birth, we are hastening to our death; every moment brings it nearer to us. The day will come - it will most certainly come, and only God knows how soon - when we shall never see the night. Or the night will come when we shall never see the morning. The time will most certainly come when thou, my soul, must bid a long farewell to this cheating world and to all that thou hast admired therein - and even to thy own body, the individual companion of thy life - and take thy journey to another country, where all that thou settest of value upon here will appear as smoke. Learn, then, to despise this miserable world and all its enjoyments, with which thou must part so soon, whether thou wilt to or no.

- ii. *“Consider secondly that, as nothing is more certain and inevitable than death, so nothing is more uncertain in the time, the place, the manner, and all other circumstances of our death. ‘O my soul,’ says St. Francis de Sales, ‘thou must one day part with this body, but when shall that day be? Shall it be in winter, or in summer? In the city, or in the country? By day, or by night? Shall it be suddenly, or on notice given thee? Shalt thou have leisure to make thy confession? Shalt thou have the assistance of thy spiritual father? Alas, of all this, thou knowest nothing at all! Only certain it is that thou must die and that, as it almost always happens, much sooner than thou dost imagine.*
- iii. *“Consider thirdly that death, being so certain and the time or manner of it so uncertain, it would be no small comfort if a man could die more than once, that so, if he should have the misfortune once to die ill, he might repair the fault by taking more care a second time. But alas! We can die but once, and when once we have set our foot within the gates of eternity, there is no coming back. If we die once well, it will always be well; but if once ill, it will be ill for all eternity. O Dreadful Moment, upon which depends an endless eternity! O blessed Lord, prepare us for that fatal hour!*
- iv. *“Consider fourthly the folly and stupidity of the greatest part of men, who though they daily see some or other of their friends, acquaintances or neighbors carried off by death - and that often in the vigor of their youth, very often by sudden death - yet always imagine death be at a distance from them, as if those arrows of death which are falling on all sides of them would not in their turn reach them too; or as if they had a greater security than so many others, who are daily swept away. Senseless worldlings! Why will you not open your eyes? Why will you fondly imagine yourselves secure from the stroke of death, when you cannot even promise yourselves so much as one single day of life? How many will die before the end of this month that*

are as young, as strong and healthy as you are? Who knows but you may be of that number? Ah, Christians, take care lest you be surprised! Set your house in order; and for the future, fly sin, the only evil, which makes death terrible. Live always in those dispositions in which you would gladly be found at the hour of your death. To act otherwise is to renounce both religion and reason.”

1. This is bracingly direct, like a bucket of cold water to the face. I encourage anyone to get this book by Challoner, and read it on your own.
2. I gave this book to my mother when she was in her eighties. Her reaction was: “Why isn’t anyone talking about this? Why don’t I ever hear people talking about these things in church?”

III. What Happens After We Die?

- a. What Jesus taught regarding what happens after we die.
 - i. Note that at the time Jesus preached, there were different ideas among the Jews. Some believed in the physical resurrection of the body from the dead (at the end); others did not.
 - ii. Read **John 5:25-29**.
 1. The time will come when the graves will open, and the dead (resurrected bodies) will come forth.
 - iii. Read **Matthew 12:38-42**.
 1. There will be one Day of Judgement when people of all different times and eras will be judged.
 2. Jesus *did not* teach that we will each face an individual judgment right after we die.
 3. **Question:** Where was Jesus right after He died?
 - a. Jesus said He would be “in the heart of the earth” (not in heaven) for three days and nights, just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for that same period of time.
 - b. Note also that in **Jonah 2**, when the prophet is in the belly of the whale, he cries out that he is in Hades (Greek, from the LXX), or Sheol (Hebrew).
 - i. There Jonah was speaking figuratively, using the poetic language of the **Psalms**.

iv. Read **Matthew 25:31-46**.

1. All will be judged by Jesus at the same time, on the Last Day.
2. The righteous will inherit the kingdom, and the unrighteous will go into everlasting punishment.

v. Jesus tells the Christians in Smyrna: "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." (**Revelation 2:10-11**, NKJV)

1. It is the *second* death that Jesus says we need to be concerned about.
2. Our natural physical death is the first death. The second death is after final judgment, when the wicked are cast into the lake of fire. (**Revelation 20:14, 21:8**)

vi. Read **Luke 16:19-31**.

1. The rich man is in torment, "in Hades".
 - a. This is not the same place as "the lake of fire" (the place where the wicked are cast after the Day of Judgment, a/k/a 'hell'). See **Revelation 20:14**.
2. The rich man and Lazarus are separated by a great gulf that cannot be crossed. The rich man is on one side; while Lazarus and Abraham (those who are righteous) are on the other.

b. What happened to Jesus.

i. Read **Luke 23:39-46**.

1. Jesus tells the repentant thief on the cross, "today you will be with me *in paradise*".
2. **Questions:** Is '*paradise*' the same place as *heaven*?
 - a. If the thief will be in heaven that day, what about the Day of Judgment?
 - i. Would the thief go to heaven, then come back to earth later to be resurrected and to face final judgment? Would that make any sense?

b. **Question:** Where did Jesus go immediately after his death? Where was He between Friday evening when He died and Sunday morning when He was resurrected?

- i. Jesus said in **Matthew 12**, as we discussed previously, that he would spend three days and nights in “the heart of the earth” (*not* in heaven).
- ii. Peter gives further insight into where Jesus went, in his speech on the day of Pentecost, in **Acts 2**.

ii. Read **Acts 2:22-33**.

- 1. Peter, quoting from **Psalm 16** (designated **Psalm 15** in the LXX) says that Jesus was not “left in Hades”.
- 2. Hades (Greek) is the same as Sheol (Hebrew). We can see this by comparing Peter’s quote from the Greek LXX versus the Masoretic Text (Hebrew) for **Psalm 16**.
- 3. Jesus’ soul went to Hades after He died, but it did not remain there.

iii. Consider the pattern of the life of Jesus:

- 1. He was baptized, then tempted/tested by Satan (**Matthew 3:13-4:11**).
- 2. His life was refined by suffering.
 - a. He was made perfect (= complete) through suffering (**Hebrews 2:10**).
- 3. Death: His body was buried in the tomb (**Matthew 27**), and His soul departed to Hades.
- 4. His soul did not remain in Hades (**Acts 2:24-32**). It returned to be reunited with His body, which was transformed and resurrected.
- 5. He ascended to heaven (**Acts 1:9-11, Acts 2:33-35, Psalm 110:1**), and is now sitting at the right hand of God the Father.

c. What the apostles taught.

i. Read **Acts 7:54-60**.

- 1. I have heard others claim that since Stephen saw Jesus at the right hand of God (the Father) and said, “Lord, Jesus, receive

my spirit” that Stephen must have gone straight to heaven when he died. However...

2. **Question:** Did Stephen go straight to heaven?

- a. Recall that right before his death, Stephen said essentially the same thing as what Jesus said right before He died (as we read previously, from **Luke 23**).
- b. However, as we have already shown, *Jesus did not go straight to heaven* when he died. Therefore, what Stephen said *does not indicate* that he went straight to heaven, either!

ii. Read **1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11**.

- 1. Jesus will return; the dead will be raised, all are judged; the righteous will meet with the Lord.

iii. Paul discusses the resurrection of the dead (sometimes referred to as ‘the resurrection of the flesh’) in more detail in **1 Corinthians 15**.

iv. Jesus is described as our forerunner, the firstborn from among the dead. (**Colossians 1:18, Revelation 1:5**) As we look to his bodily resurrection, we can see what will happen to those who follow him.

d. How the early Christians understood these things.

i. Obviously, if what the early Christians taught regarding what happens after we die contradicts the Scriptures, of course we should disregard their perspective. However, several of them were only one or two human links from the apostles.

- 1. Therefore, *their perspective is valuable*, how they ‘put the pieces together’ on what Jesus and the apostles taught regarding what happens after we die.

ii. The quotes that follow are from *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, the article on ‘Dead, Intermediate State of The’, pp. 191-197.

- 1. I encourage you to refer to the article, which included many other interesting quotes on this topic. *DoECB* is a topical guide to the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* set, with references to the articles in the *ANF* set so that you can go back and read the entries in context.

iii. From Justin Martyr, a philosopher from Samaria who converted to the Christian faith and ended up in Rome, writing c. 160 AD:

1. "The souls of the godly remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse place, waiting for the time of judgment."
 - a. (Source: Justin Martyr; from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1. p. 197)
2. "[Christ's enemies] imagined they would put Him to death, and that He, like some common mortal, would remain in Hades."
 - a. (Source: Justin Martyr; from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1. p. 248)
- iv. From Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul (modern-day France). Note that in his youth in Asia Minor (Turkey), Irenaeus had been taught by Polycarp, who had been a personal disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD:
 1. "The Lord has taught with very great fullness that souls continue to exist. They do not do this by passing from body to body. Rather, they preserve the same form as that of the body to which they were adapted.... The Lord states that the rich man recognized Lazarus after death, as well as Abraham.... From these things, then, it is plainly declared that souls continue to exist, that they do not pass from body to body, that they possess the form of a man (so that they may be recognized), and that they retain the memory of things in this world. Moreover, it is plain that the gift of prophecy was possessed by Abraham and that each class receives a habitation such as it has deserved, even before the judgment."
 - a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1, p.411)
 2. "The heretics ... do not acknowledge the salvation of their flesh ... but claim that immediately upon their death, they will pass above the heavens and the Demiurge [Creator] and go to the Mother or to that Father whom they pretend exists.... For they do not choose to understand, that if these things are as they say, the Lord Himself, in whom they profess to believe, did not rise again upon the third day. Rather, immediately upon His expiring on the cross, He undoubtedly departed on high, leaving His body to the earth.... The Lord observed the law of the dead so that He might become the First-Begotten from the dead. And He waited until the third day 'in the lower parts of the earth.' ... [Accordingly,] these men [the Gnostics] must be put to confusion, who allege that 'the lower parts' refer to this

world of ours, but that their inner man, leaving the body here, ascends into the super-celestial place....

3. "The Lord 'went away in the midst of the shadow of death,' where the souls of the dead were. However, afterwards, He arose in the body. And after the resurrection, He was taken up [into heaven]. From this, it is clear that the souls of His disciples also (upon whose account the Lord underwent these things) will go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God. And they will remain there until the resurrection, awaiting that event. Then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety (that is, bodily), just as the Lord arose, they will come in that manner into the presence of God."
 - a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1. p. 560)
 - b. Note that Irenaeus says it is the heretics who held to the idea that the souls of people *go straight to heaven* when they die.
4. "'No disciple is above the Master.' ... Our Master, therefore, did not at once depart, taking flight [to heaven]. Rather, He awaited the time of His resurrection, as determined by the Father.... Likewise, we also should await the time of our resurrection determined by God."
 - a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1, pp. 560, 561)
 - b. This is an interesting line of reasoning. Jesus Himself had to go to Hades before being resurrected and ascending to heaven. And the students (referring to us) cannot be above the Master (referring to Jesus).
- v. From Hippolytus, a presbyter (elder) of the church in Rome, writing c. 205 AD:
 1. "Now we must speak of Hades, in which the souls both of the righteous and the unrighteous are detained. Hades is a place in the created system, rude, a locality beneath the earth, in which the light of the world does not shine. And since the sun does not shine in this place, there is necessarily perpetual darkness there. This place has been destined to be, as it were, a guardhouse for souls. The angels are stationed there as guards distributing temporary punishments for characters, according to each one's deeds. And in this locality there is a certain place set apart by itself, a lake of unquenchable fire, into which we

suppose no one has ever yet been cast.... But the righteous (who will obtain the incorruptible and unfading kingdom) are indeed presently detained in Hades, but not in the same place with the unrighteous. For to this locality there is one descent, at the gate of which we believe an archangel is stationed with an army. And when those who are conducted by the angels who are appointed unto the souls have passed through this gate, they do not all proceed down one and the same path. Rather, the righteous are conducted in the light toward the right. And being hymned by the angels stationed at the place, they are brought to a locality full of light. And there all the righteous persons from the beginning dwell. They are not ruled by any necessity. Rather, they perpetually enjoy the contemplation of the blessings that are in their view. Also, they delight themselves with the expectation of other blessings, ever new. In fact, they consider the new blessings as ever better than the first ones. And that place brings no labors for them. In that locale, there are neither fierce heat, cold, nor thorns. But the faces of the fathers and the righteous are seen to be always smiling, as they wait for the rest and eternal revival in heaven that follow this location. And we call this place by the name of 'Abraham's bosom.'

2. "However, the unrighteous are dragged toward the left by angels who are ministers of punishment. These souls no longer go of their own accord. Rather, they are dragged as prisoners by force. And the angels appointed over them hurry them along, reproaching them and threatening them with an eye of terror, forcing them down into the lower parts. And when the souls are brought there, those appointed to that task drag them on to the vicinity of Gehenna. And those who are so near [to Gehenna] hear incessantly its agitation, and they feel the hot smoke. And when that vision is so near, as they see the terrible and excessively glowing spectacle of the fire, they shudder in horror at the expectation of the future judgment, already feeling the power of their punishment. And again, when they see the place of the fathers and the righteous, they also suffer punishment merely from seeing this. For a deep and vast abyss is set there in the midst, so that neither can any of the righteous in sympathy think to cross it, nor do any of the unrighteous dare to cross it.
3. "I think I have said enough on the subject of Hades, in which all souls are detained until the time that God has determined. And then He will accomplish a resurrection of all—not by

transferring souls into other bodies—but by raising the bodies themselves.”

a. (Source: Hippolytus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 5, p. 222)

vi. From Lactantius, a prominent Roman teacher of rhetoric who converted to the Christian faith, writing c. 304-313 AD:

1. “Let no one imagine that souls are immediately judged after death. For all are detained in one and a common place of confinement—until the arrival of the time in which the great Judge will make an investigation of their deserts. Those whose piety will have been approved will receive the reward of immortality. However, those whose sins and crimes will have been brought to light—these will not rise again. Rather, they will be hidden in the same darkness with the wicked, being destined to certain punishment.”

a. (Source: Lactantius, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 7, p. 217)

IV. Remembering Chris Traganos

a. Susan (Chris’ widow, a member of our group) asked me recently, “Where is Chris now?”

i. From the Scriptures, I would say that he is in a place (Hades) awaiting final judgment.

ii. If the early Christian understanding is correct (and it agrees with what Jesus taught in **Luke 16**), then those who are in Hades are recognizable and able to interact with others in the same place.

1. If that understanding is correct, then Chris also may be awaiting the rest of us to arrive there, too.

b. Remembering Chris and the legacy he left behind.

i. Chris was “an unschooled and ordinary man”, a hard worker, and a ‘straight shooter’.

ii. He was very devoted to his family and friends.

iii. He demonstrated unusual high integrity.

iv. He was an overcomer in this life. He finished his life strong, at the top of his game spiritually.

1. While many lose their Christian zeal over time, Chris was moving ahead, ‘ascending the mountain’, at the end of his life.

2. I recently listened to the audio of a communion devotional thought he gave about Peter encouraging his wife to “remember the Lord” and finish her life strong, as she was about to be executed.
- c. I expect that he is in a good place, waiting for the Day of Judgment and for us to follow.