



The Concept of Physical Death from a Christian Perspective: Belief, Hope, and Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the concept of physical death from a Christian perspective, focusing on the beliefs, hopes, and meanings associated with it. Using a literature review method, data was gathered from books and articles addressing death within Christian thought. The analysis reveals three significant insights. First, Christian beliefs about physical death include varied understandings of life after death, the relationship between soul and body, and the role of Jesus Christ in death and eternal life. Second, Christian hope regarding physical death encompasses aspects such as the anticipation of heaven, reunion with God, and the immortality of the soul. This hope provides peace and support as Christians approach death, inspiring them to live with purpose and meaning. Third, the meaning of physical death from a Christian perspective includes the understanding of life's purpose, spiritual preparation, and humanity's role within God's plan. For Christians, physical death is not viewed as an end but as a transition to a better life. The findings of this study offer deeper insights into how Christian beliefs shape perceptions, hopes, and meanings surrounding physical death. Practical implications of this research can support and guide Christians in confronting mortality.

Keywords: physical death, Christianity, belief in hope, meaning

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INTRODUCTION

Physical death is an inevitable event in life. From a Christian perspective, it holds deep significance, rooted in teachings and beliefs in the Bible (Viera Valencia & Garcia Giraldo, 2019). Everyone will inevitably face death; where there is life, there is death. Death marks the end of one's journey, where a person's physical body, mind, and soul no longer remain with us. However, society at large may not universally accept this interpretation. For instance, among members of the Toraja church, it is believed that when a person dies, only their body ceases to exist, while the soul is eternal. They maintain that the human soul does not perish; it is immortal. Death thus remains a mystery that is challenging to comprehend fully.

We cannot precisely know when death will occur, yet we understand that everyone, regardless of age, social status, occupation, or rank, will face it. Essentially, life and death are two inseparable sides of the same coin. In life, a person can achieve what they aspire to, while in death, one ceases all worldly activities. If someone enters this world, there will come a time when they must also end their presence here. This understanding indicates that death marks the end of a person's earthly life.

Reflecting this understanding, the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia defines "dead" as the absence of life, no longer breathing, motionless, or completely still. "Death" refers to the state of being deceased or experiencing the loss associated with someone's passing. John Hick, however, interprets death as part of human development, leading to the peak of life in immortality. For Hick, life is a continuous process of personal formation toward perfection (Iponk, 2016). This perfection is unattainable in this world, a fact underscored by the reality of death (Viera Valencia & Garcia Giraldo, 2019).

Death is an unfathomable concept for humans, an experience that remains beyond our understanding. Facing death, individuals may feel insecure, powerless, and fearful of this formidable adversary that disregards age, wealth, or status. Although believed to lead to ultimate perfection, it is a journey that brings anxiety (Viera Valencia & Garcia Giraldo, 2019). As the essayist Francis Bacon writes, "Men fear death as children fear the dark," and just as stories make children's fears grow, so do narratives of death intensify adult anxieties.

In this context, Luis Berkhof identifies three forms of death according to the Bible: physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death. First, physical death is experienced by all beings. This form of death is not necessarily linked to sin, countering the notion that death is a result of human transgression. Death is natural and inevitable for creation. Second, spiritual death is defined as an ethical-theological reality where individuals separate themselves from God and others. This dimension of death reflects humankind's rebellion against God, refusing to submit to His commands and teachings. Here, death represents an ethical condition rooted in sin. The Bible terms this "mortal death." Medically, a person might appear alive, but if they turn away from God and disregard divine law, they are spiritually dead and subject to mortality's power (Viera Valencia & Garcia Giraldo, 2019). Although biologically alive, they are spiritually dead.

From a Christian perspective, physical death is the separation of body and soul. Within Christian belief, it is seen as part of the afterlife, where the soul faces divine judgment and receives an eternal fate. In the New Testament, physical death is often perceived as a transition from the mortal to the spiritual realm, where believers are expected to reunite with their God. This stage signifies a journey toward eternal life, wherein the soul faces judgment. Christian teachings hold that physical death is not the absolute end; rather, it is the beginning of eternal life in God's presence for believers. The Bible teaches that after death, the soul encounters divine judgment and experiences either eternal life in heaven or eternal separation in hell, depending on the individual's relationship with God during their earthly life.

This paper aims to explore the concept of Physical Death from a Christian Perspective: Belief, Hope, and Meaning, seeking to deepen the understanding of Christian beliefs surrounding physical death and the significance attributed to it (Viera Valencia & Garcia Giraldo, 2019). This study contributes to existing literature by offering a comprehensive exploration of physical death within Christian theology, adding to current understandings of death across ethical, spiritual, and theological dimensions. By examining perspectives such as those of John Hick and Luis Berkhof, this paper bridges biblical interpretations with theological and cultural views of death, especially in unique contexts like the Toraja community.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a literature review method with the following steps: the researcher searches and reads books and articles discussing Physical Death from a Christian Perspective: Belief, Hope, and Meaning, then outlines key concepts and theories relevant to the study topic. According to Mestika Zed (2003), a literature review can be understood as an activity related to the methods of library information collection, reading, note-taking, and processing research materials. A literature review involves studying various reference books and previous research findings, which provide a

theoretical foundation for the research issue (Sarwono, 2006). Literature research also includes data collection techniques involving books, literature, notes, and various reports related to the problem to be solved (Nazir, 2003). Sugiyono (2012) describes library literature as theoretical reviews, references, and scientific literature related to cultural values and norms that evolve within the social context being studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Christian Beliefs About Physical Death

Original Sin and Its Consequences

In the Bible, original sin refers to the ancestral sin carried by all humanity as a result of the fall of the first humans, Adam and Eve, who rebelled against God (Genesis 3:1–7). The devil, appearing as a serpent, succeeded in convincing humanity to eat from the tree of knowledge. Adam was aware that following the serpent's temptation would violate God's command, yet he proceeded, thus committing a personal sin. This act led to profound changes: Adam lost his original purity and righteousness in the Garden of Eden, thereby damaging humanity's relationship with God. As a consequence of his disobedience, Adam had to face death. This condition, passed down to everyone born into the world, is known as original sin (Lewis & Demarest, 1996).

In Romans 5:12–21, Paul declares that the power of sin existed even before humanity fell into personal sin. This sin was inherited from our ancestor (Adam) and passed down to all people. Adam's sin is inherited biologically, linking every person universally to his sin. Although Adam's transgression happened in the distant past, its consequences remain evident in modern civilization. The Bible employs various terms to describe sin (Ferguson, 2012).

The most frequently used Hebrew words for sin are *khatta't*, *'awon*, *pesya*, and *ra*, while the Greek terms are *hamartia*, *hamartema*, *parabasis*, *paraptoma*, *poneria*, *anomia*, and *adikia*. Each term holds a distinct meaning that reflects various aspects of sin. Sin is understood as failure, error, evil, transgression, corruption, and injustice. At its core, sin is inherently negative, causing humanity to stray from the path of righteousness and marring the goodness that God has created. Sin not only damages the relationship with God but also disrupts our connection with God and each other (Grudem, 1994).

Death as the Wages of Sin

Sin is a concrete concept and, in secular law, is viewed as a violation of ethical codes collectively agreed upon by legal experts as standards for governing social life and ethics within society. When these legal experts reach a consensus and incorporate it into the laws of a country, that standard becomes the norm in that nation. Anyone who breaks this consensus recorded in the law is considered sinful. However, a limitation of worldly laws is that they can only address sin at the most basic level as wrongful behavior (Hart, 2007).

Romans 6:23 states, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord." In essence, sin is rebellion against God, leading to separation from God, who is the Creator and Sustainer. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). God is known as the "I AM." Life itself resides in God, and when we sin and separate ourselves from God, we separate from the true source of life. This separation results in death (Erickson, 2013).

There are three explanations for this: First, sin does not always immediately lead to physical death. Romans 6 explains that when we sin, we die spiritually rather than physically. Second, when Christ saves us, we are redeemed from eternal spiritual death and granted new spiritual life. Paul writes to the Romans, "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ

Jesus, our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Third, even the sins of believers can lead to a kind of “spiritual death.” Although we are saved from the eternal separation from God, we are not exempt from the consequences of a damaged relationship with our Heavenly Father. When we sin, we experience symptoms of spiritual death, such as guilt, emptiness, confusion, and alienation from God (Ware, 2000).

Consider the relationship between a child and a parent. If a child rebels, the relationship with the parent is disrupted. The parent still loves the child and always desires the best for them. The child is neither abandoned nor forgotten, but they may face certain consequences: loss of trust, discipline, guilt, and so on. This relationship, though strained, will eventually be restored, often through a period of suffering. This scenario reflects our relationship with God. When we rebel against God’s authority in our lives, we rebel against life itself, experiencing “death”—a state of spiritual destruction that brings suffering. When we return to God, our spiritual condition is restored, and we experience fellowship with God, meaningful life, righteousness, and freedom. The father, rejoicing over the return of his lost child, said, “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24; Piper, 2003).

The Importance of Forgiveness and Salvation in Christ

Forgiveness and Salvation in Christian Life

Forgiveness and salvation are gifts from God essential to human life on earth. Forgiveness is a divine grace granted to humanity through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, who willingly endured crucifixion. Humanity, having sinned, is separated from God due to transgressions, but through faith in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins can be attained. This forgiveness liberates individuals from the penalty of sin and restores the broken relationship with God.

Forgiveness

Romans 3:23-25 states, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God presented as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith, by His blood." By asserting that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul references the Jewish tradition that recognizes humanity’s loss of divine glory due to Adam’s original sin (Jacobs, 1998). Humanity has lost its likeness to God due to sin, yet sinners are justified by God’s grace through the redemption found in Jesus Christ. Righteousness, in this context, means being justified by God’s saving work in Christ. In His death and resurrection, God reveals Himself as “righteous and just among those who believe in Jesus.” This forgiveness reflects God’s patience and His willingness to pardon past sins. However, God’s justice extends beyond the past; He declares Himself to be the "justifier for those who have faith in Jesus" in the present age, signifying not only a new covenant with Israel but also an eschatological transformation a new creation (Jacobs, 1998).

Salvation

Salvation is a divine gift that grants eternal life to those who believe in Him. Human beings cannot achieve salvation through personal effort or good deeds, as all are sinners and cannot meet God’s standard of perfection. Yet, through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, individuals can receive salvation and eternal life with God. Salvation frees believers from eternal punishment and offers the hope of eternal life with God.

Salvation is an act of God’s grace. According to Saro Duha, the term "gift" originates from the Greek *charis*, which means "grace" and signifies the unmerited favor of God toward those deserving punishment. John’s Gospel introduces Jesus as the bearer of grace (John 1:17). Duha elaborates that salvation in Jesus Christ provides various

benefits, including deliverance (1 Peter 1:10, 13; 2 Corinthians 4:15; 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2), the embodiment of righteousness in Christ (John 1:18; 1 Corinthians 15:8-10), all the requirements of human salvation (Romans 5:2; 1 Peter 5:12), and temporary blessings in this world (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Therefore, "grace" encompasses a wide scope in relation to salvation and God's blessings for His people (Duha, 2005). As Andrew Wommack notes, grace encompasses all that God accomplishes on behalf of humanity. John 14:6 affirms this truth: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" Likewise, Acts 4:12 states, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." John 1:14 also conveys that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

Christian Hope in Physical Death

Eternal Life in Christ

Eternal life in Christ assures believers that after accepting Jesus as their personal Savior, they have the promise of eternal life with God in heaven after physical death. Jesus Christ died and rose again to remove humanity's sins, offering salvation to all who believe in Him. The promise of eternal life is a significant aspect of Christian eschatology, for without it, the hope of eternal existence would hold little meaning in human life. Understanding this, John emphasizes the concept of eternal life throughout his Gospel.

In John's Gospel, the eschatological belief in eternal life is prominent. John, the author, deeply affirms and believes in eternal life after death. The term "eternal" (*aiionios*) characterizes life with an eschatological hope, primarily referring to "the life of the age to come" (Morris, 1971). Physical death does not signify the end of existence; rather, there is an everlasting life beyond it. Morris defines eternal life in John's context: "The word we translate as 'eternal' literally means pertaining to an age. Theoretically, the age could refer to the time before creation or the present age, but practically, it refers to the age to come. As this age represents the culmination of everything and never ends, it can mean 'eternal'" (Morris, 1971).

Eternal life in Christ does not mean immunity from challenges, temptations, or suffering in this world. Yet, the assurance of eternal life with God offers believers hope, strength, and comfort amid life's trials. To live out eternal life in Christ, Christians are called to love others, forgive, serve, and live according to Christ's teachings. This journey includes spiritual growth, Bible study, prayer, and active involvement in the church community. Eternal life in Christ assures that through faith in Jesus Christ, one can establish an everlasting relationship with God and live with Him forever, bringing hope, strength, and comfort in this life and shaping how one lives and interacts with others.

The Hope of Bodily Resurrection

The belief or hope in bodily resurrection reflects the conviction that, after death, the physical body will be raised in a transformed, perfected state. This belief is central in many religious traditions, including the Abrahamic faiths like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In Christianity, for instance, hope in the bodily resurrection is a fundamental teaching. Christians hold that, after death, their bodies will be resurrected by God at the time of Jesus Christ's Second Coming. This resurrected body is envisioned as eternal and perfect, free from death and human frailty (Jacobs, 1998).

In the New Testament, various writings reinforce this hope in bodily resurrection. For example, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul teaches that Christ's resurrection is a guarantee of believers' resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). He also explains that the resurrected body will differ from our current body, as it will be immortal and no longer

subject to death (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). This promise of bodily resurrection is closely tied to the hope of eternal life. According to Christian teachings, after the resurrection, believers will dwell eternally with God in a perfected state, both spiritually and physically (Duha, 2005). This hope in bodily resurrection provides comfort and moral motivation for many believers, encouraging them to live righteously in this life with the conviction that their actions have eternal consequences.

The Christian Perspective on Eternal Life with God

Eternal life with God is the ultimate goal for believers. The Bible teaches that God, the Creator of all, holds power over life and death. For those who believe in Him, God's Word promises eternal life with Him after death. Psalm 16:11 states, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." This signifies that eternal life with God is a state of complete and everlasting joy. In Christian belief, eternal life with God represents the ultimate hope and purpose for each believer, signifying that after physical death, the soul will live forever in God's presence (Wommack, 2003).

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ promises eternal life to those who believe in Him. He says that He is "the way, the truth, and the life," and that no one can reach God the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Jesus also teaches that those who believe in Him will have eternal life and will not perish (John 3:16). By accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior, believers receive salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life as a grace-given gift from God, not through personal efforts, but through divine grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). Eternal life with God offers believers joy, peace, and freedom from suffering, as well as intimate fellowship with God. It involves the resurrection of the body, which at Christ's return will be transformed from mortal to immortal (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). Christians see eternal life as a priceless gift, providing comfort and motivation to live a life of faith in Christ.

The Meaning of Death in Christianity: Transformation from Death to Life

The transformation from death to life is viewed in Christianity as resurrection or life after death. The Christian faith teaches that, after physical death, the soul continues eternally in another realm, either in heaven or hell, depending on the choices made in this life. The resurrection of Christ lies at the core of the Christian teaching on resurrection. According to the Bible, after His crucifixion and burial, Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day, thus providing proof that life after death is possible. Christ's resurrection assures Christians of their own resurrection and eternal life with God (Morris, 1971).

In the Old Testament, terms for death, like "mut" and "mawet," carry various connotations. According to Brueggemann (as cited in Bailey, 2005), "mawet" is used in three specific ways: a) biologically, to denote the end of life's history (Genesis 21:16); b) mythologically, as a force or principle (Job 18:13, Jeremiah 9:21); and c) symbolically, to represent loss, such as separation from God's intended purpose (Deuteronomy 30:15; Psalm 13:3-4). These usages suggest death in the Old Testament carries multiple meanings. First, it symbolizes a life that falls short of God's intended fullness, often due to sin (Genesis 3:1-7). Second, death is seen as a "force opposing creation's order" (Job 18:13). Third, it denotes the end of physical life, where one's existence on earth ends as the spirit departs the body (Genesis 2:7). In Christianity, death is viewed as the end of earthly life but not of human existence. Death is seen as the entrance to a better life with God, encouraging believers to live in accordance with God's teachings and to accept salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Brueggemann & Bailey, 2005).

Death as the Beginning of a Better Life

Death is not viewed as an end but rather as the beginning of a better life. Christians believe that after death, the soul faces God for judgment and enters into eternal life in either heaven or hell, depending on one's relationship with God during their earthly life. For Christians, death signifies a temporary separation of body and soul; the body returns to dust, while the soul lives on eternally. Physical death is seen as a consequence of human sin, but through faith in Jesus Christ, Christians believe in a resurrection to eternal life with God. In the Christian worldview, life after death is free from suffering, sin, and mortality marked by joy, peace, and eternal communion with God. Thus, death is regarded as a gateway to a better life, where believers find complete restoration and everlasting happiness. The Christian understanding of death as a transition to a better life is rooted in the belief in eternal life (Hick, 1993). Eternal life, as explained in Christian doctrine, involves existence in the presence of God, freed from suffering and worldly limitations (McGrath, 2016).

The Importance of Facing Death with Faith and Preparation

Facing death with faith and preparation is considered essential in life. Here are some reasons why it is important:

1. **Peace of Mind:** Facing death with strong faith and adequate preparation provides peace of mind. With solid conviction and readiness, one may feel more prepared to face the end of life. Embracing death as a natural part of life, while holding strong faith, offers reassurance that there is life after death. Embracing death peacefully through faith can alleviate fear and help one find meaning beyond physical existence (Kübler-Ross, 1997).
2. **Spiritual Readiness:** Facing death with faith and preparation enables individuals to deepen their relationship with God or other spiritual beliefs. This involves reflecting on the meaning of life, mending relationships, seeking forgiveness, and finding inner peace. Spiritual preparation can provide strength and calmness as one transitions from this life to the afterlife. Spiritual readiness is a vital aspect of many religions, where preparing the soul for death involves inner healing and forgiveness (Smith, 2015).
3. **Life Guidance:** Awareness of death can remind individuals to live with purpose and gratitude, motivating them to pursue good principles, lead with integrity, and make a positive impact on others. The awareness of life's brevity inspires individuals to live fully and mindfully, creating meaningful impact on others (Frankl, 2006).
4. **Practical Preparation:** Beyond spiritual preparation, facing death involves practical planning, such as writing a will, planning a funeral, and communicating one's wishes to loved ones. Practical preparation can ease the burden on family members and ensure that personal wishes are honored after passing. Proper planning, such as wills and funeral arrangements, provides practical support for family and fulfills the individual's final wishes (Rosenblatt, 2016).

Key Scriptures Supporting Faith in Death Preparation

Numerous biblical scriptures emphasize the significance of having strong faith and preparing for death:

John 11:25-26 - Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die."

Hebrews 9:27 - "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."

Matthew 24:44 - "Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

These verses underscore the value of a strong faith in Jesus Christ and thorough preparation for facing death. Faith in eternal life with God reminds believers to always be prepared since the timing of God's call is unknown.

Note: Biblical teachings frequently reference preparedness, emphasizing that faith, rather than material wealth, is the foundation for facing death and attaining eternal life (Wright, 2008).

Preparation for Death: Spiritual and Practical Aspects

Christians often approach death with practical and spiritual preparations, ensuring peace for themselves and loved ones:

1. **Drawing Closer to God:** Psalm 62:2 urges believers to seek God as a source of peace and security. When one grows close to God, they gain insight into His heart, strengthening their faith and resilience. Drawing near to God aligns with the Christian understanding of preparing the heart and spirit for eternity (Lewis, 2001).
2. **Living a Purposeful Life:** James 4:14 compares life to vapor, fleeting and temporary. Hence, success in the Christian perspective is not about worldly achievements but in contributing meaningfully to others' lives. Living purposefully reflects Christian values, where one seeks to serve others rather than pursue personal wealth or status (Willard, 2006).
3. **Making a Positive Impact:** Preparing for death inspires many to focus on leaving a legacy of integrity and service to others rather than material gains.

CONCLUSION

Death is an unavoidable reality for every human being. According to the Bible, death originated with the sin of humanity's ancestors, Adam and Eve, who, by disobeying God's command, lost their original holiness and righteousness in Paradise. This disobedience led to a broken relationship between humanity and God, and the consequences of this fall have been passed down to everyone born into the world. Death, or mortality, is the result of sin, as sin is fundamentally an act of rebellion against God, which separates us from Him. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). God is known as "I AM," the ultimate source of life, and therefore, when we sin and separate ourselves from Him, we lose access to the true source of life. This separation is the reason for death.

Forgiveness and salvation from God are essential for humanity in this life. Forgiveness is a gift from God, extended to humanity through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, who willingly sacrificed Himself on the cross. Those who have sinned and become separated from God can receive forgiveness by placing their faith in Jesus Christ. This forgiveness releases humanity from the penalty of sin and restores the relationship with God.

In Christ, there is eternal life. When someone accepts Jesus as their personal Savior, they gain the assurance of living forever with God in heaven after their physical death. Jesus Christ died and rose again to remove the sin of humanity and offers salvation to everyone who believes in Him.

Eternal life with God is the ultimate goal for those who place their trust in Him. The Bible teaches that God is the Creator of all things and holds authority over life and death. Christianity teaches that after physical death, the human soul will live forever, either in heaven or hell, based on the decisions made during one's earthly life. The resurrection of Christ is central to Christian doctrine, providing assurance that life after death is real and offering hope to believers that they, too, will rise from the dead and live eternally with God. Death is not the end but rather the beginning of a new, better life. Christians believe that after death, each soul will face God for judgment and will enter eternal life, either in heaven or in hell, based on their relationship with God during their earthly life.

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