



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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You Will Die – Meaning What?

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“You’re Going to Die.” Jo’s look of terror and sheer disbelief told quite a story.

“Yes, Jo,” I said. “You’re surprised by that?”

“Of course, I’m surprised,” Jo answered. “Why wouldn’t I be? You’re not supposed to die – not for a long time. I don’t want you to die.”

“All right, Jo,” I replied. “I’ll take that under advisement and see what I can do about it.” I was being somewhat facetious, but I knew that Jo wasn’t. He was dead serious in his reaction.

“Jo,” I asked, “does your reaction suggest that you might like to discuss this subject today?”

“You bet it does.” Jo wasn’t uncertain or surprised about that.

“First, Jo, tell me where you are coming from. What do you mean?”

Jo thought a minute. “You are not supposed to die. I don’t want you to die. You told me that they said you have pancreatic cancer. And people don’t live more than two years with that terrible disease.”

“You can’t just die.” Jo was clearly very distraught. “You’re too important to me. Surely God won’t do that to you – or me. God can’t. I just won’t let God do that to me.”

“But, Jo,” I said. “You already know that death is a part of life. The way God has created things, every living creature dies. It is simply a part of living – just like being born. Why then should dying be such a big deal for us? Why should human beings not die? Why are we so terrified of death – so resistant to the very idea? Why do we not see it as normal, the way the rest of life is?”

“Well, I don’t,” Jo exclaimed. “I just don’t want you to die. I don’t want anybody I care about to die.”

“And if I do?” I asked.

“I don’t like it one bit,” Jo replied. “I won’t have it. Although I guess I have to face that I can’t control it.”

“I guess you do, Jo,” I answered, “since that’s how it is. You said that you wanted to think about it some more. Are you ready now?”

“Yes,” Jo said. “But not yet.”

“Not yet? What else is it that you want to discuss at this time?” I asked.

“The last time we were talking, you told me that you had had a serendipitous experience, and that you wanted to share it and a story with me. I don’t know if I can take on a serious discussion about death – not just yet. But I think I might be able to handle a discussion about your serendipitous experience. For some reason I’ve thought a lot about what you said. So give me some relief now by telling me the story.”

“That’s reasonable, Jo,” I answered. “Although I think you will find that the story of that experience fits this discussion, too.”

“As you know, a serendipitous experience is one in which there is a flash of light, or insight, and something that may have been clear already, becomes crystal clear. It is a kind of an ‘Aha!’ experience. I don’t remember just now what it was that we were discussing except that it had to do with believing and the way people react when one belief differs from another. The general reaction is for the person to get upset – often extremely upset – because another disagrees with him. It is as if there must be universal agreement or somebody is wrong – and it might be me. Only that can’t be, for, if it is, some of my foundations may be shattered.

“We’ve had bitter wars over this issue – each side trying valiantly to insist that it is right. Historically, even the church has been enemy of the church over this – like in Northern Ireland right now. And Christians have become bitter enemies because of it – split congregations and factions within the congregation, major troubles all too often.

“My flash of insight was that it just doesn’t need to be that way. I saw very clearly that the reality just doesn’t need to be that way. It appears that to differ doesn’t really make any significant difference – not in the long run – and not unless a person, or congregation, or nation insists on it making a difference. I think I’ve known this all the time, but now it is crystal clear.

“That’s my serendipitous experience, and my story, I believe, illustrates my point. It has to do with my dad, who was a fine Christian gentleman. He lived what he believed and was faithful in his service to the church – and in his life – to God as he understood God. Needless to say, in time, we differed in what we believed. Apparently, he decided that either it didn’t matter, or that he couldn’t change me. Anyway, he didn’t try to, and we had many wonderful discussions, deeply meaningful to both of us, before his life ended. And I don’t think I ever changed what he believed – not even a little bit.

“He was of the old school. His beliefs evolved from his understanding of Scripture – which was that it means exactly what it said – literally and word for word – and of course, as he understood it.

“An example is his understanding of what Scripture had to say about heaven. Heaven was just what the Bible said. The city four square. Streets paved with gold clear as glass. Perfect peace for everyone. And loved ones, of course, knowing each other,

reunited in heaven.

‘Dad was married to Effie Lou for 62 years when she went to heaven. A couple of years later, Dad, then 86 years old, married his second wife, Hattie, who took care of him in a wonderful way for the remaining nine years of his life.

“Dad was at peace with himself. He was ready to die. Often he would say, ‘Why doesn’t the Lord take me home?’ He was ready for that wonderful event. Then he would tell this beautiful story of him and Effie and Hattie blissfully strolling the golden streets of the Eternal City happily hand in hand. What he didn’t remember was that Effie – heaven or not – wasn’t about to stroll any street anywhere with him while he was holding hands with another woman.

“To me, that says something about the meaning of death. And the special insight was that it didn’t make any difference that Dad and I saw this differently. For him, it was true. He was comfortable and at peace with himself. It served his purposes quite adequately. Whatever it may be, if the belief of a person results in that person being comfortable, secure, and at peace, that is enough. It doesn’t make any difference whether or not I agree.”

“What a beautiful story,” Jo said. “I think I understand. Now it is up to me to practice what I understand.”

“Jo, I wonder. Are you ready now to continue our discussion about the meaning of death? If so, I want to use two Scripture passages. The first is from Genesis 2:17 where, as God finished instructing Adam, God said, ‘in the day that you eat of it (meaning the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) you shall die.’ (Gen. 2:17) Escapist (Fall – Redemption) theology, as I understand it, interprets that to mean that God has commanded; that anyone who dares to do differently disobeys God and is subject to the ultimate punishment of death – whatever that means.

“The second is from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written.

‘Death is swallowed up in victory.  
O death, where is thy victory?  
O death, where is thy sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.’ (I Cor. 15:54-58)

Jo's face was glowing. "What a beautiful Scripture," he said. "What does it really mean?"

"That is a very good question, Jo," I replied. "You tell me."

"Well," Jo became somewhat meditative. "I need to gather my thoughts on this one."

"Be my guest, Jo," I said. "Take your time. Sort out your thoughts."

Jo did just that. Finally he said, "Now, what I have always believed doesn't seem to make sense."

"Oh," I responded. "And what is that?"

"I've heard that beautiful scripture from I Corinthians most often at a funeral," Jo replied. "A person has died, and we declare that death has been conquered, and there is no sting. How can that be

"And then we proclaim that 'The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law,' but 'God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' Excuse me. We have a dead body here, and we're talking about 'victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' I don't want to take the comfort in that away from anybody, but, all of a sudden, I don't sense much comfort in those words – not for me anyway. Unless the victory referred to is over sin – and that has little to do with death. Is that a possibility?"

"Yes, Jo," I said. "It is a possibility, and it occurs to me that it might be more helpful just now to think about the possible meanings of the word 'death.' There are at least two for the word, you know."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't know," Jo answered. "Tell me about them."

"OK, Jo," I replied. "Then, let's see which definition we think might apply. Death. There are at least two kinds of death – the death of the body and the death of the spirit. God created me a spirit being, and there is a way that I can act – or decide – that means that, for all practical purposes, I am dead. I am dead because I choose to be separated from God, who gave me spirit life in the first place – and who gives it to me abundantly if I allow it to happen. And, if I don't believe it, I am, for all practical purposes, dead."

"Spirit life?" Jo questioned. "I know we have talked about that, but I need some refreshers as to what you mean."

"All right, Jo," I replied. "Let's review a bit. You remember that in Genesis 1:3, God is described as 'the Spirit of God'."

“Yes, I remember,” Jo answered.

“And you remember that, in Genesis 2:7, the words are, ‘Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.’”

“Yes,” Jo said. “Now that you mention it, I remember that, too.”

“Now that you are recalling,” I said. “Let’s keep in mind that the three words, ‘spirit’, ‘breathed’ and ‘breath’ are the same root word in the Hebrew, and that they carry the meaning of wholeness, or completeness – of being alive, if you will.

Further, from those passages I interpret that this is a way of describing what it means that I – all of us – are created in the image of God, and that the meaning is completed in the concept of being in community with God. Hence God has created me a whole or complete being who is in relationship with my creator.

“If I choose, on whatever basis, to believe that I am not in that relationship, or do not need it, I suggest that I have chosen to be dead spiritually. I have given up my spirit being. I am not alive. For me, this is a way to describe being spiritually dead – and that death is very real. I no longer see myself having the fullness of life that God gave me to start with.”

“I remember,” Jo said again. “Now talk about how that fits in with that passage about death in First Corinthians.”

“Jo,” I explained. “I wish that I could say that I can tell you what Paul meant when he wrote those words, and, of course, that he meant that they now mean to me, but I can’t. I don’t know what Paul meant, and I have no way of knowing. So I must keep it clear that this explanation is one that I have worked out that makes sense to me.

“The words are ‘Death is swallowed up in victory,’ they having been preceded by ‘the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality’ (I Cor. 15:54) Then, if I have chosen to be back in relationship with God, death is not the victor and death has no sting. I am imperishable – immortal – because God has given me that victory. Incidentally, I want to write more about this in my next paper.

“And, the passage says, ‘The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.’ (I Cor. 15:58). Since sin, in one meaning, is the choice to be separate from God and to depend instead on the law, I experience the power of sin and the sting of death. Death is the victor.

“So what do I do about it? The scripture tells me. ‘Be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain’ (I Cor. 15:58). There it is. If death is the enemy, and I want to conquer death, the

answer is for me to live what it means to me to be the person God has intended for me to be from the beginning. Death is swallowed up in victory. There is no sting.”

“Could that be the meaning of that passage of Scripture?” Jo asked. “Could that really be the answer?”

“I don’t know, Jo,” I replied. “But I know it makes a lot more sense to me and brings me a lot more comfort to think in these terms. I can’t make sense of ‘death is swallowed up in victory’ when I am looking at a body out of which the life has gone.”

“Have you written all that you meant to write about the other meaning of death?” Jo wanted to know. “After all, your title is ‘You Will Die ---Meaning What?’”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t talked about the other meaning of death, have I?” I replied. “However, it won’t take but a minute.

“As you know, all life has a beginning and an end. We choose to call that ending death. It is natural. It is normal. It happens to all of us sooner or later. That’s the way it is. And grief is also a normal part of that death experience.

“Insofar as I know, no one has ever succeeded in conquering that death – not finally. But it is not the enemy to be defeated at all cost. It is just how it is.”

Jo looked at me a long time. Finally he said, “You’re going to die, aren’t you? That pancreatic cancer is going to get you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Jo, it is,” I replied. “If something else doesn’t bring that event about first. And you know, Jo, that’s OK. I don’t need to contend with death. I don’t need to try to make it not so. Why? Because God is in charge and God determines the length of this body’s years. Then I add – since God has given me life and I have accepted God’s gift, that life has, from the beginning, conquered death.”

“And that is OK too, isn’t it?” Jo responded.

“Yes, Jo, it is. Amen and Amen.”