

So it's been a little while since I've been up here. I was actually scheduled to speak last semester. And some of what I'm going to be touching on today will actually serve as a bit of an explanation as to why I was not up here last semester. But I thought I'd begin with a little bit of an introduction for those who don't know me. I served for many years as a dean of students here, but I realized that at this point, as I look out, it's been long enough that for most of you, you were not students when I was the dean of students. So you may not know me as well. Some of you do. And for those who don't know me, I'll do my best to introduce myself. I actually do this through pictures because I'm often in the back of the room and I see people like Dean Gordon show these pictures of his children.

And you guys seem to really love that. You have very expressive responses to his adorable children and his beautiful wife and, you know, all these things. And so I was like, all right, okay, well, I could show them some pictures. And then. And then I don't know if you remember this, but not long ago, I was in. We were in a School of Divinity chapel, a Thanksgiving chapel. And you guys remember this. Bill Krewson showed a bunch of pictures of his dog. You guys remember that?

And you guys seem to really, really like that, showing pictures of these adorable animals. So I thought that I would actually start with showing you guys a picture of my cat. Yes, this is. Yeah, it's a dreary day. This is our kitten.

Absolutely adorable.

So I figured we'd cheer you guys up with this cute picture of a cat. Well, guys, I have something to confess to you. This is actually not my cat. This is not my cat. I really.

I like cats. I love cats, in fact. And I grew up with adorable cats like this. But my wife, she's allergic to cats, so we can't have cats in the house. So no cats in the house.

So we're more kind of of dog people. And so figured we'd show you guys our dog. This is our dog.

I got it. I gotta be honest with you guys. Confession time. That's not really my dog. That's a picture of a random cute dog I found on the Internet.

I actually. I have a nephew who has a dog named Snoopy that actually looks a lot like this. I was trying to find a picture of Snoopy, but that's actually just a random picture of a dog. But it is a very adorable picture of a dog. But my girls and I have been petitioning for years to actually get an animal.

But so far, my wife, she has a compelling argument against it. And maybe it's one that you guys have heard in your homes, but this is her argument. It's, are you going to take care of it? And the answer, of course, is. And we all know deep down in our hearts, yeah, no, probably not.

Probably that's all going to fall on my wife Hannah, to do most of the care for the animals. So I haven't been able to convince her, but I did actually want to show you guys some pictures of my children. Yes, yes, I know they're adorable.

All right, I gotta be honest with you guys about something. True confession time. Okay, These are my children. These are my children. I promise you, they're my children. But here's my true confession time. They don't look like this anymore, okay?

This was many, many years ago. They're now, see 10 and 12. So they're getting up in here, and this is my first, like, thoroughly honest picture. Here it is. Here we go.

So this is them. This is what they look like now. In fact, this was just a week or so ago. And just to prove it, you guys can look up. This is a Stephen Curtis Chapman.

Most of you probably don't know who that is. Ask your parents who Stephen Curtis Chapman is. But this was just from about a week ago or two ago at a Stephen Curtis Chapman concert in Glenside. So proof that this photo is only a couple weeks old. And some of you actually might recognize the

woman in the middle because she is a professor here.

She's also my wife, but she's a professor here. And for those of you who are in psych majors, you maybe have had her. And if you go on to study counseling, you, you will undoubtedly have her. She teaches a number of courses, both at the undergrad level, but most of the courses that she teaches are in grad counseling. So that's my wife, Hannah, and then my daughter Alethea, which is a Greek word. It means truth. She usually goes by Laethe, which is a little unfortunate because people think that her name is Lacey and that she has a lisp and she has to spend a lot of time correcting people that her name is not Lacey, her name is Alethea, and somehow that's just gotten shortened to Lathy. And then my daughter Charis, spelled C H A R I S. And I think we have a Charis and Alethea here in the student body. But Charis. So I know we have at least one Charis here, but so you'll understand this, my wife and I had no idea how often we would end up because of Autocorrect texting about chairs in our life.

So if you actually look through our text feed, it's just. It's frequently, you know, are you gonna pick up chairs from school today? And there's chairs on our way. So we actually have stopped bothering to actually correct it. We know what we're talking about when we talk about Alethea and chairs.

Thankfully, Autocorrect doesn't even try with Alethea. They just assume it's another language. But that's my family. And then pictures of the cat that I wish I had and the dog that my children wish to have. So beat that, Dean Gordon, with your real pictures of your real family.

All right, Now, I don't want them up there. The whole. Derek. Okay. As much as I love seeing them, they're distracted.

I'll put one of those pictures of cute cats up there if things go. So that'll serve a little bit as an introduction. But I do want to talk about why I was not actually up here last semester. And some of you know these details, but many of you don't. And I'm going to share this partly to fill in a few gaps and partly because it explains why matters of life and death have been on my mind in a particularly vivid way recently.

So today, and I thought the two songs that we sung were absolutely perfect, by the way, we're going to be talking about life and death. So a little bit of a heavy topic. It's a good thing it's not rainy and gloomy outside. Welcome back from spring break. But we are going to be talking about life and death.

And when we talk about death, we're going to talk about it in language that is accurate to a materialistic understanding. And when I actually share that language, it might actually be a little difficult to hear. But I'm going to present a biblical understanding of life and of death that I hope is going to leave you all with hope as you leave this room. But it's going to be a bit of a roller coaster.

We're going to go dark before we go on a light path, but some background. So back in September of last semester, I got kidney stones. Has anybody ever had kidney stones before? No. They usually don't afflict folks of your age.

They're fairly common. Let me tell you this about kidney stones. I don't recommend them. They're extremely painful. So do you guys know if, like, your parents had kidney stones before?

Excruciatingly painful. Okay, so I've actually had, and I won't say who, but I've had women who have had children and kidney stones tell me that of the two, they would take the child bearing experience over the kidney stone experience. Okay, I'm just passing that along from what they shared. I can't speak from my own experience, but. But regardless, kidney stones are painful.

So one day I woke up back in September in excruciating pain. My wife went to drop the girls off at school, and when she came back to the house, she found me in a fetal position on the bed. I couldn't get out of bed, so she obviously knew something was going wrong. I actually thought that my appendix had burst. And so we quickly went to the hospital.

It was about a mile away, and it was maybe the most excruciating mile drive in my entire life. It was at the beginning of the day, and school busses were still there, and we had to stop for all these kids crossing the streets. And then somehow my wife found every pothole and speed bump in the Jenkintown, Abington area where we lived. But I got to Abington Hospital and I walked into the emergency room, and it took the physician's assistant and nurse, the medical staff there, all of about 10 seconds to diagnose me with kidney stones. I mean, they literally looked at me like, oh, you have kidney stones?

Yeah, okay, they're painful. And I said, we know. We could tell. And so they. They did what they normally do when you have kidney stones, which is put you on a lot of painkillers, which was which was great. Of course, at first they start you on Tylenol, which is not so great. They're like, we'll give you some Tylenol. I'm like, I don't have a headache. This is painful.

But eventually they got me on the right painkillers, and it's just a matter of most of the time waiting for the kidney stones to pass. But in the meantime, doctors will usually do something like a CT scan to figure out where this kidney stone is. And so I went and I got a kidney stone. How many of you had kidney stones before? I'm sorry, how many have had a CT scan before?

CT scans, something like that? Right. Not quite as intense as an MRI, but they stick you on this little donut thing that's like a human X ray. And then they actually, to get a sense of where the kidney stones were. And so they did this.

And I got back to the emergency room, and after about 45 minutes, three doctors came in and introduced themselves, and two of them introduced themselves as oncologists, which is a little strange, because when you have kidney stones, it's typically not something that would put you in front of an oncologist. And if you know what an oncologist is. I started putting the pieces together pretty quickly. These doctors informed me that they had found a very disconcerting mass on my kidney. So the kidney stone was in my left kidney.

The mass, which turned out to be larger than my kidney itself, was on the right side. So the conversation shifted pretty significantly at that point. I was admitted into the oncology ward and informed that I had cancer. So, of course, initially, there was not a lot that was known. It was clear that I had a very large cancerous tumor on my kidney.

But they also identified it or thought what the language they use is lesions. Thought that they saw lesions on my liver, on my lungs, on my spinal cord. And all of this, as you can imagine, is quite frightening. You guys might not know who I am, how old I am, but I'll reveal to you, I'm 41 years old, which might seem ancient to you guys, but I still feel fairly young. And this was all a significant shock to me, to be having conversations that involved words like malignancy and spread and even cancer itself.

Now, fast forward, things actually really only got better from there, and I'm happy to actually share that with you. And obviously, being up here and back at work, things did get better. I won't go into all the details, but I got excellent care at Fox Chase, which is a hospital is very close, some of the best in the world in terms of cancer. And after two surgeries, one of them fairly radical, but after two surgeries, the doctors really feel like they removed all of the cancerous tissue in the tumor. So I went in for an MRI just last week, which, if you know what an MRI is, if you don't know what an MRI is, it's basically.

It's a. It's like a torpedo tube, a human torpedo tube that serves as a, you know, a human fax machine. And they do a whole body scan and came back and they said, you know, after that surgery, we actually are so confident that we got all of the disease. We're not ready to declare you disease free, but it's really not necessary for you to do anything like chemotherapy or. More likely, what I have done is immunotherapy.

So an incredibly, incredibly encouraging prognosis. And I'm thrilled to actually be up here. It was obviously a lot of a roller coaster. And this is something as an aside, and not even really the main

point of my talk, but being 40 in my early 40s, I didn't spend a lot of time going to the doctor. Usually when I was in pain, my modus operandi was to ignore it until the pain went away. I imagine that's where most of you guys are as well.

And so it would take a pretty significant pain to get me to the hospital. Also, a little bit about background in terms of a CT scan. CT scans these days are not like MRIs. MRIs can scan large portions of the body, but a CT scan actually just scans a very narrow bandwidth of the body. And if the doctors had scanned any other part of my body outside of my kidneys, they probably would not have found this tumor until it was too late, until it had spread to my lungs and to my brain, and then it may have actually become terminal.

So the Lord knew exactly what he was doing. He knew exactly what he was doing, the amount of pain that I needed to be in to get me to the doctor, and he knew exactly what I needed in terms of what to get the doctor's attention concerning my diagnosis. So I'm very, very grateful to the Lord, and it's actually been a real lesson in God's providence. But this is all really just background to what I actually want to talk to you about today, which is life, life and death. Because experiences like these, as you can imagine, have a way of sharpening your thinking about certain things.

When you hear the term malignant attached to your own body, when your own body betrays you, you start to think differently about life and death. And so some of what I want to share today is really what I have been thinking about, things I have been wrestling with and things that I am acutely aware of, perhaps more so than any other point in my life. But I actually want to start with talking about our culture's understanding of death.

Our culture, guys, is exceedingly uncomfortable with death. For most of human history, death was something that was a lot closer to us, in the sense that many people who lived in agricultural societies would be around death more often. Death was a bit more visible in their lives. People would often die in their homes with families around them in their final hours. And then burial was even handled by the communities.

Death was close. Today, we've largely removed death from our daily lives. The sick and elderly are often cared for in specialized facilities, right? Most people die in hospitals surrounded by medical professionals rather than their own family.

Of course, most of this is a result of genuine medical progress and compassionate care that modern science can provide. And again, as you guys just heard, I'm a beneficiary of modern science. And I don't mean to be a critique of it in this talk, but there has been this side effect in that we are increasingly distant from the tangible reality of death. We're uncomfortable with it. We avoid talking about it.

And when we do talk about it, we like to soften the language. We rarely say that somebody died. Instead, what do we say? We say they passed away or they fell asleep, or we see their rest. We say they're resting now or in a better place.

Now, sometimes those phrases can come from a genuine Christian hope. But in my experience, often they function as a kind of linguistic cushioning, a way of avoiding the starkness of what death actually is. We talk about death as though it is a long nap. But if you step into a worldview that rejects God and reduces reality to nothing but matter and energy, the picture becomes much bleaker.

And this is the world that we're living in. Most people embrace something of a materialistic understanding of death. Most of your science textbooks embrace a fairly materialistic understanding of death. From a strictly biochemical and clinical perspective, human death is not even an instantaneous event, but a progressive, entropy driven transition. It is defined as the irreversible cessation of integrated metabolic and neurological functions within a biological system.

Put more simply, death is the permanent absence of respiration. It is a permanent cessation of cardiac activity. And ultimately, it is the irreversible loss of all functions of the entire brain, including

the brain stem. When the synapses of the brain stop firing, the electrical activity that makes thoughts and memory possible becomes silent. From a purely materialistic perspective, death is not merely an event; it is the final collapse of a biological machine. Every memory that you have, every face you recognize, every sound you remember, every idea that you hold to yourself exists physically as patterns of synaptic connections in the brain. When neurons die and begin to break down, those patterns are literally erased.

This isn't blackness or silence, because both of those require a mind to perceive them. It is the total nonexistence of the observer. The universe continues to exist, but the you that knew it existed is gone so completely that it is as if you never existed at all. This is a reality of the materialistic worldview. Your atoms simply move on.

They were once a part of stars. They became a part of the soil, and then plants and then food, and then you. And eventually they will be a part of something else. In that view, you were nothing more than a temporary knot in the flow of matter, a brief arrangement of carbon and water that mistook its own complexity for a soul. The universe is not only indifferent to your existence, it is indifferent to your disappearance.

That is the bleakness of a strictly materialistic understanding of death. And when you truly understand this vision of reality, you begin to understand why so many people are desperately trying to escape it. Why Silicon Valley billionaires are investing enormous resources into life extension technology, why people are experimenting with cryogenic preservation, why others talk about uploading consciousness into the machine, becoming more and more a reality. In a world where we have AI behind all of these ideas is the same underlying if death truly means the permanent eraser of the self, then it is the most terrifying thing imaginable.

The Bible offers an entirely different vision. The scriptures certainly acknowledge biological life. They recognize the unity of body and soul that constitutes human existence. But the central biblical idea of life, I don't know if you guys have ever noticed this, but this is really an amazing thing is not a biological function. The central idea of life in the Bible is communion with God. Life in its fullest sense is fellowship with our maker.

The Bible speaks about life and really at least three related senses. The first is, of course, physical life. This is the unity of the body and the soul that allows us to exist and act within the created world. Second, there is the spiritual life. This is communion with God while the body and soul remain united. It is the new life described in Romans 6, where those who are united to Christ walk in newness of life. And then third, there is eternal life. And Scripture defines eternal life in a way that surprises us. Jesus says in John 17:3, the passage that Dean Gordon read for us earlier, "this is eternal life that you, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Eternal life is not merely living forever. Eternal life is knowing God. It is communion with him. It is fellowship with the Creator, restored through Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul speaks of this when he refers to that which is truly life, a phrase that he uses multiple times. True life is not simply respiration or neural activity. True life is reconciliation with the God who made us, which means something very important. From the Bible's perspective, it is possible to be biologically alive and yet spiritually dead.

It is also possible to face physical death while already possessing eternal life. Death, our understanding of death, needs to be reconsidered. It just changes the way Christians understand death entirely. Scripture teaches us, of course, that death enter the world through sin. It is not natural in the ultimate.

It is an intruder to God's creation. It is an enemy. And yet, for those who are united to Christ, death is no longer the final word. Jesus already passed through death and came out on the other side. Through his death and resurrection, he has broken its ultimate power, which means that for believers, death is not annihilation. It is not the erasure of the self. It is not the collapse of a biological machine into meaningless atoms. Instead, death becomes a passage. The body and soul are temporarily separated, but the person continues, in conscious communion with God.

And one day, even that separation will be reversed. The Christian hope is not merely life after death. The Christian hope is ultimately resurrection. One day Christ will return. The dead will be raised, bodies will be restored and glorified. Creation itself will be renewed. And the people of God will live in unbreakable, broken fellowship with him forever.

Why does this matter? Experiences like the one that I went through this fall have a way of making these truths feel less theoretical. When doctors begin talking about malignancy, you start to think more concretely about the possibility that your life may end sooner than you expected it to. You start thinking about your family, about unfinished projects, about the future you assumed that you would have. You realize very quickly how fragile human life actually is. But the Christian gospel allows us to face that fragility with a different kind of confidence.

It reorients the way we think about life and death entirely. Because the most important reality about our existence is not how long our biological systems keep functioning. The most important reality is whether or not we are reconciled to God. It is our life of eternal communion with Him.

Scriptures tell us that every human being will exist forever. We are all eternal beings. I don't know if you think about that very often. Sometimes I think Christians can think about eternal life. Starting when you die. You are an eternal being now. The only question is, how will we exist? Scriptures describe really two ultimate possibilities. Eternal communion with God or eternal separation from Him. These are the two options before Him.

This is the contrast between life and death that we get in the Bible. Eternal life and life itself, from a biblical perspective, is communion with God. Death, particularly eternal death, is separation from Him. And through the ongoing work of the Spirit, we are sanctified. Our lives are gradually reshaped so that we increasingly reflect the character of Christ as we live in proximity to him. We are restored not only to stand before a holy God, but to live in proximity to him. That is the entire purpose of God's rescue plan, was for us to live in communion with him. Proximity to him, in fellowship with him.

One final word as we wrap up, and I'll let you guys go. Not long ago, my grandfather died. In fact, we celebrated his life just on Saturday. But we gather with hope, because for a Christian, death is not stepping into darkness. It is stepping into the presence of Christ each day. Sorry. One day each of us will close our eyes in this world. It may actually come sooner than any of you think or have planned. When we open them again, it will not be to nothingness. It will be to a kingdom prepared for us. A city whose builder and maker is God. Hear me, guys. There is no darkness waiting for us. There is no eternal silence. There is no cosmic indifference. There is only life. Life with God. Life with Christ that will never end.

It will be as fresh and as new to us 10,000, 100,000, a million years from now as it is the moment we first step into his presence. That, according to scripture, is life. That is truly life. Let me pray for you guys as you go.

Heavenly Father, the image that the world offers us of death is bleak. And, Lord, that makes the vision, the reality of our eternal communion with us that much more precious when we realize it. Lord, I believe the men and women in this room know you. They have expressed as much. And so we together can express our gratitude that we will one day close our eyes and open them in a celestial city, a new kingdom, an eternal communion and fellowship with you, where all tears will be wiped away.

Lord, as we leave from here, Lord, leave us with a new vision, a fresh vision for the glorious life that not only awaits us, but. But the glorious life that begins and is with you now. Lord, I pray these things. As these brothers and sisters go from this room, Lord, as we eat our meals and we fellowship and we experience just a small, small glimpse of the fellowship of believers and saints in the new Kingdom. I pray these things in your Son's name. Amen.