

Bishop Otsuka's 2022 New Year Letter
Living Faith in the Corona Era, II

Meeting Death as Christians

Introduction

In this 2022 New Year Letter I want to explore with you how we live our faith in the corona era, specifically with hints for Meeting Death as Christians.

As Japanese society rapidly experiences a declining birthrate and aging population, a growing number of elderly people want to live the rest of their lives without being burdens for their children and others. They understand that preparing to meet death has become essential for living better now.

The corona pandemic has been an opportunity for people to fundamentally question our social and economic activities and individual lifestyles.

As a Christian living in this corona era, I want to think about meeting death from a biblical standpoint that leads to a more positive way of life.

1. Abundant life

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10).

Let us begin our reflections on meeting death with the beautiful words of Jesus about receiving "abundant life." This is not an abundance of worldly wealth and success, but the abundance of eternal life that overcomes death. As St. Paul says, we are now looking at what seems dimly reflected in a mirror, but at the Lord's Second Coming we will see God face to face. Now we only know in part, but then we will clearly know as we are known to God (see 1 Corinthians 13:12).

So, our first task in meeting death is to bring out what has accumulated in my memory. I must become like a scholar who has studied the kingdom of heaven and draw forth the new and old from my store (see Matthew 13:52). The old is the bitter memory of rejecting God's love, while the new is the gospel experience of response to Jesus' call.

Each time the People of Israel remembered and commemorated the events of Exodus, they gave thanks for God's patient guidance in their disobedience and looked forward to the completion of their salvation. In the same way, when we sincerely examine our memories and honestly face our past our hearts will awaken our willingness and hope to live a joyful future.

2. The house of God awaits

Meeting death confirms the meaning of our being born into this world as we give thanks for living in the love and grace of God.

Jesus said at the Last Supper, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." (John 14:2). This house is the eternal dwelling in heaven of the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:1). I imagine that everyone is invited there without exception, and that everyone in their most basic reality shares fellowship with God in some way unique to that person.

Until we reach the Lord's house, the Father sends the Holy Spirit through the Son as counsel and helper to each of us (see John 14:15–21). Because of this Holy

Spirit, we each build a life that is uniquely our own.

Therefore, it is meaningless to compare the meaning and value of my life with that of others. Each of us was born to create in this world a life that cannot be replaced by others, to be a singular blossom.

3. Remember the sabbath day

In meeting death, we face our own death, but we think of it not as preparation for dying, but as a way to expand our minds toward eternal rest, a sabbath beyond time. The Lord's Commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8), reminds us that God our Creator has a goal.

The entire Bible begins with the phrase, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth," (Genesis 1:1) and ends with the Lord's promise and our plea: "Surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

David said, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters" (see Psalm 23:1-2) and sang of rest. Jesus promised eternal rest when he said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest ... and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29).

The goal of creation is a blissful world where God and humankind live together face-to-face (see Genesis 2:1-3). To that end, God, in time, uses salvation history to prepare the fulfillment of creation through Christ, the Alpha and Omega (see Revelation 1:8).

The history of the universe, the world, and our own lives has an end, and all things will rest in that sabbath. The time in which I live is a sacred drama that God spreads for me that unfolds toward a final sabbath rest. In every moment until that acceptable time, that day of salvation (see 2 Corinthians 6:1-2), God's grace must not be wasted. The joy of bearing fruit one-hundredfold awaits us (see Mark 4:20).

4. Looking to Christ, Perfecter of Faith

In his later years (around age 60), St. Paul wrote: "Not that I have already obtained [righteousness by faith] or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own ... but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal" (Philippians 3:12-14). Therefore, we who believe in God's guidance look toward Christ, the founder and perfecter of faith, as we run patiently through our own appointed race (see Hebrews 12:1-2).

Christ is our companion in meeting death. Like the two disciples heading to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-27), when we experience setbacks or failures in our lives and feel regrets, we should invite Jesus to come and walk with us. Jesus himself explained the necessity of the suffering of the Messiah which was regarded as a stumbling block: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). He taught His disciples that God's work of salvation is a mystery and that all events have meaning.

Qoheleth the teacher says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3.1). First, there is a time to be born and a time to die (Ecclesiastes 3.2). After saying that all God does is beautiful at all times, he reminds us that people "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Before a series of disasters happened to him, Job said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21), acknowledging that his life and death are under the rule of God. God then tests whether Job's thoughts are sincere.

As Luke writes, Mary patiently pondered all that happened to her (see Luke 2:19, 51). We, too, continue to ponder our meeting death with trust in the Lord.

5. Questioning the meaning of God's silence

Meeting death forces us to meditate on God's silence.

In the Book of Psalms there is a group of prayers known as the Lamentation Psalms. In them, a sense of the presence of God is mixed with a sense of God's absence, that God has abandoned the one who prays or even that there is no God. When God's silence continues, we wonder if it is God's wrath or punishment for our sins, and we cannot bear the silence. We tend to want to experience God emotionally, but what God asks of us is to trust completely.

Margaret F. Powers' poem "Footprints in the Sand" describes a dream in which the author walks through life with the Lord. Her footprints and those of the Lord have been side-by-side on a sandy beach, but there was a point when she faced difficulties and sorrow in her life and there was only one set of footprints. So, she complains to the Lord, "I just don't understand why, when I need You most, You leave me." Then the Lord says, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you, never, ever, during your trials and testings. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

One day, Job loses all he has, including his health, and asks God the meaning of the heartbreaking event, but is discouraged by God's not answering, God's silence. But the book of Job teaches us that all experiences are for realizing God's unchanging presence and we should not interpret God's work from a merely human point of view. When I trace the memories of the suffering and darkness of the past, I should not ask why they happened to me, but how the Father loves me through them.

6. "I believe in the resurrection of the body"

The basis for our meeting death lies in our resurrection faith: "I believe in the resurrection of the body." This is the pinnacle of the Creed. To die is horrible; this is a normal human feeling. But Christians can learn from St. Paul's epistle not why we die, but why death is horrible. It is because of the sin of humankind (see Romans 5:12-6:14). By the sin of Adam, the first human, all were in thrall to sin by nature and thus under the rule of death. Sin is disobedience toward God, abandoning God and trying to live as God oneself. As a result of this sin, the relationship between God and humans has been severed.

But through Christ's passion and death, our sins are forgiven and our relationship with God is restored. As a result, we can live free from the anxious fear of death. Paul says: "For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many." (Romans 5:15). The state of suffering under the rule of sin and death is insignificant compared to the glory of our future as children of God (Romans 8:18-19).

The truth that Christians are made alive by the free love and mercy of God is accepted in faith. By being "baptized into Christ Jesus" (see Romans 6:3), we

receive the first fruits of the Spirit that makes us children of God (see Romans 8:23), and enables us to join the Lord in praying, "Abba, Father" (see Romans 8:15). At the end of the world, we will be united with the risen Lord Christ and live eternal life in a resurrection body (see 1 Corinthians 15:35–49).

7. "Give us this day our daily bread"

A Christian's greatest joy is to receive the Eucharist as food for the journey of life. Jesus said, "Whoever believes has eternal life" (John 6:47), and he promised, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6:54).

However, even as we receive eternal life, our salvation is also yet to come; we live with both aspects. That is why Jesus used his body to nourish us for our journey through a life filled with suffering and sorrow. In the Lord's Prayer, the "daily bread" for which we pray is all the blessings God gives each day as well as the sacrament God gives for our life in this world.

In addition, through the sacrament of the Eucharist we are united with God who transcends time. Through baptism we share in Christ's death and resurrection, and through the sacrament of the Eucharist, while in this world we already take part in the heavenly life of the risen Christ.

When we think of this, we realize that the whole of each person's life is not just a record of personal activity but is also a record of God's eternal touch in time. Even if I can no longer remember my own story, I am engraved in God's memory. In meeting death, we taste the eternal "present" that lives with God in the continuous flow of every moment.

8. "Without love, I am nothing"

In meeting death, we graduate from a "duty ethic," the attitude that life must be lived a certain way.

A rich young man asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). But there is no answer to his request for a rule to follow. Salvation is to be received as a gift from God. Fundamentally lacking that understanding, the youth did not realize that the world of desires and the world of rules do not bring freedom and joy. They come from a world of love. Jesus invites the young man to part with his property and awaken to this world of love.

We, too, must carefully look for what prevents us from living in the world of love. We must be liberated from an orientation of loving God as a duty and deepen a life of love that freely responds to God's love.

Paul says in his hymn of love (1 Corinthians 13:1-13), that even if we have enough faith to move mountains, use up all our possessions for the poor, or give ourselves to death in pride, if we are without love there is no benefit to our life. Faith, hope, and love will remain forever, but the greatest of them is love.

It is only in meeting death that it is possible to recall Paul's "List of Love" each day and practice it. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

9. "Remember me"

We who meet death do not spend "waiting time" until we die and go to a

paradise called heaven to be happy there. We have something to do: to ask God and others for forgiveness. We all have “unresolved memories,” repeated self-justifications and excuses for our failures in the past.

One of the two criminals on the left and right of Jesus' cross hears Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) and asks Jesus to remember him when He comes to fulfill his kingdom (see Luke 23:42). Jesus answers, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43) and promises salvation and the forgiveness of this criminal's sins. Meeting death is a way of prayer that has the same hope as this criminal.

"Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). We who wish to be forgiven cannot refuse forgiveness to our brothers and sisters. We must do as the Lord's Prayer says: "Forgive our sins as we forgive others."

St. Peter says. "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:8-9).

Meeting death is a precious opportunity to make all encounters of the past and the future a pure exchange of love. Once you realize that your intention to live by your own strength has actually been a life helped by many people, you can open your heart to those with whom you need to be reconciled. We can and should offer heartfelt prayers for forgiveness from those who have already died or whom we can no longer meet in person as well as from God.

10. "To God who gives joy to my youth"

As we age, we all feel a decline in physical strength and function, but Paul says that for those who know the resurrection of Christ this phenomenon is a sign of inner youth. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

The inner is recreated in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) and grows to the stature of Christ every day (see Ephesians 4:13). From glory to glory we will be remade into the same form as the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). David praises the Lord for "your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:5). The old Latin Mass opened with praise "To God who gives joy to my youth" (*Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*). Our inner youth is the youth that God gives us, and God rejoices in it.

Inner youth dwells in a humble heart that accepts the kingdom of God obediently like a child (see Mark 10:14-16). Jesus presented a child as a reflection of the true image of the children of God. This is because children need love, seek to be accepted unconditionally, try to be satisfied with themselves, and seek nothing but love from others.

The greatest value for people is to be one of the “little ones” that Jesus speaks of in Mark 9:42. In our society where efficiency, health, and success are prioritized while the weak are discriminated against and losers are excluded, even as we grow old, we can testify to the biblical word, "whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

11. Christian simple life

The Christian simple life can be said to correspond to yoga's practice “DAN-

SYA-RI” of refusing to acquire the unnecessary (DAN), discarding the unnecessary (SYA), and abandoning obsession with things (RI).

Paul called everything else loss compared to the wonder of knowing Christ, and even if he lost everything for Christ, he regarded them “as rubbish” (see Philippians 3:8).

This spirit is the secret of the simple life for Christians. Jesus said, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). We fight our obsession with wealth, stop wanting more, and free ourselves from vanity and a self-centered outlook on life, creating a place in our hearts for the poor and the weak.

Regarding the life of faith, Paul teaches Timothy: "Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it." (1 Timothy 6:6-7). In meeting death, we aim for a simple life with a heart that trusts in the Lord. We are not the owners of our belongings, but their administrators, and by using them for our neighbors, we serve God's providence (Gaudium et Spes, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 69).

Rather than storing up things for some time when we might need them, we should review what is important to stay in God's love, leave the future to God, and be satisfied with the joy of living in this moment. Christians do it with the aim to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33) and "whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

12. Mother of Mercy

In the opening prayer of the Mass on the feast of the Assumption commemorating the Virgin Mary's being raised body and soul to Heaven at the end of her life believers pray that we may enter eternal joy with Our Lady, expressing the hope for salvation for all who believe. In the fourth meditation of the Glorious Mysteries of the rosary, we ask for the grace of a good end.

Night prayer before going to bed ends with "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46) and finally the Latin chant *Salve Regina* or in translation, "Hail, Holy Queen." As descendants of Eve who has been exiled from the Garden of Eden, we pray that as we wander through this "valley of tears" we be protected on our journey and finally see the face of Jesus. The Virgin Mary will stand close to us and ask the Son to help us when we are weak, wounded, humiliated, outcast, and suffering.

The Latin phrase "Memento mori" (remember your death) exchanged by medieval monks meant the same as "Memento Domini" (remember your Lord). The message is, do not forget that you are mortal, and do not forget the Lord of life.

In this age of growing anxiety about the future caused by the corona crisis, let us start meeting death as Christians, giving living testimony of renewed faith.

Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.
(1 Corinthians 16:22-23, see also Revelation 22:30-21)

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Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
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