

“Life Without God?”

When my kids were in grade school, they brought home a saying that stuck around our household for awhile.

Whenever things didn't go the way they wanted them to go, they would say, *“It stinks!”*

I'm pretty sure they didn't realize that they were quoting the Bible, but they were.

When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to the tomb with Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, and after they arrived Jesus gave instructions for the stone that sealed the entrance to Lazarus' tomb to be rolled back. Martha objected, saying, *“But Lord, his body has been there for four days; it stinks!”*

Modern translations of the *New Testament* tend to use kinder, gentler language, like the NIV's *“There is a bad odor.”*

But the plain translation is, “It stinks”-or, as the *King James Version* puts it: *“It stinketh!”*

There's nothing surprising or shocking about this: we all know that when living things die, they decompose, and when they decompose, they stink.

But organic decay is only an extreme example of something that takes place every day throughout all creation.

This phenomenon was described by Sir Isaac Newton, who called it the *Second Law of Thermodynamics*.

Put as simply as possible, the *Second Law of Thermodynamics* states that throughout our physical universe, order is gradually deteriorating into disorder.

Highly organized, efficient forms of energy—like light and electricity—are continually breaking down into less organized, less efficient forms—like heat.

And what is true of energy is also true of physical matter as well.

Cloth unravels, machine parts wear out, houses get messy, buildings fall apart.

Scientists call this natural process of deterioration *entropy*, from an ancient Greek word $\epsilon\eta\tau\epsilon\omicron\pi\epsilon\iota\alpha$ which meant “shame” or “humiliation.”

“Entropy” means that all things gradually disintegrate.

A perfectly stacked pyramid of ping-pong balls sooner or later will collapse into disarray, but the ping pong balls will never arrange themselves into a pyramid.

As the poet William Butler Yeats put it: *“Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.”*

As usual, the Bible paved the way for scientific discovery: sixteen centuries before Sir Isaac Newton was born, Paul observed entropy at work.

In his *Letter to the Romans* Paul wrote that all creation was “...in bondage to decay.”

It was obvious to Paul just as it is to modern empirical scientists.

The question is: what causes entropy?

Why does everything fall apart over time—including our own minds and bodies?

The answer lies back in the Garden of Eden, at the beginning of time.

In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth by organizing matter and energy into a harmonious order.

He separated light from darkness, sky from earth, land from water, plant from animal, and so forth.

He created order out of chaos.

But when man allowed sin to enter the world, God’s creation began to unravel and “uncreation” or disintegration began.

In scientific language: entropy set in.

In God’s perfect world there had been **shalom**: harmony, beauty, growth and eternal life.

But sin infected the world with discord, ugliness, disease and death.

“On the day you eat of it you will surely die,” the Lord had said to Adam, and it was not an empty threat.

Now we all live with the consequences of Adam’s sin—in our physical environment, in our bodies, in our relationships and in society itself.

We even see it in the Church.

Sin infects everything it touches and sin touches everything.

We were born steeped in it and it stays with us throughout our lives.

After we die, our minds and bodies will be restored and renewed and we will once again have ***shalom***—along with eternal life.

But as long as we live in this world we will carry the burden of our sinful flesh, the “bag of worms” that hangs around our neck, as Luther called it, and we will spend our days—and nights—wrestling with discord, disease, anxiety and the fear of death.

And at the end of our temporal lives we will end up exactly like Lazarus—stinking in a grave as we return to dust and ashes.

For a believer, though, the story doesn’t end with the stinking.

Jesus called out in a loud voice, *“Lazarus, come forth!”*—and the dead man arose with new life flowing in his veins and a new spirit animating his mortal frame.

The same One who made the lame walk and the blind see created new life out of death and decay.

And He did it simply by the power of His Word!

Lazarus didn’t do a single thing to help.

He didn’t give his heart to Jesus, he didn’t speak in tongues, he didn’t respond to a spark of good hidden somewhere in him.

He didn’t say the sinner’s prayer; he didn’t even repent of his sins. He couldn’t do any of these things because he was dead!

All he could do was lie there and stink!

But God's Word, "*Lazarus, come forth!*"—raised the dead man to new life.

He got up and walked out of his tomb and Jesus said: "*Take off the graveclothes and let him go!*"

I love those words!

"Take off the graveclothes and let him go!"

Death and the grave had no claim on Lazarus after the Word of God entered his ears and gave him new life.

He was a new man—re-created by the same Word that created the sun, the moon and the stars; the same Word that created you and me; the same Word that raised us up to new life when we were dead in our sins.

And just as God has released Lazarus and you and me from death, one day he is going to release all creation from its bondage to decay when he re-creates a new heavens and a new earth, because however loudly the prince of this world may shout and dance around in his graveclothes, ***"This is our Father's world!"***

It's easy to get depressed over the way things are going in the world—and in our own country.

Disillusionment, suspicion and conspiracy theories abound, not only in regard to government but in regard to the basic institutions of our society—public and private.

The media muck-rake scandal everywhere—in the lives of sports heroes, movie stars, political leaders—even the clergy.

Books are written impugning the character of our founding fathers—men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton—even Abraham Lincoln.

Great artists like Shakespeare and Michelangelo and Mozart are sarcastically referred to as "dead, white, European males."

Our youth, in whom we have always placed our hopes for the future, are showing the strain as well.

A survey of secondary school teachers conducted back in the 50's asked teachers to identify the five biggest problems they had with students.

The five they listed were: chewing gum in class, running in the hallways, failure to do homework, cheating on exams and passing notes in class.

The same question was asked of secondary schoolteachers in 2005.

The problems they listed were: use of illegal drugs, carrying weapons, teenage pregnancy, suicide and physical violence.

The consequences of original sin are multiplying as people are drawn more and more into the devil's dance.

I am reminded of a cartoon character who used to occasionally appear in my favorite comic strip: Pogo the Possum.

The character was a vulture who wandered around with a sign hung around his neck which said, "Debt, doubt and doom loom."

And that's why it's so important to remember that, as we sing in one of our hymns: ***"This is our Father's world--and let us ne'er forget: that though the wrong seems off so strong, God is the Ruler yet!"***

For those who worship Jesus as their Lord and Savior, God has already begun to reverse entropy, to create new life out of decay and death. Listen to Paul's words: *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time..."*

Even now God is transforming the death throes of a dying creation into the labor pains which signal the birth of a new heavens and a new earth!

The groanings of a dying world are being transformed into the birth pangs of a new creation!

And soon—very soon—God will reveal this new creation in all of its glorious liberty.

God never abandons us!

He didn't abandon Adam and Eve after they had opened the spigot and allowed sin and death to pour into the world.

Instead, he promised them a Savior who would rescue them from sin and death and restore **shalom** to mankind.

He didn't abandon David after his grotesque sins against Bathsheba and Uriah; he forgave him and told him that his kingdom would last forever.

He didn't abandon Peter after Peter denied him three times; he restored him and made him an Apostle.

God never abandoned them and he never abandons us!

Even now, as our flesh is gradually perishing along with the sin in it, our Spirits look to heaven through our prayers and our worship, through God's Word and the blessings of our Christian fellowship.

In one of our hymns we sing: "And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long; Steals on the ear the distant triumph song; And hearts are brave again and arms are strong; Allelujah! Allelujah!"

The fate of all creation apart from God is disease, death and decomposition.

If you want an accurate picture of what your life would be like apart from God, imagine Lazarus after four days in a warm tomb.

The kids are right: it stinks.

But if you want an accurate picture of what your life is like as a believer and a child of God, imagine Lazarus rising up like a phoenix out of his mortal remains, shedding his graveclothes and walking forth in newness of life.

The words Jesus cried out to Lazarus as he lay in his tomb are the same words he cries out to all those who lie dead in their sins: "**Rise up and walk in newness of life!**"

And for every sinner who has heard his voice and risen up from death to life, Jesus says the same thing he said for Lazarus: "**Take off his graveclothes and let him go!**"

Amen.