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The Death of Kobe Bryant: Fallen Icons and Heart of Popular Culture

Justin Bailey

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The Death of Kobe Bryant: Fallen Icons and Heart of Popular Culture

Abstract

"It was one more reminder that control is an illusion, that life is fragile, and that each day with loved ones is a gift."

Posting about reactions to the death of Kobe Bryant from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in things

January 30, 2020

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Justin Bailey

On Sunday, January 26, 2020, Kobe Bryant, his thirteen-year-old daughter Gianna, and seven others were killed in a helicopter crash. The deaths sent shockwaves through the NBA, Los Angeles, and the world at large. NBA teams started games by taking 24 and 8 second violations, in tribute to the numbers he wore. Talk show hosts wept openly. Sports analysts spoke of lost friendship, reconciliation, and death. Tributes poured out from a whole generation who had grown up wanting to be like him.

The response evoked memories of other icons who died too young: Elvis, Princess Diana, and Michael Jackson. Here was a generational talent who had just started the second half of his life, a creative force who seemed to have so much more to give. In a world where the closest thing to transcendence is often found in meeting a famous person, Kobe's death was treated almost like the death of a saint.

There were minority reports, of course. Some expressed annoyance that the death of a celebrity would be singled out as more significant than the rest of the lives lost in the crash. Others reminded us of the very public allegations of sexual assault against Kobe in 2003, wondering if he would have survived the #metoo movement. (Criminal charges were dropped; the civil case was settled out of court). Still others rolled their eyes at the fact that a sports figure could generate such an outpouring of grief when compared to other tragedies in the world.

As for me, I was taken by surprise by how much Kobe's death affected me. Basketball is my favorite sport, but he wasn't my favorite player. I lived in Los Angeles for four years,

but the Lakers weren't my favorite team. I respected his legendary intensity, but wondered if it was a bit over the top. Why then did Kobe's death matter so much to me?

I am sure part of my reaction has to do with the shared experience of raising a daughter. What parent has not felt the inadequacy, the fear, the pain of knowing what life can give and what death can take? No matter how invincible Kobe seemed, there are things from which no father can protect his children. I don't believe I or my children are in danger of a helicopter crash. But, it was one more reminder that control is an illusion, that life is fragile, and that each day with loved ones is a gift.

Yet, the death of a cultural icon evokes more than ordinary empathy. Over the past few days, I've been glued to coverage of Kobe's legacy. I have been moved by the way that death has interrupted an otherwise distracted and superficial cultural conversation. The usually acerbic Skip Bayless spoke poignantly about wrestling with his own mortality. Analyst Max Kellerman, who usually smirks, somberly quoted a Yiddish proverb: "Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht" ("Man Plans, and God Laughs.")

More significantly, Kobe's death seemed to provoke more than words. Analyst and former player Kendrick Perkins reached out to NBA star Kevin Durant in an attempt to reconcile their feud: "Just wanted to tell you I Love you my brother and whatever I did to hurt you I'm sorry bro and hope you forgive me!!! I love you bro real Talk!" Shaquille O'Neal, whose beef with Bryant broke up the Lakers dynasty in the early aughts, similarly announced that after Kobe's death he reconciled all the outstanding conflicts in his life (he and Bryant had reconciled years earlier). Former player Gilbert Arenas reported that Bryant had told him to use his "bright basketball mind" to become a coach instead of "wasting it being an idiot on social media," and that he would do just that, starting his coaching career. Add to this the thousands of Angelenos and Philadelphians making pilgrimage to the Staples Center or Lower Merion high school, leaving candles, jerseys, and other tributes.

Professional sports, like other forms of popular culture, are a complex conglomeration of image and inspiration, money and marketing, ambition and aggression. It is easy to make the "bread and circus" critique, to argue that popular culture is the way that the powerful keep common people in their place. There is truth to this critique. But for all of us who consume it, we do so because popular culture is for us a source of *meaning*, not just *power*.

We should certainly be aware of cultural ideologies and resist cultural idolatries. But, we should also realize that the parts are more than their idolatrous sum. And *part* of being a fan is having heroes. I am reminded of C.S. Lewis' comment: "to love and admire

anything outside yourself is to take one step away from utter spiritual ruin.” Kobe’s legacy may be complicated, but there is something profound about the outpouring of grief and loss (and even repentance) that it has produced. People experience deep meaning, even deep magic in the lives and deaths of their heroes, imperfect as they may be.

If we cannot understand why people would weep at the death of a hero in a Marvel movie, if we cannot understand why millions were devastated by the deaths of Elvis or Michael, if we cannot understand why Kobe has gripped the imagination of so many, then we have not listened to the heart of popular culture. If we fail to listen to our culture’s heart—to its longings and losses—we will also fail to discern the Spirit of God at work, creating openings in which the hope of the gospel can be felt.

Moments of clarity can pass quickly. Analysts will quickly resume shouting over each other about the latest trivial debate. Celebrities will continue to be celebrities. Life will go on. But, this cultural moment gives us the opportunity to pause and reflect. It allows us to consider the hopes and fears that linger just beneath the surface of the lament for Kobe.

Tragedy has a way of stripping away superficialities. It reorients us, reminding us what matters most. Despite our best efforts to insulate ourselves from God, and to distract ourselves from the truth, reality pierces us with its sharp edges. Our illusion of security and invulnerability is punctured. We are left deflated, looking for something more solid on which we can stand, some ground of hope amid the world’s brutality.

Tragedy leaves us longing for more than memory. It leaves us longing for resurrection—a cultural longing about which the church has something to say.