

A Christian and Death

May the blessings of the LORD be upon you this day through the ministry of his Word and of his Spirit.

Have you ever thought about dying, death, and life after death? I'm sure that we all have, especially is this so if we have had the experience of seeing a loved friend or relative die.

Even if we have been spared the agony of losing someone we care about in death, the fact of death cannot escape us. Sooner or later, we will all die, and we will have people that we know to die and leave us in our grief.

The question of life and death and what lies beyond the grave has always intrigued men. The Bible addresses itself to these great and ultimate questions. It tells us that our relationship to Jesus Christ determines the future state of our persons. The Bible is the one place we can go for the answers to our questions because it is the revelation of God to humanity.

Listen to these words from the Holy Scriptures, the written Word of God:

"It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that to face the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). The fact of death is indisputable. All men and women must face it.

Today's subject is: "the Christian and death." Listen to the words of Jesus:

"Jesus said to her, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*" (John 11:25-26).

Listen also to the testimony of the Apostle Paul:

"For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

"For we know," says Paul, "that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens... Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight – we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:1, 6-8).

Some of us have been stunned by the sudden or slow passing of a consecrated person, that is, a godly man or a precious sainted mother, or grandmother. You have stood at an

open grave with hot tears streaming down your face and have cried out in agony, "Why, oh God, why? How can I go on without him, without her?"

We may prefer not to discuss the fact of death. But it will be profitable for us to consider a Biblical definition of death and then look at the Christian and the experience of death.

What is death? There are many definitions now vying for the public's approval. The older biological definition of death was when the heart stopped beating and circulation ceased. Nowadays people tend to view death more as *the cessation of brain activity*. In general usage, death means the cessation of life in any form.

The Greek word translated "death" is "thanatos," which means merely "separation" (whether natural or violent); thus it is the separation of the spirit-soul (man's immaterial personality) from the body - so that life on this earth is ended.

Biologically, death brings the cessation of bodily activity. When death comes, the body begins the process of decomposition, which is natural for it. But what of the spirit? The Bible says the *body returns to earth, but the spirit returns to God* (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Jesus gave us some help in understanding what happens at death when he told the story of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, in Luke 16:19ff. In the story, the experience and destiny of the two men is contrasted. The beggar died and immediately entered into a state of blessedness described as "in Abraham's bosom." He was carried there by the angels of God, whereas the rich man, who was ungodly, died, and entered immediately into a state of misery. In both there was a separation of the body and spirit - the material and non-material parts of man, and both were conscious in a life beyond the grave.

However, Jesus revolutionized the concept of death for those who believe in him. He referred to death by the metaphor of sleep. The Apostle Paul also uses this word picture to describe the Christian dead. Now, He was not teaching "soul-sleep" but rather the conception of death as something that brought quiet and rest rather than something to be feared.

The whole mission of Jesus was to ransom his people from the fear of death and from the punishment of eternal hell by dying in their place before God's holy law. "*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death*" (Heb. 2:14-15).

It is for this reason that Paul exultingly cries in 2 Timothy 1 verse 10, *"Our Savior Christ Jesus abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel"*.

According to Paul, the body is subject to death, but the spirit is not, and in God's own time, at the return of Christ, the body is to be transformed through resurrection and glorification. It is to be so transformed that it will be fit for the Spirit's eternal dwelling and it can never be subject to death again.

You see, this is the meaning of those significant phrases in the Apostle's Creed:
"I believe in the resurrection of the body and in the life everlasting."

Jesus conquered death and the grave in his person by dying in our stead under the judgment of God. Because he was sinless and his sacrifice sufficient, he was resurrected and now holds the keys of death and the realm of the dead. This is the reason we know that when Christ returns, he will bring those with him who have left this life through the portals of death with faith in his name, and the bodies of the saints will be raised incorruptible.

But what about now? In the meantime, while we await the resurrection, where are the dead who die in the Lord? How can we face the experience of death with courage?

The Word of God amply supplies the answer. We may face death confidently both for ourselves and our loved ones who die in the Lord because we know that death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Listen to the psalmist as he sings: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever!* (Psalm 23:6)
...And the words of Psalm 73:24, *"You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory."*

Death for the Christian is no accident. It occurs in God's appointed time. Perhaps we could even picture it as moving from one room to another in the house of God. This is the reason the Apostle Paul could say, as he awaited execution, "to die is gain."

Now we should not be misled. The Bible describes death as our enemy. It exists because of sin. It can only be banished when sin is banished. But though physical death remains, the sting of death – the law of God and its resulting judgment has been removed through the death of Christ. Therefore, we can face death unafraid, knowing that because of Christ's work, it can only usher us into a more glorious perception of the presence of God.

To us who remain on earth, death is an enemy. It deprives us of loved ones and precious relationships. It brings grief and sorrow and inward pain at the great senses of loss. But for those who have died in the Lord, death is a defeated enemy – the only hard part that remains is the process of dying. Even that is taken care of by the grace of God who gives his children “dying grace” – to see his glorious face beyond the suffering and separation. Death has been transformed into a blessing in the lives of God’s children. Thus the Apostle John wrote, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds will follow them” (Rev. 14:13).

One of the great bonuses of being a Christian is that death is not to be dreaded – it is a coronation! They are promoted into the presence of the Lord and they rest from their labors here by basking in the presence of the Lord – they go to the Father’s house which has many rooms – many palaces. They depart this life and we bid them goodbye, but they arrive on another shore and God bides them an eternal “Good morning!”

You see, the word “decease” really means “exodus.” Death is no dead-end alley for the Christian; rather, it is a thoroughfare into the presence of God.

Why is this so? Jesus answered that question in his statements to Martha as he approached the tomb of her brother Lazarus. Those who believe on him have been given, here and now, a never-ending life. If you believe in Jesus, you will never really die! You can’t, because you have been given eternal life in the regeneration of your spirit.

The Christian faith has a joyous affirmation to make – this life – this present life for the Christian - is everlasting. Eternal life exists right now for those who are united to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Once a man or woman knows God and Jesus Christ, whom God has sent, the life they possess in this present moment becomes eternal, for the believing persons go right on existing through the experience of death and beyond the grave. The present life differs from the life after death because it is lived on a different level and in a different mode, but it is the same life and personality who continues to live on in the eternal state.

Thus to die is gain – it brings us the gain of rest from our labors, as well as the blessedness of being in our temporary disembodied state in the immediate presence of the Lord Jesus, our great God and Savior. “I believe that for the Christian, spiritual life is without end.”

You see, only those who are prepared to die --because the judgment against their sins has been satisfied by means of their trust in Christ Jesus – these are the ones who are truly prepared to live on this earth.

Those who believe the Word of God and trust in the Son of God shall not perish – they have eternal life.

“O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?” Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ... Yes, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord! (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57; Revelation 14:13)

Although the intermediate state brings one into a presence with the Lord in a disembodied state, this is not our ultimate destiny nor our full comfort. Here is how the Apostle Paul says believers are to receive comfort at the death of loved fellow believers. We read 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18, ^{but} we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers *and sisters*, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as indeed the rest *of mankind do*, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose *from the dead*, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. ¹⁵ For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore, comfort one another with these words.”

Prayer:

O God our Father, we are astonished at your great work of redemption. We thank you for the liberating truths of the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

We are so thankful that in this death-filled world there is a possibility for a life that is eternal. Grant that many who hear this podcast will come to know Christ as Lord and Savior and thus have life without end. For those who weep because of separation caused by death, comfort them by these glorious truths. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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