

Life and Death

Mankind's Basic States of Existence

There are no facts more basic and more familiar to men on earth than life and death, yet there are none more profound. They have been scrutinised from many different aspects, and universally debated, yet man is no nearer to comprehending them today than he was centuries ago. The philosopher may have refined his metaphysical concepts, and the scientist may have added greatly to his store of knowledge, but in the ultimate, life and death still remain inscrutable, defying simple analysis and definition.

Most people when asked to define death would say something like, "The cessation, or the absence of life"; but this merely begs the question, for what is life?

In our present consideration we would approach the matter from one specific standpoint that which we would regard as the most important, namely the theological aspect. We would seek to study what God says in His word concerning life and

death, and this surely is of supreme relevance for what can surpass in importance what He has said about life, Who is the Author of it? Or what He has said about death, in Whose hand ultimately lies its sentence and its execution? (Deut. 32:39; 1Sam. 2:6; 2Kings 5:7).

If we go back to the beginning, which is usually the best thing to do, we find ourselves pondering two apparently simple statements, which are yet of deep significance. In Genesis 2:7 we read, **“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul”**; then in verse 17, **“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”**.

Besides man there are other creatures that possess life (Genesis 1:20), that have in their nostrils “the breath of life” (Genesis 6:17), but it is only of man that we read that he possesses the breath of life as a result of God breathing into his nostrils. Of man alone is it said that he was created in the image of God and after His likeness (Genesis 1:26-27); and it is this particular form of life, human life, that we wish to consider.

We may gather from this Genesis record of man’s creation that life commenced by the infusion of an invisible, immaterial element into the physical frame. It was the union of the two that constituted man **“a living soul”**. This word **“soul”** has various shades of meaning in Scripture. Here (Gen. 2:7) it indicates the whole person; man became a soul. So the word “persons” is literally “souls” in Genesis 14:21; 36:6; Exodus 16:16 etc. It is in this sense that a “soul” can “die”, i.e. a person experiences physical death (e.g. Leviticus 23:30; Ezekiel 18:4,20). Sometimes the word denotes the immaterial part of man itself, in contrast to the physical part, the body; in which sense of the word

man possesses a soul (e.g. Psalm 16:10; Matthew 10:28; 1Thess. 5:23).

The word is at times employed of animals as possessing physical life (for example the word “creature” is really “soul” in Genesis 1:21,24; 2:19 etc.), but man possesses a soul in a way no animal does. This is seen in a number of Scriptures. In 1Peter 3:20, Peter says of the ark which Noah built **“wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water”**, completely discounting all the animals which the ark had been built to preserve. **They** did not possess souls, in the same way as Noah and his family possessed souls.

The same is true of the word **“spirit”**, as Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 makes clear. It has been objected that verse 21 merely poses questions, and makes no assertions, but Scripture does not pose nonsensical questions.

The verse is meaningless if the content of it is not fact, and certainly the first member of the verse is confirmed by chapter 12:7 of the same book. From the standpoint of earth the death of a man and the death of a beast are identical, for death means the complete end of natural life for both, but from the stand point of heaven they are very different.

Man’s tripartite being has been touched upon in the pamphlet “What is Man?”. Since soul and spirit are never regarded as separable, man’s immaterial part may be called either soul or spirit in contrast to the body (Matthew 10:28; 1Cor. 7:34).

If human life commenced by the infusion into the body of this invisible, immaterial element, physical death is the separation of this element from the body. James 2:26 says that **“the body without (or, apart from) the spirit is dead”**. Death is the departure of the soul (Genesis 35:18; 1Kings 17:21-22; Job 27:8; Luke 12:20), or an expiry, the return of the spirit to the God who gave it (Ecc. 8:8; 12:7; Luke 23:46; Acts 5:10; 7:59). The body is like

a tent, a temporary dwelling in which the true person lives for a little while on earth, and which is left at death (2Peter 1:13-14), or like a garment which is put off when no longer needed by the wearer (2Cor. 5:1-4). Death is not the absolute end but a departure for other realms (Luke 9:31 where “decease” is literally “exodus”; Phil. 1:23; 2Tim. 4:6), the entry into the unseen world where **“all live unto Him (God)”** (Luke 20:38). This is a journey which all men must take (Josh. 23:14; 1Kings 2:2). As far as **“things under the sun”** are concerned, the dead have no more cognisance of them (Ecc. 9:5-6), but they are not annihilated, or even in a state of soul sleep, but either rejoice in the Lord’s presence (2Cor. 5:6,8; Phil. 1:23) or suffer torments in hell (Luke 16:22-24). It is this fact of the continuance of the soul and spirit after death which distinguishes man from the animals, for when they die they perish absolutely.

This consideration of physical death leaves us with a problem regarding Genesis 2:17 however. God warned Adam that in the day in which he ate of the forbidden fruit he would surely die. Satan, in the form of the serpent, denied this (Gen. 3:4). And yet Adam and Eve did not die physically in the same day in which they ate the prohibited fruit. Was God wrong and Satan right?

We must obviously examine the point carefully, for great issues are involved. Certainly on the day Adam sinned he became mortal, the principle of decay and death became operative in his body so that death became inevitable for him eventually, but this does not fulfil the divine warning. In addition to this fact, however, there are two senses in which Adam died in the very day he sinned. Firstly he died spiritually. He was severed from his former communion with God his Creator, and this state of existence in separation from God which is caused by sin is regarded in Scripture as spiritual death. See, for example, Ephesians 2:1,5, which

describe the present condition of the whole human race by natural birth in an unregenerate state. Only by being **“quickenet (made alive) together with Christ”, “born again”, or “created anew”** can this natural condition of alienation from God, which is spiritual death, be remedied.

But we believe that Adam and Eve also died vicariously on the very day they sinned; that is, they died in the person of a substitute. We read that God clothed Adam and his wife with coats of skins, in the place of those self-made aprons of fig-leaves which even they had felt to be inadequate. These coats of skins could only have been provided by the death of the animals whose skins they were, so that they point to the very commencement of the truth of atonement (covering) on the basis of substitutionary death. We are bound to feel that Adam and Eve must have died physically and perhaps eternally on that very day if the animals had not died in their stead. For that physical death is included in the consequence of Adam’s sin would be indicated in Romans 5:12-14 and 1Corinthians 15:21-22, as well as in the fact that in order to put away sin, the Saviour must experience physical death.

But if the animals died in their stead, why did Adam and Eve both succumb to physical death later on? Or to lift the matter out of the realm of the types to that of spiritual realities, if Christ died in the believer’s stead, why is the believer still obliged to suffer physical death? The fact is the believer is not obliged to die, and may never do so. If Christ returns during their lifetime, they will be transported to heaven and their body will be transformed into the likeness of Christ’s body of glory, beyond the reach of death forever (John 11:25; 1Cor. 15:50-57). This shows that death is not obligatory. But why then do so many believers die? They die not as those who pay the judicial penalty of sin, but as those who submit to the

governmental ways of God who employs death to carry off His people for quite a different reason, namely to bring them home to Himself in heaven. For the unbeliever, death is the officer of justice sent to carry them off to judgement, and a part of their sentence. But because the believer’s sins are forgiven through the atoning death of Christ, death has lost its sting, and has become a blessing instead, the minister of God sent to carry them safe beyond the cares and trials of this world into the bliss of the Lord’s presence (1Cor. 3:21-23).

Scripture indicates that physical death seals a man’s destiny eternally. In the language of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the world entered at death, **“there is a great gulf fixed”** so that those who would pass from one side to the other **“cannot”** (Luke 16:26). This accords with the teaching that both salvation and judgement are eternal (Hebrews 5:9; 6:2). The Saviour spoke of those who die in their sins, and offered them no hope of a further opportunity of salvation beyond the grave, either by purgatorial fires, or further spiritual light. His language categorically denied to them, and so to all those who die in their sins, the possibility of entering heaven (John 8:21). According to Romans 5:9 it is those who are **“NOW justified by His blood”**, who **“shall be saved from wrath through Him”**. The whole tenor of Scripture is that those who reject Christ and His gospel in this life, seal their eternal doom (Mark 16:15-16; John 3:36; Heb. 9:27).

There is another aspect of death which is also the consequence of sin, and this is the most solemn of all, namely eternal death. Those who experience physical death, still in a state of spiritual death, must finally be cast into the lake of fire: **“This is the second death”** (Rev. 20:14). As with the first or physical death, this is not extinction of being. It is separation from God in the lake of fire eternally. This is not where we want to, or need end up, for Christ has died that we might be saved.