

Life and Death

Life in one sense refers to the physical functions of people, animals and plants. For the physical world, life is the time between birth and death. The Bible teaches that for human beings physical death is not the end of life, man is more than a physical creature; he is a spiritual being. This is very important. Let's see if we can understand what this means. First, the Bible identifies God as the creator of all things:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.¹

God created every living thing, but something unique is noted when God created man and woman:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.²

Only human beings were created in God's image. What does this mean? More important than the physical presence of life, man like God is a spiritual being. This separates mankind from every other living thing on earth. Jesus Christ said:

"God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."³

Our spiritual existence transcends physical death. What can we know about how our life will be after the physical body has died? Remember in the Bible God is identified as the creator and therefore the source of life, both physically and spiritually. In the following passage the psalmist sings of God, then a passage from the book of proverbs:

For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.⁴
The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
turning a man from the snares of death.⁵

The Bible speaks of eternal life. Eternal life is more than just eternal existence. Eternal life refers to being in the presence of God for eternity. Jesus Christ said this in prayer:

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.⁶

Eternal life comes through faith in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said of Jesus Christ:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.⁷

This is the way God chose to do it. Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.⁸

¹ Genesis 1:1

² Genesis 1:26-27

³ John 4:24

⁴ Psalms 36:9

⁵ Proverbs 14:27

⁶ John 17:3

⁷ John 3:36

⁸ John 6:47-51

God makes the promise to us of eternal life if we believe in Jesus Christ and follow his instructions. Clearly this is much more important than life in this world which is temporary. Christ handles this point here:

The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.⁹

If you love me, you will obey what I command.

He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.¹⁰

What did Jesus command that we need to obey? Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus Christ gave these final instructions to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.¹¹

The followers of Jesus Christ in carrying out his instructions summed up his teaching by instructing people to believe, repent, be baptized and follow in the apostles teaching. This is the path to eternal life. The day will come when God will choose according to our obedience to these instructions. From the book of the prophet Daniel we read:

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.¹²

Each of us has this choice to make. The choice is between life and death. Believe the promise and follow the instruction from God and you are promised eternal life. Moses speaking to the nation of Israel as they are about to enter the promised land makes this very point:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.

⁹ John 12:25-26

¹⁰ John 14:15, 24

¹¹ Matthew 28:18-20

¹² Daniel 12:2-3

For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.¹³

Moses sums up the entire body of instruction he received from God in this way: "I have set before you life and death". God is not neutral on this question. The entire purpose of his word to us is summed up with these words: "Now choose life." God strongly desires for us to live and this is why Jesus came in the flesh. The point is made crystal clear that physical death is not the end of life when Jesus Christ is raised from the dead. The apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Rome:

But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.¹⁴

The believers in Corinth had come to believe some confusing teaching about the resurrection from the dead and the apostle Paul wrote to correct and comfort them. Much of First Corinthians chapter fifteen is on this topic. Here is an excerpt:

But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.¹⁵

Let's insert here what Jesus Christ said to Nicodemus about being "born of water and the spirit" recorded in the Gospel of John chapter three. This is another way of making the same point:

Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."¹⁶

This spiritual birth comes with obedience to the word of God. It comes when you believe the promise and follow the instruction from God. Now back to First Corinthians chapter fifteen:

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all

¹³ Deuteronomy 30:11-20

¹⁴ Romans 8:10-11

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:35-36, 42-49

¹⁶ John 3:3-8, 16

sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The Bible speaks of death in various ways: physical, spiritual and eternal. Physical death is easiest for us to understand. The first physical death mentioned in the Bible is when Cain murders his brother Abel (Genesis 4). The first mention of death though, both physical and spiritual is in Genesis chapter two. God is giving instruction to Adam in the Garden of Eden:

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."¹⁸

Adam and Eve chose to disobey God's instruction (this is the definition of sin) and as a result both physical and spiritual death came to mankind. In the following passage the apostle Paul discusses the connection of sin and death and the remedy for spiritual death:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁹

The remedy for spiritual death is to believe the promise and follow the instructions of Jesus Christ. Disobeying God's instruction is sin. Sin causes separation from God. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.
But your iniquities have separated

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:50-57

¹⁸ Genesis 2:16-17

¹⁹ Romans 5:12-21

you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear.²⁰

Sin and death go hand in hand. God is the source of life, sin causes separation from God and consequently death. The apostle Paul writing to disciples of Jesus Christ in Rome contrasts their former way of life with the benefits found in Jesus:

What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.²¹

The Bible also speaks of “the second death” (eternal death):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.²²

In the same way that eternal life is with God in heaven, eternal death is separation from God in hell, this is the second death:

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”²³

If physical death indeed were the end of our existence how could there be a “second death”? This is why Jesus Christ came in the flesh, died and was then resurrected: to show us the way to eternal life. Jesus Christ is the remedy for spiritual death and also the “second death”, he said:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies²⁴
I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.²⁵

He was raised from the dead by the power of God so that we could have eternal life. The apostle Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus Christ in Corinth:

By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.²⁶

Summing up our discussion of life and death; we learn from the Bible that, in contrast to plants and animals, mankind is also a spiritual being and therefore physical death is not the end of our existence. God has promised eternal life through his son Jesus Christ to all those who believe his promise and follow his instruction. In other words believe, repent, be baptized and follow in the apostles teaching. This is the only path to eternal life. This is how God chose to do it. The alternative is eternity separated from God and therefore an unspeakably miserable state. What God requires from us is simple to understand and not difficult to do. Especially considering the tremendous promise he makes to each of us. God sent his son Jesus Christ to be our savior and example. The resurrection of Jesus Christ clearly illustrates that we can have eternal life.

²⁰ Isaiah 59:1-2

²¹ Romans 6:21-23

²² Revelation 2:11

²³ Revelation 21:5-8

²⁴ John 11:25

²⁵ John 5:24

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:14

The apostle Paul wrote these words of encouragement to believers in Jesus Christ:

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.²⁷

Once again, if you want to have the same comfort and confidence the apostle Paul expresses here you need to believe the promise and follow the instruction from God.

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²⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1