

The Christian Answer to Death and The Eternal Destiny of the Redeemed

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Introduction

Death is the great enigma of life. People in virtually all societies, ancient and modern, consider death an enigma, an anomaly, a mystery. It is so contrary to life, so shocking when it strikes, that it demands some kind of explanation. Philosophers may try to rationalize the existence of death, but only Christianity has an adequate answer.

Here we have one of the great apologetical arguments for Christianity: it alone provides the explanation of death and the hope with which we can face it.

Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.¹

Christians know that death brings them into the very presence of their Lord and Savior in heaven.² But the Christian answer to death involves much more than this. Ask someone, even a Christian, if he wants to go to heaven when he dies. The answer will almost certainly be yes. But then ask him if he wants to go now! If Christianity has the answer to death, it must do more than offer the hope of heaven when we die; other religions do that. Should a Christian feel guilty if he does not want to go to heaven now? A *complete* answer to death must include why we strive for life and recoil from death. It must also explain why there is death in God's creation in the first place.

I submit that Christianity not only gives the assurance of heaven at death, but that it *alone* explains the whole pathos of death, which surely does hold all of mankind in slavery.

Christianity Explains the Will to Live

We instinctively and stubbornly strive to live. It is true that age, infirmity, and loneliness can tend to make one weary of living; but very often not even these things fill the mind with any joyous anticipation of death. And certainly, while in the fulness of life, no one wants to die, not even Christians. But should he not want to? Should he not *want* to die and go to heaven to be with Jesus? Why does he want to live rather than go to heaven right now? Christianity explains why.

The doctrine and theology of creation provide the answer and explain our will to live. God created the earth; it was beautiful and good. He created life; and man--the highest form of life--was placed on earth as his home and given the command to subdue it and cultivate it. The relationship established by God in creation between man and earth was pronounced "very good." The tree of life was the centerpiece of the Garden of Eden. It is therefore only "natural"--that is, part of the created order--that man should love life as God's gift to him and strive to live. This

1 Heb. 2:14-15

2 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-24.

was God's plan from the beginning, and the will to live is built into us by God.

Christianity Explains the Shocking "Unnaturalness" of Death and Why We Abhor It

There is nothing "natural" about death. That is a pagan belief, not a Christian belief. Death was not part of the created order--at least not for man and possibly not for animals too. Man was created to live forever, and to live forever on this earth. Adam would never have died had he not sinned. According to Paul, death is an *enemy*.³ Christianity calls death what it is--the great enemy of mankind.

Sometimes I sense deception in some of our funeral practices. We attempt to make death appear natural, beautiful, and serene. Nothing is further from the truth. God created man *whole*. He had a spiritual side as well as a physical side, but he was *one*--a whole man. Death rips him apart and destroys the body, which has been fearfully and wonderfully made by God.⁴ To see a dead body, even when it is not a friend or loved one, rightly fills us with great sadness--the sadness for a fallen soldier, a victim of death. Indeed, death is an *enemy*. The Bible *says* so.

Christianity Explains the Origin of Death

Death was not part of the created order. Man was created to live forever. Christianity teaches that death entered the world as the penalty for sin.⁵ According to Paul in Romans 5:12, all mankind sinned in Adam, and therefore all men die. "The wages of sin is death."⁶ There is nothing "serene" or "beautiful" about death.

Christianity Explains Why Believers Die

But if Christ paid the penalty for our sins, why must we die?

Wrong Answers

Our death is a judicial penalty.

No, our death is not a judicial penalty. Christ has taken the full penalty for our sins and has made satisfaction; he is our propitiation.⁷

Our death is required to complete our sanctification.

No, death is not required to complete a believer's sanctification. Enoch and Elijah were taken into heaven without dying.⁸

Our death is necessary to set the believer free from the physical ills and sufferings of the present.

3 1 Cor. 15:20-26.

4 Ps. 139:14.

5 Gen. 2:16-17; 3:19; Rom. 5:12, 21; 1 Cor. 15:21.

6 Rom. 6:23.

7 1 John 2:2.

8 Gen. 5:18-24 (cf. Heb. 11:5); 2 Kings 2:1, 11.

No, this answer is also wrong. The *parousia* generation will not experience death.⁹

The Real Reasons

First, although death is not required to complete our sanctification, God has ordained death as the ordinary means to culminate the sanctifying chastisements for his people.

For example, the thought of death, bereavements resulting from death, and the feeling that sickness and suffering are harbingers of death all have a beneficial and sanctifying effect on the people of God. They humble the proud, check worldliness, and foster spirituality.

The hour of death itself is often the supreme test of faith and frequently calls forth striking manifestations of the consciousness of victory in the very hour of seeming defeat.

Second, death culminates the believer's mystical union with Christ.

Just as Jesus entered his glory by the pathway of suffering and death, so believers share in these same afflictions and enter their eternal reward through these experiences.

Also, the presence of Jesus himself, together with the Father and Holy Spirit, will never be more keenly felt than at the hour of death. No believer will ever be forsaken at that hour.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.¹⁰

Precious in the sight of Yahweh is the death of His godly ones.¹¹

Christianity Gives the Only Hope for Ultimate Victory Over Death

As noted above, death came as the penalty for sin, and Christ died for our sins and paid the penalty for our sins. If we believe that and trust our eternal destiny to it, we will have eternal life.

But we still die. However, God can bring good out of evil,¹² and through his ordination, certain benefits can and do accrue from death. Nevertheless it is still an enemy, something very unnatural and dreaded by all. Though we go to be with the Lord when we die, our real hope is *resurrection*. Christ has conquered death through his own resurrection. Because he rose from the dead, he will raise us from the dead. Thus Christ has redeemed the whole man, and herein is the Christian hope in the face of death. The Apostle Paul states that now we have victory over death and that death has thus lost its sting:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

9 1 Cor. 15:51-54; 1 Thess. 4:13-18.

10 Ps. 23:4.

11 Ps. 116:15.

12 Cf. Joseph's statement to his brothers in Gen. 50:20.

"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.¹³

Is death robbed of its victory and has it lost its sting simply because we go to heaven when we die? That is not what Paul says here. We do go to heaven when we die, but death has lost its sting *because death cannot hold the body in the grave*. We shall be raised from the dead in glorious resurrection bodies. *That* is the hope of the Christian.

It is important to note that this resurrection is a physical body.

There is a tendency in some groups, especially Eastern Orthodoxy, to resist the idea of resurrection of our physical, material body of dust. We see here the influence of the ancient Greek view that the body is inherently inferior to the soul and in fact is a prison for the soul. To be liberated from this prison at death, then, becomes the highest goal of the soul.

This view is the exact opposite to the biblical view. Christ was raised from the dead as the firstfruits or the guarantee of our resurrection from the dead.¹⁴ What were the characteristics of the firstfruits, that is, Christ's resurrection body? He could be touched,¹⁵ and he could eat.¹⁶ Using Paul's analogy of the harvest, if Christ's resurrection was the "firstfruits" of our resurrection, then our bodies will be like his.¹⁷ Elsewhere, Paul makes this explicit:

We await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.¹⁸

The Eternal Destiny of the Redeemed

The above material reviewed the biblical teaching on death and resurrection. However, more is needed to form a complete picture that awaits believers after death. What is the believer's ultimate, eternal destiny? What will be our home or dwelling place throughout eternity? Heaven?

The first verse of a well-known Gospel song goes as follows:

This world is not my home, I'm just passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.¹⁹

Here again the church has been infected with ancient Greek philosophy. This infection has

13 1 Cor. 15:51-57; Paul cites Isa. 25:8 and Hos. 13:14.

14 1 Cor. 15:20-22.

15 John 20:17, 27.

16 Luke 24:38-43.

17 What about 1 Cor. 15:42-44? "So also is the resurrection of the dead...it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body." As Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 249-50, points out, the same Greek words used here for "natural" (*psychikos*) and "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) are also used in 1 Cor. 2:14-15. Here "spiritual" does not mean nonphysical. The spiritual man is "someone guided by the Holy Spirit, at least in principle, in distinction from someone who is guided only by his natural impulses. In similar fashion, the natural body described in 15:44 is one which is part of this present, sin-cursed existence; but the spiritual body of the resurrection is one which will be totally, not just partially, dominated and directed by the Holy Spirit."

18 Phil 3:20-21.

19 "This World Is Not My Home" lyrics and music by Albert E. Brumley.

obscured our real, biblical hope. As it happens, scholars representing all three millennial positions agree on this point. Let me quote from two different scholars.

Anthony A. Hoekema, an amillenarian, states the following:

One gets the impression from certain hymns that glorified believers will spend eternity in some ethereal heaven somewhere off in space, far away from earth. The following lines from the hymn "My Jesus, I Love Thee" seem to convey that impression: "In mansions of glory and endless delight / I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright." But does such a conception do justice to biblical eschatology? Are we to spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs, and flitting from cloud to cloud while doing so? On the contrary, the Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God's praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On that new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity, enjoying its beauties, exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God. Since God will make the new earth his dwelling place, and since where God dwells there heaven is, we shall then continue to be in heaven while we are on the new earth. For heaven and earth will then no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be one (see Rev. 21:1-3). But to leave the new earth out of consideration when we think of the final state of believers is greatly to impoverish biblical teaching about the life to come.²⁰

Now read what George Eldon Ladd, a premillenarian, writes:

Throughout the entire Bible, the ultimate destiny of God's people is an earthly destiny. In typical dualistic *Greek* thought, the universe was divided into two realms: the earthly or transitory, and the eternal spiritual world. Salvation consisted of the flight of the soul from the sphere of the transitory and ephemeral to the realm of eternal reality. However, biblical thought always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence...

The New Testament conceives of a heavenly Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, the true homeland of the saints, and the dwelling place of "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:22; see Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20). While this heavenly Jerusalem is represented as the dwelling place of the departed saints, heaven is not their ultimate destiny, but only the temporary abode of the saints between death and the resurrection (Rev. 6:9-11; II Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). In the consummation after the resurrection (20:4), the heavenly Jerusalem will descend from heaven to take up its permanent location in the new earth.²¹

20 Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 274. In the hymn cited by Dr. Hoekema, "My Jesus I Love Thee," the phrase "mansions of glory" is used. The reference is probably to John 14:2-3: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (KJV). According to Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1968), p. 511, the reference is to the New Jerusalem that descends down to the new earth. Jesus' coming again in v. 3 refers to his second advent. The phrase is never used to describe what happens for the believer at death. See George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 299,303-304.

21 George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 275-76. Note Heb. 11:16: "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." However, as Franz Delitzsch points out in his commentary on Hebrews (II:246), nowhere in the OT do the Patriarchs express a desire for a home in heaven. Barry Horner, *Future Israel* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), p. 249, explains, "His [Abraham's] search for 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one' must be understood not according to a Gentile worldview, but the Hebrew worldview of the author [of Hebrews]." Horner goes on to cite amillenarian scholar Samuel Waldon: "The heavenly country is not a country in heaven, but a country *from heaven*....Though heaven is the happy abode of the disembodied righteous during the present age, in the age to come heaven comes to earth" [emphasis original]. What Abraham hoped for was an earthly residence in the land promised to him that would be glorious, holy, and permanent (Horner, p. 250); it does not involve "some amorphous, ethereal existence" (p. 71).

In discussing the doctrine of creation, I already mentioned the close relationship between man and this earth. The affinity that we naturally feel for life here on earth and our reluctance to leave it should not surprise us, nor should it make us feel guilty as Christians. This affinity and mutual benefit was built into the created order by God himself. But just as death, our great enemy, rips us apart soul from body, so it rips us from our created home.

Christianity, however, answers our need even here. Jesus Christ redeemed and saved not only individual people from the penalty of sin, he also secured the redemption of all nature--"far as the curse is found," as we sing in "Joy to the World." Paul argues in Romans 8:18-25 that all creation groans under the curse and anxiously awaits its own redemption, the removal of the curse and its effects. And, significantly, Paul in the same passage associates this with our own eagerness for the redemption of our bodies, i.e., the *resurrection*.

But what is the real significance of the redemption of nature for us? It represents the *complete* victory Christ has purchased for us. Death, our great enemy, will not only be destroyed but its effects in nature will be completely nullified. In the face of our own death we have the assurance of Christ that it will not conquer us. It will not conquer us personally, nor will it permanently separate us from our home by creation. We will be back! We will be back on an earth from which the curse has been lifted, on which there will be no death. And we will be back complete, in our resurrection bodies because the grave could not hold them.

It might be well to remember what Isaiah said about the Lord:

*He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited.*²²

Yes, we go to heaven when we die and join our Savior Jesus who is also, currently, in heaven. But he is coming to this earth again. That will be the time at which our resurrection occurs. Subsequent to his second advent, the earth will be renovated to become the new earth, and we will spend eternity with him on the new earth.

Returning to the Gospel song, "This World is Not My Home," the chorus asks,

O Lord, you know I have no friend like you
If Heaven's not my home, then Lord what will I do?

Answer: Enjoy throughout all eternity the wonders of God's creation on the new earth, which he redeemed for you by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ!

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."*²³

22 Isa. 45:18.
23 Rev. 21:1-5.