

Three Types of Death

By

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There are three types of “death” spoken of in the Bible. The first is Physical death. The second is called “spiritual” death. The third is “eternal” death. We, in this fairly short little article, will attempt to define each of these three types of death in order.

#1 — PHYSICAL DEATH.

This is the death that is the best-known among mankind. It affects each and every person in various ways. It is emotional. It is final. It is the loss of life for the deceased person. The death of a person affects the body/flesh, breath/spirit and being/soul.

We are informed in Genesis 2:7 that our “body/flesh” is composed of the elements of this earth — “the dust of the ground.” We are also informed in this same verse that God breathed into the body/flesh the “breath/spirit” of life and that this caused the body/flesh to **become** a living “being/soul.” (Read the articles, *The Breath of Life*, and *A Preliminary Study on the Biblical meaning of Soul*, to see what God revealed to us about the “breath/spirit” of life.)

The point of Genesis 2:7 is that an animated physical body is a living body. And with the addition of the “breath/spirit of life” to the physical body it BECOMES a LIVING creature — a LIVING BEING, i.e., a LIVING SOUL! A living soul is what a person IS, not something that was added to body. The LOSS of the breath/spirit of life is the physical death of a person, and results in the person being turned back into the “dust of the ground.” Genesis 3:19 tells us that “*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*” King Solomon speaks of the loss of the “breath/spirit” of life this way: “*Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the breath/spirit will return to God who gave it*” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

This death also happens to fish, fowl, animals and all creepy-crawly things on this earth of ours. For example, Ecclesiastes 3:19 which speaks of the death of man and all living creatures, tells us “*For that which happens to the sons of man happens to animals; even one thing happens to them: as one dies, so dies the other; yes, they all have one spirit [breath]; so that a man has no preeminence above an animal: for all is vanity.*” King David writing in Psalm 104:29, speaking of animals, tells us God shall “*take away their breath/spirit, they expire, and return to dust.*”

Physical death is the condition of the “breath/spirit” being separated from the body of both man and living creatures. When separation takes place the loss of life, i.e., death, is the result. Life is extinct. What once was is no longer. And this loss of life is due unto each person: “**It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment**” (Hebrews 9:27) — with one exception, being alive when Jesus returns to resurrect the dead! The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, page 989, says: “*Although variously interpreted throughout the Old and New Testament, death is basically understood as the termination of life on earth. Most frequently it indicates the end of an individual’s existence.*”

An interesting scripture passage is found in the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament book of Job that speaks of physical death.

“For if a man should die, shall he live again
having completed the days of his existence?
I shall wait until I exist again.” (Job 14:14)

Most versions of the Bible interject the question mark after the word “again”, disregarding the rest of the sentence. But that puts a whole different perspective on the topic Job was talking about. Job knew he would die at the end of his allotted days – the days that he existed as a living being/soul. He also had faith that he would exist at some time in the future – when he looked forward to being re-created by God. One should think on what Job had to say.

“The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). When dead, one ceases to be. Unless God intervenes in some miraculous manner, that extinction is forever! When Jesus, on the cross, gave up his life he would have been forever extinct (I Cor. 15:18 in context) if God had not made the promise to him that he would not be abandoned to the grave forever (Acts 2:27). By the power of God Jesus was raised up from the dead after three days (to fulfill prophecy). This same promise is given to all men (and women) before their physical deaths through the Gospel message if they believe and obey the Son, Jesus. Believers, in Christ Jesus, will be raised up from the dead and will be given immortality to live forever. Those who do not accept God’s offer will also be raised from the dead, but then face judgment for that refusal, and will face death again — the second death in the Lake of Fire (See Rev. 20:14–15).

#2 — SPIRITUAL DEATH.

While the expression “spiritual death” never appears in the whole of the Bible, the concept is easily understood — it is a very figurative expression, and is to be understood just as one understands “physical death”, i.e., the loss of life or one’s death to something — in this case, spiritual life! One will find that many times in the Bible “spiritual death” refers to a condition of being separated from God as a type of “death”. It is this “type” of death from which we get the expression “spiritual death.” The term “spiritual” is used to distinguish it from physical loss of life, i.e., death.

A person may ask, “What causes ‘spiritual death’?” The answer from the Bible is stated in a simple word that is easy to understand: SIN. Sin separates one from the grace, or “friendly disposition” of God — which is the basic meaning of the term “grace”. We find Isaiah saying, “*Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear*” (Isa. 59:2). It is this “separation” that is viewed as a type of death, even though the person is still alive physically. It is “death” in the sense that it is a loss of life, the abundant life that comes from being in spiritual contact with the grace of God. When one is cut off from the source of life, God, one is counted or characterized as being “dead in sin”.

Good examples of this can be found in the New Testament. One example comes from Jesus Himself and is found in John 15:1–6. Jesus refers to himself as a “vine” and tells us that we who are IN HIM are all branches. But, if we should get “separated” from this vine (cut off from Christ), the result is “death” — we wither away and die! This is a separation that results in “spiritual death” while we are living, and is found in this

condition at our “physical death” leads to “eternal death” — the complete extinction of both body and being (soul): see Matthew 10:28 and Luke 12:4–5.

First Timothy 5:6, alluding to “spiritual death”, says: “But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives.” Even though this woman is still a living, breathing being/soul, none-the-less her relationship to God has been separated and that is spiritually a true “loss of life” — a “death.” Living in wanton pleasure, SIN, is a repudiation of the life God wants us to lead. To be separated from God in this physical existence of ours will result in our being unfit for an everlasting existence with God in the new Heaven and Earth promised to those found IN Christ. To be spiritually separated from God HERE will result in being eternally separated from God after having completed the days of our existence in this age — That would be both spiritual and physical death from which there is no reprieve.

Everyone, at one time or another in physical life is found to be “dead in our sins” and, that is what the concept of “spiritual death” is. “***He who has the Son has THE life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have THE life***” (I John 5:12). Those who do not have the spirit of Christ IN them do not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9–13), and therefore, are spiritually dead in sin. Being without Christ IN one’s self, and dying, makes one fit only for ultimate destruction in the lake of fire, which is the “second death.”

As the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible states: “*All men are by nature spiritually dead, that is, alienated from God the source of life by sin, insensible to divine things, unresponsive to His laws...and therefore, although they still live in this world, their attitude to sin, the law and the world is to be that of dead men.*” (Vol. 2, Pgs. 71, 72.)

Speaking to the Ephesians who had converted to Christianity, the apostle Paul reminded them “*you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world*” (Eph. 2:1–2). And to the Colossian Christians he reminded them of the same thing in different words which meant the same thing: “*And when you were dead in your transgressions...He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions*” (Col. 2:13). Again, you see the concept of “spiritual death” being spoken of.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son, He put the following words into the fathers mouth: “*For this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found*” (Luke 15:24). This son was not physically dead, but his father considered him to be “spiritually dead” until he came to his senses and returned back home.

When one of Jesus’ disciples said that he had to leave to bury his father, Jesus told him to “*Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead*” (Mt. 8:21–22). Notice that Jesus in these two verses made reference to both the physical and spiritual use of the concept of death. The dead burying the dead shows one being spiritually dead and the other one being physically dead — an excellent example of the concept we are talking about.

In the book of Revelation Jesus told John to write to the church in Sardis and say, “*I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead*” (3:1). If one reads the rest of the passage one can understand that being spiritually dead is the one who

will be erased out of God's Book of Life. The result of being stricken from the Book of Life means that one will face eternal death in the Lake of Fire (See Rev. 20:15).

#3 — ETERNAL DEATH.

“Those who remain in spiritual death throughout their lives and do not believe on the Son of God, die in their sins (John 8:21, 24) — and in the Day of Judgment will be consigned to a state of eternal separation from God, called in Scripture the second death (Revelation 21:8)” (The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 2, page 71).

The above comment states the case in a single sentence. Eternal death is the second death of a person. There is no reprieve promised from this death, thusly it will last forever, i.e., eternally. This is the ultimate destiny of all those who are not found to be IN Christ Jesus! As the physical death of a person would be forever if not raised from the dead (See I Cor. 15:13–19), the second death is the extinction of body and being/soul forever because for it there is no promise attached that would raise one from this death. Being “separated” from the *source of life* one has no life of any kind. One can not exist without God supplying that life, i.e., the breath/spirit of life within a person. This is where “spiritual death” and “eternal death” result in the same condition — a separation from the Life-Giver. Thusly, spiritual death merges into “eternal death.”

We can sum up all three “deaths” just spoken about by saying that “**death is a separation from life**” whether it is physical, spiritual or eternal! The Bible portrays death as a separation from life, not a preservation or continuation of life in some other form. Death is the loss of life, period, regardless if it is physical, spiritual or eternal.

Job asked, “If a man should die having completed the days of his existence, will he live again?” And then he tells us his expectation: “I shall wait until I exist again.” The question Job asked is the ultimate question about man's destiny. Will he remain dead or will he be re-created in the future? As we see when we read the Book of Job, he had faith that he would be recreated by God — someday, somehow. We too, should have this faith!

Jesus came and challenged mankind by setting forth the ultimate goal of living forever, and warned all of losing that opportunity. Jesus openly proclaimed that God had sent him into the world with divine power to give life, and that it was his intention to give this life to certain ones while others would be rejected and be subject to the second death after judgment.

We find that Jesus did many marvelous works in the sight of the Jewish people and their leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the leaders persecuted him. Jesus told them that “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:16–18) Jesus then gave them this answer:

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father

judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.

“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. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of man.

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” (John 5:19–29)

We have Jesus saying: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life**”* (John 3:16). The destiny of man can be summed up in one little, but important word — LIFE! The Greek word for “perish” is “apolumi” which means to be utterly destroyed.

This little article is written about three deaths; physical, spiritual and eternal, which concerns the destiny of man. It is appointed for all men to die once, then comes judgment; and with it LIFE or DEATH. The LIFE or DEATH mentioned are eternal, i.e., they both last the same time.

We of the Conditionalist viewpoint believe the biblical view is that the second death spoken of in Revelation 20:15 is a termination of life itself. It is not just an everlasting separation from the source of life, God; it is also an everlasting separation from the “breath/spirit of life” itself. If one is separated from God, how would or could one remain living? In the Lake of Fire, the “Second Death,” the unbelievers will be ultimately destroyed, deprived of life, and will cease to be. It will not be pleasant for those thrown in. But the *process* of dying will *result* in death, and that death, which is a separation from life and the life-Giver, will last forever.

There is no room in such as short article like this to respond to all the questions that it raises. This is where study of the Scriptures comes in. A study of the words used by the writers of Scripture concerning this topic is very revealing, and by all the rules of hermeneutics and using etymology, exegesis and the helps of lexicons, etc., one can come to a reasoned conclusion. There are many articles on this Web Site that add to what is said in this article — please read them. May God be with you and you seek to grow in the knowledge of Christ.

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