

DEATH – PHYSICAL

Background

With the exception of those who are alive at the time when Jesus returns, we must all die at some time. Physical death is not the same as spiritual death (see Study No. 15). Spiritual death means eternal, conscious separation from God. Although physical death is that of the body, the soul lives on. For this universal effect, there must be a universal cause. We learn from the Bible that sin entered the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin. (See Romans 5:12–14.) Whilst the rebellion of Adam can be accepted as an actual event in time, we can also affirm with clarity that all individual men and women rebel (sin) against God and so what the Bible says is true – the wages of sin is death.

Genesis 2:17; Ezekiel 18:1–32; Romans 6:16, 23; 8:6, 13; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22.

Physical pain and death were not what God originally intended for his creation. Longevity was a feature of early mankind. Universal death (physical corruption) accompanies universal moral corruption.

Psalms 14:1–3; Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21–23; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:4; Galatians 5:19–24; 1 Peter 1:22–25.

What does Jesus teach about death?

Jesus' life was touched by bereavement if we may assume that Joseph died some time before Jesus began his earthly ministry. Jesus wept in Bethany at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35), and he spoke about life after death, and about judgement, heaven and hell. After death there will be a separation of the righteous and the wicked. The gospel message brought the good news of peace with God through righteousness – ultimately through the righteousness of Jesus himself. His teaching indicated the reality of eternal life or eternal punishment – see, for example, the parable of a man named Lazarus (not to be confused with the Lazarus who was raised by Jesus in Bethany; Luke 16:19–31). In the parable, Jesus speaks of Hades – the world of the dead, understood to be the place where unrepentant sinners reside until the final day of judgement. Remember that we learn what we know about hell from the lips of Jesus himself. We know that believers should fear God, who has the power to throw them into hell. (See Luke 12:4–5; an aspect of revealed truth which is not much emphasised by many preachers today.)

Jesus recognised the reality of death, and he knew that he himself would suffer and be put to death.

Jesus conquered death

Jesus, who for our sakes submitted to physical death, conquered death. He was raised from the dead, victorious, on the third day. His tomb was left empty. For the saved man or woman, death has to be gone through, but it should hold no horrors for believers walking in obedience because, like the apostle Paul, we long to see our Lord (Philippians 1:23). But death and what lies beyond it remain the ultimate horror for those who die in their sins, rejecting the cross of Christ.

John 20:3–9; Acts 2:24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

God is the God of the living. It is made abundantly clear in the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, and in the Book of Revelation, that after death will come judgement: the Lord Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. He will judge with justice. It will be crucial that we shall die believing and trusting in him, as faithful overcomers. But it may be asked: what happens to the souls of the deceased between their death and the day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts will be revealed? The New Testament uses the picture of 'sleep' to describe the state of the dead who are awaiting the Lord's return. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 to learn more about this revealed truth and its significance for how we should be living our lives here and now). Our minds turn to the promise of Jesus to the thief on the cross next to him (see Luke 23:39–43). Was that a special case or a more general indication of the state all faithful, repentant, God-fearing believers will experience after death? Scripture does not answer all our questions, and we have to allow for the fact that time itself may be rather different in the world to come. Are we conscious of the passage of time when we are asleep? That seemingly hard question is answered for us if we will meditate on what the Lord has revealed about how time is in his sight:

Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

Psalms 90:2, 4, NIV

The false doctrine of purgatory must be rejected – it appears to have arisen through misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:15. Historically, certain practices associated with prayer for the dead may have brought some material wealth to religion which taught that false doctrine, but we must hold fast to Jesus' teaching. There is an unbridgeable divide between the saved and the unsaved, at the point of death.

Luke 16:23, 26; Luke 20:37–38; John 5:24; Hebrews 9:27; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 21:6-7.