
Death and Life

Death and life are two of the great themes of the Bible. The New Testament abounds in references to “everlasting life” or “eternal life” or just “life”. It is important that we understand God’s idea of life—and even more important that we know how to enter into it.

In the beginning

All life begins with God. His name *Yahweh* means “the self-existent one; the one who was, who is, and who will be” (Psalm 90:2; 93:2). The first chapter of Genesis is the account of how He created living and non-living things. He spoke the living things into being in the ocean and sky, and on the land (Genesis 1:11,12,20,24,25).

However, when it came to the creation of man, God did not just *speak* life into him; instead, He *breathed* into him, and man became a living creature (Genesis 2:7). Man was not the only creature that had “the breath of life” in him (see Genesis 6:17; 7:15, etc.), but he was the only one into whom God specifically breathed life.

The fall from life to death

There is much that we don’t know about those days in Paradise. It seems there was to be no death – not even of animals, for the man and the woman were to eat the fruits that grew all around them (Genesis 1:29). It seems also that the Tree of Life was the source of unending life (Genesis 2:9), for later God said that if they ate of it they would live for ever (3:22). Perhaps the intention was that they should eat of its fruit regularly in order to sustain their life.

We cannot here go into the reasons why God gave Adam and Eve that one test concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Note the warning (Genesis 2:16,17): “In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The Hebrew is much stronger: “dying, you shall die”.

When Eve took the forbidden fruit (not an apple!), she died. When Adam took it from her, he died also. God had said, “In the day that you eat of it,” not “after many decades.” There is evidently a difference between *seeming* to be alive and actually *being* alive—at least as far as God is concerned. In fact, from that point on Adam and Eve were dead, though on the face of it little appeared to have changed.

The temptation

Satan focused Eve’s attention on the one thing that God had forbidden. In doing so he planted the thought that perhaps God was not as kind as she thought. The final temptation that he used was actually the same thought that had led to his own downfall: “I will be like God” (Genesis 3:5; compare Isaiah 14:12-14). From this we learn that *spiritual death comes from a desire to be independent of God and to set oneself up as god*. It puts self at the centre, instead of God.

Eve was deceived into believing what satan said. She took his words into her mind and acted upon them. Adam’s disobedience was worse than hers, because unlike her he was not deceived. His choice was between staying with God or going with her, and chose her.

The results

The result of the fall was alienation – of Adam from Eve, of mankind from the rest of creation, and of mankind from God. Physical death entered the world soon afterwards, as the first blood was shed so that they could be clothed (Genesis 3:21). They were driven out of the garden – not out of anger, but to

protect them from the possibility of living for ever in sin (Genesis 3:22,23). God prevented them from living for ever in the knowledge that *death would become mankind's way back into life*.

The generations of death

After the fall we see generation after generation rising and dying (Genesis 5:5,8,11, and so on). Paul tells us that “in Adam all die” (1 Corinthians 15:22), “death spread to all men” (Romans 5:12) and that it “reigned from Adam to Moses” (v.14). All the generations following on from Adam – including ourselves – though they *appeared* to be alive, were actually living in death. This that we call *life* is not really life from God’s point of view. When we see this, we understand what Jesus meant when He said, “I came that they might have life” (John 10:10). It is life of a different order.

In Ephesians 2:1 Paul says that we were not only dead as a result of sin inherited from Adam. We were also “dead in [our own] trespasses and sins.” Doubly dead!

The Life manifested

It follows that if the Son of God was to come into the world, He must come by a virgin birth. He could not have any of the heredity of Adam. When Mary asked the angel, “How will this be?” (Luke 1:34), his answer was: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” The conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb was entirely a work of God; she had nothing to do with it except to believe and to acquiesce. The *conception* was miraculous; the birth that followed in Bethlehem was completely normal.

It is not surprising that God should choose to bring His Son into the world in this way. It was a woman who had believed the word of satan, with the end result that death came into the world. Even so it was a woman who believed the word of God and brought into the world the Son of God, so that He could undo the work of satan (1 John 3:8).

John spells out for us the origin of the Lord Jesus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...In him was life, and the life was the light of men... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:1-4,14

In the words of Paul, “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:47), “a life-giving spirit” (v.45). It is worth noting that, as far as Paul is concerned, there have only been two *real* men in the world: the pre-fall Adam, and the Lord Jesus.

The origin of Jesus

Reading John’s gospel, it is evident that people found Jesus Christ to be a mystery. They did not know who He was or where He was coming from. He Himself speaks openly about His origin and the fact that the Father sent Him from heaven:

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. (John 6:38)

As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. (John 6:57)

You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me. (John 7:28,29)

You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.
(John 8:23)

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. (John 8:42)

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you. (John 17:25)

Even the disciples did not really know who He was (John 14:9). Why was this? He appeared to be a man like they were, but even taking into consideration His amazing power and grace, He seemed to live on another plane. The reason was simple: He was *alive*; they were *dead*. He implied this:

Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

—John 14:9

Later, after the Holy Spirit had come, John knew who He truly was. You can almost hear the wonder in his voice:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us...

Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

—1 John 1:1,2; 5:12

Notice that John refers to “life”; he does not even need to say “eternal life” (though he says it in v.2). Jesus had said twice earlier: “I am...the life” (John 11:25; 14:6); “I came so that they might have life” (John 10:10). It is simply “life”—not “abundant life” or “everlasting life” or “eternal life”. If I have one car and it is grey, I need not refer to it as “the grey car”. I just call it “the car,” and “grey” is understood. So it is with life; it does not need adjectives to describe it. It is the only real life.

The Cross

The death of Christ on the cross is the single greatest watershed in the history of the world. On the cross, Life took on death, as Jesus became the great representative of fallen humanity. The Father “for our sake...made him to become sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In becoming sin, He was identified with death and all that death entailed.

Did the Jews kill Him? Or the Romans? The answer is No in both cases:

I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.

—John 10:18

On the cross, as an act of will, He surrendered His life to the Father.

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last [literally, He breathed out].

—Luke 23:46

The word “commit” in the verse below means “to deposit for safe keeping”. This act of will was the reason that He died so quickly as compared with the two thieves.

Peter tells us that Jesus “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). Although He had become the embodiment of sin and death on the cross, in an act of supreme faith He surrendered His life to the Father, in the knowledge that the Father would raise Him up. This is “the faith of the Son of God” that Paul speaks of (Galatians 2:20, KJV).

The resurrection

The bodily resurrection of Christ, according to Peter, was not really a miracle. Note the words “not possible” below:

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

—Acts 2:23,24

It was the death that was the miracle. After the death, the resurrection was inevitable.

When John saw the glorified Christ, Jesus said to him, “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades (Revelation 1:18).” Jesus now has the authority to give eternal life to all whom the Father has given Him (John 17:2). In other words, He can now give to us the same life that He lives, and undo the work of satan that took place in Eden (1 John 3:8). We can receive life in place of our death.

How do we obtain life?

When He rose from the dead, Christ rose into “an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16). His human nature remains (1 Timothy 2:5), but the life He lives is no ordinary human life. It is human life living the life of God. This is the life that He offers us when He says, “because I live, you will live also”.

Christ entered into this resurrection life by first dying to sin (Romans 6:10). This is the way that we enter into it also. We can only live one life at a time: either the old “life” that we inherited from Adam, or the new life that we receive from Christ. We cannot mix the two, or live one life on one day and the other life on a different day. There is no concept in the New Testament of “asking Jesus into my life”. He *is* our life (Colossians 3:4).

Like Jesus, before we can know resurrection life we must first enter into death. This is the reason that God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden: so that they would not live for ever, and that death could open the way to life. Jesus implied this when He said: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). If ever a man took up a cross, it meant only one thing: he was going to die on it.

We now see the cross not just as a place of death—a place to be avoided at all costs—but a place of blessed relief, where we can leave the old life behind and enter into resurrection.

The need for new birth

Since we can only live one life at once, it makes complete sense that we must be *born again*. Just as we entered into our own non-life by being born into it, so we can only enter into real life by being born into it. The old life must be succeeded and replaced by a new life. It is not a question of trying to make the new life overcome the old one. Nothing less than the death of the old, followed by the new birth, will bring us into life. Jesus said as much to Nicodemus (John 3:1-7). This is something that *God* must do; I cannot do it for myself (John 1:13). Any “decision” that *I* make is meaningless unless God does this.

Peter confirms that the new birth had in fact happened to himself and the people he was writing to:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

—1 Peter 1:3, 23

Paul says the same thing in a different way, emphasizing (as he always does) the “how” of it:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in [literally, by the faith of] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

—Galatians 2:20

What Paul saw was that when Christ was on the cross, He became the embodiment of the *whole* human race. He did not only die *for* me; He died *as* me too, including me in His death. See 2 Corinthians 5:14,15. We saw previously that Christ was “the second man”. On the cross He became “the last Adam” too (1 Corinthians 15:45,46). He took the whole heredity of Adam down into death and left it there. When He rose again, He became the “firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18). And when we are born again, we come to “the assembly of the firstborn [plural] who are enrolled in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23).

Free, but not cheap

For this reason the preaching of the cross is “folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Since the cross leaves absolutely no room for human effort or merit, it is an offence to the natural man, who would rather do anything that submit to the truth of it. But if the cross cost Jesus His life, so that He could not enter into resurrection until after death, we realize that it will also cost us our own life to go through that door.

The order is always *death before life*. See, for example, John 5:24; 2 Corinthians 4:12; 1 John 3:14.

When we are thoroughly convicted of sin, we realize that only death will solve the problem. It is not just what we have *done*; it is what we *are* that is the problem. All the patching-up solutions that we have tried are not sufficient. The question is: are we willing to go that way? If it hurts, we should remember that in crucifixion, the agony lasted only as long as the man fought against death. As soon as he died the agony ceased. So it is with us.

The new birth, and the gift of life, are free, but they are not cheap!

The Spirit of life

Looking back at the creation of Adam, we remember that God breathed into his nostrils the “breath of life”. It is consistent, therefore, that when the new birth occurs, the Holy Spirit comes. He is, after all, “the spirit of life” (Romans 8:2). The birth and the Spirit are inseparable.

When a baby is born, the mother is waiting for one thing: to hear the birth-cry. When she hears it, she knows that the baby that she has carried in her womb is alive. But before the baby cries, it must take its first breath. First the breath, then the cry. Since “breath” and “spirit” are the same in both Hebrew and Greek, it is not surprising that the order is stated clearly by Paul:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

—Romans 8:15,16

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

—Galatians 4:6

This “cry” is an intuitive knowledge that we have been born and that God is our Father. John says, “I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father” (1 John 2:13). John goes on to say, “He that believes on the Son of God has the testimony *in himself*” (1 John 5:10). The inner “Father!” cry is the sure sign of the new birth.

Summary

That which we call “life” is not life as far as God is concerned. All the generations from Adam (the first man) up to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (the second man) lived in death. When Christ came, the life was visible, but nobody understood it.

On the cross, the Life entered into death in a mystery that we shall never fathom. He not only bore the sins of the world; He also became the embodiment of fallen humanity (the last Adam). When He died, He took fallen humanity down into the grave. But then He rose into newness of life, and now He sends the Spirit of life to all who are willing to embrace the cross and let their old life die.

To those who are convinced that, left to themselves, they cannot change, the cross becomes a blessed exit. It is the exit from the self-life, and a doorway into resurrection life. As surely as it was so for Christ, just as surely it is true for us. No cross – no resurrection. After the cross, resurrection is inevitable, as Peter said.

Here is what Charles Wesley wrote on the anniversary of his new birth:

On this glad day the glorious Sun

Of Righteousness arose:

On my benighted soul He shone,

And filled it with repose.

Sudden expired the legal strife;

'Twas then I ceased to grieve;

My second, real, living life

I then began to live.

...

He speaks; and listening to His voice,

New life the dead receive,

The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,

The humble poor believe.