
DEATH

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Whenever death is mentioned, the picture that comes to most minds is a funeral and a tomb. Most people consider that death takes place at the end of life; they understand death to be the termination or absence of life. In this sense, death to them is an event. However, death is operating in us all the time (Eph. 2:5). How is it that when we decide to pray, read the Bible, or preach the gospel, we feel weak, powerless, tired, and exhausted? Is there no escape from making a resolution to do good and failing to meet our own requirements? Do we simply lower the standard so that we feel good about ourselves but then accomplish little for God? These experiences suggest that death can operate even before the terminus of life.

Death as a Present Condition—the Operation of Death

Death is first explicitly mentioned in the Bible shortly after God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden of Eden. God set them before two trees and charged them, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may eat freely, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of it you shall not eat; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17). Although Jehovah said that they would surely die in the day that they partook of the tree of knowledge, we know from Genesis 3 that they continued to live. Since we know also that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), we must realize that in some sense Adam and Eve died, which indicates that there is an operation of death besides physical death, and that this operation progressed until, and even beyond, Adam’s physical death (Rom. 5:14). As a result of Adam’s sin, his human spirit was deadened first (Eph. 2:1, 5), and eventually, nine hundred and thirty years after his creation, his human body died (Gen. 5:5).

So then, there is spiritual death and a physical

death, and it is through the operation or progression of death that physical death comes about. There is “a time to die” (Eccl. 3:2), which is “the day of death” (Eccl. 8:8). While we may take care of our health and visit the doctor for a regular checkup to prolong our physical life, at the best we simply delay the inevitable. Human life is ultimately overcome by death. This is what Paul means when he says, “Through one man sin entered into the world, and through sin, death; and thus death passed on to all men” (Rom 5:12). Since the time of Adam’s fall, humanity has been subject to death and its effects, such as weakness, sickness, and impotence. Death has been operating since the day Adam and Eve transgressed; death has passed on to all men and has indeed been reigning as a king over them (Rom. 5:14, 17).

Human beings may be physically alive, but in the eyes of God they are counted as dead spiritually (Eph. 2:5). This death operates not only in unbelieving people of the old creation but also in the believers, because we are persons of the old creation and the new creation. Even after we are saved, death deadens our spirit, giving us the sense of being short of life and power. Death deadens our soul so that it is confused and devoid of feeling. And death deadens our body so that it is weak and sick. Eventually, death overcomes us when we physically die. This death is not only physical death but the death in which human beings are entangled daily.

The Experience of Death

In Romans 7 Paul testifies of his own experience of death prior to becoming a Christian, but the experience he narrates is regrettably the experience of most people after they become Christians and try to please God. Paul says, “For when we were in the flesh, the passions for sins, which acted through the law, operated in our members to bear fruit to death” (Rom. 7:5).