
HB 2:14-15 : THE VANQUISHED FOE

No. EE19

The fear of death is a universal experience. Job calls it, "the king of terrors" (Job 18:14). Just the thought of it brings us to a halt. The death of an acquaintance fills us with shock. Raise the topic in a conversation, and everybody feels ill at ease.

In more than one place the Bible speaks of the prospect of death as its shadow. And it is indeed a shadow which we all must enter - and very soon (unless the return of Christ occurs in our lifetime). What awaits us at the other side?

With regard to death, most people adopt the ostrich approach. They don't think or talk about it and if they can, they stay away from funerals. This of course changes nothing about the pending reality.

There are, however, also the curious, and those obsessed with death. And every one of them has his own philosophy about it, often based on so-called scientific research - which normally proves to be nothing more than the stories in the tabloids of those purporting to have returned from the dead.

Fact is that nobody has ever returned. There are certainly those who have come out of an apparent death. But once the electro-chemical processes of the brain have ceased, nobody ever returns.

What am I trying to say? *If we want to know what is going to happen to us after death, we are totally dependent on God's revelation in his Word!*

THE NATURE OF DEATH

□ We talk of a "natural death" and an "unnatural

death", which is all very well. *But according to the Word of God all human death is really unnatural!*

God created man to live, not to die. Yet death is a universal occurrence. Why? It is the consequence of sin. Death is the wages of sin - and until sin and its effects are something of the past, death will, alas, remain with us, unnatural as it may be.

□ Death is the termination of the unity between body and soul. It is the moment that "the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ec 12:7). According to Gn 12:7, "God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being". It is this act of creation that is made undone by death. As such death is most unnatural and terrifying.

THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

□ Death does not mean that a person ceases to exist, or that his personal and conscious life ends.

We refer to human existence during the period between the physical death and the resurrection of the body upon the advent of the Lord Jesus, as the *intermediate state*. The Bible tells us very little about it. The apostles tended to look right through this state, keeping their eyes fixed on the resurrection.

□ We can, however, make at least four statements about the intermediate state.

- Those who are united with Christ through true faith, go to him immediately after death.

- The intermediate state is a conscious state.

- Believers and non-believers do not have the same destination. Believers go to a place of glory, and unbelievers to a place of misery.

- The intermediate state is a preliminary and interim phase until our salvation is brought to

completion, when body and soul are reunited again. This will happen when the Lord returns in glory.

RESURRECTION AND JUDGEMENT

□ Both the righteous and the unrighteous will be resurrected. "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" (Jn 5:28-29).

□ The resurrection of the justified is described in moving terms in 1Th 4:13-18. The apostle does so in order that we may not be ignorant about this matter and mourn like the heathen when one of our loved one's in Christ passes away.

□ The Bible sketches a terrifying picture of the eternal state of the unrighteous. When one contemplates the expressions the Word of God uses (often Jesus himself) to describe the punishment which these people face, you realise that it is truly "a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hb 10:31). For these people it would have been better by far had they not been born at all.

- Wrath and anger, trouble and distress (Rm 2:8-9).

- Weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 22:13).

- Everlasting destruction (2Ts 1:9).

- The fiery furnace (Mt 13:42, 50).

- Eternal punishment (Mt 25:46).

- The lake of burning sulphur; the lake of fire (Rev 20:10,15).

□ Allow me therefore, with all the earnestness at my command, to say to all those who have not as

yet truly fled into Christ: *Remember that nothing is as certain as the fact of death; and nothing is as uncertain as the time when it will happen.*

THIS LIFE AND ETERNITY

❑ Fallen and unbelieving man sees death as the end of everything. The Word of God, however, presents it as being in a certain sense the beginning of everything - as the end of the imperfection we still know so well, and the experiential entry into life eternal. It is the time when we will reap what we have sown during this life. Then you and I will experience the relationship (or non-relationship) with God that we have had during this life, intensified a thousandfold. And we will receive exactly what we have chosen in this life - to live obediently to the honour of God and his Son, or to live for ourselves and the compensations of this world.

❑ When the unbeliever breathes his last, the opportunity to chose Christ will be something of the past. Nowhere does the Bible teach the possibility of a second chance.

Although this life is but a fleeting moment in comparison to eternity, it determines my eternal destination and my eternal state!

❑ We live therefore in the valley of decision. The options are still open. Have you chosen Christ yet? I am not talking about a superficial or impulsive little prayer or a five minute formula. I am talking about a quality decision, one which radically determines the priorities and course of your future life.

Or to put it differently: *Are you ready to meet your God?*

VICTORY OVER THE FEAR OF DEATH

❑ The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus frees people from the fear of death (Hb 2:15). And indeed, that has been the experience of millions for centuries. It happens when the Holy Spirit brings

the truth of the gospel to life in your heart. It happens when you are renewed in your mind. And as you embrace it more and more in faith, so you are slowly but surely lifted from the swamp of fear.

❑ On what grounds does a true Christian lose his or her fear of death?

- Firstly, Jesus stripped death of its *intimidating threat*.

The fear that the fact of death instills, depends to a large extent on the measure of uncertainty it holds. But the truth sets one free. Those who are in Christ, experience the inner witness of the Spirit that the message of the gospel is true. They know that God's children at death do not enter an unknown darkness, but the home of their Father.

- Secondly, Christ stripped death of its *legal claim to my person and my life*.

If, in dependent trust and in all sincerity, I have embraced Christ's merits, I have the assurance of his trustworthy Word that I am justified. In addition I have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit who calls out in me, "Abba, Father!"

- Thirdly, Christ stripped death of its *power to keep me imprisoned*.

With his resurrection the Lord took hold of the keys of death and hades. This is the guarantee to the resurrection also of those who have been united with Him through faith. The Head was resurrected; the body will surely follow. This is true to such an extent that the Bible says that I *have already* been raised up with Him (Eph 2:4-6).

- Fourthly, Christ stripped death of its *glory*.

Of course it is still a great heartache when a loved one dies. But we know that a true Christian's exit from the grave will be infinitely better than his entrance into it. Furthermore, not only is death unable to hold me, it is also impotent to keep me in my fallen state - for I will be raised in perfect glory.

CONCLUSION

❑ In his very comforting book, *Immortality*, Lorraine Boettner uses this striking illustration (p. 29-30):

"I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength, and I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come down to meet each other. Then someone at my side says, 'There, she is gone.' Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side, and just as able to bear her load of living weights to its place of destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her; and just at the moment when someone at my side says, 'There, she is gone,' on that distant shore there are other eyes watching for her coming and other voices ready to take up the glad shout, 'Here she comes' - and such is dying."

❑ This is a very apt illustration. One word in the New Testament for death, usually translated "to depart" (Phil 1:23; 2Tm 4:6), literally means *to untie*. At that time it was also used when a ship was untied from the quay and lifted anchor.

Truly, Paul may justifiably ask in 1Cor 15:55 on behalf of Jesus' disciples, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Nico van der Walt

- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.
- Subscriptions, changes of address, cancellations and correspondence: E: dupleissismh@telkomsa.net; P.O. Box 35289, Menlopark, 0102, South Africa. Tel. 012-804 0316; 083 5544 941.
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