

I. Eternity in Biblical Perspective

If I Should Die Before I Wake...

“The Bible and Death?”

Genesis 2:15–17

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This is not an expositional consecutive text but an expositional topical text. The reason I have chosen this series eternity in Biblical perspective was not because of the recent passing of my sister, although it has coincided with this challenging providence, but some of the reasons go way back to God’s call on my life. At the time I was called to the ministry the attractive thing to do was to go into parachurch ministry, like Campus Crusade, InterVarsity and Navigators, and all of which I highly value. So the men who were pretty gifted would do that and the other ones would be told to go get a church somewhere so that was kind of the way it was viewed.

In my college years and early years in seminary my heart went the other direction, because when I would study the Scripture it would tell me that Jesus went to the cross to purchase His church with His own blood and that Jesus had given Himself for the church, His bride, to secure her. He had gifted pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints in the church so that they could do the work of the ministry. God’s plan of His Great Commission and equipping people with the Great Commandment was worked out in the context of the church. It was abundantly clear in the book of Acts that when God turned the world upside down He did it through leaders rooted in churches, like Ephesus, Jerusalem, Rome and Antioch. So my heart immediately went to and was nurtured in being a pastor/teacher.

There was something that was working against that for I still had that siren call to a parachurch ministry so why would that be in light of the conviction and passions I had? I was really excited about this pastoral piece of hospital visitation and funerals. I remember talking to my pastor when I went to him about the call to ministry telling him I wasn’t sure if I was called or not. He gave me this advice; ‘son, if you can do anything else in life other than the ministry then go do it, but if God won’t let you do anything else then you have to do this.’ I began to share with him my lack of attraction to hospitals and funerals. His response was for me to take a trip for about three days and deal with it, because that would be a vital and crucial part of my life. It certainly would be nice to go do a parachurch ministry where I would deal with the living and then pawn it off to the churches when they were dying, sick or in the hospital. Yet he told me that is not what we do for it was at moments of crisis, like that where we want to bring the testimony of Christ so that was what I had to deal with in my heart where I’d be willing to do it and be ready to do it.

Thus I have been in the pastorate now for over 40 years and I have been in scores of cemeteries, along with being beside many hospital beds. I have seen people getting ready to meet the Lord and I have seen people who were not yet ready to meet the Lord. I have seen families grappling with the loss of a loved one and understandably so. So where do you start? Let me tell you what you don’t do. You don’t get yourself into trouble and you don’t trouble others by trying to come out with meaningless platitudes and sentimental statements, like ‘God has bouquets in heaven and your loved one was a wonderful flower that He plucked for a bouquet.’ I have heard some of the most unbelievable things.

All I have is the Bible so what does the Bible say about eternity? What about the door to eternity? That is death itself. Why is that believers who are ready to meet the Lord and long to

meet the Lord, still fight for life? Why is it that they work through treatments? Why do they cling to the reality of life with the reality of death in front of them and with the Biblical knowledge this is a different death because they're a believer who is going to be with the Lord? How do you help people walk through this? The biggest question of all is, what is it like on the other side of grace and no longer in need of faith or hope? What about that intermediate state where He hasn't come again yet so the eternal and final state has not yet been established?

What does it mean to be absent from the body yet present with the Lord, because in all of eternity you won't be absent from the body and present with the Lord? In the final state you will have a body. Your body will be resurrected into a glorified new body but in that intermediate state you are absent from the body yet present with the Lord. What does that look like and mean? What does the Bible tell us about all this and I want to be able to give people comfort and direction in those moments that is faithful to God's Word and I want you to know about it. There have been many times that I have been in hospitals and funerals where I received instruction on this for it wasn't me helping them but them helping me.

This happened on my very first hospital visit. My pastor knew I was struggling with it and I was brought into Charlotte to be a Youth Pastor that summer by my home church. The pastor had me doing certain things to start introducing me to the pastoral ministry. One Tuesday I was told 'here's a lady in the hospital you need to visit and son, this will be good for you so go for it.' I asked him what I should do and he told me 'Go and read the Bible to them and have prayer with them.' I noticed there was a little twinkle in his eye and I said 'ok' and I got to find out what the twinkle was as I went to the hospital that day to visit with this lady. With fear and trepidation I knocked on the hospital room door and she said 'come in.'

As I walked in there was a founding member of our church. Diabetes had removed both of her legs. She pulled herself up and the next words out of her mouth was 'Well you're the preacher boy huh? I've been waiting for you.' I went over and began to pray for her and she began to pray for me. I opened my Bible and began to read from the Psalms and I only said one sentence before I began following her as she quoted it ahead of me word for word. My pastor knew who to send me to for my first hospital visit. It wet my appetite instead of further frightening me. So my goal is to give you some Bible information on this that will help you in your ministry to other people.

I love this about this church for when others go through difficulties in a hospital or a home or a relationship or facing the issues of eternity, as members you don't run from it for you run to it. You are ready to serve. There are some things in God's Word that can help us when we run to it and not from it and the first thing is to understand this thing called death.

If I'm not mistaken there is a definite and distinct absolute probability that if Jesus doesn't come back first, you and I are going to die. I only know of two exceptions of this and that's Enoch and Elijah. Everyone else has met death, even our Savior. Some people had to meet death twice and those were the ones Jesus raised but they had to die again. So this is a certain reality that you and I face. Hebrews 9:27 says [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* I will cover the matter concerning the judgment in a later study but for now I'm just going to cover the first part and that's God's appointment for our death. Why is it there?

Maybe you're a fan of the movie Forest Gump and you know a lot of the sayings from that movie? One that's very popular is 'life is like a box of chocolates.' Another saying is 'Momma says that dyin' is a part of livin' and momma maybe a wonderful southern woman of thoughtful wisdom but she is a terrible theologian. Dying is not a part of living. Dying is an

enemy to what God created called living. It is an intruder and not to be considered a part of living. The only people that believe dying is a part of the living are either those who have not dealt with the Word of God about death or are those who have rejected the Word of God for a Darwinian atheistic world and life view.

For those who understand a Biblical world and life view dying is not a part of living. Let's take a look at living first by looking in Genesis 2:7 which says *[7] then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.* Notice that Adam was not a living creature when God formed him from the dust of the ground. He was a corpse. He did not become a living creature until God breathed into him the breath of life and then Adam became a living soul. That's what makes us who we are in life.

That view of life still penetrates our society. I just saw the movie *Sully* again. Captain Sully, a pilot, would not rest until he found out about all his passengers. When the report came it said that all 178 souls are accounted for. We are living beings because we have a soul. We learn from this text that to live is to have a spirit or a soul as well as a body – to have a physical as well as a spiritual.

You must not allow what has happened to you and that is the inundation of Greek paganism into our educational system so that basically the way we think – is it a body and soul or body and spirit or body, soul and spirit. I'm not a trichotomist so I don't believe it's body, soul and spirit. I believe that you are a body and soul or a spirit. The immaterial you is referred to for different purposes with different names – soul, spirit, mind, heart, etc. So there is a material you that comes in the image of your parents. There is an immaterial you that comes in the image of God and it is that which makes you a living being. That is what has established you as a person.

So where does this matter of death come from? We see the admonishment just a couple of verses later in the text. Don't think of your body as a vehicle carrying around this soul or spirit so death must be opening the door of this body and letting the soul or spirit out. When you understand the language, framework and the grammar here in this text you see that the soul is breathed into that body. The picture is more aptly two threads woven into one cloth that we are physical and spiritual so what you do physically affects you spiritually and what you do spiritually will affect your physically. So we are a being with these two threads that were not made to be separated. They were made to be united, intertwined and interdependent for all of eternity. We were made for forever. Dying was not a part of living. You don't find dying in Genesis 1 and 2. It's not natural. You find dying in Genesis 3 after sin enters in. In Genesis 2 you find the warning.

Genesis 2:15–17 says *[15] The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. [16] And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, [17] but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

Man is given a mandate from the Lord that has four elements to it. One is that he is to rule over the creation (the call of stewardship as those made in the image of God – vice regents). He is to have dominion over the creation. Secondly, he is to subdue the earth (the sanctity of work) and thirdly he is to be fruitful and multiply which is his call. The fourth statement is a statement people think is a negative but it is given as a positive. It is not given 'do not eat of the tree of good and evil' but it is given as 'you may eat of every tree of the garden' so it's a positive command for all those trees are yours so go eat of those trees. The prohibition to that positive

command is not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If that positive command is broken the disobedience will bring a penalty. It will bring God's judgment and that judgment is death, thus death will be visited.

Now let's look at Genesis 3 starting at Genesis 3:1–3 which says *[1] Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.*

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" [2] And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

Here we see Satan questioning the Word of God which he still does today. Through even those at seminaries he trains those to question the Word of God and they go into churches questioning the Word of God. When that happens not only is there the undermining of the authority, efficiency and the inerrancy of the Word of God but there is also the adulterating of the Word of God as Eve is doing here by adding to what God told them. God did not tell them they couldn't touch the tree. Satan goes on to tell them that God is a liar.

Genesis 3:4–7 says *[4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [7] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

You would have thought Adam would have spoken up after verse 5 for they already were like God because they were made in the image of God and they knew that. Here we also see what John was talking about in I John 2 when he talks of the lust of the flesh (saw fruit was good for fruit), lust of the eyes (fruit delight to the eyes and the boastful pride of life (desire to make one wise). We also see Eve didn't do this in isolation for Adam is with her in sinful silence. He is not doing what he was called to do in caring for his wife. Let's continue in the text.

Genesis 3:8–13 says *[8] And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. [9] But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" [10] And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." [11] He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" [12] The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." [13] Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

So as Adam and Eve sin against the Lord fear now comes into creation. "I was afraid and I hid myself." Shame also comes into creation. "I was naked." What else comes into creation? It is man's religion. Interestingly, when they said they were naked they really weren't because they had already sewn fig leaves or breaches as the Geneva Bible puts it, for themselves, yet that didn't work. Our works to cover our fear and shame never work therefore they hid themselves in the trees. We're always trying to hide ourselves in the trees of materialism, secularism, consumerism, etc., but that doesn't work. Their third effort to cover up is a secular religion where they say they have a syndrome and that is "I'm a victim." They are looking at someone else to blame and Adam not only blames Eve but even blames God for He was the One who gave

Eve to him. I need some therapy for I have a very dysfunctional life and I must have a dysfunctional God because He gave me her. Eve is no different than Adam and comes up with that comedic line of 'the devil made me do it.' So it's all cover up and not confessing up.

So what does the Lord do? Genesis 3:14–15 says [14] *The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. [15] I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

Now we have a promise of the anticipation of the Virgin birth because there is going to be a woman who has a seed and women don't have seed biologically. Men have seed. The One that woman who is given a seed gives birth to will be enemy of and the adversary of Satan and his seed and will win the victory. How do you know the victory? It is because He will be bruised on His heel for it will cost Him but the serpent will be bruised upon his head and that's lethal. This is the first Gospel message that is given to us as one of hope but it also tells us there will be adversaries and opposition – there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman plus her offspring. The offspring of the woman will be the Messiah and those that belong to the Messiah. This is why we know there will be persecution against the Lord's church until He comes and the serpent will try to devour that church and the one that belongs to the Lord. As long as Satan is allowed existence that warfare will exist between them and the offspring of that promise.

Genesis 3:16 says [16] *To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."* Death is brought to the marital relationship as the woman desires the husband's position to want to be over him which is contrary to the husband. Then the husband will respond with his physical strength or his separation, isolation as he shall rule over the woman. The noun form of the word rule used here is tyrant so in its original form here it would say that the husband will tyrannize the wife.

Can you see why from this that the Gospel should be making a difference in a marriage? Instead of women seeking to conquer their husbands you have women who complete their husbands and come along side of them with respect. Instead of men who would resort to the tyrannizing of their wives either physically or ignoring them or walking away as they would abandon their covenant vows, you have men who would lay down their life for their wife and love them as Christ loves the church. Yet here we see death is brought to relationships and death now begins to be introduced, even spiritual death.

Genesis 3:17–19 says [17] *And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; [18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. [19] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, (death) and to dust you shall return."*

Thus the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Here that death is described as the curse of sin that is brought to creation, to the creature, to the creatures, to relationships, to the sanctity of work, to the sanctity of marriage, to the sanctity of childbearing and all of this is now impacted by man's sins and death becomes present and prevailing throughout all creation. Yet a promise is given that there will come One who will win the victory over Satan and all of his seed. The Messiah will win the victory over Satan, sin, death and all that it brings.

To summarize it is sin that brings forth death and death comes three ways. The Greek word for death is *thánatos* which means a separation from. Death is that which was not made to be separated, but the body and the spirit is now rendered apart from each other. James talks about the soul being separated from the body and that's not a simple tearing apart. It is rendering apart what wasn't in creation designed to be rendered apart.

There are three kinds of death that comes in *thánatos*. One is physical death which is the separation of the soul from the body. I have been in a hospital room many times when the diagnosis is terminal and to see how much we do ethically in sustaining life but there have been times as I have seen the machines doing their work for the person yet the person is already with Jesus. There have been other times I've been there and I have said 'I don't think it's done' and one of them was my father in law. The doctors had already showed us and told us that he was near death but I told my wife 'tell them to give us at least 12 hours because I don't think he's done' and three days later he walked home. He was able to see another grandbaby born and then spend another year and half with them.

The moment when the spirit leaves the body is a fascinating thing to think about. It has been so challenging in life to be in those situations. When does that soul leave the body? I understand how we have all these kinds of metrics and brain waves and all but when does that soul leave the body because that's when they are dead. They are then absent from the body but present with the Lord. The earthly tent is laid aside in anticipation of a heavenly tent for eternity.

Secondly, there is a spiritual death that is the result of sin. Ephesians 2:1–3 says *[1] And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— [3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.* So in verse 1 he says we were dead but yet we were living out life in our sin so clearly this isn't a physical death. This is a spiritual death because you are living out your spiritual depravity. Let's continue.

Ephesians 2:4–10 says *[4] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were **dead in our trespasses**, (living in the dominion of sin – spiritual death) made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— [6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

So when you are born physically in this world you are not yet physically dead but the moment you are born you are spiritually dead, for you are dead in your sins. Therefore your physical life is living out rebellion against God. Now none of us were as evil as we would have been and could have been, not because we had a little spark of goodness in ourselves, but it was because of God's common grace that keeps us from being as evil as we would be. This is revolutionary in a Christian world and life view. If you understand what I'm saying you would be horrified but you wouldn't be amazed at Hitler. You would be amazed that you were not one, because the only reason you're not one is God's grace that restrained us from our depravity in common grace and then came redeeming grace, so that we came to Christ by His grace to be born again.

Ephesians 2 is telling us we're dead in our sins and the only way we can get to Jesus is for the Spirit of God from Jesus to bring us from death unto life because until then we are dead in our sins. We are not sin sick, we are sin dead and separated from God. So people will bring the Gospel to you as we're called to do and God will use that but something has to happen to you for that to benefit you. That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3 that *he could not* enter the Kingdom of heaven because he did not have the ability, Jesus isn't speaking of permission here. Nicodemus could not enter the Kingdom of God until he was born again. Whosoever will may come if they have permission but then Jesus says no man can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). There has to be that glorious, sovereign work of grace to bring us from death unto life for us to come to Christ. In other words, it's not become a Christian to be born again, you have to be born again to become a Christian, until then we're dead in our sins.

The third death is eternal death. Death is separation. We should not have to be told when we come to praise God that there is no soft singing because we were dead and now we're alive. If someone came out of a casket what would you do? You would get pretty excited about it. As Christians we are products of a spiritual cemetery and we have been raised to the newness of life by God's grace and for His glory. That is why we sing Amazing Grace and we are actually amazed by grace. O how marvelous and O how wonderful is God's grace to me!

So in eternal death one would hear 'depart from Me, I never knew you.' This is with no remedy for all eternity which is the judgment of God upon our sin for all eternity. The way you don't have to face that judgment is to come to Jesus who took that eternal condemnation for you at the cross so that we could have everlasting life.

Death is not part of living. It's an intruder and it came from sin. When sin came death came – physical death, spiritual death and eternal death. Why did this come to you? Why did this eternal death come to you that you don't want to be a part of, for you want to have eternal life? Why you and are there any exceptions? Is there anyone that is innocent and if not, why not? God has the answer for that and it's called original sin and that is why the actual sin. God tells us why and how and I will tell you that in our next study on eternity in Biblical perspective. If you want to look further into now then read Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 for in death spread to all men. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You so much for Your Word and for the time we could be together in it. I pray that you get more people to hunger and thirst after Your Word. I thank You for what we can learn because it's going to help us not only face life, face the shadow of death, anticipate eternity but it will also help us in discipling others beginning with our own loved ones and children as well as others in our relationships. Lord, continue to bless us as we spend time in Your Word in this matter and bless Your people as they absorb and marinate in what we have covered in this study. We give You the praise in Jesus' Name, Amen.

