

Our Life After Death (I)

By Rev. J. Kortering

Death possesses a terrible sting.

Any of you who have gathered around the deathbed of a loved one have felt it. It is an awesome moment when you are called upon to be present at death.

Strange things often accompany the agony of dying. Perhaps some of you have personally witnessed a dying loved one lifting up a feeble hand heavenward and trying to describe the angels that are present or the heavenly splendor that they see. Not infrequently this vision of splendor evokes a cry of eager anticipation from the dying. Soon the last breath is heard and the forces of death take hold. A once active, breathing, speaking, loving person now lies coldly still in death.

At such a time the question of life after death cries urgently for an answer. Job asked it "If a man die, shall he live again?" Job 14:14a. Does one simply go to sleep after death? Is death the end of all existence? Does one leave this life to begin the enjoyment of a better life?

These questions become urgent for two reasons.

Interest in the life after death is not born out of mere curiosity, rather we desire to know what happens to our loved ones who depart from this life. If the bond of love has been established in Jesus Christ, we desire to know whether our departed brother or sister continues to enjoy that bond of fellowship with Christ or not. Even this interest is not centered simply in the person. Our concern is not limited to the well-being of a loved one. Chiefly, the motive of our question is this, do they continue to live to the glory of God or not? We know that the purpose of life here is centered in the praise and glory of God, we likewise wonder whether God is glorified in the death of His saints or not.

Even then, we cannot divorce ourselves personally from this interest in the life hereafter. We know that we are going to die. The only exception applies to those who will be upon the earth when Christ returns (I Thess. 4:16, 17). We desire to know for ourselves what we may expect at the time of death.

The promises of God are clear and sure on this point. As we consider the Scriptural truths on this subject, it is our prayer that each one who reads this may come to the same conclusion as the Apostle Paul in I Cor. 15:55-57. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the Victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Immortality of the Soul

We are accustomed to speaking quite glibly of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. If we consult the dictionary we are confronted with a definition similar to this one, "Immortality -

exemption from death or annihilation, unending existence, everlasting, as immortality of the soul.”

This definition indicates that our thinking and “uses loquendi” of this work has been thoroughly conditioned by Greek philosophy. According to the Greeks, immortality simply applied to the continued existence of the soul after death. The late Prof. Berkhof explains this view and contends that the Bible uses the term in this way. “Immortality in the sense of continuous or endless existence is also ascribed to all spirits, including the human soul. It is one of the doctrines of natural religion or philosophy that, when the body is dissolved, the soul does not share in its dissolution, but retains its identity as an individual being. This idea of the immortality of the soul is in perfect harmony with what the Bible teaches about man, but the Bible, religion, and theology, are not primarily interested in this purely quantitative and colorless immortality, the bare continued existence of the soul.” Systematic Theology, page 672.

Does the Bible speak of immortality as mere continuous existence? First, the Bible speaks of God as being immortal. “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise god, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” I Tim. 1:17. Likewise in I Tim. 4:14-16, “That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ which in his times he shall show, Jesus Christ which in his times he shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man hath seen, nor can see, to whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen.” Secondly, Scripture uses the word immortal as a description of the believer only once, “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.” I Cor. 15:53, 54.

From this it must become immediately apparent, that the word immortal cannot and must not be applied to the wicked outside of Christ. The word itself, *athanasia*, means outside the scope of death, without death. The Word of God certainly does not describe the wicked as deathless. The very opposite is true. Already in the beginning of time the warning was issued, “The day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” Gen 2:17. This actually happened when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned,” Rom. 5:12. The character of this death is described for us by the Psalmist, “For lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee,” Ps. 73:27. This is paraphrased for us in the Psalter, “To live apart from God is death, tis good his face to seek.” This same idea is presented to us in I Peter 3:12, “the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.” This applied to both the body and the soul of the wicked that are outside of Jesus Christ. All during their earthly existence and even reaching beyond, they die and sink deeper into death. Physical death brings them to a greater measure of separation from God. The apostle John speaks of a second death for the unbeliever, “and the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever . . . and death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death” Rev. 20:10, 14. It must be apparent that the term immortality cannot be applied to the wicked outside of Christ. Their souls are not immortal, they are dead and pass into a deeper state of death continually, even unto hell.

Only the children of God are immortal and their bodies must be put on immortality. They are delivered from the power of death through Jesus Christ who is the “resurrection and the life” John 11:25. Principally this life is infused in the child of God when God regenerates him, John 3:3. This rebirth delivers us from the power of sin and death, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” I John 3:9. It is this life of Christ that places us in a relationship with God, “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous and his ears are open unto their prayers” I Peter 3:12. In the power of this life we seek God, “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near, Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thought; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon,” Isa. 55:6, 7. This infusion of life in us is called the first resurrection and through it we look forward to the final resurrection of body and soul in the life hereafter, “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and Christ and shall reign with him a thousand years... and I saw the dead, small and great stand before God... and the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them... Behold the tabernacle of God is with men.” Rev. 20:6, 12, 13; 21:3.

Why Physical Death For The Believer?

The weight of this question can be appreciated only with a proper understanding of the nature of death. Let it be emphasized from the outset that death is not natural. Because we live in the sphere of death we become conditioned and accept death as something ordinary. We expect to die; it is the inevitable end of all men, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment,” Heb. 9:27. Death is under the direction of our Sovereign God, He alone takes life. In fact it may never be said that when God has accomplished His purpose with man, He slays him and thereby delivers him through physical death to his everlasting abode.

Christ Jesus has delivered His people from the curse of death. As the perfect High-Priest He sacrificed His blood upon the cross as the payment for the sins of His elect, “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people,” Heb. 2:17. Through the blood of atonement, Christ completely redeemed His people from death, He removed the curse forever, I Cor. 15:55-57.

Why must the believer pass through physical death? From the above we understand that death is not punishment for the child of God. The curse of physical death was also removed by Christ. We must place physical death in the context of the purpose of God for all things. The whole earth is under the curse of death. This includes all mankind, Rom. 3:23, and the whole of the creation, Rom. 8:22. It is the purpose of God to save His people by delivering them out of the curse of death. Time is the means within which God unfolds His perfect counsel. This indicates to us that the full realization of life everlasting must await the end of time, I Cor. 15:25-28. Hence our whole life is a passing through the valley of the shadow of death, Ps. 23:4. Physical death is the means that Christ uses to separate us from the sphere of the curse when our purpose on earth is finished, and to deliver our soul to a higher realm of glory to await

the reunion of the body in the resurrection. Death for the believer is not a curse, rather it is the servant of Christ which delivers us unto life everlasting, II Cor. 4:16.