

“Michael Rogers has given the church a fascinating study of the Christian hope of heaven. With pastoral skill, careful interpretation, and logical force, the ultimate destinies of the soul are portrayed. This engaging book will bless laymen and clergy alike. Highly recommended!”

Peter A. Lillback, President, Westminster Theological Seminary

“What happens after I die? Who has not asked that question? And very obviously believers want to know what the Bible says. Michael Rogers in this marvelous book has provided a thorough yet readable treatment of Scripture focused upon the triumph of Christ over sin and death. It is convicting and encouraging, challenging yet attractive in handling what the Scriptures say concerning the matters of eternity. It compiles and arranges what the Bible affirms and reveals yet avoids exotic speculation where the Bible is silent. This book is at one and the same time a great read and a great resource.”

Harry L. Reeder, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

“Death is the great modern taboo, the thing which we all fear more than anything else and yet which is rarely mentioned, even in Christian circles. It is thus useful to have available a helpful book on the topic. Michael Rogers here addresses the issue head on with theological care and pastoral concern. This is a thoughtful and sensitive exploration of questions surrounding the afterlife and will repay the time spent reading it. Highly recommended.”

Carl R. Trueman, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Though death, along with taxes, is for certain, surprisingly little has been written on the subject. And most of what is out there may actually be counterproductive. This book stands in the gap. Filled to the brim with keen biblical insight, sound theological engagement, and warm pastoral care, this book will be your first—and maybe only—stop for guidance on any and all issues related to death. Speaking personally, my family and I have been richly nourished by the pastoral ministry of Michael Rogers for fifteen years. I am delighted to see that wider audiences may now experience his edifying teaching.”

Stephen J. Nichols, Research Professor of Christianity and Culture, Lancaster Bible College

“After nearly forty years of fruitful pastoral ministry you would expect Michael Rogers to be wise in guiding believers through the challenging question, what’s next after this life? In *What Happens After I Die?* those expectations are exceeded. These pages reflect a depth of biblical reflection and practical help through which Dr. Rogers now extends his thoughtful understanding of Scripture to all who will read. What does the Bible say about heaven and hell? How will this world end? How can I be ready? These and many other questions are addressed with skill and Christ-centered hope. This is not dry eschatology; it is biblical truth that both challenges and encourages, enlightens and engages.”

Timothy Witmer, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *The Shepherd Leader* and *The Shepherd Leader at Home*

“Is it pie in the sky when you die? Or is it seventy virgins? Or both? Or neither? Michael Rogers does an outstanding job of leading a search of the Scriptures to see what is true about the future destiny of God’s children—and of everyone else. This book will shape your prayers and your life so that both are more ‘conformed to the image of his Son.’ I commend it highly.”

Samuel Logan, International Director, The World Reformed Fellowship

WHAT HAPPENS
AFTER I DIE?



MICHAEL ALLEN ROGERS

Foreword by Bryan Chapell

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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FOREWORD

THE QUESTION NEVER GOES AWAY: What happens after I die? One of the most poignant times I have been asked this question was after the funeral of a young girl, killed in a farming accident. She had only done what many of us raised on farms have delighted to do—ridden the fender of a tractor while her father cultivated a field. For many farming families, this is a way that kids do what “big people” do, learn farming, and spend time with Dad—all at the same time. The family outing turned to tragedy when the tractor hit a hidden ditch and the girl was thrown.

As she fell, her father turned to catch her, but she was already beyond his grasp. Instead, her eyes met his, and she spoke one word: “Daddy.” He later said that she did not scream his name in panic or desperation. Instead, she seemed calm and spoke his name only as if saying a loving goodbye. At one level, his daughter’s lack of fear comforted the father. He knew his daughter to be a dear Christian, and he believed that, even in the moment of death, her faith had spared her the terrors of the accident. At another level, the daughter’s expression of love for her father haunted him.

In her dying, the young girl had reached out to comfort her father. There was no hint of blame or abandonment. The gesture was a reflection not only of faith, but also of the closeness of the family. And now the father felt keenly the weight of his daughter’s enduring some measure of eternity without her parents. He asked me, “Won’t she be lonely without her mother and me?”

The father believed that he and his wife would eventually join their daughter in heaven, after their deaths. But he struggled with the idea of their child enduring what would likely be decades without her immediate family. He was simply being a caring father in asking what may have seemed like a question inappropriate for the polite and careful conversations that accompany funerals. As a parent, he could not fathom how his child could navigate the unfamiliar streets of heaven or rest “in the arms of Jesus” without her mommy and daddy there.

The simple question that came from such fatherly concern actually represents a host of questions that stretch thought and imagination as we

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try to grasp profound truths of our faith. The question about a daughter's loneliness in heaven implicitly is also a question about: (1) the nature of our existence prior to and after Christ's return; (2) the timing and effects of our reunion with loved ones; (3) the nature of our relationship with God and others for eternity; (4) the spiritual status, mental state, and maturity level in heaven of a person who dies as a child on earth; (5) the status of the body (before and after Christ's return) of one who has died, especially if the death is disfiguring; (6) the nature of time in eternity, and whether decades on earth are relevant to a heavenly clock; (7) how answers to all of these questions should affect our lives now; and many more related questions.

The answers to some of these questions will readily come to the minds of biblically informed believers; the answers to others have perplexed theologians for centuries; and the answers to a few will come only when Jesus returns to answer them. The difficulty of some of these questions, however, should not make us hesitate to search Scripture to answer those that we can. The Bible addresses the most pressing questions we should have about what happens after we die in order to give us a strong and precious hope, enabling us to face life's greatest challenges and griefs.

The Bible clearly tells us that we will meet again with loved ones who have died in Jesus. We know that after death, we will be with the Lord forever. We know that when we are with Jesus, grief and pain will vanish forever. We know that our spirit will finally be united with an incorruptible body. We know that sin will touch and tempt us no more. We know that evil will be punished and righteousness will be vindicated. We know that Christ's righteousness will be ours. We know that everlasting joy will be ours. We know that our world will ultimately be made new and better. We know that the afflictions we face now will fade in comparison to the glory that will be revealed in us. We know that when our children die, they are safe in the arms of Jesus.

In order to receive the full comfort and courage of these truths, while also not making assertions that would create false hopes, we need to know what Scripture promises and how those promises apply to our lives. *What Happens After I Die?* does precisely this. In these pages we have the double blessing of clear articulation of biblical truth *and* deep reflection based upon decades of pastoral experience. Dr. Michael Rogers brings us both the sound reflection of a mind that has studied the Scriptures for decades

and also insightful applications from a heart made tender by pastoring people through generations.

As a consequence of his pastoral experience, Dr. Rogers presses the biblical truth precisely to the issues that are most likely to affect our lives and challenge our hearts. His conclusions are based on rigorous and faithful exposition of Scripture. When he offers an occasional speculation in the light of mysteries Scripture does not fully unravel, he honestly identifies the questions that remain, while still showing how his tentative conclusions are consistent with what Scripture does disclose.

The importance of this book must be measured against the reader's assessment of the accuracy of the sentence that begins this foreword: "The question never goes away: What happens after I die?" More than three decades of pastoral experience confirm the truth of that sentence for me. A father's question about the possible loneliness of his child in heaven has been preceded and followed by hundreds of a similar nature: "Will Dad recognize us when we get to heaven, though we will be many years older than we were when he died?" "When we are in heaven, will my sister still blame me for not coming to her wedding?" "Will my mother finally be able to support my choice of spouse, after we all die?" "Will Jesus forgive the sins that I have forgotten to repent of, after I die?" "Will my father regain his right mind in heaven?" "Will I have to forgive the man who killed my daughter, if God lets him into heaven?" "Will our baby, who died in infancy, be in heaven, and will she love her parents?"

Such questions can perplex us, worry us, and even deprive us of the joy of the gospel, if we don't know how the Bible addresses them, comforts us, and gives us hope beyond the challenges of this life. Thus, as a faithful pastor, Dr. Rogers is careful to take us to the Scriptures to answer these and many more questions in order that each of us may say, "I can live fully and joyfully now because I know what will happen after I die."

Bryan Chapell

PREFACE

“NOW I LAY ME DOWN to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” In early childhood that prayer formed both a mantra and a creed; it was the total sum of Christianity I knew. When you think about it, the systematic theology packed into those two sentences is very comprehensive. It is a petition for God’s providential care offered in conscious acknowledgment of one’s felt mortality, humbling the petitioner and teaching a sense of God’s sovereignty over human beings he has made. Here is a great spiritual foundation to build upon. Would that all prayers were as eloquent.

My mother must have taught me the prayer, though I have no remembrance of that. We were an unchurched family until I was six. Nevertheless, this bedtime petition was a fixed ritual well before I began Sunday school attendance as a first grader. The prayer was my entire religious life, repeated as a reflex when the bedroom light was switched off; I recited it with all the discipline of a cloistered monk at Evensong. Looking back, I believe a subliminal element of fear motivated me. That one word, *die*, was conspicuous in this liturgy, like a word wrapped in barbed wire. Could it be that I might not wake to see tomorrow? I was ten before death affected my life, when a boy from my school died in a fire. But the merest possibility of life cut short sobered me. I figured adults who composed prayers probably knew things I did not, so I prayed with fervor about premature death, however remote the chance. Such was my talisman raised against unknown darkness.

People everywhere are hungry to know what the Bible teaches about death and realities beyond. A relative void of sound, Scripture-based preaching on the subject is now filled by a glut of personal experience testimonials, proclaiming near-death visionary experiences. A recent best-seller apparently is based on a preschool-age child who stuns his family with specific facts reported about dead relatives—knowledge he supposedly acquired via a brief trip to the edge of heaven and back. Nothing I can say will keep millions from pursuing eternity based on subjective, mystical accounts. Humanly speaking, I offer no comparable fireworks,

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only the divine Word of God as it speaks on these subjects—the one inerrant sourcebook of truth revealed from the mind of God by his Spirit. My entire authority as a death spokesman resides in the Bible. If I stray from it, by all means doubt what I say.

Beginning in fall 2009 and culminating Easter Sunday 2010, I preached twenty-six sermons on death and the afterlife for the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church (PCA) of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Sermon CDs purchased and responses to our radio broadcast indicated I had touched a nerve of interest. I serve a congregation of people who love the unvarnished truth of God preached. My predecessor told me after he retired that what he missed most about worship at Westminster Church was “the quiet rustle of Bible pages” as he spoke—hundreds of folk looked up each reference cited. This splendid Berean congregation prodded me to publish the sermon series. I am deeply grateful to them for prayerful support of my weekly pulpit ministry. Likewise, I should thank members of Valley Presbyterian Church in Lutherville, Maryland, where earlier messages on this material were heard by God’s flock in the 1980s.

The order of the material has been revised here from the preaching series, and everything was rewritten and expanded. I first deal with the origin of death as the Bible describes its source and its tyranny. Then we delve into the horrible subject of an unbeliever’s fate without Christ—termed the “default destination.” Only after probing hell will we explore the shining prospect of heaven. As we do, keep in mind that heaven has, in a manner of speaking, two stages: the immediate state of the believer after death as a soul perfected in righteousness and the ultimate event of receiving a resurrection body, climaxing at the final coming of Christ on the historic “Day of the Lord.” One chapter, “Is My Child in Heaven?” was at first two sermons, but is now merged into one chapter. Despite its considerably greater length than the other chapters, I felt it had to be written as a unified argument.

Preachers generally find it hard to translate pulpit words into written prose for publication. It is somewhat like reducing a movie made in three dimensions back to just two. Sermons that may have been effective when spoken can seem bland in print. George Whitefield complained once that he would accede to a request to publish his sermons if someone could figure out “how to get the thunder and lightning on the printed page.” My oral style remains intact, since I seek a conversation with you as a reader. I am

quite aware of an autobiographical element in these pages, which I sought to restrain but not eliminate. I hoped readers might journey through my own emerging discoveries as a Christian pilgrim learning about death and life eternal, as I've matured from boy, to pastor, to senior citizen.

My audience is the man, woman, or young person in the pew, ordinary folks who seek biblical answers about their future. This book is a layman's survey of a vast landscape. Thus the academic community will most likely dismiss this volume as simplistic. Every subject I undertake is far larger than what I have covered. Whole books have been written about each chapter topic, and I am frustrated by all the side alleys and interesting details I had to neglect. More detailed discussions would be required at many points if I had been writing for scholars.

For those who do seek a more comprehensive, yet plainly written expansion of these subjects, I heartily recommend *The Promise of the Future* by Cornelis P. Venema.¹ Venema's work is superb—thoroughly biblical and balanced. He also deals with competing millennial views and other areas of general eschatology, which I have studiously avoided in my narrower focus upon the experience of the individual at death and beyond. (If you must know my millennial stance before we embark, it is amillennial, the same as Venema and many of the sources I have cited. I look to the lordship of Christ active today, even before he returns to history, and I view the redeemed people of Israel and today's church as one covenant people of God.) Another fine guide written at the layman's level is *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* by Edward Donnelley. Anthony Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future* has been a trusted guide for me since the day it was published.²

My hope is that the transformational gospel of Christ crucified and risen will be repeated often within these pages. Every sermon I preach endeavors to present at least the kernel of the gospel of God's magnificent grace in Christ Jesus, as do these chapters. Those who do not already confess him as Lord can certainly read this volume with some level of understanding, but I pray that in doing so, they will realize that apart from trusting in Christ as Lord, their only prospect beyond the hour of their death is catastrophic. But with Christ, hope for the future becomes stunning beyond all description.

When I finished the manuscript, I was surprised to realize how often I had quoted various works of C. S. Lewis. He is, of course, one of

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Christianity's eloquent defenders, but he disclaimed being a theologian or Bible scholar. Imagination was his forte, and eternity was never far from his gaze. Colorful imagery makes Lewis's exploration of issues touching heaven, hell, and death unforgettable and usually spot-on within biblical parameters.

I am indebted to Dr. Bryan Chapell for his eloquent foreword. He graciously completed this just as he was transitioning from nearly two decades of service as president of Covenant Theological Seminary, to serve as chancellor. My ministry colleague and friend, Dr. John S. Light, was an ever-present theological sounding board. Dr. Stephen J. Nichols heard this material preached and gave me unique aid in early stages of the move toward publication.

Lastly, I speak with profound gratitude to my wife, Carol, to whom this volume is dedicated. Beloved wife: awesome death now wields only one glittering dagger that gives me real pause—a severe yet temporary separation from you.

PART ONE

DEATH'S TYRANNY OVERTHROWN

O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!
Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! . . .
Look away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more!

PSALM 39:4-5, 13

Why did you bring me out from the womb?
Would that I had died before any eye had seen me
and were as though I had not been,
carried from the womb to the grave.
Are not my days few?
Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little cheer
before I go—and I shall not return—
to the land of darkness and deep shadow,
the land of gloom like thick darkness,
like deep shadow without any order,
where light is as thick darkness.

JOB 10:18-22

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

JOB 19:25-27

THE LAND OF DEEP SHADE



A *FASCINATION WITH OLD CEMETERIES* first stirred in me when I was twelve. One Sunday afternoon I joined my maternal grandparents on their errand to prune rosebushes planted beside family graves in the rural western New York village of Griffin's Mills. For two centuries, the dead from the surrounding area had been transported to a level green beside a small Presbyterian church until their memorials stood rank upon rank across acres of shaded ground. If Easter Sunday congregants would have filled every pew at the nearby church, they could not equal ten percent of the deceased human beings whose several thousand granite guardians thronged the lawns. My grandparents pointed out markers representing immediate ancestors, but at age twelve I considered any associations I had with these folks a matter of indifference. While my escorts tended roses, I began an hour of curious meandering—my first ever free time spent in a large cemetery. As a naive adolescent I had no notion that I had trespassed upon a great human convocation until I was startled to overhear their murmurings. The dead testified.

Some of the oldest stones bore macabre carvings of skulls and crossbones, which I associated with the ensign of a pirate ship. Faded letters on mossy limestone quoted Victorian poetry or verses of Scripture no longer easily deciphered. I found crumbling headstones marking a final bivouac for soldiers of both the American Revolution and the Civil War. One Union army private was identified by his military unit, and I deduced that since his death occurred in the first week of July 1863, he could have fallen to a minié ball at Gettysburg.

Calculating from engraved dates of birth and death, I was surprised at how many pre-twentieth-century lives had tragically short spans. I wondered what a fifteen-year-old girl named Eunice might have looked like. What caused her early death in the 1870s? Could her final illness

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have been remedied by a dose of nonexistent penicillin? Who could tell me the wrenching story of parents with three small markers flanking their own, each guarding a baby that was either stillborn or less than one year old? Why was one particular citizen with the odd first name of Roscoe so prominent in the 1880s that he rated an eight-foot-tall marble plinth? Roscoe dominated the chessboard of stones like a bishop. What did the size of a grave marker signify seventy years later, when only a handful of his descendents might recall who Roscoe was?

The longer I explored, the more questions that cemetery proposed. My grandparents were surprised to find me reluctant to quit my newly discovered world of not-so-silent human dust. Any previous sense I had that my adolescent life would simply continue unendingly was left behind in that memorable hour. Death had asserted many mysteries. Without realizing it at the time, I went from there drawn to one of the famous resolutions Jonathan Edwards composed before he was twenty: "Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying and of the common circumstances which attend death."¹

Cemeteries still interest me a half-century later, since my calling has taken me to dozens of them as a pastor presiding at burial ceremonies. Three years after that Sunday visit my grandmother was interred in the same plot she tended on that earlier day. My grandfather never guessed that twenty more years would pass beyond his wife's demise until his turn came. He could not have imagined I would be the minister presiding at the grave when his ninety-four-year-old body was laid to rest. Now I sometimes wonder—who among their widely scattered twenty-first-century descendants ever tends those rosebushes on a Sunday afternoon?

In 1999, purchase of adjacent acreage for a building expansion brought the church I pastor in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, into possession of a hilltop family graveyard situated within a copse of trees two hundred yards from our existing building. Historical society records informed us that forty-three known burials had occurred on that plot across a fifty-year span between the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, with the last recorded burial being in 1834. Neglect, ravages of time, and vandalism left only a few broken German-language stones to bear witness. On February 15, 2004, our church reopened that ground for its first burial in 170 years. The body interred that day was my father's. Now, many times annually, bodies or ashes of my sisters and brothers in Christ

are placed in this earth, adjacent to the dust of early Mennonite settlers. Burial rights are reserved in that lovely hilltop cemetery, in anticipation of a coming day when my own clay will join that of my father and a growing “cloud of witnesses.”

THE ONLY REMAINING TABOO

What awaits us after death? We begin consideration of the Bible’s teaching on the subjects of death, divine judgment, and the final destinations of either hell or heaven. Only the last of these topics is normally allowed today in social conversation by obstinately death-avoiding people. Heaven can be discussed, but the conversation usually pursues a harmless fantasy, malleable to any fanciful shape the speaker’s imagination devises: “She’s dancing on golden streets now, for sure . . .” The heaven most moderns conceive of is a creation of wishful thinking, a spiritual placebo. It tends to be a light-hearted, harmless way of forecasting the inconceivable. After mentioning it, many people realize they only half believe in it. The heaven of popular discussion these days certainly is not proscribed by the dictates of Christian biblical revelation.

Death as God’s righteous judgment and an eternal hell are taboos that secular people steadfastly refuse to discuss, except to tell you how much they disdain all thoughts of them. Avoidance of the subject has a long history. Legend says King Louis the XV of France once banned all people in his kingdom from mentioning the word “death” in his presence. Nevertheless, King Louis most assuredly died.

A pastor friend once made a call upon a church member, a woman advanced in years who was fully aware that she was dying of congestive heart failure. As a mature saint resting in Christ this nursing home patient had no illusions about her future. She was brimful of hope as the pastor read Scripture about heaven, and they discussed the believer’s future with confidence. However, in the midst of that pastoral visit, the woman’s unbelieving daughter entered the room. She heard the conversation and looked agitated but said nothing. The pastor prayed and excused himself to leave. He was surprised to have the daughter follow him into the hallway, where she verbally tore into him with eyes blazing. She said, “How *dare* you talk to my mother about death! We are doing everything possible to surround her with positive encouragement and you come here telling her she is going

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to die. How dare you!” Not long afterward that lady attended her mother’s funeral. Perhaps she blamed that event on the pastor’s negative attitude.

No matter how doggedly you avoid the topic, every single person will die. After decades of superefficient operation, that great engineering marvel—your human body—will shut down and cease thousands of functions in a matter of minutes. Your heart muscle will stop pumping and masses of neurons in the brain will switch off. Your body’s core temperature will cool and rigor mortis will begin. What then becomes of the unseen essence of you?

Millions seem to think they will continue uninterrupted life upon this earth. At least, they are striving mightily in that direction, running hard to delay facing a terminal certainty. I drive past a fitness and racquet center every day that has expanded its parking lot several times in ten years just to accommodate hundreds of cars parked there daily by suburbanites arriving in Audis, Volvos, and BMWs, eager to tone up their bound-for-the-grave bodies.

John Lennon of the *Beatles* wrote in his song “Imagine”: “Imagine there’s no heaven . . . No hell below us . . . Imagine all the people, living for today . . .”² Lennon’s theology enjoys wide appeal: inviting us to live exclusively for right now; supposing we can be carefree and without consequences in this present moment if we look no further ahead. One evening years ago, on the sidewalk outside his New York apartment, a man with a pistol snuffed out Lennon’s vain illusion. Despite the efforts of our death-avoidance, those graveyards really do keep filling up. But unlike fitness center parking lots, the cemetery keeps all its occupants for the long term.

It causes strong concern to realize that of all groups, evangelical Christianity has almost ceased to provide a preaching and teaching emphasis on the biblical hope of life beyond death, based in Jesus Christ. Pulpits today are more often dedicated to preaching topical, seeker-sensitive messages that concentrate on how to have a fulfilling marriage, how to manage your finances, or how to implement sound principles of child-raising. How many “seeker” congregations hear much from Scripture about preparing for the hour of death and for eternity? When, for instance, did you last hear a sermon about hell? Richard Baxter long ago urged pastors to preach “chiefly on the greatest, most certain and most necessary truths. Many other things,” he said, “are desirable to be known, but this must be known or our people are undone forever.”³

Countering this trend of neglecting essentials, I propose to carefully examine the Bible's consideration of death across a broad range of texts, Old Testament and New. We shall find that Scripture offers no death-denial or escapism, just clear-eyed realism. God's Word proclaims hope for eternity in a life secured by Christ's great resurrection victory, which effectually changes all who trust in him as Lord over life and death, heaven and hell. Martin Luther once said, "We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime, inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance and not on the move."⁴ By "on the move" I assume Luther meant when it is gathering speed in my direction. Nancy Guthrie adds, "You must look at death while you are alive and see sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven, permitting nothing to divert you from that view."⁵

DEATH AS A FEARFUL MYSTERY

On few other subjects is the Bible's principle of *progressive* revelation better seen than this one. Many vital Scripture truths were only half-baked after centuries in the oven of Old Testament revelation. Old Testament saints held a hope of an eternal future beyond death that was vague and often sounded contradictory. Israelites lived for generations staring into a tenuous future, with mystery and darkness as dominant characteristics. Only after many centuries did these dim hopes give way to the full-orbed resurrection confidence of the early Christian church. The keystone event of Christ's bodily resurrection was needed before the Holy Spirit could bestow clear images of life after death that we hold to today. Modern Judaism still depends only upon the Old Testament for its revelation of eternity; thus even the most religious Jews in our century are generally more fixated on quality of life issues in *this* present world than they are on hoping for ultimate heavenly reward or weighing a fear of hell.

Job 10:18–22 presents the Old Testament view of death in highly pessimistic tones, from a man of faith. The famous sufferer Job was in a deep valley of depression when he said, "I loathe my life" (10:1)! He pleaded with God to make some sense of his harsh suffering. Yet his challenge to the Lord was so plaintive, it did not appear that Job expected any positive divine answer. He peevishly prayed, "Why did you bring me out from the womb?" (10:18). His birth seemed pointless. He spoke of going to the place of no return, "to the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom

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like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness” (vv. 21–22). Job used several different Hebrew words for “darkness,” piling one upon the next for a suffocating effect. The land beyond death was to Job in his distress a pit of anxiety, chaos, and despair.

The Old Testament testifies to a master destination beyond death called *Sheol* (or “Hades” in the Greek Old Testament): a place where dead souls consciously survive in varying degrees of blessedness, or perhaps in continued suffering. Old Testament texts often depict Sheol simply as a vast gathering corral for all departed souls. The wicked and the godly go side by side into Sheol, although the two groups may have quite different experiences there. Numbers 16:33 refers to sons of Korah who died under God’s wrathful judgment: “They and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.” That picture would lead you to assume that Sheol is *hell*. But Genesis 25:8 appears to have the same destination in mind when it reports: “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.” Abraham’s future prospect was peaceable. Sheol was for him a blissful family reunion.

Other texts confirm the hope of reunion with generations already departed, as when David predicted in 2 Samuel 12:23 that in Sheol he would see his son conceived by Bathsheba, a son who died shortly after birth. Continuous identity with your earth personality also seems to be guaranteed, since 1 Samuel 28:14 describes the other-worldly resuscitation of Samuel, whose form was immediately recognized by King Saul. Job 3:17–19 paints Sheol as a place of rest and relative freedom: “There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners are at ease together; they hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and great are there, and the slave is free from his master.”

Sheol—a word used sixty-six times in the Hebrew Old Testament—might be visualized as a great cavern into which all persons are indiscriminately swept. The expectation was that all living men and women should anticipate going there. Psalm 89:48 asks, “What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?” Sheol’s location was understood frequently as in the “depths of the earth.” One always descends “downward” to Sheol, which probably gave rise to the persistent yet groundless notion of hell being located literally beneath the surface of planet Earth.

On a few occasions Sheol is painted as a prison with barred gates: “They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished” (Isa. 24:22). Isaiah at least on one occasion visualized hopeless permanency in that dwelling: “They are dead, they will not live; they are shades, they will not arise; to that end you have visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them” (Isa. 26:14). These gloomy sentences speak of the *wicked* man, the nonbeliever, who placed no hope in Jehovah. God was not praised or thanked by unbelievers in their lifetimes on earth, and so their religion does not change in the next existence. In a better-case scenario, Old Testament people of *faith* who believed God was their Lord looked toward secure rest and peace in Sheol: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (Ps. 49:15). Divine intervention was required to realize this blessed result. Only God who first gave man the breath of life can by his Spirit restore a life from the depths of Sheol.

The overall concept of Sheol was mysterious to say the least. At times it appeared to be contradictory. It was a place more fearsome than encouraging. Job was not the only godly person who sometimes lost his afterlife confidence while awaiting such a vague future. Yet other biblical witnesses appeared untroubled by the prospect of Sheol’s deep shadows. Notwithstanding all fears expressed, total extinction of living persons never seems to be considered. Biblical teaching about Sheol showed that man continued to exist, and that he existed for a purpose.

AN OLD TESTAMENT SHAFT OF SUNLIGHT

Having painted a gray view of Old Testament Sheol, we nevertheless find Scripture presenting some distinctly positive affirmations on life after death. Prominently, Psalm 16:11 describes “pleasures forevermore” to be enjoyed at God’s right hand. David declared that his “whole being rejoices” and “my flesh also dwells secure” (16:9). Familiar bold assertions of eternal security occur in Psalm 23, where David emphasizes every believer’s ability to walk undisturbed “through the valley of the shadow of death” and “dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” It is easy to see why the beloved Twenty-third Psalm conveys psychological/spiritual confidence in the face of death. Many persons other than gospel believers seize the literary assertions in Psalm 23 as valued supports in times of crisis. Majesty of

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the language alone carries some comfort to those who may not know the great Shepherd as Lord.

My favorite Old Testament assurance is Psalm 73:24–26, in which Asaph told the Lord, “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Asaph possessed a rock of certainty, which he forcibly called to mind after he’d begun to be overwhelmed by a fleeting illusion that earthly health and wealth were the best prizes to covet.

Consider a remarkably positive text, Job 19:25–27. We have all seen iconic calendar pictures where a photographer captures cumulous clouds looming over a country landscape, but one cloud-opening allows sunlight to stream brilliantly down upon green fields like heaven’s own floodlight. This could be a visual depiction of Job 19. We can hardly believe the speaker here is the same Job who poured forth dark pessimism in chapter 10. His faith had experienced a complete reversal. He raised himself up to his full height to shout, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” This was a premier moment for biblical hope. It is astonishing that in the ancient book of Job, a hope of resurrection so exactly corresponds to salvation forged by our risen Lord Christ, who will give resurrection bodies to his trusting people when he finally “stands upon the earth” in history’s last day. Undergirding Job’s stunning prediction was the prophetic Holy Spirit; Job did not speak out of his own devices. As a natural man, he could not have been entirely conscious of every shade of meaning in his words as he uttered them. He prophesied matters too wonderful for his own comprehension.

The key term in Job 19:25 is “my *Redeemer*,” from the Hebrew word *go-el*. In ancient times, a *go-el* was a close kinsman who paid all the costs needed to be a material benefactor for a distressed or deceased relative. It was the duty of the *go-el* to pay any price and exert whatever influence he possessed to restore what his kinsman had lost: property, a good name, or even descendants to bear his name. Boaz is a classic example, taking this role for Ruth the Moabitess, buying future security for her and Naomi when he married Ruth.

Job knew he was helpless to penetrate death's fearsome shadow by his own strivings. He desperately needed a go-el to execute justice for his pitiful losses and to secure his future as a righteous man. The redeemer he described fits the person of Christ exactly: a living Judge who would stand upon the earth. As a man in a miraculously renewed body of restored *skin*, Job expected to shout for joy at the sight of Christ! Momentarily abandoning his own woes, Job claimed in so many words that Jesus the Redeemer would act for him centuries later on history's timeline. Notice that in our text Job spoke of this event in the present tense, as if the matter was already accomplished in his day. "My Redeemer *lives!*" Some biblical critics warn us not to read too much New Testament resurrection theology about Jesus Christ back into this very early Old Testament prophetic passage. I am compelled to side with many others who ask, what *else* are we supposed to think this could mean?

LEARNING FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT VIEWPOINT

We might conclude that New Testament Christians cannot benefit from murky, inconclusive ideas of existence after death based upon Sheol and written long before Christ and his resurrection. That would be a mistake. One lesson we can learn is that God can use fear, mental confusion, or even terror in the face of death for constructive ends. Every year I hear testimonies from adult applicants for church membership who tell me how they first consciously trusted in Jesus as Lord when they were young children, because at age five or seven they simply were "scared of going to hell." This should never be the total reason a believer seeks Christ as refuge, yet God can use even this childhood fear as a constructive motivator, bringing us into a deeply felt need of his mercy and grace. Fear of death induces us to run toward a refuge. Pouring cold water on this fear as we pass from childhood to adult maturity is not necessarily a spiritual benefit. Here is one reason why Jesus praised childlikeness, a quality adults need to retain: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Children instinctively know right things to fear. It takes a jaded adult to cease fearing God's final judgment, before which we still should tremble.

I have also heard personal testimonies narrating how some crisis of family grief brought folks to face their own mortality head-on. Crisis suffering may induce us to voice despair like Job's wailing in chapter 10. In

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some low pit of sorrow the Lord gains our full attention as on few other occasions. He uses the hour when all material securities are undone for spiritual surgery on us. Like Job, in the course of living we acquire a proud self-sufficiency. Layers of stubborn old lead paint must be scraped or burned off our souls, reducing us to a level where God may apply a new primer coat of grace. Job had to taste bitter spiritual bankruptcy before he could learn a new and radical dependence on his God. Similarly, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 about an unidentified crisis in his life: “We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” God stripped both Paul and Job of all self-reliance. They exhausted self-based alternatives. Figuratively, at the bottom of a pit of despair, these believers discovered uncompromising trust in God as Redeemer.

A second useful lesson from the Old Testament view of death is the reminder not to build our own imaginative constructs about life after death based on wish-fulfillment or pure speculation. The shape of eternity beyond the grave is no “Gumby” figure we can manipulate to suit our whimsy. A thriving book industry exists today with authors conjuring images of heaven based on totally subjective claims taken from “near-death” experiences. These autobiographies may provide interesting novelties, and many of their authors are probably sincere about their experiences, but they carry no inherent authority for truth or objective reality. We must seek right concepts of eternity based only upon the solid ground of Holy Scripture.

Job’s shining trust in a redeemer who would give him a share in historic resurrection came from God’s special revelation. Looking to the Bible alone, we will discover that many details we might like to know about the vast future remain mysterious. We must shun the strong temptation to fill in these gaps by our own devices. However, the big picture is no conundrum. God has revealed a sufficiency of knowledge about eternal reality. Deuteronomy 29:29 declares, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.” Although we are not told everything, God has told us *enough*. So, just as we were taught in kindergarten to color within the lines, the Bible must be our guide in these matters instead of subjective, autobiographical claims.

Third, Christians can take confidence from knowing that in his early epoch of Bible history, Job received a prophetic insight of the same risen Christ we must trust today. We will see in coming chapters that God has ordained a great division to occur among all people at Christ's throne on history's conclusive "day." Your place in that final judgment will be determined before your hour of physical death, based on where you stand with Jesus the Redeemer. Dying in a sure knowledge of him means everything! Some people are so foolish as to think they may be the *only* human beings not in need of this unique Savior to resolve their soul's dilemma.

Jesus Christ—the Redeemer of whom Job prophesied—transacted atonement for the sin of his believing people, shattering death's leg-irons. Because of Christ, we are not consigned to an Old Testament future shrouded in gloomy uncertainty. Every man and woman who ever lived either will answer to a perfectly holy God without Christ as Redeemer-Intercessor, or be assured of his or her mediation by trusting in Jesus before our bodies rest in the cemetery.

Our declaration can be: "*I know* my Redeemer lives!" Christ shall stand upon the earth in the last day. In my own renewed flesh, my resurrected eyes will see him. This prophecy shines splendidly out of deep shadows.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 5:12-17

CHAPTER TWO

DEATH'S UNIVERSAL REIGN



AT ONE TIME IT WAS a common theatrical practice to debut a Broadway musical by opening the show in a city outside of New York, like Boston or Toronto. There the show was on trial while the director, writers, and cast worked out the bugs. Songs and dialogue could be cut or rewritten and new material inserted in the interest of polishing a show into a hit. It seems the idea was that if the show was destined to be a flop, at least this would be discovered in a quieter venue, removed from the glare of Broadway's bright lights and world-class theater critics.

DEATH CAME BY SIN

When God made the first man in his image and “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7), it was the pinnacle work of his Spirit (Ps. 104:30). It is a safe assumption that the Lord did not create Adam and Eve as the epitome of all that was “very good” in creation only to turn around and capriciously sentence them to *die*. No artist labors over a masterpiece planning to consign it to a pile of trash at the curb a week later. We may presume from the Creator's intention of making mankind for unique fellowship with him that God gave Adam and Eve biological and spiritual potential to enjoy delightful relations with him without death's tragic interruption being a necessity.

What is death, anyway? Is it a colorless, odorless gas that accumulates in our atmosphere until, after eight decades of daily absorption, its toxins asphyxiate us? Could it be a cancerous anomaly imprinted on everyone's DNA, preprogrammed to wreak cellular havoc, the way a computer virus takes down your hard drive? Automobiles occasionally come under a recall notice when the manufacturer discovers a mechanical flaw that

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causes an accelerator to stick or the steering wheel to lock in one position. Is death a secret manufacturer's defect in our human fabric from which there is no recall?

DEATH IS NOT OF NATURAL ORIGIN

In the movie *Forrest Gump* the main character declares, "My mama says dyin' is just a part of livin'." This may be appealing folk philosophy, but according to God's Word, the sentiment is absolutely wrong. Death is no friendly escort coming to take each human being home from the party in the waning hours of life's pilgrimage. It is more like a Viking raid on a Medieval English village, arriving at dawn: they come to rape, pillage, and plunder. As scripted in Genesis, death's debut in history was not simply the way things naturally *are*. And death's entre to human society did not occur on the sly, the way a terrorist might enter the United States via a tunnel under the Mexican border in the dark of night.

Death appeared as God's inevitable judgment upon rebellious human sin. To really understand its debut in human history, think of several movies that have been made from the fictional story of *King Kong*. A foolish theatrical promoter brought the huge ape Kong in chains to present him to audiences on a New York stage. The monster broke loose to rampage the theater and the entire city, finally roaring defiance to airplanes from atop the Empire State Building. Similarly, death is an ogre leaping upon center stage in Eden with a bellow of God-defiance. The appalling intruder invaded the heart of man-to-God and God-to-man fellowship. Strangely, it looked as though death began quietly, as a lie insinuated into Eve's mind. Genesis 3, however, reports that as soon as Adam joined Eve in defiance of a divine command, death broke down the lovely garden's front gate and its effects were irreversible: first claiming the human soul and eventually our bodies as well. That clap of doom is still resounding.

A capsule summary of sin and death from Romans 5:12 and following verifies that every unborn human being was affected. Paul depicted Adam, a real man of history, as the culprit who brought death crashing down on us. Then the apostle introduced Jesus Christ, the God-man also dwelling in history, who by divine grace brought forth a corresponding gift of eternal life, affecting not all persons, but "many." Romans 5:12–17 analyzes death as inescapable reality for everyone because of Adam, while eternal life is a gift imparted to many people, in Christ.

The worldview of materialistic naturalism presumes to have no difficulty explaining death's origin. Forrest Gump's view says death is a razor blade in place of a toy hidden in every box of Cracker Jacks, that each man's apple comes with a resident worm. Naturalism claims every mole, hawk, and human comes with a bar-coded expiration date, because, for reasons unknown, our living cells will not endlessly replicate themselves.

As I watch a lioness tear at the throat of a galloping wildebeest, I realize that every *National Geographic* documentary I have ever seen preaches the evolutionary viewpoint that death is a natural event in a so-called "circle of life." This circle may be small and tightly drawn for a motherless seal pup on the Arctic ice floe with polar bears nearby. It could be drawn larger for a bull elk that endures twenty rutting seasons by asserting lordly dominance over his fellows, trumpeting defiance to all comers. Yet it is only a matter of time until the elk has his turn to be a rotting carcass for wolves—when sun-bleached antlers and a sightless skull bear mute testimony that he lived at all.

Despite the dominance of materialism as a worldview, some scientists occupying the cardboard castle of Darwinism actually admit that a mystery is at work in death. A few are bold enough to say they do not perceive any clear organic cause rendering death *necessary* for an organism like man. Since highly efficient armies of our leukocytes skirmish effectively for decades with harmful microorganisms in our bloodstreams, why could this defense network not continue protecting at least some human bodies for five hundred or a thousand years, instead of a mere eighty or ninety? Scripture testifies that the earliest patriarchs, including Adam and generations beyond, did pile on birthdays until no cake could possibly hold all their candles. Why not us? What unwinding of my inner mainspring makes my death a biological *requirement*? Perhaps the answer is not found in biology, after all.

In the Genesis creation account, man first inhales God's own Spirit-breath, positioning us in clear distinction from plants and animals: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth . . .'" (Gen. 1:26). Millions reject this cosmology, shrugging it off as a mere literary symbol or mocking it as a myth. However, if you trust Genesis as God's inerrant Word, it is truth to be reckoned with.

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Since God made man in his likeness—with unique capability for divine fellowship—and since God cannot die, the Lord planned for us to have limitless lives in which to enjoy him. Does it make sense that death be viewed as a failure by the omnipotent God who spoke the universe into being? If divine image bearers were made to be “like” God, why must we die, as if we were of no more significance than a cornstalk, a mosquito, an amoeba, or a squirrel?

SIN'S CRASHING DEBUT

Romans 5:12 states, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” That reiteration of a Genesis 3 principle argues that human death never was merely a natural phenomenon. (Whether plants or animals ever died before Adam’s fall is a sidebar discussion, often debated with more heat than light. Since we know many simple organisms live only hours or days, it seems quite logical that these creatures also routinely died in Eden before Adam sinned. But agreement on this subject need not determine one’s biblical orthodoxy.) For humanity at least, in one historic hour death made an ugly entrance. We may wish it were only a badly written, poorly acted theatrical production that would have been judged unworthy of reaching the big stage for long-term performances. However, the Adam and Eve show debuted under Eden’s bright lights. And the drama has never closed since that long-ago premier.

Genesis depicts a *spiritual cause* for human death, with secondary biological effects. Even if other living creatures or plants did expire by natural causes from the beginning, neither spiritual nor physical death could have touched Adam apart from our deliberate rebellion against God. Death at its core was an irreversible rupture in the man/God relation, an ultimate divine judgment upon sin. In Genesis 2:17 God warned, “In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The man trespassed into forbidden territory. He was deceived to imagine he could gain greater godlike stature by crossing a line that defined God’s distinctiveness as Creator vis-à-vis man the creature. Satan the master liar misled first Eve and then Adam to think they might experimentally tiptoe only a step or two into the Holy of Holies where God dwelt, merely to look around. They did not plan to touch or disturb anything in that sacred room. They thought they’d get a good look and not leave any incriminating fingerprints, while satisfying

their curiosity as to why this space was rigorously roped off from human intrusion.

“When we decided to be our own saviors and lords,” Tim Keller declared, “everything in creation broke. Our bodies broke. The world broke. Life broke.”¹ Adam’s trespass was catastrophic because it willfully crossed a boundary between dependent human creaturehood and the independent lordship of the Most High God. Helmut Thielicke concluded, “Death in the biblical sense is not the death of man the mammal, but the death of man who wants to be God and who must learn that he is only man.”²

HUMAN SOLIDARITY WITH ADAM

From sin’s debut onward, Scripture teaches that God has dealt with all mankind in terms of two representative heads: Adam and Christ. Adam was our first federal representative. His action in Eden was *my* action, the same way the United States ambassador to Japan stands in the place of every citizen of the USA when he negotiates a treaty on behalf of our country. Adam was told that if he obeyed God, he would reap wonderful blessings in the bountiful creation (Gen. 1:28–29). Adam would have not only sustenance, but a meaningful career in Eden’s management; and he would discover abounding sweetness in the enjoyment of God’s world. If he disobeyed, the alternative would be calamity. Thus, death was not created by God. It is better to understand death as the antitype, or dark side, of God’s superb blessings promised to the man and woman. We in Adam decided to investigate this antitype, and we reaped a howling whirlwind.

The congregation I serve as pastor built an addition adjoining our previous worship building. Because the new structure conforms to more stringent fire codes than the old, building regulations required installation of an automatic fire door hidden in the ceiling of the main hallway connecting old building to new. Activation of alarm sensors for heat or smoke will cause a heavy steel door to lower as a fireproof barrier. Adam never guessed that God’s prohibition against taking fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would work like this barrier. The security door came crashing down to seal off God’s inner sanctum from Adam’s violation. Forever afterward, unfettered access to intimacy with God was closed. Some will protest, “But his specific disobedience was only eating forbidden fruit from a tree. How trivial is that!” It might as easily have

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been a hundred other actions had God chosen to draw the line elsewhere. The particular act itself is not critical. The issue of man's fall was premeditated human disobedience—something we all know about, beginning as toddlers.

A seventeenth-century children's reading book called the *New England Primer* had rhymes for children to memorize corresponding to letters of the alphabet. For A, it stated "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." From Adam's fall, sin and death took up residence in every human life. We can hardly call this unfair, because we act or think in terms of real sins each day. But if we think that all we do is to copy Adam's sin, we will follow a species of theology championed by Pelagius, who believed Adam was the first sinner and the worst thing you and I do is to mimic his bad example. But in fact, even the *miming* of Adam is condemnable. Once when I was about six years old I came home to repeat in the presence of my parents a piece of vulgar doggerel I had heard an older boy say on the school bus. I had no clue to what the words meant; I only thought it was clever to repeat something an older boy used to trigger laughter from his pals. I was stunned by my father's swift and negative reaction. I stood condemned that day for being an ignorant, unwitting copyist.

Adam was more than the first sinner with a long line of copyists following him like a Pied Piper. The Augustinian viewpoint understands Scripture to say we all actually sinned in Adam's defiant act. You and I were fatally wounded because we were *present* in the person of Adam, our representative head. Romans 5:19 declares, "By the one man's disobedience the many were *made* sinners." Former TV newsman Walter Cronkite came to fame in the 1950s on a program that dramatized various historic events in short plays. He took the audience into the action of one great event. At the close, Cronkite intoned the show's trademark line: "And *you* are there!" The apostle Paul assumed the entire human race was incipient in the loins of Adam when he sinned. You and I were present in Eden. Acting in Adam, we became God-defiers. The same logic is found in Hebrews 7:9–10, where it is argued that all priests of Levi actually paid a tithe to God via Melchizedek, since they were present in the body of Abraham their ancestor who offered that gift. The fall was not only about imitation, but just as truly about our *participation*.

We wonder: how could it possibly be fair for Adam's one historic disobedience to be counted against us? I must ask you in response, how is it

fair for the righteousness of Christ to be counted on your behalf? Those who rail against heaven with fist upraised by shouting the first question must consider the second question as having equal validity! We have no natural claim to the righteousness of Jesus if we disclaim an inheritance from the disobedience of Adam. Earth's great blessing of justification by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ becomes a believer's possession by the same logic as death falling upon us in Adam's revolt.

DEATH'S REIGN OF DISASTER

Romans 5:14 bluntly announces next that "death reigned." Sin invaded humanity and brought a foreign dictator to tyrannize us. Suddenly, everywhere we turn, this tyrant's forces menace us with keen-edged weapons of destruction. His intelligence network probes our innermost thoughts. We can keep no secrets; he insinuates his dictatorship into every recess of the mind until it seems he knows us better than we know ourselves. Thus, the ages-long totalitarian reign of death has led to more individual and collective woes than the political tyrannies of Nero, Hitler, Stalin, and Bin Ladin rolled into one dreadful bundle.

Spiritually, death causes ultimate *separation* between the human soul and the human body. What could be worse than to know that the very connective tissue where divinity joined the Spirit of God to our humanity can be torn asunder? To reach for the door of access to God and find it is locked from the other side? This same disruption sealed our bodily demise, although physical death did not occur immediately. "Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died" (Gen. 5:5). Adam kept the funeral director at bay a very long time before his heart and respiration stopped—but he might as well have completed his funeral prearrangements the same day he rebelled in Eden—since from that moment, an open grave beckoned to him.

Consequences of original sin unreeled in a tangle of social and relational effects for humanity. Collectively we may call this "total death." Sin and death did not very long pose as two middle-age "church lady" visitors sitting politely in humanity's front parlor with hands folded in their laps. These two became howling banshees breaking up the furniture, setting fires, and splashing graffiti on every available wall. The death which God's Word announced in Genesis 3 was a phenomenon impacting every dimension of what it means to be human. Genesis 3:17 declares that God's curse

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upon Adam would be manifested in great difficulty experienced in scratching a living from the earth. Crop failures, drought, famine, unemployment, human slavery, labor unions that prey upon the members' pension funds—every possible form of economic injustice is indirectly traceable to the initial reign of sin and death. Next, interpersonal strife entered the human family: two sons of Adam clashed in such a way that one murdered the other and then denounced all responsibility for his brother. Bitter competition and warfare broke out in succeeding generations. Before Genesis 4 closed, Tubal-Cain was forging weapons of bronze and iron, while Lamech boasted he would have vengeance seventy-seven times against any man who wronged him (Gen. 4:22–24).

Every nuance of human relationships we might expect to enjoy now hears a potential metallic clank of death's chain. Friendships go sour under death's shade. Counseling services could be located on every street corner and would not begin to stem the tide of our epidemic relational distresses. Death plants thorny hedges around joyful relations of parent and child until by teenage years our own progeny may seem to resemble our worst adversaries. Death brought the pain of childbirth so that even the thrill of human procreation is pain-scarred. Complex cellular horrors of cancer followed, along with Lou Gehrig's disease, autism, strokes, and wasting dementia.

Scoffers make light of the Bible's allegedly simplistic picture of Adam causing all this trouble merely by partaking forbidden fruit. But the act of eating a specific food in defiance to a known command of God must be understood as no less a deliberate assault on authority than Confederate artillery opening fire upon Fort Sumter. Mankind's spiritual union with God was bombarded the moment our puny will rebelled against One all-sovereign Will. If this plunge into spiritual anarchy is not solved, the inexorable gravity of our spiritual death drags us all the way into hell. What is hell, if not an existence where separation from God is unchangeable by any power within us?

Annie Dillard pictured mankind's extreme post-fall vulnerability, as if we were creatures walking upon a wide open prairie totally exposed on all sides to depredations of a skilled hunter who turns out to be God. She wrote, "In the open, anything might happen. . . . There is no reply in clear terrain to an archer in cover. Any copperhead anywhere is an archer in cover; how much more so is God! Invisibility is the all-time great 'cover.'"

. . . And we the people are so vulnerable. Our bodies are shot with mortality. Our legs are fear and our arms are time. These chill humors seep through our capillaries, weighting each cell with an icy dab of non-being, and that dab grows and swells and sucks the cell dry.”³

A BELIEVER'S SOLIDARITY WITH CHRIST

This has been a very gloomy message so far, though it was essential to draw the whole dismal picture, in order to first understand the spiritual origin of death's catastrophe. If the grace of God in Christ had not stepped in with a decisive alternative, then spiritual and physical death would have been the final word spoken about each man and woman ever born. Now we can speak about the rest of Romans 5—for thank God—his grace did intervene.

The Puritan Thomas Goodwin wrote, “In God's sight, there really are only two men in all of human history: Adam and Jesus Christ. These two have all other men hanging from their girdle strings.”⁴ John Stott concurred: “Here then are two communities, one characterized by sin and guilt, the other by grace and faith . . . the former is in Adam and the latter in Christ.”⁵ Christ is a federal head on behalf of *some* human beings just as Adam originally was for *all*. Paul argued in Romans 5 that salvation authored by God's grace enters our history as Christ radically changes a believer's entire position with God. Notice the “how much more” logic occurring twice in verses 15 and 17. Paul said if death could force the whole mass of human beings into a grim parade away from God, how much more can God's power cause persons who trust in Jesus as Lord to make a one hundred eighty degree turn. Christ redirects us into a whole new procession, leading us all the way back home to God.

Now instead of death reigning over every human being, Romans 5:17 says certain persons can “reign in life” in Christ. A Christian's physical body still must die; that portion of sin's penalty cannot be avoided. However, that is not the catastrophic part. The total death condition is cancelled when we trust in the blood of Christ shed for us. Because he died on our behalf, my soul need not expire for crimes Jesus already died for. That would be redundant. There is no double jeopardy before a perfectly just God. We can be restored to the Father's embrace of fellowship and sonship while we still breathe on earth. At our physical demise, our souls may part from our bodies, but they shall not be separated from our heavenly Father.

A FREE GIFT, NOT LIKE THE TRESPASS

Note how Romans 5:15 takes pains to say the “free gift” Christ offers is “not like” the trespass of Adam. Definite contrast distinguishes them. Adam’s sin at first included everybody without exception. But Romans 5:15 says Christ’s gift of life “abounded for *many*.” “Many” is a group potentially quite large, yet it includes less than everyone present. I could state, “Twelve hundred people attended our two worship services this morning, and many were women.” That cites a distinguishing characteristic for some not shared by all. Paul’s designation of redeemed persons as “many” parallels Bible nomenclature of “the elect” used elsewhere.

Another way two groups of humanity in Adam and in Christ are not alike, is that one group receives a dreadful *wage* they earn, while the others get a splendid *gift* which cannot be earned. Romans 6:23 summarizes, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” There is no great mystery about who is included in the group of “many” people. They are all “in Christ.” They are “those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” (Rom. 5:17).

PARTING OF THE WAYS

The sober reality, therefore, is that right now, each of us is in one of two conditions. Either we remain where we began—helplessly caught up in Adam’s huge procession because we were born following him like zombies. Or by God’s grace we have joined many who have already been consciously transferred by faith “into Christ”—new heirs of eternal life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “There are only two groups of people in the world today—those who are of the world and those who belong to Christ. In the last analysis there is no other division or distinction that has the slightest importance or relevance.”⁶

Do not fall for the lie that says death is a natural conclusion of life. It is not what our Creator intended, though he remains sovereign over it. Death is a profound spiritual judgment of God against sin that we committed once in Adam, and we continue in this sin every day. So you may choose to spend all your life’s energy among a death-denying culture that belongs to Adam. If so, you will emphasize youthfulness and pursue vigorous bodily health as the key to life and will refuse to think about death,

hoping that your ignorance can prevent it from happening. Or, by your faith in a risen Lord, you may join the *death-defying* family of Christ.

Because the Son of God went to a cross as your substitute and stood under his Father's judgment, death's sting of wrath is removed for you and many others who by God's electing grace are his possessions forever. Romans 8:23 depicts our present situation: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." True enough—we must pass through physical death. However, the fatal soul-sting of death is gone for us because Jesus took it all in himself! A Rottweiler death-bite strikes our bodies, but we passionately long for what is just on the other side of that brief moment of fear.

No wonder legend has it that some Christian martyrs told their captors just before the sword fell on their necks: "You can kill us, but you cannot *hurt* us!"