

# ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

## Study Two

### DEATH AND LIFE

#### DYING AND LIVING WITH CHRIST

In connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul the apostle spoke of our dying and living with him:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Cor. 5:14–15).

If we have died with him, we will also live with him (2 Tim. 2:11).

We need to understand here what is meant by dying and living. We may not be aware of having ‘died’ ourselves, since we are still alive as we normally understand it—in the sense of living and breathing.

Yet what the Scriptures say about this dying and living is of such consequence that it cannot be regarded as merely metaphorical—that it were ‘as if’ we had died. Life is life, and death is death. Any metaphorical use of these words—to say that what has happened to us is ‘like’ having died, when we actually have not—tends to reduce them to a meaningless fiction.

It could be that the Scriptures have an understanding of what human living, and so human dying, is all about, that is quite different from our normally accepted understanding. To know what human living really is, we may need to have our thinking recast by what is revealed in the Scriptures.

#### WHAT IS LIFE?

The gift of life is a great mystery. We think we know what life is, but it is beyond us to be able to say what it is.

Leviticus 17:14 sees life as somehow residing in the blood of a creature:

For the life of every creature—its blood is its life.

Certainly when the blood goes out of a creature, its life goes with it.

In this scientific and clinical age, we have definitions of life that centre on biological functions. How doctors determine whether life is present, for purposes of a death certificate, has to do with the functions of breathing, and whether the heart is beating, and the brain operating.

The Bible sees it as more than just this. Life and death are seen in a different way. The Bible sees it as possible to be in biological life, but to be actually dead:

She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead [has died] even while she lives (1 Tim. 5:5–6).

This is equivalent to what Paul says of all of us before we are saved by God's grace:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived (Eph. 2:1).

Jesus spoke of some whom we would consider to be alive being as dead as one who has died:

Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead' (Matt. 8:21–22).

In his parable of the prodigal son, Jesus has the father saying twice:

this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found (Luke 15:24; compare v. 32).

In the Revelation, Jesus speaks to a whole church after this fashion:

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead (Rev. 3:1).

We already see that Jesus and his apostles speak of death and life in a way different from how we may normally understand them.

Purpose and quality of life—how we live life, and what it is for—is very much part of what life is, and cannot be separated out from it. This is clear, sadly, to those who take their own life: they regard the quality of their life to be so poor, that they cannot see any point to it, and so end it. Life without quality and purpose is considered not worth living, and no different from death. So this is a great mystery: what is life, really?

One way of coping with what the Bible says about life is to say there are two kinds of life. C. S. Lewis distinguishes human beings from other forms of vegetable and animal life:

Man not only lives, but loves and reasons: biological life reaches its highest known level in him.

He then goes on:

But what man, in his natural condition, has not got, is Spiritual life—the higher and different sort of life that exists in God. We use the same word *life* for both . . . In reality, the difference between Biological life and Spiritual life is so important that I am going to give them two distinct names. The Biological sort, which comes to us through Nature, and which (like everything else in Nature) is always tending to run down and decay so that it can only be kept up by incessant subsidies from Nature in the form of air, water, food, etc., is *Bios*. The Spiritual life which is in God from all eternity, and which made the whole natural universe, is *Zoe*. *Bios* has, to be sure, a certain shadowy or symbolic resemblance to *Zoe*: but only the sort of resemblance there is between a photo and a place, or a statue and a man. A man who changed from having *Bios* to having *Zoe* would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man.

And that is precisely what Christianity is about. This world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumour going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Collins, Fontana Books, London, 1953, pp. 135–6.

I suspect that what Lewis writes here has more to do with classical Greek thinking than with the Bible. Certainly human beings do not have life in the same way God has life, as we shall see. But when ‘God created humankind [Heb. *adam*] in his image’ (Gen. 1:27), and ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being’ (Gen. 2:7), this was nevertheless life from God. This life we then forfeited when we ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Gen. 2:17: ‘in the day that you eat of it you shall die’). The eternal life that Lewis calls here *Zoe* is not the add-on of a higher stage of life to a natural kind of life that we already have. What is missing here is the whole matter of righteousness and sin in relationship with God. Decay is not simply natural, nor is it morally neutral. It is part of what God has subjected the creation to as a result of human sin, and in hope of its release through the redemption and glorification of human beings as the children of God (see Rom. 8:19–21). Eternal life is nothing less than being brought to life from death—a death, and a life, that before God has moral–relational dimensions.

Besides this, Lewis’s application of the Greek words is not sustainable from New Testament usage. In the Bible, life is life—it does not come in two stages, or at two levels. You have life, or you do not have life (see e.g. 1 John 5:12). It would seem that the two words are used interchangeably in the New Testament. While *zoe* is used extensively in John’s gospel to speak of ‘life’ in the sense of ‘eternal life’, both *bios* (in 1 Tim. 2:2: ‘so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life’) and *zoe* (in 1 Cor. 15:19: ‘If for this life only we have hoped in Christ’) are used for what Lewis would designate as the lower form of natural life.

## LIFE IS FROM GOD

The important thing to know about human living is that all of life is from God:

He gives to all life, breath, and all things (Acts 17:25, NKJV).

This is true whether we are talking about giving life in the act of creation, or giving life in resurrection from death:

the God in whom he [Abraham] believed, who gives life to the dead [resurrection] and calls into existence the things that do not exist [creation] (Rom. 4:17).

It is this God who has given life to all humanity:

then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7).

This was not just a kick-start. We are utterly dependent upon God every moment for every breath we take:

If he should take back his spirit to himself,  
and gather to himself his breath,  
all flesh would perish together,  
and all mortals return to dust (Job 34:14–15).

Hence, after the man and the woman have sinned, God says to the man:

By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

## LIFE FROM GOD HAS THE QUALITY OF GOD'S LIFE

When God gave us life in the first place, He said:

Let us make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness (Gen. 1:26).

We would expect the life we have from God, then, to reflect something of the quality of God's own life, in holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love, in relationship with God, and in keeping with the commandments that reflect God's nature. This we find to be the case, as Moses says to Israel:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for *that means life to you* and length of days (Deut. 30:15–20).

Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather *your very life* (Deut. 32:45–47).

We see that human life has this moral–relational quality. It consists in being in relationship with God, in obedience to his commandments. Indeed, Ecclesiastes says:

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone (Eccl. 12:13).

The literal translation is: ‘that is the whole of Man’—that in total is what it is to be an alive human being. Thus the Psalmist exhorts young people to live truly, in good and not in evil:

Which of you desires life,  
and covets many days to enjoy good?  
Keep your tongue from evil,  
and your lips from speaking deceit.  
Depart from evil, and do good;  
seek peace, and pursue it.  
The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their cry.  
The face of the LORD is against evildoers,  
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth (Ps. 34:12–16).

This is quoted again in the New Testament in 1 Peter 3:8–12.

## CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF GOD'S SON

We are told the destiny of 'those who love God, who are called according to his purpose':

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29).

This Son has been face to face with God (*pros ton theon*: John 1:2) from the beginning. So it is said of him:

In him was life, and the life was the light of all people (John 1:3).

Indeed, Jesus says that to know and to be in this face-to-face relationship between the Father and the Son, in their joint saving action, is what constitutes eternal life:

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

John and the other apostles saw this life in full operation in the flesh of Jesus:

this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:2–3).

So much is this so, that John makes the bold statement:

And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:11–13).

## GOD HAS LIFE, AND GIVES LIFE

Jesus spoke of his relationship with the Father in John 5:17–30:

Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.'

## The Father Has Life in Himself

One of the central statements here is in verse 26: ‘The Father has life in himself’. He is also shown to be the One who gives life to others. He is the one self-existent Creator, and the source of life for everything else.

‘The Father has life in himself’ is a statement that can only be made, uniquely, of God. People ask, foolishly, ‘Who made God?’ If there was something or someone else that made God, then God would not be God, but that being would be. God has been made by no one else. All other beings derive their existence from Him, but He derives from no one. He is of Himself—the only self-existent One. God has life in Himself, and He gives life to all.

## The Son is Granted to Have Life in Himself

Given what we have said, what Jesus goes on to say is quite amazing:<sup>2</sup>

For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (John 5:26).

For another alongside God to ‘have life in himself’ would amount to having another self-existent God alongside God. This is what was violently objected to by the Judean leaders:

For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God (John 5:18).

But the fact that the Father ‘has granted’ the Son to have life in himself means that the Son is not a separate self-existent being, as some kind of ‘other God’ in his own right. All that he has is from the Father as gift. But it does mean that the Father has held back nothing of what He is and has from the Son. The Son has from the Father the fullness of Godhead, with nothing held back. This is the measure of the fullness of the Father’s love.

The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing (John 5:20).

The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands (John 3:35).

All that the Father has is mine (John 16:15).

The Son no less fully participates in all that the Father is and does:

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19).

Still, this is not some independent action of himself. The Son is one in union with the Father in all the actions of the Father’s will and purpose:

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me (John 5:30).

This is the Son’s love for the Father:

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father (John 14:31).

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted for much of this section to D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 2000, pp. 25–43.

## The Father Gives Life, the Son Gives Life

Could it be that this propensity of the Father to give wholly of Himself to the Son, holding nothing back, is what makes His Godhead the source of all that is in creation, in such rich profusion, and that the life He gives is of this order and character? Certainly part of what it means is that the Father gives life, even where there is none:

the Father raises the dead and gives them life (John 5:21).

The Father does not withhold such a key function from the Son. The Son is given to exercise it fully and similarly in concert with the Father:

Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes (John 5:21).

It is by virtue of this, under the jurisdiction committed to the Son from the Father, that the Son gives resurrection:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:24–29).

Hence it is said of the ‘Word’ in John 1:4: ‘In him was life, and the life was the light of all people’.

## The Spirit Gives Life

No less is the Holy Spirit or ‘breath’ of God known as the Giver of life. This is true of the original creation:

These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;  
when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.  
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath,  
they die and return to their dust.  
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:27–30).

This recalls the breathing action of God in the creation of man in Genesis 2:7:

then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

We know that the Spirit (‘breath’, ‘wind’) of God was present in the beginning of creation, ‘moving over the face of the waters’ (Gen. 1:2), holding everything in readiness for the word from God to bring things into being. Hence we are told in Psalm 33:

For the word of the LORD is upright,  
and all his work is done in faithfulness.  
He loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.  
By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth (Ps. 33:4–6).

So also Jesus says later: ‘It is the Spirit that gives life’ (John 6:63). No less is the Spirit engaged in the work of resurrection:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you (Rom. 8:11).

Not for nothing is the Holy Spirit called in the Nicene Creed: ‘the Lord, the giver of life’.

## **THE DYNAMIC AND ETERNAL LIFE OF GOD**

Thus we have come to see God as the one, self-existent, Giver of all life. But what is this ‘life’ that He gives? Is it simply operating power, graciously bestowed from above? Or is it something more dynamic, purposeful, and directed than that? Many times in Scripture, God is referred to as ‘the living God’. We will look at a number of these instances, and see what they tell us about the life of God, and how that impacts on the creation and on human beings.

### **The God Who Endures**

The term ‘the living God’ is often used in contrast with other so-called ‘gods’, who are, by implication, moribund or dead. While they and their effects are short-lived, the living God endures for ever:

I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end (Dan. 6:26).

The life of this God is an everlasting life.

### **The God Who Acts**

Also in contrast to the other ‘gods’, who are rendered incapable of doing anything, the living or true God is able to act decisively, even in desperate situations:

When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, ‘O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?’ (Dan. 6:20)

Victory in battle is included, in the face of what would appear to be overwhelming military might:

Joshua said, ‘By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites’ (Josh. 3:10).

No one could defy this living God and come away unscathed:

David said to the men who stood by him, ‘What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?’ (1 Sam. 17:26).

It may be that the LORD your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the LORD your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left (2 Kings 19:4).

## **The God Who Saves**

It is fitting, then, that this God should also be known as the God who acts to save:

For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe (1 Tim. 4:10).

Saving is something that the idols cannot do—only the God who created and rules over and cares for all that He has made:

Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them (Acts 14:15).

This is the God that people turned to when the gospel came:

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

Thus worshippers of the living God have no need to associate any more with idols. Rather, they are to eschew them:

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ (2 Cor. 6:16).

A living God, who acts to save, renders unnecessary any human attempts on our part as sinners to justify ourselves by the things we do. Indeed, such works, in defiance of this saving grace from God, still reek of the death from which God has come to rescue us:

how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:14).

## **The God Who Judges in Wrath**

The God who rescues and saves is no less the God who brings judgment on evil and sin. He is capable of both:

the LORD knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment (2 Pet. 2:9).

He is to be feared accordingly:

But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation (Jer. 10:10).

This is true, not only for God's enemies, but also for God's people. Yet this living God draws near to them, that they may live:

For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? (Deut. 5:26).

Yet the warning remains, even for those who have come to salvation through faith in Christ:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God (Heb. 3:12).

## **Children of the Living God**

It is a most wonderful thing to be called 'children of the living God'. It means that these are no less living than the God to whom they belong.

First of all, this is what characterised Jesus himself:

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16).

It was ever God's intention that He should have such children:

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God' (Hosea 1:10).

This is taken up by the apostle Paul in Romans 9:26.

This has direct implications for the way we live as 'the church of the living God':

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:3).

if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

## **Life in its Fullness**

Where this God is taking us is called, 'the city of the living God':

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering (Heb. 12:22).

Little wonder that all our longing should be for such a One:

My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God? (Ps. 42:2).

My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God (Ps. 84:2).

## **In His Hand**

In the hand of this God, then, is all the power of life and death:

See now that I, even I, am he;  
there is no god besides me.  
I kill and I make alive;  
I wound and I heal;  
and no one can deliver from my hand (Deut. 32:39).

Note the order in which these occur: for the God who lives forever (see v. 40), the wounding is with a view to the healing, and the killing is with a view to the making alive. As Jesus himself said: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

Having seen what the Scriptures say about life and human living, we will next need to go on to see, in the light of this, what death is.