

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Three

LIFE AND DEATH

DYING AND LIVING

We are considering what it means to say, ‘one has died for all; therefore all have died’ (2 Cor. 5:14). What did it mean for that ‘one’ to die? What does it mean for the ‘all’?

We have seen that human living is not just a matter of lungs breathing, heart beating, and brain operating. Life has a purpose and a quality that is essential to it. There are not two kinds of life—a basic biological level of existence, with a spiritual add-on. All life is from God, whether we are talking about life as originally created, or eternal life as it will be in the end. We never have an independent existence of our own—at every point we are dependent upon God and His giving. Being made in the image of God, our life is to participate in the moral–relational quality of God’s own life—in righteousness and love—in direct relationship with the living God. This is our life.

We need to consider death in the light of this. If this is what life is according to the Scriptures, what then is death? It too will have moral and relational dimensions—it will not be just natural or neutral. Death is a big problem for us. It calls into question all that we are and all that we have done, and puts a stop to it. We expend enormous energy trying to deny it or delay it, to no avail. We would like to be freed from death in some way to be able to say: Just leave us to get on with our own lives and do what we want to do. This is not an option—life is God’s gift, dependent on Him, for God’s purposes, to manifest the quality of God’s life, according to God’s purpose for eternity. The refusal of that brings us down into death, which is its opposite, with consequences that are no less eternal.

IS DEATH A NATURAL PART OF LIFE?

Death in the Bible is not just the cessation of life. We would like to think that it is this and nothing more. We work hard on trying to render death harmless—to see it as just ‘a natural part of life’, and so somehow to come to terms with it within our own framework.

Question for Reflection:

What experiences have we had, either in connection with funerals, or more generally in the community, of attempts to accommodate death to our preferred ways of life, or to lessen its fatal impact?

As we found that there is more to life than just breathing, so there is more to death than just ceasing to breathe. Death cannot be reduced simply to the coming to the end of our life. Death is a part of the mystery of our existence, that disturbs and upends us profoundly. In the Bible, it is presented as something that is alien and hateful to human

life. Certainly in the case of Jesus it was by no means something that he accepted with equanimity:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was *greatly disturbed* in spirit and *deeply moved*. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to *weep*. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Then Jesus, again *greatly disturbed*, came to the tomb (John 11:33–38).

The words 'greatly disturbed', 'deeply moved' and 'weep' indicate strong emotion, even revulsion, at the presence of death and its dread power over cowering humanity. In 1 Corinthians 15:26, death is nominated as 'the last enemy to be destroyed'.

Nor is death just a going out into the never-never, as some might hope for—a kind of insensate forgetfulness or demise. Nor is it, as believers in 'reincarnation' popularly assert, a coming around for another turn (hopefully to get it better next time). Hebrews 9:27 bluntly states what we all sense and fear, that death is something that brings our whole life under judgement:

it is appointed for human beings to die once, and after that the judgment.

At death we are confronted concerning all we have and have not done with the gift of life, with no way of being able to do anything more about it. We stand before the One who has given it to us, and we are answerable, with no second chances. It is in the face of this reality of judgement, so unpalatable to sinners, that all the other rationalisations of death have been concocted, in vain attempts to somehow be able to come to terms with it.

DEATH AND SIN

How does death come about, and what is entailed in it? Death and sin are tied inextricably together:

sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned (Rom. 5:12).

Here death is seen clearly as judgement on sin. As one theologian has stated, 'People fear death, not because they know they must die, but because they know that they deserve to die'.

Death Came through Sin

This is how it is presented in the beginning. As well as the 'tree of life' that was in the garden of Eden, there was also 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil':

Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil . . . And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die' (Gen. 2:9, 16–17).

Also sometimes translated as 'the tree of the knowledge of all things', this tree may stand for the knowledge God has to be able to create and run the world, including the determining of all that is right and wrong. The taking of that fruit by human beings would then indicate their ill-fated attempt to be 'as God' themselves (Gen. 3:5)—to arrogate to themselves the running of the universe and the determining of what is right and wrong which belongs rightly only to God, and which they can have only from Him, in a direct,

trustful and obedient relationship with Him. We are to depend on and abide in Him, in this as in all things, for this is our very life as His creatures and His children.

This is what, for no good reason, we opted not to do:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die”’ (Gen. 3:1–3).

If depending on and abiding in God is our very life then, clearly, any abandonment of that would be our death. This was wrongly and deceitfully denied by the evil one, and we opted for the deadly lie:

But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate (Gen. 3:4–6).

While, by God’s mercy and forbearance, physical death does not immediately follow, the evidence of relational death is immediately apparent. The man and the woman cover up themselves, and hide from the presence of God:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:7–8).

Further deadly relational breakdown occurs between the woman and the man, and later within their family. God decrees that physical hardship and death will now inevitably follow:

And to the man he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 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. 3:17–19).

God mercifully ensures that such a monstrosity as the human being has now become will not be perpetuated forever:

Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24).

If there is to be life for the man and the woman, and for the whole human race, it will now have to come in another way. The tree of life is there, with healing power for all the nations, in the final holy city (Rev. 22:2, 14), but that is only after something else has happened.

Questions for Reflection:

What is the connection between sin and death?

God said, ‘in the day that you eat of it you shall die’, yet physical death did not come immediately. What does this tell us about the nature of the reality of death?

In what sense is death a merciful gift?

Death Spread to All Because All Sinned

Death is now universal for the human race. This is seen to be so in Romans 5:12, not just because all have sinned in their own way, but because, in some sense, all participated from the beginning, in a solidary way, in the sin of Adam:

sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned . . . the many died through the one man's trespass . . . the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation . . . because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one . . . one man's trespass led to condemnation for all . . . by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners . . . sin exercised dominion in death (Rom. 5:12–21).

It is over against our solidary participation as a human race in the sin of Adam that the free gift of justification and life is brought to bear in Christ, through our participation in him. This is summarised in 1 Corinthians 15:22:

as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Meanwhile, 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23). As Jesus said to those who as yet did not believe in him:

I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come . . . You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he (John 8:21, 23–24).

As unredeemed sinners, our only option is the death that goes with sin.

Questions for Reflection:

How are we to understand our solidary participation as a human race in the reality of sin and death?

How is this different from an individualistic view?

ELEMENTS OF DEATH

We begin to see, then, that death is not just the cessation of physical life. We saw that life is not just a case of being physically alive, but has to do with purpose and quality of life—with participation in the moral–relational life and action of God Himself. So too, death, being the rejection of this life, is an obverse complex of all these things, involving elements of the guilt of sin and its condemnation by the law of God, together with the griefs and fears that go with all of that.

The Guilt of Sin

Death, then, is not just a neutral thing for us sinners. It has a bite, a painful sting. Our conscience ensures that we do not go peacefully into that dark night:

The sting of death is sin (1 Cor. 15:56).

The guilt of sin does not let us rest, but rather makes death a painful, bitter, sad and disappointing experience for us—to say nothing of the judgement of God on our sin that awaits us on the other side (see above on Heb. 9:27).

Question for Reflection

What regrets might we have that would make death a distressing thing for us?

The Condemnation of the Law of God

What gives sin such deadly force is, perhaps surprisingly, God's own law. The law of God is the law of God's own being and action. It is the revelation of the way God is in Himself, and of how He is in His relationship with us, and so how we are to be in relationship with Him and with each other. It is truly the way of life, the way of true living. This is fine, if we are living in this way. But the moment we are not, the law of God becomes our enemy. It testifies against us, highlights our transgression, and passes sentence of condemnation against us:

Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law (Gal. 3:10, quoting Deut. 27:26).

The soul that sins shall die (Ezek. 18:4, RSV).

Thus it is the law of God that gives sin its deadly force:

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:56).

Sin even uses the 'holy and just and good' law of God (Rom. 7:12) to provoke us to worse and more flagrant sin, and so to greater condemnation:

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death . . . if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me (Rom. 7:5, 7-11).

For a heart that is dead set against God, the law of God only shows up more clearly the One to whom it is opposed, and makes it all the more determined to attack that One by flouting the law that has come. Thus sin is shown up in all its perverse horribleness, and is condemned for what it is, into death:

Did what is good [the law], then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Rom. 7:13).

Question for Reflection:

What is the action of God's law in relation to our death?

Grief and Remorse

It is possible to grieve over our sins in a way that brings us into release and freedom from them. This is when godly grief, arising from what we see our sin doing to Jesus on the cross, brings us to repent and embrace the salvation that is in God's love for us in that action of the cross. There is a grief, however, that is nothing more than remorse or regret, or chagrin at being found out, that remains self-centred and locked into death:

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:10).

Question for Reflection:

What is the difference between remorse and repentance?

The Devil and the Fear of Death

Death, and the judgement which follows, also gives the devil fearsome leverage over the sinful person. The devil is ‘the accuser’ (Rev. 12:10), the one who points up our sins and brings accusation day and night before our God, as part of his unrelenting anti-God campaign. He points the sinner to the judgement of death, when all these accusations will come home to roost in fearful punishment. This fear of death and its accompanying judgement is what gives the devil life-long power over the accused. This alone is sufficient to explain humanity’s avid attempted avoidance of the reality of death and all its terrifying implications.

The only way this fear and its power can be removed is by the total removal of sin and its guilt, by which Satan’s accusations fall to the ground. The sinless holy and righteous one, in whom Satan could find no grounds of accusation (John 14:30), came in our flesh and on our behalf to take that guilt and judgement into himself, to remove it, and so render Satan powerless over all who abide in him by faith:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15).

Question for Reflection:

For all our bravado, what indications are there that the fear of death and judgement underlies much of our activity?

DEATH AS THE DENIAL OF THE QUALITY OF GOD’S LIFE

The issues of life and death have to do, then, with our participation or non-participation in this saving grace of God and so in the purposeful moral–relational quality of God’s own life. Thus it is possible, as we have seen, to have the appearance of being alive, but in reality to be in death:

[she] who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives (1 Tim. 5:6).

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God (Rev. 3:1–2).

Death is, in fact, the state of every unredeemed sinner, even though it may appear otherwise to themselves and to others:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient (Eph. 2:1–2).

Life comes as a participation in the living and loving of God, just as the refusal to do so relegates us to death:

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them (1 John 3:14–15).

Questions for Reflection:

*Why is love the antithesis of death? What has this to do with the way God is?
What does hatred have to do with death?*

DEATH HAS AN ETERNAL DIMENSION

True life is the participation in the life of God, which is eternal. Death, then, cannot be just a momentary happening. It has eternal and everlasting implications:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless [*or* the unbelieving], the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death (Rev. 21:8).

Jesus himself repeatedly warned of the prolonged torments of unforgiven sinners:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:11–12).

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:41–42).

Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matt. 22:13).

As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30).

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘LORD, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matt. 25:41–46).

And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:47–48).

What is hell, but having to go out into eternity, still carrying the guilt of sin, for which the forgiveness that is there for them has been refused? This is indeed the final and terrible ‘second death’:

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, ‘Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name’ (Rev. 14:9–11).

Questions for Reflection:

Why are we squeamish about the doctrine of hell?

Why would we prefer not to believe that punishment can be eternal?

THE DEATH OF CHRIST

When Paul said, then, ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 6:23), he did not mean simply that as sinners we deserve to have our lives terminated, and Jesus had his life terminated for

us, but came back from that, so all is now well. ‘The death he died, he died to sin, once for all’ (Rom. 6:10) must mean that Jesus died the death that pertains to sin, with all that this entails of its horrific dimensions.

We see fully the horror of death only when we see what it does to our Lord Jesus Christ:

He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed [or amazed] and agitated. And he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death’ (Mark 14:33).

In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground (Luke 22:44).

Jesus knew the pressures of death crushing him in the garden, the beginning of the time when he ‘carried up our sins in his body to the tree [the place of the curse—see Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13]’ (1 Pet. 2:24, NRSV footnote), and ‘the power of darkness’ (Luke 22:53)—Satan and his hordes—were unleashed against him. He was preserved from death in the garden (see Luke 22:43: ‘an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength’; compare Heb. 5:7), that he might carry through the full work of the cross. There he suffered not only what we might call the legal ‘penalty’ of sin. By a mighty action of identification in love (as he drew all people to himself into that ‘judgement of this world’ and ‘loved them to the end’—see John 12:31–33; 13:1) he was made ‘to be sin’ (2 Cor. 5:21) for us, while having no sin of his own. God brought our condemnation to bear in his flesh, in which he was one with us (see Rom. 8:3). From the depths of that darkness Jesus cried out aloud: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34). Other verses of the psalm from which those words come spell out what he was going through:

trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shrivelled;
I can count all my bones . . .

Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!
(Ps. 22:11–17, 20–21).

All of this—and more—is what it meant for Jesus to be ‘handed over to death for our trespasses’ (Rom. 4:25). This is the death that he ‘died for all’, in which ‘all have died’ (2 Cor. 5:14).

Question for Reflection:

How have we underestimated the dimensions and impact of the death of Christ in particular, and of death itself in general?

DEATH IN GOD'S HANDS

In all this, death is still an instrument in God's hand, for the effecting of His purposes in His dealings with humanity:

I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth (Rev. 6:8).

This can be so, even among the elect:

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:9).

It is in Jesus' hands that our death becomes the instrument by which God saves us:

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name (John 12:27–28).

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13).

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16).

It is from this death pertaining to sin that Jesus has rescued us now, that we might be saved from eternal death in the age to come:

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 5:25–29).

Question for Reflection:

How has death become the instrument by which God saves us?