

Death:
A Theological Position Statement

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Introduction

In this paper I will explain my understanding of the Biblical perspective of death. The paper will be limited to the concept of death only as it relates to human beings, not to plants or animals, or other types of living things. I will not only define what death is, but will also differentiate between physical and spiritual death, explain why humans die, tell what happens after a person dies, and then explain what a Christian's attitude toward death should be.

Definition

Physical death can be defined from both a medical and theological perspective. Medically speaking, death is the total and permanent cessation of all vital bodily functions. It happens when a person's heart has stopped beating and the electrical impulses of the brain have permanently ceased, thus indicating that the last evidence of aliveness has irreversibly left the body. From a theological perspective, this is also the time that the person's body is separated from their soul (the immaterial part of humans). Ecclesiastes says concerning death: "then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Eccles 12:7).¹ After death, the physical body decays and thus is resolved into its constituent elements.

Physical and Spiritual Death

When the Bible talks about death related to human beings, it makes a distinction between physical death and spiritual death. Even while alive physically, a person can be dead spiritually. Spiritual death is a state of being in which the human soul is separated from God and has not been enlivened by his Spirit. A number of Bible passages are instructive in this regard. Ephesians 2, verses 2 and 5, mention that before we were Christians we were dead in our trespasses and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the scripture verses contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

sins, but God made us alive together with Christ. The Apostle Paul further explains this spiritually deadened state in Ephesians 4:18 as being “alienated from the life of God.” In 1 Timothy 5:6, he makes this contrast between physical and spiritual life even more explicit by declaring that a person was “dead even while she lives.”

As a normal course of experience, every human being will experience physical death. If a person has not been spiritually enlivened, after their physical death they will be separated from God eternally. Christians, who have been spiritually enlivened during their life on this earth, will go on living in fellowship with God in the “eternal life” (John 10:28; 17:3; 1 John 5:20). Only those who are not enlivened spiritually by God’s Spirit will experience the ultimate “second death” (Rev 20:14; 21:8), being eternally separated from God (2 Thess 1:9).

Why Does A Person Die?

What is the cause of death? That is, why do human beings die? The first mention of death in the Bible is in Genesis 2:17 which states, “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” In the day the first humans ate of that tree they immediately died in a spiritual sense and entered into a condition in which physical death was inevitable. This word clearly establishes human sin and disobedience to God as the reason for death. Death was God’s judgment upon humans as a result of their fall into sin (Gen 3:19). This is confirmed by numerous verses throughout the Bible. Romans 5:12 associates this penalty for initial sin with all humans by stating that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” and Romans 6:23 further makes this clear in declaring that “the wages of sin is death.”

Throughout the history of the Church, there has been a great deal of debate as to whether humans would have died if they had not sinned, or to put it in different terms, whether humans

were created as mortal or immortal beings. My feeling is that God intended for humans to be immortal; he created us with the potential to live forever. But before this potential for immortality could be realized and become an established reality, the first humans disobeyed God and thus brought death upon themselves (and upon the ensuing human race). By not eating the Tree of Life, but instead disobeying God and eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, humankind inadvertently chose to die. Adam's choice was either the Tree of Knowledge (resulting in death) or the Tree of Life (resulting in eternal life); the Bible doesn't leave room for the option of not choosing one of these. Humankind had to choose one tree at the exclusion of the other. This is made clear by the fact that after humans ate of the Tree of Knowledge God put humans out of the garden of Eden so that they might not "reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (Gen 3:22-23).

Thus, spiritual and physical death spread to all because the first humans sinned. Since humans chose death, then death reigns and was passed to all; if they would have chosen the Tree of Life, then they would have lived forever, spiritually and physically. So, although sin caused death, it is a moot point to ask if humans would not have died if they had not sinned; the Bible does not address what humankind would have been like if they had eaten from neither Tree. The Bible implies that they would have died (Genesis 2:17); the only way to live forever and thus not die was to eat of the Tree of Life. The fact that God chose to make humans out of the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7) points to the fact that this body is 'earthly' (1 Cor 15:47; 2 Cor 5:1) and thus was not meant to be eternal in that original created state.

The well-respected theologian Millard Erickson says in this regard,

Since physical death is a result of sin, it seems probable that the humans were created with the possibility of living forever. They were not inherently immortal, however; that is, they would not by virtue of their nature have lived on forever. Rather, if they had not sinned, they could have partaken of the tree of life and thus have received everlasting life.

They were mortal in the sense of being able to die; and when they sinned, that potential or possibility became a reality.²

The Final and Intermediate States

When a person dies physically, it does not mean permanent and ultimate extinction for them. Rather than extinction, death is a transfer from one state of being to another (Heb 9:27). Every human being will one day be resurrected from the dead and will be judged according to their deeds and their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus says in John 5:28-29, “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.” Every person will come to life at the resurrection and will either be assigned to “be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess 4:17) or to be eternally “separated from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:9), based on whether a person has a righteous standing with God and is spiritually alive or not. This can be considered their final state of being, where they will spend eternity. Each person’s condition will be established at the end of the world when God “will judge the world in righteousness through” Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31) and “will repay according to each one's deeds” (Rom 2:6). (Cf. Matt 25:31; Rev 20:11)

But before the time of the resurrection of all people, when humans will be judged and their eternal state will be determined, they exist in a state of being that is often referred to as the ‘intermediate state’. It is hard to say exactly what their state of being will be like during this time. The Bible says very little about this intermediate state and leaves many questions unanswered; what it does say is overshadowed by the topic of human beings’ final state of existence. Theologian Anthony Hoekema rightly says that the New Testament tells us “nothing

² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 1176-7.

more than a whisper”³ about the intermediate state. I tend to agree with Thomas Oden when he writes, “The study of the future remains, according to God’s wisdom, a matter of the meekness of faith, not the pretense of elaborate knowledge.”⁴ Even the beloved Apostle John said that “what we will be has not yet been revealed” (1 John 3:2).

However, there are some indications regarding this intermediate state that are worth mentioning. There are strong suggestions that humans are not annihilated at death, but continue to exist either in a pleasant place, referred to as Paradise, or in an unpleasant place, referred to as Hades. These places seem to be different from what has traditionally been understood as Heaven and Hell.

Hades is a realm of the dead, used as a place of torment for unrighteous people before the general resurrection of all people. Second Peter 2:9 says that “the Lord knows how to ... keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” This indicates that, even before the final judgment of all people, there awaits an unpleasant place for ungodly people. This place is clearly referred to in Revelation 20:13 which says, “Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done.” After this final judgment at the end of time, then the unrighteous people, along with death and Hades themselves, “were thrown into the lake of fire” (verse 14). Thus Hades and the ‘lake of fire’ are distinguished as two separate places. Hades is further described as a place of torment by Jesus in the parable of Luke 16 (vv. 19-31). Verse 31 makes it clear that the setting of this parable is before the final resurrection of the dead.

³ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, paperback ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) 94.

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit, Systematic Theology: Volume Three*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994; Peabody: Prince Press, 2001) 373-4.

This parable contrasts Hades with a pleasant place referred to here as “Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22, NASB), which is described as a place of comfort (v. 25). This seems to be the same place that Jesus refers to when he tells the thief being crucified next to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The Christian’s Attitude Toward Death

For a person with no hope and expectation of spending eternity with the loving Creator of the universe, death is something that is to be feared. Not only is there the end of life, but there is also the fear of not knowing what really lies ahead. But we as Christians believe that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so also will we be raised. This enables us to be free from inner turmoil and the bondage caused by “the fear of death” (Heb 2:14-15). Nor do we need to be distressed or grieve over our beloved fellow Christians who have died because we have the hope that one-day we will be resurrected and reunited with them, forever in the Lord’s presence (1 Thess 4:13-17).

Not only do we as Christians have no fear of death, but we also should properly have an expectation of being reunited with the Lord and with all the Christians of past centuries (Heb 12:23; Rev 7:9). We also have the anticipation that we will be rewarded with a “crown of righteousness” (2 Tim 2:8). This thought and expectation was so much in the mind of the Apostle Paul that he actually felt it was “far better” to “depart and be with Christ” (Phil 1:23). Living this life is surely a time to experience and know Christ, but dying will be a “gain” in that we will in some way be with Christ in a more real and lasting way (Phil 1:21, 23). Surely Anthony Hoekema has well said, “Death for the Christian is not an end, but a glorious new beginning.”⁵

⁵ Hoekema, 85.