

DEATH
RESURRECTION
and
ETERNAL LIFE

By
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I Death

Death can be understood only in connection with life. Life is a gift from God. He will also demand an account for what we have done with our personal life.¹ This applies to our body as well as our spirit and soul. For this reason we should take care of our physical and spiritual powers and not waste them. But the physical life is not an end in itself, so that it has to be preserved under all circumstances. The physical life has been given to us as an instrument to accomplish our task. Because of this we cannot look after the instrument to such an extent that we neglect or even miss our duties, as if the instrument were the sole or the main thing.

In this matter we have got the highest example in Him who said: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."² If a Christian fails on this point in a critical moment of his life, either because of being afraid of death or in consideration of the value of his own life, this only proves his lack of knowledge about the teaching of Christ.³

Why does death exist among us?

"Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."⁴ By this doctrine the Christian religion differs from all other religions and schools of thought. How the world would

have been today without the great fall nobody knows. We lack both knowledge and experience of such a state of things. But we do not need such a knowledge either, since "because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man".⁵

Sometimes other reasons are mentioned for our death, e.g. age, weakness, and sickness. But these must be considered as only secondary factors at work. When the 70 or 80 years are mentioned as an ordinary limit of life,⁶ they are rather signs of the power at work after the fall.

What is death?

Holy Scripture tells us that in the physical death body and soul become separated, but they are not annihilated. We may die in very different ways, and we may be buried differently, but in all cases the body "returns to the ground, for out of it you were taken".⁷ If it is difficult for us to understand how God will be able to raise the remains of the body and give them life again, then we must consider that the difficulties are quite as great with regard to the beginning of life. The fact is: We have managed to understand the beginning quite as much, or rather quite as little, as we have understood death: "Thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb... My frame was not hidden from thee,

when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth."⁸

When we try to understand the separation between body and soul, it is necessary also to understand the difference between the Christian doctrine and the teaching by some philosophical and idealistic schools. Many of them have the idea that the soul has become "enclosed in the prison of the body", and that it can be released from that prison only by the death of the body. All ideas of that kind are contrary to the Biblical teaching about Creation. According to it both body and soul have been created by God, both have been affected by the fall in the same degree, and both need salvation. The death of the body, therefore, does not include any liberation or salvation of the soul. Instead both body and soul are *separated* in the moment of death, *but only temporarily*. They will be united again at the resurrection and be transformed to a complete human being again and as such face their eternal future.

Death is a dreadful thing

It must be admitted that death is a dreadful thing. It is a terrible interference in the unity and integrity of man. But this interference is temporary. The dead body is put to rest in one way or another. The soul proceeds to its "room" of rest, where it will

remain waiting for the resurrection of the body and the reunion with it. Death, therefore, does not put a definite stop to the unity of man. That unity will be established again in the resurrection.⁹

The Christian doctrine about life and death must be kept quite apart from all other doctrines and thoughts, whether they resemble the Christian doctrine or not. All thoughts and beliefs about death, proclaimed as Christian, must be founded on the doctrines mentioned here: creation, the fall, the salvation in Jesus Christ, and the unity of body and soul. God did create a good world, without sin and death, but through the fall of man and his uproar against God the evil powers came into the world, and thus death came. This is in general the truth about death. From this general truth we have to distinguish the individual cases of death among men. When a person dies, it is not a proof of his personal sinfulness or guilt. When he dies it is only proved that as a human being he shares the general condition of mankind, according to the word: "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment."¹⁰

Death is already defeated

When St. Paul has cried out: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?", he goes on with a shout of joy: "Thanks be

to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"¹¹ Why this difference? He is expounding the fact that Christ, the eternal Son of God, has come into the world and shared our human conditions. This happened, not in an outward way only, with regard to His childhood, education, training, work, tiredness, tears, and suffering. What is much more than that is that He suffered for our transgressions, died, was buried, and rose again from the dead. Through all this our conditions have become changed: "As sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."¹² "It will be reckoned to us who believe in Him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification."¹³ "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."¹⁴

Thus death is defeated. It has met its conqueror, our Lord Jesus Christ. But now people very often ask: "If that is the case, why do we have to die at all?" This question must be answered in a twofold way. First: Through original sin all people are sinners, and as such they are subject to death. It is true that the one who believes in Christ has been reconciled with God and "has passed from death

to life",¹⁵ yet he shares the corruption of man. This inherited inclination to evil will be working in him up to the end of his life and may make him leave the way of life and go astray at any time. Death is the wages of sin to all men, because they are the bearers of the inheritance from Adam. Secondly: The one who believes, to him it remains to die only in the outward way, i.e. to pass the outward separation between body and soul. But the hardest and most difficult things in death have been removed from him: "He who believes has eternal life."¹⁶ "If any one keeps my word, he will never see death."¹⁷ "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."¹⁸

Even if death has been defeated, Scripture never denies that death has retained its power of causing pain, sorrow, fear, and trembling. A believing Christian may desire "to depart and be with Christ",¹⁹ but even so he is not free from pain and sorrow which so often accompany death. The pain and sorrow are due to many things, e.g. what happens in the last days and hours of life, the separation between body and soul, and also the separation from those who are left behind.²⁰ Therefore we may hesitate for what we should ask and pray: on one side to be delivered from the anxieties and pains of this life and be promoted to the life of our heavenly calling, or on the other hand to be

allowed to continue our service to our fellowmen.

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|---|--------------|----|---------------------|----|--------------|
| 1 | Rom 14:12 | 9 | Lk 16:22; 23:43,46; | 15 | Jn 5:24 |
| 2 | Jn 15:13 | | 1 Cor 15:35-58; | 16 | Jn 6:47 |
| 3 | 1 Jn 4:18-21 | | 1 Thess 5:23 | 17 | Jn 8:51 |
| 4 | Rom 5:12 | 10 | Heb 9:27; 2 Tim 4:1 | 18 | Jn 11:25-26 |
| 5 | Rom 5:15-19 | 11 | Rom 7:24-25 | 19 | Phil 1:23 |
| 6 | Ps 90:7-12 | 12 | Rom 5:21 | 20 | Phil 1:21-26 |
| 7 | Gen 3:19 | 13 | Rom 4:24-25 | | |
| 8 | Ps 139:13-15 | 14 | Rom 5:17 | | |

II

Resurrection

When our Lord Jesus appeared, He showed such a power that is never found with man. He performed things which only God Himself can do. Whether they are called "signs" or "miracles", there is one thing that must be considered to be greatest: "the sign of the prophet Jonah",¹ which means Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus had the power, not only to raise people from the dead, but also to rise from the dead. About this He says: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."² The rising from the dead is the greatest single deed after creation, it is also the strongest evidence of the divine power of Jesus Christ. It is also the strongest foundation of our hope of salvation.³

The teaching about the resurrection of the body is an essential part of the Christian gospel. When St. Paul stood before the Council in Jerusalem he referred to the Christian hope of resurrection as the true reason for his trial: "With respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial."⁴ "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised."⁵ According to Christian faith there is a strong connection between body and soul. Man is not a complete creature without a body. At the resurrection, therefore, the unity between body and soul will be restored. The body

the risen people will be given will be such as to be recognized as theirs, and yet it will be different. It will be like Christ's "glorious body" after His resurrection.⁶

Judgment in connection with the resurrection

The last judgment, as the word itself says, will be the last one in a long chain of prior judgments.⁷ When the Lord pronounces His judgment it means that the final word is said about good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, godliness and godlessness. Then mankind will reach its final destination. Nobody will have anything to object against the decisions of the Judge.⁸ Complete justice will prevail. Therefore the final judgment will lead to the praise and glory of the righteous and eternal God. He is the Supreme Judge. But He is the tri-une God, and it has pleased Him in His eternal majesty to let the final judgment be executed in the name of the Trinity by the Second Person, who is both Saviour and Judge.⁹

Who will be judged?

Before the Son of Man "will be gathered all the nations".¹⁰ When the Apostles' Creed says "the living and the dead" the meaning is the same. The

only difference is that the Creed distinguishes between such people who have died ("the dead") in the times up to the day of Judgment, and such people who are still living when the day of Judgment comes. Thus the words of the Creed strongly underline that the Judgment applies to all people, "all the nations".

But Holy Scripture also says that the Judgment will "begin with the household of God".¹¹ This thought at first sight seems to be in conflict with many other words in Holy Scripture, where it is said that those who believe in Christ will not be submitted to any judgment. But if the latter is true, how will it then be possible to speak of a judgment upon "all the nations" or upon "the living and the dead"? If we examine the total teaching of Holy Scripture in this matter we find that everything fits very well together.¹² The explanation is that we have to distinguish between the individual, secret judgment and the official, open judgment. The latter is an open, formal and solemn confirmation of the former. In one way the judgment of a true, believing Christian was held already when he received Christ as his Saviour and for Christ's sake was declared righteous.¹³ This is a verdict of acquittal from the heavenly court, and this verdict solemnly becomes confirmed in the final judgment on the last day. But this final judgment is also needed for another reason: many false judgments

have been passed and are current among men. Therefore everything will be brought into light, in order that a righteous and final judgment will be passed on all people.¹⁴

To those who do not believe it will be a judgment that is not only formal, but real. They cannot cover themselves with the righteousness of Christ, since it is not theirs. Therefore they will be standing before their Judge, dressed in their own deeds only.¹⁵ In that moment everything will depend on that fact that they have not believed in their Saviour and dressed themselves in His righteousness.¹⁶

The "books" at the Judgment

"Books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done."¹⁷ To understand these words correctly we have to be careful in our thoughts. Of course God does not need any books or registers, as we people do, in order to remember or know the things He has to judge.¹⁸ When, in spite of this, books are mentioned, it is only to show, by pictures or other things we may understand, that nothing can be hidden from God in His judgment.

It may happen that these "books" cause us to be troubled in our minds about what may be held

against us in the judgment. Then we should remember another book mentioned, "the book of life".¹⁹ The grace offered to us in our lifetime aims at our names being written in heaven.²⁰ This shows us that a person already in this life can be put on the side of those, who in the great, final test will be acquitted, provided that in his lifetime he was brought to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.²¹

There is another question related to that of "the books": Will all sins, also those which had already been forgiven, be brought up again for a new scrutiny? Many Bible scholars have held that opinion. But it must be repudiated, because it clashes with the Biblical doctrine of forgiveness: "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."²² "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."²³

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|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Mt 12:39 | 9 Jn 5:26-27; Acts 17:31 | 17 Rev 20:12 |
| 2 Jn 10:17-18 | 10 Mt 25:32 | 18 Heb 4:13 |
| 3 1 Cor 15:12-28 | 11 1 Pet 4:17-19 | 19 Rev 20:11-15 |
| 4 Acts 23:6 | 12 Jn 5:24; 2 Cor 5:10 | 20 Lk 10:20 |
| 5 1 Cor 15:16 | 13 Rom 3:22 | 21 Rev 3:5 |
| 6 Phil 3:21 | 14 Mt 5:11-12; 1 Cor 4:5 | 22 Isa 43:25; Jer 31:34 |
| 7 Rom 9:28 | 15 Mt 25:41-46 | 23 Mic 7:18-19; Isa 1:18 |
| 8 Rev 19:1-2 | 16 Rom 13:11-14 | |

III

Eternal life

In connection with the great judgment the present world will come to an end. There will be "a new heaven and a new earth".¹ Will God, when creating all anew, be using anything from the old creation? If He did, it would still be a new heaven and a new earth, "for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away". How the new things and conditions will be is beyond our understanding.² In these matters it is not important at all to think in terms of size, form or colour. It is much more important to know that "nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practises abomination or falsehood".³ The reason is that God's will rules there. His glory dwells there, the throne of God and the Lamb is standing there, and the servants of God serve Him there for ever, because day and night are no more.⁴

The heavenly glory

When we wish to imagine or understand heaven, we are told that this is a matter of "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him".⁵ Our poor abilities of understanding are not so much due to our ordinary human limitations, in a still higher degree they depend upon the fact that no man can see God and still live in this world.⁶ The prophet Isaiah was put before the glory of God in such a way that he feared he

would die.⁷ On the mount of transfiguration three disciples from the group around Jesus were put before the glory of the eternal world. They were so overwhelmed by that sight that they fell to the ground and became filled with awe.⁸ When the Pharisee Saul met the glorified Saviour on his way to Damascus, he fell to the ground, blinded by the light from the eternal world.⁹

When the eternal life and blessedness are described in Holy Scripture it is often done *in pictures*. Thus it is often described as *a kingdom*. It is called "the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ",¹⁰ or "the kingdom which He has promised to those who love Him".¹¹ Heaven and blessedness are also described as *a city*. That is "the holy city, new Jerusalem".¹² "He has prepared for them a city", "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem", "the city which is to come".¹³ Heaven and blessedness are also described as *a home*. This home is described by Jesus as having "many rooms".¹⁴

Besides such pictures there are other descriptions, e.g. that *blessedness is freedom*. "The Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother."¹⁵ A blessed man is for ever free from those things which have troubled and tormented him during his life in this world. Thus he will for ever be free from sin, against which he has had to struggle for such a long and strenuous battle.¹⁶ Further he is

free from death, which he has feared so long and finally also gone through.¹⁷

A blessed man can also be described as *owning certain things and qualities*, such as he was lacking in his lifetime. Thus in heaven he will have *complete light in his understanding*.¹⁸ He will also have *perfect purity and power in his will*, which will be in complete harmony with the will of God. He will also have *perfect security*, because there no longer exists any power that can separate him from "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".¹⁹

What is the highest and the greatest in the eternal bliss?

It can be summed up like this: *to become like the holy angels*. All physical deformities and weaknesses will be gone. The glorified bodies will be only beautiful and glorious, since they will be like Christ's glorious body.²⁰ They will be free from those needs and impulses that were so often the characteristics of the earthly life.²¹

A blessed man will be like the angels also with regard to *the heavenly service*. The blessed have not been called to a carefree or idle life in heaven, although this is a very popular belief. As the angels of the Lord, the mighty ones, "do His word, hearkening to the voice of His word",²² so the blessed serve God in heaven: "Therefore are they

before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night within His temple."²³ The service also means *praising God*. This is a praise "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues".²⁴ This song of praise is "like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals". It is the great choir of all the saved and blessed singing: "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory."²⁵ The heavenly service also means *prayer*. This may seem remarkable, when all needs and wishes have already been filled. But in spite of the heavenly fullness and joy there is one need remaining: the need of thanksgiving, praise and adoration: "Great and wonderful are thy deeds, o Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, o King of the ages... Thy judgments have been revealed."²⁶

But the highest and greatest, when the blessed will become like the angels, is not the service, nor is it the song of praise or the prayers. The highest and greatest will be the fulfilment of their greatest longing. In one way this was expressed already by Moses, when he spoke to God: "I pray thee, show me thy glory."²⁷ This means to say, that the highest and greatest is *to see God*. Of course it is wonderful to see the holy angels, in most cases earlier invisible to man, and to see and recognize so many among the blessed in heaven, but above every-

thing else stands this unspeakable thing: to see God, to see Him who will not be the Invisible any more; to see Him who will show His back no more, when He has passed by, and who will not let them fall to the ground, when His holy and eternal glory is revealed to them.²⁸ Therefore, "when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is".²⁹

To see God, that is in one way the same as to see our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The Son of man, the eternal Son of God, has made God known to us.³⁰ This is also confirmed in heaven: to see God, that is the same as to see the Lamb. In heaven our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, where He accepts homage from all the saved: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!... Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."³¹

With unspeakable joy the saved will see Him, who has removed their sins and the sins of the world. This Lamb looks "as though it had been slain".³² Even in eternity Jesus Christ carries these marks of His fight and victory, which He had shown to His first disciples.³³ The fight and the victory are the theme of the song of praise that resounds through heaven: the saved have defeated their great enemy "by the blood of the Lamb".³⁴

For His sake their names have been written “in the Lamb’s book of life”.³⁵ And now, for ever they will keep on rejoicing to see the face of God, to “stand before the throne and before the Lamb”,³⁶ and to be in the heavenly city, “for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb”.³⁷

GLORY BE TO THE FATHER, AND TO THE SON,
AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT; AS IT WAS IN THE
BEGINNING, IS NOW, AND EVER SHALL BE,
WORLD WITHOUT END

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|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Rev 21:1; 2 Pet 3:13 | 14 Jn 14:2; 2 Cor 5:8 | 25 Rev 19:5–8 |
| 2 1 Cor 13:9–12 | 15 Gal 4:26 | 26 Rev 15:3–4 |
| 3 Rev 21:27 | 16 Rom 7:14–20; Eph 6:12; | 27 Ex 33:18; Jn 14:8 |
| 4 Rev 21:1–22:5 | Heb 10:32 | 28 Heb 11:27; Ex 33:17–23 |
| 5 1 Cor 2:9 | 17 Rev 21:4 | 29 1 Jn 3:2; 1 Cor 13:12 |
| 6 Ex 33:12–23 | 18 1 Cor 13:9–10 | 30 Jn 1:14–18; 14:8–11 |
| 7 Isa 6:1–7 | 19 Rom 8:31–39; | 31 Rev 7:9–12; 14:1–5 |
| 8 Mt 17:1–8 | Rev 21:22–22:5 | 32 Rev 5:6; Isa 53:4–12 |
| 9 Acts 9:1–19 | 20 Phil 3:21 | 33 Jn 20:19–29; |
| 10 2 Pet 1:11 | 21 Lk 20:34–36 | Lk 24:30–31 |
| 11 Jas 2:5 | 22 Ps 103:20–21 | 34 Rev 12:11 |
| 12 Rev 21:2 | 23 Rev 7:15 | 35 Rev 21:27 |
| 13 Heb 11:16; 12:22; | 24 Rev 7:9 | 36 Rev 7:9 |
| 13:14 | | 37 Rev 21:23 |

By the same author:
THE WAY OF LIFE (1987)
LET US PRAY (1989)
CHRISTIAN LIFE (1995)

This booklet mainly consist of
extracts from the book THE WAY OF LIFE

Publichers:
STIFTELSEN EVANGELISK LITTERATURMISSION
GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN

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S 342 31 Alvesta, SWEDEN