

From Death to Life

Various Texts (Genesis 2: 4 – 9; 15 – 17)ⁱ

You Shall Surely Die

Genesis 2, verses 16 – 17 told us:

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ 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 surely die.” Genesis 2:16–17 (ESV)

and... they did. Not physically, of course. If God had physically killed Adam and Eve as a result of the fall, it would have been no more than they deserved, but, as we know:

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. Psalms 103:8–10 (ESV)

By the grace of God, and only by the grace of God, Adam would be allowed to live a long life after that day, fathering sons and daughters who would go on to do the same, but (and I may have said this before at some point), God always keeps His promises—always has, and always will—so when we read the promise of God in verse 17—

¹⁷ 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 surely die.” Genesis 2:16–17 (ESV)__

just the fact that God said it ought to convince us that it is true, but Romans, chapter 5 takes this even farther, telling us that

¹² ...just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, [**even**] so death spread to all men because all sinned— Romans 5:12 (ESV)

If we require further evidence, then listen again to those very familiar words of Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 1 – 3:

¹ **And you were dead in the trespasses and sins** ² **in which you once walked**, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Ephesians 2:1–3 (ESV)

There are other passages to which we might turn, but hopefully by now it is evident. When God said, “You shall surely die,” the most important consequence was not physical death (although that was part of the deal), rather, in the day that Adam and Eve ate of the tree, their relationship to God, the Author and Giver of Life was broken—that is, they died spiritually—and they brought the entire human race along for their trouble. So then, they (and we), were not *sick* in our trespasses and sins. We were not *struggling* in our trespasses and sins. We had not *sacrificed our self-esteem* to our trespasses and sins. We, as the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 2, were dead in our trespasses and sins. There’s a difference,

and it's an important difference.

Whereas, prior to the entrance of sin, Adam and Eve had walked with God “in the garden in the cool of the day”ⁱⁱ, “naked and unashamed”ⁱⁱⁱ, now, they tried to hide themselves in fear, and they, and their descendants, would walk in trespasses and sins, not following God, but rather “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...”^{iv}

The Scorched Image

From that day on, people would not be born basically decent and good, carrying the image of God like a classic work of art with a little dust on the frame that just needs to be brushed away. Instead, people would be “conceived in iniquity” and “brought forth in sin” (to borrow a phrase from the Psalmist). Imagine that same classic work of art, not with a bit of dust on the frame, but nearly destroyed by heat, smoke, and water damage after a fire in the museum. This happened in 1957. One of the largest examples of Claude Monet’s “Water Lillies” was destroyed in just this way. After the fire, it remained the work of Monet, but it was no longer put on display to the world as such, because the fire had ruined it. Since the fall of mankind into sin, all human beings carry the image of God in that way. As I mentioned last week, we are not like a windshield with a teeny, tiny little stone chip way down near the bottom on the passenger side; rather, we are like a windshield that has been struck over and over by baseball sized hail until it's barely possible to see through it at all.

Man's rebellion against God was not a “one and done” situation. They did not sin and then, feeling bad about what they had done, immediately turn back to righteousness. They chose to believe the lie of the evil one, that they could be as God, and then, as The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 1:

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts

(that would be the desire in their hearts to be gods to themselves)

to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

And we do the same, every time that we choose to walk contrary to the will of God in order to please ourselves. Thinking ourselves to be wise, we become fools and we seek to please ourselves rather than seeking to worship the true and living God. But, back to Romans 1:

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

(There will be more to say about this on another Lord's Day.)

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. Romans 1:22–32 (ESV)

See, all this is what it means to be

¹ ...dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... Ephesians 2:1–2 (ESV)

This is what God meant when He said,

...in the day that you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die." Genesis 2:16–17 (ESV)

God always keeps His promises—

⁸ He remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations... Psalms 105:8 (ESV) —

so, in the day that they ate from the tree,

¹² ... sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— Romans 5:12 (ESV)

All this what sin did to man who, as it says in the Heidelberg Catechism, “God created...good”

and in his own image, that is, **in true righteousness and holiness**, so that they might truly know God their creator, love him with all their heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory.^v

The Rest of the Story

All this is what we need to know about ourselves, and about the human race, if we are to return to the Lord for salvation and life. The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” and we are taught to answer,

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.^{vi}

But, “What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?”

Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are...^{vii}

and, as we've seen,

¹ ...you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— Ephesians 2:1–2 (ESV)

That's how great the sin and misery of mankind, apart from Christ, truly are. But wait, there's more. The second thing that we need to know to live and die in the comfort of belonging to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, is

how I am set free from all my sins and misery...^{viii}

And, for this, let's go back to Ephesians 2 and read it without the intervening description of what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins.

¹ And you were dead in...trespasses and sins...⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... Ephesians 2:1–4 (ESV)

See, death is not the end or even the point of the story of Scripture. It's the antagonist that we meet in the earliest chapters—the enemy who seems always to be lurking around the corner, laying in wait for the next unsuspecting victim; “the pestilence that stalks in darkness,” and “the destruction that wastes at noonday.”^{ix}

⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:57 (ESV)

And this is both the point and the end of the story of Scripture. We **were** dead in our trespasses and sins—“lost and ruined by the fall”^x, as the hymnwriter says—

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:4–7 (ESV)

Sin is not the end of the story—death is not the end of the story. The story ends with life and salvation. We are **delivered** from our sin and misery, for God,

⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... Ephesians 2:5 (ESV)

But the third thing we must know to live and die in the joy of belonging to God is

...how I am to thank God for such deliverance...^{xi}

And to thank God—to truly worship Him—for our salvation we have to know the death from which we have been saved, and we have to understand that it was so serious that by ourselves we could do literally nothing about it.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

In our natural, fallen state, we are dead in our trespasses and sins,

¹² ...separated from Christ...strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. Ephesians 2:11–12 (ESV)

But God’s word calls us, not to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and start all over again. “Try harder,” is not the gospel. Dead men can’t do that. But, Jesus said,

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. John 5:24 (ESV)

And this is our salvation. This is our hope for our future, and for the future of the world. Not good people (or even bad people) made a little better through the progress of evolution, and the efforts of technology, medicine, and government, but dead people made alive through faith in the Living and Abiding Word of God. For the one who hears the Word of Christ, and believes the Father who sent Him has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. John 5:24 (ESV)

An Invitation

You know, I don’t often do this—hardly ever really—but just before we turn to the Lord in prayer this morning, I’d like you to bow your head and reflect for a moment. If you are hearing these words this morning and in your heart you are thinking “Amen, and amen”. Then I want you to remember that third point from Question 2 in the Catechism. To live and die in the joy of this comfort you have to know how to thank God for this salvation. So, how are you working that out, practically speaking. We sometimes sing,

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far to small. Love so amazing—so divine—demands my soul, my life, my all.^{xii}

If that’s true, and I believe it is, then what parts of our soul, our life, and our all might we be holding back, and how can we offer ourselves—body and soul, in life and in death—as a living sacrifice of praise to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, if you are hearing these words and thinking, “This makes sense to me, but I’m not sure that it’s mine,” then right where you are, right now, acknowledge before God that you are not a good person in need of a little polishing up, but dead in trespasses and sin, and in need of a Savior who can give you life, eternal and abundant. You don’t have to walk to front or anything, just turn to the Lord, and pray in your heart, “Lord, I believe. Please help my unbelief.” Trusting in Christ alone is the only way of salvation, and it’s the most important thing in all of life, for as Jesus said,

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. John 5:24 (ESV)

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii Genesis 3: 8.

iii Genesis 2: 25.

iv Ephesians 2: 2.

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- v Christian Reformed Church, "The Heidelberg Catechism" in, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), Lord's Day 3, Question and Answer 6.
- vi Ibid., Lord's Day 1, Question and Answer 1.
- vii Ibid., Question and Answer 2.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Psalm 91: 6.
- x Joseph Hart, "Come You Sinners, Poor and Needy", in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 534.
- xi Christian Reformed Church, "The Heidelberg Catechism" in, *Ecumenical Creeds*, Lord's Day 1, Question and Answer 2.
- xii Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 384.