

What Is The Second Death?

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," November-December 2015

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent told Eve that she could disobey God, and she would not die. Even as that initial deception of mankind concerned death, modern conceptions about death and the afterlife commonly contradict the Bible. Most professing Christians believe in an immortal soul that lives on beyond death. They believe that if one professed Christ then his soul goes to heaven, but if the dearly-departed did not “get saved” before dying, then his soul goes to an ever-burning hell to be tortured for eternity. This belief, rooted in Gnosticism and even further back in Egyptian and Babylonian mystery religions, proclaims that death really is not death but just part of a mystical journey.

What the Bible teaches is different. The Bible shows that man does not *have* a soul, but that man *is* a soul. Man *has* a spirit, and *has* a body, but only when God breathed life into Adam did he become a living soul (*nephesh*; Genesis 2:7, KJV). Moreover, the Bible states clearly that the soul who sins will die (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). It says that God alone has immortality (I Timothy 6:16), unlike man who must seek it because he does not have it (Romans 2:7). Scripture asserts that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Death is not a shedding of the body and a freeing of the soul, as is commonly held, but a complete cessation of existence.

Another Kind of Death in Scripture

While the Bible speaks often of death, one death in particular, the “second death,” mankind knows little of. The phrase “second death” is found only in the book of Revelation, the first time in the letter to the church at Smyrna: “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (Revelation 2:11).

This verse does not tell us much about the second death, only that the way to avoid it is to overcome faithfully. Revelation 20:6 provides a little more detail: “Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.”

Just as overcomers will not be hurt by the second death, the same holds true for those who rise in the first resurrection. Popular Christianity maintains that the soul departs to its destination immediately after death, but the Bible teaches that nothing happens until or unless a resurrection occurs. In the grave there is no thought, no consciousness, and unless God resurrects someone by placing his spirit into another living body, that is the end of the story (see Ecclesiastes 3:19-20; 9:2-5, 10; Psalm 146:4).

The first resurrection, one to immortality for those in Christ (see I Corinthians 15:50-54; I Thessalonians 4:13-17), occurs at His return. It is also the “better resurrection” for which the heroes of faith qualified because they did not accept deliverance (Hebrews 11:35). Those in the first resurrection are raised with incorruptible, spirit bodies. These saints have been given immortality by God—there is no longer any fear of death; it is swallowed up in victory.

A third reference to the second death appears in Revelation 20:12-15:

And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

John equates the second death with the Lake of Fire, the final judgment of the incorrigibly wicked, those whose names are not found in the Book of Life. While these events occur after the Millennium, the Lake of Fire is also shown to exist before the Millennium (Revelation 19:20). Whether this means the Lake of Fire exists throughout the Millennium—perhaps as a vivid reminder of God’s judgment—or it is manifested only at the endpoints is not clear.

Blotted Out of the Book

The Book of Life, mentioned twice in this passage, is first used in Exodus 32:32-33 where Moses beseeches God to forgive Israel after the Golden Calf incident: “Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.” The Lord responded, “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book.”

In Psalm 69:28, David pleads for God’s help regarding his enemies: “Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.” He may have been referring to this same book when he wrote, “And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

In a scene reminiscent of Revelation 20:12-14, Daniel describes the future judgment of the Beast with books being opened, and the Beast being thrown into flames (Daniel 7:10-11). In another prophecy of the same general time, Daniel 12:1-2 records:

At that time Michael shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered, *every one who is found written in the book*. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

In Philippians 4:3, Paul urges the Philippian congregation to “help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, *whose names are in the Book of Life*.”

In the letter to the church at Sardis, Jesus promises that those who overcome will not have their names blotted out from the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5). Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 show that those who are not written in the Book of Life will be deceived and influenced by the end-time Beast. Being written in the Book of Life grants entrance into the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:27), while “tak[ing] away from the words of the book of this prophecy” will result in God “tak[ing] away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Revelation 22:19). Clearly, having our names in this Book makes all the difference, both in the time of the end and in our final judgment!

Finally, the second death appears in Revelation 21:7-8:

He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.
But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers,
idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and
brimstone, which is the second death.

As we saw in the letter to Smyrna and Revelation 20, those who overcome, whose names are written in the Book of Life, will not take part in the Lake of Fire, showing that overcoming is crucial to avoiding the second death.

Revelation 21:8 lists various classifications of sinners who will die in the Lake of Fire. This does not indicate, though, that if a person has committed one of these sins that he is automatically doomed. Nor does it mean that people are free to commit sins that are not listed here and be safe from the second death.

Instead, these verses describe two broad groupings of people: Those who are in union with God and those who are against Him. Those in union will have overcome throughout their lives, while those against will manifest their resistance through the sins mentioned here.

The Bible's View of Death

Given the gravity of the second death, it may seem odd that it is not mentioned more often. However, as a theme, it winds throughout the Bible, starting in Genesis 2 with God's warning not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. It is always lingering in the background. But to see this, we need to understand how the Bible uses the term "death."

There is a physical application as well as a spiritual implication, and it requires discernment to understand how the word "death" is being used in a given context. The physical application is simply the end of a human being's life, whether through age, disease, accident, or violence. The breath of life leaves the person, consciousness ceases, and the body begins to decay. This is the fate of all human beings.

But the Bible also uses death to describe the *spiritual* state of people who are undoubtedly physically alive. Notice Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

The death that entered the world through Adam's sin was not physical death. Adam was a flesh-and-blood human being, so his body was naturally subject to entropy. The fact that he was created as flesh meant that, at some point, his heart would stop, and the breath of life would leave. Even if he had lived a sinless life, he still would have died when his body ceased to function. Adam was never immortal; he needed to eat of the Tree of Life to live forever (Genesis 3:22). When Adam sinned, he immediately entered a state of spiritual—not physical—death, which contributed to the foundation of Satan's deception that life continues after sin.

As it remains today, Satan's treachery was effective and destructive because, like Adam, we typically live on—physically—after sinning. While Adam's physical death was a foregone conclusion due to his being fleshly, it was not the death that entered the world through his sin. Instead, spiritual death entered the world at that point and spread to all of his offspring. His sin destroyed the union mankind

had with God (see Isaiah 59:1-2), without which there is no life. Accordingly, separated from God, mankind has no future beyond physical death unless God acts. The wages of sin is eternal death, and there will not be everlasting life unless God gives it as a gift.

Later in the same context, Paul substitutes the word “condemnation” for “death”:

And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense [Adam’s sin] resulted in *condemnation*, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. . . . Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in *condemnation*, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. (Romans 5:16, 18)

Adam did not physically die in the instant he sinned, but at that moment, he was brought under eternal condemnation. This is why Jesus said things like “let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60). Those who had not been called into a relationship with God were living in a state of death—condemnation—despite going about the normal activities of life. These people were devoid of spiritual life; they were the spiritual “walking dead.”

Eternal Life and Death

A major reason for Christ’s incarnation was so that mankind could be redeemed from this state of death—condemnation—and given an opportunity for eternal life. Thus, He says, “If anyone keeps My word he shall never see death” (John 8:51). The Jews did not grasp His meaning: Those who keep His Word will never see *eternal* death; they will not lose the eternal life that comes from knowing the Father and Christ (John 17:3) following the Father’s call (John 6:44, 65). However, He implies that those who have His Word and do *not* keep it will return to a state of condemnation.

This can be seen more clearly in a section of John 5: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24). *Hearing Christ’s word* and *believing in God* are not as simple as they appear; a single action or decision is not all it takes for these verses to apply. Even so, Jesus shows that the way is open now for some to avoid that eternal judgment of death and to pass from the state of spiritual death into spiritual life.

Passing from death into eternal life is a result of the relationship that God draws us into. A person who has been called by God, who responds by hearing Christ’s word (in the sense of obedience), and begins to live a life of trust in God, is one who is now spiritually alive. If he remains in that state of spiritual life until the end, he will be in the first resurrection and given immortality.

Jesus’ teaching continues:

Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. . . . Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:25, 28-29)

“The hour is coming, *and now is*” means that from the time of His preaching forward, some of the spiritually dead would hear His voice, respond to Him, and begin living spiritually. In that case, the dead He is talking about are the spiritually dead of mankind.

But then the focus changes in verse 28 to the future: “The hour *is coming*.” A time will come when *all* who are in their graves will hear His voice and rise in a resurrection. “All who are in the graves” refers to those who have physically died. God, in His mercy, will resurrect each person at some point, “each one in his own order” (I Corinthians 15:23).

The fact that death is not the end is a major change from where things stood after Adam’s sin. Each person will have the opportunity to live life spiritually, in union with God, because He “is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). He will, then, give everyone a chance to repent, to come out of his or her spiritual death, and to experience a life of reconciliation with Him. That opportunity could happen in this age, or it could happen in the resurrection to physical life that takes place after the Millennium (see Revelation 20:5).

Those Who Remain in Opposition

Those who live their lives in union with God in this age will take part in the resurrection to eternal life. However, those who have tasted what God offers and rejected it—those who have done evil—will be resurrected to face their Judge, and then they will be cast into the Lake of Fire and die the second death. Hebrews 6:4-6 explains this:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

Verse 8 then relates that the fate of such people is to be burned. They will have died once already, yet that first death will not satisfy the penalty for sin. Death by old age, disease, accident, or violence (including suicide) does not pay the death penalty for sin. Only a life taken in judgment for sin satisfies the debt.

Christ’s sacrifice is one such payment. However, if an individual will not allow Christ’s blood to pay that debt, the only recourse is for his life to be taken in payment for his sin. If he is determined to live in opposition to God, unconcerned about obeying God’s commands, that person would be miserable living forever anyway. He will not be given the gift of eternal life in a state of mental or physical torment.

Instead, John 5:29 speaks of a “resurrection of condemnation.” Paul says there will be “a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15). Similarly, Daniel 12:2 mentions those who “shall awake . . . to shame and everlasting contempt.” Anyone remaining in such opposition to God will be resurrected to physical life, judgment will be passed, his body will be burned in payment of his debt, and he will cease to exist. If he is even remembered, the memory will be contemptible.

This is why the second death continues as a theme throughout Scripture, always in the background but rarely mentioned. It is the final event for those who choose to remain in opposition to God after

being given the opportunity to know Him. Paul describes this in Hebrews 10:26-27: “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.”

We who are in Christ have eternal life. We will still undergo a physical death, but eternal life is ours—and ours to lose. When we survey the warnings given in the New Testament, they are largely not about a sudden, dramatic turn away from God. Rather, they are about smaller things—little decisions of death that require time to bear evil fruit.

So there are warnings about false teachers, who will, over time, damage the faith on which we stand. The writers warn about deception, the cares of this life, and the enticements of this world. They caution us about growing weary and apathetic and neglecting this great salvation. They admonish us against letting the wrong attitudes take root. The dangers are subtle and incremental, but each one has the potential to lead us slowly away from God.

While any one thing may not seem critical today, the problem is what is produced tomorrow—which we often cannot foresee. Carelessness takes us to where our hearts no longer care about overcoming, and we become hostile toward God and the things of God. It opens us to the same lie that Eve fell for: that we can do as we please and continue living. The fact is, though, the spiritually dead do not know they are dead—they believe they are alive.

It is unlikely that anyone sets out to choose the second death. Instead, it is chosen incrementally, with all the little choices over time creating a character that is set and unchangeable. That character will either be intent on overcoming, on hearing Christ’s voice, and on trusting in God, or set in opposition to God and His law (Romans 8:7) and thus rejecting life. The choice is ours.