

Dying—Once In A Lifetime (Part One)

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, "Ready Answer,"

“ Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed . . .” (I Corinthians 15:51)

“ And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment . . .” (Hebrews 9:27)

Detractors of God’s Word cite a contradiction between I Corinthians 15:51 and Hebrews 9:27. Stated briefly, the writer of the book of Hebrews, apparently referring to biological death, says that everyone will die once, while the apostle Paul, also apparently referring to the same sort of death in I Corinthians 15, avers that some individuals will *not* die, but experience a change instead.

What does the verb *die* mean in these two passages? What does Paul mean by the verb *change*? Do both references refer to biological death—and only to biological death? We will examine the context and meaning of these passages in our search for answers.

I Corinthians 15:51: Biological Death

Near the beginning of his long discourse about the first resurrection, so named in Revelation 20:5-6, Paul establishes that he is writing about biological death. “How are the dead raised up?” he asks in verse 35. In verses 42 and 44, he clarifies that he is speaking of the body:

The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. . . . It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

When, in verse 51, he states that “we shall not all sleep [a common euphemism for death],” it is manifest that the apostle is speaking of biological death.

A commonplace approach to reconciling Paul’s comment with that of the writer of Hebrews 9:27 is to claim that the change to which Paul twice refers in I Corinthians 15:51-52 (that is, the change from mortality to immortality) is in fact a kind of death. In short, a person so changed has in fact died. Those who advance this view either, 1) definitively equate change with death, or 2) claim that physical death is a prerequisite of the change from mortality to immortality. In either case, they claim this sort of change necessarily involves a momentary death.

The apostle, however, would agree with neither understanding. Carefully note the apostle’s comments at I Corinthians 15:51-53:

I’m telling you a mystery. Not all of us will die, but we will all be changed. It will happen in an instant, in a split second at the sound of the last trumpet. Indeed, that trumpet will sound, and then the dead will come back to life. They will be changed so that they can live forever. This body that decays must be changed into a body that cannot decay. This mortal body must be changed into a body that will live forever. (*God’S WORD*® , © 1995 God’s Word to the Nations.)

To propose a close association of change and biological death is to state a *non sequitur*. For, if change is so intimately associated with death as to be virtually equivalent to it, or if change somehow depends on death to occur (as though death were a prerequisite to change), why would Paul assert that not every Christian will biologically die, but in practically the same breath declare that every Christian will experience change to immortal life? Advancing this view is to advance an illogical, indeed contradictory, one.

Paul is clearly emphasizing the *contrast* between change and death, as the adversative “but” in verse 51 suggests. He is not equating the two, not even asserting that change depends on death to occur first, as though in some

causative sense. In fact, a review of the Scriptures leads to the solid conclusion that there is no semantic support for associating biological death with change. The Greek verb translated “change” in both verses, *allasso*, never appears in the context of death anywhere in the Scriptures.ⁱ Scripturally, there is no second witness linking biological death to the Christian’s change from mortality to immortality.^{ii iii}

Hebrews 9:27: A Broader Meaning

So, we lay aside as invalid the semantically and logically untenable notion of an organic relationship between the verbs “die” (“sleep”) and “change” in the I Corinthians passage. Whether viewed as a standalone statement or in its context, we are left with the conclusion that biological death and change are not equivalent, and moreover, that change *can* occur without an associated biological death. They are not causatively linked.

Now we turn to the Hebrews 9 passage.

Rhetorically, Hebrews 9:27-28 consists of an analogy between the fact that individuals die once and the fact that Christ died once for sins. People die once, and judgment ensues. The analogy unfolds in verse 28: “[S]o Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.” As an individual’s one-time biological death precedes his judgment, so Christ’s one-time death precedes His second appearing.

The context of Hebrews 9 does not further elaborate on the subject of human death, since it is not the writer’s topic. Additional discussion of death is not necessary for the purposes of the analogy. Unlike I Corinthians 15, biological death is not a primary point of discussion in Hebrews 9.

At this point, we need to don a logician’s hat to be absolutely clear about what the writer says in Hebrews 9:27—and what he does *not* say. “It is appointed for men to die once” teaches that God has appointed (or decreed) that people die *one* time. Since the statement indicates no exceptions, the decree includes *all* people.

It does not teach that individuals die *only* one time; it does not deny that individuals *can* die more than once.^{iv} It says all individuals *can* die more than once but *will* die at least once. In stating that people die once, Hebrews 9:27 affirms the God-ordained inevitability of *a* death. That is all the statement, taken by itself, actually says: A death—one death—comes to everyone. The verse is general, not specific.

The question arises, then: What death does the writer mean?

Logically, that is a germane question. For, in this statement or in its context, the writer of Hebrews does not specifically qualify, limit, or define the meaning of the verb “die,” having no need to do so for the development of his analogy. From the statement’s context, we cannot deduce what sort (or sorts) of death he means. Logically, therefore, we expose ourselves to error if we assume that he refers *only* to physical death.

We conclude, then, that the verb “die” in Hebrews 9:27 may refer to biological death, may not refer to it, or may refer to more than one type of death.

Is it possible that the verb “die,” as used in Hebrews 9:27, has a broader meaning than it does in I Corinthians 15:51? Is it possible, from a logical and doctrinal viewpoint, that the writer of the book of Hebrews uses it more expansively, more comprehensively, than Paul does in I Corinthians 15:51?

The short answer is, “Yes.” We will find that the meaning of *die* in Hebrews 9:27 accommodates another type of death. In Part Two, we will plunge into it.

End Notes

ⁱ *Allasso* (*Strong’s Greek Lexicon* #236) appears seven times in the New Testament. For the other uses of *allasso*, see Acts 6:14; Romans 1:23; Galatians 4:20; Hebrews 1:12.

ii The Scriptures do not link the other six Greek words denoting change with biological death. The table below indicates those words.

Greek Word	Part of Speech	Strong's Number	KJV Translation	First Use
<i>Metathesis</i>	Fem. noun	3331	Being changed	Hebrews 7:12
<i>Metaballo</i>	Verb	3328	Changed their minds	Acts 28:6
<i>Metallasso</i>	Verb	3337	Changed	Romans 1:25
<i>Metamorphoo</i>	Verb	3339	Was transfigured	Matthew 17:2
<i>Metatithmi</i>	Verb	3346	Were carried over	Acts 7:16
<i>Metaschmatiz</i>	Verb	3345	I have in a figure transferred	I Corinthians 4:6

iii This strange—and semantically unsupportable—thinking of some commentators puts translators who are unwilling to step outside the restraints of their doctrinal beliefs in a logical straitjacket. Just look at what the *Contemporary English Version* does: “Not every one of us will die . . . so that we will never die again” (I Corinthians 15:51-52; *Contemporary English Version*® Copyright © 1995 American Bible Society. All rights reserved.). Some elements of this translation’s rendering of the passage are, bluntly, nonsensical.

iv In fact, the book of Revelation explicitly makes no less than four references to “the second death”: Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8. Moreover, a relatively few individuals have experienced two biological deaths. Lazarus (John 11) and those individuals resurrected at the time of Christ’s death (Matthew 27:52-53) are examples.