

Dying—Once In A Lifetime (Part Two)

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)

In Part One, we noted that the statement “it is appointed for people to die once” is highly general. Nothing in its context, or in the writer’s choice of the verb *die*, indicates exactly what type of death is meant. We asked, “Is there another scripturally supportable use of the verb *die*?” Yes. We can begin by studying the symbolism behind baptism.

*Apothnesko*¹ is the Greek verb rendered “die” in Hebrews 9:27.² Its first use is in Matthew 8:32, in reference to a herd of pigs dying in the sea through drowning. Hence, *apothnesko* clearly can refer to biological death. However, *apothnesko* is also the verb the apostle Paul uses six times in his discussion of baptism in Romans 6:1-11.³ To understand the implications of Hebrews 9:27, we need to consider this passage.

What should we say, then? Should we go on sinning so that grace may increase? Of course not! How can we who died as far as sin is concerned go on living in it? Or, don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into union with the Messiah Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, through baptism we were buried with Him into His death so that, just as the Messiah was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too may live an entirely new life. For if we have become united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old natures were crucified with Him so that our sin-

laden bodies might be rendered powerless and we might no longer be slaves to sin.⁷ For the person who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we have died with the Messiah, we believe that we will also live with Him, for we know that the Messiah, who was raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has mastery over him. For when He died, He died once and for all as far as sin is concerned. But now that He is alive, He lives for God. In the same way, you too must continuously consider yourselves dead as far as sin is concerned, but living for God through the Messiah Jesus. (*International Standard Version [ISV]*)

Three times (verses 6:2, 10 and 11), Paul uses the term “as far as sin is concerned,” signaling that he understands that, by using the verb *apothnesko*, he is not referring to biological death. He is referring to another species of death, one related to our separation from sin, not life. We could say he is delineating his use of *apothnesko* to refer to the specific sort of death he is discussing in the passage.

Romans 6:7, often mishandled by translators, nails down the understanding that Paul uses *apothnesko* metaphorically: “For the person who has died has been freed from sin.” This is the only passage in the Scriptures where some translators render *dikaioo* with the verb “free[d].” In virtually all other instances where *dikaioo* appears,⁴ translators render it as “justify” (or a similar word).

For example, *dikaioo* appears in Romans 5:1: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵ The *Disciples’ Literal New Testament* properly renders Romans 6:7: “For the one having died has been declared-righteous from sin.” Plainly, Paul is not speaking of biological death, the result of which is not justification, not being declared righteous. The translators of this version recognize that Paul is not referring to biological death but to the death Christians experience at their baptism.

Their cue is verse 3, where Paul rhetorically asks, “Don’t we know that all who are ‘baptized into Christ Jesus [are] baptized into His death?’” (emphasis ours throughout).⁶ In verse 7, as in all Romans 6, the apostle uses the verb *apothnesko* to refer to the first part of the act of baptism, the lowering of a person into the water, symbolizing death (that is, a burial).

The Dual Application of Hebrews 9:27

Clearly, when Paul refers to Christians’ being “crucified with” Christ (verse 6), he is neither talking about literal crucifixion nor literal death. Rather, he is talking about death as the first part of the act of baptism, the descent (burial) into the water. Consistently in Romans 6, Paul uses *apothnesko* (“to die”) in this sense.

So, here is how the situation stands: First, both Hebrews 9:27 and Romans 6 make use of the same verb, *apothnesko*, for “die.” Second, the context of Hebrews 9:27 is general, providing no specific meaning of the verb “die.” It simply says everyone dies once. Logically, therefore, *apothnesko* in Hebrews 9:27 *could* refer to baptism, as it clearly does in Romans 6. Is there conclusive evidence that the general statement in Hebrews 9:27 *can* refer to the death of baptism?

Indeed, there is! Romans 6:9 *is key*: “[F]or we know that the Messiah, who was raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has mastery over Him” [ISV].

Herein is the connection between Romans 6 and Hebrews 9: “Once”⁷ is at the core of the concept of both.⁸ Christ died once and was resurrected.⁹ Human beings die biologically once, their sleep to be ended by a resurrection. Through baptism, Christians die once “as far as sin is concerned,” and ascending from the water, experience a resurrection to “an entirely new life” (Romans 6:4).¹⁰

Paul’s enigmatic, almost oxymoronic, statement in Colossians 3:3 provides a second witness to the idea that baptism is death: “For you have died [*apothnesko*], and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Manifestly, the

apostle does not have biological death in mind here since, after a person physically dies, he has no life, hidden or otherwise.

Paul does not mention baptism in this verse, realizing that God's people understand this hidden life to be the new life that begins at the death of the old man.¹¹ The use of the present perfect tense in Greek (rendered "is hidden" in the ESV) indicates that this life exists now. It is not a life that begins at a later time. Our new life in Christ begins at our baptism, not at the time of the first resurrection. (Our life in and with Christ continues as a result of the first resurrection, our bodies then having been changed from mortal to immortal.) We are now enjoying that new life.

Pointedly, none of this—our descent into the water, our rising from it to "newness of life" (Romans 6:4 [KJV]), or our experiencing the first resurrection—has anything to do with our biological death. Biological death may interrupt the new life that began with baptism. But, in the case of those alive at Christ's return, their new life will not be interrupted by biological death. Those individuals will simply experience a change from mortal to immortal, as Paul describes in I Corinthians 15:53, where, we saw in Part One, biological death is not requisite for change to take place. No physical death will take place for those people.

Hebrews 9:27, Once Again

Reiterating for the sake of clarity: The clause "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" has at least two valid applications:

1. In the case of those whom God has *not* called in this age, the verb "die" refers to biological death. After this death is the White Throne Period, evidently a period of a hundred years (Isaiah 65:20) during which those participating in the second resurrection will be "judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (Revelation 20:12).
2. In the case of those whom God *has* called in this age, the verb "die" refers to the death represented by the first part of the act of baptism, the death (and burial) of the old man. Subsequent to this

death as well is a period of judgment, as the apostle Peter mentions at I Peter 4:17: “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.” Romans 6:4 indicates that the death of the old man in baptism is just as real, from God’s viewpoint, as is biological death: “Therefore, through baptism we were buried with Him into His death.”

The Christian *may or may not* experience biological death, depending on circumstances, as expressed by Paul in I Corinthians 15:51. But, *by definition*, the Christian *will* experience death through baptism. From God’s perspective, the death mentioned in Hebrew 9:27 *can* refer to the death a child of God experiences in baptism.

I Corinthians 15:51, referring to the fact that some Christians of the last days will not die,¹² and Hebrews 9:27, referring to the fact that all die, do not contradict. For, true Christians of yesterday and today *have* died—or better, their old self is dead—through baptism. That death is all that is necessary in respect to God’s decree that all die (at least) once.

The true Christian, alive at the time of Christ’s return in power and great glory (Matthew 24:30) has *already* died. His proximate continuance of eternal life (as defined in John 17:3) at the time of the resurrection of the just (Luke 14:14; Acts 24:15) does not constitute a contradiction to the twofold meaning of Hebrews 9:27.

End Notes

[1] *Apothnesko* (*Strong’s Greek Lexicon* #599) appears some 122 times in the New Testament.

[2] As an aside, Paul does not use *apothnesko*, the common, straight-forward verb for “die,” in I Corinthians 15:51. The verb frequently translated “die” there is *koima*, “to put to sleep.” Metaphorically, *koima* means “to die.” In fact, its first use, Matthew 27:52, refers to death as sleep: “The

tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” Hence, he relies on the figurative meaning of the verb “sleep,” *koima*, as a metaphor for biological death.

Koima (Strong’s #2837) appears 19 times in the New Testament. Its metaphoric use of *koima* as “die” perpetuates the corresponding Old Testament idiom: For example, the phrase, “slept with his father,” usually in reference to the death of a king (as in I Kings 2:10, regarding David) appears at least 35 times in the Old Testament.

Many English translations reflect the use of *koima*, retaining the word “sleep” in I Corinthians 15:51. Examples include the [American Standard Version](#), [The Amplified Bible](#) and [The Amplified Bible Classic Edition](#), the *Berkeley Version*, the [Christian Standard Bible](#), the [Disciples’ Literal New Testament](#), the [English Standard Version](#), the [Expanded Bible](#), F. Fenton’s *The Holy Bible in Modern English*, *Green’s Interlinear New Testament*, the [Holman Christian Standard Bible](#), the [King James Version](#), the [Lexham English Bible](#), the [Modern English Version](#), the [New American Bible](#), the [New Century Version](#), the [New English Translation](#), the [New International Version](#), the [New King James Version](#), the [New Testament for Everyone](#), the [Orthodox Jewish Bible](#), the [Revised Standard Version](#), the [Tree of Life Version](#), [The Voice](#), the [World English Bible](#), and [Young’s Literal Translation](#).

[3] Indeed, the verb *apothnesko* appears more times in the book of Romans, 19 times, than in all the other Pauline epistles combined.

[4] *Dikaio* (Strong’s #1344) appears 48 times in the New Testament, half of them in the Pauline epistles. It appears 14 times in Romans alone. Its first use is in Matthew 11:19. Only in Romans 6:7 do the translators of the King James Version render it “freed.” Only the doctrinal predilections of the translators adequately explain this once-in-the-canon (mis)translation.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are quoted from the *English Standard Version*.

[6] The concept that a dead person is free from sin is not scripturally supportable. A dead person is free from sin only in the sense that he, being

insentient, is not able to sin anymore. To squeeze the idea of freedom out of Romans 6:7, a number translators feel compelled to add the concept of *dynamis* (power) to the passage, as “We know that sin doesn’t have *power* over dead people” (*Contemporary English Version*, emphasis mine). This “power concept” is absent in the Greek. Moreover, as is clear from the context of Paul’s comments in Romans 6, centered around baptism, the insertion of the “power concept” is neither necessary nor warranted.

[7] The Greek adverb rendered “once” in Hebrews 9:27 is *hapax* (*Strong’s* #530). It appears fifteen times in the New Testament, II Corinthians 11:25 being its first occurrence: “Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.” *Hapax* is related to *ephapax* (*Strong’s* #2178), which appears five times in the New Testament. The first use of *ephapax* is in Romans 6:10: “For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God.” Probably, the English words “hap,” “happen,” and “happenstance” are related to *hapax*.

[8] The “*hapax*-concept” (or *hapax*-factor) plays an important role in the Old Testament as well as the New. In Hebrew, there are basically two words often rendered with the word *once* in English.

1. *Pa’am* (*Strong’s* #6471) appears 112 times in the Old Testament. Its first use is in Genesis 2:23. Semantically, it takes multiple forms: The translators of the King James Version render *pa’am* as “time” (58x), “once” (14x), “now” (7x), “feet” (6x), “steps” (4x), “corners” (3x), “ranks” (2x), “oftentimes” (2x), with eleven miscellaneous renderings.

2. *‘echad* (*Strong’s* #259) appears 952 times in the Old Testament. It is basically the numeral one, both as an ordinal and as a cardinal. Its first use is in Genesis 1:5: “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” The KJV translators render *‘echad* as “one” (687x), “first” (36x), “another” (35x), “other” (30x), “any” (18x), “once” (14x), “eleven” (13x), “every” (10x), “certain” (9x), “an” (9x), with 87 miscellaneous renderings.

In overview, here are some passages involving the *hapax*-concept in the Old Testament:

- Exodus 16:34: “And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins.”
- Exodus 30:10: “Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year.”
- Joshua 6:3 “You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days.”
- Judges 6:39: “Then Gideon said to God, ‘Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece.’”
- Judges 16:28: “Then Samson called to the LORD and said, ‘O LORD God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once.’”
- Psalm 89:35: “Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David.”
- Jeremiah 16:21: “Therefore, behold, I will make them know, this once I will make them know My power and My might, and they shall know that My name is the LORD.”
- Haggai 2:6: “For thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.’”

New Testament examples of the *hapax*-concept include:

- Romans 6:10: “For the death [Christ] died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God.”
- Hebrews 7:27: “[Christ] has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for those of the people, since He did this once for all when He offered up Himself.”
- Hebrews 9:7: “[B]ut into the second [section of the Temple] only the high priest goes, and he but once a year.”
- Hebrews 9:12: “[Christ] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood.”
- Hebrews 9:26: “But as it is, [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”
- Hebrews 9:28: “So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many.”
- Hebrews 10:10: “And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

[9] It is important to note that Christ, the God-Man, was not exempt from God's decree that death comes (at least) once to everyone.

[10] For another statement of this concept, see Matthew 10:39: "The *one* having found his life will lose it, and the *one* having lost his life for My sake will find it" (*Disciples' Literal New Testament*).

[11] Paraphrasers who understand Paul to be referring to the Christian's new life after the death of the old man sometimes take the liberty of modifying the noun "life" with the adjective "new" or "real" (or both), though neither adjective exists in the Greek text. Versions which add one or both of these adjectives in Colossians 3:3 include [*The Amplified Bible*](#), [*The Amplified Bible Classic Edition*](#), the [*Easy-to-Read Version*](#), the [*Expanded Bible*](#), the [*International Children's Bible*](#), the [*Living Bible*](#), the [*Message*](#), the [*New Century Version*](#), the [*New Life Version*](#), [*The Voice*](#) and the [*Worldwide English New Testament*](#). To stress the fact that this new life begins here and now, the *Jerusalem Bible* renders *zoe* as "now the life you have."

"Life" is the Greek feminine noun *zoe*, (*Strong's* #2222), appearing 134 times in the New Testament. Its first use is in Matthew 7:14. The English language uses this Greek word in "zoo," "zoology," and related terms.

[12] I Thessalonians 4:17 provides a second witness that some Christians will be alive at the appearing of Christ, at the time of the first resurrection: "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."