**DEATH AND THE CHRISTIAN**

An Overview and Summary

An At-Home Bible Study for Reflection

Study guide based on the English Standard Version (ESV)

While we were created in “the image of God” (Gen. 1:27), and are, therefore, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14), we are now also inheritors of the Fall into Sin (Rom. 5:12) and are, therefore, “by nature children of wrath . . . dead in our trespasses” (Eph. 2:3-4). The consequence of our bondage to Sin is death (Ezek. 18:20a; Rom. 6:23a).

Left to ourselves (both in being and behavior), death inevitably masters or enslaves us and has the final word. However, “as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). “The sting of death is sin . . . but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 15:57). The one who trusts in Christ will die physically, but it is God who now has the final word – the Resurrection! God’s Word is the sole source of our hope and assurance (Rom. 8:1-39!).

In Holy Baptism God graciously unites the sinner with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-11). Thus, the Christian has already “died” and is already eternally “alive” (Rom. 6:22).

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Before moving on:

(1) The Greek word “*psyche*” is commonly and correctly translated as “soul.” It is helpful, however, to understand this concept in a fuller sense. “*Psyche*” is also rightly translated by terms such as “breath of life” (as in Gen. 2:7), “life-principle,” “person,” “inner self.”

In light of that fuller sense, consider the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “My soul is very sorrowful” (Matt. 26:38) conveys the idea that in his inmost and truest being Jesus was agonizing in Gethsemane. Likewise, when Mary exclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46), she is praising the Lord from her inmost and truest being.

The “soul” (our “breath of life,” our inmost and truest being, our self) is a gift of God’s love – both a gift of creation and a gift of redemption – without the breath of God there is no life (Is. 42:5).

(2) There is a philosophical concept (generally attributable to Plato, 427-347 BC) which claims that a human being is comprised of two distinct essences: an immortal (and essentially good/divine) soul and a mortal (and essentially evil/temporal) body. The struggles humans face on earth are the result of these two separate realities in conflict; until, at last, death frees the imprisoned soul from the body and allows it to return its rightful “home.”

While the Bible certainly speaks of “body” and “soul,” it is speaks differently from this philosophical concept – for, at least, two basic reasons:

(a) According to the Bible, God is the creator of both body and soul – both were created “very good” (Gen. 1:31) and both have fallen to Sin (Ps. 51:5). As Jesus is simultaneously God and man, so also the human being is simultaneously body and soul. Furthermore, as we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, we believe in a salvation that climaxes “in the resurrection of the body.”

(b) In the above mentioned concept, death in and of itself is the victory (a release from all that weighs us down, a release that occurs because of our very nature). According to the Bible, death is the consequence of Sin (an enemy which cannot be conquered by humans themselves). Death can be conquered only by what God has done for us though Christ (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

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How is Sin and its consequence, death, overcome?

God “made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” As the Sinner for us, Jesus died for our sins (John 19:30, 33; 1 Cor. 15:3). It is important to note that because he was the Sinner in our stead, Jesus did not avail himself of his divine power to conquer death, but rather God the Father raised him from the dead (Acts 10:9c-10a; Rom. 4:23c-24; Col. 2:11-12 – the mystery of the Holy Trinity at work).

Although “the wages of sin is death,” God offers humankind a solution in his Son (Rom. 6:23) – a solution which we receive by faith (Rom. 3:23-26). And as result of this divine solution, even though the Christian dies, nonetheless, in Christ he or she still lives (John 11:25-26). In fact, the moment the Christian believes (trusts) in Christ, even while on earth and also in death, he or she has “eternal life” (John 3:16, 36; 6:54).

Death simply does not terminate the Christian’s life in Christ:

 Those who have died in the Lord are called “blessed” (Rev. 14:3).

 Those who have died in Christ, like Christians still living on earth, belong to the Lord (Rom. 14:8).

Those who have died in Christ truly “live” with the Lord (Mt. 22:32), receive “the crown of life,” escape “the second death” (Rev. 2:10-11), and become participants in God’s “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1).

 Those who have died in Christ now “rest from their labors” (Rev. 14:13).

Indeed, the Christian who has departed this life and is awaiting the Resurrection can be said to be in even better and more joyful state than the Christian remaining on earth (Phil. 1:21-23).

As the Christian “sleeps” (as it were) with the Lord in death (Dan. 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:13), he or she confidently and consciously awaits, as do the Christians still on earth, the Lord’s triumphal return and the End Time Resurrection when our salvation shall be fully consummated (John 5:28-29; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:16-17). Thus, in the words of the Nicene Creed “we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

While God’s Word comforts and assures us that death does not separate the believer from the Lord, the biblical emphasis is not so much on the interim between earthly life and the Resurrection, but rather squarely on the Resurrection itself. Thus, our hope and confidence rests upon God’s promise to bring life out of death (John 11:26-27; 1 Cor. 15:42-44; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Rev. 2:10, 21:1-4) – nothing in and of ourselves accomplishes our salvation; we are totally dependent upon God!

This emphasis on the End Time Resurrection as the consummation of our salvation is reflected in our Lutheran theological history. The Creeds place the emphasis on the Resurrection, as do the writings of Martin Luther and the Book of Concord. This led Franz Pieper (a distinguished theologian of the early LCMS) to write in his Christian Dogmatics (Vol. III, 511): “Holy Writ reveals but little of the state of the souls between death and the resurrection. In speaking of the last things, it directs our gaze primarily to Judgment Day and the events clustering around it.” This in no way diminishes the blissful state of those who have died in the Lord, but instead turns our focus on that which is the Bible’s focus, namely, the Second Coming of our Lord and the Resurrection of his people.

Because Christians are so confident that God will keep his promise and because the final Resurrection is such a sure and certain reality, we speak of it at times as if the consummation of our salvation had already come to pass. For example, Jesus showed St. John “the things that must soon take place” (Rev. 1:1); and, then later, brought that vision of the future into his present view (Rev. 21:1-4) – what was true for John is true also for us. And so we also commonly speak of “the saints above” and “the saints below;” and, as we attest in the Divine Service, we commune “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven” (experiencing God’s future as a present reality).

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Summary statements:

(1) All sinners die, because in and of themselves they cannot escape the bondage of death.

REJECTED:

 any concept that makes death “natural” or “normal.”

 any concept that suggests that sinners of themselves can determine their eternal destiny.

(2) What sinners absolutely cannot do for themselves, God has most assuredly done for them in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

REJECTED:

 any concept that allows human beings (in any way) to earn God’s “good graces.”

 any concept that diminishes the indispensable role which Christ plays in God’s plan of salvation.

(3) Because of Holy Baptism, the Christian has already died and is already eternally alive – a reality which physical death cannot nullify.

REJECTED:

 any concept which pretends that death is not real (is not the consequence of Sin).

 any concept which suggests that death either separates the Christian from his or her Lord or denies the full blessings of a relationship with the Lord.

(4) In death the Christian lives blissfully in the presence of God, awaiting the End Time Resurrection, which is the final consummation of his or her salvation (“the life everlasting,” “the life of the world to come”).

REJECTED:

 any concept that denies the reality of God and eternity (that only time and space are real).

 any concept which lessens the importance or urgency of the Lord’s Second Coming and his End Time Resurrection.