

Shorter Catechism 37
Deuteronomy 30
1 Thessalonians 4

“The Benefits of Christ at Death”

February 5, 2017

Friday evening I received word of the death of our brother Rob Meckley,
pastor of Cassopolis Church of God.

We are reminded once more that our life is fleeting.

Q. 37. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united in Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection.

Paul has some interesting language in 1 Thessalonians 4-5.

He refers to death as “sleep.”

Why?

He says in verse 10 that Christ died for us

so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

What does he mean?

Perhaps we need to back up a bit.

After all, before we can understand what benefits believers receive from Christ at death
we first need to know what *death* is!

1. What Is Death?

What is death?

Oh, well, that's obvious, right?

Death is the end of life--

when a person stops breathing

when their heart stops beating –

some would say, “when their spirit leaves their body.”

But all that tells me is what happens when someone dies.

What is death?

In the garden of Eden God told Adam that

"on the day in which you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
you will surely die."

Adam ate;

and through his sin, death entered the world.

Now we live in a world dominated by sin and death--
a world where death is considered normal--
the natural conclusion to life.

But it's not.

Death is abnormal;
it is unnatural.

Someday you will die.

Your body will lie cold and lifeless in a casket
and you will be packed away six feet under ground.
All your hopes and dreams will be over.
All your friends and family will come to your funeral
and then go on living without you.

But what happens to *you*?

What *is* death?

Nearly two thousand years ago Jesus wept in the garden of Gethsemane,
trembling at his impending death.

The next day he was crucified and he died--
yet as Acts 2:24 says,

"God raised him from the dead,
freeing him from the agony of death,
because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

Why?

Why could death not keep its hold on Jesus Christ?

What *is* death?

What is this *thing* that could not keep its hold on Jesus –
and yet this *thing* that has kept its hold on everyone else who has ever died!

a. Death Is Entering the Realm of God's Curse

Let me suggest a little different way of talking about death.

Death is entering into the sphere – or realm – of God's curse.

Death is not the end of your existence.

You cease to live when you die,
but that doesn't mean that you cease to exist.
Just because you are dead doesn't mean that you don't exist.

In death both your body and your soul die.

When your body dies, it begins to rot.
When your soul dies, it too begins to rot.

But neither the soul nor the body ceases to exist.
Death is a state of being—subsequent to life--
the difference is, as long as you are alive there is hope of blessing;
when you die, you enter the realm of God's curse.

As Paul tells us in Ephesians 2,
there is both a spiritual death and a physical death.
Unbelievers are "dead in their transgressions and sins"--
in other words, all those who are in Adam live under God's curse--
and therefore are spiritually dead.

Let's look briefly at some of the connections between death and cursing in the bible.

We start with Genesis 2 and 3 where God tells man that

“in the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you will surely die.”
And in the day that Adam ate of the tree
he was cast out of the garden of Eden –
cast out of the land of life – into the land of dust and death.

Why did God cast him out?

Lest he stretch out his hand also to the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.
Why would it be such a bad thing for man to live forever?
Because living forever in a state of sin and misery would be a living death.

In a sense Adam and Eve *died* that same day that they ate of the tree of knowledge.
They were cast out of the land of life,
and they entered the realm – the land of death.

We saw earlier in Dt. 30:15, when the Israelites were about to enter the promised land,
--a new garden of Eden, you might say--

Moses stood before them and said,

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."

If the Israelites loved and obeyed God,

he would bless them and give them abundant life in the land,

but if the Israelites disobeyed and turned away from God,

then he would curse them and they would be destroyed

Then in verse 19, Moses says:

"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Now choose life, so that you and your children may live

and that you may love the Lord your God,

listen to his voice,

and hold fast to him.

For the Lord is your life,

and he will give you many years

in the land he swore to give to your fathers,

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Notice the language connecting blessing and life, cursing and death.
And of course death is the ultimate curse,
because death is the absolute end of life--
no blessing can come to someone who is dead!
He who dies with the most toys--still dies!
But also notice that Moses declares that "the Lord is your life."
Life is found in the presence and favor of God.

The same idea may be found in the book of Proverbs,
as it contrasts Wisdom and Folly.

In chapter 8, verse 34, Wisdom calls out,

"Blessed is the man who listens to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway,
For whoever finds me finds life
and receives favor from the Lord.
But whoever fails to find me harms himself;
all who hate me love death."

The blessing of God is found in life.

The curse of God is found in death.

Once you are dead,
that's it!

It's too late to seek wisdom or blessing.

Death is the final curse--

the fulfillment of God's curse which he pronounced upon Adam:

"dust you are and to dust you will return."

But in the book of Revelation when John sees the new heaven and the new earth,
he hears a loud voice saying that

God will now dwell with his people in the New Jerusalem,
so that "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,
for the old order of things has passed away." Rev 21:4.

Death is part of "the old order" –

but it will not be part of the New Jerusalem.

And in Revelation 22:3

as he looks at the river of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb,
John says, "There will be no more curse."

Again notice the connection between life as a blessing given by God,
and death as God's curse.

But here, death and curse are said to be "no more".

Something has happened.
Something has changed:

b. Christ Has Entered the Realm of God's Curse in His Death

And here we are brought to our second point:

Yes, death is the realm of God's curse,
But Jesus Christ has entered into the realm of God's curse in his death,
and he has been raised out of death into life and blessing.
And in his death,
Jesus has destroyed the power of death,
Or as John Owen put it,
We see the death of death in the death of Christ.

But this brings us back to a question we asked earlier, *why*?
Why could death not hold on to Jesus?
After all, death had been successful at keeping hold of everyone else?

There are two reasons why death could not hold Jesus:
First, as God he had life in himself--as John 5:26 says.
But second, as man he was without sin--
and if the wages of sin is death,
then Death had no business trying to get its greedy little fingers on Christ!
Because Jesus alone did not deserve to die.
He alone did not deserve the curse of God.
Yet he took it for us--and for our salvation.
That is the love of our Savior demonstrated in full:
that although he was pure and innocent,
he took God's curse upon himself,
so that we might receive his blessing.

Keep in mind that when Jesus died, he did not cease to exist.
That is why we can say that in some way "God died."
It wasn't that the second person of the Trinity ceased to exist,
but rather, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God,
entered the realm of God's curse,
and became a curse for us.
He took our death,
so that we might share in his life.

When Jesus hung there on the cross,
death came for him.
The grave opened its mouth to swallow him up.
It looked as though Jesus had given up without a struggle.
But that was the biggest mistake of Death's life--so to speak--

because when Death took hold of Jesus Christ--
the one who was the living God and the righteous man--
when Death brought the eternal Son of God down to the grave--
when Death came for the one who had life in himself,
Death died.
Death itself came under the wrath and curse of God.

The power of his divine life overcame all his enemies and ours,
yet it is also by the power of his human life and obedience
that his victory was given meaning for us.

After all,
if the one who is fully God and fully man has defeated sin and death,
then sin and death have no power over those who have been united to him.

As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:14
“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,
even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

c. Therefore, Those Who Are United to Christ Will Never Die

After all, those who have died and been raised with Christ
can never enter into the sphere of God's curse

As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 –
“God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.”

All those who are in Christ have been united to his death and resurrection.
This means that sin has no more power of you than it does over Christ.
It also means that death has no power over you than it does over Christ.

In John 11:25-26, Jesus said,
"I am the resurrection and the life.
He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;
and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Those who live and believe in Christ receive life from him.
How does this work?
Jesus said in John 6
that unless you eat his flesh and drink his blood you have no life in you.
Today as we partake of the Lord's Supper we are feeding upon Christ.
Today as the Word of God is proclaimed to you,
you are receiving the Words of eternal life which flow from Christ's throne.

And this has always been true:
in the Garden of Eden there was the tree of life--

as long as Adam and Eve ate of the tree, they would live forever;
in Deuteronomy Moses said that "the Lord is your life"--
only in him could the Israelites find blessing in the land;
in Proverbs, "whoever finds Wisdom finds life
and receives favor from the Lord";
in Revelation we saw the river of life
flowing through the city of God,
bringing healing to the nations;
and in Ephesians 2--
the passage which talks about being dead in transgressions and sins,
Paul tells us that God, who is rich in mercy,
"made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--
it is by grace you have been saved.
And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him
in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."

You are no longer under God's curse.
You have been brought out of the land of death,
into the land of life and of blessing in Christ Jesus.
And just as God did not abandon his Son to the grave,
so also he will never abandon you who are in Christ.

2. So What Happens to Believers at Death?

a. The Souls of Believers Are Made Perfect in Holiness and Immediately Pass into Glory

Therefore, when believers die we do not enter the realm of death,
but we remain united to Christ until the resurrection.

How does this work?

Our catechism is useful at this point:

"The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness,
and do immediately pass into glory;
and their bodies, being still united to Christ,
do rest in their graves till the resurrection."

Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 5 of being "absent from the body," but "present with the Lord"
suggesting that there is some sort of intermediate state where our souls are "unclothed"
(to use the term that Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 5).

But Paul never suggests that this is a particularly desirable state.

Our longing is not to be *unclothed* but to be *further clothed* –
with our resurrection bodies!

The Christian's hope is *not* the intermediate state.

We do not eagerly await floating around as disembodied souls.

That's not what we long for!

We long for the resurrection – the redemption of our *bodies*!

b. Their Bodies, Being Still United to Christ, Remain in Their Graves until the Resurrection

The key to understanding the catechism here is in the second half of the answer:
our "bodies, being still united to Christ,
do rest in their graves till the resurrection."

Too often we assume that the body is mortal,
but the soul is immortal.

But just because your body will decompose does not mean that it will cease to exist!

When you die,
your body does not cease to exist,
rather, for those who are in Christ,
your body remains united to Christ,
just as your soul remains united to Christ.

There are some who deny that the Bible teaches that there is any intermediate state.

They suggest that all of the passages which talk about dying
and going straight to be with the Lord assume a sort of time-warp.
In this view, when you die you go straight to Judgment Day.
After all, God is not bound by time,
and it would be no problem for him to transport all those who die
directly to the resurrection.

This view would explain why Paul always seems to talk about our death
in the context of the resurrection--
and it would also maintain the integral unity of soul and body
which the Scripture everywhere seems to assume.

But I'm not convinced.

Yes, the separation of soul from body is unthinkable--
and a disembodied existence is absolutely unhuman.
To be human means you have a soul and a body,
and to exist in any other form would be less than fully human.

But that's the whole point about death;

death is unnatural.
Death is abnormal.
Death is the ultimate sphere of God's curse.
Death is unhuman.
And Death is the radical dissolution of who you are.
Dust you are and to dust you shall return.
The breath of God which gave life to man is withdrawn--

and man's body is scattered to the wind.

And yet even as you are being dissolved,
you don't cease to exist.
That is why death is such torment to those who are in Adam.
That is why death is such a curse!
Because even though your very being is rent apart like a rag that is torn in pieces,
you cannot cease to exist!

Eternal destruction is exactly the right word.
Normally when a thing is destroyed it ceases to exist.
But you cannot stop existing.
And so the destruction of the wicked can never end.

But if believers in Jesus Christ die,
doesn't that mean that our souls and our bodies are torn apart as well?

Take a look at I Thess. 4:14.

Let me give you a literal translation:
"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again,
so also God will bring with him those who sleep through Jesus."

Don't limit this to the souls of those who are in Christ--but the whole person.
Also, sleep in this context means the same thing as death.
The Bible often equates the two.

Notice verse 16 where "the dead *in Christ* will rise first."
What rises?

The body.
So when Paul says that the dead in Christ will rise,
he is plainly saying that your *body* remains *in Christ*
while you are in the grave.

Those who sleep in Jesus, and the dead in Christ are the same people,
and they are said to rise--meaning the bodily resurrection.
Not just their souls, but their very bodies are united with Christ until the resurrection.
which is why our catechism makes a point of saying,
believers' "bodies, being still united to Christ,
do rest in their graves until the resurrection."

Those who are in Christ are united to him, both body and soul,
and as Paul says in Romans 8,
"I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons,
neither the present nor the future,

nor any powers,
neither height nor depth,
nor anything else is all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Or as the Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the Christian's comfort:
"in life or in death I belong *both body and soul* to my faithful savior Jesus Christ."

You who have been united to Christ will never face the terrors of death.
Yes, you will pass out of this phase of existence--
but your body and your soul remain united to Christ,
and so you know that death will have no sting for you.
Because as Paul says in I Cor. 15:56,
"the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God!
He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Yes, death is the sphere of God's curse--
and it is a horrible thing for those who are apart from Christ,
but for you, my friends,
you have the assurance that Christ will protect you from its terrors.
When the day comes for you to stare death in the face,
you know that it is weak and powerless--
a mere phantom next to the glorious power of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He has defeated death,
and taken it captive.
Death is now but our entrance into the glorious presence of our Savior.