



Gospel / life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 6: Free From Death's Grip Into Abundant Life

"O, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24)

This cry of exasperation issues from Paul as he considers the tension of the life of a person belonging to God who has every desire and intention to serve, obey and love God (Rom. 7:22), but who finds that there is another power at work in his body seeking to drive him in the opposite direction of disobedient self-interested egoism (Rom. 7:18-21, 23). The reality of living in a "body of humiliation" this side of the resurrection into glory (Php. 3:21) is that of a daily tasting of death, and of sin being an ever-present problem.

Paul doesn't end with the lament, but goes on to praise and thank God the Father for His saving action in Jesus Christ (Rom. 7:25a). But even this thanksgiving is not a negation of all that he has said before (Rom. 7:25b): this whole struggle with death and with sin is lived out in the context of the triumphant reign of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The abundant life that we have in Christ is experienced and known by faith, not by sight, as we face sin and death very close to us. "In this sense the ever-present problem is not, in the ultimate, any problem."¹

What is life?

The realities of *life* and *death* in the Scriptures are not simply biological matters. *Life* and *death* have spiritual and relational significance.

Life is more than existence. The account of creation in Genesis 2:7 indicates the establishing of man's bodily existence by the hand of the LORD God, and then of his coming to life by the breathing into him by the LORD God of His own breath. Somehow the man through this breathing in of God became a sharer in God's own life—it seems a parallel to the man and the woman being made in the image of God in Genesis 1:26ff. This life of God again is not simply God's existing, but rather the quality of His being in holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love. So then also, as life is breathed into the man, he finds his life in a corresponding holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love in God.

To live, then, is to relate to God rightly, in obedience to His commands and purposes, and to relate to the rest of creation rightly, in fulfilment of God's commands and

¹ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Dear Death or Dark Devourer*, NCPI:Blackwood, 1989, p. 3

purposes. Created life is then essentially *relational*—obedient relationship to God, and relationship to the rest of creation in fulfilment of God’s declared purposes. Any departure from this is departure from life.

When Jesus was asked what needs to be done to know eternal life (Matt. 19:16-22), he answered by pointing to the law of God—“keep the commandments.” As he went into a description of which commandments, he focussed on those that dealt with human relationships with one another. Life is known as we seek not to murder, deprive, steal, wrong or deceive one another, but rather to give life, give gifts, give truth and give honour to one another. The man who asked was clearly despondent at the answer: he thought he’d done all these things but had not found life in them. There was still a lack. That lack was highlighted by Jesus’ answer that the man sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and so have treasure in heaven, and then come following Christ. The man was not interested in treasure in heaven—he was not interested in life with God, knowing God, loving God, being loved and known by God. He loved his little ‘treasures’ and so missed the great treasure of life. Even his love for others in keeping commandments had its cut out point—all would be done except the losing of treasures! That is really no love at all. All true love involves sacrifice. Finally all relationship at a human level really only is true when it is lived out from true relationship with God. And there is no true relationship with God that does not flow out immediately in love to all people and creation.

What is death?

Death then is more than the ceasing of biological life. The man and the woman in the garden were warned that in the day that they ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge and good and evil, against the protective prohibition of God, they would die (Gen. 2:16-17). Satan’s temptation of them consisted finally in a flat rejecting of the word of God—“You will not die (Gen. 3:4).” When they ate, they did not, in that die, come to immediate physical cessation of life. And yet they died that day—relationally to God, one another and all creation. In one sense they came alive to themselves, aware beyond healthiness of their desiring and wanting, but also they died to themselves that day, having to cover themselves as they were ashamed of who they had become. To be alive to yourself, to be obsessed by your own situation, your own needs, against the situation and needs faced by others, is to be dead even while you live (1Tim. 5:6). We find ourselves dead in trespasses and sins. How urgent that we die to ourselves and come alive to God!

There is a connection between ‘biological’ and ‘spiritual’ death. It is through the first human’s sin that death as a power enters the world (Rom. 5:21) and death has now spread out across the face of the earth as a terrible tyrant. One of the judgments of sin is the limitation of death. We do not have open to us anymore the gift of the tree of life; our lives come to an end. Our bodies are subject to corruption. This impending physical death, which human beings are adept at avoiding in their thinking, has a deep affect on human existence. Primarily it comes to us as fear (Heb. 2:15). Fear arises because first comes death, and after that the judgment. We must all appear before the judgment seat of God (Rom. 14:10; 2Cor. 5:10—“of Christ”). The sting of death is sin—death has power and tyranny over us because of sin’s guilt, and our liability to judgment. This is no academic or simply theological point: death or the approach of death brings anguish, terrors, tumult, horror to the heart and soul of men and women.

From death to life

The death of Jesus Christ was for the sins of the world. "He tasted death for every man." "He poured out his soul unto death." He was "obedient unto death." In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was "exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death." Jesus faced the reality of death which faces us, more fully and openly than ever we are able to face it ourselves. We are told that, in his dying we all died (2Cor. 5:14). All death was taken up and encompassed in the death of Christ.

In his death, Jesus dealt with our objective guilt before God our Father, bearing our rebellion and sin in his body and bearing the wrath of God due to such sinning. "He was delivered over to death for our sins..." "Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree." "He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself." "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

Whilst the cross may have looked like the victory of sin and death over Christ, in fact it was just the opposite: his victory over these powers and Satan who uses them to enslave the human race. For believers the death of Jesus at the cross neutralised and destroyed the tyranny of sin and death over them. Death has no sting and the grave no victory. The penalty of sin has been borne, the evil of sin has fully played itself out, the power of sin has been broken and the pollution of sin has been detoxified and cleansed.

What is essential in all this is to know that life is given not simply as the by-product of the death of Christ, but as participation in the triumphant life of the risen Lord Jesus. Life is linked to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." "And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

The new life we enjoy is one of reconciliation to God, and so of renewed connectedness to one another and to all creation.

Anfechtungen and death

This life is now lived out in a world in which we find death and sin around us and in us. The experience of Christians in the face of death is often one of *anfechtung*, deep and sorrowful distress and anxiety. Mature, experienced, godly men and women may be struck with dread in the face of death. The memories of wrongs done and an anxious anticipation of judgment to come brings distress. The purpose of God in these trials is to cause us to pray that the Holy Spirit would write deeper into us the reality of all that Jesus Christ, the great conqueror of sin, death and the devil, has accomplished. Confidence in the face of death is linked to faith, but not grounded in it. Faith arises at the sight of Jesus Christ. Our confidence comes from His victory: our faith is our feeble clinging to a rock which is stronger and stabler than us.