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EDINBURGH

Dead, then Alive

We tend to think of death as the end – but Christianity tells us something different, something better.

Paul's insight into our present spiritual condition explains why the world is in the state that it is. It's a problem more profound and inescapable than all the experts, politicians, educators, entrepreneurs, medics, counsellors, theorists, and priests could ever solve. Paul is going to paint a very dark portrait, a scene of death, to help us see things as they really are – especially to see ourselves as we really are. But does not have to be the end of the story.

Life has moments when things profoundly, suddenly change. Paul wants Christians to realise what the greatest turning point in their life is, so he paints a dark picture of death, and then a glorious picture of life – and credits God as being the turning-point between these two scenes.

Scene 1: Death

Paul describes us (before our conversion) as the walking dead because we were spiritually dead to God. If God is the Giver of life, to ignore, reject, replace, or rebel against Him is to deprive ourselves of life.

All of us, Paul says, do this: our lives are lived in pursuit of our own ends and independent of God. (How “moral” they are is irrelevant when this is the case.) We put our hope in other things – people, causes, money, religions... We consider these things the ultimate thing, making sacrifices to achieve them, our happiness depends on them, we look to them for meaning and purpose from them. They set the direction of our lives: the way we think, the decisions we make, the actions we take. Even if they

are good in themselves, this is deadly behaviour because it alienates us from the true God, the Giver of life. The Bible's summary description of this kind of behaviour is the "flesh", or "sinful nature".

Physical death follows. John Piper: *"The horror of death is God's appointed response to human sin. Death, by God's design, is the mirror of the moral outrage of human rebellion against God."* Romans 6:23 tells us, "the wages of sin is death." It's what we get for what we've done.

Paul also says that not only do we live this deadly way as individuals, but we create societies in opposition to God as well. We live lives of death and encourage everyone around us to do the same. God is marginalised, mocked, replaced. It's so prevalent that we hardly notice that we're in a polluted world, inhaling noxious fumes which we encourage others to breathe in too.

He also speaks of a personal force opposed to God at work in all of this too. Charles Baudelaire (paraphrased in *The Usual Suspects*): *"The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."*

What is God's response to this? Paul says we are "children of wrath." John Stott defines God's wrath as His *"steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations."*

Miroslav Volf: *"I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalised beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love."*

Maybe we nod at that, but then refuse to see ourselves as involved in the same type of opposition to God. Don't deceive yourself, Paul says, you're different only in degree: we all rebel against God, and we all hurt others along the way in doing so. Jesus said that a lustful or violent thought are as deadly as adultery or murder – they all incur the anger of God. We are “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Hell – the absence of God and all His blessings, the logic of our lives of spiritual death – follows. Our response can be summarised in *Isaiah 6:5* or *Luke 23:41*.

Scene 2: Life

The turning point in this terrible situation is the start of *verse 4*: “But God...” In Christianity, death need not be the end.

What happened Jesus did things for us that we couldn't do. God united us with Jesus so that what is true of Him can now be true of us. His perfect life, His sacrificial death, His resurrection, His ascension to glory.

He puts His life in our dead bodies and begins to work glorious change in us. This isn't a reanimation like someone in a medical drama who is given the shock treatment. The heartrate machine had flat-lined but then started going again weakly as the person recovers. Instead we get a new heart, beating beautifully, pumping strength and life around the previously dead body.

What He starts in us, He will finish. We are being transformed into His likeness, the perfect man who can never die, who forever receives the happiness and kindness and love of God. It's a life of delighted obedience, of loving God and loving all those around us. It changes our hearts, our minds, our motivations, and so it flows out of us into everything we do. It begins now, and will be completed when what is spiritually true now, that we're seated in Heavenly places with God, will be true physically too. Instead of separation from God and exile from every good thing He's made, we will be with Him in His renewed creation, with forever to enjoy it and Him.

Why did God do this? There was nothing creditable about us but God is rich in mercy, abounding in love, full of grace and kindness.

The thief on the cross next to Jesus shows us how we can this wonderful new life. With nothing to offer and nowhere to go, recognising his guilt, he asked, “Jesus, remember

me when you come into your kingdom.” He went from death to life, in an instant, proving John 3:16. Two thieves died alongside Jesus; one of them never left His side again. All of us are like one or the other of them.

However dramatic or otherwise your story of how God brought you to life is, the fact is that you were dead and now you’re alive in Him. Don’t allow foolish pride to convince you that there is or was any moral superiority in you, and don’t think that you’re too bad for God to really love you. Timothy Keller: *“We’re far worse than we ever imagined, and far more loved than we could ever dream.”*

Questions:

- Why do you think it’s important for us to realise that we were spiritually dead before God made us alive? In what areas of our lives is this particularly significant?
 - Did Miroslav Volf’s argument for God’s wrath (above) convince you?
 - Which of the two parts of Timothy Keller’s statement do you find harder to accept: that we’re far worse than we imagine or more loved than we could ever dream? In other words, are you more likely to take your salvation for granted, or fail to realise the full extent of God’s love for you?
 - How can seeing people as spiritually dead affect how we evangelise and do social action?
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Image used on slideshow was Rembrandt’s Christ Crucified Between the Two Thieves (“The Three Crosses”).



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