

Overcoming the Finality of Human Death



*"O Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?"*
(I Corinthians 15:55)

Our humanity is manifest in our sinful nature. We are born mortal and therefore inevitably naturally prone and inclined to sin. One of the privileges of being a Christian is the availability, at our disposal, of forgiveness once we repent and ask for it. However, being a Christian means so much more than just having our sins forgiven. It is striving for goodness through good works; journeying toward Heaven, the ultimate destination, where we will attain immortality and eternal glory. Being a Christian is essentially centered around "being alive".

I. Death Defined

Commonly, everyone accepts the fact that physical death is the ending of the physical part of man, his human nature. The early church fathers eloquently and succinctly defined death in their writings.

According to Tertullian (c.210) "...death is the debt of nature. It is the obvious separation of the body and soul."

According to Lactantius (c.304-313) "...death is the dissolving of the nature of human beings." And like Tertullian, Lactantius concurs that death is the separation of the body and soul.

Salvation began with death. The death of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the Holy Cross paid for sin and purchased us with His blood. The Lord Jesus Christ gave salvation through death. Again, salvation was begun and given through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unless we share in the Lord Jesus Christ's death; we will have to endure the second death of torment in the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:14). St. Paul teaches us, *"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death..."* (Romans 6:3-4).

Salvation does not end with baptism; but is perpetuated through death. St. Paul warns us, *"Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey it in its lust"* (Romans 6:11-12).

In its simplicity, we entered into salvation through death (the Holy Sacrament of Baptism); and our bodies must continue to be dead to worldly lusts.

The Ninth Hour Prayer in the Agpeya says:

"O, Who tasted death in the flesh in the ninth hour for our sake, we the sinners, put to death our carnal lusts, O Christ, our God, and deliver us. Let my supplication draw close before You, O Lord; according to Your Word give me understanding. Let my petition come before Your presence; according to Your Word revive me."

II. Reason for Death

Theophilus (c. 180) states, "If a vessel being molded has some flaw in it, it is remolded or remade, so that the vessel can become new and entire. So also it happens to man by death. For somehow, or other, he is broken up, that he may rise in the resurrection whole. By this I mean, spotless, righteous, and immortal."

Irenaeus (c. 180) looks at death from another perspective. He alludes to man's death as a termination to man's sinful nature. For with death, man ceases to sin. Death puts an end to sin by the dissolution of the flesh. This dissolution should take place in earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, dies that he may begin to live with God. Irenaeus further explains that although the body is dissolved at the appointed time, because of original sin and disobedience, it is placed as it were, in the crucible of the earth to be re-cast again. When it is re-cast, it will not be a corruptible body but rather a pure one no longer subjected to decay. To each body, its own soul will be restored.

Tertullian backs this up more strongly by saying, "...Death resulted from man's arbitrary choice, if he had not sinned, he certainly would not have died."

Methodius tells this beautiful story which corresponds to the resurrection of man...

"An eminent artisan once created a noble statue, made of gold. It was beautifully proportioned in all of its membersexquisite to look upon. But there was an evil man who was so jealous over this beautiful statue that he could no longer bear to see its beauty. So in his envy, he mutilated the statue, destroying its elegance. Upon discovering this, the artificer decided to cast the statue over again. He had bestowed much pain, labor, and care upon the statue. And he wanted it to be free from defect. So his only choice was to melt the statue down and then remold it to its original beauty. Now, God's plan seems to be similar. Upon seeing man, His most beautiful work, corrupted by envious treachery, He could not bear to leave man in such a condition. For He loved man and He did not want man to remain blemished forever and to carry blame for all eternity. So He dissolves man again back to His original materials. In this way, by remolding man, all of man's blemishes can waste away and disappear. So the melting down of the statue corresponds to the resurrection after death" (c.290).

Lactantius (c.304-313) provocatively asserts that "If death was appointed at a fixed age, man would become most arrogant and would be destitute of all humanity. For almost all the rights of humanityby which we are united with each otherarise from the fear of death and the consciousness of frailty."

III. The Glorious Resurrection Defies Death

1) The Glorious Resurrection teaches us not to be afraid of earthly death.

We pray the Lord's Prayer...

Our Father Who art in Heaven; hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom Come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our bread of the morrow (the coming world) and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, in Christ Jesus our Lord. For Thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.

Cyprian fundamentally questions, "How preposterous and absurd it is, that while we ask that the will of God should be done, yet when God calls and summons us from this world, we do not at once obey the command of His will. Do we wish to be honored with heavenly rewards by Him to whom we come unwillingly? Why, then do we pray and ask that the Kingdom of Heaven may come, if the captivity of earth delights us?"

St. John, the Holy Gospel author, records this instruction conducting the Lord Jesus Christ's message, "*Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. You have heard Me say to you, 'I am going away and coming back to you.' If you love Me you would rejoice because I have said, 'I am going to the Father,' for My Father is greater than I*" (John 14:27-28).

Cyprian (c.250) supports this by writing, "No one should be made sad by death. In living, there is labor and peril. In dying, there is peace and the certainty of resurrection."

2) The Glorious Resurrection teaches us that dying is not a loss but a gain.

"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Cyprian also supports this by summarizing death,

"When the dear ones whom we love depart from the world, we should rejoice rather than grieve. Our brethren who are freed from this world by the Lord's summons are not to be lamented. For we know that they are not lost. Rather, they are sent before us. Departing from us, they precede us as travelers as navigators are accustomed to do. They should be envied, not bewailed! The black garments should not be taken upon us here, when they have already taken white garments there... The Gentiles can deservedly and rightly criticize us that we mourn as though our dead were extinct and lost. For, we say they are alive with God... There is no advantage in setting forth virtue by our words, but then destroying the truth by our deeds... The Holy Spirit teaches by Solomon that those who please God are taken from here sooner and are more quickly set free. Otherwise, while they are delaying longer in this world, they might be polluted with the pollution of this world..."

When the day of our summons arrives, we should come without delay. We should come without resistance to the Lord, when He Himself calls us. Although this should always be done by God's servants, it should much more be done now---now that the world is collapsing... We should ever and a day reflect that we have renounced the world and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. Who would not hurry to return to his own country, if he has been placed in a foreign land? Who that is hurrying to return to his own friends would not eagerly desire a prosperous gale so that he might embrace those dear to him even sooner. We regard Paradise as our country. We have already begun to consider the patriarchs as our parents. Why do we

not hasten and run so that we may behold our country? Why do we not hurry to greet our parents? For a great number of our dear ones are awaiting us there" (c.250).

Many early church fathers believed death was a stage of restoration. "Since then, there is certainty as to the resurrection of the dead, grief for death is needless...For why should you grieve, if you believe that your loved one has not perished?...We wound the Lord Jesus Christ when we do not accept with equanimity the summoning out of this world of anyone by Him, as if they were to be pitied" (Tertullian (c.200).

3)The Glorious Resurrection teaches us hope.

"I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as the others who has no hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13).

The "looked for" salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ has given us through His Glorious Resurrection, is our hope. Our hope lies in our striving while here upon this earth. It moves us to do the works that God would want us all to do. The work of the Lord leads us to the hope of eternal life.

"Therefore my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor will not be in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:58).

For those who love the Lord, the hope of eternal life presents itself to those who especially strive to worship Him under dire circumstances. Those wounded and the one slain in the midst of the multiple church worship service attacks in Alexandria, Egypt were abiding in the work of the Lord. While continuing steadfastly in prayer and spiritual preparation for the Holy Week to come, unassuming church members were attacked by shock and surprise while guards put in place to protect the praying Coptic Christian population gazed upon the chaos.

It is my firm belief that those who were hurt and the one who lost his life had had their hope and trust in the Lord's power and His eternal goodness.

The Lord Jesus Christ has overcome the suffering of this world; and so shall His faithful followers. It is at this time, especially in celebrating the Glorious Resurrection, that we contemplate on the Lord Jesus Christ both the source and goal of our hope. The resurrection takes us from a world of evil actions, (man against man), in which everything will eventually be abolished after a time; to a heavenly world free from sin where men will live with each other in brotherly love, purity, and peace everlasting.

For the small children and the elderly (as well as those adults) forced to witness violence and bloodshed in their beloved churches, the Glorious Resurrection will now take on a new spiritual sense as their hardships certainly will not be in vain. It will forever bring forth a higher level of spiritual understanding, the Lord Jesus Christ will be even more endeared and the true meaning of the Glorious Resurrection stronger and more engrained in their hearts than during previous festal celebrations.

It is plainly written, "*The spirit Himself will bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together*" (Romans 8:16,17).

Indeed, our eternal hope lies in continuing to progress and do the works of the Lord. The works of man are either good or bad. Bad works cause man to lose his salvation and promise of eternal life. Good works are essential and necessary for salvation. Salvation does not just happen through simply believing, getting baptized becoming worthy of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not saved instantly without good works.

In the last day, judgment will be according to good works. Works make us worthy of the blood shed for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. Our will through our good works must join with the Holy Spirit that works within us and become one with Him.

Addressing and encouraging the churches of Asia Minor (giving them hope) which were being persecuted; St. Peter gives us some further insight into the "elect" of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, the elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:1-2).

Who are the elect? The elect are those called according to the foreknowledge of God. St. Peter speaks of God's people "the elect" as aliens in a strange place with no intent of making the place one of permanent resident. St. Peter also states that "the elect" were "the elect" with the foreknowledge of the Lord.

Thus, we are the "elect of the Lord" having the right to salvation through baptism. We are "elect" through baptism having obtained through it the right to salvation. Yet as "elect", we have not obtained the salvation of eternal glory which we must continually strive to obtain. St. Paul explains this by saying, "*Therefore I endure all things for the elects' sakes that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory*" (II Timothy 2:10).

Obtaining the salvation of eternal glory will be through endurance; producing good works. In spite of calamity and hardship that lie before us, nothing will prevent the progression of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said,

"But, he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13). During this Feast of the Glorious Resurrection let us all give thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ Who "abolished death by His death, and manifested resurrection by His resurrection."

Bishop Youssef,
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

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