

Biblical Theology of Death and Resurrection

Why this World Matters

Introduction

- According to Paul in 1 Cor 15, the resurrection of Christ is of “first importance”—the central doctrine of Christian faith
- This was not always acknowledged, which is why Paul says: “but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to *light* through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:10)
- This is key to the biblical theology of death and resurrection, affirming both the light shed by the gospel and the ignorance of earlier times: “They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant” (Mk 9:10)

Death in the OT

- God punished the first human sin with death
- Humans were not created immortal since they had to eat from the tree of life to live forever and since the death sentence was fulfilled by their banishment from that tree (Gen 3:22-23)
- Hos 13:14 envisages God ransoming Israel from the power of death, which Paul sees accomplished in Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 1:55, 57)
- Isa 25:7-8: "On this mountain he will **destroy the shroud** that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸he will **swallow up death forever**. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth."

Death in the OT

- The NT cites this passage in relation to Christ's victory over death (1 Cor 15:54, 57; cf. Rev 21:4)
- For Christians death may be the last enemy, but it is also a glorious transition
- The above themes are actually very rare in the OT
- Generally, death is presented as the natural end of life, usually recorded without comment
- The NT echoes the theme of natural death in describing the believer's death as "sleep" (1 Cor 15:51)
- However, the NT seldom portrays death as simply the end of life

Death in the OT

- Generally, the OT envisages one fate for the dead—the **underworld** (*sheol*), a sleepy, shadowy existence in the depths of the earth (e.g., Isa 14:9-11; Eze 32:17-32)
- While the underworld is the only fate described, it is envisaged mostly for the wicked rather than the righteous, with a few exceptions:
- “They are like sheep and are destined to die; death will be their shepherd (but the upright will prevail over them in the morning). Their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions.
¹⁵ But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself” (Ps 49:14-15)

Death in the OT

- Alongside of this general picture, there are rare glimpses of a more **positive afterlife**
- God “took” Enoch (Gen 5:24), and Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:11)
- These are unique, for psalmists and prophets do not generally pray for a similar fate
- There are a few OT passages that envisage some form of continued communion with God beyond death, but they are not clearly defined (Pss 16:10; 49:15; 73:24)

Death in the NT

- In Paul's letters, he describes death for believers as the present "earthly tent" being replaced with "our heavenly dwelling" to avoid being "naked," i.e., in a disembodied intermediate state:
- "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, ³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor 5:1-4)

Death in the NT

- Yet, elsewhere Paul seems to talk about death as being immediately in Christ's presence:
- ²³ "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Phil 1:23)
- ¹⁸ "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim 4:18)

Resurrection

- The OT does suggest that God can raise “awake” his people from the dead, but not the wicked
- “But your dead will live, LORD; their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy—your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead” (Isa 26:19; cf. 1 Sam 2:6)
- However, the idea of resurrection is not a central theme in the OT
- In the gospels, Jesus describes a resurrection state in which marriage is superfluous and death unknown:
- ³⁴“Jesus replied, ‘The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection” (Lu 20:34-36)

Resurrection

- Jesus then interprets Ex 3:6: Israel's God is the God of the living, so his relationship with the patriarchs is not broken by death and the dead must therefore rise (Lu 20:36-38)
- ³⁷ "But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive"
- Jesus also repeatedly tells his disciples of his coming death and resurrection (Mk 8:32), but they don't understand
- John portrays Jesus himself as the resurrection and life, which implies resurrection and eternal life for all believers (Jn 11:25-26)

Resurrection

- For Paul, Christ's resurrection is the foundation of Christian faith and hope (1 Cor 15)
- Jesus' resurrection happened as attested by eye-witness accounts
- Christians universally believe it; death came through Adam and resurrection through Christ
- This reality should profoundly affect our lifestyle
- The perishable "soul-animated" (*psychikon*) body will be raised an imperishable "spirit-animated" (*pneumatikon*) body
- Death itself will be "swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54)
- Christ's resurrection is thus the prototype of Christian experience

Why is Resurrection Important?

- “The message of the resurrection is that **this world matters**. That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won... If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense—then it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world—news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn’t just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all” (NT Wright 1997, 65-66).