

Passing Away

John 5:24-30

If I spoke to you about someone who had passed away, you would immediately think that I was speaking about death. Someone who has passed away is someone who has died. Sometimes we even shorten that expression, and speak of those who have died as those who have passed. Passed from life unto death.

Our text this morning uses that same expression with exactly the opposite meaning. Those who have passed, those who have passed away, are those who have passed from death unto life.

v.24

And so all of you, all of you who believe in God and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have all passed away. Unto life. You see, you used to be dead. As I often read in,

Eph.2:1 “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

You were dead, in trespasses and sin. That is, separated from God. You were by nature children of his wrath. And while you were still sinners, while you were still dead in your sins, God

made you alive, “together with Christ.” And God raised you up together with Christ. And God seated you together with Christ in the heavenly places. All of that has happened to you, if you have believed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. You have passed away. From death to life.

Let’s look at that more closely, and begin by examining the nature of death. What is death? What does it mean? And how is it that we were dead? Throughout Scripture, the image of death is used to define much more than a mere physical demise. Instead,

I. DEATH IS DEFINED AS BEING SUBJECT TO GOD’S JUDGMENT.

Notice that connection in,

v.24

The concept of death is used in parallel with the state of death. The verse is really about those who have come to life and escaped the judgment, and we will get to that in a few moments, but for now notice what the person escapes from. Judgment. Specifically, condemnation. The justice of God’s wrath. And that is the state of being dead.

And who are those who are dead?

A. Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are dead.

As Paul said in Ephesians 2, by nature, children of wrath. We are not, by nature, estranged from God with some hope of restoration if we would just work hard enough. We are not subject to the discipline of some middle ground, such as the Roman Catholic view of purgatory, a holding tank to which we will be sent upon our physical death until enough people still alive on earth do enough good works on our behalf or pray diligently enough for us.

This is not a sickness that is described, nor a temporary ailment. The image used is that of death. And despite the medical advances of our own day, there is no continuum of death. That is, the difference between death and life is not relative. Death is absolute. And there is a great chasm fixed between death and life.

Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are dead. They are in a state of death, separated from God and subject to his judgment as children of his wrath.

But, how, and when did that happen? How, and when, did man find himself in the state of death, subject to God's judgment? That's an easy question.

Gen.2:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

And at that moment, man died. He was separated from God, separated from the tree of life.

Gen. 3:24 "So [God] drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

It was right then that all of us died, in Adam. That is, as our representative, when Adam died and became subject to God's judgment and curse, by representing us he subjected all of us, all of his descendants, to the same fate as his own. We read of that,

Rom. 5:12 "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

It is explained clearly in our Shorter Catechism, Q.16. "The

covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him and fell with him, in his first transgression."

And specifically we find defined in Q.18 the misery of this death. "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever."

Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are dead. And liable to the pains of hell forever, for as we read in our text this morning,

B. Those who physically die without Jesus Christ shall be resurrected unto the fullness of eternal death.

Unbelievers are dead now, separated from God. And they shall be resurrected at the last day unto death! Look at, v.28-29

The resurrection of condemnation! What horrible words, words of great terror. Their bodies shall be raised, the bodies of unbelievers. They will not simply go to sleep and cease to exist. They will not exist in eternity in a non-physical existence, but rather body and soul together, they will be condemned to the everlasting destruction of fire and burning sulfur.

Shall I describe it for you?

Rev. 19:11 "Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen,

white and clean, followed Him on white horses. 15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. 17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, 18 "that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great." 19 And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. 20 Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. 21 And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh."

There will be a resurrection of unbelievers, unto eternal damnation, with no escape.

Heb.9:27 "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."

There is no second chance. Remember the words of Jesus in the account of the rich man and Lazarus?

Luke 16:19 "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. 20 But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, 21 desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his

sores. 22 So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

And the answer.

Luke 16:25 But Abraham said, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

There is a great gulf fixed, a great chasm, and those who die without Jesus Christ shall have their bodies raised at the last day to the resurrection of condemnation.

One commentator notes soberly about our text in John 5, "The passage is one of those that ought to sink down very deeply into our hearts, and never be forgotten. All is not over when men die. Whether they like it or not, they will have to come forth from their graves at the last day, and to stand at Christ's bar. None can escape his summons. When his voice calls them before Him, all must obey...Some will rise again to inherit eternal life, but some will rise again only to be condemned. There are terrible things! But the words of Christ are plain and unmistakable. Thus it is written, and thus it must be."

That's death. But what about life? What is the definition of life? I've given you all this explanation about death so that I could answer that question, because,

II. LIFE IS DEFINED AS HAVING PASSED OUT OF GOD'S JUDGMENT.

v.24

Life, everlasting life, means that you have passed from death. You have passed from judgment. You have been made alive.

And that is the language that the Bible uses for salvation. As I read earlier,

Eph. 2:1 "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins...4 But God,... 5 made us alive together with Christ."

Or,

Col.2:13 "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

With more detail, we read in,

Rom.6:10 "And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

Now, I want you to notice something very important. Life, everlasting life, is not merely a promise for the future. It is a present reality.

A. Life is a present experience for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Notice that emphasis in,

v.24

He has life. Present tense. He has passed from death unto

life. That's in the perfect tense, a Greek tense which refers to something that took place in the past and continues to have ongoing effects. It refers to a completed action in the past which has continuing results in the present. In other words, verse 24 refers to the man who "has passed from death into life in the past and remains in that enjoyment of life throughout the present." Or more simply, he was brought to life in the past, and he remains alive!

Life, everlasting life, is to be yours now. It is for you to receive and to experience now. If you believe in Christ, you have now passed from death into life. You have now, already, received the gift of eternal life and you have now, already passed out of God's judgment.

In the words of Paul,

Rom.8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

This is one of the great privileges and benefits that we as Christians have NOW. Indeed, one of a true Christian's treasures is the 'presentness' of his salvation. There is the completeness and finality of our justification, a judicial declaration that can never be reversed. We have been declared not guilty, we have been cleansed and forgiven. And we are alive!

We are in an entirely new position before God. We are like one who has moved from one side of a gulf to another. We have passed from death unto life.

And that is what the book of Revelation calls the "first resurrection." It is the resurrection of being born again, of being raised from the spiritual death of condemnation unto the spiritual

life of those who are Christians. We read of that first resurrection in,

Rev. 20:4 “And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.”

Having been raised from the dead already and having been seated with Christ already, we are now reigning with him. Thus that thousand year reign of Christ has begun.

Life is a present experience for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Listen to these words, again from our Shorter Catechism, in defining the what it calls the benefits of salvation in this life: Q 36: “The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification, are, assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.”

What wonderfully pastoral words. And how very practical. Indeed, good theology is always extremely practical. I would dare say that each one of you feels a particular pain in need of a greater sense of one of those things--assurance of God’s love. Peace of conscience. Joy in the Holy Spirit. Increase of grace.

Perseverance therein to the end. Who among you doesn’t have some struggle in one or more of those areas. That’s the practical benefit of knowing and understanding the presentness of our salvation. Life is a present experience for those who believe in Jesus Christ. And those benefits belong to us, now!

And let me emphasize just briefly, the meaning of believe! It’s not mere intellectual knowledge. Not merely accepting a certain set of facts. So what does it mean to believe? First and foremost, it means to accept as true what God has spoken in his word. It means to surrender your mind to the truth of his word. And it means really believe that it is true, obeying the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises, as our Confession puts it. Believing means to submit our hearts to Christ’s teaching, to sit humbly at his feet by faith, to learn of him, and to follow him.

And so the call of the gospel is this, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.”

The invitation of the gospel is, that,

Rom.10:9 “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.’”

And so this morning, having warned you about the reality of death—death now to those who are without Christ and eternal death in body and soul to those who die without Jesus Christ, with that warning, I give you this invitation,

Is. 55:1 “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And

you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance. 3 Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you--The sure mercies of David...6 Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.”

And in Jesus’ own words in,

John 7:37 “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. 38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”

Come, and find life. Come to Jesus by faith, and pass from death unto life.

Let me go on to speak about the future, for just as life, spiritual life, is a present experience, so there is something for us to look forward to. Namely, the resurrection of our bodies, which is the second resurrection! Look at,

v.25

The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. All the dead, those who believed in Jesus Christ and those who didn’t. Those who hear, that is, believe, will live. And those who don’t believe? Well, we’ve already studied about them.

But for those who do hear, and believe, we see that they will experience the fullness of the resurrection of the body, the physical resurrection of our mortal bodies being made immortal!

B. Those who physically die with faith in Jesus Christ shall be resurrected unto the fullness of eternal life.

Notice again,
v.28-29

We have a good cross reference in,

1 Cor. 15:50 “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed-- 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It is the victory of life. And don’t be confused by these words, that “all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth-- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

It’s not that our Lord is speaking of the cause of our salvation, but only distinguishing the elect from the reprobate by their own mark, but the distinguishing elements of their own life. Indeed, those who have done good are none other than those whom the Lord has brought from death unto life. And those who have done evil are those who have remained in their sin and hardness of heart, and are justly condemned.

v.25

“Those who hear will live!” And they will live because,

III. JESUS CHRIST IS LIFE.

Jesus Christ gives life because Jesus is life. He is life, in himself.
v.26

None of us have life in ourselves, for that is a very definition of God. It is the great statement of self-existence, the great OT definition of the self-existence of God-- “I am who I am.” God is the great “I am,” the only one who has life in himself. And he gives himself the name Jehovah, which is the Hebrew for “I am.”

You know that Jesus claims that same title for himself, don't you.

John 8:58 Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

All of us have life that is derived from God, for as human beings, God has breathed into us the breath of life. And without that breath of God, we are but dust, less than \$.99 worth of chemical elements including water.

But Jesus is life in himself, and continues this bold claim of being equal with his father, that we studied last week.
v.26

And with life in himself, we know that,

A. Jesus Christ shall return once at the end of this age.
Jesus shall return, and,
v.28 “all who are in the graves will hear his voice.”

And all will come forth. The good and the evil. The believers

and the unbelievers. Christians and non-Christians. The elect and the non-elect.

Let me emphasize, that when the dead hear the voice of the son of God, they will all be raised. And right at that moment, they will be divided up into the sheep and the goats. This is the final judgment, and the judgment of believers and unbelievers will take place at the same time, when the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God. Jesus shall return once.

I should note that there is no room in that understanding for a future thousand year millennium, which separates the resurrection of believers from the resurrection of unbelievers. According to this passage, there is one return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age, and one general resurrection of the the bodies of all men. And one occasion of judgment unto eternal life or death.

And it will happen when Jesus Christ returns, when the dead hear his voice. Let me read a couple cross references,

1 Thes. 4:16 “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

That's not a secret rapture! That's the second coming of our Lord at the end of this age, the same thing referred to here in John 5, “the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God.”

And when he comes? The end will come, we read in, 1 Cor. 15:22 “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall

be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”

The end will come. And with it, the final judgment. And what is so clearly stated here in John 5 is that,

B. Jesus Christ will execute the perfect justice of God the Father when he returns at the end of this age.

Jesus will come in judgment.

v.26-27

And we read of Jesus' claim of equality with the father in, v.30

What Jesus' does, the father does, for they are one. When Jesus executes judgment, the Father executes judgment. They act as one. And that judgment is righteous, because it is the judgment of God.

Again, this warning for all of us,

Heb.9:27 “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”

It is the warning of,

Heb 10:30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And so I invite you to choose life. I'll end with this great OT

invitation,

Deut.30:15 “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, 16 in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, 18 I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; 20 that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.”

Dear ones, choose life. Love the LORD your God. Obey His voice. And cling to Him, for He is your life.

Rom. 10:9 “...confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, [and] you will be saved.”