

The Death by Which We Live

by G.W. North

The death by which we live is a spiritual death, not a physical one, where we are dead to God and alive to sin, but through Christ's love and mercy, we can be delivered from this state and brought to spiritual life.

Scripture: John 3:16, John 11:25-26, Romans 6:4, Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:22, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:1-5, Colossians 3:3-4, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Resurrection Power", "Spiritual Death"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the spiritual death that believers experience through Christ, which is distinct from physical death. He explains that the resurrection power of Christ is not only for the end of the age but is actively at work in our lives now, quickening our mortal bodies through the Holy Spirit. North illustrates Paul's journey from unconscious spiritual death to a conscious awareness of sin, culminating in his desperate cry for deliverance. He highlights that true life comes from being dead to sin and alive in Christ, a transformation made possible by Christ's own death and resurrection. This message serves as a reminder that salvation encompasses a present reality of spiritual life, not just a future hope.

Transcript

When Paul introduces the bodily resurrection of Christ into his teaching he does not always do so in relation to our mortal bodies, nor is he always thinking of the resurrection at the end of the age. This text is a prime example of the use to which he puts the fact and power of the resurrection throughout the whole of this section, as also in the sixth chapter. What he is saying here is that the Spirit dwelling in our mortal bodies will quicken them here and now -- the end of the age is not in view. Paul is not here saying God will raise our bodies from the dead at the last trump, but that He will quicken them at this moment while they are still alive on this earth. The message is that constant bodily quickening is definitely and graciously included in God's eternal life-plan for man. This is all part of the process which He perfected in Christ and demonstrated by His resurrection for us; apart from this it is not possible for any man to enjoy salvation in all its fulness. The death of which Paul is here speaking is not physical death. This is what he says, 'if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness'. Quite obviously this death is a death which takes place in the mortal flesh, but is not of the flesh; it does not to any degree destroy the body; it is a spiritual death, not a physical one. Paul is continuing the teaching he commenced when writing earlier with great penetration about his own experience prior to his deliverance by Christ. His contention is that by the death of Christ he was delivered: (1) from the unconscious spiritual death in which he was born and lived in until he was rejuvenated; (2) from the conscious death he died,

when the law came to him personally, that is when it was applied to his condition and he realized what life was; (3) into the conscious death which reigned in him from the moment when Christ came into him. Not one of these deaths is a physical one.

Any confusion which may reign in any heart over this matter may have arisen because the death of Christ of which we speak is associated with His physical death. Christ's physical death was necessary for our salvation: that was entirely by choice of God. It was most natural and fitting that the greater spiritual death which Christ died to sin should coincide with His lesser physical death inflicted upon Him by the cross. His physical death was vital, but though absolutely necessary for our redemption, the greater death, that is, the death to sin, was not that of the body. 'He bore our sins in His body on the tree', this is the reason why a body was prepared for Him; He needed one so that He could live in it dead to sin, and then, while still in it, finally die to the sin, our sin, which was placed upon Him on the cross for our sakes. God did not will an eternity of physical sacrifice, He did not want bodies to be offered to Him for sin on altars constantly streaming with blood. He wanted someone, a man, perfectly sinless, and willing and able to take sin upon himself and be made sin, a God-man obviously, a person strong enough to bear it and bear it away and defeat it by dying to it in toto in a human body. When Christ was incarnated He became a true man, like all other men; His person and His body were not the same. He, the real person, that is, His soul, though resident in His body, must not be confused with His body.

Man is a living soul. God made him so originally; He inspirited with His own breath the body He had previously formed of dust. He made the body for the soul, not the soul for the body. So important is this that he called man Soul, not Body. The soul is of spirit, it is spiritous and could best be thought of jointly with spirit, thus spirit/soul. It is true that the spirit/soul can only have human identity by the body, but it must always be recognized as distinct from it. Before the Lord Jesus dismissed His spirit from His body on the cross, He shouted out 'it is finished'; this was the indication that He had met, accepted and been made sin, and had conquered and ended it before He died. In the process of dying physically He had died to sin also, and this accomplished He was willing for expiry, but not until then. Christ had to deal with sin while in the flesh before He left His body; while bearing the world's sin He had to keep His spirit/soul pure from personal sin all the while His blood was being shed, or He could not have redeemed us. He had to be shown to be dead to sin before His death to sin could be, or there could have been no justification for God or sinners. He had to die to sin all the while He was dying for sin and because of sin, and He did this in order that God may be justified in all He had done, especially in taking this step. Because He did accomplish this greatest of miracles concurrently with the death He died to sin, He was able also to shed from His body the blood that should inevitably redeem us from sin. That perfect Man would not release His spirit from His body till all forms and powers of sin had been comprehensively dealt with.

This is the death Paul was talking about, this rigid refusal to become personally interested in and involved with sin, except as far as it was necessary to destroy its power over humanity and remove it. That this death was demonstrated and gloriously effected at the time of Christ's physical death was absolutely right according to the nature of things, making that death all the more wonderful and infinitely more powerful and effective. The subtlety of sin is that it has created in mankind a state of unconscious death, with the result that people physically alive are quite unaware that they are dead with a death more terrible than physical decease or the diseases that cause it. This death is existence in a state of death towards God, (of being unaware of Him, and not knowing Him or that He even exists), as being opposed to eternal life, which consists in knowing God. When God gave the law to Israel He did so in order to convince them of sin by making them aware of Himself and what He wanted and did not want and would not have. Paul

says the law enhanced sin, that is, it focussed attention upon sin, lighting it up and making it appear what it was; with customary frankness he illustrated this from his own life and experience. Like us all, he was born fallen and dead by the sin of Adam. He was in sin, though not consciously; he did not know what sin was. Not understanding it, he was quite unaware of it, so he lived happily with it, and felt really alive. Then came the time when, by some means or other, (possibly at Bar-mitzvah when the law came to him, as to every boy) sin came to him; when that happened it was enhanced to him personally. He instanced this enhancement by referring to his inward struggle with sin in relation to the tenth commandment, 'thou shalt not covet'. He had coveted many a time without knowing that it was covetousness, or lust. Then one day he realized the meaning of the law, and it dawned on him what he was doing and had always been doing. He had been existing in sin, totally dead to God, very much alive to self, and he knew he was a sinner.

As every other 'normal' person, he had been living in the grip of lust, wanting this or that or him or her for one purpose or another. In total ignorance of true spiritual life, he had lived only to satisfy his own physical, mental, aesthetic, or religious desires; he had certainly not known this was sin. But when this realization dawned on him, and he recognized that all his behaviour and everything associated with it was sin, he died. All his enjoyment had been self-indulgence, and it turned sour on him; his former life passed away. In desperation he turned wholeheartedly to religion for help and became a Pharisee. He adamantly refused to do anything that broke the ten commandments, or in any way infringed the ordinances of God as the Jews interpreted them; he treasured the law and delighted in it in his mind. As touching the righteousness that was in the law he was blameless, excelling just about everybody in the country, but he was dead, he could not live what he believed; he was one great mass of inward contradiction and corruption and he knew it. He found that nothing could halt or reverse what was going on in him; he discovered that sin was governed by law, that a spiritual process was at work in his members and he was its slave. Neither law nor will, nor religion, nor good works, nor circumcision, nor anything else could stop him from sinning, or take sin out of him. A power was dominating his mind so that he sinned as by law; it was inbred in him, he did it naturally. Sin, he discovered, was his nature, his lord, his custodian, his predestination. He was conformed by it and to it, an unwilling slave of a tyrant master. Sin had slain him, he was dead, in death; it was in him. First it had been a death he did not know, now it was a death he did know, or thought he did, but how to get rid of it or get out of it he did not know. O what a death.

In this conscious state of death he existed for many years, groaning over his wretchedness and crying out for a deliverer, thinking there was no way out and becoming harder and harder as time went on. When he met the Church he found a company of men and women who had discovered the secret that had eluded him, and he hated them for it. Brooding over his condition and refusing to believe the gospel, his zeal reached fanatical proportions, and he sinned yet more; breathing out threatenings and slaughter, full of bigotry, blasphemy and blood lust, he worked out a plan to destroy all the Christians and stamp out Christianity in his lifetime. Fanatically he threw himself into a frenzied extermination programme. He was so convinced he was right, that he actually achieved the remarkable distinction of living with a clear conscience towards God, at the same time being a murderer of men and a hater of Jesus Christ, so dead was he. But in various ways the Lord began to deal with him, gradually goading him along, till, in his wretchedness, he cried out within himself for deliverance from himself. Conflicts and contradictions raged within him, confusing all his thoughts, but all to no avail. He was the embodiment of sin and hated himself for it; but he had committed himself and, filled with pride, he went rushing blindly on in total ignorance of salvation and what it was about. But Christ loved him none the less, and one day came in mercy to him and shone upon him. He was blinded, the light was so intense. He fell to the ground, his body was laid in the dust, he could eat no food, he was incarcerated in darkness, he was brought to death. It was a terrible

experience. Physically he was still alive, but he did not know what was happening to him or when it might end; all he could do was pray and cry out to God. His state was dreadful, unforgettable, so were his prayers; they were heart cries, that was all. He had no difficulty in recalling them, they were all much about the same, pitifully full of ignorance and despair. To him it seemed his body was full of death; he knew he was a dead man. 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' he cried; perhaps he was still saying it when the Lord delivered him.

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