



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## **A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**

### **Lesson 15.2.1 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)**

#### **Temporal Death**

In Genesis 5 the temporal death of Adam's descendants is referred to in plain terms. Over and over again we read: **"He died."** The great flood in Noah's day brought temporal death to all human beings and all land animals as well, except those with Noah on the ark. We read: **"And all flesh died that moved on the earth: birds and cattle and beasts and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every man. ... Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive"** (Genesis 7:21-23). There are those who claim that the flood in Noah's time was only a local flood. The Bible account, however, makes it clear that it was a universal flood that covered the entire planet.

The Bible also uses many figurative expressions to express the concept of temporal death. God told Abraham: **"You shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age"** (Genesis 15:15). Abraham's actual death is described like this: **"Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people"** (Genesis 25:8). As we read Genesis, we notice that after the flood the years of man's life on earth became less and less. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all lived well over 100 years. But Moses, several generations later, referred to seventy and eighty years as the ordinary span of human life (Psalm 90:10). It is not much different today.

When God first created Adam, He made His body first and then breathed into him the breath of life. Temporal death is the termination of the breath of life in the body. When Jacob's wife Rachel died, the Bible tells us that a separation took place. We read: **"And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name (the name of her son) Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried"** (Genesis 35:18-19). Temporal death therefore is the separation of the soul from the body. We read in Ecclesiastes 12:7: **"Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."** The body is dust, and in temporal death it returns to dust. The spirit (or soul), on the other hand, goes to God.

When God told Moses that he would die, He said to him: **"You will rest with your fathers"** (Deuteronomy 31:16). The prophet Nathan used the same words when he spoke to King David about his temporal death. When David was about to die, he said to his son Solomon: **"I go the way of all the earth"** (1 Kings 2:2). In Psalm 13 David prayed: **"Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death"** (Psalm 13:3). Solomon describes temporal death in a poetic style in the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, using many illustrations to picture what happens at the end, as **"man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets"** (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7).

There are many references to temporal death in the words of Jesus and His apostles. When Jesus was informed that Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter had died, He said to Jairus: **"Do not be afraid; only believe"** (Mark 5:36). When Jesus arrived at Jairus' home, He **"saw a tumult and those who wept and wailed loudly."** But Jesus said: **"The child is not dead, but sleeping"** (Mark 5:38-39). Jesus then gave the girl her life back by His word. Jesus also referred to the temporal death of His friend Lazarus as a sleep. He said to His disciples: **"Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up"** (John 11:11). With these words Jesus **"spoke of his death, but they (His disciples) thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep"** (John 11:13).

After Simeon saw the infant Jesus in Jerusalem, he prayed to the Lord: **“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace”** (Luke 2:29). The apostle Paul spoke of the two choices facing him: **“I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you”** (Philippians 1:23-24).

It seems that sleep is the favorite term used by the apostles when they refer to death. The Christians in Thessalonica were particularly concerned that temporal death would rob the believers of the bliss and glory of the world to come. Paul therefore wrote them these words of comfort: **“I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 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. 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. Therefore comfort one another with these words”** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Of his own death the apostle Paul said: **“The time of my departure is at hand”** (2 Timothy 4:6).

In temporal death the soul leaves the body. But this is only a temporary separation. Temporal death is not the end of the individual person, for the soul lives on, and even though the body disintegrates, God will raise every body from the dead on the Last Day.

There are some psalms that seem to speak of temporal death as the end of it all, and for this reason there are some Bible teachers who claim that the Old Testament believers did not believe in a life after death. But this is not true. Even Job, who lived in the days of the patriarchs, had no doubt that the separation of the soul from the body in temporal death was only temporary, for in his severe suffering he cried out: **“I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another”** (Job 19:25-27).

When the Sadducees came to Jesus with the story of the woman who had seven husbands in order to ridicule the idea of a continued existence after death, Jesus proved the resurrection from the Old Testament book of Exodus. Jesus told the surprised Sadducees: **“Even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live in Him”** (Luke 20:37-38). Temporal death does not mean total annihilation or a ceasing to exist.

Jesus Himself clearly taught that temporal death does not end the existence of a human being, for He told His disciples: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”** (Matthew 10:28). When Jesus experienced temporal death, He **“yielded up His spirit”** (Matthew 27:50); **“He breathed His last”** (Luke 23:46). But that was not the end of Him, for He told the thief crucified next to Him: **“Today you will be with Me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43).

The apostle Paul pictured temporal death as the destruction of a tent, a temporary dwelling. But he said the person who dies is not then without any clothing; he is not naked. But rather God gives him new clothing. These are his words: **“We know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life”** (2 Corinthians 5:1-4).

God did not create mankind for death, but for life. Temporal death is not natural, but unnatural. It is contrary to God’s original purpose for His creatures. There is no reason to believe that God intended

animals to die either, for after God looked at His creation, He called it **“very good”**. There was no disease or death, for there was no sin. The cause of temporal death in every case is sin. Since it was the devil who introduced sin and death into the world, Jesus called the devil a murderer. **“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it”** (John 8:44).

Adam and Eve could have resisted the devil’s temptation, but they did not. Paul says clearly: **“Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin”** (Romans 5:12). **“The wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23). Death entered the animal world through the sin of man, for it is written: **“The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God”** (Romans 8:20-21). It was man’s fault that sin and death corrupted all creation, including the animal world. Therefore, creation will in some way also share in the glory of the final deliverance from evil.

As we know from experience, temporal death can come slowly or suddenly; it can come through an accident, murder, disease, or sudden heart failure. The only ones who will escape temporal death are those who will be still alive on this earth when Jesus returns.

For the believer in Jesus Christ temporal death has lost its sting. Paul writes: **“The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). Since Christ is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world, He has removed our sin as well, so that our death may be a stingless death. Since our sins have been paid for and God forgives them because of Christ, we can face death with confidence in a blessed hereafter. Nevertheless, because of our sinful flesh, we may still have anxieties about death and dying. These anxieties can be removed only by the Gospel of Christ’s redemption and the faith in that Word created by the Spirit. Jesus said: **“He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life”** (John 5:24). For this reason, the apostle Paul can say: **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain”** (Philippians 1:21).

## Questions

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1. How many persons died in the great flood in the days of Noah?
2. What is the difference in span of life from before to after the flood?
3. How is Rachel's death described in Genesis?
4. Where does the soul (or spirit) go when a person dies?
5. What happens to the body when a person dies?
6. What did Jesus call temporal death in the cases of Jairus' daughter and His own friend Lazarus?
7. How did the apostle Paul comfort the Christians in Thessalonica?
8. How did Jesus answer the Sadducees when they ridiculed the idea of resurrection?
9. How did death enter the world that God made to be very good?
10. What happened to the animal world when man disobeyed God?
11. How has death lost its sting for those who trust in Christ?