



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.2.2 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Spiritual Death

A person can be dead and alive at the same time. That is, they may be alive physically but dead spiritually. The apostle Paul said that was the case with some of the widows he knew. He wrote to Timothy: **“She who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives”** (1 Timothy 5:6). In other words, such a person may be alive with temporal or physical life but is at the same time spiritually dead, without any spiritual life. The Lord Jesus Himself said the same thing to the congregation at Sardis in His letter to them: **“You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”** (Revelation 3:1). Not only were they physically alive, but they gave the impression that they were spiritually alive also. But the Lord, who reads the heart, pronounced them dead, that is, spiritually dead, without any spiritual life. But even in Sardis there were exceptions. Jesus wrote: **“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy”** (Revelation 3:4).

The Lord warned Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate the forbidden fruit. They did not immediately die physically; in fact, Adam lived for over 900 more years. But both Adam and Eve died spiritually that day, and they remained dead spiritually until God brought them the promise of a Savior and worked faith in their hearts to put their trust in that promise. Then they were spiritually alive again, although now they were subject to temporal death; their bodies had become mortal. Even though they were spiritually alive through faith in God’s promise, they also retained their sinful nature, called the old Adam or the old man. Thus, the believer in God’s promise of salvation has two natures: the old man (his sinful flesh), and the new man, created by the Holy Spirit through the Good News of Jesus.

From the moment we are conceived in our mother’s wombs, we are spiritually dead and remain spiritually dead until we are born again by the Holy Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus: **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh. ... You must be born again”** (John 3:6-7). For this reason, the apostle Paul told the Christians in Ephesus: **“You He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13). Paul included himself and all his fellow-Jews in the number of those who came into the world spiritually dead, saying: **“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”** (Ephesians 2:1-3). Jesus must have been speaking about spiritual death when He said: **“Let the dead bury their own dead”** (Matthew 8:22). The physically dead cannot bury any dead persons, but the spiritually dead can bury their dead.

How does a person who is spiritually dead become spiritually alive? The letter to the Hebrews assures us that Jesus destroyed him who had the power of death **“through death”** (Hebrews 2:14), that is, through His own death on the cross. In a similar way a spiritually dead person becomes spiritually alive through death, that is, through the killing and crucifying of their sinful nature. One is unable to crucify and kill one’s evil nature by one’s own power. A spiritually dead person cannot make themselves spiritually alive. It is God Himself who through baptism or the Gospel Word kills and crucifies the old sinful flesh. The apostle Paul explains this for us: **“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, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”** (Romans 6:3-4). In baptism **“our old man was crucified with**

Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:6).

Unless spiritual death is replaced by spiritual life, spiritual death inevitably leads to eternal death. Jesus told a story about a **"rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day"** (Luke 16:19), but he paid no attention to the beggar Lazarus who was laid at his gate. This rich man was spiritually dead during his physical life, and then **"he died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades"**, he wanted Lazarus to visit him and cool his tongue with water (Luke 16:22-23). But Abraham told him: **"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"** (Luke 16:26). This story shows us that spiritual death leads to eternal death, with no turning back. One who dies a temporal death while in a state of spiritual death can look forward to nothing but eternal death. It is written: **"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment"** (Hebrews 9:27).

In this same parable Jesus explained how a person in his life on earth could become spiritually alive. Abraham told the rich man in hell, who expressed concern for his five brothers who were still alive: **"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them"** (Luke 16:29). **"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead"** (Luke 16:31). God in His grace has provided a way for a spiritually dead person to become spiritually alive and thus escape eternal death. That way is the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The apostle Peter wrote: **"For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit"** (1 Peter 4:6). God wants the spiritually dead to hear the Gospel so that they may be given life, spiritual life, that will endure forever.

Our life on earth, from the time of our physical birth to our physical death, is our time of grace. That is, it is during this time that we are given opportunity to hear the Gospel and come to faith in the one Savior from sin and death God has provided for us: Jesus Christ. Remember the foolish man who built more barns and paid no attention to God's Word and said to himself: **"Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry"** (Luke 12:19). **"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'"** (Luke 12:20). And then Jesus said: **"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God"** (Luke 12:21). This man misused his time of grace; his spiritual death and his temporal death was followed by eternal death.

"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). When physical death ends a person's time of grace, there are no later opportunities for any change of status. Since the next event of importance after death is judgment, death ends the time of grace for every person. Those who have not been brought to faith in Christ before their death will not be brought to faith in Christ after their death. All ideas of reincarnation are delusions.

Since we do not know when our time of death or the time death for others, we should not think that God will give us time to convert on deathbed, as He did to the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus. Whenever we have an opportunity to hear the Gospel, God is calling out to us to believe in Jesus and be saved. The apostle Paul said: **"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"** (2 Corinthians 6:2). **"The Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts'"** (Hebrews 3:7-8).

Questions

1. How can a person be dead and alive at the same time?
2. When did Adam and Eve die after their sin? Explain your answer.
3. How many persons come into this world as spiritually dead?
4. How do spiritually dead people become spiritually alive?
5. What is the main point of Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus?
6. What is meant by the time of grace?
7. When does the time of grace come to an end?
8. What is the main point of Jesus' story of man who built more barns?
9. Why must the teaching of reincarnation be condemned?
10. Why are "now" and "today" the proper times for conversion?