FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ESCHATOLOGY

The Doctrine of Last Things

He Who Was, and Who Is, and Who Is to Come

UNIT 2: INDIVIDUAL ESCHATOLOGY — DEATH AND THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Lessons 4–6: What Happens When We Die?

Lesson 4

DEATH — THE LAST ENEMY

What the Bible Teaches About the Reality and Meaning of Physical Death

A Biblical Theology of Death, Its Origins, Its Nature, and Its Defeat

"Death is the one appointment that no human will fail to keep — and the one that matters most what we believe before we arrive."

Key Texts: Romans 5:12; 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:26, 54–57; Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:1–8; Hebrews 9:27; Ecclesiastes 12:7

> *"Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."*
>
> **Titus 2:13, NASB 1995**

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

Unit 1 established the foundations of eschatological study: its definition, its pastoral urgency, its hermeneutical principles, and its historical location within the tradition of the church. With those foundations firmly in place, Unit 2 turns from the prolegomena to the doctrine itself, and it begins exactly where every human being, without a single exception, must eventually arrive: the threshold of death. Individual eschatology, the doctrine of what happens to the person at and after physical death, is not a peripheral or morbid subject. It is the most immediately relevant doctrinal question any human being will ever face. Every one of us is dying. Some of us know it more acutely than others. All of us need the Bible's answer.

Paul calls death "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26). The designation is precise and pastorally significant. Death is not a friend, not the "good death" of the Stoics or the romantic dissolution of the Romantics or the peaceful "passing" of contemporary therapeutic euphemism. It is an enemy: an intruder into God's good creation, a consequence of human rebellion against the Creator, and a power that holds every human being under its dominion until the One who defeated it on Easter morning exercises that victory in its fullness at His return. Yet death is the last enemy. Its days are numbered. Its defeat has already been accomplished in principle; it awaits only its final abolition at the resurrection of the dead. The Christian faces death neither with denial nor with despair, but with the sober, clear-eyed, resurrection-grounded hope that the One who wept at Lazarus's tomb and then called him out of it is coming back to overturn every tomb.

This lesson examines the biblical doctrine of death under seven headings: the origin of death in the fall of Adam; the nature of death as separation; the universality and inevitability of death as divine appointment; the threefold meaning of death in Scripture (physical, spiritual, and eternal); the transformation of death's meaning for the believer in Christ; the appropriate Christian posture toward death; and the Puritan art of dying well as a model for contemporary pastoral formation. Each of these dimensions of the biblical theology of death contributes to a picture that is simultaneously unflinching in its realism and radiant with resurrection hope. The goal is not to make the student comfortable with death, death is an enemy and we are right to resist it. The goal is to make the student ready for it, which is a very different and far more important thing.

A pastoral note is appropriate at the outset. No lesson in this series is more likely to land on raw and tender ground than this one. In any congregation of any size, there are people who are currently facing their own death, or who are watching a loved one die, or who are still grieving a loss so recent that the wound has not yet begun to close. This lesson does not ask those people to suppress their grief or to perform a theological composure they do not feel. It asks them to grieve, but to grieve as those who have hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The hope the gospel offers is not the suppression of sorrow but its transformation. Jesus did not tell Mary and Martha to stop weeping at Lazarus's tomb; He wept with them. And then He raised their brother from the dead. The doctrine of this lesson does not remove the tears; it gives them a trajectory.

I. THE ORIGIN OF DEATH

Death as a Consequence of Sin, Not a Feature of Creation

A. Death Was Not in the Beginning

The most foundational affirmation the Bible makes about death is that it was not part of God's original creation. Genesis 1–2 describes a world that God declares "very good", a world of ordered, relational, life-sustaining abundance in which the man and the woman are called to image the Creator, steward His creation, and enjoy unbroken communion with Him. Death is conspicuously absent from this picture. The tree of life stands at the center of the garden, its fruit freely available to those who dwell in covenantal faithfulness with their Maker (Genesis 2:9; 3:22). The warning of Genesis 2:17, "In the day that you eat from it you will surely die", is not a description of a feature already present in creation; it is the announcement of a consequence that will follow upon disobedience. Death is introduced into the created order as a judicial sentence, not as a natural process.

This is not a point about which Scripture is ambiguous. Paul's argument in Romans 5:12 is unequivocal: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." Death entered through sin. It did not exist prior to the fall. Its presence in the world is not a natural feature of biological life but a penal consequence of covenant-breaking rebellion. This is precisely why death is Paul's paradigmatic illustration of what sin has done to the human race: it is not merely the cessation of biological function but the wages that sin pays to those who serve it, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The employment metaphor is deliberate. Sin is a master that employs its servants and then pays them with the one wage they did not choose and cannot refuse.

The Young-Earth Creationist commitment of this series reinforces this foundational point with particular clarity. If the fossil record represents millions of years of death prior to the appearance of human beings, then death is a feature of the pre-human world that is entirely independent of human sin, and the biblical narrative of death's entry through Adam's transgression is at best metaphorical and at worst incoherent. But if, as we hold with the full weight of the biblical testimony, the world was created good and complete within six literal days, and if death entered the created order only in consequence of the fall narrated in Genesis 3, then the biblical doctrine of sin and redemption stands on its proper historical foundation. The gospel that promises the defeat of death in Christ makes full sense only if death is in fact the enemy that sin brought into God's good creation, an intruder to be expelled, not a fixture to be accepted.

B. The Threefold Meaning of Death in Scripture

The Bible speaks of death in at least three distinct but related senses, and a careful distinction among them is essential for understanding the full scope of what Christ has accomplished in redemption and what believers hope for at His return. Physical death is the separation of the immaterial soul from the material body, resulting in the dissolution of the embodied human person as God created it. Ecclesiastes 12:7 describes it with poetic precision: "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." Physical death is real, is irreversible by any merely human power, and is the immediate consequence of sin that every human being without exception will experience.

Spiritual death is the condition of alienation from God that sin produces, the state of being "dead in your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) in which every unregenerate person exists. This is the death that precedes physical death and that makes physical death an occasion of dread rather than of hope. The spiritually dead person is not incapacitated in every sense, they can think, love, create, and act with apparent goodness in the civil sphere. But they are without the life of God, without the knowledge of God in saving relationship, and without the capacity to please God or receive His blessing apart from His sovereign intervention in regeneration. The new birth that Jesus describes in John 3 is, in the deepest sense, a resurrection from the dead, the Spirit of God bringing life where there was only death.

Eternal death, what the book of Revelation calls "the second death" (Revelation 20:14–15), is the ultimate and irrevocable consequence of remaining in spiritual death through physical death and into the final judgment: the eternal, conscious separation from God and from all that is good, in the place of final condemnation. It is the fullest expression of the wages that sin pays, the wage that Christ bore for His people in His substitutionary death on the cross, and the wage that those who reject Him will bear for themselves forever. The relationship among these three forms of death is covenantal and sequential: spiritual death (the condition of all who are in Adam) produces the prospect of physical death (the dissolution of the body at the end of earthly life) and, apart from redemption in Christ, results in eternal death (the second death, the lake of fire). The gospel reverses this sequence: regeneration (spiritual life) guarantees resurrection (physical life) and issues in eternal life with God, the three deaths swallowed up in the three forms of life that the triune God grants to all who are in Christ Jesus.

II. THE NATURE OF DEATH

Death as Separation and Its Dimensions

A. Death as the Separation of Soul and Body

The most precise biblical definition of physical death is separation, specifically, the separation of the immaterial aspect of the human person (the soul or spirit) from the material aspect (the body). James 2:26 states this with simple directness: "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." The comparison James draws is between a body deprived of its animating principle and a faith deprived of its expression in works. In both cases, the thing is dead because of a radical deprivation, and in the case of physical death, the deprivation is the departure of the soul from the body that it animated, informed, and expressed during earthly life. The body does not simply stop functioning; it is abandoned by the personal principle that made it a human body rather than mere matter.

The biblical anthropology that underlies this definition requires brief clarification. Scripture consistently presents the human person as a unified whole: body and soul together constitute the human being as God created it. The soul is not a prisoner trapped in a body; the body is not a shell housing an immortal spark. They are together, as a unity, the image of God in human form. Death is therefore a violence against the human person, a tearing asunder of what God joined together in creation. This is why the resurrection of the body, the reuniting of the soul with the glorified body at Christ's return, is not an optional postscript to personal eschatology but its necessary completion. A soul without a body is not yet the full human being that God intends; the intermediate

state, however blessed, is a condition of incompleteness that awaits the resurrection for its resolution (a point to be developed fully in Lesson 5).

The separation that death effects is not only between soul and body; it is also, for the unregenerate, a full expression of the separation from God that sin produced. The spiritually dead person who dies physically without regeneration has no access, in the intermediate state, to the reconciling grace that the present life provides through the proclamation of the gospel. The warning of Hebrews 9:27 is solemn and irreversible: "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." The appointment is fixed. The timing is set by God alone. And the judgment that follows does not offer a second opportunity for repentance or faith, it renders the verdict that the life lived has already determined. This is the urgency that the biblical doctrine of death lends to the ministry of the gospel: the window of grace is open now; it closes at death, and it closes forever.

B. *The Universality and Inevitability of Death*

No human being has ever escaped death by natural means, and none will, with two extraordinary biblical exceptions (Enoch, Genesis 5:24; Elijah, 2 Kings 2:11) who were translated without dying, and with the single class of believers who will be alive at Christ's return (1 Corinthians 15:51–52). For the rest of the human race, in every generation, in every culture, in every period of history, death is the universal appointment. "It is appointed for men to die once" (Hebrews 9:27), the word "appointed" (apokeitai) carries the sense of something laid up, reserved, stored against the day. Death is not a random eventuality or a statistical probability for any human being; it is a divine appointment, sovereignly ordered and certainly kept.

The universality of death is the most powerful of all natural arguments against human self-sufficiency and against every culture's instinct to regard itself as exceptional, permanent, and beyond the reach of ultimate reckoning. Civilizations rise and fall. Empires that seemed impregnable are buried under the sands of time. The pharaohs who built monuments to their own immortality lie mummified in museum cases. The most celebrated and powerful human beings in history, the Caesars, the Alexanders, the Napoleons, all died. And the most obscure and forgotten human beings, the unnamed slaves, the anonymous peasants, the children whose names were never recorded, all died too. Death is the great equalizer, not in the sense that it makes all human lives equally meaningful or equally significant, but in the sense that it acknowledges no claim of exemption on the grounds of wealth, power, wisdom, or beauty. Before death, all human pretension is leveled to the dust from which it came.

For the pastor and the congregation, the universality of death is not an occasion for morbid dwelling upon the end but for clear-eyed realism about the stakes of the present life. The Psalmist's prayer, "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12), captures the proper response to death's universality: not despair, not denial, but the wisdom that comes from living with full awareness of one's finitude. The person who has learned to number their days is the person who does not squander the days they have on the trivial, the transient, and the self-serving. They are the person who gives themselves to what will endure, to the glory of God, to the good of their neighbor, to the proclamation of the gospel, and to the formation of the saints. In this sense, a clear-eyed biblical doctrine of death is one of the most powerful instruments of genuine pastoral formation available to the local church.

III. DEATH AS THE LAST ENEMY

The Sting of Death, Sin, and the Law

A. Paul's Declaration in 1 Corinthians 15

The most theologically comprehensive statement about death in the New Testament is Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:26: "The last enemy that will be abolished is death." The context is crucial: Paul has been arguing for the bodily resurrection of the dead against those in Corinth who denied it, and he has established the sequence of events in the eschatological program: Christ rose first as the firstfruits; then, at His coming, those who belong to Him; then the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the Father after having abolished every rule and authority and power and put all His enemies under His feet. Death is the last of these enemies, last in the sense of final, the ultimate adversary, the one that will be destroyed last because it is the capstone of the whole structure of sin's dominion over the creation.

Paul's identification of death as an enemy is theologically loaded. It runs directly counter to every naturalistic account of death as a normal and acceptable feature of biological existence, and to every religious account of death as a door to freedom from the body, a welcome release from earthly suffering, or a neutral transition to another mode of existence. Death is not neutral; it is hostile. It is not natural in the sense of being part of God's original design; it is unnatural, a violent intrusion into a creation that was made for life. And it is not a friend to be embraced; it is an enemy to be defeated. The Christian does not welcome death as a liberator, the Christian welcomes the resurrection that defeats death and restores the fullness of human existence that death had torn asunder.

The phrase "last enemy" also implies that the defeat of death is already underway. If death is the last in a sequence of enemies, then earlier enemies have already been defeated, and indeed they have. The principalities and powers were disarmed at the cross (Colossians 2:15). Satan was bound at the first coming (Matthew 12:29; Revelation 20:1–3). Sin's condemning power was broken for all who are in Christ (Romans 8:1). The eschatological mopping-up operation is well advanced. Death remains, still claiming its victims, still asserting its ancient dominion. But it does so as a defeated enemy whose days are explicitly and irreversibly numbered. It will be abolished, the Greek verb (katargeo) means to render inoperative, to bring to nothing, to strip of its power. The last enemy will not merely be restrained; it will be annihilated. And the One who will do it has already done everything necessary to guarantee it.

B. The Sting of Death: Sin and the Law

Paul's great doxological eruption at the close of 1 Corinthians 15 includes a remarkable anatomical analysis of death's power: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 55–57). The metaphor is drawn from the world of the stinging insect: death is like a scorpion whose sting contains the venom that kills. But the venom is not death itself; it is sin. And sin's power comes from the law, from the divine standard that sin violates and that therefore renders sinners liable to the penalty of death. The logic is precise and devastating: we fear death because we know we are sinners; sin has power over us because the law of God

pronounces condemnation upon it; and therefore death's sting is ultimately grounded in the righteous judgment of God against human rebellion.

This analysis has profound implications for the gospel's answer to death. If death's sting is sin, then the removal of sin removes death's power to harm those who are in Christ. And this is precisely what the atonement accomplishes: on the cross, Jesus Christ bore the sin of His people, absorbing the full condemnation of the law against sin, and therefore extracting the sting from death for all who are united to Him by faith. The believer who dies in Christ dies without the sting. Death still occurs, the body still returns to the dust, the separation of soul and body still takes place, the grief of those who are left behind is still genuine and deep. But the condemnation that made death terrifying has been removed. The law's verdict against the believer has been fully satisfied in Christ. And therefore death, for the believer, is stripped of its ultimate power: it cannot condemn, because there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

The Puritan theologians understood this connection between the gospel and the Christian's relationship to death with particular depth and pastoral precision. Richard Baxter, John Owen, and Jeremy Taylor all wrote at length on the theme of preparing for death, not because they were morbid, but because they understood that the person who has genuinely come to terms with death in the light of the gospel is the freest, most joyful, most courageous, and most productive kind of Christian. The person who fears death excessively is the person who holds too tightly to the present life and therefore cannot give themselves fully to the service of God and neighbor. The person who has, through faith in Christ, made their peace with the reality and inevitability of their own death is the person who is most free to live dangerously, generously, and wholeheartedly for the kingdom of God. The sting has been removed. What remains is the opportunity.

IV. DEATH TRANSFORMED FOR THE BELIEVER

Gain, Departure, and Homecoming

A. Philippians 1:21–23, For Me to Live Is Christ, and to Die Is Gain

The most striking statement about death in all of Paul's letters, perhaps in all of the New Testament, is the compressed declaration of Philippians 1:21: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul is writing from prison, facing the possibility of execution, and reflecting upon the choice between continued earthly life and death. And his conclusion is not that death is neutral, or acceptable, or even preferable on some scales of weighing. His conclusion is that death is gain, positive, affirmative, unqualified gain. The verb is unambiguous. Death, for the believer in Christ, is not a loss to be minimized but a gain to be anticipated.

The gain Paul has in mind is immediately specified in verse 23: "I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better." The gain of death for the believer is the immediate personal presence of Jesus Christ. To die is to depart, the Greek word analyo suggests the untying of a mooring rope, the striking of a tent, the release from a temporary encampment. Earthly life, for all its genuine gifts and goods, is a temporary arrangement; death is not the end of the journey but the transition to its next stage. And the destination of that transition, for the believer, is not an impersonal afterlife or a generic spiritual realm but the specific, personal, immediate presence of the Person who loved the believer and gave Himself for

them. To be with Christ is "very much better", the Greek superlative (pollo mallon kreitton) is stacked for emphasis: far, far better.

Yet Paul's statement does not diminish the value of earthly life or advocate for an indifference to death that would amount to spiritual irresponsibility. He immediately acknowledges that "to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake" (v. 24), the lives of the Philippians, their growth in faith, their need for apostolic ministry, all constitute genuine reasons for him to remain. Earthly life is not to be discarded or despised; it is the arena of fruitful labor for Christ. But death is not to be feared or fled. For the believer, it is the door through which they will pass into the immediate presence of the One for whom they have lived. The Christian can hold earthly life and the prospect of death with equal steadiness precisely because Christ is the Lord of both.

B. *2 Corinthians 5:1–8, The Earthly Tent and the Heavenly Dwelling*

Paul returns to the theme of death in 2 Corinthians 5:1–8, employing a different but equally illuminating metaphor: the contrast between an earthly tent (the mortal body) and a heavenly dwelling (the resurrection body). "For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." The tent metaphor captures both the genuine reality of the present body and its provisional, impermanent character: tents are real; they shelter their occupants from the elements and provide a genuine, functional habitation. But tents are not permanent dwellings. They are struck and moved. And what awaits the believer on the far side of the striking of the mortal tent is not homelessness but a better house, a body that is the work of God, not of human hands, and that is eternal rather than perishable.

Verse 4 captures the ambivalence of the Christian's relationship to the present body with extraordinary psychological precision: "For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life." The groaning is real. The present body is a burden as well as a gift, subject to pain, weakness, disease, and decay. Yet the Christian's desire is not for the nakedness of disembodied existence in the intermediate state but for the over-clothing of the resurrection body, in which mortal humanity is not destroyed but transformed, not stripped away but glorified. Paul's eschatology is, at this point as everywhere, thoroughly embodied: the hope is not escape from the body but the redemption of the body, the final clothing of the human person in the glory that Christ has already secured.

The pastoral conclusion Paul draws from all of this is stated in verse 8: "We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." The word translated "at home" (endemeo) is the same word used in the previous verse for being "at home in the body", the present mortal life. Paul is not saying that the intermediate state is better than the resurrection, or that disembodied existence in heaven is the final eschatological hope. He is saying that wherever Christ is, that is home. In the present body, Christ is present through the Spirit; the believer is at home. In the state of death, absent from the body, Christ is present in an immediacy that surpasses anything available in the present life; the believer is, in that sense, more fully at home. Home, for the Christian, is not a location, it is a Person. And that Person is the Lord of both the living and the dead.

V. DEATH AS AN ENEMY THAT REMAINS

The Christian Does Not Romanticize Death

A. Death Is Still Real, Still Grieved, Still Resisted

The biblical transformation of death's meaning for the believer must not be allowed to slide into a sentimental or romantic account of death that loses sight of its genuine horror. Paul calls death an enemy, not a friend, not a doorway to be welcomed with enthusiasm, and not a neutral transition. Even for the believer, death involves the tearing apart of body and soul, the dissolution of the embodied human person that God created in His image, the cessation of earthly relationships and labors, and the grief of those who are left behind. These are real losses, and the gospel does not ask us to pretend they are not.

The shortest verse in the New Testament is the most eloquent possible refutation of any theology that romanticizes death: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). He wept at the tomb of Lazarus, in the presence of death's devastation and in the midst of the grief of those who loved Lazarus. He did not weep because He doubted the resurrection, He was about to demonstrate His power over death in the most dramatic way imaginable. He wept because death is genuinely terrible, because grief is genuinely appropriate in the face of it, and because the God who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth is a God who is moved, not unmoved, by the suffering of His creatures. The God of the Bible is not a Stoic philosopher who counsels detachment from the passions of loss. He is the God who wept at the grave and then raised the dead. Both actions are essential to the biblical picture.

This means that the Christian posture toward death is not detachment, not enthusiasm, and not resignation. It is what we might call grief-shaped hope, a hope that is genuine and life-giving but that does not bypass the sorrow that death produces. Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians is the model: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). He does not say, "Do not grieve." He says, "Do not grieve as those who have no hope." The presence of hope does not eliminate grief; it transforms it. It gives grief a trajectory beyond itself, toward the resurrection that makes every parting temporary and every grave provisional. The Christian weeps at the graveside, and then believes in the resurrection. Both are acts of faith.

B. Death Still Claims Its Victims, But Not Without Resistance

The Christian community has historically understood the resistance to death as an expression of the image of God and of the eschatological hope of the resurrection. Medicine, nursing, hospice care, and every form of ministry to the dying are expressions of the conviction that human life is sacred and that death is an enemy to be resisted, even when it cannot be defeated in any given case. The doctor who exhausts every available treatment before accepting the inevitable is not in denial about death's reality, they are acting in accord with the conviction that human life, as the image of God, is worth fighting for. The community that gathers around the dying to pray, to speak the promises of Scripture, and to sing the hymns of resurrection is not engaged in a futile gesture, it is declaring, in the face of the last enemy, that the One who defeated death at Easter is present in this room and will not abandon the one who is dying.

There is also a proper asymmetry between the believer's and the unbeliever's relationship to death that the biblical doctrine establishes clearly. For the unbeliever, death is the occasion of final and irrevocable reckoning,

the moment at which the window of grace closes and the sentence of judgment begins. For the believer, death is the occasion of the deepest possible pastoral courage: the last opportunity to demonstrate, before those who are watching, that the gospel is sufficient to carry a person through the valley of the shadow of death with their eyes fixed on the Lord who walks beside them (Psalm 23:4). The deathbed of the Christian is, at its best, a pulpit from which the most powerful of all sermons is preached, not in words but in the embodied testimony of a soul that finds its hope in Christ alone when every other support has been stripped away.

The church's ministry to the dying is one of the most theologically dense and practically important dimensions of pastoral care. It requires the full range of eschatological conviction that these lessons are designed to develop: the knowledge of what death is and where it came from, the assurance of what awaits the believer in the intermediate state and at the resurrection, the comfort of the personal presence of Christ even in the valley of the shadow of death, and the hope of the new creation where death shall be no more. The pastor who can stand at the bedside of a dying saint and speak the words of Scripture with genuine confidence, not as a professional performing a ritual but as a fellow pilgrim who believes what he is saying, is the pastor who has done the work of eschatological formation that this series is designed to support.

VI. THE DEFEAT OF DEATH IN CHRIST

How the Resurrection of Jesus Changes Everything

A. The Resurrection as the First Strike Against the Last Enemy

The defeat of death is not a future hope only, it is a past accomplishment that has already been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15 rests entirely on this foundation: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (v. 20). The resurrection of Christ is not merely a proof of His divine identity or a vindication of His teaching; it is the first-strike in the eschatological war against death, the initial intrusion of the resurrection age into the present age, the firstfruits that guarantee the full harvest of resurrection that will follow at His return. Death has been struck a fatal blow. It has not yet been abolished, but it will be, and the guarantee of its abolition is the empty tomb of Easter morning.

The New Testament's treatment of Christ's resurrection is remarkable for its insistence on the bodily, historical, publicly verifiable character of the event. Paul's list of resurrection witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8, Cephas, the twelve, five hundred brothers at once, James, all the apostles, and finally Paul himself, reads like a legal brief: here are the people who saw the risen Christ, most of whom are still alive and can be interrogated. The bodily nature of the resurrection is emphasized throughout the Gospel accounts: the risen Christ eats fish (Luke 24:43), invites Thomas to touch His wounds (John 20:27), and is recognized by His disciples as the same Jesus who was crucified. The resurrection is not a spiritual experience or a metaphor for the continuing influence of Jesus' teaching; it is the bodily raising of the crucified Nazarene from the dead. And that bodily raising is the prototype of what will happen to all who are His at His return.

The significance of this for the doctrine of death is irreplaceable. Because Jesus died and rose bodily, death has been permanently redefined for those who are united to Him. Death is no longer the terminus of human existence but the penultimate station before the resurrection. The grave is no longer a permanent address but a temporary

waiting room. The body that is committed to the earth at burial is not abandoned; it is sown, as Paul's agricultural metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 suggests, awaiting the harvest of resurrection. The seed does not perish in the ground; it is transformed by the power of God into the plant it was always designed to become. So the bodies of those who sleep in Christ are not destroyed; they are being held in reserve for the transformation of the resurrection, when the perishable will put on the imperishable and the mortal will put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53).

B. *Hebrews 2:14–15 and the Destruction of the One Who Has the Power of Death*

The letter to the Hebrews provides a dimension of the defeat of death that 1 Corinthians 15 does not emphasize: the personal and cosmic character of Christ's victory over the one who wielded death as a weapon. "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Hebrews 2:14–15). The incarnation, in this remarkable passage, is presented as a tactical decision: Christ took on flesh and blood precisely in order to die, and He died precisely in order to render the devil powerless through that death. The death of the Son of God is the weapon by which the author of death is defeated.

The pastoral application of this text is immediate and profound. The fear of death is not merely an emotional response to an unpleasant biological reality; it is the mechanism of a spiritual bondage. Those who fear death are, in a real sense, under the control of the one who wields death as a threat. The person who is desperate to avoid death at any cost is the person who can be manipulated, compromised, and enslaved by the threat of it. This is the mechanism of persecution: the threat of death is the ultimate instrument of coercion. And it is precisely this mechanism that Christ dismantles in His incarnation and death. By dying and rising, He transforms death from an instrument of terror into a door that He has already passed through and holds open for all who are His. The fear of death that enslaved the whole of unredeemed humanity is, for the believer, replaced by the courage that comes from knowing that death has been rendered powerless by the One who bore it for them.

This is why the early church faced martyrdom with a composure that astonished the pagan world. Ignatius of Antioch, writing on his way to execution in Rome, expressed a longing to be ground by the teeth of lions as a way of being made pure bread for Christ. The Scillitan martyrs in North Africa went to their execution with hymns on their lips. The countless unnamed Christians of the first three centuries who refused to offer incense to the imperial gods and were killed for their refusal did so because they had been freed, by the gospel of the One who died and rose, from the fear of death that the imperial persecutors depended upon to enforce conformity. The power of the church's witness in the ancient world was inseparable from its fearlessness in the face of death, and that fearlessness was inseparable from its resurrection faith. It remains so today. The church that believes the resurrection believes that death has been rendered powerless, and that belief sets it free to live, and to die, in a way that the world cannot explain and cannot produce.

VII. DYING WELL, THE ART AND DISCIPLINE OF A CHRISTIAN DEATH

Preparing for the Last Appointment

A. The Puritan Ars Moriendi and Its Contemporary Relevance

One of the most distinctive and most practically valuable contributions of the Puritan theological tradition to Christian pastoral formation was its development of the ars moriendi, the art of dying well. In a culture that had no medical means to significantly delay death and that therefore faced it with a directness that the modern West's medical establishment has largely enabled us to avoid, the Puritans understood that learning to die was one of the most important things a Christian could do with their life. Richard Baxter's The Saints' Everlasting Rest (1650), Jeremy Taylor's Holy Dying (1651), and John Owen's extensive reflections on death and glory across multiple works all represent this tradition, a tradition that understood dying well as a skill to be cultivated, a disposition to be formed, and a testimony to be given.

The Puritan ars moriendi was built on several convictions that the present lesson has sought to establish from Scripture. First, death is not to be ignored or deferred in one's thinking; it is to be anticipated, prepared for, and approached with the full resources of the gospel. The Puritan practice of regular meditation on death, not as a morbid exercise but as a sober and realistic assessment of one's eschatological situation, was designed to keep the believer from the double error of living as though this life were permanent (worldliness) and dying as though the next life were uncertain (faithlessness). Second, the preparation for death is not primarily a practical matter (though it is that too, the Puritans were clear about the importance of settling earthly affairs, providing for dependents, and making peace with estranged relationships before the end). It is primarily a spiritual matter: the deepening of faith in Christ, the growing security in one's justification, the increasing loosening of attachment to earthly things, and the growing warmth of anticipation for the presence of Christ.

Third, and perhaps most importantly for contemporary pastoral formation, the Puritans understood that dying well was not an accomplishment of the final hours but a fruit of a life lived in constant preparation. The person who has spent their life cultivating faith, growing in the knowledge of Christ, loosening their grip on earthly possessions and pleasures, and setting their hope increasingly on the age to come, that person will die as they have lived. Conversely, the person who has spent their life in the pursuit of earthly comfort, security, and pleasure, without ever seriously confronting the reality of their own death and the judgment that follows, will face the end unprepared, and no amount of last-minute pastoral intervention can fully compensate for a lifetime of avoidance. The ars moriendi is not a deathbed skill; it is a lifelong discipline.

B. Dying in Readiness, The Biblical Call to Watchfulness

The biblical call to readiness for death is not a call to morbidity but to the liberation that comes from living without the tyranny of death's fear. Jesus' parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) makes the point with characteristic directness: the difference between the wise and the foolish virgins was not wisdom after the fact but preparation before it. The wise virgins had their lamps trimmed and their oil supplied; the foolish had neither, and by the time they went to purchase what they lacked, the door was shut. The parable is about the return of Christ, but its

application extends to every moment of reckoning that life presents, and the most personal and most inevitable of those moments is the death of the individual.

The Apostle Peter, writing to communities facing the reality of martyrdom, describes the Christian's readiness in terms of personal identity and testimony: "But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:14–15). The readiness Peter describes is not merely the readiness to articulate a doctrinal position; it is the readiness of a soul that has sanctified Christ as Lord in the innermost chamber of its will and affections, so that the threat of death cannot shake the foundation upon which it stands. That readiness is the fruit of the eschatological formation that this series is designed to cultivate.

We close this lesson where it began: with the pastoral reality of death in the life of the congregation. Someone in the room where this lesson is being taught may be facing death sooner than they know. Someone may be sitting with the weight of a recent diagnosis. Someone may have buried a spouse, a parent, a child, within the past year. And everyone in the room will die, unless Christ returns first. The doctrine of this lesson is not offered as a theoretical framework for the consideration of a hypothetical problem. It is offered as the word of the living God to people who are dying, dying with the assurance that death is an enemy that has been defeated, that the One who is coming again is the one who wept at the tomb and then called the dead to life, that the sting of death has been extracted by the cross of Christ, and that to die in Him is gain beyond all calculation. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. And until He comes, let us live, and die, in the hope of His appearing.

> *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."*
> **Philippians 1:21, NASB 1995**

Theological Terms and Definitions

Physical Death	The separation of the immaterial soul or spirit from the material body, resulting in the dissolution of the embodied human person as God created it. Physical death is the universal appointment of all human beings (Hebrews 9:27) and is the direct consequence of Adam's sin (Romans 5:12). It is real, irreversible by human power, and genuinely grieved by Scripture as a violence against the human person made in God's image.
Spiritual Death	The condition of alienation from God that sin produces in every unregenerate person, being "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). The spiritually dead person is not biologically inert but is without the life of God in saving relationship. Regeneration, the new birth by the Spirit, is the resurrection from spiritual death that alone makes a person capable of pleasing God and receiving His blessing.
Eternal Death	Also called the second death (Revelation 20:14–15): the ultimate and irrevocable consequence of remaining in spiritual death through physical death and into the final judgment, the eternal, conscious separation from God in the place of final condemnation. The second death is the wage sin pays to those who die apart from Christ; it is what Christ bore for His people at the cross.
The Last Enemy	Paul's designation for death in 1 Corinthians 15:26: the final adversary in the sequence of enemies that Christ is abolishing through His redemptive reign. Death is "last" because it is the capstone of sin's dominion; it will be the final thing abolished when Christ delivers up the fully consummated kingdom to the Father at the resurrection.
The Sting of Death	Paul's metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15:55–56 for the mechanism of death's terror: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." Sin is the venom in death's sting, and the law's condemnation of sin is the power that gives the venom its lethal force. For the believer, Christ's atoning death has extracted the sting by absorbing sin's condemnation, so that death can no longer harm those who are in Him.
Ars Moriendi	Latin for "the art of dying": the tradition of Christian reflection and pastoral formation centered on learning to die well as an integral dimension of living well. Developed especially in the Puritan tradition (Richard Baxter, Jeremy Taylor, John Owen), the ars moriendi understood dying well not as a deathbed skill but as the fruit of a lifetime of faith, loosening attachment to earthly things, and growing anticipation of the presence of Christ.
Katargeo	Greek verb meaning to render inoperative, to bring to nothing, to strip of power, to abolish. Used in 1 Corinthians 15:26 of the eventual abolition of death ("the last enemy that will be abolished") and in Hebrews 2:14 of Christ's rendering powerless of the devil through His death. The term implies not merely restraint but the complete annihilation of a power's effectiveness.
Analyo	Greek verb meaning to depart, to untie a mooring rope, to break camp, to dissolve a temporary arrangement. Used by Paul in Philippians 1:23 of his own anticipated death: "having the desire to depart (analysai) and be with Christ." The metaphor captures the character of death for the believer: not a terminus but a departure, the striking of a temporary tent in preparation for a more permanent dwelling.
Endemeo	Greek verb meaning to be at home, to dwell among one's people, to be in one's native place. Used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:6–8 in the contrasting phrases "at home in the body" (present earthly life) and "at home with the Lord" (the intermediate state). The use of the same word for both states indicates that the determining factor of "homeness" for the believer is not location but the presence of Christ.

Individual Eschatology	The branch of eschatology that addresses what happens to the individual person at and after physical death, including the nature and origin of death, the condition of the soul in the intermediate state, and the prospect of personal resurrection and judgment at the return of Christ. Distinguished from cosmic eschatology, which addresses the consummation of all things at the end of the age.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that death is an enemy, not a friend, not a natural process, not a neutral transition, and not a liberator. The biblical designation of death as the consequence of sin and the last enemy to be abolished rules out every sentimental, naturalistic, or philosophically domesticated account of death that loses sight of its genuine hostility to the human person as God created it. The Christian who has been taught to think of death as "natural" or "welcome" has been shaped more by Stoic philosophy or therapeutic culture than by the apostolic proclamation. Death is an intruder. It will be expelled. And the One who will expel it has already laid the decisive groundwork at the empty tomb.

We must believe that death has been irreversibly defeated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that this defeat, while not yet fully manifested, is absolutely guaranteed. The empty tomb is the first-fruits of the final harvest. The risen Christ is the prototype of the glorified humanity that all who are His will receive at His return. To believe in the resurrection of Christ is not merely to affirm a historical event; it is to anchor one's entire eschatological hope in the One who has already passed through death and come out the other side victorious. That belief does not remove the sorrow of bereavement, but it gives the sorrow a destination: the resurrection morning, the empty graves, the reunion of the saints.

We must believe that, for the believer in Christ, the sting of death has been removed. The condemnation that made death terrifying, the law's verdict against sin, absorbed and satisfied at the cross, no longer stands against those who are in Christ Jesus. There is therefore now no condemnation (Romans 8:1). This is not a consoling fiction; it is the most foundational fact in the universe. And it means that the believer can face their own death, and the deaths of those they love, with a courage and a composure that are genuinely supernatural, the fruit not of personal strength or philosophical detachment but of the Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead, who also dwells within the believer and will raise them at the last day (Romans 8:11).

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

We should feel a grief that is real and unashamed at the deaths of those we love. The Jesus who wept at Lazarus's tomb is our model. There is no spiritual maturity that places the believer beyond the reach of genuine sorrow at the loss of those who are dear to them. Grief is the appropriate response to death, not because we have no hope, but because what death tears apart is genuinely precious and genuinely not meant to be torn apart. The body, the relationship, the earthly presence of those we love, these are gifts of God, and their loss is a real loss. Let the tears fall. The resurrection will vindicate them.

We should also feel a growing freedom from the fear of our own death. The Hebrews passage describes believers as those who have been freed from the lifelong slavery of the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15). This freedom is not given all at once; it is cultivated through the ongoing work of the Spirit, through the deepening of faith in Christ's resurrection, through the loosening of attachment to earthly things, and through the practice of regularly bringing the reality of one's own death before the Lord in prayer and reflection. The person who has arrived at a settled, gospel-grounded freedom from the fear of death is the freest person in the world. They can give generously, serve sacrificially, speak courageously, and live dangerously because they have nothing left to protect that Christ's resurrection has not already secured.

We should desire to die well, not as a morbid preoccupation but as the natural aspiration of a life lived in the light of the resurrection. The Puritan tradition was right: dying well is a grace to be cultivated across a lifetime, not a skill to be acquired at the last moment. The person who desires to die well desires to live in such a way that when the last appointment comes, they will have nothing to regret, nothing to grasp for, and nothing to fear. That desire is a holy desire, and it is one that this series is designed, in part, to deepen.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 and 51–57 in their entirety this week. Make a list of every claim Paul makes about death and its defeat. Note the sequence of events he describes: Christ's resurrection, the resurrection of those who belong to Him, the handing over of the kingdom to the Father, the abolition of the last enemy. How does this sequence shape your understanding of the Christian hope?
- Read Psalm 90, Moses' meditation on human mortality and the eternity of God, and identify what response Moses draws from the reality of death (particularly verses 10–12). What does it mean to "number your days"? What are the practical implications of that discipline for the way you are currently investing your time, energy, and resources?
- Write a brief, honest account of your own relationship to the reality of your death. Are you at peace with it, fearful of it, avoidant of it, or something else? What specific aspects of the biblical doctrine of this lesson, the defeat of death in Christ, the removal of the sting, the gain of being with Christ, speak most directly to where you actually are in your relationship to the prospect of your own dying? Bring this reflection to the next class session, not to share publicly, but to inform your own prayer this week.
- Identify someone in your congregation or circle of relationships who is currently facing a serious illness, or who has recently lost a loved one. Bring the comfort of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 or Philippians 1:21–23 to them this week, not as a theological lecture but as a pastoral word, spoken or written with genuine love and presence. Let this lesson be received not only in the mind but in the body, as an act of ministry to the dying and the grieving.
- Begin the discipline of what the Puritans called "meditating on death": once a week, for the next month, spend five minutes in quiet prayer with the simple and honest acknowledgment before God that you will die. Bring that reality to Him. Ask Him to use it to loosen your grip on the things of this age and to deepen your longing for the resurrection age to come. Notice what happens to your priorities, your generosity, and your courage as the weeks pass.

Key Texts: *Romans 5:12; 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:26, 54–57; Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:1–8; Hebrews 9:27; Ecclesiastes 12:7*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- How does your cultural context, the particular time and place in which you live, shape the way you think and feel about death? Does your culture tend toward denial, romanticization, or frank acknowledgment of death? How has the church you have been part of either reinforced or challenged those cultural patterns?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 5:12 and 6:23. What does Paul say is the origin of death? What does the wage metaphor of 6:23 communicate about the relationship between sin and death? How does the second half of 6:23, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord", set death and life in contrast? What does this tell us about the nature of both?
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:20–28. What is the significance of the word "firstfruits" in verse 20? What sequence of events does Paul describe in verses 23–26? What is the relationship between Christ's present reign and the defeat of death? What does Paul mean when he says in verse 26 that death is the "last enemy that will be abolished"?
- Read Philippians 1:21–23. What does Paul mean by "to die is gain"? What specific gain does he identify in verse 23? What does the word "depart" (analyo) suggest about his understanding of death? Why does he conclude that remaining in the flesh is "more necessary" for the sake of others? What does this passage reveal about how Paul holds the value of earthly life and the prospect of death in tension?
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:1–8. What does the tent metaphor communicate about the present body? What does the "building from God" that Paul anticipates represent? What does Paul mean in verse 4 when he says the Christian desires not to be "unclothed" but "clothed"? Why is this distinction important for understanding what Paul expects in the intermediate state versus the resurrection?
- Read Hebrews 2:14–15 and 9:27. What two things does the author of Hebrews say Christ accomplished through His death in 2:14–15? What does it mean that the devil "had the power of death"? How does 9:27 describe the structure of every human life, and what does it say follows death? What is the pastoral significance of the irreversibility that 9:27 implies?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson distinguishes three forms of death: physical, spiritual, and eternal. How are these three related to one another in the biblical narrative? Which of the three does the gospel most directly address, and how does the gospel's address to that form of death also transform the other two?
- The lesson insists that Paul's declaration "to die is gain" does not mean that the believer should be indifferent to earthly life or eager to escape from it. How do you understand the tension Paul holds between the gain of death and the value of continued earthly life? What prevents this conviction from becoming a kind of spiritual escapism?
- The lesson argues that "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) is a decisive refutation of any theology that romanticizes death or counsels Christian detachment from grief. Do you agree? What does Jesus' weeping at Lazarus's tomb communicate about the proper Christian posture toward death and grief, especially given that Jesus knew He was about to raise Lazarus?

- The lesson describes the Puritan ars moriendi as one of the most practically valuable contributions to Christian pastoral formation. What do you find most compelling about this tradition? What might need to be recovered or adapted for the contemporary church, which faces death in a very different cultural and medical context than the seventeenth century?
- The lesson connects the early church's fearlessness before martyrdom to its resurrection faith. Do you find this connection persuasive? What is the relationship between believing in the resurrection and being free from the fear of death? Can you identify any contemporary examples of communities or individuals whose resurrection faith has produced a similar fearlessness?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson closes with the observation that someone in the room where it is being taught may be facing death sooner than they know. If that is true of you, if you received a serious diagnosis today, what specific truths from this lesson would you most need to hold onto? What would make them difficult to hold onto, and what resources does the lesson provide for holding on?
- What would it look like, concretely, to practice the discipline of "numbering your days" (Psalm 90:12) in a way that is spiritually formative rather than morbid or anxious? What specific changes in your daily priorities, your use of time, your generosity, or your relationships might result from a more deliberate awareness of your own finitude?
- The lesson describes the deathbed of the Christian as "a pulpit from which the most powerful of all sermons is preached." Have you ever witnessed a Christian dying well? What did it look like, and what effect did it have on those who observed it? What would need to be true of your life now for your own death to be that kind of testimony?
- As this unit turns now to the intermediate state (Lesson 5) and the present heaven (Lesson 6), what is the one question about what happens after death that you most hope those lessons will address? Write it down and bring it to the next session.

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 aloud, slowly: "But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Pause after it. This is the doxology of the defiant church, defiant not in arrogance but in the confidence of those who know the end of the story. Death will not have the last word. The last word belongs to the God who gives the victory.

Pray by name for those in the congregation who are currently facing death, those with terminal diagnoses, those in the final stages of a long illness, those whose age or frailty has brought the reality of death into the immediate foreground of their daily experience. Pray that the specific truths of this lesson would become living realities for them: that death's sting has been removed in Christ; that to depart is to be with Him; that the body they are losing will be raised in glory at the last day; that the One who wept at Lazarus's tomb is present with them in their own dying, weeping with them and preparing to call them forth.

Pray for those in the congregation who are grieving, the recently bereaved, those carrying losses still raw and unresolved, those for whom a particular season (a birthday, an anniversary, a holiday) brings the weight of absence surging back. Pray that the hope of the resurrection would not remain an intellectual conviction for them but would descend into the specific, concrete ache of their grief and begin to transform it, not by removing the sorrow but by giving it the trajectory Paul describes in 1 Thessalonians 4: grief that is real, that is honored, and that points through the loss toward the reunion that the resurrection promises.

Pray for the courage that the defeat of death makes available to every believer, courage in evangelism, courage in sacrificial service, courage in the face of cultural pressure to conform, courage in speaking the truth in love even when the cost is significant. Pray that the members of this congregation would live as people who have, in the deepest sense, nothing left to lose, because everything they have is held securely in the hands of the One who died and rose and is coming again. Pray that that freedom would make them remarkable, remarkably generous, remarkably fearless, remarkably joyful in the face of a world that has no reason to be joyful at all.

Close with the ancient prayer of the church: "O Lord, support us all the day long of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, Lord, in Thy mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." Let that prayer be received not as a liturgical formality but as the genuine longing of people who know they are dying, and who know that the safe lodging, the holy rest, and the peace at the last are not pious wishes but purchased realities, guaranteed by the empty tomb of Easter morning.

> *"The last enemy that will be abolished is death."*
> **1 Corinthians 15:26, NASB 1995**

Key Texts: *Romans 5:12; 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:26, 54–57; Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:1–8; Hebrews 9:27; Ecclesiastes 12:7*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com