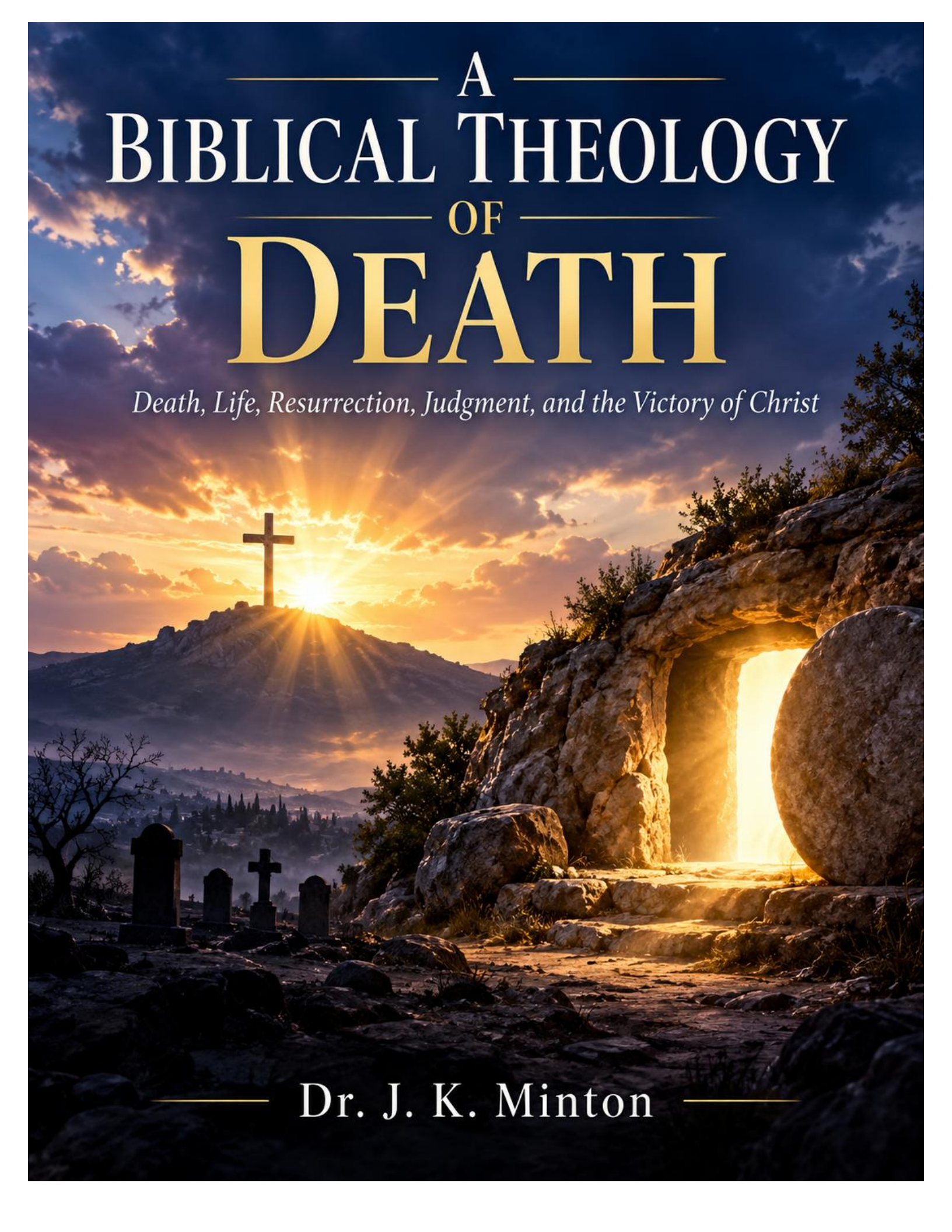




A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF DEATH

Death, Life, Resurrection, Judgment, and the Victory of Christ

Dr. J. K. Minton

Death is one of the great realities of human existence. Every generation faces it, every family eventually encounters it, and every person, unless alive at the return of Christ, will experience physical death. Yet the Bible does not speak of death merely as the end of biological life. Scripture presents death as a profound theological reality tied to sin, separation, judgment, resurrection, and the saving work of Jesus Christ. At its most basic level, death involves separation: physical death separates the person from the earthly body, spiritual death separates the sinner from the life and fellowship of God, and the second death describes the final and irreversible judgment of those who remain apart from Christ.

1. DEATH ENTERED THE WORLD THROUGH SIN

The biblical theology of death begins with sin. Paul writes that “through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin” (Romans 5:12). Death is therefore not presented as the natural fulfillment of God’s original design for humanity, but as an enemy that entered human experience through sin. That is why Scripture never asks us to pretend that death itself is good. Paul calls death “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26), and the grief surrounding death is treated as real and legitimate. Death separates people who love one another, interrupts earthly relationships, and brings sorrow and tears. Even Jesus, standing at the tomb of Lazarus and knowing that He would soon raise him, wept.

But death is not the final word. The same Bible that traces death to sin also announces that Jesus Christ has confronted death at its deepest point and defeated it through His own death and resurrection. The Christian theology of death therefore moves from the entrance of sin to the triumph of Christ. We understand the seriousness of death only when we understand the seriousness of sin, and we understand the Christian hope only when we understand what Christ accomplished at the cross and through the empty tomb.

2. SPIRITUAL DEATH WHILE PHYSICALLY ALIVE

The first form of death Scripture asks us to understand is spiritual death. A person can be very much alive physically and yet be spiritually dead. Paul tells the Ephesians, “you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Obviously, they had been functioning human beings: they worked, thought, loved, chose, planned, and participated in society. Yet apart from Christ they were separated from the life of God. Paul describes the unbelieving condition as being “darkened in their understanding” and “excluded from the life of God” (Ephesians 4:18). Spiritual death therefore does not mean the absence of personality, intelligence, affection, morality, or human

achievement; it means alienation from God, who is the source of spiritual and eternal life.

That distinction is crucial. An unbeliever may be educated, generous, religious, loving toward family, respected in the community, and capable of remarkable sacrifice. The doctrine of spiritual death does not require us to deny any of those things. It means that, despite all that may be admirable in a person's earthly life, he or she remains unreconciled to God apart from Christ. The person has natural life but not the eternal life that comes through the Son. He lives in God's world and enjoys many of God's temporal blessings, but he does not possess the restored relationship with God for which humanity was created.

SPIRITUAL DEATH IS LIFE WITHOUT A CERTAIN HOPE BEYOND DEATH

One of the most serious consequences of spiritual death is that the unbeliever has no biblical basis for hope beyond physical death. He may hope that death simply ends everything. He may hope that there is nothing beyond the grave, no judgment, no accountability, and no conscious existence. In that sense, ceasing to exist may seem to him like the best possible prospect. But Scripture does not offer nonexistence as the final destiny of the unbeliever. It speaks instead of resurrection, judgment, and the second death.

This is one reason death can carry such profound uncertainty and fear for the person who is outside Christ. Everything familiar is ending, and there is no promise from God that what follows will be better. The unbeliever may have hopes, wishes, philosophies, or personal beliefs about death, but apart from Christ he has no revealed promise of eternal life, no assurance of being with Christ, no promise of resurrection to life, and no certainty of reunion with those who died in Christ.

That is the contrast Paul emphasizes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. He does not say that Christians do not grieve. We do grieve, because death still separates us from people we love and that separation hurts. But Paul says that we do not grieve "as do the rest who have no hope." The difference is not that Christians experience less love or less sorrow. The difference is that our sorrow is joined to a promise. For the believer, death does not erase hope; it brings us closer to its fulfillment. We know that the believer who dies is with Christ, that the body will be raised, that Christ will return, and that those who belong to Him will be together with the Lord forever. Christian grief therefore looks through the grave to resurrection.

The unbeliever has no such promise. Without Christ, death is not a doorway into a promised future. It is the end of earthly life and the opportunity to respond to the

Gospel, followed by judgment. That is why the Christian message concerning death is not merely, “Do not be afraid to die.” It is far more urgent: Do not die without Christ. For those who are in Christ, there is sorrow, but not hopeless sorrow; there is separation, but not permanent separation; there is death, but beyond death there is resurrection and life. Our hope is not that death will end our existence. Our hope is in knowing that Christ has conquered death and will raise us to life.

3. HOW UNFORGIVEN SIN AFFECTS LIFE NOW

Unforgiven sin is not merely a record stored away for a future judgment. Sin affects the unbeliever in the present. Isaiah says, “your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God” (Isaiah 59:2). That separation is the deepest present consequence of sin. A person may enjoy family, friendship, health, work, beauty, accomplishment, and pleasure, but none of those created gifts can restore fellowship with the Creator. Human beings were made for God, and no created thing can finally substitute for Him. The spiritual emptiness that often persists even in the midst of outward success is consistent with this biblical diagnosis: humanity can possess much and still lack the life for which it was made.

Sin also enslaves. Jesus said, “everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin” (John 8:34). Sin frequently presents itself as freedom—the freedom to do what I want, define life on my own terms, and answer to no one. Yet what begins as a choice can become a pattern, what becomes a pattern can become a habit, and what becomes a habit can become bondage. The sinner may discover that what he once chose freely now exercises increasing control over him. Paul describes the unbelieving life as being shaped by the course of this world, the desires of the flesh and mind, and spiritual powers opposed to God (Ephesians 2:2–3). Sin promises independence, but it progressively reduces true freedom.

Sin further darkens human understanding. Romans 1 describes humanity as suppressing the truth in unrighteousness and then becoming darkened in heart and thinking. Sin does not merely influence what a person does; it can influence what a person believes about what he does. Conduct and conviction begin to interact. What once troubled the conscience can become tolerable, what becomes tolerable can become acceptable, and what becomes acceptable can eventually become desirable. A person may therefore become increasingly comfortable with the very condition that separates him from God.

The conscience remains an important witness, although it is not infallible and does not save. Romans 2:15 describes the conscience as accusing or defending human behavior. People respond to guilt in many ways: they may confess wrongdoing, excuse it, blame

others, redefine it, compare themselves with someone they consider worse, bury themselves in activity, or attempt to silence the conscience altogether. But removing the feeling of guilt is not the same thing as removing guilt before God. Forgiveness requires reconciliation, and Scripture locates that reconciliation in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

For this reason, spiritual death affects the whole person. It touches the mind because truth is resisted; the will because sin enslaves; the conscience because guilt remains unresolved; the affections because created things compete for the love owed to God; and human relationships because pride, selfishness, lust, envy, bitterness, fear, and anger inevitably spill over into life with others. Again, this does not mean every unbeliever is as wicked as he could possibly become. It means that the human problem is deeper than behavior and cannot be cured by working on self-improvement.

4. SALVATION IS PASSING FROM DEATH INTO LIFE

Because the human problem is spiritual death, salvation must be more than moral reform. Jesus said that the person who hears His word and believes the Father “has eternal life” and “has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). Paul similarly says that God, “even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5). The Gospel does not simply make bad people better; it makes spiritually dead people alive. Salvation includes forgiveness and justification, but it also includes the impartation of life through union with Christ.

Eternal life therefore begins before physical death. It is not merely endless existence after the grave; it is a present possession of the believer because he has been joined to Christ. This explains the radically different meaning physical death has for the believer and the unbeliever. Both may experience the same biological event, but they do not enter it from the same spiritual condition. One has already passed from death into life; the other remains spiritually dead apart from Christ.

5. PHYSICAL DEATH

Physical death is the end of earthly bodily life and the separation of the person from the body. Ecclesiastes 12:7 speaks of the dust returning to the earth and the spirit returning to God who gave it. Physical death comes to believers and unbelievers alike unless Christ returns first. Christianity does not promise exemption from the grave. It promises something far greater: because of Christ, the grave cannot finally hold those who belong to Him.

For the unbeliever, physical death has a different and solemn significance. The unbeliever does not become spiritually dead when he dies physically; he dies physically while already spiritually dead. Physical death does not create his alienation from God but carries that unresolved condition beyond earthly life. Hebrews 9:27 states, “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.” Physical death ends earthly life and, with it, the opportunity to respond to the Gospel. Death itself does not forgive sin, create righteousness, reconcile a sinner to God, or convert an unbeliever into a believer. Only Christ can do those things.

6. DEATH FOR THE BELIEVER

For the believer, death remains an enemy, but it is a defeated enemy. Jesus did not merely come to teach His people how to cope with death; He came to conquer it. Hebrews 2:14–15 teaches that through His own death Christ broke the power of the one who held the power of death and delivered those who had lived under its fear. Death can still touch the believer’s body, but it cannot destroy the eternal life Christ has given. That is the force of Jesus’ words to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies” (John 11:25). Jesus was not denying physical death. Lazarus had died, Martha would die, and the disciples would die. He was declaring that physical death can never extinguish the life He gives.

This leads to one of the simplest and strongest statements in the Christian theology of death: the believer may die, but the believer will never cease to live. Paul could therefore say, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21), and he could describe death as departing “to be with Christ,” which he called “very much better” (Philippians 1:23). Second Corinthians 5:8 similarly speaks of being absent from the body and at home with the Lord. The believer does not move from life into nothingness. He leaves earthly life and enters the conscious presence of Christ.

The New Testament also changes the vocabulary with which Christians face death. Paul describes his approaching death as a “departure” (2 Timothy 4:6), and Scripture frequently speaks of deceased believers as those who have “fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14). The language of sleep emphasizes the temporary character of death for the body and the certainty of awakening at the resurrection. The cemetery, therefore, is not the Christian’s final address. It is a place where bodies await resurrection morning.

Christian hope does not eliminate grief. Jesus wept at Lazarus’s tomb, and Paul did not tell Christians not to grieve. He told them not to grieve “as do the rest who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Christian grief is real because separation is real. We

weep because someone we love is no longer physically present with us, but we do not grieve as though that person has been lost to Christ. We experience the pain of separation while holding the certain promise of reunion. The difference is not the absence of sorrow; it is the presence of hope.

7. RESURRECTION: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IS MORE THAN HEAVEN

The Christian hope is greater than the survival of the soul after death. Scripture promises the resurrection of the body. Paul says that what is sown perishable will be raised imperishable, what is sown in dishonor will be raised in glory, and what is sown in weakness will be raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). First Thessalonians 4:16 declares that “the dead in Christ will rise.” At the return of Christ, believers will receive glorified bodies fitted for eternal life in the consummated kingdom of God.

For that reason, the fullest Christian hope is not merely, “When I die, I will go to heaven.” That statement is true as far as it goes, but the biblical hope goes further. Christ is coming again, the dead in Christ will rise, living believers will be transformed, and God’s people will be forever with the Lord. Physical death temporarily separates the believer from the body; resurrection will undo even that separation. Redemption finally reaches not only the soul but the body as well.

8. THE UNBELIEVER, THE PRESENT PROSPECT OF JUDGMENT, AND FINAL ACCOUNTABILITY

For the unbeliever, the prospect of judgment is not merely a future theological fact; Scripture indicates that moral accountability casts a shadow across the present. Romans 2 speaks of conscience bearing witness and of human thoughts alternately accusing or defending. A person may deny final judgment intellectually, suppress thoughts of accountability, or rarely think consciously about death, yet Scripture portrays humanity as possessing a real awareness that life has moral meaning and that we answer to Someone beyond ourselves. This helps explain why death often awakens questions that ordinary life can postpone: What happens when I die? Am I ready to meet God?

Judgment can therefore affect people now through fear, avoidance, and self-justification. Hebrews 2:15 speaks of those who through fear of death were subject to slavery throughout their lives. Jesus also explains that people may resist the Light because the Light exposes their deeds (John 3:19–20). Not every unbelieving question is a moral evasion—there are genuine intellectual questions—but Jesus teaches that

unbelief can involve more than intellect. If God is truly God, then I am accountable; if Christ is Lord, then I cannot remain the absolute lord of my own life.

Another common response is self-justification through comparison. People say, in effect, “I am not as bad as that person,” “I have treated people fairly,” “I believe in God,” or “I have lived a decent life.” Yet Scripture does not present another sinner as the standard by which we will be measured. Romans 3:23 says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The final standard is not whether we were better than someone else but whether we possess the righteousness God requires, and the Gospel declares that such righteousness is received through Christ rather than earned by human merit.

9. AFTER DEATH COMES JUDGMENT

Physical death does not end personal existence, and it does not erase moral accountability. Hebrews 9:27 joins death and judgment in a direct sequence. During earthly life a person may suppress God’s truth, excuse sin, reinterpret morality, or compare himself favorably with others. At judgment those strategies end. Revelation 20 depicts the dead standing before the great white throne, the books being opened, and the dead being judged according to their deeds. The picture is one of perfect knowledge and perfect justice: no hidden evidence, forgotten act, misunderstood motive, corrupted testimony, or mistaken verdict.

The final judgment of the unbeliever culminates in what Revelation calls “the second death” (Revelation 20:14–15; 21:8). Spiritual death is separation from the life of God in the present; physical death ends earthly bodily life; the second death is the final and irreversible judgment of those who remain outside Christ. Second Thessalonians 1:9 speaks of final punishment in terms of eternal destruction away from the favorable presence of the Lord and the glory of His power. The greatest tragedy, therefore, is not simply to die. The greatest tragedy is to die without Christ.

10. BOTH BELIEVER AND UNBELIEVER WILL BE RAISED

The Bible teaches resurrection not only for believers but also for unbelievers. Jesus says that an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, some to a resurrection of life and others to a resurrection of judgment (John 5:28–29). Daniel 12:2 expresses the same distinction in Old Testament language, speaking of some raised to everlasting life and others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. Resurrection by itself, therefore, is not synonymous with salvation. There is a resurrection of life and a resurrection of judgment.

Every person will ultimately stand before God, but not every person stands before Him in the same relationship. The believer is in Christ, justified by grace, and therefore faces no condemnation (Romans 8:1; John 5:24). Believers will still give account before Christ for their lives and service (2 Corinthians 5:10), but that evaluation is not a trial to determine whether Christ's atonement was sufficient or whether they will be condemned. The unbeliever, by contrast, stands before God apart from the saving righteousness of Christ and faces final judgment.

11. THE GREAT CONTRAST

The difference between the believer and the unbeliever is therefore not that one dies physically and the other does not. Both face physical death unless alive at Christ's return. The difference is their relationship to Christ. The believer was spiritually dead but has been made alive with Christ. When physical death comes, he enters the presence of Christ, awaits the resurrection of the body, and will share forever in the life of the age to come. He will never experience the second death.

The unbeliever, however, remains spiritually dead while physically alive. Unforgiven sin separates him from God, exerts enslaving and darkening effects in the present, and leaves guilt unresolved. Physical death ends earthly life and, with it, the opportunity to respond to the Gospel. After death comes judgment, followed ultimately by the resurrection of judgment and the second death for those whose names are not found in the book of life. The dividing line is not human achievement, religion, church membership, comparative morality, or sincerity. The dividing line is Jesus Christ.

12. DEATH HAS LOST ITS STING FOR THE BELIEVER

Paul brings the Christian doctrine of death to its triumphant climax in 1 Corinthians 15. Because Christ has been raised and because those who belong to Him will also be raised, Paul declares, "Death is swallowed up in victory" and asks, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54–55). The sting of death is sin, but Christ has dealt decisively with sin at the cross. He died, was buried, and rose again. Therefore Paul concludes, "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

The Christian does not need to call death good in order to face it with hope. Death is still an enemy, but it is an enemy whose final defeat has already been guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus. Revelation 21:4 looks forward to the day when there will no longer be death, mourning, crying, or pain, and 1 Corinthians 15:26 promises that "the

last enemy that will be abolished is death.” The story of redemption does not end in a cemetery. It ends with death itself removed from God’s renewed creation.

13. THE GOSPEL AND THE THEOLOGY OF DEATH

The Bible does not reveal these truths merely to satisfy our curiosity about what happens when people die. The theology of death is inseparable from the urgency of the Gospel. Humanity is spiritually dead, sin separates us from God, physical death is certain, and judgment follows. Yet God has provided a Savior. Jesus bore our sin, endured judgment in our place, died our death, and rose victorious over the grave. Everyone who believes in Him receives eternal life and passes from death into life.

That is why Jesus’ words at the tomb of Lazarus reach far beyond the temporary restoration of one man’s physical life. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). He did not merely claim to teach resurrection or promise resurrection; He located resurrection and life in His own person. The central question is therefore not simply, “Will I die?” We already know the answer to that question. The greater question is, “What will death mean for me?” The answer depends upon what a person has done with Jesus Christ.

For the believer, death is painful but not permanent, separation but not destruction, an enemy but a defeated enemy, and the end of earthly life but not the end of life. For the unbeliever, spiritual death is already a present reality; physical death ends earthly life and, with it, the opportunity to respond to Christ; judgment follows; and separation from God becomes final. But as long as a person is alive, the Gospel still announces that the spiritually dead can be made alive, the guilty can be forgiven, the alienated can be reconciled, the condemned can be justified, and the slave to sin can be set free.

Jesus did not simply come to make dying easier. He came to give life to the dead. The One who stood before the tomb of Lazarus and called a dead man to come forth is the same Savior who gives eternal life to those who believe. That is why the most important question in the theology of death remains the question Jesus asked Martha: “Do you believe this?”