

Of the Death of the Body.

by John Gill

Death is a disunion of the soul and body, a dissolving of the earthly house of our tabernacle, and a departure out of this world to another.

Scripture: Genesis 3:19, Job 14:5, Ecclesiastes 12:7, Luke 20:36, Romans 6:23, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Philippians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Hebrews 9:27, James 2:26

Topics: "Hope in Eternal Life", "The Nature of Death"

Description

John Gill addresses the concept of physical death, distinguishing it from spiritual death and emphasizing that it is a separation of the soul and body. He explores the nature of death, its inevitability for all humans regardless of status or age, and the divine sovereignty behind it. Gill explains that while death is a consequence of sin, it is also a necessary transition for believers, leading them to eternal life with Christ. He reassures that death, though formidable, is ultimately a blessing for the righteous, as it frees them from sin and sorrow.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 7--Chapter 1

OF THE DEATH OF THE BODY

The death to be treated of, is not the death of the soul, which dies not, as will be seen hereafter; nor the moral or spiritual death, which has been discoursed of elsewhere; nor the death of the soul and body in hell, the second and eternal death: but, the death of the body, in a strict and proper sense. The things to be inquired into, are what death is? who the subjects of it? what the causes of it, and its properties? 1. First, what death is. To say what it is, is difficult; we know nothing of it practically and experimentally, though there are continual instances of it before our eyes; our friends and relations, who have gone through this dark passage, have not returned to us to tell us what they met with in it; nor what they felt when the parting stroke was given; nor what they were surprised into at once.

We know nothing of death but in theory; it is defined by some a cessation of the motion of the heart, and of the circulation of the blood, and of the flow of the animal spirits, occasioned by some defects in the organs and fluids of the body: no doubt such a cessation follows upon death, and such the effects of it; but what it

is, is chiefly to be known from the scripture, by which we learn, 1a. That it is a disunion of the soul and body, the two constituent parts of man; the one consists of flesh, blood and bones, of arteries, veins, nerves, &c. and goes by the general name of "flesh"; and the other is a spiritual substance, immaterial and immortal, and consists of several powers and faculties, as the understanding, will, and affections, and goes by the name of "spirit"; (see Matthew 26:41), between these two there is a nexus, or bond, which unites them together; though what that is none can tell; this puzzles all philosophy, to say by what bands and ligaments things of such a different nature as matter and spirit be, should be coupled and fastened together.

Now death is a dissolution of this union, a separation of those two parts in man.[1] The "body without the spirit", *cwriV*, separate from it, "is dead" (Jas. 2:26), when that is removed, the body is left a lifeless lump of clay. 1b. It is a dissolving this earthly house of our tabernacle (2 Cor. 5:1), the body is compared to a tabernacle, as is the body of Christ, of Peter and others (Heb. 8:2; 2 Pet. 1:13; 2 Cor. 5:4), in allusion either to military tents or tabernacles, pitched by soldiers when they encamp; or to those of shepherds, which were removed from place to place for the sake of pasturage for their flocks, by which the brevity of human life is expressed (Isa. 38:12), such tents or tabernacles were commonly made of haircloth, stretched upon and fastened to stakes with cords or pins, as allusions to them show (Isa. 33:20; 54:2), and the body and its various parts are fastened together with various cords; we read of a "silver cord", which is loosed at death (Eccl. 12:6), which whether it means the bond of union between the soul and body in general, or some particular part and ligament of the body about which interpreters are not agreed, is not easy to say.

However, besides what compacts the joints together, there are certain fibers or small cords, like threads, by which those parts are fastened on which life mostly depends; there are certain valves of the veins through which the blood is discharged into the heart, which are fastened to the sides of the ventricles of it with many tendinous fibers to secure them when they are shut; which fibers are fastened to some protuberances or "pins" of the sides of the heart: now in case one of these valves should be out of order, and unfit to perform its function; yea if one of these little fibers which are fastened to them should "break", or be either too short or too long to do their service, the tabernacle would fall down at once: on such slender things hangs the life of every man, even of the greatest monarch upon the throne, as well as of the meanest peasant.[2] Now death is a pulling up the stakes of this tabernacle, the body; a loosening and breaking its cords; an unpinning it, a taking it down as it were by parts, and laying it aside for a time. 1c.

It is signified by a departure out of this world to another: so the death of Christ and some others is expressed in such language (John 13:1; Luke 2:29; Phil. 1:23; 2 Tim. 4:7), it is like going from one house to another: with the saints, it is a departure from their earthly house to an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens; from houses of clay, which have their foundation in the dust, to everlasting habitations, to mansions in Christ's Father's house. It is like loosing from the port, as the sailor's phrase is; (see Acts 13:3; 27:13; 28:11) and launching into the ocean, and sailing to another port; the port loosed or departed from at death, is this world, which some loose from willingly, others not so; the port or haven to which saints are bound, is heaven, the heavenly and better country, to which desired haven they arrive at death, and by death.

Death is the ship or boat which wafts them over to the shores of eternity. The heathens had by tradition notions somewhat similar to these, though more coarse; for who has not heard of the Elysian fields, the Stygian lake, and old Charon's boat? by which are represented death's wafting men over the black lake to fields of pleasure. But these images stand in a more beautiful light in the sacred pages; where the saints

are represented as quietly wafted over the swellings of Jordan to the land of Canaan, a land of rest and pleasure. 1d.

Death is expressed by going the way of all the earth; so said Joshua when about to die, "Behold this day I am going the way of all the earth" (Joshua 23:14), and so said David (1 Kings 2:2), it is a "going"; so Christ describes his death (Luke 22:22) it is a going a journey, to a man's long home; it is a going from "hence", from this world, and a going "whither" we shall not return any more to this world to be and live in it as formerly; it is going to an invisible state, to the world of spirits, of which we now have but little knowledge, and very imperfect conceptions; (see Psalms 39:13; Job 10:21, 22) the way lies through a dark valley, but God is the guide of his people through it; he is not only their guide unto death, but through it safe to glory; and this is the way all men go and must go; it is a common track,[3] a beaten path, and yet unknown by us; all must tread it, none can avoid it. 1e.

Death is called, a returning to the dust and earth of which the body is formed (Eccl. 12:7), the body is originally made of earth and dust; and while it is in life, it is nothing but dust and ashes, as Abraham confessed he was; and when it dies it turns to dust (Gen. 3:19), the body at death is turned into corruption, rottenness, and dust; it is interred in the earth, and mixes with it, and becomes that; which is an humbling consideration to proud man, who if he looks back to his original, it is dust; if he considers himself in the present life, he is no other than a heap of dust; and if he looks forward to his last end, it will be the dust of death; his honour, in every view of himself, is laid in the dust; and this shows the knowledge and power of God in raising the dead, who knows where their dust lies, and will collect it together, and raise it up at the last day. 1f.

Death is frequently expressed by sleeping (Dan. 12:2; John 11:11; 1 Thess. 4:14), and is so called because sleep is an image and representation of death;[4] in sleep the senses are locked up and are useless for a time, as in death a man is wholly deprived of them; sleep is but for a short time, and so is death; after sleep a man rises, and being refreshed by it is more fit for labour; so is death to the saints; it is a rest unto them; and they will rise in the morning of the resurrection, fresh, lively, and active, and more fit for divine and spiritual exercises. 2.

Secondly, who are the subjects of death. Not "angels", for they being simple, uncompounded, incorporeal, and immaterial, are incapable of death; they "die not" (Luke 20:36), but men, even all men, a few only excepted, as Enoch and Elijah, under the Old Testament; the one was translated that he should not see death, the other was taken up to heaven soul and body in a chariot and horses of fire; and those saints that will be found alive at Christ's second coming, who will not die but be changed: otherwise all men die; "all flesh is grass", every man is withering, mortal, dying, and dies; all have sinned, and so death comes upon all men. 2a.

Persons of every sex, male and female; of every age, young and old; small and great; some die in infancy, who have not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression; some in childhood, others in youth; some in the prime of their days, and in their full strength; and some in old age, and those that live the longest yet die, as Methuselah the oldest man did. Look over the account of the antediluvian Patriarchs (Gen. 5:1-32), there it may be observed, that at the close of the account of each it is said, "he died"; such an one lived eight hundred years and old, and "he died"; and such an one lived nine hundred years and old, and "he died". 2b.

Of every rank and class and condition in life, high and low, rich and poor; kings die as well as their subjects: Job wishes he had died as soon as born, then he had been with kings and counselors of the earth, and with princes whose houses had been filled with gold and silver: riches cannot keep off nor buy off the stroke of death, nor deliver from it; the rich and the poor meet together in the grave, where they are upon an equal foot. 2c. Persons of every character among men; it may be seen and observed in instances without number, that wise men die, and also the fool and brutish person; yea often so it is, that a wise man dies as a fool dies; Solomon, the wisest of men, died.

Learning, in all its branches and in its highest pitch, cannot secure from dying men learned and unlearned die. 2d. Persons of every character in the sight of God, wicked men and good men; the wickedness of the wicked, of those who are the most addicted and abandoned to it, such as have made a covenant with death and with hell, are at an agreement, as they imagine; such covenant and agreement will not stand, nor be of any avail unto them to protect them from death; though they put away the evil day far from them, it will come upon them suddenly, while they are crying peace, peace, and promise themselves a long life of prosperity: and good men, they die also, "The prophets, do they live for ever?" they do not (Zech. 1:5), merciful and righteous men are often taken away in mercy from the evil to come; true believers in Christ, such who live and believe in him, or have a living faith on him, shall never die a spiritual death, nor the second death; but they die a corporal one, even though Christ has died for them, and by dying has satisfied for sin, and abolished death.

Yet, 2e. Their death is different from that of wicked men; they die in Christ, in union to him, and so are secure from condemnation; they die in faith of being for ever with him; they die in hope of eternal life; and their end is different from others: the end of a perfect and upright man is peace; he departs in peace, he enters into peace, he receives the end of his faith, even the salvation of his soul; when the wicked man goes into everlasting punishment, he goes into everlasting life. 2f.

The reason of which is, death is abolished as a penal evil, though it was threatened as such for sin, and is inflicted as such on some; yet being bore by Christ as a penalty, in the room and stead of his people, it ceases to be so to them; the sting of it, which is sin, is taken away by Christ; the curse of it is removed, Christ being made a curse for them; death is become a blessing to them, for blessed are they that die in Christ; and hence it is desirable by them, and there is good reason for it; since it puts an end to sin and sorrow, enters into the joy of the Lord, and fulfils it. 3.

Thirdly, the causes of death, on what account it comes upon men, and to whom and what it is to be ascribed. 3a. First, the efficient cause is God, who is the sovereign disposer of life and death; it is he that gives life and breath, and all things to his creatures; life is a favour granted by him to men, and he upholds their souls in life; and since he is the author, giver, and supporter of life, he may with propriety be called the God of their lives; and he that gives life has only a right to take it away; and he is a sovereign being, and may do it at his pleasure; and he has particularly expressed his sovereignty in this instance, saying, "I kill, and I make alive" (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6), he is God the Lord, to whom belong the "issues from death"; or rather, the issues to it, the ways which lead to it, and issue in it; for as the poet says,[5] it has a thousand ways to come upon men, attack and dispatch them. 3a1.

No man has a right to take away his own life, nor the life of another; Christ, the Prince of life, who had the human nature united to his divine Person, had power to dispose of his human life, to lay it down, and take it up again; which none besides has: suicide, of all the kinds of murder, is the most unnatural and execrable; it has been committed by wicked men; as Saul, Judas, &c. Samson is no instance of it; what he

did, was not with an intention to destroy his own life, but the lives of the enemies of God, and of his people, in doing which his own life fell a sacrifice; and was done in a devout and pious manner, praying unto God: and besides, he acted not as a private man, but as a civil magistrate, and judge in Israel; and whatever may be charitably hoped of some persons, who have been left to destroy themselves, care should be taken not to encourage, nor give any countenance to so sinful a practice.

Nor ought any man to take away the life of another; since the life of man was neither to be taken away by another, in the heat of passion and wrath, or for sordid and sinister ends to obtain their property; God made a law, and it was one of the first he made after the flood, that "He that shed man's blood, by man should his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6), that is, by the order of the civil magistrate; and a person convicted of this capital crime, ought not to be pardoned; the law is express and peremptory.

And though this sin may be ever so privately committed, yet, generally speaking, it is discovered, and is punished in this life; and it is sure to meet with its reward in the world to come; such sinners are always reckoned among those who shall not inherit the kingdom of God; but shall have their portion in the lake which burns with fire, which is the second death; unless the grace of God is displayed in giving them repentance and remission of sin. 3a2. Satan, though he is said "to have the power of death" (Heb. 2:14), yet this is not to be understood as if he had a power and right to inflict death at pleasure on men; for if so, such is his malice and rooted enmity to men, that the race of mankind would have been extinct long ago.

The case of Job shows that he lies under the restraint of God in this matter: he may have been, by divine permission, in some instances, the executioner of death to the enemies of God, and to such who have given up themselves to him, and sold themselves to work wickedness. He was the introducer of sin into the world, the cause of death; and both are the works of the devil, which Christ came to destroy, and has destroyed; and Satan, because of his concern in the ruin of our first parents, by his temptations, and so of all mankind, he is said to be a "murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). 3a3.

Death of right is of God only; it is he who threatened with it in case of sin; and made it the sanction of his law. Death, whenever he comes and attacks men, it is by a commission from God. He is sometimes represented as a person coming up at our windows, and into our palaces and houses, like a bailiff to arrest men; and sometimes as on horseback and armed, and power given him to kill men with various sorts of judgments, as famine, pestilence, sword, and wild beasts; (see Jeremiah 9:21; Rev. 6:8), and whatever are the means of the death of men, whether extraordinary or ordinary, they are all of God, and under his direction; every disorder, disease, and sickness, are servants sent by him to execute his pleasure; insomuch that death is frequently spoken of as his act, and as inflicted by him; it is expressed by taking men away; by taking away their life or soul; by gathering the breath and Spirit of men to himself; by prevailing against man, and causing him to pass away; and by changing his countenance, and sending him away (Job 27:8; 32:22; 34:14; 14:20). 3a4.

Death is by his appointment; it is the statute law of heaven (Heb. 9:27). The grave is the house appointed for all men living (Job 30:23). All things leading to death, and which issue in it, are under a divine appointment. All afflictions, diseases, and disorders, are of God; these are not fortuitous events, that come by chance, or spring out of the dust; but come by the appointment of God, to bring about the dissolution by death: all the circumstances of it are according to the determinate counsel and will of God; as what death, and by what event, a man shall die; and the manner of his death, and the place where; for though we are told where we were born, and know where we now live; yet no man knows where he shall die; none but God knows this, who has determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of men's habitations,

where they shall live, and where they shall die.

The time of a man's death is appointed by God; for there is a time for every purpose of God, for the execution of it: "A time to be born, and a time to die" (Eccl. 3:1, 2), there is an appointed time for man on earth, when he shall come into the world, how long he shall continue in it, and when he shall go out of it; and before this time no man dies. The Jews sought to lay hold on Christ, to take away his life, but they could not, because his hour was not come; and the same holds good of every man.

Nor can any live longer than the appointed time; "The time drew nigh that Israel must die" (Gen. 47:29), there was a time fixed for it, and that was at hand, when he must die, and there was no going beyond it. Job says of a man, "his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee; thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass" (Job 14:5), a man cannot lengthen out his days, nor another for him; no man "can add one cubit unto his stature", or rather, "to his age" (Matthew 6:27).

The days of men are compared to an hand's breadth (Ps. 39:5), and to this hand's breadth, a cubit, nor indeed any measure at all, can be added, with all the thought, care, and means, that can be made use of; physicians, in this respect, are physicians of no value; they cannot prolong the life of men; they may make life a little more easy and comfortable while it lasts; but they cannot protract it one moment: nor can men that abound with wealth and riches, give to God a ransom for themselves and others, that they should "still live for ever, and see no corruption" (Ps. 49:6-9).

There are several things objected to this; but are what have been mostly answered already; as that Hezekiah had fifteen years added to his days; and some men not living out half their days, and dying before their time,[6] (Ps. 55:23; Eccl. 7:17). As for the objection taken from the insignificancy and uselessness of means, and temptations to lay them aside, if things are so, that no man can live longer, nor die sooner, than the appointed time: it should be known, that in general, with respect to things civil or sacred, the means are equally appointed as the end, and to be used in order to it; this appears in the case of Hezekiah; though the decree was express and peremptory, that fifteen years should be certainly added to his days; yet the prophet that brought the message from the Lord, and the King that received it, both agreed to have a plaster of figs laid upon his boil, for the recovery of his health, and the continuance of his life (Isa. 38:21; Acts 27:31). 3b.

Secondly, the procuring or meritorious cause of death, is sin; it was threatened in case of sin; and when sin entered the world, death came in by it; it is the wages and demerit of sin; "The body is dead because of sin"; it is become mortal, and dies, on account of it (Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 8:10). Man was originally made an immortal creature; the soul, in its own nature, is such, being immaterial; and though the body is composed of matter, and such as was capable of being reduced and resolved into the elements of which it was made, for sin; yet it was gifted by God with immortality; and had man continued in his state of innocence, this gift would have remained with him; for the death of the body is not the fruit and effect of nature, as say the Socinians;[7] but of sin; for if man would have died, according to the course of nature, whether he had sinned or not; to what purpose was the threatening, "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die", if he would and must have died, whether he eat or not?

But it was through sinning that he became mortal, like the beasts, and perish or die, as they do. Otherwise man would have continued immortal; and, by means directed to, would have been supported in his present life, without dying, or any fears of it; or would have been translated to an higher kind of life, for evermore. 3c. Thirdly, the instrumental causes, or means of death, are various; or which, and who, are

employed in the execution of it. Angels are sometimes made use of to inflict it; thus an angel in one night slew, in the Assyrian camp, an hundred fourscore and five thousand (2 Kings 19:35).

Multitudes are cut off by the sword of justice, in the hand of the civil magistrate, and that by the order and appointment of God. God has his four judgments, sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts, by which sometimes great havoc is made among men; the ordinary means by which death is instrumentally brought about, are disorders and distempers of the body; which operate sometimes in a quicker, and sometimes in a slower way; yet sooner or later they are the cause of men's drawing to the grave, and their life to the destroyers. 3d.

Fourthly, the properties of death, which serve to lead into the nature, power, and use of death. 3d1. It is but once; "It is appointed unto men once to die" (Heb. 9:27). Ordinarily men die but once; they do not soon return to life again, and then die again; they go by death whither they shall not return to their houses, and families, and friends again, and to their business in life, as before; when they die, they lie down in the grave, and rise not till the heavens be no more; that is, until the second coming of Christ, when the heavens shall pass away; or until the resurrection morn, which will be when Christ himself shall descend from heaven to judge the world, from whose face the heaven and earth shall flee away; (see Job 7:10; 10:21; 14:10-12).

There have been some instances in which men have died, and have been raised again to a mortal life, as it should seem, and then have died again; otherwise it is not easy to say, how Christ could be called the firstborn from the dead, if any were raised before him to an immortal life, never to die more; since some were raised before; as the "son" of the widow of Sarepta, by Elijah; and the son of the Shunammite, by Elisha; and the man that revived upon touching the prophet's bones: and also others by Christ himself; as Jairus's daughter, the widow of Naim's son, and Lazarus; of whom it is particularly observed, that after his resurrection he sat at table as a guest, at supper time, to eat and drink; which supposes the life he was raised to was a mortal one, and that he was supported in the manner mortals are, and died again (John 12:2).

But commonly men die but once, as Christ the Saviour did. 3d2. Death is certain; it is certain by the appointment of God, which cannot be frustrated; Israel must die, and so must every man; though the time when is very uncertain; the Son of man comes in an hour men know not of; therefore they should be ready, and watching, and waiting for him. Nothing is more certain than death, as all experience in all ages testify; and yet nothing more uncertain than the time when a man shall die. 3d3.

Death is mighty, powerful, and irresistible; what is stronger than death? No man has power over his spirit, to retain the spirit one moment, when it is called for: when God says, this night thy soul is required of thee, it must be given up: there is no resisting nor withstanding: when it is said, "The Master is come, and calleth for thee", thou must go; when death comes and calls for a man, he must go with him; strugglings and entreaties are to no purpose. 3d4. Death is insatiable; it is one of those things that is never satisfied; and the grave, which follows it, is another (Hab. 2:5; Prov. 30:16), though it has been glutting itself from the beginning of the world, it is as greedy of its prey as ever; and though it sometimes makes such a carnage of men, as in a battle, that thousands are slain in one day, and great numbers in a short time, by famine and pestilence, yet it never has enough. 3d5.

Death is necessary; not only by the appointment of God, which must be accomplished; but for the truth of God, in his threatening with it, in case of sin; and for the justice of God on sinners, which requires it: and

besides, it is also necessary to the saints, for their good; that they may be free from indwelling sin and corruption, which they cannot be as long as they are in this tabernacle; this earthly house in which the spreading leprosy of sin is, must be pulled down, ere a thorough riddance can be made of it; it is necessary to deliver the saints from all the troubles of this life, and to introduce them into the joy of their Lord.

Wherefore, 3d6. Though death is formidable to nature, and to natural men; yet it is desirable by good men; they seek their dismissal from hence by it; they choose rather to depart, and to be with Christ, which is much better than a continuance in a life of sin and sorrow; they are willing rather to be absent from the body, that they might be present with the Lord. ENDNOTES:

[1] So Plato says, "Death, as it seems to me, is nothing else than dialusiV thV yuchV kai tou swmatoV ap, allhloin a dissolution (of those two things) soul and body from one another." Gorgias, p. 357. and elsewhere, says he, "is not this called death, lusiV kai cwrismoV yuchV apo swmatoV, the solution and separation of the soul from the body?" Phaedo, p. 51. Ed. Fein.

[2] See Nieuwentyt's Religious Philosopher, vol. 1. contempl. 6. s. 7. 8. p. 77, 78, 79.

[3] "-----omnes una manet nox, et calcanda semel via lethi", Horat.

[4] "Stulte, quid est somnus, gelidae nisi mortis imago?" Ovid.

[5] "Mille viae lethi", Lucan.

[6] See Vol. I. B. III. Chap. 4. P. 473. (see on topic 895).

[7] Socinus de Servatore, par. 3. c. 8. p. 208. & de Statu primi Hominis, p. 276. et Praelection. Theolog. c. 1.

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