

# The Cause of Death

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The biblical view of death has been distorted in the church because of recent cultural developments. Because of modern advancements in medicine, declines in infant mortality, and extensions of life expectancy, we have been able to separate ourselves from death. The expectation and experience of death is not so much a part of our everyday life, and we have therefore been able to marginalize and ignore the essential concept of death. We in the church cannot afford to ignore it any longer, but we must face the mortality of creation and the whole human race.

Romans 8:20 reminds us that God has put the entire world under a curse as a result of man's sinfulness. This curse covers both the earth itself and its human inhabitants. However, verse 21 looks forward to the hope of release from the futility of this curse. Presently, the world groans in pain—but it is the pain of childbirth, a process in which great blessing is preceded by great agony. We as believers also groan, knowing the reality of death in and around us. However, we have the expectation of future life and redemption. Our souls have been saved and the Holy Spirit gives life within us, but our bodies are still subject to death and decay. Christians paradoxically possess both death and glory, and we feel both of these things every single day.

The second and third chapters of Genesis provide the background and context for Paul's writings about death in Romans. The problem of human death was introduced not long after the creation of human life. Genesis 2:15 recounts how God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden with responsibility to work the land. However, this responsibility came with a command, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve broke this command, and death entered the world. The serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit claiming, "You won't die!" (Genesis 3:4). Eve was tempted to ignore the reality of death, and she succumbed, just as we often do. Eve and Adam followed the serpent's advice and ate of the tree, and "their eyes were opened" (3:7). This, though it may sound enlightening, was actually a form of death. By eating of the tree, Adam and Eve gained experiential knowledge of good and evil. They became moral actors, participating in evil and disobeying God. As a result, they broke their covenant with him and experienced spiritual death.

Because of their disobedience, God pronounced a curse on man, woman, and creation. The woman was condemned to pain in childbirth and domination by a sinful husband. The man was condemned to frustration in toil and labor. The earth itself was cursed, requiring arduous work to produce enough to survive. This curse is what we see all around us every day: disease, sickness, poverty, and pain. Things go wrong, break down, wear out, and deteriorate because of the curse on creation. However, God provided a surprising way out of this sinful cycle. Death is an act of mercy, it is better for a person to die and go through redemption after death than to live eternally in a broken, painful, and sinful world. Death provides a way to redemption.

In light of the biblical origin of death, there are several ideas for us to consider:

1. Death is God's judgment of human sinfulness. It is not a random or foreign occurrence imposed on us from the outside. We are responsible for it, and it was intentionally instituted by a loving God. It is part of God's plan, and we cannot ignore or flee from it. Death is in us and a part of us.
2. Even in God's judgment, he is merciful. Death is an end to our sin and an end to painful experiences in a broken world. It provides release from the curse of sin and holds a promise of redemption on the other side.
3. Physical death and spiritual death are inextricably linked. Spiritual death in the Garden brought on physical death in the curse. However physical death is now a reminder of our own spiritual death. Our daily experience of brokenness, whether at home, in relationship, or at work, should draw us not to frustration but to contemplation of the inner spiritual death in our own hearts.



4. Death and dying are spiritual disciplines. We have significant work to do around death—we must contemplate it, face it, and prepare for it. Death establishes a limit on our time on earth, and consciousness of this limit gives us a sense of urgency and focus.
5. Death is a paradox. The way out of death is through death. We cannot be fully redeemed until we pass through the veil of physical death. Christ himself used dying to defeat death—his death on the cross provides the ultimate means to the redemption of creation itself as well as its human inhabitants. Only in Christ's death can our own sin, brokenness, and mortality be defeated and permanently redeemed.

