

What Does It Mean to Be Spiritually Dead?

By John Edmiston, johned@cybermissions.org



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What does it mean to be spiritually dead? This is an enormous question for anyone who shares the gospel with others. What are we saving them from? Is it really that terrible? What happens when consciousness perishes? How do people end up spiritually dead? Can faith itself wither and decay into nothingness?

It is obvious what physical death is. The person who dies loses all consciousness of the outer world, they stop moving and breathing, their vital organs cease to function, they become cold and stiff, and decomposition soon takes over.

The spiritually dead person loses consciousness and awareness of God, self and the needs of others, they stop moving and growing and breathing in the soul, their vital organs of spiritual life and spiritual perception cease to function, and they become rigid, harsh and cold. Decay and decomposition of the soul takes over. They are eventually tormented by their own madness, their own evil and by their self-centered disappointment at the non-fulfillment of their screaming demands (Luke 16:19-24). That is spiritual death!

In the New Testament, death (*Thanatos*) is a spiritual power (Hebrews 2:14), which is the

last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and it is also a cosmic region that Jesus has conquered by taking the keys of Death and Hades (Revelation 1:18). Jesus is the One who abolishes death.

2 Timothy 1:10 and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...

Jesus' abolition of death is so complete that Christians who die physically are simply described as having "fallen asleep in the Lord" so that while their body is in the grave, their spirit and soul are alive and conscious before God. (1 Thessalonians 4: 13-15, 5:10; 1 Kings 2:10, Daniel 12:2, Matthew 27:52, John 11:11-13, Acts 7:60, 1 Corinthians 15:6,18; 2 Peter 3:4, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Philippians 1:20-24, Romans 8:38,39, Revelation 6:9-11, 7:9-17)

Jesus offers eternal life and victory over death to all who hear Him and believe:

John 5:21-29 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. (22) For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, (23) that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. (24) Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. (25) "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. (26) For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. (27) And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. (28) Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice (29) and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Eternal life is possible, but so is eternal death. In this next section we will examine the four types of spiritual death that are discussed in the New Testament.



The Four Types of Spiritual Death in the New Testament

- 1** **Unbelievers** are spiritually dead by nature due to:
- a) the sin of Adam (Romans 5:12-21),
 - b) the domination of the Satanic spiritual world (Ephesians 2:1-5), and
 - c) the sting and power of the Law (Romans 5:13, 7:5, 1 Corinthians 15:56).

In this sense they are unresponsive spiritually, hostile in mind, and far from God (Colossians 1:21). Those who are yet to become Christians are spiritually dead prior to conversion, however they are not so spiritually dead that have no hope of repentance, some of them are saved by the grace of God, and not by their own good works (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Ephesians 2:1-9 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— (3) among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (4) But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, (5) even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (6) and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, (7) so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (8) For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (9) not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

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2 Churches can become spiritually dead. This was the case with the church in Sardis, which Jesus declared to be dead. These churches lack good works. Their faith is incomplete. They are almost totally unresponsive to Christ's commandments. However, they can still repent, wake up and complete the good works that they have so far failed to do. If the dead church fails to repent, then Christ will come against them:

Revelation 3:1-3 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (2) Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. (3) Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

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3 Believers can die spiritually. There are two ways believers die spiritually:
a) Their faith withers and dies due to sin, greed, rebellion and unbelief.
b) Through the all-consuming hatred of others.

The first way that believers can die spiritually is *by the death of their faith*:

This consists of Christians whose faith has slowly died, mainly through long-term sin which may include sexual immorality (1 Timothy 5:6, Romans 8:13) and consequent hardening of the heart leading eventually to unbelief. Christians become spiritually alive by faith, and they die spiritually from unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-19). This is why Christians must carefully guard their faith, life and doctrine (2 Timothy 1:13,14)

Hebrews 3:12-13 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (13) But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Those who lose their faith are described as branches that wither away (Matthew 13:6), which become dead and lifeless and unfruitful. Eventually these branches are cut off, thrown away and burned (John 15:6), because their faith has no accompanying works and is dead faith (James 2:17).

James 2:17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Matthew 13:5-6 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, (6) but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.

1 Timothy 5:6 but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

Romans 8:13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Some Christians die spiritually because of the sin of greed. Judas, Ananias and Sapphira, and those who take the mark of the Beast, put silver and gold before Christ and His Name. Ananias and Sapphira are the only deceased believers in the N.T. who are described as dead, rather than asleep.

Acts 5:10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Which is a direct contrast with the martyr Stephen:

Acts 7:60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

So, Paul warns Timothy about this deadly spiritual snare of the love of money:

1 Timothy 6:9-10 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. (10) For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

The second way believers can die spiritually is by giving in to *deep and murderous hatred*:

This consists of Christians who die spiritually due to resentment growing in their hearts until it overwhelms all spiritual life. They become consumed by hatred, darkness and a murderous spirit at the core of their being:

1 John 3:14-15...Whoever does not love abides in death. (15) Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

1 John 2:9-11 Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. (10) Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. (11) But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

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4 **Evil spirits and those who follow them** experience the "Second Death" (Revelation 2;11, 20:6, 20:14, 21:8) which is being cast into the lake of fire which results in eternal torment.

Revelation 21:8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Revelation 19:20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophetThese two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.

Revelation 20:10-15 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (11) Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. (12) And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. (13) And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. (14) Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. (15) And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 14:9-11 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, (10) he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. (11) And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

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Further Thoughts

Unbelievers can repent and be saved. Dead churches can wake up, complete their works and avoid spiritual death. Those who die following Satan and who take the Mark of the Beast go into eternal torment. But what about the Christians who died spiritually? Those whose faith has slowly dried up and died, and the ones who have chosen the path of resentment, darkness and hatred. Is there a way back to spiritual life for them?

Those Whose Faith Has Withered and Died

The writer of the Hebrews addresses his audience, which was slowly drifting away from the faith, having become dull and immature (Hebrews 5:11-14), so a stern warning is issued:

Hebrews 6:4-9 For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, (5) and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, (6) and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (7) For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. (8) But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (9) Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

The metaphor of agricultural failure is found in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13), the vine and the branches analogy (John 15:1-10) and in the example of the fig-tree that is cursed by Jesus (Mark 11:12-25). It is once again reinforced in Hebrews 6 above. The unproductive spiritual life, without good works or spiritual fruit, is just “thorns and thistles” and “its end is to be burned”.

However, there is some good news. In another parable, that of the Barren Fig Tree, it seems that God is patient with the unfruitful and gives them an opportunity to repent and bring forth fruit:

Luke 13:6-9 And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. (7) And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ (8) And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. (9) Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

The patience of God is meant to lead us into repentance (Romans 2:4). The unfruitful, disobedient Christian will experience God’s patience and mercy for a time, however if they

remain barren and refuse to produce fruit, then will they be “cut down”. The long-term, willfully sinning Christian, contemptuous of the grace of God, faces the certain fury of the Lord:

Hebrews 10:26-31 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, (27) but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. (28) Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. (29) How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? (30) For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” (31) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The biblical evidence is clear. Faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Disobedient, unfruitful Christians are given a grace period to repent, but if they ignore this, then they perish. The author of the book of Hebrews had some hope, and he felt sure of better things—things that belong to salvation (Hebrews 6:9), so he exhorts them to wake up, pay attention to the Word of God (Hebrews 4:12) and live the productive life of faith (Hebrews 11).



Those Consumed by Hatred

The apostle John says that those who dwell in hatred are spiritually dead, and are walking in darkness (1 John 2:9-11, 3:14-15, 4:20). Jesus also makes it clear that those who are unforgiving, resentful, punitive and harsh will face God’s judgment:

Matthew 6:14-15 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (15) but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 18:32-35 Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. (33) And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ (34) And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. (35) So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Mark 11:25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Luke 6:37-38 “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

Acts 8:22-23 Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. (23) For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

Colossians 3:13bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Forgiveness is, apparently, spiritually compulsory! Paul tells us in Colossians “.. so, you also, **must** forgive”. We must do the hard work of loving our enemies and forgiving those who sin against us. This is not optional, we either forgive or we die spiritually. The person consumed by anger, hatred, bitterness, and envy is in bondage just as Simon Magus was in bondage when the apostle Peter rebuked him saying: “For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

The embittered Christian (Simon Magus was by now a baptized Christian, see Acts 8:13) needs to pray to the Lord that the intent of their heart may be forgiven them (Acts 8:22). Part of this process is making a clear decision not to repay evil for evil or to take revenge:

Romans 12:17-21 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. (18) If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (19) Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (20) To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (21) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Someone who is consumed with hatred can save their soul through prayer, repentance and forgiveness. However, it is far better to “keep short accounts” both with God and with one another. Confess your sins regularly, and give up on your grudges quickly.

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Conclusion

The cure for spiritual death is to be spiritually alive! We become spiritually alive through faith, and faith comes by hearing (and attending to) the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). The Christian life then proceeds from faith to faith (Romans 1:17) and sees miracles (Galatians 3:2-6). We are made alive in order to grow and to mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:13-15) and to do good works that were prepared beforehand for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Engaging in Christian ministry such as evangelism (James 5:19-20) and loving others (1 Peter 4:8), also helps you live out your faith and to be fully spiritually alive.



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