

# Death

As in ancient culture in general, death in early Christianity appears as an anthropological constant and as the last threat to human life. Death can be understood as a termination of all (human) relationships; however, the belief in the resurrection of Jesus decisively changed the perspective of the first Christians toward death.

The New Testament uses the Greek term θάνατος (“death”) to denote the end of physical life and the corresponding verb, ἀποθνήσκω (“to die”). The one who died is called “dead man” (νεκρός); the dead body is also referred to by the term σῶμα/*sōma*. If the deceased are called “those who are asleep” (or “passed away,” with the verbs καθεύδω or κοιμάω), the New Testament takes up a well-known ancient euphemism (1 Thess 4:13; 5:10; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:51; John 11:11–14; Acts 7:60; see Job 14:12; Ps 13:4; Dan 12:2; 2 Macc 12:45; 1 *En.* 91.10; Hes. *Theog.* 213; Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist.* 15.25.2).

## Death as a Threat to the Individual

Despite the widespread post-Easter expectation of the imminent beginning of God’s reign (1 Thess 4:15, 17; 1 Cor 15:51f.; 16:22; Phil 4:5; Rom 13:11f.; Rev 22:20), death remains a basic experience and a human reality for early Christians. So the death of church members in Thessaloniki provoked grief within the community (1 Thess 4:13, albeit the main concern was probably that the dead would not be present at the Parousia of Christ). The mortality of humans and their physical existence is taken for granted (2 Cor 5:1–4; Rom 6:12, 21; Jas 5:20). According to Paul, Christians now live in “this body of death” (Rom 7:24), and “to set the mind on the flesh is death” (Rom 8:6; see 1:32). Life is burdened by the fear of death (Heb 2:15; see 5:7; 9:27). Paul as an apostle hovered several times between life and death (1 Cor 4:9; 15:30–32; 2 Cor 6:9; 11:23–26, 32f.; Phil 1:20–25), and he interpreted his salvation from those dangers as an act of

God, and thus as a religious experience (2 Cor 1:8–10). The serious illness of Epaphroditus brought him close to death (Phil 2:25–30). Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane expresses the threat of death unadorned (Mark 14:32–36), and his death on the cross reveals the harsh reality of a violent death (Mark 15:33–37).

The facts of death and burial are only marginally told in several passages (Niebuhr, 2007, 59–68): a funeral procession, carrying the dead body of a young man out of the city of Nain (Luke 7:11f.); the laments for the dead daughter of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue (Mark 5:38f.; Luke 8:52), where Matt 9:23 mentions flute players; the mourners at the death of Tabitha in Joppa (Acts 9:39); mourning and consolation at the death of Lazarus (John 11:31, 33, 35). In Palestine inhumation was the common form of burial (Matt 8:21f.; Luke 9:59f.; Acts 5:6, 9f.). The story of Jesus' funeral describes more precisely how the body is wrapped in linen and laid in a rock-cut tomb (Mark 15:42–46). John 19:38–42 also reports on an exceptionally large quantity of myrrh and aloes, which are wrapped around Jesus' body in linen cloths.

The question of whether a violent, premature death should be interpreted as a punishment for personal sin was answered unambiguously in the negative by Jesus in Luke 13:1–5. Nevertheless, a few stories about the penal death of God's enemies are narrated in Acts: of Judas in Acts 1:16–20, and of Herod Agrippa I in 12:19–23. The story of Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1–11, who deceived the Jerusalem community, contains features of a punitive miracle: their sudden death appears as God's judgment, which serves not so much as a punishment but as divine protection of the holiness of the earliest Christian community (see Rev 2:23). In Matt 27:3–5, Judas, watching the condemnation of Jesus, came to realize that he had handed over Jesus unjustly, and, as a consequence of his guilt, he committed suicide ("I have sinned"). Interpreting 1 Cor 11:30 in this regard is difficult: did Paul understand deaths in the community as God's judgment because of misconduct during the Lord's Supper, as it is believed by many researchers? Or did Paul allude to the permanent union in Christ of the community with their deceased (see Schreiber, 2013, 29–31)? The reference to death was used by some of the church fathers as an educational tool to motivate proper behavior (e.g. Lact. *Opif.* 4.16–22).

## Death as a Cosmic Power

Death is not only understood as an anthropological constant but as a cosmic power that threatens human existence. A personification of death often takes place (1 Cor 15:26, 55; death as a power taking action: 2 Tim 1:10; Acts 2:24; Rev 20:14; 21:4).

Rom 5:12–21, in retelling Gen 3, provides an etiology of death (see 1 Cor 15:21f.; Rom 6:23; Wis 2:24): through Adam's transgression, sin (also personalized) entered the world, which brought with it death for all humans – death became an ally of sin (see Jas 1:15; 5:20). 1 John 5:16 tells of a sin that leads to death. In Rom 7:10–13, Paul, referring to the condition of Adam (and thus of everybody faithful to the Torah), writes that sin led to his death by the "command" (as a metonym for the Law). And because sin also took possession of the Law, the Torah, the Law also leads to death (Rom 5:20; 7:5, 9–13; 1 Cor 15:56). Rom 8:2 can thus speak of "the law of sin and of death."

In the early church, not only is the sin of Adam regarded as the cause of death (Aug. *Civ.* 13.3f.) but death is believed to redeem the faithful from their perishable bodies and the dangers of life on earth (Iren. *Haer.* 3.23.6; see Fitschen, 2002, 606).

Heb 2:14 refers to the devil as to the one who has power over death. The fourth horseman in the vision of Rev 6:8 is explicitly called “Death” (ὁ θάνατος) and has Hades in his entourage. He is given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, pestilence, and wild animals.

## Overcoming Death by the Individual

In Jesus’ conversation with the Sadducees in Mark 12:18–27 (Matt 22:23–33; Luke 20:27–38), he indicates that he shares the early Jewish hope of the dead being raised (Dan 12:1f.; Isa 26:19; *L.A.B.* 3.10), which he derived from God’s self-revelation in Exod 3:6 as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (see Matt 8:11f.; Luke 13:28f.).

Jesus’ miracles of raising the dead demonstrate his authority over death. The stories in Mark 5:21–43 (and parr.) and Luke 7:11–17 contain allusions to the miraculous raisings of two children by the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:18–37). In Acts, Peter and Paul, following their Lord’s example, also practice the power to raise people who had just died (Acts 9:36–42; 20:7–12). These stories of resuscitations are already told in the light of Easter. This becomes particularly evident in the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1–44, where, beyond the individual case, something fundamental about the resurrection of the dead is said: the widespread early Jewish belief in the resurrection on the “last day” is now focused on Jesus – in *him* the awakening of the dead will take place: “I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25).

In the face of imminent death, the decision for or against Jesus in Luke 23:39–43 gains unique explosiveness; belonging to Jesus opens the door to paradise. The clear temporal separation between the present and future reality of the kingdom of God is suspended in death (Schreiber, 2002).

In early Christianity, belief in the resurrection of Jesus transformed the Christian perspective on death in a decisive manner. For Christians, it now formed the basis for hope of their own resurrection. This was conceived theocentrically: God is the one who “makes the dead alive” (Rom 4:17), and in 1 Thess 4:14: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” This hope, which is guaranteed in Christ, changes grief (1 Thess 4:13). The basis for Paul’s argument for the resurrection of the dead in 1 Cor 15:12–23 is formed by the traditional formula of faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection in 15:3–5. The Christian hope for resurrection is carried by the believer’s relationship with Christ, whom God raised from the dead (Rom 4:24f.; 8:11; 14:8f.; 1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:14). This relationship is concisely expressed in the designation of Christ as the “firstfruits” (ἀπαρχή) of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20f., 23), or the “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος), respectively (Rom 8:29; Col 1:18; Heb 1:6; Rev 1:5; Acts 26:23); see Rom 8:17: “Joint heirs with Christ.” Linking the hope for resurrection to Christ leads to the prospect of salvation in 1 Thess 4:17: “So we will

be with the Lord forever” (see 2 Cor 5:8: “Indwelling at the Lord”).

As a consequence, Paul expresses his longing for a new life in Christ (2 Cor 5:1–8 [see Schmeller, 2010, 281–303; Vogel, 2006]; Phil 1:21–23; Rom 8:23–25), whereas the issue of its timing (awakening immediately after death or at the eschatological resurrection of the dead) became subordinate to the hope for everlasting communion with Christ. Both in life and in death, Christians belong to the Lord (Rom 14:7f.; 2 Cor 5:14f.). As a guarantee of everlasting life with God, he sent his Spirit (2 Cor 5:5). This does not mean that physical death no longer has any meaning for Christians, as apparently claimed by a certain movement in Corinth (1 Cor 15:12–19; see later 2 Tim 2:18). The resurrection remains a *Hoffnungsgut* (a promise), although in Christ a firmly guaranteed one. In 1 Tim 4:8 the promise of future life motivates godly life on earth.

In the language of John's Gospel, everyone who trusts in Jesus, that is, who lives in a relationship with him, has “eternal life” (John 3:16, 36; 6:27, 40, 47, 54; 11:25f.); “in my father's house there are many dwelling places,” and where Jesus is, there his people should be (John 14:1–3). Characteristic of the Gospel of John is the view that Jesus' followers already share in eternal life. “Eternal life” as a qualitatively new, fulfilling life currently begins with faith in Jesus (John 5:24–29; 6:33–35, 44, 51; 17:1–3; 1 John 3:14), whereby the boundary between earthly and heavenly life is permeable (Barton, 2011, 319). By encountering Jesus, a person is “born again from above” (John 3:3–7, 14–16). Physical death loses its final power (although, of course, it remains a fact for the time being; 1 John 3:2). In Rev 14:13 the deceased who have died in the Lord are called “blessed” because they find rest from their labors.

## Overcoming Death as a Cosmic Power

By the establishment of God's eschatological reign, death as a cosmic power will be overthrown and destroyed. According to 1 Cor 15:26, 54f., at the end of God's implementation of his reign, death, the “last enemy,” will be destroyed (see Isa 25:8). God has acted eschatologically through Christ, so the final power of death is broken by Christ and death has lost its ultimate horror (Rom 5:21; 8:2, 38f.; 1 Cor 3:22f.; 1 Tim 1,10). As Rom 8:17–30 demonstrates, resurrection and glory are the compensation of earthly suffering and death – and thus the rehabilitation of the concept of God. Suffering and death are not allowed the last word in God's story with his creation.

Jesus appears as Lord over death in John 6:39; 8:51, and the Son of Man has “the keys of Death and of Hades” in Rev 1:17f. According to Heb 2:14f., by his death he has withdrawn the power of death and thus the people's fear of death. In the narrative world of Matt 27:52f., Jesus' death and resurrection are followed by the resurrection of many departed “saints” leaving their graves. In Rev 20:14 Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, which is conceived as an eternal place of punishment (Lindemann, 2014, 277; see Rev 20:10). Then “Death will be no more” (Rev 21:4; see the description of eternal life in abundance in Rev 22:1–5). Later, Athanasius of Alexandria (*Inc.* 27, 30) and Augustine of Hippo (*Conf.* 4.12.19) will speak of the “death of death” (see Dietrich & Vollenweider, 2002, 595).



# What Happens in Death?

The New Testament only marginally reflects the idea, prominent in Platonic and Stoic philosophy, that in death a separation of body and soul takes place, and the soul, liberated from the body, ascends to higher spheres (Matt 10:28, contrast Luke 12:4f.). By contrast, a more holistic conception of humanity dominates the New Testament. Paul discussed this issue in 1 Cor 15:35–54: in death there will be a transformation of the whole person from an earthly into a heavenly or spiritual existence – “we will all be changed” (1 Cor 15:51); this implies immortality (2 Cor 5:4, 8). A similar conception is given in Mark 12:25 (Matt 22:30; Luke 20:35f.): the resurrected are no longer living as earthly beings; more precisely, “They neither marry nor are given in marriage,” but “are like angels in heaven,” thus having a transformed, heavenly existence with God (see Dan 12:3; 2 Bar. 50:2–51:11).

The belief that those who belong to Jesus will experience a state of salvation after death has been essential; Jesus “rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess 1:10). The detailed notions of postmortem existence are, however, affected by various conceptions and therefore show differences; they cannot be systematized. The emphasis may be either more on the postmortem fate of the individual or on cosmological and collective events (see Dietrich & Vollenweider, 2002, 587f.).

In the first case, the state of salvation (or punishment) occurs immediately after death, which appears especially in Luke by incorporating Hellenistic conceptions (Luke 16:9, 19–31; 23:39–43; Acts 7:59; Phil 1:23). In the second case, it is assumed that the dead are located in a grave or in the underworld (Rev 20:13; 1 Clem. 50:4). In the eschaton the raising of the dead will take place – usually all the dead are raised (Acts 24:15), sometimes only the righteous (Luke 14:14). The resurrection will culminate in God’s eschatological judgment (1 Cor 3:13–15; 2 Cor 5:10; Matt 25:31–46; Rev 20:12f.). Life in the presence of God as a reward or in absence of him as a punishment will face each other as a result of the judgment (Mark 9:43–48), and the enemies of God (and the Christian community) might be struck with everlasting “destruction” (ἀπώλεια; 1 Cor 15:18; Phil 1:28; Rom 9:22; 2 Thess 1:9; Matt 7:13; John 3:16; Heb 10:39). In Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8, this is called the “second death”: those whose names are not written in the book of life will be thrown into the “lake of fire” (20:11–15), while those who steadfastly resisted emperor worship will partake in the millennial reign of the Messiah and will not fall into the “second death” (20:4–6).

This concept of a distinction between the physical and the eternal death was continued by the early church (Barn. 20.1; Diogn. 10.7). Augustine distinguishes between the “first death” (*prima mors*) as a consequence of original sin, in which body and soul separate, and the more severe “second death” (*secunda mors*), which comprises divine judgment and eternal damnation (Aug. Civ. 13.2, 5, 8, 12). The Platonic dichotomy of body and soul was resumed more intensively (e.g. Iren. Haer. 5.7; Tert. Test. 41; see Fitschen, 2002, 606f.). The perception that the dead would temporarily be transferred to a place of blessedness (1 Clem. 44:5; 50:3; Herm. Vis. 1.1.4f.) evolved into the assumption of an intermediate state in which the good and the bad were located before the Last Judgment (Just. Dial. 5.3; Tert. An. 55, 58).

## Death as a Metonym

At some points in his letters, Paul refers to death and dying in a metonymical way. In the context of the life-threatening dangers to which he was subjected while proclaiming the gospel, he uses death as a metonym for the danger of death (1 Cor 15:31 “I die every day”; Rom 8:35f.). Paul interprets his apostolic existence as participation in the death of Christ; his “dying” is an image of the dying of Christ (2 Cor 4:10–12; Phil 3:10). He carries “the marks (στίγματα) of Jesus branded on” his body (Gal 6:17).

Dying is also used as a metonym for separation and distance – from the old existence, from the “world” (Gal 6:14; see Col 2:20), or from the “deeds of the body” (Rom 8:10, 13; see Col 3:5). To have “died to the Law” means to be in a new position relatively to the Torah, which allows a new interpretation of the Torah (Gal 2:19; Rom 7:4, 6). In Rom 6:1–11, Paul describes baptism as a ritual participation in the death of Jesus. The one who “died to sin” with Christ (6:2) is no longer subject to the power of sin as a matter of principle, but lives a new existence “to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11; see 2 Cor 5:14f.; 2 Tim 2:11). To be subject to the old existence means being dead (Rom 8:6, “to set the mind on the flesh is death”; see 2 Cor 3:6). Later, Col 2:13; 3:2f. and Eph 2:1–7; 5:14 relate being dead to the old life “in trespasses.” However, the danger of falling back into the state of death remains (Rev 3:1f.).

The logion of losing and gaining one’s life by following Jesus is primarily aimed at the *social* consequences of following him: the loss of social relations and the renunciation of social status structures (Mark 8:35; Matt 16:25; Luke 9:24; and Matt 10:39; Luke 17:33; John 12:25; see also 1 John 3:16). It may also stand for an exercise in preparation for dying physically (Mark 8:34).

## Death in the Context of Religious Conflicts

Early Christianity particularly remembered the violent death of some Christians who persevered in their Christian identity in sociopolitical conflicts with their (Jewish or pagan) environment: Stephen in Acts 7:54–8:2, James (the son of Zebedee) in Acts 12:1f. (Mark 10:39), and Antipas (the “faithful witness”) in Rev 2:13 (see already John the Baptist in Mark 6:17–29). Allusions to the violent death of Peter can be found in John 13:37; 21:18f.; 1 Pet 5:1; and 2 Pet 1:14f., and to the death of Paul in Acts 20:22–25, 37f.; 21:10–14; the 2 Tim 4:6–8. The first Christians recognized the death of Jesus on the cross as an unique act of salvation (Mark 14:1–15:41; Rom 3:25f.; 5:6–11; John 3:16; 15:9–15); his dying became a role model for his followers, and theologically his resurrection from the dead stood for his rehabilitation by God (Mark 16:1–8; see the early Jewish tradition of the martyrdom of seven Jewish brothers and their mother in 2 Macc 7:1–42; 4 Macc 5:1–17:6).

The possibility of a violent death for the sake of one’s Christian identity remained an ongoing, more or less imminent, threat (Mark 13:12; Luke 21:16; John 16:2; Rev 2:10; 11:7–10; 12:11). But threatened Christians were able to compensate for that by their hope for resurrection and a close relationship to God or Christ (Rev 6:9–11; 11:11–13; 20:4). The apostolic life of Paul is perceived as a role model in 2 Tim 4:6–8. 1 Clem. 5:1–7 exemplifies the struggles and the

“testimony” of the apostles Peter and Paul that finally led to their executions. Later, *Acts Paul* 12 and 14 offer a legendary account of Paul’s death, being portrayed as an *imitatio* of Christ (Löhr, 2012, 159–162). In the 1st century CE, the term “witness” (μάρτυς, μαρτυρέω), originally meaning witness to Christ in word and in life, was not used as a technical term to denote martyrdom. This was changed in the early church, when martyrdom became increasingly significant. Becoming a martyr was attractive to some Christians, as it meant the deliverance of their souls from their mortal bodies (Ign. *Rom.* 4.3; 6.1f.). The fundamental idea of martyrdom is that of compassion and imitation of Christ’s sufferings and death, which is also reflected in the examples of the apostles (Pol. *Phil.* 9.1f.; *Mart. Pol.* 19.1f.; Herm. *Vis.* 3.1.9; 3.5.2; *Sim.* 9.28.5f.; *Ep. Apos.* 31). In the course of time, this led to the veneration of the relics of the martyrs, to which miraculous power was attributed (see Brown, 1981, 1981; Fitschen, 2002, 605–607).

## Historiography

In the writings of the early Christians it is not death itself, but the overcoming of death, the possibility of awakening from death, that is the actual theme. Since death is treated as a motive in a variety of contexts, the research literature focuses on different passages or discourses. The overview in the *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* article by R. Bultmann from 1938 is still fundamental. More recently, there are studies that place the ideas of death in the New Testament in the contexts of contemporary discourses: links of New Testament statements about death to the Old Testament (Bormann, 2006) or the ancient concept of *ars moriendi* are treated (Vogel, 2006) and comparisons with Josephus drawn (Niebuhr 2007). More often, the question of death and its significance for the self-understanding of the early Christians is taken into consideration (Schreiber, 2002; Barclay, 2011; Joelsson, 2016).

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