

Traditionalism and the (Not So) Second Death

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In his apocalyptic vision recorded in the book of Revelation, John sees a lake of fire into which the risen wicked are thrown (20:15). There they join a seven-headed, ten-horned beast, a two-horned beast (the false prophet), and the devil, all three of whom are in eternal torment (20:10). This imagery is often appealed to by proponents of the traditional view of hell, typically treating it incorrectly as if it were a literal description of future events, or offering no justification for assuming that the proper interpretation is one in which the damned will suffer for eternity,¹ despite the interpretation offered by "He who sits on the throne" (21:5) which is that the lake of fire is a symbol for "the second death" (21:8).

Conditionals, recognizing this as the divine interpretation of the cryptic lake of fire imagery, take the interpretation in a quite straightforward way: those who die apart from Christ will rise and die a second time. Traditionalists offer an alternative explanation for the phrase, "the second death." As the first death is a separation of body and soul, they often argue, so, too, is the second death a separation, one of the whole person from God for eternity (a claim which itself will be examined more closely in the future here at Rethinking Hell). And whereas the first death is physical, they tend to say that the second death is in some way a spiritual one. But in identifying the second death as spiritual death and separation from God, they demonstrate that they don't *really* think it's a "second" death at all.

Separation and Spiritual Death

According to many traditionalists, the second death is a form of eternal separation from God. Robert Peterson writes, "death signifies separation in Scripture, including... 'the second death,' that is, the eternal separation of sinners from the joyous presence of God ([Rev 2:11](#); [20:14](#); [21:8](#))."² He explains that "As death means the separation of the soul from the body, so the second death denotes the ultimate separation of the ungodly from their Creator's love...being deprived of God's fellowship for all eternity."³ And so, he insists, "The wicked will not cease to exist; they will exist in perpetual separation from God's eternal life ('death')...cut off from the gracious presence of God."⁴

Peterson is not alone. A.W. Pink concurs, writing, "As the first death is the separation of the soul from the body, so the second death will be the eternal separation of the soul from God."⁵ John Walvoord says the second death "indicates eternal separation from God."⁶ Saint Augustine writes that it is "called the second death, because the soul shall then be separated from God."⁷ G.K. Beale explains, "A facet of suffering the 'second death' is also being separated forever from the presence of God who dwells in the 'city' of God."⁸

The quotes can be easily multiplied. "The second death [means that the soul] is ultimately and finally deprived of that presence of God and fellowship with him which is the chief end of man and the essential condition of worthwhile existence."⁹ "He can consign them to eternal (second) death, separating them forever from His presence and kingdom."¹⁰ "What the book of Revelation calls 'the second death' ([Rev. 2:11](#); [20:6, 14](#); [21:8](#)) is a final separation of the wicked from the gracious presence of God (cf. [2 Thess. 1:9](#))."¹¹ "In 'the second death'...they will be...separated forever from the presence of God, and cut off from his benevolence, his providential care, and his grace."¹² "The *first death* consisted in the separation of the soul from the body for a season; the second death in the separation of body and soul from God for ever."¹³ The second death "will consist in an eternal separation of both from God."¹⁴ In it "their eternal state is one of eternal 'death' (i.e. separation from God) in sins (John viii. 21, 24)."¹⁵ It is a picture of one's "ultimate fate as eternal separation from God"¹⁶ and of "exclusion from God's fellowship and companionship."¹⁷

The second death is also often considered by traditionalists to be some sort of "spiritual death." W.G.T. Shedd writes that "Spiritual death is the same as the 'second death.'"¹⁸ Beale says that "the 'lake of fire' [is] the place of those suffering the 'second [spiritual] death' in the postconsummation age."¹⁹ Cyrus Scofield writes, "spiritual death is a state of eternal separation from God in conscious suffering. This is called 'the second death' (Rev. ii. 11; xx. 6, 14; xxi. 8)."²⁰

Dead in your trespasses and sins

Many traditionalists, however, including many of those quoted above, believe that the unsaved are spiritually dead and separated from God *now*, and conditionalists are likely to agree that there is some sense in which this is true. After all, Paul wrote that the Ephesian believers "were dead in your trespasses and sins" ([Eph. 2:1](#)). Peterson says that "death signifies separation in Scripture, including...the separation of living unbelievers from the life of God in spiritual death ([Eph 2:1, 5](#))."²¹ Shedd writes, "the spiritually dead are described in Scripture as conscious...The 'dead in trespasses and sins walk according to the course of this world' ([Eph. 2:1,2](#))."²² Beale says, "the New Testament can speak of a spiritual death that separates people from God (e.g., [Luke 15:24, 32](#); [Eph. 2:1, 12](#); [Col. 2:13](#))."²³ Eldon Woodcock writes that through evangelism, God brings people "from spiritual death to spiritual life."²⁴

Larry Dixon explains, "'Death' in [[John 5:24](#)] seems to refer to a condition of spiritual separation from God. That decision to move out of the realm of spiritual death into the realm of eternal life is made in this life, not after one has died!"²⁵ Robert Reymond writes of man's fallen state, "Paul calls this...a form of death, the fallen heart being 'dead in transgressions and sins' ([Eph. 2:1](#); [Col. 2:13](#))."²⁶ R.C. Sproul likewise says, "fallen man is spiritually dead...According to Paul [sinners] are *dead*. There is not an ounce of spiritual life left in them."²⁷ John MacArthur preached, "that is precisely the definition that the Scripture gives of people outside the Kingdom of God. They are totally shut off from God altogether. They live as if he did not exist. They are not able to respond at all to him."²⁸ Mark Dever writes, "we are, says Ephesians 2, dead in our sins and transgressions... This is what the theologians call depravity. It is the death that deserves death."²⁹ Scofield says, "Spiritual death is the state of the natural or unregenerate man as still in his sins (Eph. ii. 1), alienated from the life of God (Eph. iv. 18, 19), and destitute of the Spirit."³⁰

Some differences exist, of course, among traditionalists when it comes to what it means that believers were formerly dead in trespasses and sins. But the consensus appears to be that unbelievers in the here and now are living their lives in some sense separate from God, spiritually dead.

The "Second" Death?

The problem, then, should be readily apparent. Those living this life outside of Christ are *already* separated from God, *already* spiritually dead. The second death, it is alleged, is likewise a separation from God, a spiritual death. Several of the authors cited above, in fact, mention the two states together in the same breath, even though they appear separately above:

The spiritually dead are described in Scripture as conscious. [Gen. 2:7](#) compared with [Gen. 3:8](#): "In the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." Adam and Eve "hid themselves." After their fall they were spiritually dead, and filled with shame and terror before God. The "dead in trespasses and sins walk according to the course of this world" ([Eph. 2:1,2](#)). "She that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth" ([1 Tim. 5:6](#)). "You being dead in your sins hath he forgiven" (Coloss. 2:13). "Thou livest, and art dead" ([Rev. 3:1](#)). Spiritual death is the same as the "second death."³¹

Spiritual death is the state of the natural or unregenerate man as still in his sins (Eph. ii. I), alienated from the life of God (Eph. iv. 18, 19), and destitute of the Spirit. Prolonged beyond the death of the body, spiritual death is a state of eternal separation from God in conscious suffering. This is called "the second death" (Rev. ii. 11; xx. 6, 14; xxi. 8).³²

A facet of suffering the "second death" is also being separated forever from the presence of God who dwells in the "city" of God... Elsewhere the New Testament can speak of a spiritual death that separates people from God (e.g., [Luke 15:24, 32](#); [Eph. 2:1, 12](#); [Col. 2:13](#)).³³

But then, in what sense is the second death a "second" death? These traditionalists do not believe that the unsaved who were formerly spiritually dead and separated from God rise to spiritual life and unity with God prior to the second death. Therefore, it's not a second death at all; it is an unbroken continuation of the state of death in which they had lived, albeit perhaps intensified and accompanied by additional retributive elements like physical, emotional and spiritual suffering.

Shedd even said that the "spiritual death" he identified in passages speaking about the here and now "is the same as 'the second death.'" Scofield went so far as to say that this state of spiritual death, "[p]rolonged beyond the death of the body... is called 'the second death.'" Woodcock similarly writes, "one's spiritual status at the time of one's physical death will be one's status for all eternity,"³⁴ and "their present lost condition involving their wandering from God and living in sin would, if not changed, lead to their permanent lost condition."³⁵ According to traditionalists, then, the risen wicked don't die a second death; *they die further* (except, of course, for the body which never dies).

What makes this view still more problematic is that this state of spiritual death in which the unsaved live now, and which will be continued and unbroken, but amplified, in hell, actually *precedes* the first death implied by the second, widely acknowledged by traditionalists (including those cited above) to refer to physical death. Not only, then, is their view of hell not really a *second* death at all, but it commences prior to the first! If we're to believe traditionalists, the divine interpretation of the lake of fire imagery as the second death is more perplexing than the imagery it purports to explain!

A First of its Kind

Perhaps the traditionalist might attempt to argue that the spiritual death and separation from God in the second death is of a fundamentally different nature than the spiritual death and separation from God in which the unsaved live now. What that argument might look like is not clear. After all, in the quotes above, the first state is one in which sinners are separated and wandering from God, from the life of God, totally shut off from God, alienated from God, spiritually separated from Him, and destitute of His Spirit. They are spiritually dead, lacking even an ounce of spiritual life. These theologians are perhaps a little more explicit in describing the second death as separation from the gracious presence and kingdom of God, deprived of His fellowship and companionship, lacking eternal life, but it seems that these are likewise true of sinners now.

One of the quotes above, however, says that in the second death the risen wicked will be deprived of God's benevolence, providential care and grace, of which they are recipients in the here and now. And so, perhaps it could be argued that there are some significant ways in which this second state of separation from God is fundamentally different from the first. Whereas sinners now are extended common grace and are shown a degree of kindness and care, in the second death that will no longer be true. They will be utterly deprived of those things.

Such reasoning, however, does not escape the problem. For one thing, it is entirely arbitrary to say that the first spiritual death experienced in this life—separated and wandering from God, deprived of His life, totally shut off and alienated from Him, destitute of His Spirit, lacking even an ounce of spiritual life—is fundamentally different from the second spiritual death—deprived of just a few more of His blessings. Furthermore, it is doubtful that a traditionalist employing this reasoning would affirm that sinners in this life enjoy God's kindness, care and grace *in full measure*, meaning that their complete deprivation of these mercies is, once again, merely an amplification of the state of spiritual death and separation in which they presently live. On the other hand, if one insists on this arbitrary distinction as constituting what are truly two spiritual deaths, then the second such state is not a *second* anything; it's the first of its kind.

The second death is the *second* spiritual death and separation from God only if it fundamentally shares the same qualities as the *first* spiritual death and separation from God. But then, the only way it is second is if this separation is not an unbroken continuation of the first. That is to say, unsaved sinners must at some point come to spiritual life and be united with God, so they can spiritually die and be separated from Him a second time. It is, no doubt, highly unlikely that any traditionalist is willing to affirm that.

Second Torment?

Perhaps traditionalists would do better to locate the nature of the second death, not in some sort of intensified spiritual death and separation from God (since it would not be second at all), but rather in the torment inflicted in hell. Assuming a dualistic anthropology in which the disembodied, immaterial souls continue to live on in death, and operating from a somewhat literalistic interpretation of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, a traditionalist might argue that just as the first death consists in torment, so, too, will the second death. So long as such a traditionalist is willing to affirm a brief respite from torment upon resurrection from Hades, it would seem at first glance that a second everlasting period of torment in hell could properly be called a second death.

Putting aside the rather awkward definition of death as torment, this line of reasoning suffers from still another problem. Those over whom John says the second death will have no power are those who come to life and reign with Christ (20:4-6). Those who are not thrown into the lake of fire—the second death—are first raised out of death and Hades (20:13-15). The first death, then, is something experienced by both believers and unbelievers alike; both are raised from it, and only the unsaved experience the second.

Therefore, if what qualifies the second death as the *second* death is the torment in which it consists, and in which the first death likewise consists, then it follows that believers, too, experience torment in Hades prior to the resurrection. But even given a literalistic reading of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, believers are at rest being comforted in the bosom of Abraham. And the dualistic interpretation of passages like [Luke 23:43](#) ("Today you will be with me in Paradise.") and [2 Corinthians 5:8](#) ("to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord") has believers experiencing bliss in heaven, not torment in Hades. What makes the second death a *second* death, then, cannot be any torment in which it is believed to consist.

No Interpretation At All

The traditional understanding of the second death is thus fraught with problems. It is not a *second* anything at all, either because it is an unbroken, albeit amplified, continuation of the state of spiritual death and separation from God experienced by all people prior to salvation, or because it is a first of its kind unlike anything preceding it. Alternatively, it is a second period of torment, from which it logically follows that those who die in Christ experience torment in Hades alongside the unsaved. How traditionalists might try to overcome this challenge awaits to be seen, but it will likely render John's interpretation of the imagery as discombobulating as the imagery itself, and thus no interpretation at all.

Conditionalism, on the other hand, makes perfect sense of the interpretation offered by the One on the throne. Our understanding of the text is simple and elegant. Those who die a first time apart from Christ will be raised, judged and sentenced to permanent execution: to die a second time. And this, of course, coincides with the repeated and consistent testimony of Scripture that the wages of sin is death.

Footnotes

1. For one of several reasons to interpret the imagery otherwise, see Date, C. [2012, July 12]). "Consistency in Preterism: Annihilation and

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20. Scofield, C. The Scofield Reference Bible (Oxford University Press, 1909). 1251
21. Peterson. Two Views of Hell. 112
22. Shedd. The Doctrine of Endless Punishment. Kindle Locations 887-891.
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