

Spiritual Death, Annihilation, and the Calvinistic Corpse

Pastor Kelly Sensenig

The Calvinistic Corpse



The old Calvinistic corpse illustration and theory of spiritual death goes something like this. “Since a dead body (corpse) cannot respond to anything, neither can a spiritually dead person respond to God without God first regenerating the person or by giving the individual selective and elective faith, so they can believe. God must bypass the human will and choice of man, since man will never choose salvation, but

only reject God in his corpse state of unbelief and sin. Man is unable to respond to God in any way because he is spiritually dead. Man has no capacity for faith and therefore must be given faith by God so he can believe.”

Essentially, the corpse illustration of the Calvinist says an unsaved person has no ability or faculty to believe on Christ and therefore God must do everything, either regenerating the person first and then giving them faith (one is saved before he believes), or simply giving the person faith so they can be regenerated. Many of the hyper Calvinists will ask: “How do you preach to a dead man?” They will conclude that you can shout and scream at the grave all day long, but there will not be any response. The dead must be raised and given life in order to respond. God must make us alive (give us the new birth) before we can have faith in him.

They will also conclude: “Just as a baby naturally cries out after it has been born, so believers cry out to God in faith after they have been born again.” Calvinists have varying opinions on whether regeneration precedes or comes after faith, but all Calvinists conclude that dead people can do nothing. A spiritually dead person cannot exercise their own personal volition (will) and express faith in Christ. This is because he is corpse.

Man’s depravity is such that he cannot respond to God without regeneration or the gift of faith. God must choose to give a person faith, without the sinner extending his own human volition to believe in Christ, since human will would be another

form of works or legalism. Of course, this is an errant teaching since faith is always juxtaposed or contrasted to works and legalism (Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 2:16). Essentially, the strict Calvinist and Hyper-Calvinist does not stress believing very much. This is because until God “zaps” the person with faith, he cannot believe. According to Calvinism, our faith and salvation occur without our consent. Again, all of these errant positions can be easily refuted from Scripture (Acts 16:31; 1 John 1:12-13; Eph. 1:13) but we are focusing this study on the nature of spiritual death and human volition.

Calvinism in various ways enters the realm of man’s philosophy – not God’s Theology! The error related to Calvinism’s corpse is that they define deadness in a way not defined by Scripture. Spiritual deadness is separation from God, but God does not picture spiritual deadness as a corpse (annihilation). This is a manmade illustration and illusion that falls woefully short of the scriptural teaching on depravity and spiritual death. It is true that the Bible says man is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1), and left to himself, he will never respond to the Gospel since Scripture reveals “There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:11). But it is equally true that humanity does possess free will (choice); however, man’s free will is limited by his depraved nature. This is why God must intervene and seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Nevertheless, depravity and spiritual death does not leave man without choice to exercise faith in Christ (“Thy faith has saved thee” – Luke 7:50). If man cannot choose his eternal destiny, then his soul and spirit must be annihilated! But the Scriptures do not teach this for one moment.

The problem is that Calvinists make too much out of man’s spiritual death to prove that an individual has no freedom of choice, or ability to respond favorably to the Gospel invitation, without first being regenerated by God, or having his will changed by God. Their argument is that man cannot have any volitional response before God, or express personal repentance or faith in Christ, since he is spiritually dead. Like Lazarus, a dead man, or corpse, can say nothing, or do nothing. To Calvinists this seems to be logical, but to Bible readers it is not Scriptural.

We must be careful that we do not misrepresent the scriptural teaching of spiritual death and human responsibility (“whosoever believeth” and “whosoever will” - John 3:16; 22:17). Let’s turn the tables on this old, worn-out, Calvinistic illustration of a dead body by remembering that there are always two sides to a story! In fact, there

are two sides to death. When a human body dies it cannot respond to anything, but the human spirit continues to exist and live on after death, which is capable of responding to the surroundings of the afterlife (Revelation 3). We need to look at the whole picture of death as it pertains to both the human body and spirit in order to fully understand the nature of spiritual death.

Physical and spiritual death are both a separation of one thing from another. Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body (2 Cor. 5:8) and spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God (Eph. 2:12). However, even though physical death occurs in relation to the human body rendering it unable to function, the human spirit continues to possess the ability to reason and possess intellect and choice in the afterlife.

We must compare apples to apples when considering death – not apples to oranges. To compare the immaterial human spirit to physical death is an illegitimate comparison, like comparing apples to oranges,



since the two are not alike. This is because the spirit is eternal, rational, and continues to function in the afterlife whereas the body ceases to function being only the vehicle of the spirit. This means that the realm of spiritual death cannot accurately be compared to a dead corpse since spiritual death does not mean total inability to hear and respond to God, the Gospel, and the plan of salvation. The human spirit, which is spiritually dead, does not cease to possess the capabilities to effectively respond to God's initiatives upon the human soul.

Here is my main thesis. ***Like physical death, spiritual death means separation – not annihilation.*** In physical death the soul departs from the human body and a separation occurs between a person's physical and immaterial existence (James 2:26). The human body no longer possesses physical life, but the immaterial part of man (his soul and spirit) continues to exist and possess life beyond the grave (2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9-10). The Bible clearly teaches that the separation and absence of the physical (human body) from the immaterial (human spirit) does not mean annihilation of the spiritual part of man's existence, rendering it incapable of existing and responding in the afterlife. In a similar way, spiritual death, or the

absence of spiritual life in a person within this life does not mean annihilation of a person's spirit, rendering it incapable of responding to God's drawing and initiatives (2 Thess. 2:13; John 6:37).

The ardent Calvinist wants to link death to the human body (a dead body cannot do anything) in order to illustrate their concept of spiritual death (a spiritually dead person has no capacity to express faith). However, this is where they fall short and actually fail in their analogy. They must complete the illustration of death. They must also consider the human spirit, which continues to exist after physical death has occurred (Phil. 1:21), and which is able to respond to stimuli and its surroundings (Rev. 7:14-15). The death illustration of the human body fails to convey the entire picture of death. The physical death of the human body is only one aspect of what occurs when a person dies. In death, there is no cessation of human existence but the continuation of one's existence in the spiritual realm, an existence that is filled with intellect, reasoning, and choices.



Here is the true biblical analogy. In physical death the soul is separated from the human body and the body ceases to exist. In spiritual death there is also a separation of man's immaterial existence (soul and spirit) from possessing spiritual life (Ephesians 2:1-2). But this does not render the human spirit annihilated, it continues to exist and possess activity, reason, and choice,

even though it is spiritually dead. Now let's compare apples with apples. Just as a dead body no longer possesses physical life, so the spirit of an unsaved person does not possess the spiritual life of God (John 3:7). However, just as the real person continues to exist in the *afterlife* following his physical death, possessing a certain amount of awareness and capacity for response (Luke 16:23-31), so the spiritually dead individual continues to exist in their state of spiritual death in *this present life* with a certain capacity of awareness and ability to respond to God.

Here is the point. Possessing spiritual death during this life (Jude 12) does not result in the inability of a person to reason and react to God's movement upon his soul. Although unsaved people cannot understand or discern truth without God's

intervention (Romans 3:11; Col. 1:21), this does not render them incapable of responding to God's initiatives and promptings upon their soul ("Come now, let us reason together" - Isaiah 1:18). To state succinctly, spiritual deadness is not the same thing as physical deadness. **We should not compare the human spirit to a corpse since it is not the same entity. The human body is physical and ceases to exist after death, but the human spirit is immaterial and continues to exist after death.** Most of our illustrations can be helpful but they also fall short (like illustrations of the Trinity). People who are spiritually dead are still rational, thinking, living beings who are capable of responding to God's initiatives.

Since physical death never means annihilation of the human spirit, we can apply this same Biblical truth to spiritual death. Spiritual death or separation from God in this life does not mean the annihilation of the human spirit, rendering it incapable of responding to God. Rather, it means that an unsaved person is able to express repentance toward God and faith in Christ (Acts 20:21) in response to God's work and wooing upon the human spirit (John 6:44). In short, spiritual death does not mean the annihilation of a person's existence to think, reason, and respond. **So, the corpse analogy breaks down for several reasons. The physical (body) is not the same as the spirit (the immaterial). The body ceases to exist after death, but the spirit does not. The body can no longer respond to stimuli after death, but the human spirit can.** So, the corpse illustration does not accurately represent the entire picture of death which pertains to the human spirit.

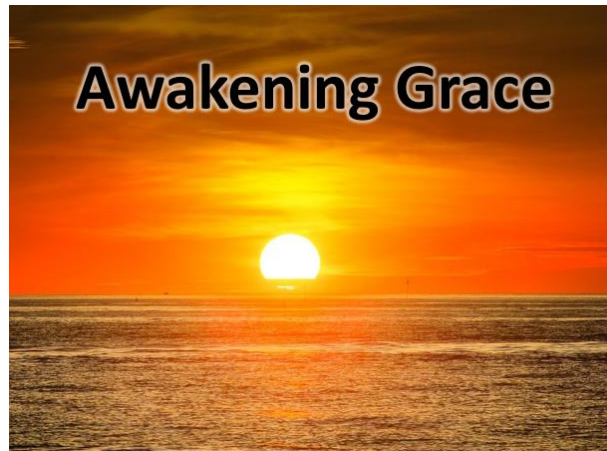
Here then is the biblical truth about spiritual death. Jesus taught that spiritually dead people, those who existed in the realm of spiritual death, can hear and respond to the Gospel of Christ ("the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" - John 5:25). This is because God has given all men both the *command* (Acts 17:30) and the *capacity* to exercise repentance ("except ye repent" - Luke 13:3,5) and personal faith ("his faith is counted for righteousness" - Rom. 4:5) even within their spiritually dead state. When the Holy Spirit convicts a man of his sinfulness (John 16:8), he can respond to the Gospel and be saved (John 6:37), or he can reject the Gospel invitation (John 5:40).

Jesus taught in John 16:7-8:

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto

you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world (all mankind) of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.”

A spiritual dead person needs “awakening grace” or the grace that God brings upon the mind and heart of a spiritually dead sinner to show him that he is a sinner and in need of salvation. It’s called the grace of God’s conviction, inner light, revelation, and illumination of a person’s lost estate and need for salvation (Heb. 6:4; 10:32; 2 Cor. 4:4). Sinners need a “GRACE AWAKENING” that comes from the Holy Spirit opening their eyes and showing them their lost estate and need for salvation from hell (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2).



We must always view things from a biblical and not a philosophical viewpoint. This means we should understand what the Bible says about spiritual death and human responsibility, when comparing all the scriptural data, and not base our theology on an old worn-out illustration of a corpse. **To state it succinctly, the Bible teaches spiritual death but not spiritual annihilation.** The entire picture and illustration of death, as it pertains to the human body and immaterial spirit, would lead to this conclusion. The human body cannot respond but the human spirit lives on and is capable of reacting, speaking, and reasoning. In a similar way, the spiritual dead person cannot respond to the Gospel without God’s initiatives, but the human spirit is still not deactivated or annihilated, rendering it incapable of certain actions and responses toward God.

Robert Gromacki said:

“He (God) has graciously worked in and through the human will to gain the assent of that will without violating human responsibility.”

In summary, the corpse illustration repeatedly fails the Biblical test. This is because it only views death from one angle, ignoring the fact that the spirit lives on after death and is capable of response and interaction in the afterlife. The event of physical death does not mean annihilation and the same is true regarding spiritual death. Unlike physically dead bodies (corpses), unsaved people, who are in the

realm of judicial and spiritual death (John 3:18; 3:36), are still living and rational beings that can interact with God's pleas and proposals. This means their human wills are not annihilated and incapable of reasoning with God's divine intervention and enlightenment upon their souls ("almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" - Acts 26:28).

Yes, a person's faith is an act of their will made possible by the work of God on the human heart (Acts 16:14). God allows faith to be *possible* while man makes it *actual* through His volitional response to God's proposals. An enlightened will and understanding of the truth (Heb. 6:4) allow a person to receive or reject God's open offer of salvation (John 3:18). Nevertheless, it's the preparatory work of grace and the Spirit's ministry upon the heart of man that allows him to exercise his volitional nature and remain autonomous (independent or free) in the matter of his choices.

Harry Ironside reacts to the corpse proposal of the Calvinist:

"To say that because a sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, is dead toward God, therefore he cannot repent, is to misunderstand the nature of that death. It is a judicial, not an actual, death. The unsaved man is identified with sinning Adam by nature and practice, and so is viewed by God as dead in trespasses and sins. He is spiritually dead, because sin has separated him from God. But actually he is a living, responsible creature to whom God addresses Himself as to a reasoning personality, 'Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool' (Isaiah 1:18)."

Roy L. Aldrich adds:

"A doctrine of total depravity that excludes the possibility of faith must also exclude the possibilities of 'hearing the word,' 'giving serious application to divine truth,' and 'praying for the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration.' The extreme Calvinist deals with a rather lively spiritual corpse after all. If the corpse has enough vitality to read the Word, and heed the message, and pray for conviction, perhaps it can also believe."

John MacArthur is a very well-known Bible teacher today. However, he is stooped in Reformed Calvinism. Listen how, on one occasion, he invited a lost sinner to be saved. "Faith is a gift from God. It is permanent. The faith that God gives begets obedience. God gave it to you, and he sustains it. May God grant you a true, saving

faith, a permanent gift that begins in humility and brokenness over sin and ends up in obedience unto righteousness. That true faith – it is a gift only God can give. If you desire it, pray, and ask that God will grant it to you” (Transcribed from Dr. MacArthur’s tape GC 90-21 dealing with Lordship Salvation).

Of course, this is not how the Bible concludes we are saved. It says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31). It does not say pray that you will be given faith, ask God that He will grant it to you, through regeneration (new birth), so you can express an obedient faith (Lordship salvation). This is a total distortion of what the Bible teaches regarding the way of salvation. Through the Spirit’s conviction “his faith” (the sinner’s own faith) is counted for righteousness (Rom. 4:5). Yes, it’s a faith made possible by the message and movement of God’s grace upon the human heart and will (Acts 18:27), but it’s still the sinner’s personal choice, belief, or faith (John 3:16; Rev. 22:17). Once again, we see the Biblical balance between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.

The Bible says, “For by grace are ye saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8). Salvation comes into a person’s life through an expression of personal faith that is placed in Christ for one’s salvation. This means faith comes first and salvation is the result of individual faith. But Calvinists will tell you that the only thing a sinner can do to be saved is beg God to save him, pray that God might give him saving faith, read the Bible, hope he is one of the elect, and keep asking for elective faith.

Now think about this. If you can do these things (beg, pray, ask, and be concerned about your eternal soul and salvation), then spiritual death should not be compared to a corpse after all, as the Calvinist assumes! Furthermore, if you can beg, pray, ask and be concerned about your soul, then you can surely believe! And so, it is: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” (John 6:47).

Hear & Believe

Dead men can hear! Jesus taught in John 5:25: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is,

when the dead shall hear the voice (*those in the realm of spiritual death will hear*) of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live” (*be made spiritually alive by God’s regenerating life*).

Did you catch what Jesus said? Dead people can hear! Spiritually dead people can hear and respond to Jesus's words and be saved. The same is true today when a person hears and responds to the words of Jesus in His repeated promises of eternal life (John 3:15-16; 6:47). Spiritually dead people are capable of hearing and responding to His invitation to salvation and eternal life. In fact, Jesus's words in John 5:24 present a very clear order: hear, believe, everlasting life (not everlasting life, believe and hear).

An individual hears and responds to the truth through personal faith BEFORE he is saved. A person does not have to be saved before they can hear and believe (express faith in Christ). Let's stop reading REFORMED theology and start reading GOD'S theology. The Bible says we are to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). Faith precedes regeneration, even while realizing that the glorious transactions of repentance, faith, and regeneration work together in a synergistic fashion to bring about a person's conversion (Acts 3:19; 15:3; 11:18; 20:21; 1 Thess. 1:9). A person does not receive everlasting life BEFORE he hears and believes – he receives everlasting life AFTER he hears and believes. Let's study our Bibles!



Dead men can respond to God! John 1:12-13 says, "But as many as received him (*while being in the state of spiritual death*), to them gave he power to become the sons of God (*regeneration and new*

birth), even to them that believe on his name (*personal responsibility while in the state of spiritual death*): Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (*acknowledging God's initiative and power in bringing people to salvation without eradicating or annihilating human responsibility*).

The fact that salvation is "of God" (John 1:13) means that God is the sovereign planner, provider, and pursuer of a person's salvation. Nevertheless, to conclude that the human will is only subject to the sin nature and has no freedom to exercise itself otherwise, even with God's aid and assistance, goes beyond the teaching of Scripture. God enables us to have faith since salvation is "not by the will of man" (human determination without God - John 1:13) but at the same time He makes us

responsible for faith (“But as many as received him” - John 1:12). The individual has the final say regarding His eternal destiny.

John 6:37

“All that the Father giveth me shall come to me (*God’s initiative*); and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (*man’s responsibility*).

2 Thessalonians 2:13

“But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit (*God’s initiatives*) and belief of the truth” (*man’s responsibility*).

Romans 4:5

“But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him (*man’s choice*) that justifieth the ungodly (*God’s work in salvation*), his faith (*man’s responsibility*) is counted for righteousness” (*God’s saving work*).

To summarize once again, grace enables a man to believe (Acts 18:27; Heb. 10:29) but at the same time it does not take away his responsibility to believe (“his faith” - Rom. 4:5). Without God’s initiative man cannot possess saving faith (2 Thess. 2:13) but **man is the one who does the believing** (John 3:15-16; 6:47; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 1:21) and **God is the One who does the saving** (Rom. 10:13; Titus 3:5), so we can conclude that ...

