

## TIME TRAVEL

When I was a kid I loved science fiction. I watched *Science Fiction Theater* on TV (sponsored by General Electric, whose motto was “progress is our most important product!”). I went to see scifi movies and I subscribed to *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine and bought every Ace Doubleback Science Fiction novel I could find. My favorite stories were those that had to do with time travel, and my very favorite time travel story concerned a man who traveled through time by dying. He discovered that he had this gift when he was killed in a car accident but immediately came back to life as a new person in the future. He had several subsequent adventures, each one of which ended with him dying and coming back to life as a new person. I must have read that novel ten times. Of course you’re looking at someone who read *Blackie the Crow* five times and *The Bobbsey Twins in Tulip Land* more than once--when he was in junior high. Let’s just say that I was a late bloomer—in many respects.

Anyway, whether the author of the novel intended it or not, there was a Christian theme in his story. We Christians DO travel through time by dying and rising up as new people. We do this in three ways. First, we die in the waters of our baptism so that we can be born again as new people in Christ. Second, during our Christian lives on earth we are continually dying to the kingdom of this world so that we can learn to live in the kingdom of God. And finally, our mortal bodies die so that we can rise up as new creations in heaven. All of this takes place IN time until God finally delivers us OUT OF time into eternal life. And so we are like the time traveler of the novel: death doesn’t obliterate us—it is merely the means through which God translates us into a new kind of existence.

First of all, in order to enter the kingdom of God, we have to die and be born again, as Jesus says to Nicodemus: “...no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again...of water and the spirit.” And Paul writes in Romans: “...don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life.” We are all born of our mother’s flesh and receive our earthly bodies and spirits. But those bodies and spirits are deeply flawed, corrupted by the sin we inherited from Father Adam and Mother Eve. We are born slaves of sin and the only way we can escape it is to be set free by one who has power over sin. Therefore, Christ, who has conquered sin and Satan, comes to us in our baptism, washes our sins away, and sends His Holy Spirit to live in us and serve as our internal counselor and “watchman.”

The Greek word from which we get the English word “baptize” was βαπτω, which originally meant “to drown or bring to destruction.” Over time, βαπτω acquired the additional meaning of “cleansing” and people would baptize things in order to make them clean—pieces of furniture, articles of clothing, weapons stained with the blood of combat and so forth. John the Baptizer appropriated this ancient rite and applied it to people; everyone who wanted to publicly repent of their sins and symbolically wash them away could be baptized by John in the Jordan River. When Jesus came, he turned the rite of baptism into a sacrament: all people were to be baptized not only *out of* their sins, but *into* God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism not only cleansed you from your sins, it was a “washing of regeneration,” Paul wrote,

which *“...now saves you...”* And so in baptism we die and are reborn, as Paul writes, *“If we have been united with [Christ] like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.”* We die so that we can come alive in a new and better way.

The second way we die and are reborn is in the day-to-day living of our Christian lives. Christians have to gradually die to the kingdom of this world so that they can come to life in the kingdom of God. Once again, Paul writes: *“...if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive...”* This dichotomy between “body” and “spirit,” or, as Paul calls it elsewhere, our “old man” and our “new man,” is one of the most interesting—and exasperating—things about living as a Christian in this world. Every Christian has within him two opposing natures which are constantly at war with each other: an old, stubborn, rebellious nature and a new, obedient Christlike nature. We all know this from our daily experience with sin and temptation: we hate our sins but we love doing them. Paul describes the conflict between these two natures within him: *“...in my inner nature I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my flesh.”* Old man versus new man; flesh versus spirit. And it goes on every day.

But if our sinful nature was put to death in our baptism, how can it continue to torment us? How can something which is dead exert power over us—causing even the iron-willed Paul to cry out in desperation: *“...the good that I would do I do not do, but the evil that I hate—I keep on doing!...What a wretched man I am!”* Well you have to understand that when the Bible uses the word “die,” it doesn’t mean “cease to exist”; it means “to exist apart from God.” When Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they didn’t drop dead, even though God had told Adam, *“On the day you eat of it you will die.”* What they did was to separate themselves from God, who is the source of all life. All who are connected with God draw life from Him and remain alive. But anyone who is not connected with God is dead. Like a zombie, he may seem alive, but he cannot have life in him because he is not connected with the source of life. He doesn’t cease to exist; he just ceases to live. God says of such people through the prophet Isaiah: *“...those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched.”*

So even though our sinful nature is slain at our baptism, it lives out its death in us, stinking up our lives by urging us to sin and rebel as long as we inhabit this earth. Christian life can seem like one of those games you find at a carnival where ugly little puppets pop up and you pound them down with a mallet but they keep popping up. That’s the way it seems with our sins. We try to hammer them down but they keep popping up. We may be helpless before our sins, but in the end God will put them away.

Finally, we die a third death—our biological death—through which we enter the gates of heaven. Of all three deaths, this is the one we seem to fear the most. But why?! Our fear of death is only an indication of how much we have allowed our enemy, the prince of this world, to tempt us into unbelief. Why should we be afraid to die? As my great aunt Belle’s gravestone in Pierce City, Missouri, says: *“Death is but the dawn of eternal day.”* Of all the things we have to fear, our biological death should be the least! Consider Paul’s attitude: *“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain....”* For Paul, life was fruitful labor and death was going to be with Christ forever. There may be some reason to fear how we will die, whether by trauma or wasting away with a disease—such fears are reasonable. But for the Christian,

death is merely the end of struggle and strife and the beginning of unimaginable joy. Death will enable us to finally become what we were originally designed to be: perfect in every way.

Martin Luther had a marvelous way of describing the difference between the three lives we live. He described them in terms of three different kinds of light: natural or created light, the light of faith, and the light of glory. As natural created beings, we live our lives under natural, created light—the light of the sun or the artificial forms of light we have invented. Such light enables us to understand the created world. It even enables us to understand that there is a God in heaven, because God has revealed Himself in the order and integrity of His creation. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: *“The world is charged with the grandeur of God!”* But natural light cannot reveal Christ to us: only the Holy Spirit can do that by opening our eyes to the light of faith. Faith shows us the face of God’s love in Jesus Christ and enables us to understand that our sins are forgiven and that we are beloved children of God. But even faith cannot show us the light of glory. Only when we have passed through death into God’s eternal heaven, will we behold the light of glory. Then we will no longer need natural light or the light of faith to see God: we will be able to see Him with our own eyes—just as Job knew that one day he would. When we dwell in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, there will be no need for the light of the sun or the moon for it receives its light from the glory of God and the Lamb is its lamp.

But for now we live by the light of faith. And even at times when the world doesn’t make sense, when the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, when we stumble and fall and all of our plans fall apart—we still have our faith. And our faith provides us with a light that is superior to the light of nature because it enables us to understand things that the light of nature cannot possibly show us. And so, Paul says, *“...we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

And as God promised through the prophet Isaiah: *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”* Amen.

### **Romans 7:14-25**

<sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.