

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.**
(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)*

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Men Die Once

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After the Lord's death on the cross, it is recorded that many dead saints came out of the tombs and entered Jerusalem (Matthew 27:52-53), and some teach these ones were taken up to heaven when Christ ascended into heaven. Scripture is silent on what ultimately happened to them and whether they were raised incorruptible and immortal. If they were, then it could be argued that they were not taken up with the Lord and are walking this earth today.

However, I believe the correct answer to their whereabouts is that they died again and are in the grave, just as, according to the historical record, Lazarus was raised from the dead, died again, and is in the grave. Some call this type of being raised from the dead **resuscitation**, meaning one is raised with a mortal body that continues to be subject to death. If we accept this line of thinking, then it could be stated that they died twice, not once.

Since the dead are asleep and **the dead do not know anything** (Ecclesiastes 9:5), they did not have any more recollection of their first death than they currently do of their second death. No one has an experience of death because no one knows they are dead. They are asleep, awaiting the resurrection, either the first one, which is the better resurrection, or the second one, which is associated with the great white throne.

I make this point for those who might think it would be horrible to die and be resuscitated after having been in heaven upon death. For those who have read my material on the matter of death and heaven, you know that I believe the Bible does not teach that we "die and go to heaven" as is commonly taught. We die and enter a state that could be likened to sleep or "asleep in Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:14), as Paul called it, and, in this state, we wait to be awakened through resurrection.

But what about the passage in Hebrews that states men are appointed to die once?

(27) And inasmuch as it is appointed for men [reserved to the men] to die once and after this comes judgment, (28) so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. (Hebrews 9:27-28 NASB [CV])

Obviously, this cannot be a universal statement, for, if you accept the above view, it could be said that the ones that came out of the tombs were appointed to die twice. Further, according to Paul, there will be some who are alive and remain when the Lord comes to meet His people in air (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Obviously, their mortal bodies will not go into the grave to undergo decay or corruption, and they will not die even once.

It seems to me that for Hebrews 9:27 to apply to those who are alive and remain when the Lord comes, this group will have to experience a moment of death, even if it is a split second, as they are set free from their mortal bodies in which sin reigns to take on immortal bodies of glory in which righteousness reigns.

We know that we will be **changed in a moment** (1 Corinthians 15:51-52), and, in the Greek, the word *moment* is *atomos*, which means "uncut, indivisible." Notice the similarity to our English word *atom*. We could say that it will be an atomic change, a change at the atom level, and, for this change to take place, the old must die or undergo dramatic change for a new atomic order to be established. Perhaps it is like a light switch being turned off and then on.

At any rate, those who are alive and remain will not experience death in the usual fashion, if at all. However, if there is no death, as we know it, for them, then this verse can only apply to the vast majority of mankind, the multitudes that have died and their bodies have undergone corruption, and not to all.

Now, as for judgment, Scripture clearly teaches judgment for all, **for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ** (2 Corinthians 5:10). **We will all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written: “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God,” so then each one of us will give an account of himself to God** (see Romans 2:15-16; 14:10-12). This includes all mankind, for there is no partiality with God.

Given that there are at least two groups that do not die once, one dying twice and the other possibly never dying, it appears that Hebrews 9:27 is not a universal statement applying to all men or all mankind, as many translations imply.

I propose that the phrase “**it is appointed for men to die once**” refers to a much narrower and special class of people, namely, the Levitical priests of the old covenant. The editors of the Concordant Version have attempted to make this clear by using the phrase “**reserved to the men to be dying once.**” Perhaps this is **interpretative bias**, but referring to **the men** takes it from the universal realm to a more focused realm, namely, the priesthood of the old and new covenants. After all, chapters 9-10 and, in fact, the entire epistle, compare and contrast two priesthoods, the Levitical priests of the old covenant, all of whom died, and Christ, the Chief Priest of the new covenant, who died and now lives. The Levitical priests were overcome by death, thus ending their intercession for the people, and the Chief Priest overcame death and now lives to intercede for all. His priesthood is much greater, for He is a priest of the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:17).

It is important to understand that the epistle, as its title indicates, was written to Hebrew believers to exhort them that the old covenant and all for which Judaism stood had been made obsolete and was ready to disappear (Hebrews 8:13), which it did when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in 70 AD. They needed to come outside the camp where Christ was crucified (Hebrews 13:13). As Hebrews, they would have understood that the men in question were the Levitical priests and not all mankind.

The key to this verse is in the transitional phrase “**so Christ also,**” which refers back to “the men die once.” In other words, the Levitical priests died once and so did Christ die once but with a big difference. The Law appointed men as high priests who were weak and, as such, had to offer up daily sacrifices for their own sins and the sins of the people (Hebrews 7:26-28). They offered up sacrifices for sins year after year, but it was impossible to take away sins. When a priest died, his service ended, but sin continued without any permanent remedy. Under the old covenant, the judgment of sins continued unabated. The death of a priest did not bring a conclusion to the matter. Instead, another priest had to step in and resume the sacrifices. Thus, they each died and judgment of sins continued.

The good news is that this all changed with Christ when He died once for the sin of the world and judgment for sin fell upon Him. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins; but the blood of the Son of God does take away sins. He came to bear the sins of many. This is why when He comes a second time, it is without reference to sin for those who eagerly await Him. Sin has been judged on the cross. I think it is important that the writer of the epistle did not state that Christ died once to bear the sins of many and then comes judgment. Instead, we are reminded that He will come a second time without reference to sin. Why? Because He took away the sin of the world when it was judged on the cross! He died once and judgment fell upon Him. The judgment all face in the future is the judgment of works or deeds, not of sin (2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:13). The judging of sins referred to in Hebrews is over; it is finished. **So Christ also** means that so did judgment come with the death of the Son of God.

This is the promise of the new covenant for all who are waiting for **a salvation to be revealed in the last time** (1 Peter 1:5). In that glorious day, those eagerly awaiting Him will be **atomized** into immortal, spiritual, sinless bodies in the twinkling of an eye.