What Is the Biblical Definition of Death?
By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

In our time most of the human race, including many Christians, substitute a naturalistic definition of death for the Bible's definition. This kind of thinking can be increasingly found even among Evangelical pastors and in reputedly conservative seminaries.

Building Our Case on Solid Ground

Many Darwinian evolutionists, and virtually all atheists, believe that man, being a creature purely of time and chance, merely ceases to exist when physical life ends. Increasing numbers of professing Christians, though they believe the soul continues to exist for a time after death, teach the future complete annihilation of unbelievers.

But as Christians we must be careful to build our thinking about death upon solid Biblical ground. We who are subject to death cannot define death. Only Someone who exists outside of the sphere of death can objectively define death for us. God has done that in His Word. So the critical question is this: How does God in Scripture define death?

The Bible's Definitions of Death

First, we need to maintain the distinction, as Scripture does, between physical death and spiritual death. The Bible speaks of the two distinctly, but they share one common characteristic. The Biblical definition of death - whether physical or spiritual - is not non-existence, but separation.

Physical death is, as I explained in another article, the separation of body and soul. "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Spiritual death means that man, apart from salvation in Christ, is separated from God. All who
are sinners in Adam died in Adam, just as all who are justified in Christ are made alive in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22). Paul speaks of the unsaved as being "alienated (Greek apellotriomenoi, estranged or shut out) from the life of God" (Ephesians 4:18). This is true even though the unsaved person has physical life. The final state of unsaved souls cast into the Lake of Fire for eternity is called "the second death" in both Revelation chapters 20 and 21:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the Lake of Fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the Lake of Fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8)

Revelation 14:11 says that "the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night."

In neither case does the Biblical definition of death - physical or spiritual - imply or entail cessation of existence. Quite the contrary.

**What About the Tree of Life?**

Some of our correspondents have raised another question, suggesting that it adds weight to the annihilationist case: "Doesn't the fact that God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden
after they had sinned, so that they would not eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in their sinful state, lend credibility to the teaching that the unbelieving dead are annihilated?"

If we look at God's eviction of our first parents in context, we find that it does not. In Genesis 3:22 God utters what is, in the original language, an incomplete sentence: "Then the Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever ---' "

This utterance must be viewed in context. Genesis chapter three is not only the account of man's fall from perfection and into condemnation. It also marks the transition point from man's condemnation under God's original commandment to God's merciful implementation of His foreordained Covenant of Redemption, which is described in detail for us in Ephesians chapter one. At the point when God uttered the words of Genesis 3:22, He had already made gracious provision for the covering of Adam and Eve's sin through the shedding of blood (Genesis 3:21, Hebrews 9:22). Moreover, He had proclaimed the future coming of the Christ who would deal with sin and Satan forever (Genesis 3:15).

These acts of God, signaling the initiation of the eternal Covenant of Redemption in time and creation, meant that the Tree of Life was no longer the way to eternal life as it had been under the former relationship between God and man. To allow Adam and Eve to partake of that tree and live forever in their now-sinful state would have been an effective reaffirmation of the former relationship that man had just broken forever. (Many Bible teachers speak of this relationship as the Covenant of Works.) Likewise, for God to have permitted fallen man to eat of that tree would have been an effective repudiation of the gracious way of salvation God had now opened through the coming death of Christ. The horror, the unthinkable nature, of such possibilities is reflected in God's incomplete sentence of Genesis 3:22.

It is for all these reasons that we find so many historic confessions of faith and doctrinal statements of churches affirming what Scripture teaches: the everlasting conscious
blessedness of the saved, and the everlasting conscious torment of the lost. There is, truly, an eternal Heaven to be gained, and an eternal Hell to escape, "through the blood of the everlasting covenant" (Hebrews 13:20).