

THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

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**CATECHISM**

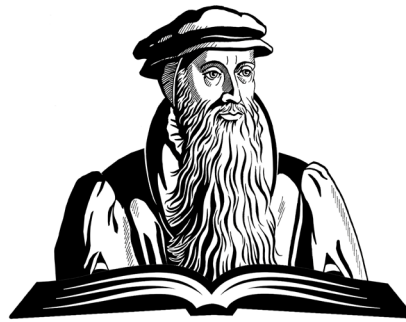
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

Lecture #28

**Blessings of Salvation  
at Death**

*Catechism Question 37*



**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

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*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

### Lecture #28

## Blessings of Salvation at Death

**Question 37:** *What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?*

**Answer:** *The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.*

The believer has many enemies in this life. While this is a sober statement, the believer has great cause for confidence. No believer is to be confident in himself, against even the smallest enemy. Yet every believer should have confidence, even against the greatest enemy. This is because of God's grace to each individual believer. One such enemy that finds out all men, terrorizes some, and can alarm and sadden even the most experienced believer, is death. Death can be hard for us. Of course, all that we know, by personal experience at present, is life. We may experience pain or sickness, but so long as we are still living, we don't actually experience death. Many of us have been to funerals. Some have even been present when another human being died. However, none of us can speak of our own experience with death. What we do know, by seeing it in others, is that at death the body stops functioning as it did when alive. While the body remains, the person no longer breathes. His hearts stops beating. His physical life in this world has ended. This of course is very sad to us. It is especially so when someone we love dies. It can also be very scary for us when we think we may be nearing death. However, the believer has good news regarding this last enemy. The Bible tells us that the believer not only receives benefits from Christ in this life, or for the life to come. The believer receives benefits from Christ at death.

Notice our Question today, #37 of the *Shorter Catechism*: "What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?—The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection."

Well, one key word we want to emphasize, is this word "believers." A believer is one who believes, that is, trusts in Jesus Christ as his Savior. Remember how Question #31, on Effectual Calling, expressed it, when it tells us that God's Spirit effectually calls, and he does so persuading and enabling us to accept Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel. A believer is not someone who simply acknowledges that Jesus is the Savior. A believer is someone who trusts, who embraces, who receives, and rests upon Him for his own salvation. A later Question states this simply and beautifully, when it says, "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel." The point is important if we are to

understand who receives benefits from Christ at death—only those who are believers, that is, only those who have received and rested upon Christ alone for salvation.

Well, with that clearly understood, let's take up the main points of our lesson. First, The Separation at Death; second, The Perfection at Death; and third, The Rest at Death.

Well first then, The Separation at Death. What is it that takes place at death? We admit there is much that is mysterious to us. None of us has actually experienced death personally, however, we are grateful that God, who knows all things, has given us understanding regarding the main things about death. When we consider what happens at the moment of death for a human, it is important to remember what a human is. A human being is made up of a physical body, and a spiritual soul. You'll remember that when Christ became man, he took to himself a true body and a reasonable soul. So long as a human lives in this life, his body and soul are bound together in a mysterious and yet wonderful way. We have physical bodies that operate in this world, and yet we have a nonphysical or spiritual soul that is united with our body. There's a world of wonder here as we think of how our soul and our body connect and interact with each other, a thing that, in itself is unseen, and yet the effects of it are evident at all times. While we have many questions, we can understand that there is a connection between the two. When we think and feel certain things in, as we say, our emotions, this will often have an impact on our body. Likewise, when our body experiences certain things, like physical pain and harm, this impacts our mind and soul. Well, how does all of this relate to death? Well it's in this way. At death, this connection between our body and soul is severed, that is, the body and soul separate. This can be an overwhelming concept, of course. And yet we see it clearly in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Notice the words of Jesus in Luke 23, verse 46: "When Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost." Notice his body is upon the cross. It says that he is "commending" that is, he's committing, or setting forth—sending—his spirit. And once he said this, "he gave up the ghost." This expression means he expired, or he breathed his last. So his words right before he died committed his soul to his Father in heaven. And once he breathed his last, his body and soul separated. Yet his human body, now dead, remained on the cross while his human soul was welcomed into the presence of his Father in heaven.

We should know this is true for believers and unbelievers alike, as far as the separation of body and soul. At death, the souls of believers and unbelievers are separated from their bodies. However, as we'll see in our next point, there is a tremendous difference between the souls of believers and unbelievers from that point onward.

Second, The Perfection at Death. We've just noted that both the souls of unbelievers and believers are separated from their bodies at death. But what happens to them? The *Catechism* says, "The souls of believers at their death are made perfect in holiness." So let's focus on this truth for a moment. Remember that when we speak of human soul, we speak of that part of human nature that has consciousness, that thinks, and understands, and desires, and experiences affections. Well, now notice that the Bible teaches that at death, the believer enjoys the perfecting of his soul, that spiritual and conscious part of what he is—it will be perfected. In Hebrews 12, the church is reminded of heavenly things. Notice, in verse 22, "But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect." What an expression that is! There are many things worth our attention, but for our lesson, notice that expression: "The spirits of just men made perfect"—the souls of righteous men made perfect. That's what is in heaven. In heaven, there is,

of course, the glorious and living God, which is the focus of all the hope of the saints. There's also the innumerable company of angels. There are also the souls of believers, those who have died, and their souls have entered into heaven, and yet we're told there that their souls have been made perfect.

Well, how the believer groans in this present life over his remaining sin. Is there anything that is more grievous for the believer than his own sin? Paul knew of this grief and struggle. He wrote of it, in Romans 7, verses 21 through 24. He says, "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Notice, this is Paul the Apostle, and yet he's wrestling with his own grief over his own sin, longing to have further deliverance. This reminds us that the best of Christians in this life still have indwelling sin. John wrote of this simply, in 1 John 1, verse 8: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Of course, we rejoice in the blood of Christ, for the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. And we also give thanks that God is at work now, making us increasingly sanctified, even throughout our whole life in this world. However, we still long to be without the slightest impurity of our thoughts and desires.

Well, here's encouragement. This is what the believer receives at death. This is what the *Catechism* means when it says, "the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness." And when does this change take place? Well, it's at death. The very moment one dies, the soul is transformed and welcomed into heaven. There's no delay, there's no holding tank for the souls of believers. There certainly is no purgatory, where believers must work off remaining consequences for their sins. All their sins have been answered for by the blood of Christ. And now it is that their souls are perfected in holiness. Notice how simply this is mentioned by Jesus Christ to the thief that believed on him at the cross, in Luke 23, verse 43, "And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Now just moments earlier, this thief had been mocking and ridiculing Christ. By God's grace, he was brought to believe on Jesus. And so soon as that happened, God speaks these words of peace—not only that his sins are forgiven, which is an immense blessing, but that he would be with Christ in paradise that day. We don't know all about the sins and crimes of this thief, but we do know that what happened to him the very moment he died was that he entered into heaven, and his soul was perfected. And this we know because Christ said, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." He did not need to wait. He did not need to suffer for the temporal punishments he deserved for his life of sin. He was ushered immediately into paradise with Christ. When did that happen? At death.

In Philippians 1, verse 21, Paul was able to write, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Why would it be gain for Paul? It wasn't he would stop existing. That would be something that was far worse, because as he was alive, he was in fellowship with God. Rather, as he goes on to put it, in verse 23, he says, "For I am in a strait"—that is, a difficulty—"betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better." You see, he felt an inward wrestling of his soul. On the one hand, he wanted to live for Christ and serve His people in this world. It was his great joy in this life. However, on the other hand, he saw that death would usher him into the more intimate and the most glorious presence of Christ. "To depart," he said, "and to be with Christ." Well, this confidence that Paul expressed is not for Paul alone. It is for every believer. This is why, in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 8, Paul is able to write, "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." You see, every believer has the benefit



that once death comes, his soul shall be present with the Lord.

The *Catechism* does not discuss this directly, but it's worth noting that the souls of unbelievers instantly enter upon the agony of their spiritual torments in hell. It's only the souls of believers that instantly enter into the glorious joys of their spiritual delights in heaven. It's worth remembering that this blessed and glorious change for the better is only for the believer. Unbelievers do experience a change at death. Indeed, their souls separate from their bodies, their souls don't stop to be, but rather, their soul enters a change, such a change, wherein they experience the immediate and unending torment of their soul in hell. And what is all the more agonizing is that they're awaiting the resurrection of their bodies, when their souls and bodies will be reunited and cast into the lake of fire, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth forever. It's a solemn truth. There is a change of what happens for both the believer and the unbeliever, and it happens immediately at death. Oh, by God's grace, to be a believer.

Let us move into our last point, The Rest at Death. You may be tempted to think that the perfecting of the believer's soul in heaven is the only benefit of death. After all, their body wastes away in this world. But there is another one that is a great comfort, and notice the *Catechism's* words, "and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection." It's true, the bodies of believers are lifeless once death happens. They begin to decay and disintegrate. Over time, only their bones remain, and sometimes even their bones disintegrate. Yet here is a sweet, pleasant truth. The bodies of believers remain united to Christ. Notice how Paul, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13 and 14, speaks of believers who have died. He says, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." He says that they are asleep. Now, he's not ignorant, he knows that they have physically died. He goes on in the next verse to speak of those who are still alive at the coming of Christ. He's simply likening death to sleep. It reminds us that death is not final. As those who sleep awake and arise, so those who are dead shall arise as well.

But notice that Paul says they "sleep in Jesus." This is important, because all who die are awaiting the resurrection. As we'll see, there is a resurrection that includes all men. And yet, in that resurrection, there will be the resurrection of the just, the righteous, those who are believers and who follow God in Christ; and there will be the resurrection of the wicked. And oh, what a horrible thing it would be to be resurrected unto damnation. All, in other words, are awaiting the resurrection. But for the believer, the grave is made a bed of peace, awaiting glory at the resurrection. Christ does not abandon their bodies. He remains united to them. At times, we can have a hard time going to sleep at the end of the day. I'm sure that everyone has had the experience of being afraid of the dark. We are often afraid because we imagine bad things will happen in the night. We can't see and make sense of all that's around us. Every sound can awaken a fear. Well, if you ever had that happen, you've probably had the comfort of a loved one, perhaps a mom or dad, comfort you and be with you while you fall asleep. You are able to fall asleep because you have the comfort of your loved one's presence and care.

Believer, here is comfort for you at that long sleep of death. Christ is with you. He welcomes your soul into his glorious presence, and yet he remains united to your body, never to forsake it. He will remain united to it through the years that remain until his glorious return. Now, he welcomes your soul, gloriously transforming and protecting it at death. He remains united, watching and caring for your body. As we'll see in the next lesson, he will raise it up in glory at the resurrection.

Well, as we close, let me challenge you to remember something serious. It's not easy to hear,

and it's not easy to think about, but it's something worth considering well. You will die. Now, this is not a light thought, but it's a needed thought. I certainly hope that you have a long life in this world. I hope that you have many causes for smiles and laughter. Above all, I hope that you come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your own Savior and serve him with all the life that remains. Whatever happens in this life, whatever it is, good or bad, you will come to the end of your life, you will breath your last, and you will die. This means it's important for you to prepare for that day. You should not put off preparing for that day, for many reasons, two of which include,

First, that you will never know when that day will come. It may be that you live for another eighty years, it may be that you have only eight minutes left. You simply don't know. Some people who are the greatest in health and strength die instantly for an unknown problem. This is why it's important to prepare. We don't know when death will come.

But another reason is that God has pointed out how we are to prepare. And he directs us to the hope that comforts us at death, and blesses us at death, for he points us to Jesus Christ. He is the Savior of sinners. He tells us that if we trust in him, we have everlasting life, that whether we live or die in this world, we are assured of peace and glory, because of Christ. Oh, do not put off preparing for death, for looking to Christ will bring you benefits, as we've seen, in this life, and benefits, as we've just seen, at death. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Let me finish by comforting you who are believers. Here is a word for you. Christ, your Savior, has a treasure ready for you at the very moment you take your final breath. At that very moment, he will perfect your soul and welcome you into heaven. At that very moment, you will enter upon the fullest joy and glory ever known. At that very moment, you will be with Christ in glory. Oh, believer, I know that death can be scary. It's called "the last enemy." But I know this—Christ is our comfort. Christ is faithful. Christ is good. And when you have fears that come to you about death, remember to look to Christ, who died and conquered death. Remember to look to him, who will welcome you, believer, into heaven, who will care for your lifeless body, and he will always be your cause of rejoicing. Look to Christ, and in doing so look forward to the benefit which will be yours at death.