

How Jesus has abolished death

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

2 Timothy 1:10 (KJV):

[God's grace] is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

According to Paul:

God's grace has been "made manifest" through the coming of Jesus.

Jesus has "abolished death", so that life and immortality are our present possession.

All this being revealed to us through the gospel and received by faith.

The Greek term translated "abolished" is *katargēsantos*, "having abolished" — from the verb *katargeō* (Strong's G2673), meaning "to render inoperative, inactivate, make of no effect, annul, abolish".

In this present article, we examine the different ways Jesus has abolished death for his followers.¹

The abolition of death was something that Isaiah foretold

Isaiah 25:6-8:

⁶ *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, ...*

⁷ *And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.*

⁸ *He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth ...*

Isaiah chapters 1 – 35 are set against the death and devastation associated with the Assyrian invasions: From 733 to 722 BC the Assyrians dismembered the northern kingdom of Israel and deported many of its inhabitants.

¹ This article should be read in conjunction with another article on this website: *Resurrection represents the end of Man's exile.*

Yet Isaiah's immediate concern here (in chaps. 24 – 27) is with Israel's final restoration.²

Isaiah connects Israel's restoration with the end of death itself.

Death will be swallowed up "on this mountain" (25:7) — by which is meant on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, where Yahweh reigns over his people (cf. Isa 24:23).

"Covering" and "veil" (25:7) might refer to a burial shroud — the sheet in which a corpse is wrapped for burial. Or it might refer to the veils that cover the faces of mourners at a funeral. (Translations differ somewhat.)

Either way, the references are to death and the gloom associated with it.

Death, the great "swallower", will itself be swallowed up — permanently!

Moreover, the Gentile nations will be blessed along with Israel.

Yahweh, on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, will prepare a great feast for all peoples (25:6).

"Rich food" is symbolic of great spiritual blessings.

He will remove the burial shroud/veil that is associated with death — and that for all nations.

This shroud won't be needed anymore, because death itself will be no more (25:7-8).

Isaiah is foretelling the nation's final restoration, and (in light of his earlier prophecies) we can be sure that this will be accomplished by the Messiah — by the virgin-born "Immanuel", the king from David's line who delivers Israel from all her enemies. See Isaiah 7:14; 8:9-10; 9:1-7; 11:1-16; 16:4-5.

So, the abolition of death is something the Messiah would accomplish.

Concerning Isaiah's prophecy, Ciampa and Rosner note:

Isaiah 25:8 is cited in rabbinic literature as a divine promise that death would be no more in the age to come.³

"Age to come" in Jewish thought has reference to the future messianic age and kingdom.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:54, applies the promise of Isaiah 25:8 to the Final Resurrection.

In so doing he affirms the traditional rabbinic interpretation: Messiah would raise the dead and abolish death.

And indeed, Jesus has inaugurated the messianic age — the "age to come".

He has fulfilled Old Testament expectations and brought the new age.

He did so when he came back in AD 70.

Therefore, Death has been abolished through the work of Jesus.

The "sting" and "victory" of death are now no more (1Cor 15:55); death for us (post-70) is but a transition to eternal, heavenly life.

We shall now examine three ways that death has been abolished.

² This passage is part of a section called "The Little Apocalypse" (Isaiah 24 – 27) — called such because it supposedly deals with universal judgment at the end of the world. But actually, these judgments are tied to God's deliverance of his people — their gathering from exile, and the restoration of their nation and city (Jerusalem). That this section deals with the nation's return and restoration may be seen from Isaiah 26:1-2; 26:15 (cf. Isa 54:2-3); 27:6-9; 27:12-13 (cf. Isa 11:11).

³ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner. Section on 1 Corinthians 15:54. In: G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, editors, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 747.

1) Eternal life is our present possession

In **John 6:35**, Jesus makes the following promise:

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

Jesus promises that all who come to him will never again hunger or thirst.

Not literally of course, at least in this life. Rather, he's promising to satisfy our deepest needs and longings.

Fulfillment in this (spiritual) sense applies also to the following promises concerning life and death:

John 6:50:

"This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die."

John 8:51:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

John 11:25-26:

²⁵ *Jesus said to [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. ..."*

In the above verses Jesus isn't promising that his followers won't actually die.

He's rather promising (as John 11:25 makes clear) that all who believe in him will live beyond death, so that death for them is essentially irrelevant.

The point being, as the following verses show, eternal life is the present possession of all who trust in Jesus. But only in eternity, beyond this life, is death literally abolished.

John 3:36:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 5:24:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

John 6:47, 54:

⁴⁷ *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life."*

⁵⁴ *"Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*

1 John 5:13:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

Therefore, with eternal life as our present possession, death has been effectively abolished.

2) Hadean Death has been abolished

Recall Jesus' promise to Martha (Jn 11:25-26):

All who believe in Jesus will live beyond death; for all such, death effectively is no more.

Martha acknowledged that her brother would rise again on the "last day" (Jn 11:24).

"Last day" relates to the Jewish hope of resurrection: Messiah at the end of the (then) current age would raise the dead and usher in the eternal kingdom in which death would be no more.

Martha acknowledged that Jesus was the promised One who would bring all this about (Jn 11:27).

But this was all going to happen much sooner than she thought:

Jesus was about to inaugurate the new age — the messianic age, the Age of Resurrection — and he proved it by raising Lazarus from the dead.⁴

Before AD 70 people who died entered Hades — either Hades-Paradise or Hades-Tartarus.

John calls these intermediate abodes, "Death and Hades" (Rev 1:18; 20:13-14).

Within these abodes, the deceased awaited the Final Resurrection and Judgment.

Revelation 20:14 shows the termination of these intermediate abodes:

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

How should we understand John's vision — the termination of Death and Hades?

Answer:

The visions of Revelation show Jesus fulfilling OT prophecy. Enthroned in the heavenly Zion, he exerts his power to take possession of the nations, putting down all who oppose his rule (cf. Psalms 2 and 110).

According to Paul, Hadean-Death was the very last enemy to stand in the way of his all-encompassing rule (1Cor 15:25-26; cf. Ps 110:1).

And that's precisely what we see in Revelation 20:

Other enemies have been defeated (the Beast, Harlot, Satan), and now death itself is being dealt with.

But how can we say that the intermediate abode of Paradise was an "enemy"?

Answer:

Before the Resurrection, Hades-Paradise acted as a sort of prison in that it kept the saints out of heaven.

The saints were effectively still in exile and excluded from God's presence.

In Paradise they awaited God's final verdict.

But right at the start of Revelation Jesus declares that he possesses the keys of Death and Hades (Rev 1:18).

With the implication that he is about to use them!

⁴ "Last day" is a reference to the closing of the (then) current age and the commencement of Messiah's eternal reign and kingdom. It's the time of judgment of both the dead and the living:

In John's gospel it's tied to the resurrection and judgment of the dead (Jn 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48).

The Parables of the Weeds and of the Net describe the judgment of those alive at "the end of the age" (Mt 13:39-40, 49).

This closing of the age would coincide with Jesus' coming as king to bring judgment on Jerusalem and its temple (Mt 24:3).

Therefore, the end of the old age and commencement of the new took place in AD 70.

Jesus' advent inaugurated the "last days" of Israel and of the old world order — see Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:3; Jude 1:18. By the time John wrote his epistles, "the last hour" had arrived (1Jn 2:18).

Now, Revelation states time and again that its visions were to be fulfilled soon (Rev 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10).⁵ Jesus was coming soon, not just to judge the nations, but also to raise and judge the dead. And so, in AD 70, Jesus “unlocked” Death and Hades to release their inmates (Rev 1:18; 20:13). Both the saints and martyrs in Hades-Paradise, and the wicked in Hades-Tartarus, were resurrected and judged; thereafter they entered into their final abodes: heaven or the “lake of fire” (Rev 20:11-15). Following the Judgment, Death and Hades were themselves terminated. But note, not all death is abolished: The lake of fire constitutes a sort of “second death” — a death beyond natural death — that continues eternally (Rev 20:15; 21:8). Only for God’s people is death finally abolished.

What all this means is that the “last day” Resurrection has been and gone. For believers post-70 AD, there is no more waiting in Paradise. Now, when a person dies, judgment follows immediately (Heb 9:27) and each person enters his or her final abode: heaven or the lake of fire. Paul himself anticipated this changed arrangement that some of his readers would live to experience: 1 Corinthians 15:51: *We shall not all sleep*, [in Paradise, awaiting final resurrection] ... 2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Believers who die post-70 immediately receive their new heavenly bodies.

3) Death as separation from God has been abolished

Adam was expelled from God’s presence the day he sinned. That very day he died spiritually. Access to the tree of life was denied to him. Physical death also ensued. But in Christ we’re restored to God’s very presence. This was symbolized when the veil of the temple was torn the moment Jesus died (Mt 27:51). Jesus has dealt with sin. All who believe in him are fully justified — acquitted and declared righteous. Thus, God can accept us into his presence, and into heaven when we die. As the Hebrews author explains, we can approach his throne of grace with confidence (Heb 10:19-20). The fact that Christians now live in God’s presence is depicted in John’s final vision of the book of Revelation.

Revelation 21 – 22 depicts the post-70 AD world order: “Jerusalem” — God’s dwelling place — has come down to earth (Rev 21:2, 10). And so, this city is now both in heaven and on earth. It’s where Christians “live” under the New Covenant — in a legal and spiritual sense (Heb 12:22). Within the city we are restored to God’s presence: Adam was banished from God’s presence, but within the city the saints see God’s face (Rev 22:4). What transpired at the Fall has been reversed: there’s no more death, tears, pain or curse (Rev 21:4; 22:3-4). We have unrestricted access to the tree of life and the water of life (22:14, 17). All these blessings are true absolutely in heaven, but they’re also ours already in Christ.

⁵ Revelation was seen, written down and distributed to the churches of Asia just prior to the outbreak of Nero’s brutal persecution. That persecution began around November 64 AD. See my article on this website: *A Preterist Interpretation of Revelation*.

John's point is obvious:

Christ — the definitive Deliverer — has ended our banishment and exile by dealing with sin.

Through his death we are fully restored to God's presence in the inner sanctuary (Mt 27:51; Heb 10:19-20).

The long exile that began with Adam is finally over.

Note that in Isaiah's prophecy, death will be swallowed up "on this mountain" (Isa 25:7) — by which is meant on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem (cf. Isa 24:23).

John's vision shows the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: death is abolished for the citizens of Jerusalem.

But as aforementioned, death is not finally abolished for everyone:

Evildoers, though present in the new creation, remain under God's curse and outside the city's walls until such time as they repent (Rev 22:14-15).

The "second death" (beyond the grave) awaits the finally impenitent (Rev 21:8).

Conclusion

Isaiah prophesied that death would be terminated in the messianic kingdom.

Jesus has brought that kingdom: death for believers is "abolished" (2Tim 1:10).

Death has been abolished in the following senses:

- 1) Eternal life is our present possession.
- 2) Hadean Death has been abolished.
- 3) Death as separation from God has been abolished.

We live in God's very presence, and, with the Resurrection now past, physical death for us is but a portal to eternal life in heaven.

Objections concerning death having been abolished

Objection 1:

John's vision (in Revelation 21 – 22) speaks of no more death, tears, pain, or curse (21:4; 22:3). It's portraying the eternal state after this present world has been wrapped up and transformed. A brand-new New Creation.

Response:

John's vision portrays what was then about to transpire (Rev 22:6, 10). It depicts the post-70 AD world order that continues to our own day. The city is presently both in heaven and on earth (Rev 21:2, 10).

In view of these facts:

1. Only in heaven is there absolutely no death, tears, etc.
2. Even on earth, the blessings described pertain only to those within the city; those outside remain under God's curse (Rev 22:14-15).
3. This side of eternity we enjoy these blessings provisionally.
The promised blessings should be related to similar promises found in John's gospel — promises that all who believe in Jesus will never again hunger or thirst (Jn 6:35), or die (Jn 8:51; 11:25-26).
4. Revelation 21:4 is consciously echoing Old Testament promises concerning the joy of the redeemed gathered from exile into restored Zion (e.g., Isa 25:8; 35:10; 51:11; 55:12; 60:20; 65:19; Jer 31:13). Jerusalem's restoration means the end of the gloom and sorrow associated with exile.

Objection 2:

Death, including physical death, was the result of the Fall.
Hence Genesis 5: "and he died. ... and he died. ...", etc.
The preterist view doesn't remedy physical death, but considers it to be a normal feature of the physical world. But the Bible regards death as an enemy and anticipates its total abolition.
In the New Creation death will be absolutely no more, as described in Isaiah 11:6-9.

Response:

1. It's doubtful whether God ever intended for Adam and Eve and their descendants to live permanently in this world. The example of Enoch (Gen 5:23-24) hints at what might have transpired had the Fall not intervened: people would have been translated, at a relatively young age, into the next life without dying.
2. Edenic imagery (used to describe the New Creation in Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17-25, etc.) is not meant to be taken literally. Rather, it is a figurative depiction of the peace to be enjoyed in the future messianic kingdom. Significantly, in Isaiah's new creation death still takes place, albeit at a great age (Isa 65:20).