

Death: The Obsolete Relic Of A Fallen World

By: Keith Keyser

*“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, **who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.**” 2 Timothy 1:8-10ⁱ*

Recently the Japanese conceptual artist known as Arakawa died. What makes this stand out on the obituary page is that his wife Madeline Gins and he were determined not to die. Through extreme avant-garde architecture they planned and sometimes constructed houses that were supposed to enable the occupant to live forever. As one reviewer describes their style: “They build buildings with no doors inside. They place rooms far apart. They put windows near the ceiling or near the floor. Between rooms are sloping, bumpy moonscape-like floors designed to throw occupants off balance. These features, they argue, stimulate the body and mind, thus prolonging life. ‘You become like a baby,’ says Mr. Arakawa.”ⁱⁱ Another adds:

Their most recent work, a house on Long Island, had a steeply sloped floor that threatened to send visitors hurtling into its kitchen. Called Bioscleave House (Lifespan Extending Villa), it featured more than three dozen paint colors; level changes meant to induce the sensation of being in two places at once; windows that seemed too high or too low; oddly angled light switches and outlets; and an absence of doors that would have permitted occupants even a modicum of privacy. All of it was meant, the couple explained, to lead its users into a perpetually ‘tentative’ relationship with their surroundings, and thereby keep them young. ‘It has to do with the idea that you’re only as old as you think you are,’ Steven Holl, the Manhattan architect, said of the couple’s work, which he said was deeply rooted in Japanese philosophy.ⁱⁱⁱ

Gins herself described the intended effect of this strange domicile: “Comfort is rife with anxiety. Elation comes when you erase that. In Bioscleave House, you are practicing not to die.”^{iv} Obviously Arakawa’s death at the age of 73 is a setback to their ideas. His wife noted this fact in one of his obituaries: “Madeline Gins subsequently promised to continue her campaign to prove that ‘ageing can be outlawed’ but resignedly admitted that ‘this mortality thing is bad news’.”^v

Death Seems To Be Alive And Well

The grim reality of death’s ongoing presence in the world frustrates human science, philosophy, and religion. With all of the innovation in the modern era, no one has been able to render death extinct. What man cannot do, however, the Lord Jesus has already accomplished. As the text at the beginning of this article says: “...who [i.e. Christ] has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10.) In this verse, “abolished” means “‘to make completely inoperative’ or ‘to put out of use.’”^{vi} Another comments: “[katargeo means] ‘to reduce to inactivity’...In this and similar words not loss of being is implied, but loss of well being.”^{vii} One might then counter, “But death seems to be active in the world!” In order to

understand the Lord Jesus' triumphant work, the term "death" – as it is used in God's Word – must be fully understood.

Romans 6:23 famously avers that "...the wages of sin is death..." James 1:15 agrees, saying: "...sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." Its ubiquitous presence on earth stems from the fall of man, when he sinned against God, who is the source of life (Gen 3; Rom. 5:12; Jn. 1:3-4) Sin is choosing one's own way over the Creator's way. Its essence is self-deification: affirming that humans can be their own gods. The Bible affirms that all people are afflicted by sin and death, because all descend from Adam, and themselves have in turn sinned over and over again (Rom. 5.) But what is death exactly?

Know Thy Enemy

Death in the Bible refers to separation, and has implications for three main areas:

1. Physical Death – The most common way that contemporary people use the word; it is the separation of soul and spirit from the body. The Scriptures refer to it hundreds of times (e.g. Gen. 5:5.)
2. Spiritual Death – The current separation of human beings from their Maker. God forewarned man that sin would result in instant spiritual death (Gen. 2:17; compare 3:7-10.) Ephesians 2:1 states that we are "Dead in trespasses and sins." Sin alienates people from the holy God who made them to have a relationship with Himself (Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:21.)
3. Relational Death – The Second Death (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8.) This is the future eternal separation of the lost, who are physically banished from God's presence in the lake of fire. The spiritual death spoken of under point #2 is permanently confirmed for eternity.

Christ's work addresses all three areas of death:

1. His death and resurrection shows that He is more powerful than physical death and the grave cannot withstand Him (Acts 2:24; Jn. 11:25.) He will one day demonstrate His defeat of death by raising "the dead in Christ" and having them live eternally thereafter (1 Thes. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:20-23.)
2. Ephesians 2:4-5 teaches that Christ makes alive those who receive Him by faith. By faith believers are brought into a living relationship with their Creator (Jn. 1:12-13; 17:3.)
3. The overcomer in Christ – that is, one who is born of God by believing that Jesus is the Son of God – is promised deliverance from experiencing the second death (1 Jn. 5:4-5; Rev. 2:11.)

Thus, one can see that He has rendered death ineffective – it is mortally wounded and is destined for extinction.^{viii} As W.E. Vine explained it: "For the believer physical death is but the entrance

upon a condition in which the spirit enjoys an activity far superior to that experienced here, a life entirely free from all effects of sin. This will be extended to his whole being, when the Lord comes to the air to receive the saints to Himself, death in all its forms having been robbed of its power by Him when He accomplished that for which He became incarnate.”^{ix}

The new heavens and new earth will be free of this fearsome and cruel scourge. What is more, His gospel manifests life and immortality. Life is really about knowing God personally and enjoying Him. Therefore, eternal life can begin in this life, and cannot be interrupted even if the Christian dies physically (2 Cor. 5:1-8.) Life in Christ is death-proof, for it is stronger than death and has already debilitated it. Pointing out some of the other uses of “abolish” in the New Testament, John Stott remarks: “It is surely significant that this same verb *katargeō* is used in the New Testament with reference to the devil and to our fallen nature as well as to death (Heb. 2:14; Rom. 6:6). **Neither the devil, nor our fallen nature, nor death has been annihilated. But by the power of Christ the tyranny of each has been broken, so that if we are in Christ we can be set free.**” Faith in Christ is the answer to man’s quest to avoid death, as well as his struggle to vanquish the Devil and indwelling sin.

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are cited from *The New King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982. The boldfaced emphasis in the quotation is mine.

ⁱⁱ Amir Efrati, “Couple’s Dreams of Immortality at Death’s Door, Thanks to Madoff.” *Wall Street Journal*, 3/24/09: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123785033607519075.html> Accessed on 6/3/10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred A. Bernstein, *The New York Times*, 5/20/10, Obituary for “Arakawa”: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/20/arts/design/20arakawa.html?pagewanted=print>; accessed on 6/3/10.

^{iv} *London Telegraph*, 5/23/10, Obituary for Arakawa: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/7756801/Arakawa.html> Accessed on 6/3/10.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Gerhard Delling, “Katargeo” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Logos), 453 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-).

^{vii} W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger and William White, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, vol. 2, electronic ed. (Logos), 3 (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1996).

^{viii} John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1973, electronic ed. [Logos]), pp. 37-38. Emphasis mine.

^{ix} W.E. Vine, comment on 2 Tim. 1:10, *Collected Writings of W.E. Vine: 2 Timothy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997; electronic ed. [Logos]).