

# Spiritual Death: Lazarus or the Prodigal Son?

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Do Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 support the Calvinist view of spiritual death? Thoughtful, unprejudiced study suggests Calvinists have misunderstood and therefore misrepresented both the (1) *significance* and the (2) *nature* of spiritual death in the Scriptures.

## Spiritual Death is Not Our Spiritual Condition

The beginning of this misunderstanding and misrepresentation begins with our spiritual condition. Calvinists portray death as our spiritual condition, with other descriptors receiving only “Also Ran” honorable mentions.

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| DEAD!   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blind               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Self - Jn 12:40</i></li> <li>– <i>Satan - II Cor 4:4</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Deaf / Not Hearing <i>Mt 13:9-17</i></li> <li>• Darkness Itself <i>Eph 5:8</i></li> <li>• Sick <i>Mt 9:12; Mk 2:17; LK 5:31;</i></li> <li>• Lost Coins, <i>Lk 15</i></li> <li>• Lost Sheep, <i>Lk 15; Is 53:6</i></li> <li>• Fools <i>Rom 1:18-32;</i></li> <li>• Foreigners, Aliens, Strangers <i>Eph 2:12-19;</i></li> <li>• Slaves of Sin<br/><i>John 8:34; Rom 6:6, 6:16-22; Gal 4:8</i></li> <li>• Prodigals, <i>Lk 15</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost <i>Mt 18:11</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children Of</li> <li>• Wrath</li> <li>• Satan</li> <li>• Disobedience <i>Eph 2:2, 5:6; Col 3:6</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Objects of Wrath <i>Eph 2:3</i></li> <li>• Hearts               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Hardened Jn 12:40; Ep 4:19</i></li> <li>• <i>Darkened</i></li> <li>• <i>Uncircumcised Acts 7:51; Col 2:13</i></li> <li><i>Ignorant</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Enemies of God<br/><i>Rom 5:10; Col 1:21</i></li> </ul> |

This perception is wrong. The Bible doesn't teach that spiritual death is our condition; it teaches that spiritual death is only one of many metaphorical descriptors for our condition. Our condition is that we are separated and alienated from a Holy God by our sinful nature and our sins. The graphic below presents a more Biblical picture of our spiritual condition.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darkness Itself<br/><i>Eph 5:8</i></li> <li>• Sick <i>Mt 9:12;</i><br/><i>Mk 2:17; LK</i><br/><i>5:31;</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blind               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Self - Jn 12:40</i></li> <li>– <i>Satan - II Cor 4:4</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Deaf / Not Hearing <i>Mt 13:9-17</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost <i>Mt 18:11</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children Of</li> <li>• Wrath</li> <li>• Satan</li> <li>• Disobedience <i>Eph</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost Coins, <i>Lk 15</i></li> <li>• Lost Sheep, <i>Lk 15; Is 53:6</i></li> <li>• Fools <i>Rom 1:18-32;</i></li> <li>• Foreigners, Aliens, Strangers <i>Eph 2:12-19;</i></li> <li>• Dead <i>Eph 2:1; 2:5; Col 2:13</i></li> </ul> | <h1>SINNERS!</h1> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slaves of Sin<br/><i>John 8:34; Rom 6:6, 6:16-22; Gal 4:8</i></li> <li>• Prodigals, <i>Lk 15</i></li> </ul> | <p style="text-align: right;"><i>2:2, 5:6; Col 3:6</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objects of Wrath <i>Eph 2:3</i></li> <li>• Hearts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Hardened Jn 12:40; Ep 4:19</i></li> <li>• <i>Darkened</i></li> <li>• <i>Uncircumcised Acts 7:51; Col 2:13</i></li> <li>• <i>Ignorant</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Enemies of God<br/><i>Rom 5:10; Col 1:21</i></li> </ul> |
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Spiritual Death is just another list item in the list of descriptors of our spiritual condition. Further Bible study reveals an even more damaging fact for Calvinists. The Scriptures *nowhere* portray spiritual death as

- The centerpoint of our spiritual condition,
- The foundation of our spiritual condition,
- The apex of our spiritual condition, or
- The starting point for discussions of our spiritual condition

Calvinists have misinterpreted the significance of spiritual death by mistaking it for our spiritual condition and then by giving it an importance the Scriptures do not warrant.

### **Calvinist Misrepresentation of the Nature of Spiritual Death**

In addition to misunderstanding and misrepresenting the importance of spiritual death, Calvinists also misunderstand and, therefore, misrepresent the nature of spiritual death.

Calvinism, Corpses and Lazarus. Calvinists believe a spiritually dead person is like a corpse.

“Those who are dead do not respond to stimulus. Indeed, they cannot respond to stimulus. You can poke them and yell at them and flash bright lights at them, but they will not, they cannot respond.” <http://tcp11.tripod.com/wrath.htm>

Calvinists even drag Lazarus into their expositions, using his inability to resurrect himself as defense of the spiritual corpse approach to spiritual death. Though they cannot point to either an impressive array of substantiating verses or even a single “killer” proof-text to validate their magnification of Spiritual Death, Calvinists can come in by the back door and claim that death pretty much trumps every other descriptor; being a corpse is way more significant than being just blind, lost, wounded, or sick.

This is smoke and mirrors. There is no Biblical substantiation for this point of view, not a single verse from Matthew 1:2 to Revelation 22:21 that elaborates upon spiritual death in the way it is elaborated upon in the Calvinist example above. All such elaborations are extra-Biblical imagination not divine revelation.

Nekros. The Greek New Testament has 6 different roots for dead, death, and dying: *Αποτηνεσκο*, *Απογενομενος*, *Νεκρος*, *Τηνεσκο*, *Πτομα*, and *Τελευταο*. (I am a layperson who has taken one introductory level Greek course, definitely not a Greek scholar. All the research below was completed with the online version *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. I welcome correction on any point by someone knowledgeable about New Testament Greek.)

*Νεκρος* (hereafter *nekros*) is the Greek root used in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 when speaking of spiritual death. Calvinists seem to be on very shaky ground with *nekros*. Their Lazarusian Toe Tag view of spiritual death would have been much stronger if Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 had used *Πτομα* (*ptoma* - corpse, carcass) instead of *nekros*. As it is, Paul chose *nekros* to describe spiritual death. Let us see how this word is used throughout the New Testament .

#### *Nekros* Used Literally

- **Physically Dead** –Matthew 5:10, 8:22, 10:8,14:2, 17:9, 22:31, 22:32, 23:27, 27:64, 28:4, 28:7, Mark 6:14, 9:9, 9:10, 9:26, 12:25, 12:26, 12:27; Luke 7:15, 7:22, 9:7,9:60, 16:30, 16:31, 20:25, 20:37, 20:38, 24:5, 24:46; John 2:22, 5:21; 5:25, 12:1, 12:9, 12:17, 20:9, 21:14; Acts 3:15, 4:2, 4:10, 5:10, 10:41, 10:42, 13:30, 13:34, 17:3, 17:31, 17:32, 20:19, 23:6, 24:21, 26:8; 28:6; Romans 1:4, 4:17, 4:24, 6:4, 6:9, 6:13, 7:4, 8:10, 8:11, 8:11, 10:7, 10:9; I Corinthians 15:12, 15:12, 15:13, 15:16, 15:20, 15:21, 15:29, 15:29, 15:32, 15:35, 15:42, 15:52, II Corinthians 1:9; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:20, 5:14; Phillipians 3:11; Colossians 1:18, 2:12; I Thessalonians 1:10, 4:16; I Timothy 4:1; II Timothy 2:8; Hebrews 6:2, 9:17, 11:19, 11:35, 13:20; I Peter 1:3, 4:5; James 2:26; Revelations 1:5, 1:17, 1:18, 2:8, 16:3;
- **The Resurrected Dead** – Luke 16:30, 16:31, 24:5; Romans 14:9, Revelation 11:18, 14:13, 20:12, 20:12, 20:13
- **Those Waiting to Be Resurrected** - Revelation 20:5

#### *Nekros* Used Metaphorically

- **Sin is Dead** – Romans 7:8
- **Dead Works** – Hebrews 6:1, 9:14
- **Christians are Dead to Sin** – Romans 6:11
- **Faith Without Works is Dead** – James: 2:17, 2:26
- **Separated** – Luke 15:24, 15:32;
- **Live Men Still and Unmoving (Like the Dead)** – Revelations 1:17;
- **Spiritually Dead (Unregenerated)** – Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60; Romans 11:15; Ephesians 2:1, 2:5; Colossians 2:13; I Peter 4:6;
- **Spiritually Dead (Regenerated - Church at Sardis)** – Revelations 3:1

The Irrelevance Of Lazarus. The first thing to address is the irrelevance of poor Lazarus, oftentimes re-dragged out of his tomb to substantiate Calvinist doctrine about spiritual death. Calvinists see a connection between the physical resurrection of Lazarus and resurrection from the spiritual death of Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2. True, the root *nekros* is the same. However, there is nothing, not a single verse from Matthew 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, connecting the physical death and resurrection of Lazarus to the spiritual death and resurrection of Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2. The connection is totally extra-Biblical; again, human imagination posing as divine revelation.

The Relevance of the Prodigal. If one insists on building a “death” doctrine from a totally unrelated Bible story, why not choose the story of the Prodigal Son? The Prodigal Son Story uses the same word for “dead” found in Ephesians 2 (*nekros*) and in a sense much more consistent with the remainder of Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 than the Lazarus story.

*Luke 15 “24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost , and is found.”*

Let me clarify one extremely important point about my referencing the Prodigal Son. A Pelagian or Semi-Pelagain might interpret my allusion to the Prodigal Son as a claim we can come to God without God’s initiation or enablement. I am not claiming this. If this were a real person sharing his prodigal story as a testimony, the light of other Scriptures would cause me to assume the convicting power of the Holy Spirit at work in the pigpen and the Prevenient Grace of God behind the young man’s decision to return to his father’s house.

What Is Not in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2. If Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 supported the Calvinist view of spiritual death (the Lazarus view), it would be logical to assume the rest of the passage would develop that thought. There would be examples of corpses not responding to divine light, heavenly speech, or spiritual proddings. Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 in no way develop this thought; there are no such examples.

What Is in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2. Instead, Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 are filled with prepositions of relationship and metaphors related to distance, separation, inclusion, exclusion, and broken relationships, including the division between Gentile and Jew. In other words, the context is more supportive of the Prodigal Son view than the Lazarus view. Let’s compare the language in these passages using a table. As you can see, the Prodigal Son view of Spiritual Death is bulging with examples; the Calvinist, Lazarus side of the table is ... well, totally empty.

| <b>The Language of Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Supporting Lazarus View of Death</b>             | <b>Supporting Prodigal Son View of Death</b>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sons of disobedience</li> <li>• children of wrath</li> <li>• called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands</li> <li>• without Christ</li> <li>• aliens from the commonwealth of Israel</li> <li>• strangers from the covenants of promise</li> <li>• you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.</li> <li>• has broken down the middle wall of separation</li> <li>• He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.</li> </ul> |

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.</li> <li>• no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God</li> <li>• circumcised with the circumcision made without hands</li> <li>• raised <u>with Him</u> through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.</li> <li>• and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive <u>together with Him</u></li> </ul> |
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Spiritual Death and Sardis. The church at Sardis offers still another possible view of spiritual death (or perhaps just a refinement of the Prodigal View). Sardis was a regenerate group of people, capable of responding to God, yet they were called dead. It appears they were dead in the same sense we speak of “dead” churches today. They had been connected to God in meaningful relationship and service but had ceased to be so. Death was not their inability to perceive divine stimuli; it was their inactivity in the face of divine stimuli. Certainly here, and perhaps in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 as well, “You are dead!” is not a prognosis but an accusation.

### **Why Blind a Corpse?**

One other thing that undermines the Lazarus, Toe Tag view of spiritual death is the work of Satan. In II Corinthians 4:4, we read ...

*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

Perhaps it is not so obvious at first, but when you consider this verse in relation to the Calvinistic view of spiritual death, an obvious question will pop into your mind: “If human beings are already incapable of seeing, hearing, or feeling God by virtue of their being dead in their trespasses and sins, why would the god of this age have to blind them? Why blind a corpse?”

### **Why A Correct Biblical View of Spiritual Death Is Important**

The Prodigal Son view of Spiritual Death seriously undermines the *Regeneration Precedes Faith* soteriology of Calvinism. While the Lazarus, Toe Tag Dead view of spiritual death is shared by many Arminians, they do not draw the same conclusion from their belief that Calvinists do. A Calvinist concludes that spiritual death in the Lazarus sense means that an unregenerate person cannot hear, see, or respond to spiritual things. The only way this natural man--dead in his trespasses and sins--can respond to God if he is first regenerated. Once the natural man has been regenerated, he can then exercise faith. This order of salvation runs

completely counter to the common sense reading of Scripture, but *Regeneration Precedes Faith* is a foundational truth for Calvinism.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, street level Calvinism (Calvinism stripped of its academic, philosophical/scholastic framework) is extremely dependent upon the Calvinist interpretation of spiritual death for justifying its belief that *Regeneration Precedes Faith*. We have demonstrated above that Calvinists do not have a meaningful interpretation of spiritual death, that, in fact, their interpretation appears flat-out wrong regarding both the *significance* and *nature* of spiritual death.