

# Westminster Larger Catechism

## *Question 84*

Halifax, 5 July 2009

### **Q. 84 Shall all men die?**

**A. Death being threatened as the wages of sin, it is appointed unto all men once to die; for that all have sinned.**

#### **Introduction:**

Two weeks ago, we begin to consider the communion we have with Christ in glory.

- He dwelt in glory with the Father from all eternity as God's Son,
  - but now He has entered glory as the one who has completed the work of our salvation—
    - as the head of the church who represents us before the Father as the one who has redeemed us.
    - His acceptance into glory as our redeemer and head means that we also who are members of His body have been accepted.
- From the moment you believed, you entered into living communion with Him;
  - and because He is in glory, you have communion in glory.
    - As we saw last week, the Scripture says that you are already seated with Him in the heavenly places.
      - Even though you are still on this earth for a little longer,
        - you are already able to have a taste of the glory that He has.
      - You will not receive the fullness of that glory until you go to be with Him in glory.
        - When we die, our spirits will depart to be with Him... and we will have communion with Him in death...
          - and then at the resurrection on the last day, our bodies will be raised incorruptible and we will have final and full communion with Him in both soul and body, and that communion will last forever and ever.
        - It is not until then that our communion in glory will be complete.
  - As we study about the communion we have with Christ in glory, there is a progression.
    - We begin with the communion we have with Christ in this life—we looked at that last week...

- Then we move on the communion we have with Him after death...
  - And last of all we will consider the communion we shall have with Him in the eternal state (after the resurrection).
- Last week, we did the communion in glory we have in this life...
  - But this week we begin to look at the communion we have with him after death...
    - This week's question is actually a preliminary question to that topic...
    - It is a question that brings us to consider the fact that we all must die.

For our Scripture reading, I have selected Ecclesiastes 3:16-22, but before I read it, I want to make a couple of comments about it.

- Ecclesiastes is a book about the sheer vanity of life “under the sun,”
  - that is, life if it is lived without reference to eternity—
    - as if we only had hope in this life.
  - Solomon talks about how you can pursue riches and honour and education and pleasure and all sorts of things in this world...
    - but how apart from a conscious responsive relationship with God, it is all totally empty and worthless.
      - It's all vanity.
- Now in the portion that I have selected for our reading, Ecclesiastes 3:16-22,
  - Solomon says that in this world, he finds wickedness even in the courts of justice.
    - Now if there was any place in the world that you would expect to find justice, it would be in the courts!
      - For it is here that the whole purpose is to sit down and decide justice.
      - It bespeaks of our great wickedness that even in our courts wickedness is found.
  - Solomon says that God will have to judge us because we do not judge ourselves in this world...
    - He says that God must show us that we are like animals.
      - They do not exercise justice, and neither do we who were made in the image of God exercise justice.
      - Therefore, God causes us, who were made in the image of God and have eternity in our hearts, to die like beasts.
      - The very same thing that happens to animals happens to us.

- As far as this world is concerned, there is no difference.
- We are just like the beasts that perish—we all die—we all return to dust.
- Listen now as I read to you from Ecclesiastes 3:16-22
  - READ> Eccl 3:16-22.
    - You see here that this passage tells us that everyone must die in the same way...both man and beast...
      - vs. 20 says,
        - “All go to one place: all are from the dust and all return to the dust.”
    - Today we want to examine this rule which we know by experience and are taught about in the Scripture...
      - and then we want to look at how knowing that we shall return to dust ought to affect our lives.

**I. So first, let us look at the rule—the rule that all are from the dust and all must return to dust.**

A. What does Solomon mean when he says we will all return to dust?

1. He is obviously talking about what happens to our *bodies* when they die.
  - a. This is an echo of what God said to Adam after the fall.
    - In Gen 3:19, He said,
      - Gen 3:19: In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.
    - In the context, the LORD is speaking to Adam about the consequences of eating from the tree that God commanded him not to eat of...
      - It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
        - By eating from it, Adam was claiming for himself an authority to decide for himself what was good and evil.
        - Instead of living by God’s counsel, he would determine for himself how he should live.
          - God had warned him that if he ate from this tree, he would die.
  - b. And you can see that death is described here as returning to dust.
    - God made us out of the dust and dust is all we are but for His making of our bodies and sustaining them...

- so it is very appropriate for us who wanted to live apart from God to return to what we are without him—the dust of the ground.
  - We were made out of the dust so we return to the dust.
    - This is what happens to our bodies.
- c. We constantly witness this in our world...
- Animals and people all return to the dust.
    - The same thing that happens to animals happens to us.
    - We rot and decay until we are completely disintegrated—swallowed up by the ground as it were.
  - You can see in verse 19 that he is showing that there is no difference as far as what happens to our bodies between men and animal.
2. But notice that Solomon also speaks about our spirits in verse 21.
- Here there is a difference, but we do not recognise it in our vanity...
  - He says:
    - Ecc 3:21: “Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?”
- a. By the spirit, Solomon is not speaking about the Holy Spirit, but of the spirit (*רוח* *roo' - akh*) of man which is the life or animating principle.
- Like the animals, we are a two part being, made up of spirit and body.
  - And the Bible teaches us that when we die, the body and the spirit separate from each other.
    - James defines as dead body in this way... he says:
      - James 2:26: For...the body without the spirit is dead...
      - Our bodies are dead when the spirit departs from them.
        - This is true of both animals and men.
- b. But Solomon’s point is that the sons of this world do not consider that the difference in what happens to our spirits and the spirits of animals.
- We do not do not consider that the spirit of man goes up when he dies and that the spirit of the animal goes down when it dies.
  - At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon explains what happens to the spirit of man when he dies
    - In Ecc 12:7, he says:

- Ecc 12:7: The dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.
  - No doubt, he is referring back to Genesis 2:7 where it says:
    - Gen 2:7: And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.
- c. And that the spirit returns to God means that we go to Him to be judged by Him...
- Death is the end of the animal, but it is not the end for man.
    - In death, his spirit is brought before His creator to be judged.
    - This is a huge difference and it is foolish to ignore it!

TRANS> So you learn from this that death occurs when our body is separated from our spirits—our bodies return to dust and our spirits return to God.

B. And I want you to consider that death is universal—it happens to everyone.

1. Solomon says, in Ecc 3:20, “all go to one place.”
  - Now remember the context here...
    - He is not saying we all go to heaven, but that our bodies all go to the same place before the resurrection...
    - We know this because he continues:
      - “all go to one place, all are from dust and all return to dust.”
  - You see that he says “all return to dust.”
    - Now of course you already know this without being told.
    - Solomon is not telling us something that we don’t already know—
      - He is rather drawing our attention to this.
2. The universality of death is confirmed elsewhere in scripture:
  - a. In Romans 5:12, we are told that “death spread to all men”
  - b. In Hebrews 9:27 we are told that it is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgement.

TRANS> So the rule is that all die...

3. Yet, I should mention that there are a few exceptions to the rule.
  - a. First, there is Enoch.

- In a passage where we are given a genealogy of the patriarchs, and in each case told how long the patriarch lived,
    - There is an exception with Enoch...
    - When we come to him, it says:
      - Gen 5:23-24: So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.
    - Someone might want to dispute that perhaps this is just another way of saying that Enoch died, but this is definitely not the case...
      - In Hebrews 11:5, we are told:
        - Heb 11:5: By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death,
  - Enoch's unique passage from this world to heaven stood as a testimony to the ancient world of life after death.
    - When you add everything up, you will find that Enoch was actually one of the first people to pass from this life into the next...
      - In fact, he was taken away 13 years before Adam died!
      - So Enoch's passing was a testimony to almost everyone in the ancient world that there was life outside of this world.
        - His passing was an exception to the rule that all men shall die.
- b. In the same way, Elijah the prophet passed from this world without dying.
- In 2 Kings 2:11, we are told...
    - 2Ki 2:11 Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.
  - I will not further comment on this...
    - I only present him as the only other exception to the universal rule that we are given in scripture.
- c. But we also know of a future exception that will involve many people.
- In Matthew 25, we are told that when our Lord Jesus returns,
    - All the nations will be called forth to Him to be judged...
    - And that means everybody!
      - His call will be so powerful that even the dead will be raised from their graves to come forth...
        - We are told this in John 5.

- But what about those who are still alive?
  - In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul tells us that those who are alive and remain will be called together to meet Him in the air at His return.
    - In the context, he is talking about believers.
      - But according to John 5 and Matthew 25 as well as Jesus' parable about the 10 virgins,
        - it appears that unbelievers will also be summoned to Him at this time to their great sorrow.
        - Believers will meet him in the air to usher him in,
          - and unbelievers will be brought together to meet him for judgement so that all will see Him together.
          - We cannot possibly know all the details, but we can know what we have been told.
  - And what we are told is that those believers who are alive at his return will not die—their bodies will not turn to dust...
    - They will be like Elijah and Enoch—they will pass from this life into the next without death.
      - This is brought out in 1 Cor 15 where Paul says:
        - 1 Cor 15:51-52: Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.
    - Those outside of Christ will also be changed so that their bodies will live forever...
      - It is reasonable to suppose that they will not return to dust either, but that their bodies will be changed and then cast into the Lake of Fire, seeing the second death.

TRANS> I don't want to get bogged down into too many details—but the point is,

- death is universal, even though there are some notable exceptions to the rule.

C. But why does death happen? Why do we return to dust like this?

1. In verse 18, Solomon says God does this to test us—

- The word translated *testing* here is a word that speaks of testing something to see what it is—
  - such as testing gold or silver by fire to see if it is pure...
- We are tested to prove what we are...

- Solomon says that He causes us to return to the dust so that we will see that we are just like animals...
    - that we are made from the dust of the ground.
    - God has to remind us of our humble origins as mere creatures because of our pride...
2. You see brothers and sisters, death is what we might call a reality check!
- a. We, proud humans that we are, forget that we are but dust.
- We get so high and mighty, so pompous, that we suppose we can make our own judgements and live our lives apart from God.
    - Death is a constant testimony to us that this is not so!
  - Remember the context—
    - Solomon is talking about the courtrooms of this world.
      - This is the one place in all the world where God’s justice ought to be administered...
      - This is where men sit down to focus their attention of what is just.
        - But Solomon says that in this fallen world of sin, wickedness is found even in our halls of justice!
          - Ecc 3:16: Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, Wickedness was there; And in the place of righteousness, Iniquity was there.
        - In the verse that follows, he says that God is going to have judge us—
          - He must judge us because we do not properly judge ourselves.
  - Just look at our courts today!
    - It is unconscionable that our courts do not protect even the weakest members of our society...
      - Our judges have determined that it is perfectly legitimate for a mother to kill the child in her womb...
      - They have determined that it is perfectly acceptable for businesses to be opened on the Lord’s Day.
      - They have determined that adultery should have no penalty.
  - If such things are done in our courts, where the whole focus is supposed to be on rendering justice...



- If God is disregarded in the court—how much more in our day to day lives!
  - We are so puffed up and vain that we live as if we have no Creator.
  - We have forgotten that we are but dust!
  
- b. You can see what an appropriate sentence death is.
  - God brought death upon us to put us in our place...
    - to remind us what we have forgotten—
    - that He is God and that we are but dust and ashes!
  
  - A lot of people are puzzled as to why there is death and all those things that go along with it...
    - sicknesses and birth defects and disabilities and shortages and destructive storms and all the rest...
      - They complain at God and accuse Him of injustice because of these things...
        - For them, death does not have the humbling affect it ought to have...
          - They go on making proud and arrogant statements as if they are not creatures...
  
- c. In Psalm 82, the LORD humbles proud judges with the reality that they will die...
  - These are the ones who make themselves to be gods by rendering judgments that are contrary to God's will...
  - So in Psalm 82:1-2, the it says:
    - Psa 82:1-2 God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods. How long will you judge unjustly, And show partiality to the wicked?
    - And then the reality check comes:
      - Psa 82:6-7: I said, "You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High. But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes."
    - Death reminds them that they are not gods, but men made of the dust of the ground.

TRANS> So death is something that God brought upon us to put us in our place.

3. But in speaking of it from this perspective, I do not mean to minimise it as a punishment...

- I do not mean to suggest that it is just remedial—only something designed to teach us humility and to reform us...
  - Death is, first and foremost, a necessary punishment for sin against a holy God...
    - It is, according to Romans 6:23, the wages of sin.
- For the elect, the very threat of death is indeed remedial and instructive...
  - God uses it to humble us before it strikes so that we will flee to Christ for mercy and deliverance from death as a penalty.
    - but for those outside of Christ,
      - while death restrains them somewhat...
      - they are not truly humbled before God so as to seek His salvation.
    - Death, rather than humbling them, is only a precursor of the judgement to come.
- Death is a very opposite thing for the believer and the unbeliever...
  - The believer has, since his conversion, desired to die to sin that he might live for God...
    - At death he will get this!
    - God will change us through death so that we will become pure and holy, and when our bodies are raised at the last day, there will be no more sin in us at all!
      - It is a glorious prospect... about which I will have more to say next week...
  - But the unbeliever is always trying to forget that he is but dust.
    - He has no desire to die to self that he may live to God,
      - so for him, death is only the beginning of shame.
      - He refuses to come to Christ for life and tries instead to hang on to his own life...
        - and so he loses his life—he loses his own soul and is cast into a miserable eternity.
  - For the believer, death is a passage into eternal life,
    - For the unbeliever, it is a passage into eternal death.

TRANS> So now having seen what death is—and that it is universal and that it is given to humble us and is the wages of sin...

## **II. Let us consider how the knowledge that we shall die ought to affect us.**

### **A. First, let the knowledge that you shall die humble you!**

1. My friends, God, with death, shows you that you are but dust and ashes.
  - You are not here by your own power...
  - You did not create yourself and you cannot sustain yourself.
  - So what makes you think you can govern yourself?
2. My friends, it is a shocking thing how high our arrogance can rise!
  - To see puny men complaining at God for His judgments!
  - To see the dust casting away God's laws and setting up his own in their place.
  - To see pride and arrogance where meekness and humility ought to be.
  - It is all so inappropriate for dust and ashes to behave this way!
3. You need to become as little children—as little children ought to be...
  - looking to your God in heaven for guidance and counsel...
  - looking to Him to sustain you...
  - crying out to Him for mercy.
  - You are but flesh... you are going to die...
  - Your breath is in your nostrils...
  - You are but a creature—He is the Creator.

TRANS> Let the knowledge that you shall die humble you!

### **B. Secondly, let the knowledge that we all shall die remove from you the fear of man.**

1. We saw in Psalm 82 how even the judges who are appointed to render justice shall die...
  - Too often, we are over-awed by other people.
  - They are dust and ashes, but we put them in the place of God.
- a. We look at rulers and governors as Saviours...
  - We look to the civil magistrate to solve all our problems—to rescue our economy, to bring in world peace, to make us safe and healthy...
  - But they are but dust and ashes—they are not able to do such things.
- b. We look at the rich and famous as guides for living...

- We wear the same immodest clothing and we embrace the same corrupt lifestyles as the Hollywood elite...
    - not recognising that their way of life leads to death...
    - That all their plastic elegance and beauty will be swallowed up by the grave...
      - It is not their beauty we should want to be upon us,
        - but the beauty of the LORD that endures forever!
  - c. We can also look at other people as those who will make us happy or who will solve all our problems...
    - We try to find our life in others who are dust instead of in the LORD who is our Maker and only Redeemer.
2. My friends, it does not matter at last what other people think of you.
- The only thing that matters is what the LORD thinks of you...
    - They will all die, but the Lord will live forever.
    - He is the One who has life in himself and who alone gives life to all.
  - Jesus calls us to have a holy disregard for anyone who does not lead us in God's ways...
    - Lu 14:26 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.
  - There is no contradiction between this and the command to honour our father and mother—and to love even our enemies...
    - The hatred to which Jesus refers is that hatred which absolutely refuses to do what pleases them if it is against God...
      - And also to absolutely refuse to stop following the LORD no matter how much it may displease them for you to do so...
        - Yes, even if they want to kill you because of it.
          - They are only dust and ashes.
          - They will not have the final word.
          - Mt 10:28 "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.
- C. Thirdly, let the knowledge that we all shall die teach you to have a proper estimation of both your trials and your joys.
1. There are many hard things that you are faced with in this world...

- There are also many pleasant things that you experience...
  - But the danger is that you will start to think that this is all there is.
    - That is what Solomon talks about in the book of Ecclesiastes.
    - You start to think that life under the sun is all there is!
2. Death is a constant reminder that all this is not forever.
- a. Now let me tell you, your trials ought to alert you that God is not pleased with us—even death itself is a constant testimony of His displeasure with us...
    - And you need to understand that the troubles you experience in this life are but a precursor of the wrath to come.
    - They cannot be compared with the torment that Jesus describes that awaits those who do not repent and turn to Him for salvation.
      - You have no ability to stave off God’s judgement—no more than you can stave off death.
      - You must rather flee from the wrath to come by turning to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of all your sins.
  - b. And those good things you enjoy in this world—they are not forever either.
    - Psalm 49 speaks of those who think their houses and the names will last forever— It says:
      - Psalm 49:11-12: Their inner thought is that their houses will last forever, Their dwelling places to all generations; They call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man, though in honor, does not remain; He is like the beasts that perish.
    - No my friends, do not latch on to this world as if this is all there is...
      - It is not all—you are all going to die and you are all going to be judged and you are all going to pass into the next world...
        - This world is only temporary, but the world to come is eternal.
        - Live in the light of eternity!
3. You must learn the maxim stated by the apostle Paul in 2 Cor 4:18:
- 2 Cor 4:18: while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.
- a. This means two very different things for you, depending on your relationship with Jesus Christ.
    - If you have come to Him for salvation,
      - then these words are very comforting to you...

- because they tell you that your trials are but for a moment compared to eternity...
  - It is a tremendous comfort to know that they will end and that what you endure for Christ now will be used to advance your future glory...
    - In verse 17, Paul says:
      - For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,
  - It is “light” not because it is not hard, but in comparison to the glory that is coming.
    - Always keep that in mind if you are a believer.
  - But if you are not in Jesus Christ,
    - The sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared with the shame that is coming for all eternity!
- b. And so also with the blessings of this life...
- If you are in Christ, these are just a foretaste of the glory to come...
    - In them you see yet another evidence of the goodness of God—that He should have so many delightful things for us even in this fallen world of sin and rebellion—
      - a world so wicked that it crucified His Son when His Son came to save us...
      - These are only the beginnings of the joy that is to come when the goodness of God is unleashed upon us without restraint in the world to come.
  - But if you are not in Christ,
    - You need to see the testimony of God’s goodness also in the blessings of this life...
    - You need to understand that He is sustaining the world in order that sinners may be brought to repentance...
      - And that if you will repent and turn to Christ, you shall know His unmitigated blessing in the life to come.
      - But if you refuse,
        - know that the comforts and joys you now receive from God’s hand each day will all be taken from you.
        - Do not think that you will go on forever!

TRANS> And this leads to our conclusion...

D. Fourthly, let the knowledge that we all shall die show you how important it is to prepare for death.

1. Death reminds you that you are going to meet God in judgment.
  - a. Hear how Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes:
    - Ecc 12:13-14: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil."
    - In other words, the only way to live life under the sun is to live in reality that you will die and that after death is judgement...
    - Even your very thoughts and intentions that are now hidden will be brought forward in that day.
  - b. And His judgement will be final.
    - There will be no appeal...
    - There will be no chance to go back and try again...
    - Your sentence in that day will be utterly and eternally final.
    - That is a very sobering thought!
2. This being so, Solomon says that you ought to fear God and keep His commandments.
  - a. In other words, you need to live in the reality of Him and of His glorious authority that is over all.
    - That is what is to fear Him...to live consciously before Him as He is...
    - When you do that, you will keep His commandments.
  - b. But how do you come to live in the fear of God and to keep the commandments of God?
    - 1) You must look to Him and see that we all die because of our sin.
      - You must accept that He is a holy God who has, in justice, pronounced judgement against us.
      - I know you would rather avoid Him and run away from Him...
      - but there is no need for that!
    - 2) Ever since the fall, God has provided a way of forgiveness and life.
      - He has commanded us to look to the shedding of the blood of the covenant for the forgiveness of our sins.

- He has promised in His covenant that He will forgive us if we will look to the provision He has made for us...
  - And of course that provision for sin was revealed 2000 years ago...
  - Jesus Christ, the One who came and died for the remission of His people's sins.
- God calls you to turn from you sin and trust in Him.
  - And if you do, He promises you forgiveness and eternal life.
  - And this forgiveness is complete forgiveness.
- Psalm 130 brings forgiveness and the fear of God together for us when it says,
  - "There is forgiveness with you that you may be feared."
  - If there were no forgiveness, we would avoid the Lord, but now we have one who has died in our place.
    - And though we all must still die,
      - He takes away the sting of death for all who trust in Him.
      - For us, sin becomes a passage into eternal life and eternal freedom from sin.
- c. You prepare for death, then, by coming to Christ.
  - That has how you come to fear God and keep His commandments.
    - You are but dust, and you cannot come to God on your own...
      - You must come to Him in the way that He has appointed.
      - Only then will you be prepared to die.
      - See that you do this without delay.
      - You will never be disappointed.