

Three Reigns of Death

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In 1793 there began a period of about a year that History has recorded as the "Reign of Terror." It started after the beginning of the French Revolution and was a period that witnessed mass executions of those identified as being "enemies of the revolution." Although there had been beheading machines in existence prior to this, a new instrument had been introduced just two years prior to this. The recently invented guillotine, named after physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin who proposed a uniform method of capital punishment to the National Assembly in 1789. Dr. Antoine Louis and German engineer Tobias Schmidt designed the famous beheading device in 1791. Nicknamed the "national razor," it was the tool of choice during the horrific Reign of Terror, performing some 16,594 executions. King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were among its first victims. All together about 40,000 those marked as enemies of the new order lost their lives during this regrettable year.

Today we're going to talk about another reign, which might also be accurately called a "reign of terror." By no means limited to the country of France during the 18th century, this reign has circled the globe and straddled the centuries. You don't have to speak French to be affected by the reign of this tyrant. We are speaking of the reign of death, which has affected us all.

Death was never a part of God's plan. He created life. More than merely giving life to His creatures, He is the Essence of life. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." John 14:6. But He endowed His created beings with a free will, because love that is forced or coerced is not acceptable. In fact, it is not really love at all.

Free will brought about the possibility of sin, and sin brings death. That's because sin separates one from the Source of life. Isaiah 59:2 says, "Your sins have separated you from your God," and being separated from God, Who is the Source of life, brings death, just as surely as pulling the cord from the electrical socket disables an appliance from working. Sin came when Adam and Eve transgressed the express command of God, and thereby incurred the penalty of death. But God through His grace provided for the possibility of salvation to all His earthly creatures, through His marvelous plan of redemption. What we're going to look at today is how that great plan can be seen in three separate segments. We're going to talk about the

“Three Reigns of Death.” There are three phases of God’s dealing with the problem of death that Scripture brings to view.

What does the term “reign” mean? That means to exercise control and authority as a king does. That means to occupy a throne and be in charge. Do we find that because of sin death has achieved that type of rulership and power? Indeed we do. With limited exceptions, only two listed in Scripture, Enoch and Elijah, death has come upon all, young or old, good or bad. It’s no “respector of persons.” Death has “reigned.” We’ll see that the Scripture divides this kingship of death into three phases.

The first is found in Romans 5:14 where we read, “Nevertheless *death reigned from Adam to Moses.*” What is this talking about? Well, if we back up a few verses we find, “Just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law, nevertheless *death reigned from Adam to Moses.*” Romans 5:12-14.

Paul is saying that in some way, death “reigned,” or exercised control, from Adam to Moses. This is the first phase or segment of death’s kingship. We know that Adam died as the head of the human race. Does anyone know how old he was when his life came to an end? He was 930 years old, almost a millennium, as were almost all who lived before the Flood. Actually, he was preceded in death by at least one person, his son Abel who was murdered by his brother Cain. Maybe Eve also passed to her rest before her husband. But since it was Adam’s sin that opened the door to sin, and as the head of the race, Paul points to him as being the starting point of the reign of sin. Death reigned “from Adam.” He was the beginning, in the sense of the “first cause” of death coming upon humanity.

“Death reigned *from Adam to Moses.*” Why is Moses the terminus of the first phase of death? That’s because Moses was brought back to life from the grave. In a specific sense Moses became the first to break through the tomb and end the first phase of the reign of sin. What about Enoch? Enoch’s situation was a little different. The finger of death never touched him at all. He never descended into the dusty grave. He was translated so that he never died at all, so it remains true that in a particular way the reign of death was uninterrupted from Adam to Moses.

We know that Moses both died and was resurrected from death. Because of his sin in striking the Rock (twice) rather than speaking to it to obtain water, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land with his people. As leader of the congregation, he was held to a very high standard. After giving his farewell speech (the book of Deuteronomy), he ascended Mt. Nebo and was shown the land of Canaan, along with a panoramic view of Israel's history from the Entrance to the Cross, from the Cross to the Advent and the future glory of heaven and the New Earth.

With that concluded, the Lord laid him to rest in an unmarked grave. "So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day." Deuteronomy 34:5, 6.

So Moses died and fell victim to the tyrant king death. But we know that he didn't remain in that grave forever. It cannot be said of Moses as Peter spoke of King David, "He is both dead and buried and his tomb is with us to this day." Acts 2:29. How do we know that for sure? Because when Jesus was still alive, while on the Mount of Transfiguration, we're told that Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with the Savior. "Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, brought hem up on a high mountain by themselves, and was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with them." Matthew 17:1-3. The Bible tells us how Elijah was taken to heaven on a fiery chariot, so that he was like Enoch translated and didn't die. But what about Moses? We just read that he did die and God Himself buried him.

Now, if it is true that Scripture tells us that Moses died and was buried, and then later tells us that He appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, then it follows logically that Moses must have been brought up from the grave sometime between his death and burial and when Jesus was on earth.

When exactly did it take place, we're not told. We'll have to find that out later. I'm interested to know when that was! Maybe the Lord in His mercy allowed his saint to rest a while and miss out on most of the tragedies of the Old Testament as the people of God wandered farther and farther away from the truth and the whole purpose of the Exodus and Entrance into Canaan was subverted by the enemy.

At some point, though, Moses was resurrected. What a scene that must have been! The small book of Jude alludes to this great and significant event. It was huge! Remember that up until this time no one had ever died and come back to life in glorified form. What Jesus was about to do was unprecedented. It's only one verse, what we read in Jude, but it opens a wide window of understanding. "Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" Jude 9.

We believe that the term "Michael" is a code term in Scripture for Jesus. The name comes from parts meaning "like" and "God" and can be rendered as a statement, "The One Who is like God," or a question, "Who is like God?" Both apply accurately to Christ. He is the "One Who is like God" in the preeminent sense. He is the "express image of His Person." Hebrews 1:3. "I and My Father are One." John 10:30. "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." John 14:9. On the other hand, Isaiah 14 tells us that Satan wanted to be "like God," but only in power, not character. In this sense the name Michael as a question, "Who *is* like God?" is meaningful.

And it seems that most often the term Michael is found in situations in which there is confrontation between Christ and Satan, as it is in this case. Try to imagine the scene. Christ the Lifegiver descends from heaven to Mt. Nebo and approaches the grave of the sleeping saint. Satan, the enemy, senses that something dramatic and unprecedented is about to take place. Immediately he is there to challenge Christ upon what authority He can bring Moses back to life. That was a very real conversation that took place.

Satan advances these arguments. They all seem very logical. Moses was a sinner. Moses broke God's law. The wages of sin is death. Conclusion: Moses is right where he belongs to be, lying dead in a grave. That's what justice demands. Moses couldn't and didn't atone for his sins, and no one else had paid for them either. What right does Christ have in raising Moses from the grave?

Did Jesus answer Satan's charges and challenges? No, He didn't. What did Jude tell us? "Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he (the devil) disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" Jesus didn't get into an argument with Satan. He could have! He could have asked how it was that Eve and then Adam ate of the fruit?

How was it that Moses was led to murder? Who tempted him to rashly strike the rock? But He didn't. He simply said, "The Lord rebuke you."

Was it true that Moses had sinned? Yes. He had murdered; he had lost his temper. We know about those sins because Scripture records them. His record was blemished. Was it true that Moses deserved to die and remain in the grave? Yes. Was it true that Moses' sins had not been paid for and therefore there was no justification for his being resurrected? Be careful about this one! The right answer is both "Yes" and "No." Yes, it is true that in a technical and real sense atonement had not been made in behalf of Moses. The cross would not rise on Calvary's hill for another 14 centuries. But that's only viewing the matter in the technical sense and the real sense from a human way of thinking.

What does Scripture tell us about the cross experience from a different perspective, the way that God looks at things? Jesus is the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Revelation 13:8. How can that be, if He wasn't crucified until some 4,000 years after the earth was created? It's because God lives in a different reality. He "calls those things which do not exist as though they did." Romans 4:17. In God's mind the payment for salvation was a reality as soon as sin entered, though Jesus' blood would not be shed physically for 40 centuries. Otherwise, Adam and Eve would have perished immediately when they transgressed.

And because the devil would never have understood or accepted this concept, it wasn't worth getting into an argument with him about it, as Christ prepared to call His beloved servant Moses from the grave. Redemption for him was an accomplished fact, in God's mind, and therefore He had full right and authority to grant him immortality.

That doesn't mean there wasn't risk when Jesus came. That doesn't mean that Jesus couldn't sin. That doesn't mean that His temptations weren't real. It's that God's foreknowledge doesn't affect the freedom to choose, even Jesus' free will to choose to be faithful to His Father. Because our minds are limited, we get into trouble if we try too hard to put those things together. But nevertheless, they are, and we can accept them as true even if we don't fully comprehend them.

When Moses came from the grave that day, to the dismay of the enemy, he came not with the aged body or mortal flesh, but with the touch of immortality, forever to live. And thus Moses appeared on the Mount with Jesus, a token of those who will one day rise in glory. In

this limited but very important sense, "death reigned from Adam to Moses."

Now we come to the second phase of the reign of death. According to His promise, Christ was born in Bethlehem. He grew up and lived a perfect life, without a taint of corruption or stain on His character. Despite all His kindnesses and miracles of healing, they clamored for His crucifixion and Jesus was led to Golgotha. Satan, of course, was behind this movement. He thought that He could destroy God. How foolish! Satan didn't realize it, but by putting Jesus to death he was really signing his own death warrant. The nails put into Jesus' flesh were really the nails driven in Satan's coffin.

Here's what Scripture says about the significance of Jesus' death. "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that *through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.*" Hebrews 2:14.

Paul makes it plain that it wasn't merely the instigator of death whose doom was sealed by the cross, but the very essence or principle of death itself. "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.*" II Timothy 1:8-10. Notice that the verb is in what we call the "perfect" tense; "has abolished," meaning that the act was completed and the effect of it still continues. Christ's death abolished death, in the legal sense.

Even though Jesus was the Lamb "slain from the foundation of the world" and His sacrifice was a reality in God's mind from the beginning, it was absolutely vital that He lay down His life within the reality that you and I, and the rest of the universe can see and understand. It wasn't a "sham." It wasn't a "mirage." That was real blood that was spilled. The wood of the cross was real. The spikes in His hands and feet were real. The thorns of His crown were real. The life, His human life, which was surrendered that day, was a real life. His death and unconsciousness in the grave were real. It was necessary that He actually submit to His Father in total obedience and

comply with every particular of the Plan which had been conceived in heaven even before sin entered.

He died the death that sinners deserve. The Bible calls it the "second death." He somehow experienced the anguish and loss that the lost will know on that last day. He became a member of the human race that He "might taste death for everyone." Hebrews 2:9. In this way He struck a lethal blow to death and its author. He was the heavenly Samson who brought down Satan's kingdom by his death. The reign of death came to an end, in a literal and legal way, when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave. What a wondrous and generous accomplishment! Praise God for His unspeakable Gift!

"Knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God." Romans 6:9, 10. The dominion of death suffered a mighty setback when Jesus died and rose. And because we are in Him, we have eternal life now and are not under the condemnation of sin or the threat of eternal death. Because we believe in Him we have "passed from death into life." John 5:24.

Phase two, the death of Christ on the cross, was vital. But the Plan is not complete. Though the final determination of Satan's kingdom has been established, though the outcome has been decided in the war between Christ and Satan, we're still here, aren't we. We still walk sadly to the cemetery to lay our loved ones to rest. We still experience the sorrow of separation when our friends and family breathe their last. There remains yet the termination of the third phase of the reign of death.

That of course, will come when Jesus returns in glory. The resurrection of the saints, the ones that the Bible identifies as those who "sleep in Jesus" is the grand event toward which we are pointed. If the dead went to their reward immediately when they died, what would be the point of the resurrection? The Bible clearly highlights the grand reunion when Christ returns as the event to which we should be looking forward and eagerly anticipating. That will be the end of the third reign of death.

Paul put it this way. "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. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this

corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'" I Corinthians 15:51-55.

Earlier in that same chapter Paul writes, "Then (at Jesus' advent) comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power (he is speaking of the reign of death). For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." I Corinthians 15:24-26. Notice the paradox in that the same author, Paul wrote that by Christ's death He "*has abolished death,*" expressing it has a completed act, and yet he also wrote that, "the last enemy that *will be destroyed* is death," pointing to the ultimate conquest of death.

What a terrible day it was when death took the throne and assumed control! Death reigned as the leaves of the trees turned their colors and fell to the ground. Can you imagine the curiosity and consternation as Adam and Eve saw the effects of sin? "Adam, look over there." "What is it, dear?" "That maple leaf. It's not green anymore. It's turning yellow, red and brown. Why is the color changing? Why isn't it green anymore?" "I don't know, Eve, but I don't think it's good."

Then slowly the leaves died and fell to the ground, and the hearts of Adam and Eve sank with despair and they grieved more than parents do at the death of their children. What we celebrate as "Fall Colors" was to them a sword piercing their hearts. Death reigned as nature suffered the effects of sin. Death reigned as Adam and Eve cradled the slain body of their son Abel. Death reigned as the inhabitants of earth were swept away by the Deluge. Death reigned in an uninterrupted way for at least 25 centuries. Not one of Satan's captives had escaped the steel grip of the tomb. He had enchained all within the bonds of silence, not allowing one of his victims to be released from his hold.

Then came one day when the Son of God descended in glory and called His son Moses to rise. Satan was there to challenge and argue, but Jesus paid him no attention. It was to the glory of God, to the assurance of His power, to the encouragement of those would one day walk through the valley of the shadow of death that Christ called Moses to life. The reign of death suffered a mighty blow!

One day Jesus Himself would walk through the valley. He would give His life blood as a spotless sacrifice, a perfectly presented Atonement for the sins of mankind. In this way He would destroy death and the devil. That act which had been in God's mind forever became a visible reality on Calvary and satisfied the legal requirements of God's justice so that He could maintain the integrity of His law and yet save mankind. Miracle of miracles! Love beyond our comprehension! The enemy of death was struck a lethal blow!

Someday soon the Plan will be completed. The day longed for and anticipated; anticipated by us? Yes, but by our loving Lord more than we can imagine. He has longed and waited for this day. We need the "patience of the saints" to wait for it. But know that He has had the "patience of the saints" in a way that exceeds our understanding. Oh how He longs to come and call His sleeping saints to life! But the day will come. May it be soon. He will call in victory for the sleeping ones to awaken from their dusty chambers.

With a mighty shout and the voice of the Archangel, accompanied by the trumpet of God, they will rise in triumph and glory. What a day that will be! The reign of death, the cruel, thieving, murderous reign of terror will finally be over! Will you give your heart to Jesus so that, whether living or asleep, you will hear His voice on that day? Will you ask Him to justify you and declare you "not guilty" by His grace and the atonement He made for you on the cross? Will you ask Him to change and cleanse you so that the thoughts, motives and faith of Jesus will be in your mind?