



Conducted by
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What happens to the dead? The O.T. scriptures teach that flesh becomes dust and the spirit goes back to where it came from (Eccl. 12:7; Job 34:14 etc.) In the N.T. we have such passages as 2nd Cor. 12:1-4; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9, as though a change might have come about since the death and resurrection of our Lord. Please explain.

The questioner presumably means what happens to a person when physical death comes? because people can be dead in more senses than one—they can be spiritually dead. Eph. 2:1: "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." This must be a severe body blow to those who believe man is totally physical and wholly mortal. In Gen. 2:17 God said to Adam concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ". . . for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die," yet Adam did not die *physically* the day he ate thereof, but he died to God spiritually that day. So care is required in deciding exactly what kind of death is referred to. Not only must we be careful regarding the meaning of "death.." In considering this question we must also be careful of the way we define such terms as "man," "life," "soul," "spirit," "mortal," "immortal," "destroy," "grave," "hell" and several others, because a true definition is obviously a vital necessity, as is an honest appraisal of the context in which such terms are used. We spend one third of life asleep: yet sleep is still a mystery to man. Death, and its consequences, is in many respects similarly a profound subject and we can but sift out from the scriptures relevant truths and try to fit them together to provide a general picture. God has not revealed all, but as much as we require to know.

What Is Man?

The constitution of man seems the logical point at which to begin a study of what happens to the dead, and at once we are on controversial territory, for not all men are agreed on man's constituent parts. Man was of course made a little lower, in the life strata, than the angels and 1 Thess. 5:23 says, "I [Paul] pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." We all know what the body is and no one argues about this, but with reference to "spirit" and "soul" some would define the former as "breath" and the latter as

“animal life.” The fallacy of the former is seen in such passages as, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” [breath] where I am sure Jesus was not intending to say that asthma sufferers had any cause to be happy! In Acts 17:16 we read that Paul’s “spirit was stirred within him.” His *breath* was stirred within him? Similarly it must be erroneous to suggest that soul means “animal life” and that Gen. 2:7 says that when God breathed into man’s nostrils “man became a living soul” (animal life). A living animal life? Can there be a dead animal life? It is important therefore that we be not misled by unsound definitions of “soul” and “spirit,” because our understanding of both has a direct bearing on our study of what happens to the dead. The soul and spirit are part of the man but not part of his body. In Matt. 10:28 Jesus said to the twelve, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Body

When death ensues or supervenes a separation of man’s constituent parts takes place. The physical (now inanimate) body goes to the tomb and eventually disintegrates, returning to the dust from which it was made. The intelligent and spiritual part of man goes back into God’s care, consciousness being an inherent attribute of the spirit of man—Eccl. 12:7: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” James confirms this by saying, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” Jas. 2:26. Nowhere do we read, however, that the spirit without the body is dead. It is nevertheless suggested by some that when man dies he goes into complete oblivion and extinction because he is wholly mortal. It is said that Eccl. 9:5 is a scripture which fosters this belief: “For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.” If however we read to the next verse we come to a salient phrase which gives an important qualification to what has just been said: “Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy is now perished; neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done *under the sun.*” Chap. 9 mentions “under the sun” several times and certainly man, after death, has no further participation in activities “under the sun” or in human and earthly emotions. Psalm 90:10 says that we “fly away” from such things. Man’s lifeless corpse in the grave certainly “knows not anything,” but man is more than flesh and bone.

Soul and Spirit

Our interest must centre therefore, on the spirit and soul. The two are so closely akin that it is extremely difficult to separate them and we must consider them *unum quid* as the spiritual part of man which goes to the place of departed spirits at death. The writer to the Hebrews (4:12) in describing how incredibly sharp and powerful the word of God is says that “it is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and it is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” It is as easy to separate the marrow from the joints as it is to separate soul and spirit, and only a spiritual scalpel can do it. Soul and spirit leave the body at death. Jesus and Stephen commended their spirits to God at death, and it is too absurd to believe they were referring to their breath. Indeed Stephen asked Jesus to receive his spirit (Acts 7:55-60) and we know where Jesus was at that time—at God’s right hand. Similarly the soul is referred to as surviving the body at physical death (Matt. 10:28 already referred to) and Rev. 6:9-11 “And . . . I saw the souls of them which were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” They had died and were no longer on the earth, but still much alive, conscious and with the propensity of memory. See also 1 Kings 17:22, where Elijah brings back to life a dead boy: “And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah and the soul of the child came into him again and he revived”; and 1 Sam. 28:14-15 where the witch of Endor brought up Samuel to Saul from the dead “an old man . . . and covered in a mantle.” There is certainly no thought or conscious activity in the grave—the

body merely moulders back to dust. The body is simply the vehicle in which a person lives and is carried. Peter says, "Yea I think it mete, as long as I am in this tabernacle [tent] to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath showed me." (2 Peter 1:13-14). There is much supplementary evidence along this line. Take, for instance, the case of Dorcas in Acts 9:39. We are told that after she had died she was washed and laid in an upper chamber. Some of the disciples heard that Peter was in the locality and sent for him. "When he was come into the upper chamber many of the sorrowing widows showed him the garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them." But she was still there in the upper chamber, someone might say. Her body certainly was but she (Dorcas) was somewhere else. I suggest she had gone to the place of departed spirits. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise." Where did Jesus go that day? His *body* certainly went to the tomb but He went to the place of departed spirits. We must study the word "paradise" carefully. Paul was torn between two desires—to live and be with his brethren, or to die and be with Christ. Phil. 1:23: "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." If the grave meant extinction for Paul then he would have had no such dilemma. In Matt. 22:23-32 the Sadducees, who did not believe in angels or the spirit and believed man to be wholly mortal, tried to confound Jesus on the question of the resurrection. Jesus replied that at the resurrection we shall be like the angels of God in heaven. Jesus also said, regarding the dead, that the 'dead' are very much alive for God is not the God of the dead but of the living. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and although those men "died" many years before, they are very much alive, not on the earth, of course, but somewhere else. This very important fact helps us to understand better the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-32) where we read of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Matt. 17:9 calls it a "vision" but there are different kinds of vision and this one is from the Greek *horama* and means "an appearance." Jesus certainly did not talk to wisps of mist nor was he guilty of perpetrating a shabby deceit upon Peter, James and John, but he actually spoke to these two men (remembering that Elijah never saw the grave but was transferred bodily). 2 Peter 1:16-18 provides God's own confirmatory seal on the event as being a very real happening indeed.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

In the question of the dead, Luke 16:19-31 must be referred to. Be it a parable or not (and it is difficult to accept the view that it is a parable) the picture presented is clear enough. Both men went, it seems, to the place of departed spirits at death. Notice the remarkable references to physical faculties—the cries, the thirst, the tongue, the tip of the finger and the facility of memory in recalling the fathers house and five brothers. Abraham (a parable?) said, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."—a rather pointless statement if the dead are extinguished and unconscious. We must heed the word of God in our lifetime because after death it will be too late.

What happens to the dead? I think these few scriptures suffice to indicate to us that, at death, the constituent parts of man separate. The body goes to the tomb and returns to dust, awaiting the resurrection. The soul and spirit (the intelligent and conscious part of man) goes back to God and to the place of departed souls and spirits there to await the resurrection and the *formal* judgement day (albeit Luke 16 suggests a pre-judgement). This was as true of the O.T. age as it is now. The changes wrought in Christ were not changes affecting the aspect of *physical death* but rather that he brought about a hope of escape from that eternal spiritual death, through His atoning sacrifice and to substitute eternal life in the mansions of glory for lasting shame and perdition.

"For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

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