



QUESTION: “What happens when folks die?”



This month I wish to look at a subject which is described by the brother who brought it to my attention as ‘a *complex question which keeps cropping up.*’ Well, of one thing I am sure; it is a subject in which I expect every reader of the “S.S.” to be interested, and, for that reason, I will quote the relevant section of his letter and then deal with the scriptures to which he refers. You will see that I have numbered the points that he wishes us to consider.

The Question: “What happens when folks die?”

1. “We read that Solomon says ‘the dead know nothing at all’ (Eccles. 9:5).
2. The Lord and Paul call it ‘being asleep’.
3. He (the Lord) tells the Sadducees that ‘God is God of the living’.
4. The Lord also told the thief on the cross that he would be in Paradise that day.
5. He said that the Rich Man could see Lazarus and could talk with Abraham. Would He use a fable to prove a Truth?”

1. Solomon’s Observation.

With regards to Solomon’s observation, we should remember that, even if he was the wisest man of his day, Solomon was not omniscient. There were things that even he did not know, because God had not yet revealed them. In other words, in the statement to which our questioner draws our attention, Ecclesiastes 9:5, Solomon was merely expressing the view of death commonly held among his people in his day.

But, when we examine the Old Testament scriptures it becomes clear that, even among God’s ancient chosen people, Israel, there was no clear understanding of, or belief in, life after death. The Covenant enacted at Sinai related to their manner of life in an earthly ‘Promised Land’. This is quite evident in the Commandment in Exodus 20:12, which declares that parents were to be honoured, in order ‘*that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.*’ This instruction, with its promise, is also repeated in the Psalms, See Psalm 37, for example and look particularly at vv. 3, 9, 11, 22,29, and 34.

A fact, which we are inclined to overlook, is that, in the Covenant, which God made with His people at Sinai, there is no mention of blessings in a life hereafter and certainly no mention of Heaven. The blessings promised to those who kept the Covenant were related to this present life: namely *longevity and posterity*. That is, a long life in the earthly ‘homeland’, Palestine, and someone to carry the family name forward.

Consequently, the Old Testament reveals that God’s people of that period had a very simple – one might almost say simplistic - view of life, with a philosophy which declared;

“Do good, and God will bless you with prosperity and longevity in the Land which He has promised to His people. But do evil, and you will be punished’.

The effect of this belief was that when a person experienced hardship or adversity in his life, people believed that he was being punished by God because of some wickedness in his life. On the other hand, when one prospered, his prosperity was taken as proof of divine approval and blessing.

Well, of course it would be fine if life were *that* simple! But we know – and *they also* were forced to recognize – that it does not always work out that way! Often the wicked seem to prosper in this life, even to the extent of seeming to escape punishment for their wickedness, whilst those who try to live good lives often have to face severe hardship. This is comes out very clearly in Psalm 73, where the writer struggles with this very dilemma.

Therefore, gradually it was revealed to the Hebrews that, because the wicked often escape being called to account for their wickedness in this life, there would be a time and a place where the balance will be redressed and justice will be done. Because God is the Righteous God, the wicked must, and will, be punished, and the righteous will be vindicated, if not in this life but certainly in the after-life.

And yet, as the New Testament scriptures reveal, even in the days of the Lord Jesus, the puzzling question of death and what lies beyond, had not been completely resolved and was still fiercely debated among the various religious parties. The Pharisees firmly believed in a both a future life and a Judgment, whilst the Sadducees rejected both.

It was the Lord Jesus Himself who **"brought life and immortality to light, through the Gospel"** (2nd Tim.1:10). He *'brought it to light'*. He drove away the mists and doubts which had engulfed it for so long. And He did it, both by His teaching and His own resurrection from the dead.

2. Death as Sleep.

It is true that both the Lord and Paul speak of death as 'sleep'. In fact the word *'cemetery'* comes from the Greek word *'kormeterion'*, from which we also obtain our word *'dormitory'*. Thus, a cemetery is regarded as *'a sleeping-place'*.

But the words *'dead'*, or *'death'* are never used in the scriptures in connection with the *'soul'* – one's true self. In fact, nowhere do the scriptures ever suggest that the soul *'sleeps'*. The word is only ever used with reference to the body – the *'tent'*, or *'tabernacle'*, as Peter calls it in 2nd Peter 1:13.

You will see, in 2nd Cor. 5:1, that Paul uses the same expression, when he refers to death of the body. Paul says, **"I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better."** And, again, **"Absent from the body, at home with the Lord."** This means that when a believer *'dies'*, the worn-out *'tent'* – his body – goes to *'sleep'* in the earth, to await the resurrection and the change which will occur when Christ returns. But the soul, the real person, goes *'to be with the Lord'*.

Our loved ones do not lie in graveyards. They are simply not there!

In Rom. 8:23, Paul says that we have, as believers, already received *'the first fruits'* of the Spirit, and we now await *'the redemption of our body'*. This means that when the Lord Jesus returns, the body which was committed to the earth to *'sleep and to 'wait'*, will be raised incorruptible – a new body, like His *'glorious body'* – to be re-united with the soul, which has been *'at home'* with the Lord Who has made redemption possible.

3. God, the God of the Living (Matt.22:32)

You will recall that it was the Lord Himself who used this phrase during a discussion with the Sadducees, who foolishly imagined they had driven Him into a corner with an implausible story of a woman who had been married an unlikely seven times. They gleefully wanted to know whose wife she would be in the resurrection, since she had had seven husbands.

The response of Jesus was devastating! He said, **"You are in error, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God!"** He then pointed out, first, that in Heaven there would be no need for marriage, the primary purpose of which is to make possible, by means of procreation, the replenishing of Earth's population, which is constantly being depleted by death. In Heaven there will be neither death nor birth.

Furthermore, as religious teachers the Sadducees should have understood the scripture (Ex.3:15) where God says, **"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."** The significance of this verse, used by the Lord in His reply to the Sadducees, is that when God made this statement, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all been dead for centuries,

and, therefore, according to Sadducean doctrine, no longer existed! Yet God did not say, 'I was the God of Abraham...' as He surely would have done, had these patriarchs ceased to exist. He used the present tense; **'I AM the God of Abraham...'** implying that they still existed. This was driven home by the Lord with the words, 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living'.

4. The Lord and the thief on the Cross.

The fact that the Lord said to the 'penitent thief', as he is popularly called, '*Today you will be with Me in Paradise*', is further proof that conscious existence does not end when the body dies.

After His body had been taken down from the Cross, for the rest of the day of His crucifixion, and for several more days, the body of Jesus lay in Joseph's new tomb. The penitent thief was not there with Him! After their deaths at Calvary, the Lord and the thief were never again seen together in this world.

In fact, I believe we may be absolutely sure that, after they had been removed from the cross, the bodies of *both* thieves would have been consigned to the fires which constantly burned in the Valley of Hinnom, because that was where the corpses of criminals and beggars were destroyed.

We must therefore conclude that the Lord kept His promise, and that before the end of the day of their crucifixion, they were together in another world. Where were they? Well, the word '*paradise*' is of Persian origin and it describes the King's enclosed, private garden in which he walked and talked with privileged and favoured subjects. Wherever the 'Paradise' to which the Lord referred is located, it was a place, or condition, of the greatest blessedness; and it was experienced after death.

5. The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16)

The brother who raised this question about death was absolutely correct in thinking that the Lord would never use a fable in order to prove a truth.

In the first place, the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus the beggar is not introduced as either a parable or a fable. It opens with the words, "**There was a certain rich man... and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus.**" The language suggests that this is a story concerning two men who actually existed.

And, even if it is insisted that what we have here is, indeed, a parable, let us remember that a parable is a likeness. The story told must mirror the truth that it is intended to illustrate. Our brother is right when he suggests that the Lord would never teach error in any form.

Of course, there is a great deal that one could say about the Rich Man and Lazarus but what we may learn from what Jesus says is crystal clear:

- i) Death is not the end. It is a junction – not a terminus.
- ii) After death, memory is retained. We shall remember.
- iii) We shall also recognize those we have known on Earth.
- iv) No change of state is then possible.
- v) It will not be a time for mercy, but for justice.

Conclusion.

The Lord Jesus could doubtlessly have told us all there is to know about what lies beyond the experience we call 'Death'. As it is, He 'brought life and immortality to light, through the Gospel'. He told us sufficient to make us realize that this life is a time for preparation. And what He has told us should not make us afraid, but should inspire us with hope and longing. How wonderful it will be, to be 'at home with the Lord!' (2nd Cor. 5:5-8)