

LIFE BEFORE DEATH—LIFE AFTER DEATH

From the pew and the pulpit to the television talk shows the question “Is there life after death” is being asked, not only by religious people but people of the world. Anyone claiming to have had an out of the body experience can usually get their fifteen minutes of fame on national television and a book about someone’s visit to heaven or hell and being able to come back and tell about it, will sell millions of copies, even though the Apostle Paul relates his miraculous event of “being caught up into the third heaven” states he “heard inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak” (II Cor, 12:4). It is basically religious people who buy into this fantasy. It seems there is very little difficulty in believing that there is some form of life after death. Even the disciples had no trouble in believing in ghosts (Mark 6:49; Luke 24:36-39). The “dullness” of the disciples’ thoughts gave Jesus an opportunity to correct their wrong ideas by positive teaching. Ever since Satan deceived Eve in the garden by convincing her to believe the lie “you shall not die” there has been a denial of the reality of death and the affirmation that even after physical death one continues to live in some state. Job asked the important question: “If a man dies shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). Not “if he dies shall he go on living?” Job’s question is answered affirmatively in the New Testament; he shall live again at the general resurrection of the just and the unjust when all shall come out of their graves, some to the resurrection of life and some to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:29). Nothing is said of them continuing to live in another state after death (See Acts 24:15).

This brings up the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31). In this account Luke uses the word *hades*, translated “hell” in the KJV, and the terms “*Abraham’s bosom*” not “heaven”. In order to understand this passage we must include the context, something traditionalist conveniently ignores. Jesus has spoken of covetousness and stewardship (16:1-13). When the Pharisees scoff at his teaching (ver. 14) he warns them against self-justification, reminding them that God knows their hearts and that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God (ver. 15). The rich man and Lazarus provide a perfect illustration of this truth. This passage is usually used to prove the immortality of the soul. Some go to Hades, and some to Paradise. Therefore it is not accepted as a parable, but a reality. Some say it is not a parable because Jesus does not say it is a parable. Jesus never said all the parables were “parables”. For example in Matthew 15:13, 14 Jesus teaches about the blindness of the Pharisees and says nothing about a parable but in verse 15 Peter said “Explain the *parable* to us.” In Mark 7 Jesus teaches about the tradition of the Elders and does not mention that his teaching is a parable, yet in verse 17 “his disciples question him about the *parable*.” In Luke 12:35-40 Jesus teaches about slaves being ready for the return of a master. He does not say it is a parable, but in verse 41 Peter asks, “Lord are you addressing *this parable* to us or everyone else as well?” Mark 4:34 states that “He was not speaking to them without parables but he was explaining everything to his own disciples.” The moral of this story is stated in Luke 16:31: “If

they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.” It was unbelieving Israel, especially the Pharisees and the leaders, that did not listen to Moses and the Prophets. They are represented by the rich man because Israel was the most favored people on earth (Rom. 9:3-5) Lazarus, on the other hand, represents the Gentiles who were without hope until the gospel was revealed (Eph. 2:11,12). The “crumbs from the rich man’s table and the dogs” is descriptive of how the Jews thought of the Gentiles (Matt. 15:21-21). Abraham’s bosom shows that the Gentiles became children of Abraham and heirs of the promise, which the Jews claimed a being exclusively theirs (Gal. 3:26-29). When the rich man died and lifted up his eyes in Hades represents the fact that he died having no relation to Abraham, thus the unbelieving Jews were cut off from the covenant (Matt. 21:43); while the Gentiles were given salvation (Rom. 11:11-15). The gulf between them is the division made by acceptance or rejection of Christ. To this day the Jews are in torment, weeping at the wailing wall in Jerusalem, weeping over the loss of their once exalted position. Nothing in the context remotely suggest the final state of the wicked. The context is the wrong thinking of the Jews.

With the exception of the Jewish religion every pagan religion in existence, including the occult, reincarnation believers, and new age thinking, believes in some form of life after death. The belief in life after death has replaced the scriptural teaching of the resurrection. When the church preaches that the dead go on living after death either in heaven or hell it negates the need of a resurrection. As a result of this teaching there is a general neglect in today’s preaching and teaching on the significance of the resurrection, giving attention to it only during the Easter season. Perhaps the reason for this neglect is our denial of death as our enemy. In the secular world the death of the unborn (abortion) and death of the aged (euthanasia) is using death as a friendly way to solve our social problems. In the church it has become a door to a better life and is therefore glorified in song and sermon, especially funeral sermons, and has given so much attention to death and dying we have ignored life and living, living in the power of the resurrection. The problem the Apostles faced was not that people did not believe in life after death, rather they could not believe the resurrection. The book of Acts is a message of the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ assures us of his presence and gives purpose to life (2:24, 33: 3:24,26). It proves the word of God is true (2:23-36; 13:30-37), and shows the futility of natural thinking (3:14,15). It is the resurrection that shows God demands repentance and judgment (17³⁰-32). In Acts the resurrection is the driving force behind the growth of the church. Jesus is alive. He has ascended and God has made him both Lord and Christ. He has thus sent the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, into the world. It is the church, the body of Christ, that has this message to proclaim as the answer to our needs.

Too long the church has looked upon and emphasized its weakness had has failed to realize its strength. The Apostle reminds the Ephesians to “be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might...” (Eph. 6:10). This strength is “in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about

in Christ when He raised him from the dead and seated him at His right hand..."(Eph. 1:19,20). Our strength is resurrection power made available to us by his ascension. The cross has become the focal point of the church to the extent that the resurrection and ascension has never had much meaning to the average Christian. Take a look at a modern hymnal. There will be twice as many songs about the cross as there is about the resurrection and none on the ascension. It is in his resurrection that we have life and in his ascension that we have power. We need to wake up to this fact and stop whining about how the world is treating us (taking away prayer in schools and the ten commandments off the wall). Big Deal! What else can we expect from the world? In 1973 Oz Guinness published a book entitled *The Dust of Death* in which he shows that the "dust of death" was slowly settling over the Western culture. So he charts the journey of a generation out from the technological wasteland and into the Promised land of radical living...out of the culture of Eastern religion, psychedelic drugs and the occult and into a third way. In the last sentences of the book he shows this third way to be found in the resurrection "that blasts apart the finality of death to provide an alternative to the sifting, settling dust of death and through a new birth open the way for a new life." The church needs to wake out of the dust of death and live in the joy of life.

In I Corinthians 15 Paul does not argue the resurrection upon the basis of the immortality of the soul, but rather argues immortality upon the basis of the resurrection. The question, then, is not "Is there life after death?" but rather "Is there life before death?" The fact of the truth of the resurrection means the Christian already has life in Christ. There will be a resurrection of the dead in the last day (John 5:28,29; 6:38), but before that final resurrection there is another, a first resurrection: the resurrection of Christ as "the first fruits." He arose from the dead and all believers share in his resurrection (Rev. 20:5,6). Note John does not say the believer himself as such is resurrected, but that he has *part* in the first resurrection. He is sharing in the resurrection of Christ. How is this true? Colossians 2:12 "Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were raised up with him through faith in the working of God, who also raised him from the dead." Christ's resurrection was the first resurrection (he was the first man to ever be raised from the dead to die no more) and we participate in his resurrection through baptism, so now we "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). When we were dead in our transgressions, God "made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5-6). Those who are baptized into Christ and thus united with him in the likeness of his resurrection (Rom. 6:4-14) will be joined with him in the final resurrection as well (Rom. 8:9-11). So contrary to popular belief, baptism is even more a resurrection than the resurrection of the body. Resurrection is a complete transformation, and the foundation for this transformations takes place at the first resurrection. As Eric Sauer wrote in his book *The King of the Earth*: "Christ is risen! With this message the Gospel has spread round the world. Biblical Christianity is both acceptance of life and joy in life in the highest and noblest sense of the word. Christ, the Living One, is the source of a Divine, perennial river of life, creating and maintaining life."

If physical resurrection is not merely a "re-awakening" or "reformation" but a complete transformation, then becoming a

Christian is not merely a change of character but the beginning of life. Paul shows in Romans 6:1-10 that we have died to sin, been buried, and raised to a completely new life. This is what happened to Christ. When he was raised from the dead it was a resurrection to a completely new and different life than he had lived for thirty three and a half years. The Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection came to Christ with the question: If a woman had seven husbands and they all die, than she dies, whose wife shall she be in the resurrection? Entangled in their question was the idea that in the resurrection there will be a reproduction of what we have in this life. This is what much of the religious world teaches today...that our eternal life will simply be a continuous life as we know it now but without any of the heartaches of our physical life on earth. N.T Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* writes: "Salvation does not consist simply of going off to the heavenly dimension and staying there while earth goes on its way to destruction." The resurrection teaches us that the life we have at resurrection will have no semblance of our physical life on earth. We may ask "was not the body of Jesus raised with all the character traits he had before his death?" (the wounds in his hands and side etc.). It is true he appeared to his disciples in this form, but the Apostle John later writes: "Beloved now we are the children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him just as he is" (I John 3:2). John had seen him as he was after his resurrection, but now he says *we shall see him just as he is*. To quote Wright again he states on this passage: "Jesus is at this moment beyond our sight, and our present lives are bound up with his, in a way invisible to the world around. But one day Jesus will be revealed. At that time, the life believers already possess will be revealed. When it happens, we shall be 'like him'. The royal presence of Jesus will be the signal for the great transformation in which the hidden reality of present Christian experience will become the public reality of God's new world, and His renewed people." Many Christians have accepted the heretical idea that the body passes permanently away after death and we reappear in some type of disembodied state. If this is true then the resurrection of our body is not a very important doctrine. It is also an unbiblical idea that the earth doesn't matter because it is going to be destroyed and we will all be taken to heaven when we die. No scripture says we go to heaven when we die. Our destiny is an earthly one; a new earth, an earth redeemed and transformed. An earth reunited with heaven, but an earth nevertheless.

Ever since the days of the early church the subject of what happens after death has been a matter of confusion and debate. In the days of the early church a heresy called Gnosticism had to be confronted by the Apostles. The Gnostics taught that the body was evil and the resurrection was simply a fantasy. To the Greeks the idea of a bodily resurrection was absurd. They called Paul a "babbling" (Acts 17:18). One of the main points of Paul's sermon in Acts 17 was the resurrection of the dead. He did not preach the immortality of the soul, rather the resurrection of the body. Paul taught that the Christian does not want to be "unclothed" but clothed upon that mortality might be swallowed up in life (II Cor. 5:2,3). In other words we do not want to be disembodied. The Scriptures never speak of a soul without a body. The soul has no independent existence. The scriptures do not speak of an "immortal soul". The resurrection is the hope of the Christian, not death.

