

AFTER DEATH: SCRIPTURE OR MYTH?

Albert Schweitzer wrote in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*: "Many of the greatest of Jesus' sayings are found lying in a corner like explosive shells from which the charges have been removed." This is true not only of Jesus' sayings but can be applied to the entire Bible. One scriptural teaching that is like an explosive shell with the charge removed is the teaching of what happens after death. Sir Anthony Buzzard in *The Forgotten Christianity of Jesus* wrote: "The Greek doctrine of the survival of the soul separated from the body has so permeated the churches that its members are committed to believing and teaching the falsehood that the dead are really alive in heaven (or hell), an idea which is absolutely foreign to the Bible." To most Christians and preachers today, this is a shocking statement and a denial of the Bible. However, what is more shocking is to read or hear the unscriptural and outrageous opinions expressed as truth and accepted by many sincere Christians without any investigation from the Scriptures. We will point out some common teachings on this subject and compare them with what the Bible says, in spite of being vilified and charged with preaching a false doctrine of "soul sleeping" and accused of believing "Jehovah's Witness doctrine." (Odd that no one believing in water baptism is accused of believing the JW doctrine).

The question of what happens after death has been a topic of controversy since the last Apostle died and the Scriptures were completed. The leaders of the church during these early years are referred to as "The Church Fathers" and their writings reveal as much controversy and misunderstanding existed then as now. This is seen in the following quotes from their writings taken from *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. *Tatian (160 AD)*: "The soul is not in itself immortal but mortal. Yet it is possible for it not to die. If it does not know the truth it dies. It is dissolved with the body, but rises again at the end of the world with the body, receiving death by punishment in immortality, but if it acquires the knowledge of God, it does not die, although for a time is dissolved." *Irenaeus (180 AD)*: "At death souls continue to exist, they do not pass from body to body, they possess the form of a man and they retain the memory of the things of the world. Each class receives a habitation such as it has deserved, even before judgment." *Papias (120 AD) as quoted by Eusebius*: "Those who are deemed worthy of a habitation in heaven will go there, others will enjoy the delights of Paradise, and others will possess the splendor of the city. There is a distinction between the habitation of those who produce a hundred-fold, and the habitation of those who produce sixty-fold, and those who produce thirty-fold. The first will be taken up into the heavens. The second will dwell in Paradise and the last will inhabit the city." (Note: they do not identify "the city"). *Tertullian (197 AD)*: "Gehenna is a reservoir of secret fire under the earth for purposes of punishment, We will likewise have derision heaped upon us. After the resurrection the body has to be 'killed' by God in Gehenna (along with the soul), its killing is eternal" It is remarkable such teachings as this were common only a few generations from the writings and teaching of the Apostles.

Over nearly two thousand years later these same sentiments are being echoed in the sermons and writings of the religious leaders today. The real problem is the assertions they make without a smidgen of Scripture to back them. Following are some such statements and our answers:

The following quotations are from a monthly periodical entitled *The Banner of Truth* in which Fred O. Blakely wrote: "In death, the saint's spirit goes to the intermediate state of Paradise, where it has a disembodied relation with Christ and the spirits of the saved. Although this is superior to anything known here, it still is not the ultimate joy God has provided for His children. Man disembodied is only part man; it takes the entire threefold nature, spirit, soul, and body to make a complete personality. As the natural body sleeps in death the released spirit exults in the Lord's presence, and partakes of joys beyond our present ability to conceive. Jesus himself was proclaimed by Peter as having been busily engaged in preaching "unto the spirits in prison" during the interim between his death and resurrection (I Peter 3:18-20)."

Answers: The scriptures say nothing of an "intermediate" state where the spirit goes at death. Rather at death "the dust (body) will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Eccl. 12:7). At his death Jesus committed his spirit into the hands of the Father (Luke 23:46). Nothing is said about his spirit going to Paradise and having a relationship with the spirits of the saved. Jesus is said to have been "seated at God's right hand" when he ascended (Eph. 1:20) how, then, could he be in the intermediate state of Paradise having relations with disembodied spirits? Nowhere do the scriptures speak of a "disembodied" person. As to Peter's account of Jesus preaching to the spirits in prison (probably fallen angels) there is no reference to his doing this while his body was in the tomb. It was forty days after his resurrection that Jesus remained on the earth. It could well be during this time he did this.

Erwin Lutzer of the Billy Graham Association in an article *One Minute After You Die* wrote: "Those who find themselves in heaven will be surrounded with friends whom they have known on earth. Friendships, once rudely interrupted by death, will continue where they left off. Every description of heaven they have heard will pale in the light of reality. All this forever. Others---indeed many others---will be shrouded in darkness, a region of deprivation and unending regret. There with their memories and feelings intact, images of their life on earth will return to haunt them. They will think back to their friends, family and relatives; they will brood over opportunities they squandered and intuitively know that their future is both hopeless and unending. For them, death will be far worse than they imagined." Where is the scripture that says this? It is completely unbiblical yet it is the belief of the majority of Christians today. After the crash of the World Trade Center Billy Graham said to a national audience: "Many of those who died are in heaven now and they do not want to come back; it is glorious and wonderful." This is a common saying voiced from many pulpits during funeral services.

Many beliefs on life after death are based upon the erroneous belief of “near death experiences.” A book that became a phenomenal best seller in the last decade of the 20th century was Betty Edie’s *Embraced By The Light*, published in 1992. Here is a quote from the book that gives some idea what it is about: “When we die we experience nothing more than a transition...we are given a choice to remain on earth until our bodies are buried or to move on...there are many levels where we are most comfortable...those who have bonded to the world through greed, bodily appetites, or other earthly commitments become earth bound. These spirits stay on earth. They reside there as long as they want to; eventually they learn to move on to accept the greater warmth and security of God.” This book was carried by many religious book stores, and undoubtedly read by many “Bible believing” Christians.

An example of such nonsense is seen in a quote from the book written by Maria Shriver (former first lady of California and niece of John F. Kennedy) entitled: *What’s Heaven?* which is aimed at children: “Heaven is somewhere you believe in...It’s a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of any in the universe...If you are good then you go to heaven...When your life is finished here on earth God sends angels down to take you to heaven to be with Him there...And Grandma is alive and she is in a safe place with the stars, with God and the angels...She is watching over us from up there...” This is perhaps an exaggeration of the belief of many Christians, but it is more or less exactly the kind of teaching millions of Christians have come to believe.

The common belief that at death the Christians go directly to heaven and sinners go directly to hell, and the resurrection is ignored is based primarily on three passages in the New Testament: II Corinthians 5:8: “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” Philippians 1:23: “I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ...” and Luke 23:43: “I say unto you today, you will be with me in Paradise.”

II Corinthians 5:8: Chapter five is connected with chapter four. In the original text there is no break between chapter 4 and chapter 5. What Paul says in chapter 5 must be seen in the light of the subject he is discussing in chapter 4 which is stated in verse 14: “Knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.” Paul had written to the same people in I Corinthians 15 concerning the resurrection at the appearing of Christ, The same language is used in II Cor. 5 that is used in I Cor. 15. Note I Cor. 15:54: “But when this perishable will have *put on* the imperishable, and this mortal will have *put on* the immortality, then will come about the saying that is written ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” II Cor. 5:2, 4: “For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, longing to be *clothed* with our dwelling from heaven...for indeed while we are in this tent we groan being burdened not because we do not want to be *unclothed* but to be *clothed*, in order that the mortal may be swallowed up by life.” The word *put on* in I Corinthians 15 is the same word as *clothed* in II Corinthians 5. Further: I Cor. 15:54: “then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is *swallowed up* in victory.’” II Corinthians 5:4: “We do not want to be *unclothed* but *clothed* in order that what is mortal may be *swallowed up* in life.” I

Corinthians shows that “being absent from the body and present with the Lord” takes place at the resurrection and not at death. In death the person is asleep and unaware of the passing of time.

Philippians 1:23: “But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ.” The key to understanding this passage is the phrase “depart and be with Christ.” The way we should interpret Scripture is to compare Scripture with Scripture. The Scriptures are their own best interpreters. Paul will not write one thing to one church and contradict it by writing something else to another church. In I Thessalonians 4:13-17 Paul says he does “not want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.” He does not comfort them and tell them not to grieve because the souls of loved ones are enjoying conscious bliss with the Lord in heaven. Rather he explains that “those who have fallen asleep” will be resurrected from the dead at the resurrection when the Lord returns. He states that “if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, *even so*, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” The popular belief is that those whom “God will bring with him” are the souls of those who have gone on to be with the Lord. Notice the words “*even so*”. This connects “if we believe that Jesus died and rose again” with “God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” That is, if we believe Jesus rose again, *even so*, in the very same way God brought him from the dead, He will bring with him (Christ) by resurrection, those who are asleep in Jesus. This interpretation is proven by noting that the term “*even so*” is used to mean “in the same way” in other passages: John 3:14: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *even so* must the Son of man be lifted up.” John 5:21: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, *even so* the Son also gives life to whom he wills.” Gal. 3:6: “*Even so* Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.” Rom. 6:11: “...the life he lives, he lives to God, *even so* consider yourselves to be dead unto sin but alive unto God.” I Thess. 4:17 states that when the Lord descends from heaven “then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always *be with the Lord*.” This expresses the fact that this is the way we get to be with the Lord, through resurrection at his appearing. Paul’s desire to depart and be with Christ (Phil:1:23) would be realized in resurrection.

Luke 23:43 “...I say unto you today you shall be with me in Paradise.” It seems the confusion of this passage is caused by the translators. The Greek text has basically no punctuation and it is a personal choice where the English translators put commas, paragraphs etc. Replacing the location of the comma in this passages gives it clarification. The passage can legitimately be translated: “Truly I say unto you today, you shall be with me in Paradise,” or “today (in your dying hour) I say unto you...” There are passages of Scripture when for added emphasis the speaker says “I say to you *today*” Deut. 30:18; “I declare to you *today*, you shall perish.” Jer. 42:21: “So, I have told you *today*, but you have not obeyed the Lord your God.” Acts 20:26: “Therefore I testify to you *this day* that I am innocent of the blood of all men.” On that day, in his dying hour, Jesus gave the thief assurance that he would be with him in Paradise, but he doesn’t say when. Simply by replacing the comma the sentence has an entirely different interpretation. This is no injustice to Scripture.