

LIFE IN ETERNITY

Questions that have plagued mankind throughout the ages are questions concerning what happens after death. King Solomon, after observing the cycles of life in Ecclesiastes 3:1-9, said God “has set eternity in their heart, without which man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end” (verse 11). It is interesting that God “has set eternity in their hearts.” What will happen in eternity (assuming man believes in a hereafter) is a question that has bewildered, perplexed and confused mankind as no other question man has faced. This unknown has given birth to endless speculations and theories that have left most people without any explanation or understanding of what eternity holds for the human race. The late Erich Sauer, noted German theologian, in his book *The King of the Earth* states: “Our human attempts to penetrate the secret of eternity leads us to two possibilities only, both of which embrace the whole entity of reality. The first possibility is the *nothingness* in which all earthly processes come to rest, the death of the universe, which is science’s last word about the future. A second possibility exists only in the universal resurrection message, which the messengers of the risen Lord have carried throughout the world, is in fact true. According to this message the world does not await nothingness. but the great transformation of the world.” It is in this sense we are using the phrase “life in eternity.” The Bible (NASV) uses the word “eternity” only four times in the Old Testament and two times in the New Testament. Ecclesiastes 3:11, noted above. Isaiah 43:13 God says “from all eternity I am He,” and Isaiah 45:17 says Israel will not be humiliated “to all eternity.” Micah 5:2 and II Peter 3:18 speaks of the “days of eternity” and II Timothy 1:9 states that “His purpose and grace was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.” All this means life in eternity cannot be comprehended and understood apart from “the spiritual.” I Corinthians 2: 14, 15: “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually examined. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is not examined.”

To borrow Erich Sauer’s statement “human attempts to penetrate the secret of eternity,” we list only a few efforts by the unspiritual: *New Ageism* “we become gods, God is in everything.” *The Occult* “the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them.” *Reincarnation* “being re-born after death into a different body.” *Witchcraft* “the use of supernatural power other than God.” *Satanism* “A substitution for God and His word.” *Angel mania* “Manipulating the spiritual for our own good. Making angels our spirit guides, mediators and personal guardians.” *Mysticism* “The belief that direct knowledge of God and spiritual truth can be attained through subjective experience.” *Extraterrestrial* “Existing or occurring outside the earth and its atmosphere...example UFO’s” Add to this “Ghosts, dreams, visions, psychic healing, clairvoyance, séances, Horoscopes, communicating with the dead and fortune telling.” It is not just the worldly attempts to explain the mysteries of the spirit realm; the religious attempts are just as confusing and perplexing as those of the world.

Two of the most confusing issues propagated by most of the religious world today, which becomes anathema to any interpretation differing from the traditional norm, is the immortality of the soul, and what happens at death. It was in the garden of Eden the immortality of the soul was introduced on the earth by the serpent assuring Eve that when God said by partaking of the forbidden fruit “You will die” He did not really mean what He said so “the serpent said to the woman. ‘You surely will not die!’” (Gen. 3:3, 4). Literally “dying you will not die.” The scripture teaches: “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20). “He poured out his soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12). “Who (God) alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen nor can see” (I Tim. 6:16). It is stated in I Corinthians 15:26 that death is an enemy, the last enemy to be abolished. Death takes away life, it does not give life. Life is in resurrection, not death. If the soul is immortal and lives on after death then the resurrection is of no value. Further if disembodied souls are able to live and enjoy the presence of God in heaven for eternity, then what is the need of a resurrection? Death and not resurrection becomes the hope of the Christian. Ever since the days of the early church the soul has been a matter of confusion and debate. In these days a heresy called Gnosticism had to be confronted by the Apostles. The Gnostics taught that the body was evil and resurrection simply a fantasy. To the Greeks the idea of a bodily resurrection was absurd. They called Paul a “babbler” (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 Scripture never speaks of a soul without a body. The soul has no independent existence. The Scriptures do not speak of an “immortal soul.”

What happens after death has also been a matter of great concern to the Christian. The belief of mainstream Christianity is stated well by Robert Hach in his book *Possession And Persuasion*: “If when one dies, one goes either to Heaven or to Hell, then the day of one’s death becomes the day of judgment, that is the instant one presumably meets one’s Maker. In which case, the second coming of Christ to raise the dead seems rather beside the point in that the dead have already ascended, or descended, to their eternal destinies. Christianity has replaced the present age and the age to come with Heaven and Hell. Salvation has been transformed from a *coming* to a *going*: the *coming* of the kingdom at the end of the age has been replaced by the *going* to Heaven (or to Hell) at the end of each individual life. The day of the judgment has been *updated* from the end of the age to the end of each life. The role of anticipation in Christian faith has largely been handed over to wild-eyed millenarian fundamentalists.” Every time Jesus and the Apostles speak of death they call it a “sleep.” The Old Testament when speaking of a person’s death always simply says “he died” or “he slept with his fathers.” In 52 scriptures God chose to use the expression “sleep” with reference to the death of man, both saved and lost: 41 passages in the Old Testament and 11 in the New Testament. All these passages refer to the whole person, and not just the

body, as being asleep in death, a sleep that continues until the day that Christ descends and with a shout, the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, awakens all (both the saved and lost). Note these Scriptures: Dan. 12:2: "And many of those who *sleep* in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt." Matt. 27:52: "and some tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints, who had *fallen asleep* were raised." Luke 8:52,53: "Now they were weeping and lamenting for her; but he said, 'stop weeping, for she has not died, but is *asleep*' and they began laughing at him, knowing that she had died." John 11:11-14: "Our friend Lazarus has *fallen asleep*; but I go that I may awaken him out of *sleep*." Acts 7:60 (Stoning of Steven) "And having said this, he fell *asleep*." I Cor. 15: ver. 6: "After that he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have *fallen asleep*." Ver. 18: "Then those also who have *fallen asleep* in Christ have perished." Ver. 20: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are *asleep*." Ver. 51: "Behold I show you a mystery, we shall not all *sleep* but we shall be changed." I Thess. 4:13: "We do not want you to be uniformed about those who are *asleep*." Ver. 15: "We who are alive and remain at the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have *fallen asleep*." II Peter 3:4: "Since the Fathers *fell asleep* all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." When these scriptures are rejected and it is insisted the soul continues to live wherever they are destined for eternity is the basis for the confusion and perplexity in the religious world concerning life in eternity.

Most of the religious world's focus is upon "heaven" and little attention is given to the earth. In fact they have given the earth a bad press. The Scripture has more to say about the earth than it says about heaven. Since "God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), and "the earth is the Lord's and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell it" (Ps. 24:1, 50:12, 89:11), and "the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3), we should accept what the Bible says about the earth if we can get our mind off of going to heaven for a while. Without going into detail about the reason God created the earth, let's say just as there is going to be a "new heaven" there is also going to be a new earth (Isa. 65:17, 66:22; II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1), and "as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Num. 14:21); further, "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). The common theme today is that this earth is going to be destroyed and for many Christians the sooner the better so we can go on to heaven. However, it is the worldly system, not the world, that is going to pass away (I John 2:15-17). After the flood God promised Noah: "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done *while the earth remains*, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease" (Gen.8:21). How long will the earth remain? Ecclesiastes 1:4: "A generation comes and a generation goes but *the earth remains forever*." Psalm 104:5: "He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it will not totter forever." Psalm 119:90: "Thou didst establish the earth, and it stands." If God's promise to Abraham was that he would be heir of the world (Rom. 4:13) and if "The meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5) it doesn't seem that the earth will be destroyed. Psalm 115:16 states: "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the sons of men."

When giving suffering Christians comfort Paul asserts: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Rom. 8:18-22). Not only did the sin of Adam bring a curse upon the whole human race, but the earth suffered a curse as well. Now the children of God are waiting eagerly for the redemption of their bodies (ver. 23) and the creation itself is also waiting to be redeemed (ver. 21, 22). Far from being destroyed the world is going to be redeemed when the curse is taken away. Just as we receive a new body at resurrection (Eph. 1:14; I Cor. 15:38-44) so we will inherit a renewed earth on which to dwell in that body. Not only is man redeemed from sin and death, the earth will be redeemed from the curse. It is in this redeemed earth, not in a city in the sky, that we will dwell in for eternity. It may come as a shock to those who seldom read the Bible, but nowhere does it say "we go to heaven" when we die, nor does it teach that a city beyond the blue is the destiny of the Christians in Eternity.

Two words in scripture (never mentioned by modern day preaching) help us to understand eternity: *restoration* and *regeneration*. Acts 3:21: "whom (Jesus) heaven must receive until the period of *restoration* of all things" and Matthew 19:28: "You who have followed me, in the *regeneration* when the son of man will sit on his glorious throne, you shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* defines "restoration" as "to bring back to a former state" and "regeneration" as "restoration of a thing to its pristine state." These two words are a commentary on Paul's statement in Romans 8:21: "the creation itself will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." The destiny of the Christian then is a renewed and redeemed earth, not a city in the sky. Romans 8:17 states: "we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ." This means whatever Christ inherits in eternity we will inherit the same thing. Whatever he does in eternity we will share it with him as a fellow heir. In Psalm 2 God declares He will install His king upon Zion and would "give him the nations as his inheritance and the very ends of the earth as his possession." The average sermon on the beatitudes speaks glibly on the phrase "the meek shall inherit the *earth*" (Matt. 5:5), then waxes eloquent on "mansions in the sky." Jesus is quoting Psalm 37, where inheriting the land (earth) is repeated six times. Jesus speaks of the reward of the faithful as receiving "authority over the nations and he shall rule them with a rod of iron" (Rev. 2:26, 27) and "he who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with me on my throne" (Rev. 3:21). Paul writes to the Corinthians and censures them for not knowing this: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels?" (I Cor. 6:2, 3). The judges in the book of Judges were administrators and governors, and "judging" is the function of a leader and king (Psalm 2:10, NASV margin). All this means that in eternity the saints will not be floating around on a cloud with a halo on their head and a harp in their hand. Paul is telling the Corinthians to get in some practice while they are living in this present world.