

# DEATH AND RESURRECTION

By

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“I’ll fly away, O glory, I’ll fly away. When I die, hallelujah by and by, I’ll fly away.

It is assumed by many Christians that when they die, they immediately go to heaven and live in the presence of the Lord. At funerals we may be told that the deceased person is not dead, but gloriously alive in heaven.

Ever since the Council of Nicaea in 325 the general teaching in the church has been that everyone has an immortal soul, which must continue in conscious existence after death. The Bible clearly says the very opposite, that Christ ONLY has immortality.

There are three passages of scripture that some think teach that there is a conscious state between death and resurrection. They are 2 Corinthians 5:8, Philippians 1:23 and Luke 23:43. Many Witness readers have inquired about the meaning of these verses.

Before looking at these scriptures, we need to see what the Bible says about death.

“For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything” (Eccles. 9:5).

The Psalmist wrote, “The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence” (Psalm 115:17 – compare Psalm 17:15).

“Put not your trust in Princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goes forth, he returns to this earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:3-4).

“A man that has lain down in death shall certainly not rise again until the heaven be dissolved, and they shall not awake from their sleep” (Job 14:12). “For if a man should die, shall he live again, having accomplished the days of his life? I will wait till I exist again. Then shall thou call and I will hearken to thee” (Job 14:12-14 – Cf. Job 19:25-27).

Scriptures do not contradict themselves. The question then is how do we reconcile these facts of death with what Paul writes and with what Jesus said in the passages mentioned above?

Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 5:8, that he is willing “to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord,” must be kept in context, rather than isolated as a proof text. Beginning in verse 4 of chapter 7, Paul writes of the threat of death, but is assured that God will raise him up (4:14). Then in 5:2 he writes, “For verily in this (earthly house) we groan, longing to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven.” “Clothed upon” is literally (Greek) “putting on over” and does not refer to any intermediate state,

but to the final transformation of the resurrection body. In verse 4 he writes, “We that are in this tabernacle do groan...not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be clothed upon, that what is mortal may be swallowed up of life.” In Romans 8:23 Paul explained what it is that he “groans” (sighs) for: “Even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” The plain sense of 2 Cor. 5:1-10 does not contradict what Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 15:18, where he said that if the dead are not raised, “Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished.” This scripture plainly says that at death life is totally absent until the day of resurrection.

If Paul’s hope was to be immediately present with the Lord at death, why did he tell others that their dead friends would have to wait until the resurrection to be with the Lord? “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left to the coming of the Lord shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

I must concur with F. F. Bruce that the interval between death and resurrection is not an interval in consciousness of the believer, no matter how long it might be measured chronologically.

Now to Philippians 1:23: “For I (Paul) am in a strait between the two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better.” The concern here is the same as in 2 Corinthians 5:8. Since Paul viewed death as sleep, and in total sleep there is not consciousness of time, the next thing that he would realize after death would be the presence of the Lord in resurrection. This is the hope he often emphasized, including Phil. 3:20-21.

It is significant that in none of these passages does the Apostle Paul say a word about going to heaven, as we so often hear today.

In Luke 23:43 is our Lord’s promise to the thief on the cross: “Verily I say unto thee today shall thou be with me in paradise.” The Greek word rendered “today” is *semeron*, which means “today” or “this day.” Since the word “that” is not in the text, *semeron* goes with the verb preceding it. Jesus actually said, “Verily I say unto thee this day, thou shall be with me in paradise.

There were no commas in the original [earliest manuscript – KF] text, and the translators in most versions have placed it to fit their traditional (faulty) concepts, however some versions have corrected this, placing the comma after “today.” *Seмерon*, “this day,” is used in Matthew 6:11 where it goes with the verb preceding it: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Similarly, in Luke 2:11 we read, “Unto you is born this day...a Savior.”

Neither Jesus nor the thief went to Paradise that day. Paradise existed in the Garden of Eden, and will not be restored until the ages of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 2:7,

21:1-22:5). Jesus was assuring the thief “this day” before he died that he would be with him in that future paradise. Jesus did not teach that He would go to paradise the day he died. He predicted that he would be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). The “heart of the earth” was Joseph’s new tomb (Matt. 27:60). In the meantime the thief would sleep the sleep of death until the resurrection.

Some scorn the use of the term “sleep,” saying that it is a doctrine of a cult. Before ridiculing this term you should remember that it is the term God has chosen to use some 50 times in the Bible in describing death, and specifically, saints “now sleeping” (1 Cor. 15:20) are called “asleep in Christ.” Jesus taught that the dead were asleep, not in paradise (Luke 8:52, John 11:11-14). There are some 25 passages that show that the first conscious moment after death, for every saint, will be on Resurrection Day.

Also, we should consider the fact that in death there is no consciousness of the passing of time. The very next event for those who fall “asleep in Christ” (to use Paul’s terminology) will be to awaken in the resurrection. This does away with the so-called “intermediate state” about which there has been so much speculation.

The idea of life continuing after one is dead (?) follows the pagan doctrine of natural immortality. This is the thing offered to Eve by the serpent in Eden: "You shall not surely die...you shall be as gods (or God)" (Gen. 3:4-5). One of Plato's successors was Plotinus, an Egyptian-born philosopher of Rome who lived from about 205-270 A.D. He had a great deal of influence on Christian leaders in Alexandria and Rome, promoting natural immortality.

Some may ask "What difference does it make?"

For one thing, we should believe truth, not Satan's lie.

For another, belief in natural immortality opens the door to grizzly ideas of hell or purgatory, of Valhalla, Elysium, the underworld, prayers to the dead, ghostly visits from the dead, reincarnation, and anxiety about dead loved ones. The biblical truth is that death is the loss or absence of life. The body returns to dust, while the "breath of life" or spirit returns to God who gave it. This breath of life is man's life-force, not a person or conscious entity.

Most importantly, Jesus did not teach immortality of the soul but resurrection of the dead. When Lazarus died, instead of saying that he was in heaven, Jesus plainly said that he was dead, and then proceeded to call him forth from the tomb; not from heaven.

After the crash of the World Trade towers, Billy Graham said to a national audience, "Many of those who died are in heaven now, and they don't want to come back; it is so glorious and wonderful:" Millions heard this statement – a statement that refutes the Christian hope. If those who die in Christ are already in heaven, enjoying a glorious life, then there is no resurrection, for resurrection is a resurrection from the dead.

The apostle Paul sums up the Christian hope: "Behold. I tell you a mystery; we all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible... For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labor is not vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:50-58).

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