

# After Death – What?

## The Bible's answer

THERE is no escaping the reality of death. When it comes suddenly, unexpectedly, as the result of an accident or heart attack, we are shaken; similarly when someone still in the prime of life dies of cancer or kidney failure. Such events are so common that we all experience them. We are overcome by the sense of our own helplessness: we cannot reverse what has happened. All human resources are powerless to restore a dead person to life. The grieving relative is not easily comforted.

How do people react to the fact of death? The young frankly do not treat the matter seriously. When they have the occasional shock of a friend is killed in a road accident, for example it is just bad luck. The tragedy is soon forgotten. The middle-aged do not care to contemplate death. It is too far off yet to seem a real danger: Better face it when it comes. Older people become more aware that here is a reality they will not escape. Their friends and relations pass off the scene. Failing eyesight and hearing, growing physical ailments remind them that the human frame eventually perishes.

### Survival?

Many people find some comfort in the idea of survival. A mysterious inner life called the soul is thought to pass out of the perishing body and to go to heaven, where the personality continues to live in bliss. This view is not so confidently or so widely held as once it was; it is now often more a pious hope than a strong conviction. And it is very vague, as is shown by the prayer uttered each Christmas Eve at the famous Lessons and Carols service in King's College, Cambridge. The leader prays that the congregation may be joined with those who rejoice with us, but on another shore and in a greater light – he means those who have died. If we were to ask, What is this greater light? Where is this other shore? we should be unlikely to get any very definite answers. The hope is vague.

The view which used to be held, as a necessary counterpart, that the souls of evil people go to hell, there to suffer torments, is now very generally abandoned, except for the Catholic Church, which maintains belief in hell, purgatory, limbo and paradise. It must be said that there is a certain lack of reason in the popular attitude here. For if the souls of the righteous go to heaven, where do the souls of the wicked go?

An increasing number of people today are frankly pessimistic. They accept the fact that death is the end of life. I shall soon be pushing up the daisies, as one acquaintance put it. The view has unfortunate consequences, for the person holding it is strongly tempted to argue that his life is all he has; it is his own to do as he pleases; and he may as well eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow he will die. This view of life has a serious effect upon the kind of life to be lived, which can become self-indulgent and self-centred, with the disastrous results for society which we are seeing today.

### Messages from the dead?

The inescapable fact is that since the dawn of history millions upon millions of human beings have lived, died, and been laid in the grave. If they have in fact survived in some new form,

would you not have expected to hear from them some word of consolation for the bereaved, some information about their state, or some warning for the living? *Yet we never hear anything from them.* Not a word. Is not this strange? And where are all these millions anyway?

There are people, called Spiritualists, who believe in survival and claim to receive messages from the dead. But thorough investigation will reveal how unconvincing the claims are. Years ago the present writer attended séances and read widely in the literature. The alleged messages from the dead were so trivial and commonplace as to require no "spirit" explanation. The descriptions of the after-life were filled with gardens, streams, fruit trees and sweet smelling flowers, enjoyed in blissful idleness. Quite clearly this is just an idealised picture of human longings. C. E. M. Joad, a serious investigator in psychical research, commenting upon the poor quality of alleged spirit communications, robustly declared: "It is evident that if our spirits survive, our brains certainly do not!"

Then there is "the pity of it". Men and women sometimes living worthy lives, humanly speaking, being helpful, kindly and intelligent; some even learned and expert in their field. Need all this just be lost for ever? Is there no way in which the life and character which is of *real* value can be preserved? Naturally this raises the question, What is real value? We shall come to that later.

#### **The vital question**

How do we settle this question about what happens after death? Where do we go for a thoroughly reliable and truthful answer?

Do we trust to our own feelings or "intuition"? How do we know we are right? How could we expect anyone else to accept our view *on our own authority*? How can any man or woman anywhere tell us the answer? How do *they* know, anyway? Do we accept the views of religious leaders, either of individuals or of Councils or Synods? How do *they* know? And what are we to think when prominent religious leaders are seen to be divided among themselves on important issues? One prominent bishop has declared that Christ did not literally rise from the dead; others declare the Resurrection to be one of the foundations of the Christian faith. Who are we to believe "and why"?

These questions, when sincerely faced, lead us to this inescapable conclusion: the opinion of one human mind is, *of itself*, of no more value than that of any other. In other words, *human thinking cannot give us the answer.*

From this a very important conclusion emerges: since no human mind can pronounce with authority on what happens after death, then clearly we need an authority coming from outside and above mankind "that is a *superhuman* authority.

#### **The answer**

Such an authority exists among us. It is the Bible which from first to last declares that it is a message to the human race from God "the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and of mankind.

The Bible writers never claim to speak on their own authority, but only "the word of the Lord". "I have put my words in thy mouth", as God said to the prophet Jeremiah (1:9). Jesus

accepted the writings of the law and the prophets (our Old Testament) as the word of God. He himself declared that the words he spoke were God's words. The apostles said the same thing: Paul declared that all scripture is given by inspiration of God and used a term which means "God-breathed". The "breath" (or Spirit) of God is in what is written, and so what the scriptures say is truth. The earliest believers in Christ, from those who knew the apostles personally, accepted the Old and New Testaments as the true and reliable word of God. For centuries the teaching of the Bible has been the foundation for Christian belief.

Just think what the Bible does. It records how the human race came into being and it explains in clear terms why there is evil, suffering and death in the world. It tells us positively what happens after death. And it also reveals the new kind of life which can be ours, if we will only pay attention to its message.

There is no other book in the world which does all this. In fact there is no book anywhere which shows so many signs of being produced not by human minds, but by the mind of God. Over 100 years ago Henry Rogers wrote a remarkable book entitled *The Superhuman Origin of the Bible Deduced from Itself*. He declared: "The Bible is not such a book as man would have written if he could, nor could have written if he would." The reason is that it is a message to us from God. That is why it deserves our sincere attention.

### **The Bible and us**

It is most important that we should understand what the Bible has to say about us, our origin and our nature. It is the only authoritative account anywhere of how we came to exist.

The book of Genesis is about our origin. It tells us clearly that man was a *created* being: that is, he depended upon a Creator for his very life. He was not responsible for his own origin. This is how it happened:

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7)

Notice man's lowly origin: from the ground. Genesis tells us also (at 6:17 and 7:22) that the animals too share "the breath of life" with mankind. But it is the expression "a living soul" which claims our attention and teaches us the first and essential condition for understanding the Bible: we must understand Bible terms in its own sense, and *not in ours*. Now to many people "the soul" suggests some spirit within man which "survives the death of the body". But that is not at all how it is used in Genesis, where the word translated "soul" is used of the animals as well. In Genesis 1:21,24 it is translated "living creature". The Revised Standard Version (RSV) renders "living soul" as "living being". So does the New International Version (NIV). The New English Bible (NEB) has "a living creature".

The conclusion is clear: Genesis is telling us that by origin and nature man was created a living being. Of course, he has greater powers of mind than have the animals, but basically his nature is the same as theirs.

### **The coming of death**

The question as to how man's life might come to an end is treated very early in Genesis. Adam was told by God that if he disobeyed the commandment he had received, he would die. He did disobey, and this is the judgement which was pronounced upon him:

“in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, *till thou return unto the ground*; for out of it wast thou taken: *for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.*” (3:19)

The record is devastatingly simple: death is not a door opening to a new life ó it is a judgement for disobedience. Man returns to the ground. So in the Genesis record of the Flood, when “the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence í for all flesh had corrupted his (God's) way upon the earth” (6:11,12), the waters of judgement came, and men and animals perished in the same way:

“All flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast í *and every man*: all in whose nostrils was the breath of life í died.” (7:21,22)

### **Man and animals**

The Bible frequently compares the nature of man to that of the animals. The Psalmist declares, speaking of both:

“Thou (God) takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust.” (104:29)

The writer of Ecclesiastes is quite categorical: he desires men to see ó

“that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath í All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.” (3:18-20)

Men and animals have by nature the same fate: they all return to the ground. Some may object that the next verse gives a different sense, but all modern versions (RV, RSV, NIV, NEB) put it thus:

“Who knows *whether* the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?” (verse 21)

That is, who can tell whether there is any difference? Incidentally, the word translated “spirit” here is the very same as is rendered “breath” in verse 19; which shows that “spirit” here is *the life* resulting from breathing. It ceases when breathing stops.

So the “soul” can die. The Psalmist, speaking of the judgement God brought upon the proud Egyptians by the ten plagues, says: “He (God) spared not their soul from death”; and then immediately adds: “and gave their life over to the pestilence” (Psalm 78:50), showing that the soul and the life are the same thing.

Twice God declares through Ezekiel: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:3,20). Samson, in his final appeal to God, prays: “Let me die with the Philistines” (Judges 16:30). But the margin of the AV shows that what Samson literally said was: “Let *my soul die* í ”

The soul then, is the person, the living being. When he perishes, the soul, or life, perishes with him.

### **Man in God's image**

Does this mean that men are no better than the animals? Not quite that, for Genesis 1:26 tells us that man was made *in the image* of God. In other words, the physical nature of mankind is just like that of the animals; but man has a superior mind, capable of understanding and responding to God. The Psalmist has this most valuable comment:

*Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.* (Psalm 49:20)

So it is *understanding* which can make the difference between a man and the animals. When we ask, *Understanding what?*, then the New Testament comes powerfully to our aid, as we shall see.

In view of the Biblical evidence so far reviewed, it is no surprise to learn that the dead rest, completely unconscious in the grave. Do not trust in princes or in man, says the Psalmist, for

*his breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.* (Psalm 146:4)

David prays that God will deliver him, for

*in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?* (Psalm 6:5)

Psalm 115 says the same:

*The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence.* (verse 17)

The writer of Ecclesiastes is most emphatic:

*For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.* (9:5-10)

The place of the dead is consistently described in these emphatic passages as *in his earth* (the dust of the ground from which man was made), *in the grave* and *in silence*.

### **The sleep of death**

Daniel has a remarkable statement on this subject. It is especially significant because of the use made of the same idea in the New Testament. His prophecy contains this reference to events in *the last days*, when God will show His power once more in the earth, at *a time of trouble* such as never was:

“Many of them that *sleep in the dust of the earth* shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:1,2)

Now that this statement refers in part to the faithful servants of God is clear from the assurance that they will receive “everlasting life.” But look where they are until they receive this reward: they sleep “in the dust of the earth”, a testimony entirely consistent with all we have seen so far.

At this point some readers may say: “So far you have been quoting the Old Testament. Surely the New Testament is a new revelation of Jesus and the Gospel? Does it not say something quite different?”

### **Jesus, the apostles and the Old Testament**

To answer this question it is essential to understand what was the attitude of Jesus, and the apostles after him, to the writings now known as the Old Testament. The facts are clear and beyond question: they all accepted “the law, the psalms and the prophets”, as the inspired word of God. They quote from them constantly in support of their preaching; they never contradict or cast doubt upon any Old Testament passage, but rather seek to draw out the true significance of what was written. You would thus expect the New Testament writings to agree in their teaching with the Old, and so it proves. Here are a few examples.

There had been a tragedy in Galilee. Roman soldiers had killed a number of Jews in a religious riot. Some Jews came to Jesus to tell him of it. His response is very significant. Do you think, he asked, that those Galileans who died were greater sinners than all the other inhabitants of Galilee, because they suffered such a fate? Not at all, he said, but I tell you this:

“Except ye repent, ye shall *all* likewise *perish*.” (Luke 13:1-3)

Now “to perish” in the Bible means just what it means to us: to cease to exist with no suggestion of survival. There is no escaping the teaching of Jesus here: all mankind will perish, *unless they repent*. This is just like Psalm 49: man is like the beasts that perish, *unless he understands*. Here we have the first hint of the answer to our question, “Understand what?” It has evidently something to do with repentance.

Jesus also agreed with Daniel, who had declared that “many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” (12:2). This is how John’s Gospel records his saying:

“The hour is coming, in the which all that are *in the graves* shall hear his (Jesus’) voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation (condemnation).” (John 5:28,29)

(Jesus’ “all” is the same as Daniel’s “many”: it is all who during their lifetime have “heard the voice of the Son of God”, verse 25.)

Look where the dead are: “in the graves” (“sleep in the dust of the earth”, Daniel); they “come forth” by resurrection (“they awake”, Daniel); they come forth either to life or to judgement. The harmony between Jesus and Daniel is complete; the Lord is endorsing the teaching of the Old Testament on this important matter of the place, the state, and the fate of the dead.

The apostles uphold the same teaching. John, in the best-known verse of the New Testament, declares:

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, *should not perish*, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

The words we have emphasised are frequently ignored, but there is no escaping the verdict that those who do *not* “believe in” Jesus (in the way the scriptures explain) will *perish*, that is cease to exist.

The Apostle Paul has the same message. Writing to the believers in Ephesus, he tells them that before they came to know and believe in Christ, they were “without Christ” – having no hope, and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). This is a shattering saying. It tells us plainly that if we are not related to God through Christ, in the way He requires, we are “without hope”. How precious must be that “understanding” which can save us from such a fate!

James tells his readers not to make too confident assertions of what they will do at some future time. You never know what will happen tomorrow, he says; and then adds:

“What is your life? For ye are a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” (James 4:14, RV)

The RSV and the NIV have: “You are a mist that appears” – and then vanishes.”

Daniel’s description of the dead as “sleeping” in the grave is reproduced by the Apostle Paul. The believers at Thessalonica were mourning the death of some who had believed in Christ:

“I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are *asleep* (he means in death), that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” – For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven” – with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise” – (1 Thessalonians 4:13,16)

Notice what this passage is saying: the faithful believers who have died are “asleep”; those who do not believe have “no hope”; Christ personally (note “*himself*”) will descend from heaven; and the faithful dead will rise “of course” from the grave of course. Here are basic teachings which are found throughout the New Testament. They are foundation truths of the Gospel.

### **The resurrection of the dead**

It has always been hard for those who believe in survival after death by some immortal soul or spirit, to explain why the New Testament lays such great emphasis upon the resurrection of the dead.

That it does so is beyond question. Jesus assumes that it is true, in telling the Jews not merely to invite their rich neighbours to a banquet, hoping to get a return invitation, but to invite those in need, and “thou shalt be recompensed *at the resurrection of the just*” (Luke 14:14). The faithful dead are to be raised from their graves; that is when they will receive their reward.

The Apostle Paul devotes a whole chapter to asserting that the dead will rise. He makes a special point of arguing that if Christ did not rise from the dead, then no one else can either. In that case, "they also which are *fallen asleep* in Christ have perished" (1 Corinthians 15:18, RV). (Note the implication here: if in this case even the believers in Christ have "perished", how much more those who have not believed!)

But there is no doubt about it, says Paul: Christ *did* rise from the dead (see his impressive list of actual witnesses in verses 3-8 of this chapter); and so Christ has "become the firstfruits of them that *are asleep*" (verse 21, RV). Twice within three verses Paul has described the dead as "asleep". Such is his agreement with Daniel.

In the remainder of this chapter Paul declares that for the faithful dead there is to be, after their resurrection, a change of nature: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Our present nature is mortal and corruptible; but when the dead are raised, they are to be *changed*: for *this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality*". This is the way "death is swallowed up in victory" (verses 50-54).

So we arrive at the clear Bible truth that the reward of the righteous does not consist of some "spirit existence" somewhere; it will be the granting of an incorruptible body, one that will not waste away and perish as our present one does, but will no longer be subject to death. The reason is remarkable: God has a work for the faithful to do in the future. Those who are granted resurrection from the grave will move about in the world as real, tangible people, engaged in the practical task of enlightening the nations of the world in the truths of God which they have either ignored or perverted for so many centuries. This will be the purpose of the rule of Christ over the nations when he returns, as the Bible says he will.

"But ...?"

But are there not some passages in the New Testament which support the idea of survival after death? There are a very few passages sometimes quoted in this way. But when they are carefully examined, they will be found to be in harmony with the teaching of the Bible as a whole. We treat here some of the better known ones.

**HELL:** In the Old Testament the word translated "hell" means no more than a concealed or covered place. Translated as "hell" 31 times, it is also rendered "grave" 31 times, in passages like these:

(Jacob, mourning the loss of his son Joseph): "I will go down into *the grave* unto my son mourning" (Genesis 37:35).

"In *the grave* who shall give thee (God) thanks?" (Psalm 6:5).

"There is no work nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in *the grave*, whither thou goest" (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

Hence the prophecy about Christ: "Thou (God) wilt not leave my soul in hell", means quite simply that God would not leave his life, or himself, in the grave, as is shown by the rest of the verse: "neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One *to see corruption*" (Psalm 16:10).



In the New Testament this passage is quoted by the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:27,31). He uses the Greek term usually translated *ōhellō*, showing that he understood it in the same way as the Psalm.

**GEHENNA:** There is, however, in the New Testament another and very interesting word translated *ōhellō*, represented in English as *ōGehennaō*. This was the name of a place just outside the city of Jerusalem. The following explanation from Grimm-Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* is very helpful:

*ōGehenna:* ἰ the valley of lamentation ἰ is the name of a valley to the South and East of Jerusalem, so called from the cries of little children, thrown into the fiery arms of Molech, an idol having the form of a bull. The Jews so abhorred the place after these horrible sacrifices had been abolished by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10) that they cast into it not only all manner of refuse, but even the dead bodies of animals and of unburied criminals who had been executed. Since fires were always needed to consume the dead bodies, that the air might not become tainted by the putrefaction, it came to pass that the place was called ἰGehenna of fireἰ

Now Gehenna is used 12 times in the New Testament, 11 of them by Jesus himself. Here is one case:

*ōIf thine eye offend thee (cause thee to stumble, RV), pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell (Gehenna) fire: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.ö (see the whole passage, Mark 9:43-48)*

Jesus' meaning is this: If there is anything you are doing with your hand, anywhere you are going with your feet, anything you are seeing with your eyes, which is preventing you from entering the kingdom of God, then stop doing it; for otherwise you will end up being destroyed with the wicked in death. The worm and the fire are symbolic agents of destruction. They are not everlasting, but they continue their work till all is consumed. So Gehenna becomes a type of the judgement upon the wicked in the last day.

All other uses of Gehenna will be found to contain the same idea.

**THE SOUL:** The Old Testament passages already considered have shown that the *ōsoulō* means *ōthe personō* and his *ōlifeō*. It can sin and it can die.

The word so translated in the New Testament is used about 100 times. It is rendered *ōsoulō* 58 times, *ōlifeō* 40, and *ōmindō* 3. One of the sayings of Jesus is significant. Having told his disciples that anyone who desires to be one of his true servants must *ōdeny himself, and take up his cross, and follow meō*, he goes on:

*ōFor whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"(Matthew 16:25,26)*

The English reader would think two different words were being used here, *ōlifeō* and *ōsoulō*. Yet it is the same original word throughout, a fact which the RV and the RSV versions recognise by translating *ōlifeō* in all four cases.

Another passage often quoted is: "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" – This sounds very impressive, but the second part of the verse says: "but rather fear him (that is, God) which is able to *destroy* both *soul* and body in hell" (Gehenna – Matthew 10:28).

So the soul can be destroyed. Jesus' meaning is not hard to follow: If a faithful servant is put to death, he will get his life (or soul) back at the resurrection of the dead, as we have seen. But the unfaithful servant will be totally destroyed in death, in the judgement symbolised by Gehenna. His "soul", or life, will perish with him.

**THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS:** If the reader is not familiar with this passage (Luke 16:19-31), he is recommended at this point to study it carefully.

Lazarus, the beggar, dies and is "carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom". The rich man dies, but when he is "in hell" – in torments, he can see "afar off" Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus, "that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue" – But the request is rejected – the former rich man must suffer his punishment. Besides, says Abraham, "between us and you there is a great gulf fixed", so that no passing over from one place to the other is possible. The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers, lest they suffer the same fate as he has done. This request too is rejected, in terms we shall consider further in a moment.

Now there are certain features of this narrative which make it impossible to take it literally. Abraham's bosom as the place of the righteous after death; the conversation between Abraham in bliss and the rich man "in hell"; the idea that one might be sent with water from the one place to the other – to cool the tongue of a sufferer. The conviction that this is not a literal account of the states of the dead, but a kind of parable, or symbolic narrative, becomes a certainty when it is realised that all these details were part of the tradition of the Pharisees at the time, as Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, shows in his *Discourse Concerning Hades*. So Jesus was employing some of his opponents' own ideas to confound them.

But it is in the last few verses of the passage that Jesus' real point emerges. When the rich man requests Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, Abraham replies: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." When the rich man says, "Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent", Abraham replies: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Within a short time this saying was strikingly fulfilled. Jesus raised Lazarus – the real Lazarus – the brother of Martha and Mary, from the dead. The miracle created a sensation among the people, but far from "being persuaded", the leaders of the Jews were only the more resolved to kill him. Very shortly after that, Jesus himself rose from the dead. Despite the powerful evidence of witnesses, the Jewish authorities were determined to deny his resurrection and to reject his claim to be the Son of God. They had not really accepted the teaching of their own scriptures, "Moses and the prophets", and they would not accept the claims of Jesus to be the expected Messiah.

This was the whole point of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. It perfectly conveyed the point Jesus wanted to make. It has nothing to teach us about the state of the dead. For that we must go to the evidence of the Bible as a whole.

**THE THIEF ON THE CROSS:** Luke 23:39-43 contains the account. Jesus hangs on the cross. One of the two thieves, crucified with him, confesses that he is being "justly condemned," but "this man (Jesus) hath done nothing amiss." Then, turning to Jesus, he says,

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." (verse 42)

This is an astonishing request. Look what it implies:

1. that to the thief Jesus was "Lord";
2. that the thief expected Jesus to survive the crucifixion;
3. that at some future time, Jesus would be "coming into his kingdom";
4. that *at that time* Jesus would be able to "remember him" and to restore him to life.

All these assumptions agree entirely with what the New Testament teaches. Now look at Jesus' reply:

“VERILY I SAY UNTO THEE TODAY THOU SHALT BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.”

Now that is just how the Greek letters appear in the oldest manuscripts: they are all capitals; the words are not separated; and there is no punctuation. So how do you understand Jesus' answer? Is it,

"Verily, I say unto thee, *Today thou shalt be* with me in paradise?"

Or is it,

"Verily, *I say unto thee today*, Thou shalt be with me in paradise?"

It makes all the difference in the understanding of Jesus' promise. How are we to decide? Grammatically either sense is possible. *Semeron* (today) may be taken either with the first verb, or the second. But there are other considerations.

1. Jesus was using a familiar Hebrew form of statement commonly found in the Old Testament. Here are three examples from one chapter (Deuteronomy 4:26,39,40):  
"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart: Thou shalt keep (God's) commandments, which I command thee this day."  
To declare something "this day" (or today), was a form of solemn statement with full assurance of truth. Similar expressions occur 42 times in the book of Deuteronomy alone. So Jesus was using a well known Hebrew form to underline the seriousness of his words, "I say unto thee today." The thief could be assured that what Jesus promised would indeed come to pass.
2. Where was Jesus "that day" anyway? Not in glory, in heaven. He was *in the tomb*. As he prophesied himself to the scribes and Pharisees: "The Son of man (shall) be three days and three nights *in the heart of the earth*" (Matthew 12:40). "Heart" is a Hebrew idiom for "midst"; he meant he would be in the grave.
3. What are we to understand by "paradise"? Once again we must be careful to get our understanding from the Bible itself, not from human traditions. The word was originally Persian and in the Old Testament is translated forest, orchards, and gardens.

Isaiah declares that when the time comes for the Lord to comfort Zion, He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the *garden* of the Lord (51:3).

The Greek translators of the Old Testament (about 200 years before Christ) rendered the Hebrew *garden* here by *paradeisos*, the word used by Jesus in his reply to the thief. Now the reference in the Isaiah prophecy is to the prosperity and fertility of the Land of Promise, the land occupied by Israel in the years before Christ. So *paradise* stands in the Bible for the new kingdom of peace and joy which Christ will establish when he returns to the earth, when he comes in his kingdom, as the thief believed he would. Thus understood, the passage owes nothing to Greek legends, but is quite consistent with the teaching of the whole Bible.

The small number of other passages which are sometimes brought forward to support the idea of survival of the soul after death will also be found, on careful examination, to be quite consistent with the rest of scripture.

#### Why so widespread?

The question may well be asked, If the survival of some soul or spirit after death is not taught in the Bible, how has it become so widely believed among religious people?

The explanation is simple. Some such idea of survival was common in all the pagan religions of antiquity, in all nations. It represented a common longing of the human mind. It was a distinctive mark of early Christianity that it rejected this false belief. The first Christians understood the perishing nature of mankind. They looked for the new life, promised through the Gospel, not at death but at the return of Christ when the faithful dead would rise from their graves. As time went on, however, mass conversions of formerly pagan nations occurred in the Roman world. Inevitably many converts brought their pagan notions with them. Further, the leaders of the Christian Church tried to make its teaching harmonise with the ideas of the philosophers, derived from Greek sources. The immortality of the soul was common among them.

But wherever there has been a serious attempt to discover what the Bible is really saying, there has been also a return to the beliefs of the early Christians. Such a return occurred during the Reformation in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The truth has been acknowledged openly in more recent times by distinguished theologians. Look at these quotations:

In 1897, B. F. Westcott, Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, commenting on 2 Timothy 1:10, wrote:

The central fact of our creed is *not the immortality of the soul*, but the resurrection of the body. Our Saviour brought life and *incorruption* (not immortality) to light. Bearing this truth in mind, we can see the force of Paul's words: "The Lord Jesus shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation" (Phil. 3:21, R.V.). See *Some Lessons of the Revised Version of the New Testament*, page 192.

In 1924, Bishop Gore (of London) wrote:

“I think it that, in the doctrine of human nature, the proposition that the soul of man is in its essence incorruptible, and so necessarily immortal is derived from Greek philosophy and not from scripture.” *The Holy Spirit and the Church*, page 288, footnote.

Appalled at the spread of irreligion in the war years, the Church of England set up a Commission under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Rochester. Members of many religious communities took part. The report, *Towards the Conversion of England*, published in 1945, contains this paragraph:

“The idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, and not to Bible sources. The central theme of the New Testament is eternal life, not for anybody and everybody, but for believers in Christ as risen from the dead.” page 23.

(The italics in these quotations are the present writer’s.)

These are remarkable declarations indeed. All that we have been finding in scripture is here confirmed. Men and women do not automatically survive death. By nature they perish in the grave. Those who are to attain to eternal life will do so as a result of resurrection from the grave at the coming of Christ.

#### **The vital message**

From our brief review of the teaching of the Bible on this important subject one thing becomes clear: the message it contains is vital to us all, for if we take no notice of it, we shall perish. That is why its message is called “the Gospel”, that is “the good news”. Just how essential it is Paul showed in reminding his readers in Corinth of

“the gospel which I preached unto you by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you” (1 Corinthians 15:1,2)

To the Romans he wrote:

“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Romans 1:16)

How much our perishing race needs this “good news”! What a marvellous thing it is that this message of life still exists among us, for here it is, in the pages of the Bible, in the very words of Jesus and his apostles. Let us make it our aim to get to know this “word of life” while we still have the opportunity, for our very future is at stake.

By Fred Pearce

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