

“If a man dies, will he live again?”

(Job 14:14)

“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13).

The death of a loved one is a great trial of our faith. Such a trial not only tests our faith but, by God’s grace, it can strengthen and sustain it. At such a time when one’s heart is burdened by sorrow, the words of man, no matter how sincere and tenderly expressed, seem shallow. It is then that our Lord proves He is not only “acquainted with grief,” but also that “our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried” (Isaiah 53:3, 4). It is then that His name, Emmanuel (God With Us), becomes a comforting reality.

The fear of death is normal and instinctive, added to which is the natural fear of the unknown. And death to us who are alive is unknown, but it is not unknown to our Lord! When our sight is dimmed by tears, we can place our hands in His. As He leads and guides us, we are comforted by the words of the psalmist, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

There is a great distinction between natural sorrow and hopeless grief. The instructed child of God may sorrow, but he does not grieve. He does not grieve because he has the assurance that the Lord Jesus Christ has borne his griefs. He may sorrow greatly, but even that is different from the intense and long-continued suffering of grief. He sorrows not “as the rest who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). When he understands what the Scriptures teach about the dead in Christ, he is able to realize that he sorrows for himself and not, perhaps, so much for his departed loved one. Realizing this he can avail himself of the healing balm which our Lord’s presence provides. Thus the Homegoing of a loved one will not only test our faith, it can strengthen it.

When Does Eternal Life Begin?

In order for us to understand what the Scriptures teach about death, there is a simple elementary truth about eternal life that must be recognized and emphasized. The truth is self-evident; namely, eternal life does not begin when we die, nor does it begin at our resurrection. Eternal life begins the moment we accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).

This is simply elementary truth. Eternal life is not only for the future after our earthly pilgrimage is finished; it is also the immediate temporal possession of the

believer. With this truth in mind, it will help our understanding to distinguish between three different facets of eternal life. We can describe them by comparing the adjectives: *good, better, best*.

Here on earth our present life in the Lord Jesus Christ is essentially the *good* life. We describe it this way in spite of the fact that each of us goes through periods of trial and tribulation. Even these periods are not only eased but sanctified by our Lord Who said: “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33b). During the present facet of eternal life, even great tribulation is beneficial:

“And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

This facet of eternal life is so *good* that many fear to go through the valley of the shadow of death even though that is the *better* facet of eternal life.

The Good, Better & Best of Eternal Life

This second facet of eternal life is the blessed existence of “the dead in Christ.” Of this facet we shall use the Scriptural term *better* – “to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (Philippians 1:23b). This facet is not merely better, it is “*very much better,*” but *very much better* is not the *best*. When a loved one dies in the Lord, his body is buried, but his soul and spirit are with the Lord. In other words, he and his body are separate. Theologians define this as “the disembodied state of the soul.” This separation will not always be! Our faith in the Lord Jesus embraces not merely the eternity of the soul (paganism also does that); it promises the resurrection of the body. This is the *best!*

“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.” The New Testament describes their glory as being “with Christ.” Before the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord, the Old Testament had a term that was frequently used to describe this state of the righteous dead, namely, “gathered to his people.”

“Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre” (Genesis 25:8,9).

Observe carefully how simple and clear are the statements:

1. Abraham breathed his last and died.
2. He was *gathered* to his people.
3. He was buried.

A casual reader might equate Abraham’s being “gathered to his people” with his burial, but this would not be true. Abraham’s people were buried in Chaldea; Abraham was buried more than 500 miles away. Abraham was not buried with his people and therefore the term “gathered to his people” does not mean that he was buried.

Our Lord Explains the Meaning of “After Death”

Concerning the gathering or assembling after death of the souls of Old Testament believers, we have a statement of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself which not only explains but clarifies the condition of the departed dead both saved and unsaved.

In Luke 16, our Lord tells of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. The beggar died and was carried into Abraham’s bosom. The rich man died and his body was buried. He found himself in hell (Greek, *hades*; Hebrew, *she’ol*). Since his body was buried, he was now in a disembodied state. Even though he was apart from the body, he was in a place of torment. He was not there because he was rich. Abraham was also rich, but Abraham accepted God’s righteousness by faith. Evidently this man had trusted in his riches.

He looked up and saw Abraham afar off and the beggar Lazarus in his bosom. All three were in *hades*, but Lazarus and Abraham were in a separate place from the rich man. Abraham and Lazarus were in a place of rest and comfort. The rich man was in a condition of torment. They were separated from each other by a great gulf.

Since Abraham’s body had been buried in the Cave of Machpelah, and he is now seen in *hades*, therefore he was apart from his body. When Abraham was “gathered unto his people,” he survived the death of his body and was gathered or assembled with the souls of other righteous people.

Where Is Hades Located?

With reference to the location of *hades*, our Lord said:

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights *in the heart of the earth*” (Matthew 12:40).

Concerning this experience of the Messiah, the psalmist prophesied: “For You will not abandon my

soul to she’ol” (Psalm 16:10). When our Lord said He would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, He did *not* refer to His burial. He was buried in a tomb, not under the surface of the earth, but on it. He was placed in a rock-hewn tomb (Matthew 27:60).

The Apostle Peter clarifies this when, on the Day of Pentecost, he refers to Psalm 16:

“For David says of Him ... Because You will not abandon My soul to *hades*, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay” (Acts 2:25, 27).

Putting these verses together, we can come to only one conclusion; namely, that our Lord taught that the place of the departed dead, *hades*, was “in the heart of the earth.”

When our Saviour rose from the dead, it is evident that He took with Him up to heaven the souls of those who, though they had dwelt in that part of *hades* called Abraham’s bosom and Paradise, were nevertheless captives of death.

“Therefore it says, ‘When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives’” (Ephesians 4:8).

From whence did He lead them? The answer is found in the next verses which are parenthetical.

“(Now this expression, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things)” (Ephesians 4:9, 10).

Our Lord descended “into the heart of the earth.” From *hades* He took up those who had been the captives of death, such as Abraham and all of the Old Testament righteous ones who believed God’s promises concerning the coming of the Messiah. They believed God and, like Abraham, their “faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:5). So much for those who were “gathered unto his people.” They are now located in the same place where those blessed ones are who died in Christ.



What Is the Meaning of “Absent from the Body?”

The Christian who dies is described as “dead in Christ” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). As Christ rose from the dead, the one who dies now lives in Him. At death, the believer as a personal soul goes out of the body. “Absent from the body,” this is the secret of death. “The body without the spirit is dead” (James 2:26a). In Scriptures, the body is compared to “an earthly house,” “a tent,” “a tabernacle.” Just as a tenant is a distinct entity from a house, a tent or a tabernacle, so is the soul of a believer distinct from his body. The body is said to be the clothing of the soul,

“For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked ... because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed” (2 Corinthians 5:2-4).

When the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ dies, at the same time he is taken from the body, he departs to be with Christ.

“We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Wipe your tear-filled eyes, you who sorrow. Your loved one is *with the Lord!* If we had only these three words for comfort, what light they shed upon the believer’s life beyond the grave! Just before our Lord went to Calvary, He told His disciples that He was going to heaven to prepare a home for them. He said:

“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2).



Our Lord Has Prepared a “City” for His Own

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that the place our Lord has prepared for His own is a city. “He has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16). He also tells us the foundation of the city, a “... city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). The Apostle John gives us a fuller description. It is a city with a jasper wall, gates of pearl, streets of transparent gold, a city where there is no night (Revelation 21:18, 21, 25). To be *with Christ* is to be with Him in that city.

There are many questions we ask as we lay the body of a loved one at rest. For some of the answers we must wait, but there is enough divine revelation to provide abundant comfort. Our loved ones are at home with the Lord. Some details about that home have not been revealed in the Scriptures, but we do know that that home has been prepared especially by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself for His beloved. “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). He Who made the world in six days has now had 1,900 years to prepare this home. This we know: they are at rest and they are in His presence.

“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him. For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10).

The departed dead are conscious. Abraham had conversation with the rich man. We have good reason to believe that “the dead in Christ” are intensely interested in their loved ones on earth. Certainly the unrighteous rich man was interested, for he said to Abraham:

“Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment” (Luke 16:27-28).

To show that the dead in Christ are aware of events on earth and retain their interest in earthly affairs, we refer to Revelation 6:10.

“And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”

If we could only realize the blessedness of those who die in the Lord, we would also realize that to wish them back here on earth is not a sign of love for them, it is utter selfishness on our part.

The Lord Jesus Had a Body – So Shall We

Their condition is *far better*, but it is not the best. They are now clothed in white robes, but they are still disembodied. A human being needs to be embodied. The *best* way to be embodied is to have a body like the Lord Jesus Christ. Such is the promise of the Lord for all who put their trust in Him. It will take place at our Lord’s Coming and at that time He will raise the bodies of the believers. It will be the same body, but with splendid additions; it will be glorified and immortal.

“We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

“We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

This is that blessed hope – we shall see Him, we shall be like Him, just as our loved ones who are “dead in Christ” shall see Him and be like Him. “Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

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The Dead in Christ

by Dr. Daniel Fuchs

After death, what can we anticipate?



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