

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

PART VI



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Question #16 - *“Does the spirit leave the body at the time of death? Then Jesus comes at the end of time and takes the soul home to heaven.”*

In our last segment we talked about the fact our mind and spirit, upon death, not only leaves this physical body which is currently a part of us, but it never returns. Contrary to classical human thought, this also leaves us with no ability to interact with, and in this physical universe. Thus, we cannot get back to this world from some other realm, and we are not going to be able to look down on it from above or the like. This, in no small part, is because our physical form is what also connects us to time itself as God created it for this universe. All this brings us to more of the heart of the question about where do we go after death, and that is what we are going to discuss in this segment of “A Matter Of Life And Death.”

In truth, the Bible tells us there are only three places in existence where we can reside, aside from the fact we will all stand directly in the presence of God on Judgment Day. Those places are: here in this universe where we were created to be; the place Jesus said He was going to prepare for those who want to be eternally with God; and the place we

most often simply refer to as “hell.” Now, there are a couple of stories in the Bible, people like to point to, which they feel muddies the water a bit on this point, but I disagree.

The first story is truly that - a story. One day as Jesus walked this earth, He told a story about a rich man and a poor beggar. The beggar was sick and lay at the gate of the rich man's estate, hoping he could get some assistance from just what the rich man threw out, but the rich man cared not for anyone. When the rich man dies he goes to a place of torment, which can certainly be called hell. The poor man also dies; and in the story, the rich man can see the poor beggar on the other side of a great divide, in a place which is termed “Abraham's bosom.” This is a place of comfort, and many would simply call this heaven. The story tells us, being in these places of comfort and suffering are truly a reverse from the way these two men had been in life. Thus, the rich man asks if it is possible for the beggar to give him some water, even if it's just the wetting of his finger touched to the rich man's tongue. The rich man goes on to also request that the beggar go back to earth and warn the rich man's relatives they need to change so they do not come to this same place he is in. Neither of these requests can be fulfilled, and the rich man is told the point of warning his relatives is moot because they, just as he should have, should believe the prophets God has sent. They should not need a specific messenger from beyond the grave, nor would it truly help! (Luke 16:19-31)

This story causes some to say there must be a place where people who serve The Lord go, where they are comforted until the time of the resurrection. This seems to some to be further supported by the second story, which is not just a story, but an actual happening. For that one, we look at what happened the day Jesus died on the cross. On that day, there were criminals hung on both sides of Jesus. The gospel of Luke tells us one of these criminals takes the opportunity to scoff at Jesus much like the crowds did that day, but the other did not. Instead, he took the opportunity to scold the scoffing criminal and remind him that they both deserved the punishment they were suffering, while Jesus had done no wrong. The humble man then asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus entered His kingdom. This man was truly turning from the sin he had done

in life, and was requesting of Jesus, mercy and forgiveness. Jesus grants the man's request by simply saying, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43

Both these stories tell about a place which could be talking about heaven; and many people simply believe when those who serve God die, they go directly to heaven. The problem with this is, Jesus made it very clear He was leaving this world to go and prepare a place for us, so that we may be with Him for eternity. (John 14:1-3) This means a place, other than this universe, was not prepared for us at creation. This universe was to be our home, and God did not set us up to fail or with failure in mind. Even when the Bible says Jesus is The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, it's not indicating God planned on us failing from the foundation of the world. What it is saying, among other things too deep for us to get into here, is Jesus was always The One Who would have to do the necessary work, and be our giver of life if we did fail. This is because our flesh is the part which mirrors Jesus, and that is the part which was made temporal. Because of our design, Jesus has always been The One Who would have to be prepared to give His life for our sake. This is why we are told in the Word of God that the book which contains all the names of those who will go to the place Jesus is preparing - which is that place we often generically refer to as heaven - is The Lamb's Book of Life! (Rev. 13:8, 17:8, 21:27)

A fact which goes hand in hand with this is also one we should look at, and that is, as we go through the Word of God, the word "hell" is not really a place so much as a concept. In truth, it has more of a relationship with the word "grave," and the simple fact we die. At some points it just refers to the fact someone is in misery. Now, at the risk of being a bit gruesome, let me just point out, not everyone is laid in a grave when they die. Some people's bodies are never found. Some people are eaten by animals, or their bodies are destroyed by any number of means. Saying something such as, "hell and the grave," is an attempt to cover the fact not everyone is seen as resting in peace, in a grave, as we would traditionally like to place them.

In the book of Revelation, when we are told

about the Day of Judgment, we are told even more than just hell and the grave give up their dead. This is not said because the oceans, hell, and the grave are all actual holding places for the dead. This is because God wants us to be crystal clear, no matter who we are, no matter how we die, no matter what religion or belief system we subscribe to or not, we will stand before Him! When that happens, those who have not cared for the things of God will be cast into a place Jesus describes as outer darkness (which is a reference to the aspect we will be separated from the presence of God for eternity), and everlasting punishment! (Matt. 25:30-36) In the book of Revelation, the place is called "...the lake of fire." Revelation 20:15; and what Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 verse 41 is that this is also not a place made by God because humans were expected to fail. The lake of fire is a place which was prepared for the devil and those angels who followed him. It will only be used for humans because they have made the same choice the devil made: and that is to rebel against God's will!

Getting back to our two stories, we should see that on the cross, Jesus did not have time - such as we are taking here - to explain what exactly was going to be the sequence of events upon the criminal's death, nor can just everyone truly wrap their head around all the information. However, that's alright because it's not necessary for salvation that we understand all the dynamics. Understanding dynamics is something which is beneficial for those of us living and needing to be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks us about our faith. (I Pet. 3:14-16) The man on the cross next to Jesus was only hours, at best, from his death, and very limited in what he could do with the time he had left. Thus, Jesus simply comforts the man on the cross by confirming to the man he would find himself that very day, with Jesus, in a much better situation. That is why we simply see the word "paradise." Paradise is not a place as Jesus uses it, it's a simple explanation of what would come next, which the man could, in his agony, easily grasp.

Now, when it comes to the story of the rich man and the beggar, it needs to be simply understood, Jesus was telling what we call a "parable." Jesus told many of these stories, and they are intended to be illustrative of the truth, not a literal description. For

example, Jesus tells of ten virgins, five of whom had prepared their lamps with enough oil to wait as long as it took to meet the bridegroom, and five who had not been so vigilant. When the five foolish virgins wanted to share the oil of the five who had prepared ahead of time, they were turned down because that would bring the possibility none of them would make it. While the five foolish were gone to the market to buy oil, they missed the coming of the bridegroom. When they returned to the place where the marriage supper was to be held, they were denied entrance on the basis the bridegroom did not know them. If they had truly wanted to be a part, they should have been prepared to be there and go in when the bridegroom came. (Matt. 25:1-13)

This story tells of those who know Jesus is coming, but who do not care enough to prepare their lives to meet Him. However, all the imagery of women needing a lamp to wait by a door or the side of a roadway to meet a man coming to get them, in order to go inside a house and have a traditional middle eastern marriage celebration, is all illustration. In truth, there isn't any literal door or road for us to get an oil lamp and wait next to, and salvation is not just for women! This is also true of Abraham's bosom. It is not a literal place, nor is the story's purpose to teach us what heaven and hell will literally be like. The story is about the fact someone who dies and finds they missed out on heaven will be very miserable, and if given the chance, they would want relief from the misery of that mistake. They would even hope for the ability to warn their family and friends. However, stories just like this one show us it will be too late at that point to change your mind, and they warn us of what a big mistake it would be to wait!

The fact of the matter is, it is on Judgment Day that we are told those found in The Lamb's Book of Life will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God, as well as those who are not in the book will be cast into the lake of fire. (Matt. 25:31-46, Rev. 20:15) Judgment Day is the day God will separate the sheep from the goats. There are not places prepared for people to go who are followers of God versus other places prepared for those who are not, in order for people to be separated until the resurrection. The fact people believe there are other places is why

some end up believing there is hope for praying their loved ones into heaven after they have died. Some people even believe there are different levels of heaven and hell which the dead can be prayed into or out of, or which the dead themselves can achieve or earn by doing works of one kind or another. Once you've jumped the rails from what the Bible teaches, the sky's the limit as to what you can come up with!

Now, if we do not go to some holding place; we are not left to float around here; and we do not stay with our bodies; what is the sequence of events after death? To answer that we want to look at specific points of scripture. Some of these we have, for the most part, already covered; but we want to put them all together, looking at the facts they give us. We'll start with I Corinthians 15:51 where Paul boldly says, "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,..."

I know the first thing some would point out is Paul's use of the word "sleep," so we had better cover that first. In English, this word is the same as the word we use for going to bed and napping, but in the original language it is not. Probably one of the reasons we do not simply see the translators using the word death here is because there was an effort made (In the translation of the King James Bible) to make the words flow, while maintaining the original content. This is not a bad thing, you simply need to be aware of it, and realize just because the word "sleep" is used here instead of something such as "be dead," this scripture is not confirming a theory such as grave sleeping.

It comes down again to the fact we don't really know how to describe death; and because throughout time man has seen death to be so much like the process of falling asleep, our words are very related. However, in truth, the word Paul used here comes from a root which does not attempt to even define the loss of consciousness which happens in sleep, or anything like it. The root actually refers to the simple act of being laid out, or to lay outstretched. Depending on a person's sleep habits, this does not apply so much even to the idea of sleep position. Many people do not lie outstretched, they tend to bend their knees, curl their arms, and lie on their side, at least for different periods during sleep. Very

few lie for very long, totally on their back, lying out at full length. On the other hand, this is the exact position we put most all bodies in when placing them in the grave or a casket of any kind.

Now, that's the root of the word Paul used. If we look directly at the word he specifically used, we find it means, "to put to sleep." If taken in context, we understand Paul is not speaking at all in terms of where a person is or the state they are in, other than the physical body itself. He is referring directly to death from the aspect of what happens to a dead body. In the tradition of his place and time, bodies were laid out lengthwise and often rapped in cloth. Then because a dead person does not have the ability to move on their own, a person or persons would pick up the rapped body and lay it on a shelf - or stone bed if you will - inside a tomb. This is exactly what was done with Jesus' body. Even those who could not afford tombs, dug graves, much as we do today, so the body could be laid out lengthwise as it's placed in the hole. Simply put, the word Paul uses here has direct relationship to why nowadays we refer to a person as being, "laid to rest."

Paul says he will show us a mystery. Why? Just as Nicodemus did not fully grasp how a person could be born again, and Jesus tells us it's just like many things in creation - such as the weather - which we do not fully understand, this is something only God can do! Paul is saying, I will tell you a truth that I can not fully explain, which is the fact (And keep in mind Paul is speaking here to those who follow God), just like Jesus, our being laid in the grave is not the end of our existence! This is true in spite of the fact we all know we do not see our grave opened a day or so after we are put in it and find that our body has disappeared, as was the case with Jesus. What we know is something the Old Testament refers to, especially when talking about kings who died: After death it was said individuals, "...slept with his fathers." or was, "...gathered to their fathers." (Judg. 2:10, II Chron. 16:13, 34:28)

These references occur because there was a practice among the ancient cultures, Israel is related to, of laying a body in a tomb and leaving it there until the body was nothing but dust and bones. Then, to save space and the cost of continually carving new

tombs, the bones would be gathered into a box or carved out hollow, under the very shelf the body had been laying on. These holding places often contained the bones of family members who had already gone through the process, and the practice made room for a newly deceased family member to be laid on the shelf. This was truly being gathered, on a physical level, to or with your fathers; and it emphasizes the fact, even those people who were shown to be greatly loved of God - such as King David - were allowed to turn to dust. However, Paul tells us that's alright because we will not need our physical forms which die. We will be in a new form which is different than what we walk in now. "...we shall all be changed,..."; and by changed, Paul is talking in the sense of one taking off clothes and putting on new ones. Again, our bodies will not be transformed as Jesus' body was. Instead, we will put on a new body!

How will this happen? Verse 52 says it will be lightning fast! "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,..." When will it happen? "...at the last trump:..." This is a simple reference to those seven trumpets we see in Revelation. "And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever." Revelation 11:15 Now, we will come back to this point in a bit, but let's stay with Paul's words for the moment. Paul says, when that trumpet sounds, "...the dead shall be raised incorruptible,..." Which means those who have already died, from Adam and Eve all the way down to the last person who has died before that moment, out of those who have served The Lord, they will be born again!

Now, what happens to all those who are still putting one foot in front of the other? Paul says, "...and we shall be changed." Because those who have died cannot hear Paul's words, nor read them from the Bible, the "we" refers to those (Again, only out of those who have served the Lord) who are still alive at the time of the last trump. Those who are alive will also not stay in their current physical forms just because they have not died as yet. They also will, at that moment, leave behind their current physical forms and be born again, into a new incor-

ruptible body! To be clear, I do not believe there will be dead bodies left behind which will need to be buried, or rot. The most plausible thought is that our current forms will simply be shattered in the transition. Visually one might say, the person was there one moment and the next there was just a wisp of dust.

Paul talks about this issue again in I Thessalonians, which brings us back to the point in Revelation 11:15. In I Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul also talks about the fact, we which are still alive at the moment of resurrection will not, in anyway, prevent those who are already in the grave. In fact - and this is important since we are asking about time - Paul says in verses 16 & 17, "...the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air..." Again, how will this happen? In the twinkling of an eye! If all this happens in the twinkling of an eye, why would Paul bother to tell us those already dead in Christ will rise "first"? The answer is that he is covering the time issue of Jesus being The Firstfruits, but not the first one to ever die.

As time steps one foot in front of the other, we see that people live and die. Then one day, Jesus came, gave His life, and rose from the dead. From there, people continued to live and die; but just as before, no one raises from the dead. Why have we not seen people permanently raised from the dead like Jesus was? Simply because we have not come to the one foot in front of the other point in the time sequence where that event takes place. However, do you remember what Jesus told the man on the cross next to Him? Jesus said, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43 The true answer to the question we are driving at here lies in the fact death leaves you with no feet to put one in front of the other; thus, those who are dead, are no longer constrained by time itself!

As we live, we live waiting for that moment when Christ will return, but if our physical form dies before we make it to that moment, there is simply no reason for us to have to wait anywhere! Because we are disconnected from that part of us which constrains us in this fishbowl of time, we get to jump

over the events of this world and arrive at the resurrection! This is why Paul says the dead in Christ shall rise "first," not because their graves will open and they will rise before those of us still alive can be changed, but because they have already left this world, the bodies which connected them to it, and the time it runs on. Paul puts it this way, because those who are already dead have already by-passed those of us who are alive and walking in this universe!

Now, I understand this may seem like a hard concept to grasp, and I know there are those who will never truly wrap their minds around the thought, but it's what we have been talking about all along. Time is no more difficult for God than death. God created life, but He also created our time sequence. He is not constrained by it, but He constrained us in it for a purpose. Even in heaven, we will live in this kind of one foot in front of the other lifestyle; and the fact God wants us to live this way is a main reason it's necessary for us to have new bodies and a new place to walk in, after sin has brought a total end to the universe we now walk in. Humans simply are not built to hover around, lie in a grave, or do anything else, in a spirit only form.

In our next segment we will talk more about the why this is where true believers in God living on this side of Christ's Second Coming go upon death, and get into the subject of where those who fit into different categories of time and belief go, as well as why. Along the way, we will discuss doctrinal subjects related to the Second Coming of Christ such as the tribulation and what is termed "the rapture." Until then, I pray you will grow in His assurance and comfort, as you prepare your life to meet The Lord at His return!