

Asking Our Hard Questions of the Bible

November 28, 2005

What Happens After We Die?

- I. Introduction
 - A. Announcements
 - 1. Open with prayer
 - 2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions OK for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
 - 3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
 - 4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
 - 5. Read passages (volunteers)
 - 6. Put diagram on the board of heaven, sheol/hades/hell, paradise, tartarus/abyss abaddon and second diagram of new heaven and new earth, lake of fire.
 - B. Does anyone have any questions for us to consider for next time?
 - C. We are now in the season of Advent, a time when our focus is normally on birth, so our topic does seem a bit *unseasonal*.
 - 1. Instead of talking about birth, we will be talking about what happens after death. Although there are a number of passages in the Old Testament that talk about what happens then, we will look only at the New Testament writings, because they are clearer and more complete.
 - 2. But maybe it's not altogether inappropriate, since what happens after death is, for believers at least, a new beginning, a new life, in a sense a new birth.
- II. In the ancient Near East there were three divergent views on life after death.
 - A. In ancient Mesopotamia (e.g., Babylon) apparently few believed in it. The Gilgamesh Epic said, "Gilgamesh, where do you run? Life, which you seek, you will not find. When the gods created mankind, they allotted to mankind Death, but they withheld Life in their own hands."¹
 - B. The Egyptians took an opposite view.
 - 1. Like the Mesopotamians, they also had many gods, including one named Osiris whom they believed ruled over the place of the dead.
 - 2. According to their legend Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, but was later restored to life by his wife, Isis. The Egyptians believed that if Osiris could live on so could they.

¹ *The Tree of Life*, New York: Viking Press, 1942, p. 263

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3. However, there was a catch: the afterlife was only for the pharaoh and his highest officials.²
- C. The Bible presents a view uniquely different from each of these, and grounds it in the historical facts of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.
 1. During Jesus' ministry he made it clear that there is indeed life after death.
 2. There was a group of Jews known as the Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection or life after death. (That's what made them 'Sad, you see') Mark 12:18-27. Jesus made it clear that they were wrong.
 3. And Jesus clearly taught that life after death was not just for the rich and famous. For example: John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that *whoever* believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."
 4. When Martha told Jesus she knew her brother Lazarus would "rise again in the resurrection at the last day," Jesus replied "*whoever* believes in me will live even though he/she dies and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." John 11:24-26
 5. Unlike the Egyptians and others, life after death was not reserved for those who had wealth and power but simply for those who put their trust in God.
- D. The Bible records some very dramatic eyewitness accounts to verify that there really is life after death.
 1. First of all, there are the accounts of Jesus raising someone to life who was dead. (On the list of miracles I handed out last time.)
 - a. Jairus' (a leader of the synagogue) daughter—Mt 9:18-19, 23-26; Mk 5:22-24, 35-43; Lk 8:41, 49-56
 - b. Lazarus—Jn 11:1-46
 - c. The widow's son at the village of Nain Lk 7:11-16
 2. There are also handful of other restorations recorded in the Bible.
 - a. Elijah revived a widow's only son and Elisha also restored a man's life.
 - b. Dorcas/Tabitha at Peter's prayer Acts 9:36-41
 - c. Eutychus by Paul Acts 20:7-10 (after he fell from a window)
 3. There are only a very few of such restorations, and they came at critical times—when faith in God was in peril (in the OT cases of Elijah/Elisha) and when faith in God through Christ was rapidly expanding into new areas of the world.
 4. But the point for us tonight is this: If the dead cease to exist, how can they be revived? If, however, they continue to live in some other way than we can see, cannot God restore them to their bodies?

² *The Bible Almanac*, Packer, Tenney, White, p. 117

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- E. That is not the strongest evidence we have for life after death, however.
 - 1. The strongest and most witnessed evidence is the Resurrection of Jesus.
 - 2. In the other instances, the people were revived in their own bodies as they had been before. A time would come for them to experience physical death again. That's why I've called them restorations rather than resurrections.
 - 3. But with Jesus, his body was transformed into a different kind of substance. He would not and could not die again.
- F. There are 11 different recorded appearances of Jesus after his very public death. They are reported in 6 books of the Bible
 - 1. In Matthew (2 times)—28:1-10, 28:16-20
 - 2. In Mark (4 times)—16:1-8, 16:9-11, 16:14, 16:15-18
 - 3. In Luke (5 times)—24:1-12, 13-32, 34, 36-43
 - 4. In John (5 times)—20:1-9, 11-18, 19-25, 26-31, 21:1-23
 - 5. In Acts (1 time)—1:3-8
 - 6. In 1st Corinthians (4 times)—15:5 (twice), 6, 7
- G. One of the most important passages in the Bible on life after death is in 1st Corinthians 15. **Read 1st Cor 15:1-8.**
 - 1. The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is overwhelming.
 - 2. It is an historical fact that can only be denied by ignoring all the evidence.
- H. But what does it have to do with what happens to **us** after death?
 - 1. Let's read on in **1st Cor 15:12-19**. What is the point being made? What is the connection here between Christ's resurrection and ours? [Christ has been raised so resurrection cannot be denied.]
 - 2. In **vv. 20-22** it becomes even clearer. What is the connection here? [All who are in Christ will be resurrected as he was]
 - 3. The passage concludes, then, with a summary of the ultimate day of Resurrection. **Read vv 23-27.**
 - 4. Death itself will die; it will be destroyed. A time is coming when there will be no such thing as death, because there will no longer be any such thing as sin.
- III. The next question then is, "where will we be after we die until that time when death itself is destroyed?"
 - A. First let's look summarize briefly at what happened to Jesus after his death (we did a study on this in Spring 2004)
 - 1. He "made a proclamation (preached) to the spirits who were in prison" 1st Peter 3:18-20, 2nd Peter 2:4.
 - a. We found from our study in 2004 that those spirits were angels who had rebelled against God. We would call them evil spirits or demons.

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- b. This took place in hell/tartarus. But there is no mention of Jesus staying there.
 2. He appeared to the disciples and many others. We know this from those passages we mentioned earlier (including 1 Cor. 15)
 3. He ascended into heaven. Lk 24:50-53, **Acts 1:1-2, 9-11**
 - B. It doesn't seem like we will exactly follow that same pattern.
 1. We have no victory to proclaim over fallen angels. Besides, Jesus has already done that.
 2. We don't have reports of the dead routinely appearing to public and private gatherings (except, of course, on TV which unfortunately has become the ultimate source of spiritual truth for far too many.)
 3. So what does this say about us being taken into heaven?
 - C. **Before we answer that, let's first look at some major errors that are taught about the afterlife.**
 - D. I remember when I was a child and trying to understand about life and death, that for a time I thought our soul would just sleep after we died. It was a childish misunderstanding, but some adults apparently share it, too.
 1. There is for some a belief in what is called "Soul Sleep." It is the idea that we are not conscious in any way from the time of our death until Christ calls us in the final resurrection.
 2. The Ana-Baptists believed in this in the 1500's. King Edward VI wrote (in his fortieth article out of forty-two), "The souls that do depart hence do sleep, being without all sense, feeling, or perceiving until the day of judgment."
 3. Seventh Day Adventists are the main believers in this today. When the body dies, they believe the soul literally sleeps until the day of Resurrection.
 4. Jehovah's Witnesses have a strange variation on this. They believe that body and soul don't sleep but are both destroyed at death. God then re-creates them—or at least makes a duplicate—for living on the future Paradise Earth.
 5. Soul sleep is neither very comforting, nor at all what the Bible teaches us.
 - a. When the Bible says a person is "sleeping" in relation to death, it does not mean literal "sleep." (Luke 8:49-54; 1Cor 15:6),
 - b. Sleeping is just a metaphorical way to describe death because a dead body appears to be sleeping and because there is still a resurrection to come.
 - E. Another error that is growing in popularity in the U.S. is **Reincarnation**.
 1. Reincarnation has been a popular belief for thousands of years, but it has never been accepted by Christians or followers of Judaism.

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2. It is primarily found in Hinduism and some pseudo-Hindu new-age mysticism.
 - a. Hinduism is at least honest enough to recognize the problem of sin and of reaching perfection. Their answer to this is that people are reborn in an endless cycle until they eventually get it right. Unfortunately, every time they are “reborn,” they are still sinners, so the problem remains unsolved.
 - b. The new-agers and other pseudo-spiritualists don’t think deeply enough about the problem to have any basis at all for their belief, but their own imagination.
 3. The Bible never directly mentions the concept of reincarnation. It never mentions people having a second chance at life, or coming back as different people or animals.
 4. The one passage that some point to as evidence for reincarnation is **Matthew 17:9-13** (links John the Baptist with Elijah.)
 - a. Do you see how someone could use this passage by itself to support such a belief? What was Jesus really saying here?
 - b. Besides, there is another passage that directly refutes this twisted interpretation. **Read John 1:19-21.**
 - c. Do you see the type of error the reincarnations make in the Mt. passage? [*eisegesis* instead of *exegesis*; reading own notions *into* instead of reading meaning *out of* the Bible]
 5. The Bible tells us that we have one and only one life. **Read Hebrews 9:27.** (Appointed to die once and then face judgment.)
 6. Jesus made it pretty clear, too. He told the criminal on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise!” (Luke 23:43), not “You will have another chance to live a life on this earth.”
- F. **Purgatory** is a concept that is deeply ingrained among Catholics, but it too is an erroneous one.
1. I read on the Internet about a pamphlet someone passed out entitled “Everything the Bible has to say about Purgatory.”
 - a. When the pamphlet was opened the inside was completely blank.
 - b. The Bible never mentions anything even remotely similar to Purgatory.
 2. Catholics base the concept of purgatory primarily on one of the Apocryphal books, 2nd Maccabees.
 - a. In 2 Maccabees 12:38-46, Judas Maccabeus orders that sacrifices be offered in the Temple in Jerusalem for slain Jewish soldiers who had worn pagan amulets.

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- b. “. . . In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. ⁴⁴ For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. ⁴⁵ But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.”
 - c. Some people have seen this story as biblical justification for the teaching on purgatory, and it is the passage the Catholic Church uses to justify the doctrine and practice of praying for the dead.
 - d. Our chief disagreement over this passage is that they accept ^{2nd} Maccabees as part of the Bible and we do not.
 - e. In addition, though, the passage says Maccabeus “made atonement for the dead.” This is at odds with all of the rest of Scripture. No one makes atonement for the sins of another, living or dead, until Jesus does so with his crucifixion and resurrection.
3. Some Catholics also point to **1st Corinthians 3:12-15 (esp. v. 15)** for evidence of a purgatory.
- a. But the passage is using an illustration of things going through fire as a description of believers’ *works* being judged. If our works are of good quality they will survive, but if our works are of poor quality they will not pass through the fire and we will not be rewarded for them.
 - b. This does not mean a believer literally must go through flames – it is only an illustration of God judging our works.
4. The problem is The idea that we have to suffer for our sins after death is contrary to everything the Bible says about salvation.
- a. Jesus died to pay the penalty for all of our sins (Romans 5:8).
 - b. Jesus suffered for our sins so we can have the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).
 - c. Jesus died for our sins once and for all Hebrews 9:24-28
 - d. Jesus is our advocate and atones for our sins 1st John 2
- G. **Universalism**—the belief that everyone will be saved—has crept into many churches, but it cannot be supported by the Bible. Though some do try by referring to passages taken out of context and without accounting for the dozens of passages that say clearly that some will be saved and others will not.
- 1. Jesus warned us that “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).
 - 2. “The kingdom of Heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore;

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and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13: 47-50).

3. Matthew 25:44-45 Those who do not feed the hungry, etc. go to “eternal punishment.”

4. Let’s read this one. It is very strongly stated. **2nd Thessalonians 1:5-9**

H. **Muslim:** “The Prophet said: ‘If a woman dies while her husband was pleased with her, she will enter Paradise. The Prophet said, “I looked at Paradise and found poor people forming the majority of its inhabitants; and I looked at Hell and saw that the majority of its inhabitants were women.’”

—The Noble Qur’an—Al-Ghaashiyah 88:10-16

1. I guess it isn’t a big surprise to hear this from the Qur’an, is it?

2. Just to set the record straight, remember what is written in **Galatians 3:27-28**

IV. OK, what does the Bible really say happens to those who are saved? (We will focus our attention on the saved/redeemed/righteous/faithful: I use these interchangeably)

A. While we looked at the non-Biblical theories, we got some of the answers, but let’s look specifically at where the Bible says Christians will be after death.

1. **2 Cor. 5:6-8** To be away from the body is to be home with Christ

2. **Php 1:20-24** Paul—life is to be with you, death with Christ

3. **Romans 6:5-10** (we died with Christ, so we will live with him.)

4. **2 Timothy 2:11-13** hymn “If we have died with him, we shall also live with him . . .

B. That seems to answer the question pretty well, but it is not the final answer.

1. For one thing, this refers to immediately after our deaths. It tells us what happens to our spirits/souls.

2. Our bodies will still be in the grave/ashes.

3. There is still a final resurrection of the body that is to come, but that is a very involved and controversial issue that we can’t get to today. We will, instead, stay focused on what happens immediately after we die.

C. We—that is, our spirits/souls—will be with Christ, but where will we be when we are with Christ?

1. Jesus told his disciples that he will go to his Father’s house to prepare a place for them (John 14:1-3). So where would that be? (Heaven: see defs.)

2. But in **Lk 23:39-43** where does Jesus say the believing thief will go? (today be with me in paradise)

3. If we look at our definitions (handout sheet), we find that heaven is the dwelling place of God and God’s angels, but from Genesis to John, it is never the place where the blessed dead go.

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4. The dead who are blessed are said to go to a part of Sheol/Hades called paradise.
 5. There is a problem with this view, however.
 - a. According to our definitions, heaven is the abode of God and the part of Hades called paradise the abode of the faithful. And they are not the same!
 - b. Interestingly, in 2nd Corinthians 12:2-4 paradise seems to have changed locations. Hades has always been referred to as “below,” but now it seems to be above!
 6. Let’s use our diagram to illustrate what is going on here.
 7. From O.T. through the gospels, the righteous/saved who die go to wait in Paradise in the realm of Sheol. But after the gospels something has changed. What is it?
 8. Write “Jesus Christ” on the line separating heaven from paradise of Sheol.
 9. **Read Phil 3:20-4:1.** We no longer look forward to waiting with Abraham, but to meeting with Jesus. When Jesus was crucified the curtain of the Most Holy Place in the temple was torn. At the same moment Jesus threw open the door to heaven. All who have faith in Christ are now “citizens of heaven.”
- D. Rev. 14:13 “Then I heard a voice from heaven say, “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

V. Summary

- A. Our goal today was to learn what the Bible tells us will happen when we die. It’s a big topic and there is more that can be said.
 1. Have we done that satisfactorily?
 2. Have these studies been helpful?
- B. How does what we have studied apply to each of us?
- C. What questions for next time?
- D. Any comments on our format or subject matter so far?
- E. Next meeting: Monday Jan. 23rd, 7-8:30 p. m.
- F. Close in prayer
- G. **Archives of class notes can be found online at:**
www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa