

Hartford Bible Students

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When a Person Dies

There is a longing hope within mankind that death does not end all existence. But can we find a rational basis for believing in life after death? There are so many religions and so many philosophies as to the state of the dead that it is hard to discern the truth of the matter. As Bible students, we should refer to the Bible alone for doctrinal clarity.

How Does the Bible Describe the Death State?

Human life is composed of the body organism and the mind. The body is made up of the inanimate elements of the earth, while the conscious mind is made up of the composite of experience — the ability to reason, learn, communicate, create, worship, appreciate beauty and exercise free-will. This composite of the body and the mind is what makes up the individual, and death, therefore, is the state at which the individual ceases to exist. By inspiration, King David confirmed this thought: “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth, in that very day his thoughts perish.” (Psalm 146:4)

So the dead are not conscious, for the mind ceases to exist and the body decomposes. “...there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” (Ecclesiastes 9:10) Death, therefore, is the exact opposite of life.

Jesus’ Description of Death

When Jesus’ friend Lazarus died, Jesus described death as sleep: “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I

go, that I may awake him out of sleep.” The disciples reasoned, “Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well.” (John 11:3-27) They thought it would be a great mistake to awaken a sick man. Seeing that his disciples misunderstood, “Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.” Jesus used the figurative illustration of sleep to emphasize two important points. (1) Those who are asleep are unaware of what is going on in the world around them. “The living know that they shall die; but the dead know not anything.” (Ecclesiastes 9:5) (2) The dead are figuratively asleep in their graves waiting for an awakening — the re-animation to life again of both the body and the mind.

That the dead should be restored to life at a future time was not a new idea to Lazarus’ family, for they believed the Old Testament promises which hold out this blessed hope.

“The Resurrection at the Last Day”

The death of Lazarus was not due to his lack of faith in this promise expressed by Job, nor any lack of loyalty to Jesus. Lazarus believed in Jesus, yet he died and remained in the grave four days. In regard to this fact, note what Jesus did NOT say when he came to comfort Lazarus’ family: Weep not, for your loved one is not really dead, for he is now in heaven. No, Jesus said plainly to his disciples, “Lazarus is dead.” The grim reality that Lazarus had been dead in his grave four days proves that he did not go to heaven.

When Jesus said, "Thy brother shall rise again," Martha replied, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." She knew from Old Testament prophets, like Job, that the dead were in their graves waiting for the resurrection in the last day when Jesus would raise the dead.

Jesus did not deny the truthfulness of what Martha said. Rather, he confirmed her faith, saying, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live..." (John 11:25, 26) The Apostle Paul also confirmed this: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven [at the last day]... and the dead in Christ shall rise..." (1 Thessalonians 4:16)

"The Hour is Coming"

Our Lord said: "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his 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 judgment." (John 5:28, 29 RSV) Jesus' statement, "they that have done good," refers to Christian believers who have proven faithful to their covenant of sacrifice. These are a little flock in comparison with the billions who have died. (Luke 12:32)

The Apostle Paul tells Christians to "put on immortality" implying that they did not already have it inherently. (Romans 2:5-7; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55) Immortality is promised only to those who are now being called, tested, and selected to be joint heirs with Christ in God's Kingdom.

The vast majority of the dead are of that class which have not done good from the divine standpoint. According to human standards, most of them have been morally upright, but they have not been footstep followers of the Master. So the blood of Christ has not yet given them a standing of righteousness before God. Nevertheless, God

loves these also, and He sent His Son to die for them. These have never had a genuine opportunity to believe — develop faith and obedience.

Billions have never heard of Jesus, and among those who have heard of him there are few who have understood clearly the real purpose of his coming into the world. They have not been intentionally wicked, but they have not done good in the sense of accepting Jesus as their savior. These billions are to be awakened from the sleep of death and given an opportunity "to come unto the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4)

The great truth which will then be made known to all — clearly and unmistakably — is that Jesus' death provided "a ransom for all." Yes, Jesus died for "the sins of the whole world," and when he establishes his Father's kingdom on earth, those who accept this provision "will find life." (1 John 2:2; Proverbs 8:35)

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