

Hartford Bible Students Newsletter

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LIFE AFTER DEATH

Down through the ages of human history, people have been unwilling to accept the finality that death brings to life. Because people do not want to believe that death ends their life, it is not surprising that the subject of death and the afterlife has been a matter of intense concern and speculation.

In this article, we will examine the Biblical understanding of the nature of death. Does the Bible teach that death is the cessation of life for the whole person, body and soul? Or does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, a transition to a new and higher form of life for the immortal component of our being?

Belief in an Afterlife

According to a study from the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California, the vast majority of Americans, 80%, believe there is life after death and that every person has a soul that will live forever. According to the Ipsos/Reuters poll, 51% of people worldwide believe there is an afterlife, 23% believe they will just cease to exist, and 26% don't know what will happen after death.

The fact that the majority of people in societies believe in some form of life after death points to the basic human need for reassurance and certainty that their life will not end at death. It is not our aim to address every major cultural and religious belief on the nature of death. Our aim is only the Biblical view of death and how it has been interpreted by Christians and in Christian society. To set the stage for the study of the Biblical view of death through Christian history, we need only point out the serpent's lie, "You will not die" (Genesis 3:4 NSRV). This lie has lived on throughout Christian history to our time.

Christianity's View of Death

In the history of Christianity, death has been defined generally as the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. This belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body has given rise to such Catholic doctrines as prayer for the dead, indulgences, purgatory, limbo, intercession of the saints, the eternal torment of hell, etc. Since the time of Augustine (AD 354-430), Christians have been taught that the disembodied condition of the soul continues in paradise, purgatory, or hell until the resurrection of the body, which will bring completion to the salvation of the saints and the damnation of the wicked.

The Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century started largely as a reaction to the unbiblical practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in purgatory. However, the reformers did continue to believe in the conscious existence of souls either in the intermediate state of paradise or hell before the resurrection.

By rejecting as unbiblical the popular beliefs regarding the suffering of souls in purgatory, the reformers paved the way for a re-examination of human nature by the rationalistic philosophers of the enlightenment in the 18th Century. The first significant attack on this belief in the survival of the soul

after death came from David Hume (AD 1711-1776), an English philosopher. He questioned the immortality of the soul, because he believed that all knowledge comes from the sensory perceptions of the body. Since the death of the body marks the end of all sensory perception, he said it is impossible for the soul to have conscious existence after the death of the body.

The decline in the nearly unanimous belief of an afterlife in Christian nations reached its climax in the mid-18th Century as atheism, skepticism, and rationalism spread in France, England, and America. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which led people to believe that humans have no divine spirit or immortal soul since human life is the product of spontaneous generation or evolution, inflicted another blow to the belief in an afterlife.

Study of the Afterlife

Public interest in the life of the soul after death soon revived in America when the three Fox sisters of Hydesdale, New York conducted a séance on March 31, 1848. Since it was claimed that the spirits of the dead at the Fox house communicated by a rapping sound on the table, "table rapping" séances became fashionable all across America and England as a way of communicating with dead spirits. In 1888 Margaret Fox admitted it was a hoax and the rapping sound was made by cracking her toes. Nonetheless, this phenomenon led to the organization of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. By 1930 the scientific community had coined such terms as extrasensory perception and paranormal psychology or parapsychology. These gave scientific credibility to the study of the afterlife. In our day the study of near-death experiences, based on reports from people who have been resuscitated from a close encounter with death, have become the subject of numerous best-selling books and has contributed to the belief in the survival of the soul after death.

The belief in conscious life after death is popularized today especially by the New Age Movement. An important aspect of the New Age Movement is channeling the alleged communication with departed human and extra-human intelligences. This phenomenon of channeling, which is really just a New Age style of spiritism, has become a booming business in all American cities. The number of professional channelers in Los Angeles, for instance, has increased from 2 to over 1,000 in the last 10 years.

In many ways, the New Age's view of death as the entrance into a higher sphere of living reflects the traditional Christian belief in the conscious survival of the soul at death. Both beliefs can be traced back to the first lie uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "You will not die" (Genesis 3:4). This lie has lived on through the centuries in both Christian and non-Christian religions.

Satan's methods have changed, but his objective is still the same: make people believe the lie so that Christ's ransom sacrifice becomes of no avail. Our only protection against such a deception is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the nature of death and the state of the dead. It is to these questions we now turn our attention.

Bible's Description of Death

When we search the Bible for a description of the nature of death, we find many clear statements that need little interpretation. Scripture describes death as a return to the elements from which man was originally made. In pronouncing sentence upon Adam after his disobedience, God said, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19). This verse tells us that death is not the separation of the soul from the body, but the termination of one's life.

In the Old Testament we learn three important things about the nature of death: First, there is no

remembrance of the Lord in death. “For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave [Hebrew: *sheol*] who shall give thee thanks?” (Psalm 6:5). The reason there is no remembrance in death is because the thinking process stops. “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:4). If the thinking process, which is generally associated with the soul, survived death, then the thoughts should not perish. But the fact is “the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Second, no praise of God is possible in death or in the grave. “What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? Shall it declare thy truth” (Psalm 30:9)? By comparing death with dust, the Psalmist shows that there is no consciousness in death because dust is inanimate. It is not alive, and it cannot think.

Third, death is described as a “sleep.” “Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death” (Psalm 13:3). This characterization of death as a “sleep” occurs frequently in the Bible because it fittingly represents the state of unconsciousness in death.

In the New Testament, death is described as sleep more frequently than in the Old Testament. The reason for this is that the hope of the resurrection gives new meaning to the sleep of death from which all will hear the voice of the Son of man and come forth (John 5:28-29). It is no accident that the sleep metaphor is used for death in the Bible. First, there is a similarity between the “sleep” of the dead and the “sleep” of the living. Both are characterized by a condition of unconsciousness and inactivity which is interrupted by an awakening.

Second, the “sleep” metaphor is a hope-inspiring figure of speech to represent death. It implies the assurance of a later awakening. As a person goes to sleep at night in the hope of awakening in the morning, so in the millennial morning all who sleep in Jesus will be awakened. As sleep is not final, so death is not final.

A third reason for the use of the “sleep” metaphor is that there is no consciousness of the lapse of time in sleep. The metaphor provides a fitting representation of the unconscious state of the deceased between death and resurrection. They have no awareness of the passage of time. It matters not if it is one day or one year or one thousand years.

The Bible uses the term “sleep” because it demonstrates a vital truth; namely, the dead are unconscious. They are asleep and are not aware of any lapse of time or what is happening until they are called forth. “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in their grave shall hear his voice, and shall come forth” (John 5:28-29).

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