

What Does God's Word Say About...

What Happens at Death – Part 2

In Part 1 we know that when Jesus spoke to Mary He had not yet ascended to the Father (i.e. heaven) though He had been in Paradise prior to His resurrection. According to the apostle Paul, Paradise (the resting place of the righteous) is now spoken of as being in heaven. The apostle Paul, with a vision and revelation of the Lord, said he was caught up into the third heaven (Paradise) and heard inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak (2 Cor. 12:1-4). The apostle Paul wrote about what happens NOW when a person dies. "For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heaven. For indeed in this house (our body) we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave us the Spirit (word of God) as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must ALL appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that EACH ONE may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:1-10). An "earthly tent" is a temporary structure, while a "building" is permanent. Therefore, our physical body is merely temporary but we will receive a spiritual body that is permanent. While we are in this physical body we are absent from the Lord. Yet notice that when we are no longer in this physical body we will be "at home with the Lord." That Jesus is now in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, is beyond dispute (Acts 7:55-56). Therefore, if we will be at "home with the Lord," and the Lord is with the Father in heaven, then when those who have been obedient to God's word die, we will be in heaven with the Lord, and not in some intermediate state (i.e. Hades). Remember that those who are disobedient to God's word will be thrown into the lake of fire (Gehenna or Hell). This is the second death (total eternal spiritual separation from God) Rev 20:14.

According to scripture, when the Lord returns in His second coming, He will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. Paul writes, "But do not be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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 Thess. 4:13-17). This scripture explains two things that will happen and may appear "confusing." First, we read that Jesus is going to "bring with Him" those who have "fallen asleep" in Him (we have already explained that the word "sleep" is used in scripture as physical death). Remember Solomon explained that when we "fall asleep" "then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" Eccl. 12:7). In scripture the words "soul" and "spirit" are used interchangeably. In the above scripture God is returning with the saints soul and spirit. Secondly, we discover that "...the dead in Christ will rise first." The question we might ask is: "How can Jesus bring with Him the same people who are 'rising' from their graves?"

The answer lies in the difference between what is coming with Jesus, and what is rising. Paul explains this in the "Resurrection Chapter" (1 Cor. 15). "But someone will say, 'how are the

dead raised?’ and ‘with what kind of body do they come?’ There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body there is also a spiritual body. Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; 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 Cor. 15:35-54). Paul goes to great lengths to show that there are two bodies under consideration. The first is the one in which our spirit now resides. This body is “perishable and sown in dishonor.” “Dishonor” = the state of corruption. It is sown in “weakness” (since it can only exist and act in the physical realm and is subject to death = “weakness.” The second body, however, is quite different. It is “imperishable and raised in glory and power” as a spiritual body.

If we are to put this all together, we must conclude; at the Lord’s second coming those who are living will be given their immortal, imperishable body (i.e., they will be changed, vs. 51). And the spirits of those who have died and have been with the Lord in heaven, will also receive their new bodies when they return with Him and meet with the saints in the air. Therefore, both the living and the dead receive their new bodies at the same time. Those who were disobedient to God’s word will also receive an immortal eternal body and will be separated from God in eternal hell (Matt. 10:28).

A final question some may have is: “So what about the day of judgment?” Matthew 25:31 describes a day when all the world will be judged. This can be confusing because we said earlier that we are judged at the time of our death. Matthew chapters 24 through 25 is called “The Olivet Discourse.” In these chapters Jesus is answering the questions posed to Him by the disciples. With this Jesus gives three parables (the faithful and evil stewards – Matthew 24:45-51; the five wise and five foolish virgins – 25:1-13; and the parable of the talents – 25:14-30) to show what will happen at His second coming. In each case we see similar features; the lead character gives a responsibility to people in the parable, he then goes away for an indeterminate period of time, he later returns at an unexpected time, he deals out rewards/punishments on the basis of how the individuals carried out their responsibilities.

When Jesus then begins speaking of His second coming (25:31-46), He is referring to those who are alive when He returns. We know this for two reasons; first because of all that has already been said through the parables; second, because when He comes it says, “and all the nations will be gathered before Him...” (Matthew 25:32). This cannot be talking about those who have previously died, for these will not stand before God as “nations” but as individuals (e.g. “each one”- 2 Cor. 5:10). Therefore, this “Day of Judgment” in Matthew 25 (and others found in the scriptures (e.g. John 5:28-29, etc.) does not refer to men of all ages, but rather to those who are alive on the day of our Lord’s second coming. The Judgment Day that the rest of us will face will be on that day when we die physically and stand before the Lord (Heb. 9:27).

