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“TO DIE IS GAIN”

By David Phillips

To mark the 10th anniversary of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote two prayers to be used at memorial services. One of these contained the petition:

May she rest in peace where sorrow and pain are banished, and may the everlasting light of your merciful love shine upon her; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Is this an acceptable prayer? In the 19th Century our forebears in Church Association railed against such prayer and we have summarised CA Tract 3 in this issue. But in the 20th Century, liturgical change saw the creeping re-introduction of prayer for the dead. Therefore, the first and most important matter to be clear about is what happens when you die. Whatever our pain and sadness at the loss of those close to us, we need to be clear, as the Apostle Paul writes, that for those in Christ ‘to die is gain’.

How can you know?

How can you know what happens when you die? There were recent newspaper reports about research into the ‘out of body experiences’ some people claim and which are sometimes equated with ‘near death’ experiences. But what happens just before you die is not our question, rather what happens when you are dead? This is why the Bible is our only reliable authority.

It is reliable because God is our creator and He is therefore the only reliable guide to what happens to us when our earthly body ‘gives up the ghost’. But it is also reliable because the Lord Jesus Christ died and rose again from the dead. There are others in the Bible who died and rose but there is no record of their experience. But the Apostles were instructed by Christ and in the New Testament we have their record of his teaching and what they themselves have passed on as the Holy Spirit guided them according to Christ’s promise. Therefore Scripture is our only reliable guide to what happens when you die. It is a sufficient guide, telling us all we need to know, but not always all we would like to know.

What happens when you die?

Human life is made up of body and soul. The soul is the animating principle, called in the bible the *spirit*, the breath, the *life*. The body is physical, made of the same matter as the earth, indeed Adam was formed directly from dust, an image picked up in many passages. But the soul is spiritual, the life force which God gives. Ezekiel 37 shows this in a very graphic way.

A person dies when the breath of God blows on them. See for example Psalm 104.29, Isa 40.7 and possibly Ps 103.16.

Death is a consequence of sin

Sin entered through Adam and according to God’s word, ‘*in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*’ (Gen 2.17). Adam and Eve were separated from God, which is spiritual death, and eventually died a physical death. Paul tells us ‘*the wages of sin is death*’ (Rom 6.23) and James that ‘*sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death*’ (Jas 1.15). All have sinned, and all die. In its natural course death is preceded by decay (Isa 40.7, Job 14.2 etc).

When a person dies the soul departs but the body remains ‘*the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it*’ (Eccl 12.7). The body without the spirit is dead

(Jas 2.26). So the bible uses the descriptive phrase '*breathed his last*' (Gen 25.8 etc) but also '*give up the ghost (spirit)*' (Job 3.11 etc) and when Jesus died He '*gave up His spirit*' Jn 19.30. Paul and Peter both describe this as putting off our earthly tent/tabernacle (2 Cor 5, 2 Pt 1.14).

When a Christian dies they go to be with Christ

The richest and most remarkable promise is that given by Jesus to the thief on the cross – '*assuredly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise*' (Luke 23.43). Paul desired to depart '*to be with Christ*' (Phil 1.23) declaring also that to be '*absent from the body is to be present with the Lord*' (2 Cor 5.8). Jesus has prepared a place for us '*that where I am, there you may be also*' (Jn 14.3). As Stephen died '*he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*' and prayed '*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*' (Acts 7.55, 59).

No waiting

These Scriptural verses show that there is no waiting to be with Christ after death. We are with Christ in paradise when we die. This has been a great comfort to the bereaved and there is nothing in Scripture to lead us to think otherwise. Therefore those who through faith are *in Christ* when they die, remain *in Christ*. Nevertheless this is not the final state of the dead.

Return and resurrection

Jesus promised to return and whilst some will be alive many others have, of course, died. When He comes '*those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake*' (Dan 12.2). Those who belong to Christ '*he will raise up at the last day*' (Jn 6.44, see also 1 Cor 15, 1 Thess 4.13-17 & Rev 20.13). Both the just and unjust are raised (Acts 24.15, see also remainder of Dan 12.2).

Waiting

There is therefore a sense in which the dead are waiting. The spirits of those who have died in faith are with Christ but their bodies remain in corruption. On the day of judgment their bodies will be raised incorruptible. This is why Christians have generally buried their dead, it is an expression of our faith. Scripture can therefore speak of the dead as sleeping in Jesus (1 Thess 4.14) but also though they were dead, Moses and Elijah appeared in physical form at the transfiguration of Christ.

What about the Lost? Scripture says nothing about what happens immediately to those who die not having believed in the Son. Several of the Reformed confessions state that the lost go straight to hell to await the judgment and this seems a reasonable inference.

Judgment

All are judged, believers and unbelievers (Mtt 13.30, 2 Cor 5.10), even the demons (Mtt 8.29, 1 Cor 6.3). The primary standard of judgment is already determined - our acceptance or rejection of Christ and his word (Jn 12.47). Therefore whilst Jesus did not initially come as judge (also Jn 12.47), yet he brought judgment (Jn 9.38). Believers will also be judged and rewarded according to their deeds (see 2 Cor 5.10 and many other sayings of Jesus).

The final state of the unrighteous

This is the second death - that is the death of the spirit (Rev 2.11 & 20.14 etc.) It is striking that the most vivid teaching about hell comes from Jesus. He calls it a furnace of fire (Mtt 13.42), where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mk 9.48). It is a prison (1 Pt 3.19) and a lake of fire (Rev 20.14-15). Whilst man can kill the body we are to fear God who can destroy body and soul in hell (Mtt 10.28).

The final state of the righteous

God will create a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21.1). Our bodies will be raised as resurrection bodies. What we have now is temporary, a tent, what we will have then will be like an eternal

building which is made by God (2 Cor 5). What we have now is sown in corruption, but our bodies will be raised in incorruption (1 Cor 15.42). Heaven is not simply better, it will be very different. Jesus says there will be no marriage (Mtt 22.30) he calls it a house of mansions (Jn 14.2). In heaven God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Rev 21.4. Above all else heaven is the dwelling of God, the city of God; *'But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light'* (Rev 21.22-23).

A second chance?

The Bible teaches very clearly that judgment is final, there is no teaching about a second chance. Jesus makes this plain in the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16).

Being clear on the Scriptural teaching about death is important for teaching and sharing the faith, but it will also help us to cope with loss, help the bereaved and determine how we pray in private and together. If we are confused about the Scriptural teaching then that will show itself in these other areas too.

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