

GRAVE EXPECTATIONS

What Happens After Death?

DWIGHT HALL

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What Happens After Death?

When Katie, my nine-year-old niece, was killed on her bicycle, a million questions swirled through my mind. I had heard all sorts of accounts of what happened after death: she got a new body in heaven, she was now with Jesus, her spirit remained here on earth communicating with loved ones.

One friend said, “It really doesn’t matter what you believe about the dead, as long as your beliefs are a comfort to you, and my beliefs are a comfort to me.”

On one level, that philosophy sounded quite appealing; on the other hand, and after a careful study of the matter, I have come to

think that what one believes about death really does matter.

Everyone wants to know what happened to their dead loved ones. Are they happy? Are they safe? How can we be sure they're not in hell? Can they visit us from the grave? How do we know ghostly spirits have purely benevolent motives? What does the Bible have to tell us about our dead loved ones? What are the secrets of the dead? What are the secrets beyond the grave?

The Word of God will provide answers to these questions.

The Most Important Question

One could argue, and with good cause too, that the question of death, and what happens after death, is the most important question the living can ever ask. *Why?* Although all creatures die, humans are the only ones who know for certain that they will die. So it would seem logical and reasonable to know, if possible, what happens after death because our time *there*, in the realm after death, wherever and whatever *there* is, may be a

lot longer than our time here in the realm of the living!

Therefore, with death so real, so powerful, so omnipresent, with it perhaps being the one great and inevitable fact of life (some say that as soon as we are born, we begin to die), it would be surprising if the Bible—the Word of God itself—didn't have something to say about such an important topic for humans beings. And the fact is the Bible does have quite a bit to say about death.

The problem is, however, that folks don't always agree on just what that is.

Two Options

There are, generally, two grand and overarching views on what the Bible teaches about death.

The first view, though coming in various nuances and shades, teaches that, at death, the soul, or some conscious entity inherently immortal in humans, leaves the body and exists in another realm, often depicted as heaven or hell, purgatory, or some other state. The essence of this position, sometimes

dubbed “immortal soulism,” is that something in humans maintains a conscious state after death.

This view is, by far, the most common in the Christian world. Catholicism and much of prevailing and educated Protestantism have almost wholly embraced it. For generations, Christian presses have published volumes, both popular and scholarly, that promote this view.

But these Christians aren’t alone, either. Almost all those in the religious world have as well. New Agers, channellers, spiritualists, Hindus, Mormons, Islamic extremists, animists, cultists, Scientologists, and devil worshippers agree that something conscious from our earthly existence continue to live after we die. Nearly all pagan religions, ancient and modern, have accepted this position. Centuries before Christ, the philosopher Plato helped introduce into western thought the idea that an immortal soul survives the body at death and begins a new existence as a conscious entity in some other realm.

This is the view often promoted by Hollywood, too, with movies such as *The Sixth Sense*, *The Mothman Prophecies*, *Ghost*, *Ghost Dad*, and *Dragonfly*, and this understanding of death forms the foundation of the occult and other forms of spiritualism. Indeed, Hollywood is now focusing intensely on the spirit world, but are their fantastical portrayals just imagination or are they grounded in reality? Television, too, with shows like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files*, *The Ghost Whisperer*, *Crossing Over*, *Medium*, and others all promote these false views in one way or another.

Reincarnation is another form of life after death that seems appealing to people. The allure is multi-faceted. Many lives mean many chances to acquire deliverance using their inner resources. If the process doesn't work one time, it eventually will another time. Another premise for reincarnation is that it provides an option, so that the doctrine of a final judgment by a holy God to an eternal hell might be avoided or even rejected. People gravitate toward this thinking because retribution or

reward can occur without having a personal walk with God.

In contrast, others believe that the Bible teaches the dead are unconscious, asleep, and remain that way until the resurrection at the end of time. This view, often dubbed “soul sleep,” and very common in the early days of the church, had almost completely disappeared by the third or fourth century after the death of Christ. Scattered folks in the church throughout history, along with certain strains of thought in Judaism, have always believed in this view. Also, it’s held by only a relatively small number of Christians today, small at least in contrast to all those—Christians and non-Christian—who adhere to “immortal soulism” in one form or another.

These are the two main views, two mutually *incompatible* views we might add. First, the dead are in some conscious existence, which means that, possibly, they could contact us. Second, they are all—the good, the bad, the ugly—dead in the ground, awaiting final judgment; therefore, could never make any kind of contact with the living at all.

The question we want to ask ourselves in this booklet is simple, “Which view, the first of ‘immortal soulism,’ or the second of ‘soul sleep,’ does the Bible really teach? And secondly we want to ask, “Why is it important for us to know which is correct?”

Letting the Bible Speak for Itself

The following are some Bible texts that deal with what happens before and after death. Generally we understand that when we read the Bible, we need to know how to study it. The key points are to have a humble and teachable spirit, keep it simple, always pray first, banish skeptical thoughts, and study things thoroughly for oneself.

As we do this, we need to ask the following simple question, “Which view—the first, which places the dead in some living, conscious state in heaven or hell; or the second, which has them unconscious in death—makes the best sense in light of these biblical texts?”

To begin this study, the prophet Daniel wrote, “And many of them that sleep in the

dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). How does one make sense of these words if good, saved Christian folks were already enjoying the bliss of heaven? The text seems to teach the latter view, that the dead, both the good and the bad, are asleep “in the dust of the earth” until the resurrection.

Jesus spoke the words, “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 damnation” (John 5:28,29). Are the dead asleep in the grave until the resurrection, or are the dead living in some other realm of existence? In light of Christ’s words in the above texts, it’s hard to make sense of the idea of them living on immediately after death in some kind of conscious realm.

In the context of the second coming, Jesus said: “And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man

according as his work shall be" (Revelation 22:12). *So He's bringing His reward with Him!* But don't the faithful dead get their reward immediately at death, soaring to heaven, at least as commonly taught? Many of Christ's faithful followers have been dead for centuries. Certainly they should have been enjoying their reward long before now, much less whenever the second coming gets here. Yet, that's not what Jesus said. He said that the reward comes *with* Him. On the other hand, if His faithful followers are dead, asleep and knowing nothing, the words make perfect sense. They are dead, and only when Jesus returns and raises them will they receive their reward.

In response to those who denied the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians the following words. As they are read, ask the simple question, "If the saved dead are already in heaven with Jesus, as is popularly surmised among many Christians today, *then what could Paul possibly be talking about here?*" He made it known when he

wrote, "And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (1 Corinthians 15:17, 18; NKJV). *So those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost?* But aren't they already with God in heaven? If so, the texts become nonsensical. Again, when the dead in Christ are asleep, unconscious in the grave, the texts make perfect sense.

"For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?" (Psalm 6:5). "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish" (Psalm 146:4). "The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence" (Psalm 115:17). "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). If, at death, the dead soar off to bliss in another realm, then these are all difficult texts to understand. In contrast, if the dead are unconscious, "the dead know not any thing," until the resurrection, the verses make perfect sense.

“Contrary” Texts

Hence, these verses reflect what the Bible teaches—the latter view, the minority view regarding mortality. The dead aren’t immediately transported into another realm of conscious existence as so many Christians believe. Instead, they are unconscious in the ground or wherever their final resting place is.

Yet, there must be some texts that would seem to teach the other view, right? After all, why would so many Christians believe that way if there weren’t?

Some of these texts exist; however, a closer look—particularly in context and in light of other clear biblical testimony—reveals that they’re not teaching something contrary to all the ones we’ve just observed.

The mostly commonly cited verse promoting the argument that the righteous go immediately to heaven at death occurs in Luke, at the crucifixion of Christ between two thieves, “And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the

other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:39-43).

“Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” A more modern version reads, “And He said to him, ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:43, NASB).

What does that mean?

Notice how one simple punctuation adjustment alters what Jesus said. Here are the same words of Jesus, only now with a punctuation change—*punctuation, by the way, wasn’t in the original manuscripts but was added centuries later as someone’s interpretation*—“Truly I say to you today, you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Amazing—the translation that had Jesus telling the thief he would be in paradise that

day now says something else completely. The comma, commonly placed *before* the word “today” (“Truly, I say to you, today you shall ...”), is now *placed* after it (“Truly, I say to you today, you shall ...”), and suddenly a whole new meaning appears. Again, the punctuation was placed centuries after the text itself was written. In fact, Jesus was assuring the doomed man at *that moment* that he would *one day* have a place in Christ’s kingdom. It’s like saying to someone, “I give you my word, *right now, at this moment*, that next month I will pay you what I have promised.”

To add to the argument, why would Jesus tell the thief that he would be in paradise that day when Jesus didn’t even go to paradise that day? Jesus died on Friday, rested in the tomb Saturday, and was resurrected on Sunday. When Mary appeared to Him Sunday morning, what did Jesus say to her? “Touch me not; *for I am not yet ascended to my Father*: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (John 20:17; emphasis supplied).

So what does “*not yet ascended to His Father*” mean? Didn’t He tell the thief two days earlier that they both would be in paradise that same day? If the comma remains before the word “today” then Jesus should have been in paradise with the thief on Friday. *Yet here He is, on Sunday morning, telling Mary that He has not yet ascended to His Father.* How could that be if, on Friday, He told the thief that both of them, that day, would be in paradise? It couldn’t be. Instead Jesus, along with the thief, rested in the tomb on Sabbath. On Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus and the thief weren’t together in paradise on Friday, and thus the text fits perfectly with all the others that point to the second view of “soul sleep.”

But what about these next verses? Don’t they refute that the dead are asleep in the grave? “Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and

Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him” (Matthew 17:1-3; NKJV).

These would, for sure, refute the idea of the dead sleeping except that, according to the Bible, Elijah was taken to heaven *without* having even experienced death (2 Kings 2:1, 11), and a text in the New Testament that, while not overtly clear, implies that Moses, having died, was resurrected (Jude 1:9). So one shouldn't be quick to draw from one account of two unique men a paradigm for all the dead, especially with the numerous other texts that teach that death is a sleep.

What about the following texts from Paul?

“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be

unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:1-10; NIV).

Paul’s point is that human beings in this world, in this “earthly tent” (our mortal bodies) suffer in those bodies, but don’t give up hope because we have the promise of a

“heavenly dwelling,” the time when “what is mortal may be swallowed up by life,” meaning, *eternal life*. Being “home in the body,” living in our mortal bodies here and now, is contrasted to the promise of eternal life in Jesus, which he describes as being “at home with the Lord.” Paul isn’t saying the moment you die, the moment you shed your “earthly dwelling” you’ll be “at home with the Lord” in heaven. No, he’s saying that for now, we have these earthly bodies one day we’ll “be at home with the Lord” and shed this “earthly dwelling.”

When Paul wrote that “we are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord,” he is simply saying, *“I’d rather be in heaven, with Jesus, than here in this world.”* He’s not talking about what happens immediately at death. How could he, when he and other Bible writers were so clear that the dead sleep and remain that way until Christ returns?

The Bible, then, does not teach the idea of an immortal, conscious soul existing in another realm after death. That’s a pagan

concept that made its way into Christianity in the early centuries of the church and never left, even though it was not part of the church's original teaching *because it is not a biblical teaching*.

Near-death Experiences

But what about all these documented near-death experiences (NDEs) when thousands of people who are “clinically” dead come back to life and give fantastic accounts of meeting spiritual beings, of seeing their beloved dead, and/or of talking with angels or even with a divine figure whom many associate with God or Jesus? How is this explained in light of the idea that the dead are in an unconscious sleep until the resurrection?

For instance in 1973, Betty Eadie “died” from complications in surgery. When she somehow revived, a few minutes later she had a fantastic story to tell about her experience in the afterlife. The book telling her story has been a bestseller because it proposed to answer people's deepest needs. Some of the things she said, however, should cause

Bible-believing folks to be careful about the kind of credibility they give to NDEs.

One answer is in the name of the phenomenon itself, *near-death* experiences. To be *near* death isn't the same as being truly dead, as in *rigor mortis* dead. We must be careful about what we conclude from *near-death* experiences, about the reality and nature of death itself. It would be as foolish to draw a conclusion from them about death itself as it would be to draw a conclusion about the ravages of alcoholism from someone who has only sipped a glass of wine for the first time.

Also, why do most come back from NDEs with no sense of a need for Christ or His salvation? If these people were really taken to heaven, or were talking to God's angels, or to other dead, or even to God Himself, then why didn't any of these heavenly beings teach them the basic gospel? Many of those who "died" were not professing Christians and rarely come back as ones either. Instead they claim that these spiritual beings gave them comforting words about love and kindness but said little or nothing about the cross, the

atonement, or mankind's need of a Savior. One would think that while receiving a taste of heaven, they should have obtained at little more advice on how to live there permanently. Yet, so often what they're told seems more like New-Age dogma, which could explain why, in many cases, they come away less inclined to consider Christianity than they were before having "died."

Supernatural Deceptions

All of this leads to the heart and soul of this whole question about what happens at death. According to the Bible, the first outright lie Satan had told humanity dealt with death. In the guise of a serpent, Satan in Eden said to Eve, "You shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4) if she ate from the tree, even though God had said that she would die if she ate from it. The lie worked so well then that the devil has been promoting it, in one form or another, ever since.

Look at this text, "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his

angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world ..." (Revelation 12:7-9).

Satan deceives the whole world. So how does he do that? By, among other things, making billions believe that the dead, in one realm or another, are still alive, and in some cases they can communicate with us. And that's just what he has done all through the millennia with the idea—found in almost every false religion, cult, spiritualist, and New-Age teaching, as well as nearly all of Christianity itself—that we have some sort of immortal soul that lives on after death. In other words, virtually everyone believes what he told Eve in Eden, "You shall not surely die."

Accordingly, it is crucial that no one falls for Satan's lies. As long as anyone believes that, at death, the soul goes on living in one form or another, then that person is completely open to most occult or spiritualistic deceptions; deceptions that can easily

promote the idea, either openly or by implication, that you don't need Jesus. After all, if during an NDE, or a séance, you see blasphemous and unbelieving Aunt Sally having as much fun in death as she did in her wild life, are you going to be more inclined to accept Christ, or less? But if Aunt Sally is really unconscious in the ground, then who else but a supernatural deceiver like the devil is behind the illusion that the person you're seeing is someone or something else?

In contrast, the person—admittedly in the minority—who understands that the dead are unconscious and know nothing will never fall into this, one of Satan's most effective and dangerous deceptions. A deception that, through false Christian teachings, through spiritualism, through New-Age doctrines, and through popular Hollywood films is ensnaring billions with the false belief that we don't really die but continue to exist in another realm for all eternity. All who believe this lie is easy prey for any and every kind of demonic impersonation of loved ones, a camouflage that has led untold millions to

believe that they were communicating with the dead when that communication was really with satanic forces.

Because we are living in the final moments before Christ comes, Satan is working furiously to deceive and destroy. The Bible says in Matthew 24:24 that, if possible, he would deceive the very elect. This most cunning and dangerously devised lie, I believe, is Satan's greatest cause for our destruction.

“And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light”
(2 Corinthians 11:14).

Satan is the great deceiver, and beside his greatest deception, which is making folks believe that he isn't real, is his next greatest deception—to give us the belief that we reside in another realm after death; therefore, providing untold masses with the belief that they can communicate with the dead.

Some folks laugh at the idea of Satan, demons, and evil angels. Still the fact remains: a majority of people on earth believe in things

like angels and demons, so the matter hardly is controversial. Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism all teach the existence of these supernatural beings.

The Dead in Christ Shall Rise First

Maybe this is a stunning revelation. Maybe you're sad, upset, angry. Yes, the dead don't immediately go soaring to heaven or plunge into hell. Instead, they all rest in the ground. Katie, that sweet child, is "sleeping in her grave." When her life ended that day, as cold as it sounds, her consciousness ended as well.

But if that's true, then where is the hope of eternal life when Christians ultimately settle in the same place as non-Christians, and that is in a cold and dark grave?

The hope is found to which we have alluded from the beginning, in the resurrection to eternal life, which will happen for Christ's followers at His second coming. That's where the promises of all things eternal come to full fruition.

Consider the following texts that deal with the second coming. Read them in light

of what we have learned, which is that the dead are asleep, awaiting the return of Jesus when they will be resurrected.

At the same time, what could these verses mean if the dead were already in heaven with Jesus?

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16; NKJV). *How could they rise if they are already in heaven?*

“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:30, 31; NKJV). *Who’s He gathering if they are already with Him in heaven?*

“I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where

I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2,3; NKJV). *How does that make sense if they are already with Him in paradise?*

“And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. ... No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:39, 40, 44).

“But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the first fruits; afterward

they that are Christ's at his coming"
(1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

All these texts teach that at second coming, the dead in Christ will be resurrected and given immortality at that time. Look at the language: those who are "dead," those who are "in the graves," those who shall be "raised at the last day," those who are "dead in Christ" shall all be resurrected to eternal life when Christ returns. *That's* when they're given their eternal reward and not immediately after they die.

"Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall 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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put

on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: *‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’*” (1 Corinthians 15:51-55, NKJV).

It is then, at Jesus’ second coming, that “death is swallowed up in victory,” that the graves are opened, that all those who died in the Lord “put on incorruption.” It’s then, and only then, that our mortality is changed into immortality, and we begin the eternal life of peace, joy, and happiness that we all desire.

Taking a Stand

How much clearer could the Scriptures be? We die, and we sleep in the ground until Christ returns, and then those who are “in Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:14), those who have given themselves to Him in faith, are raised to eternal life in Him at the second coming. The Bible does teach, too, that the lost dead—who like the saved are also sleeping in the grave—are also to be resurrected, where

they face judgment, and then are eternally *destroyed*, which is vastly different from being eternally tormented, another common but false belief.

But the question arises, *Didn't many good and faithful Christians all through the ages, and even many today, believe the first view, the view that the dead continue living?* Yes, as we said in the beginning, that's the most popular position. But it's also dead wrong. We're not judging these folks, their hearts, their motives, or anything else; we're simply saying that, on this important teaching, they are mistaken.

The question for us is, *What position do we take, the popular one, the one that does leave millions, even billions, open for terrible deceptions; or do we take the biblical one, the one firmly rooted in Scripture, the one that secures us from some of Satan's cruelest tricks?*

Only we can make the choice for ourselves.

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, *shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto*

all them also that love his appearing"
(2 Timothy 4:8; emphasis supplied).

What a wonderful message in contrast to Satan's lie. He knows that his time is short, and so he's doing everything possible to lure people into believing error and things that will lead to their eternal loss.

But right now, you have the knowledge to build an effective defense against his deceptions. Even more so, you can help family, friends, and neighbors by teaching them these truths. Use this booklet as a tool, and share it with them.

Or, even better yet, read and share the larger book *Secrets Beyond the Grave* with your colleagues because it explores these same topics. The *Secrets* book can be ordered from Remnant Publications' web site www.RemnantPublications.com, by calling 1-800-423-1319, or by mail at PO Box 426, Coldwater, MI 49036. This book probes more deeply into the human condition after death as well as into other themes regarding Satan's final deceptions.