

I was recently talking to a young man in China. As we started talking about the subject of death, he said, "But nobody can know for sure what happens after a person dies." To his surprise, I replied, "I know for sure." Less than two weeks after our conversation, my oldest brother Dan suddenly died in his mid-fifties. He started having headaches and went to the hospital where he was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia resulting in blood clots. Within a couple days he was dead, and my family was heartbroken, but we were heartbroken with hope and you can be too. Paul said, "I don't want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep (died), lest you sorrow as others who have no hope" (1 Thes. 4:13).

Many of us have lost loved ones who were very close to us, and yet most people are confused about what happens after death, mainly because they don't know how life began. The key to understanding the mystery of death is first to find out how life began. Once we know this, we may know for certain what happens after this life. Fortunately, the Bible gives us the answer to this mystery. It says life began when "God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). We are told that God breathed the breath of life into man. According to the Bible, dust plus breath equals life.

Since the Greek word for breath and spirit are used interchangeably, this has led to some confusion in the Christian world, but a proper understanding of this helps clarify the issue. Let me illustrate. The Bible says, "the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit [or breath] will return to God who gave it" (Eccl. 12:7). While some think this means the spirit goes straight to heaven, this is actually saying that when we die, the breath of life returns to God. Psalms confirms this, stating, "You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust" (Ps. 104:29). Just as life came from breath and dust, death comes when God removes the breath, and we return to dust.

Again, some use the verse that says "the spirit will return to God who gave it" to claim that the dead are now in heaven, but the same author tells us just before this that "the dead know nothing" and their memory "is forgotten," adding that "there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (Eccl. 12:7; 9:5, 10). Many pastors have used the former verse to claim that the dead are still alive while ignoring the latter verses, but in the context, we see that Solomon was not saying the spirit goes straight to heaven at death. He was saying that when we die, God removes the breath of life, and we return to the dust where we enter a state of complete unconsciousness.

The idea that the soul goes straight to heaven or hell did not come from the Bible. Rather, it came from the doctrine of the immortal soul which entered the church when God's people mingled with pagan nations. The doctrine that the soul is immortal and cannot die is a pagan doctrine that is not found in the Bible. The Bible consistently refers to people as "mortal" with a "mortal body" (Job 4:17; Rom. 6:12). In fact, Paul says, "the Lord of Lords, who alone has immortality," is inherently immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). If God is the only One who is immortal, then man must be mortal, which means the soul and spirit do not continue to live after death, but rest in the grave until the resurrection.

The Bible goes on to explain that immortality is a gift believers will receive at the resurrection. John 3:16 says whoever believes in Jesus "should not perish but have everlasting life." Notice the contrast. Those who don't believe will perish, while those who believe will receive immortality, or everlasting life. Paul says, "the dead will be raised," and then "this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:52, 53). Again, immortality is a gift given to the righteous at the resurrection and not before. Although we are mortal, Christ has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel," so we must "seek for glory, honor, and immortality" (2 Tim. 1:10; Rom. 2:7).

When Jesus comes back, God's people will be given the gift of immortality. At that time, "the dead in Christ will rise" up out of their graves (1 Thes. 4:16). Think about that for a moment. If people went straight to heaven or hell when they die, then why would we need a resurrection? And how would that work? Would God put our spirits back into our bodies? No, while Christianity has adopted the idea that the soul or spirit continues to live after we die, going straight to heaven or hell, or perhaps floating around this earth to help or haunt the living, the Bible says just the opposite, stating that the body simply rests "in the grave" until our "change comes" (Job 14:13, 14).

Until the resurrection, the body rests in the grave in a sort of sleep without dreams. That's why Jesus referred to being "dead" as "taking a rest in sleep" (John 11:13, 14). The condition of death is described as "silence" and "darkness" (Ps. 115:17; Job 17:13). You don't see or hear or feel anything until the resurrection. Finally, when Jesus returns, "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). When Christ returns, "all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28, 29).

While some may go the grave to talk to their dead loved ones, the Bible says, "His sons come to honor, and he does not know it" (Job 14:21). In spite of popular opinion, the Bible says the dead do not hear the words spoken to them because they are not in heaven listening. They are waiting in the grave. We are told that even David, one of the heroes of faith in the Bible, is "dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day... For David did not ascend into the heavens" (Acts 2:29, 34). According to the Bible, we don't go straight to heaven or hell, but wait in the grave until "the resurrection of the dead" when God will "raise us up by His power" (1 Cor. 15:21; 6:14).

While some base their beliefs on near death experiences, encounters with dead loved ones, or on mediums and those who channel the dead,

these apparitions are not really from the dead, but “spirits of demons, performing signs,” for we know that “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (Rev. 16:14; 2 Cor. 11:14). Satan and his angels can easily impersonate the dead. That is why God warned His people to avoid those who conjure “a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord” (Deut. 18:11, 12). God strictly warned against speaking to the dead because these dark arts do not conjure up the dead, but evil spirits.

While the Bible repeatedly affirms that the dead are asleep in the grave, many refuse to believe the plain teachings of the Bible because it feels better to believe their loved ones are watching over them, or perhaps because of some supernatural experience they had, but we must not trust things based on feelings, or even experience. The Bible is our only safeguard against the deceptions of the devil. Those who accept the idea of the immortal soul have left an open door for Satan to communicate with them. Our only safety lies in God’s word. As hard as it may be, we must lean implicitly on the Bible. In the end, those who do so will find that everything will turn out alright.

The good news is that we do not have to “be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.” While death brings seasons of sorrow, we can have hope beyond the grave because death was defeated when Jesus rose from the grave! Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 5:24). While the dead are resting now, the day is coming when death will finally come to an end. Then we can finally say, “there shall be no more death” because through Christ, “Death is swallowed up in victory” (Rev. 21:4).

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