AFTER DEATH—WHAT?

Catechism Two, Lesson 25

Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:8

1. What Is Death?

Death is the separation of man’s soul and spirit from his body, and the entrance into eternity. The most common Greek word for death is thanatos (than-a-tos), which means “decease; the termination of earthly existence; the deprivation of all that makes life on earth possible.” Death involves three important changes:

(1) The suspension of personal union between the physical body and the soul and spirit.

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain.… Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it (Eccl. 12:6, 7).

(2) The return of the body’s chemical elements to dust (decay or corruption).

… for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return (Gen. 3:19).

(3) The entrance of the soul and spirit into a new state of existence, awaiting resurrection of the body and judgment by God.

And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

2. Is The Bible The Only Authority Concerning Life After Death?

Yes. Nevertheless, questions about what happens after death have plagued man since Abel died. Men have sought all kinds of means to find out what happens after the soul and spirit has left the body of a loved one. This has led to all kinds of superstition and magic. But definitive knowledge about life, death, and what follows death can be found only in the Bible. Jesus Christ Himself is the only man to die and experience all that transpires afterward and still come back to tell us about it. This makes Him the final authority.

I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death (Rev. 1:18).

A. Death is not annihilation.

Some teach that death means the total disintegration of all that pertains to the person. They teach that through death the person simply ceases to exist. But neither the Old or New Testament teaches such a doctrine. The Bible emphasizes eternal continuity of the person.

B. Resurrection is not reincarnation.

Others teach that death is simply a process of rebirth, that we will come back in some other form. At the root of this idea is the antibiblical idea of karma which stresses the repetition of life in different forms

until one’s soul is good enough to earn eternal rest. Such an idea is totally foreign to the grace of God. The companion teaching called “transmigration of souls” emphasizes that we come back in new forms many different times. The Bible stresses the importance of our God-given identity. We shall be changed to be like Him, but we will be the person God always intended us to be.

3. Is There Any Difference In The Death Of The Christian And The Non-Christian?

Yes. In order to understand the difference, we must first consider the makeup of the human being. This is defined in Genesis 2:7:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

God originally made man to consist of three parts: a soul, a body, and a spirit. We call this a “trichotomy.” Man did not remain in this condition; he sinned. As the result of this sin, his spirit no longer ruled within him. Instead, his spirit and soul became mingled together. Fallen man thus became two parts or a “dichotomy.” This is whyunregenerate man is “soulish” and is unable to know spiritual things.

When man is born again, his spirit is restored to its rightful place. It is made alive again by the Spirit of God (Eph. 2:1). We are born again of the water and of the Spirit, because only that which is born of Spirit is spirit (John 3:3–6). We become a new person through the new birth—a complete person for the first time in our life. This makes a difference in what happens at the time of physical death.

A. The body of the believer and the unbeliever undergo the same changes in death.

When the soul and spirit leave the body, the body ceases to function. Decay begins. Since this part of death follows natural law, it makes no difference what the spiritual condition of the soul was when the body died.

B. The spirit and soul of the believer are carried into the presence of God at death.

The difference is in what happens to the soul and spirit. The Christian need not fear the transition from earthly existence to eternal existence. God is with him all the way—He is our guide even unto death. Paul talks about this transition as being absent from the body to be present with the Lord. Angels carry the believer’s spirit and soul into God’s presence to await resurrection and judgment. This place is called “Paradise.” It is a place of conscious pleasure and freedom from pain.

C. The spirit and soul of the unbeliever continue in separation from God.

The unbeliever actually experiences two deaths—two distinct kinds of separation. The first death is the physical death common to all men, the separation of soul and spirit from the body. The second death is spiritual separation from God, an everlasting banishment from His presence. When physical death comes to an unbeliever, his spirit and soul leave his body and are carried to a place in the center of the earth to await the last judgment. This place is called Hades or Sheol.

4. How Has God Removed The Fear Of Death For The Christian?

God does not want any of us who are in Christ to suffer the bondage that fear of death brings upon us. Jesus has already removed death’s sting and demonstrated that the grave has no lasting victory. He has destroyed the one who for so long tormented man with threats about death, Satan himself. The writer to the Hebrews declares:

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Heb. 2:14, 15).

The Apostle Paul not only had no fear of death; he actually anticipated it. His only conflict was between his desire to finish the work he knew was needed here for the Church, and his desire to enjoy God’s unveiled presence after death. Why could Paul face death with such confidence? He knew something. It was real to him that Jesus Christ had destroyed all the terror in death. Paul triumphantly declared:

… Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54–57).

The sting of death can be removed from surviving loved ones when they come to realize that the departed one is better off now than when on earth. We do not sorrow as those who have no hope. We can experience the normal process of grief which comes to us because we have lost someone precious to us. But we have the hope of eternal reunion. We shall one day go to the one we lost, if we know the same Lord.

5. How Does The New Testament Picture Death?

Since death is something we have not experienced yet, it is difficult to talk about it in words alone. The Holy Spirit uses many word pictures to help us see what lies ahead of us in terms of things we already do understand.

A. Death is compared to sleep.

Jesus used the word “sleep” when He spoke of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:11). Jesus well knew that Lazarus’ actual state was one of death. He simply chose to speak in softened terms. He wanted to emphasize the fact that Lazarus would awaken.

Luke, the author of Acts, uses this same idea in writing of the stoning of the first martyr, Stephen. The record says simply “…he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60).

The Apostle Paul, looking ahead to the sounding of the trumpet which will awaken all who have died in Christ, also holds out the hope that some of us may never “sleep” at all (1 Cor. 15:51).

This word “sleep” is used many times to show us that death brings release from care and anxiety—the cares and perplexities of this life are finished. And they are!

B. Death is considered a departure.

Paul wrote to Timothy, “The time of my departure has come” (2 Tim. 4:6). He used the Greek word analysis which sounds very much like our English word “analysis.” It means “to cut loose, to free someone from chains, to break camp, to raise anchor, or to dissolve a substance into its elements.” Paul was really saying, “I am ready to cut the rope that ties me to this life, I am pulling up anchor in order to sail into a bigger world.” Paul rejoiced that his moorings were about to be loosed; he had fought a good fight of faith while living upon this earth. He was ready for something better.

C. Death is really an exodus.

When the children of Israel left Egypt, they left a land of bondage and sorrow for something better. The only problem was that they did not know exactly what details this would involve. They had to trust the God who was leading them out, that He would also lead them into their inheritance. Peter was thinking of the similarities we face when called to leave this world and enter God’s eternal provisions for us. We face uncertainty as to detail but we know the character of our God. Peter wrote:

Moreover, I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease [exodus] to have these things always in remembrance (2 Pet. 1:15).

Peter knew he would be leaving his earthly body behind very soon; but he was expectant. God had something wonderful planned for him at the end of his journey through death.

D. Death is “putting off the tabernacle” (2 Peter 1:14).

If we used tents more often, this would readily bring something to mind. Paul and Peter both speak of this same idea: they will take down this earthly tent in order to receive a permanent dwelling place which is more suitable to their soul and spirit. Paul talks about being unclothed in order to be clothed upon with immortality. In other words, he has outgrown the need for these temporary earthly clothes and wants more suitable attire. Paul does not want to dispose of his earthly body in order to be naked; he simply wants to be ready for God’s new provision.

E. Death is going to “Abraham’s bosom.”

This was a familiar term of endearment to the Jews of Jesus’ time. It spoke not only of rest but of family belonging. This term referred to the condition of the righteous after death. Abraham was the founder of the Jewish nation—their father. To “lie in one’s bosom” referred to a custom at that time of reclining on couches; to eat, propped up by one arm. Those closest to the host were considered in positions of honor—a place reserved only for special friends. To be in Abraham’s bosom spoke of honor, of fellowship, and of rest—enjoying a closeness to all who had preceded one in death.

6. Does The Method Of Burial In Any Way Affect Resurrection?

No. What happens to the physical body in no way determines what happens to the soul and spirit. The decisions which make a difference here are made in this life—are we “in Christ” or not?

Regardless of how we dispose of the corpse, it will sooner or later decay and return to its original components. Corruption is a part of the sentence of death which was passed onto mankind through Adam. The Lord God told Adam and Eve, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). After death, the body dissolves into the chemical elements of which it is composed. By a natural process, these elements are absorbed into the earth. However, the miracle of resurrection is that God through the word of His power can raise the original person even after such total disintegration!

Cremation, the burning of the corpse, is simply a speeding up of this process of decomposition. The Bible does not prohibit cremation; it does give countless examples of burial. It does not matter whether the body goes into dissolution in low gear or high gear. Anthropologists have classified a number of ways various tribes and groups disposed of their dead. Burial was the common method used in Bible times, but this choice is evidently a matter of Christian liberty.

Home Study: Lesson 25

Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the most common Greek word for death?

2. What two errors must we avoid when teaching about death and resurrection?

a. —the teaching that

b. —the teaching that

3. What happens to the soul and spirit of the believer after death?

4. What happens to the soul and spirit of the unbeliever after death?

5. What is the difference between the first and second death?