



COMFORT
FOR THOSE
WHO SORROW

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Some Questions and Answers

Are you in sorrow because someone dear to you has been taken away in death? The experience is hard and often difficult, and leaves a terrible emptiness in the lives of those who remain. Questions often arise in the minds and hearts of those bereaved. Will we ever see our loved ones again? Are they happy now, and will we join them one day in their happiness?

Why do people die? Some would be inclined to answer that it is natural for people to grow old and die, but the weakness of this answer is that millions die before they grow old. Death is no respecter of persons and strikes down young and old, saint and sinner alike. Whether it is an infant or an old person who dies, the final parting comes as a blow, and often a shock to those who are left. There is really no such thing as a natural death, for death is unnatural and generally unwanted.

God has given us answers to our questions and clear explanations, as well as His plans for the human race, in His revealed Word, the Bible. God has explained in the Bible that people die because of sin, not any individual sin or sins of each one who dies, but original sin, the sin of disobedience on the part of our first parents. God's chosen apostle, Paul, explains that *"sin entered into the world, and death by sin."* (Romans 5:12)

By heredity we are all members of a dying race, and we should always remember this when death takes someone we love. Remembering this helps us to realise that this tragic experience is not due to our lack of interest or care, and that it is not a special punishment either upon the one who has died or upon those who remain. Death came upon all people because of the disobedience of Adam and the consequence which followed. God said, *"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."* (Genesis 2:16).

Our loved ones die because *"in Adam all die"*; but we can take comfort in the wonderful promise of God that just as all in Adam die, *"even so in Christ shall all be made alive."* (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Some Traditional Beliefs

Many Christians and non Christians believe that each of us has a "soul" which continues to live after the body dies, and that this undying or immortal "soul" then goes either to heaven or to hell as God decides. These matters of an alleged "soul", "heaven" and "hell" need fuller discussion than is appropriate in this booklet, but some brief comments are now offered for the reader's consideration.

The Bible tells us that the first man was formed from the dust of the ground, and God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so that Adam, the first man, became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7) Adam did not receive a soul, he became a soul, that is, a living sentient being, when he commenced to breathe. There is no mention in the Genesis account of immortality, and no justification in God's word for believing that Adam, or any of his descendants, possessed two attributes, a body and a soul.

The word "soul" occurs nearly a thousand times in the Old and New Testaments together, but the expression "immortal soul" is never to be found anywhere in the Bible. In fact the contrary is said by Ezekiel in chapter 18 verse 4: *"The soul that sins shall die."* Furthermore, Christians are told to seek immortality, (Romans 2:7), a clear indication that they do not now possess it.

"Heaven" in the Bible is the realm where God dwells, and where the Lord Jesus Christ also dwells with Him, as also do the heavenly angels. It is a realm of spirit beings, about which we know virtually nothing. But we do know that *"no one has ascended into heaven"* except Jesus Christ, as He Himself said in John 3:13. God's promise to the human race generally is eternal life on earth, not in heaven, as we say a little further on in the section "The Heavenly Promise".

"Hell" is traditionally understood as a place or realm of fire and torment by burning. This understanding is based unfortunately on misunderstandings of sections of the Bible and on false theology.

The word "hell" occurs thirty-one times in the Old Testament, and in every case is a translation of the word "sheol" which means "the grave". The Hebrew word "sheol" has no hint of fire or torment in its meaning.

The New Testament is more complicated, because the English word "hell" is a translation of three Greek words, "hades", "tartaroo" and "Gehenna". The Greek word "hades" corresponds to

the Hebrew word "sheol" and means simply "the grave". "Tartaroo" means "the deep" or "an abyss" and is used only once, while "Gehenna" signifies the "Valley of Hinnom", a deep and narrow ravine with steep, rocky sides, situated outside Jerusalem. The Valley of Hinnom was used as the garbage destruction of the city, and fires were kept burning there to consume the city's rubbish. No person other than executed criminals was ever thrown into the fires of the Valley of Hinnom.

When "Gehenna", translated as "hell" occurs in the New Testament (it occurs eleven times), it is used symbolically to signify destruction, based on the literal destruction of the refuse cast into the Valley of Hinnom. A fuller discussion on the use of the word "hell" in the New Testament is to be found in our book "Everlasting Punishment" available free on request.

When the Bible was first translated into English in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the word "hell" did not have the meaning that it has come to have today. The word "hell" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word "helan" which meant a covering or concealment, so that the word "hell" meant a place that was covered or concealed. There was no thought in earlier centuries of fire or torment in the word "hell". The word "hell" has undergone a change of meaning and now conveys the notion of suffering and burning in fire, a notion for which false theology is to blame.

Patient and careful study of the Bible reveals that the teaching of eternal torment is not to be found there. The teaching that God will condemn millions of earth's peoples to be tormented forever in a fiery hell falsely attributes to God the motives and actions of a fiend.

God will finally destroy even death itself. Paul told us this in 1 Corinthians 15:26: *"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."* In the Revelation, John wrote, *"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire."* (Revelation 20:14).

In the Bible "fire" is frequently used to mean destruction, and that is what will happen in the future Kingdom Age to Satan, persistent and wilful evil doers, false systems, corrupt organisations and governments. Fire in the Bible never means "eternal torment". Fuller and more detailed discussion of these important matters may be found in our books "Everlasting Punishment" and "The Few and the Many" available free on request.

So, on the authority of God's word, the Bible, we affirm that there is no such place or realm as a fiery hell, and consequently no-one need be concerned about loved ones coming under condemnation to a place or realm that does not exist.

Death Is Likened To Sleep

The record of the raising of Lazarus to life after he had died provides us with some very enlightening and encouraging thoughts. Jesus was a special friend of the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, and, when Lazarus became ill, Mary and Martha evidently took it for granted that Jesus would come and help them. They sent a message to Jesus, *"Lord, the one you love is sick."* (John 11:3)

Jesus received this message but did nothing about it for two days. Finally He said to His disciples, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."* (John 11:11).

This statement seemed to surprise Jesus' disciples, and they replied, *"Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."* In other words they thought it would be unwise to awaken a sick man who was resting quietly in sleep. It would be better to let him continue sleeping. They did not understand what Jesus meant, *"so then he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead."* (John 11:14) In other words Jesus gave us a true and also a comforting viewpoint of death. It is likened to sleep, meaning that those who are dead are at rest, waiting for the Lord Jesus to call and awaken them from the sleep of death.

There are two main characteristics of sleep. One is that those who are asleep are not conscious, they are not aware of what is happening in the world around them. They are neither sorrowful nor happy and are not concerned with problems or cares. A second characteristic of sleep is that there is the expectation of an awakening and a return to active life again.

After announcing His intention to His disciples, Jesus journeyed to Bethany and the home of His friends, Martha and Mary. Martha met Him as He approached their home and said, *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Jesus then said to her, *"Your brother will rise again."* (John 11:23) In these words the great hope of the Bible for all who have died is expressed: they shall live again.

Martha knew and believed the Old Testament prophecies declaring that the dead would one day be restored to life. She said, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

She probably had in mind such statements as that of the patriarch Job, who asked the question, *"If a man dies, will he live again?"* Job answers his own question by saying, *"I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made."* (Job 14: 14,15).

Martha would also have been aware of the promise made prophetically by God concerning the little children who were killed at Herod's command when Jesus was born as a baby in Bethlehem. The Lord said to the grieving mothers, *"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears ... They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future, ... Your children will return to their own land."* (Jeremiah 31: 16,17) We know that these prophetic words were meant to comfort the mothers of Bethlehem, because Matthew tells us so in his gospel, chapter two, verses 17 and 18.

Resurrection and the Last Day

Martha said to Jesus, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."* (John 11:24) What did Martha mean by the "resurrection" and the "last day"? "Resurrection" is a translation of the Greek word "anastasis" (Strong's concordance reference 386) and means simply "standing up again".

The "last day" is the time in God's plan for the salvation and recovery of the human race from sin and death. "Day" is used as a period of time, just as we frequently speak of periods of time as "days" in such expressions as "in my day", "the present day", "in days of old", and as sometimes used in God's Word, "in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens" (Genesis 2:4). The "last day" in God's plan is actually a thousand years in length, and is a time of salvation and blessing for the whole human race. (Revelation 20: 4,6).

Jesus confirmed Martha's faith by saying *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. "* (John 11:25) *"Do you believe this?"* Jesus asked Martha, and Martha replied, *"Yes Lord, ... I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."* (John 11: 26,27).

Even in Martha's day there had been more than four thousand years of dying. Her own brother had died, so she knew that if God's promises to bless all people through Christ were to be fulfilled, those asleep in death would need to be awakened, and she believed that Jesus was the One Who would do that.

Jesus confirmed the truth of His words by raising Lazarus from the dead to normal life again, even though he had been dead for four days. (John 11: 43,44) But this was a demonstration of Jesus' future power and authority. Lazarus would have died again, and would sleep in the grave until Jesus would call him back to life again in the resurrection to come.

Another instance of Jesus' likening of death to sleep occurred when Jesus was asked by a certain ruler whose daughter had died to come to his house and lay His hand upon her to restore her to life. When Jesus entered the ruler's house, He said to the crowd of people and the musicians who were there, "*The girl is not dead but asleep.*" It is written that they laughed at Him, but He went in and raised the girl to life again. (Matthew 9: 18, 23-26)

Here, as in the case of Lazarus, Jesus referred to death as being merely a sleep, because from God's intention to provide life through Christ, there is to be an awakening of all earth's millions held captive in death, when the morning of the day of Christ's reign shall dawn, the time when God's kingdom has finally begun. This future time is the time when the words of the Lord's Prayer will be fulfilled, "*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*" (Matthew 6:10)

It is God's plan to awaken everyone from the sleep of death. The apostle Paul said that "*there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.*" (Acts 24:15) Jesus also said that "*a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be judged.*" (John 5: 28,29)

The Bible Has Foretold These Last Times

The resurrection, the standing up again, is a fundamental teaching of the Christian faith, and is mentioned many times throughout the Bible.

Many scientists and secular thinkers have sought to discredit the Bible and continue to attack its recorded events and claims. Such opposition and attacks will not be discussed here, but suffice it to say that the Bible has foretold these developments. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*There will be terrible times in the last days,*" (2 Timothy 3:1), while the Apostle Peter wrote, "*...you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.*" (2 Peter 3:3).

Jesus Himself prophesied that there would be upon the earth "*distress of nations with perplexity,*" and that the hearts of people would fail them for fear as they contemplated the things coming upon the earth. (Luke 21: 25,26) Jesus' reference to the fear that would fill the hearts of people seems sufficient to indicate that He was referring to the present time, for never before has there been such widespread fear among earth's peoples of the dangers of continued warfare, ongoing starvation and suffering of millions, and the ever-present threat of terrorism.

The Sure and Certain Hope For Everyone

Christians need not fear what is coming upon the earth because they have faith in God through Jesus Christ and in what the Scriptures declare concerning today and tomorrow. To know the plan of God for the human race is to have peace and joy in our hearts and minds, in spite of the fear by which we are surrounded. Committed Christians also are in a position to give comfort and assurance to others.

We are now living in a time near the end of the world. This will not mean the end of our earth, because God has promised that "*the earth remains forever.*" (Ecclesiastes 1:4) The end of the world means the end of this order of things in all its aspects - social, economic, political and religious - prior to the setting up of God's just and righteous kingdom under the rulership of Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God under Jesus Christ will be a time of peace, safety and security which the world's peoples have never known. The blessings to come as promised by God are recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. Isaiah writes, "*The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.*" (Isaiah 35:1,2) "*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue should for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.*" (Isaiah 35:5, 6) John in the Revelation writes, "*God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4).

It is difficult for us to imagine a world in which there is no death, but God has promised that it shall be so, and Christians can believe His promise, take heart and be comforted. To those who may read these promises, we say also: do not lose hope, because you will see your loved ones again, and because of Christ's power, never be parted from them ever again.

The Heavenly Promise

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus told us to say, "*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" (Matthew 6:10) The promise to the human race is a world order of peace and security. Human beings will be raised to life again to live forever, if they will, on this earth.

But Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers tell us of a special invitation to Christian believers in this present Gospel Age. The invitation to each Christian believer is to qualify by faith and obedience to be changed from a human being to a spirit being, and assist God's King, Jesus Christ, in the future promised work of blessing all nations and all families of the earth (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; Hebrews 6: 13-18; Galatians 3: 8,16; 1Corinthians 15:49).

The promise is only to a "*little flock*" (Luke 12:32). No-one knows who are members of this "little flock", but anyone and everyone is eligible to qualify by faith and obedience to Jesus Christ and to God through Him for as long as this Gospel Age lasts.

Christian believers are all earnestly recommended by Jesus and the New Testament writers to continue their lives in faith and obedience to qualify for an inheritance "*reserved in heaven.*" (1 Peter 1:4) The heavenly inheritance is not one of ease or idleness, but one of actively assisting Jesus Christ, God's rightful King, in bringing life and happiness to the whole human race on an unpolluted, productive and fully restored earth.

What Next?

The promises of God of unimagined blessings to the human race and to the earth on which we live occur frequently in the Bible. It is difficult to understand why so little is said about them. Some of the main blessings promised can be found in:

Daniel 2:44
Isaiah 35 (the whole chapter)
Isaiah 65 (the whole chapter)
Isaiah 2:3, 4
Amos 9:13
2 Peter 3:13
Revelation 21:1-7
Revelation 22:17



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