

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

by Gordon Ferguson

Introduction

Probably all religious people have questions about what happens when we die. Many of them believe that we cease to exist at death until the resurrection at the end of time. Some of the people in this category believe this doctrine simply through a basic ignorance of what the Bible teaches about the subject. Others who believe the soul cessation doctrine are a part of groups with specific teachings designed to substantiate their views. Among these groups are the Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and others.

Perhaps more pertinent to many of us is the idea that we go directly to heaven when we die. Certainly Paul talked about dying and being with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), but does that really mean that we go to heaven at death? If so, this would mean that we would return at the resurrection to be re-united with our body (changed into a spiritual body), and then face Judgment. That would seem a rather strange sequence of events, and perhaps a bit anticlimactic. Of course, the issue is not what seems good or bad to us, but rather what the Bible actually teaches. The purpose of this study is to determine in somewhat of a comprehensive manner what the Bible does teach about the subject of what happens immediately at our death.

Those who mistakenly believe that the "sleep" of death (1 Corinthians 15:51) includes both body and spirit often come to this conclusion because of a limited knowledge biblically. For example, a failure to understand the background purpose of the Book of Ecclesiastes leads to inaccurate conclusions about this subject. The background is that the author is showing that "life under the sun" is meaningless, in contrast to life viewed with heaven's perspective, which is meaningful. Yet a cursory reading of the book can lead to confusion.

Note some of the statements in Ecclesiastes about the nature of man which seem to teach the "soul sleep" doctrine. "Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth (3:21)?" "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten (9:5)." If the passages are allowed to stand alone, without knowing the context of them, it would be natural to assume that man has no conscious existence apart from the body. However, the whole of biblical teaching on the subject cannot be harmonized with this view, as even Ecclesiastes will show. Consider the writer's comments in chapter 12, as he is now moving to his conclusion – the necessity of gaining a spiritual perspective of life and not simply "life under the sun" (verses 12-13). He writes: "and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (12:7).

Coming To Terms With Terms

The JW's often go back to Genesis 2:7 in developing their doctrine, which reads: "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" (King James Version). They go on show that the same Hebrew word translated "soul" here (nephesh) is used in other places in reference to animals.

For example, Genesis 2:19 states: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” Here, creature is from *nephesh*. So the JW argument is that man does not have a soul; he is a soul.

Of course, the Hebrew word *nephesh*, and the Greek equivalent, *psuche*, can be used simply to denote the animate life of God’s creatures. But it can also be used to denote the inner being of man which is unique to him of all God’s creatures, and which survives the body at death. In this usage, it refers to what the Bible also calls “spirit.” Of course, spirit is another word with variations of meaning, but one clear meaning it connotes is the inner part of man made in God’s image. God is spirit, and when Genesis 1:26 informs us that man was created in God’s image, it must of necessity refer to this nature. Sometimes the terms *soul* and *spirit* are used interchangeably in the OT (Job 7:11; Isaiah 26:9), and twice in the NT, soul and spirit are differentiated (1 Thessalonians 5:34; Hebrews 4:12). In the latter instance, the soul would refer simply to the animate life which all creatures share and the spirit would refer to the spiritual part of us made in God’s image.

We noted earlier that our spirit returns to God at death. Zechariah 12:1 and Hebrews 12:9 inform us that God is the father of our spirits. In the Hebrews passage, the writer contrasts our earthly fathers, from whom we receive our physical bodies through the act of procreation, and God, the father of our spirits. Therefore, the part of us given directly by God that results in our being made in his image is the part that lives past our physical death. As James 2:26 says, “the body without the spirit is dead.” He does not say that the spirit without the body is dead. When death occurs, the spirit simply leaves the body. In this vein, note the wording of Genesis 35:18 in the New American Standard Version (which is literal in its use of the word “soul” here): “And it came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.” The more we understand about the nature of man, the more we see that he is primarily a soul who happens to live in a body, not a body who happens to have a soul.

Life After Death in the Old Testament

In the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE), the writer of the article “Death” had this to say: “For we are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea, that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness, and is nowhere found in the Old Testament.” This statement reflects a common sentiment, but is it really true? I don’t think so, although the lack of a developed OT doctrine of life after death would not necessarily militate against the NT developing such a doctrine. Two other word usages are important to us at this juncture, the OT *sheol* and the Greek *hades*. Sheol is most often translated “grave” in the NIV, and *hades* is often translated the same. But other literal translations such as the NAS most often render both words as they are, in a transliterated state, simply out of the ambiguity involved. Interestingly, another article in ISBE by another author, under the heading “Hades,” gives a different slant on the subject:

The Greek conception of Hades was that of a locality receiving into itself all the dead, but divided into two regions, one a place of torment, the other of blessedness. This conception should

not be rashly transferred to the New Testament, for the latter stands not under the influence of Greek pagan belief, but gives a teaching and reflects a belief which model their idea of Hades upon the Old Testament through the Septuagint. The Old Testament Sheol, while formally resembling the Greek Hades in that it is the common receptacle of all the dead, differs from it, on the one hand, by the absence of a clearly defined division into two parts, and, on the other hand, by the emphasis placed on its association with death and the grave as abnormal facts following in the wake of sin. The Old Testament thus concentrates the partial light it throws on the state after death on the negative, undesirable side of the prospect apart from redemption.

Certainly the OT teaches life after death (Psalm 73:24), which could refer only to the resurrected state. The Ecclesiastes 12:7 passage quoted earlier, along with Psalm 90:10 and its reference to our “flying away” when our lives end, seem to point in a different direction. Therefore, while it certainly cannot be argued that the OT teaches *clearly* a doctrine of life immediately after death, the doctrine may be deduced from other vantage points.

One, an interesting phraseology is that used to describe death as being “gathered to his people.” Note what Jacob said to his family when his death approached: “Then he gave them these instructions: ‘I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite’” (Genesis 49:29). A few verses later, the record says: “When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people” (Genesis 49:33). In Genesis 50:5, Joseph equates being “gathered to his people” with simply dying. The following verses inform us that Jacob’s body was embalmed for forty days, transported to Canaan, during which time an additional seven day period of mourning was observed, and finally buried. Whatever else may be said, being gathered to one’s people was not simply a reference to the grave. The more likely reference is to the intermediate state after physical death and before the Judgment Day.

Two, Psalm 16 is clearly a Messianic Psalm, and verses 8-11 are quoted in Acts 2:25-28. Verses 26-27 read as follows: “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.” The word “grave” here is from *hades*, and Jesus not seeing decay physically is different from being abandoned to hades. When he died, his spirit did evidently go to hades while his body was in the tomb. (The KJV confuses the issue with its translation “thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.”) Likely 1 Peter 3:18-20 refers to this same event in Christ’s life, but the exact interpretation of it is more difficult to grasp. This passage reads:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, [19] through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison [20] who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built...

But what does 1 Peter 3 teach? Two explanations seem most plausible. First, Peter is saying that Jesus was put to death in the body but then raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit. In fact, it was through the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Christ, (1 Peter 1:11) that Jesus once preached (in the person of Noah) to the wicked people before the flood. At the present time, however, these same disobedient people are in prison (the bad side of hades). Second, Jesus was put to death in the body but made alive in his spirit (or soul). While Jesus was in the Hadean spirit world, he made a proclamation of victory to that generation from Noah’s day who had been so flagrantly disobedient. (The word *preached* in verse 19 is from the Greek *kerusso*, meaning to herald or proclaim, and not from *euaggelizomai*, meaning to preach the

gospel.) The lesson in this case was to show that God will always have the last word over even the worst persecutors! Given the context of the passage, the second view seems most likely to me, and although Jacoby once preferred the former (*Life to the Full*, 85-88), he now prefers the latter (*Questions and Answers* book, published in 2001).

Three, another OT event is alluded to in the NT, a very pertinent passage on the subject – Matthew 22:23-32. Here Jesus was talking to the Sadducees about the resurrection. It seems that this sect of Jews had a long-standing debate with the Pharisees about the resurrection. Luke’s comment in Acts 23:8 succinctly shows the differences in the two beliefs: “The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.” The Pharisee’s view of the resurrection was flawed, since they thought that we would be resurrected simply in a body like the one we had and would carry on life much as it had been before. No doubt they were constantly filled with consternation as they tried to answer the Sadducees about the woman with seven husbands. They would have had no problem envisioning a man with seven wives, but never the opposite!

Jesus showed that both groups were wrong. “Jesus replied, ‘You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. [30] At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. [31] But about the resurrection of the dead--have you not read what God said to you, [32] ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not the God of the dead but of the living’” (Matthew 22:29-32). His argument was based on the tense of a verb: “I *am* the God...” rather than “I *was* the God...” Had these patriarchs not been living in some form at the time, Jesus could not have used the present tense. Of course, Jesus also taught in many passages the resurrection of the body at the last day, but he also taught that the spirit was alive after the body had died.

New Testament Considerations

Once we come to the NT, many passages show that physical death is not the end of the matter (although it is the end of *our* matter in a physical sense!). Our soul or spirit definitely survives death. Matthew 10:28 could hardly be plainer on this point: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Revelation 6:9-10, although found in a symbolic book, has something to say on the subject: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. [10] They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’”

Just before he died on the cross, he said to one thief who was also near death: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The passage in Luke 16:19-31 about Lazarus and the rich man after their death gives us several basic truths about life after death in an intermediate state. One, hades is comprised of two parts – the bad side and the good side. We would assume that the good side is the *paradise* of which Jesus spoke to the thief, and the bad side may be the *tartarus* of 2 Peter 2:4 (“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell [*tartarus*], putting them into gloomy dungeons to be

held for judgment.”) Two, it is a place of conscious existence. Three, once you die, you cannot go from one side to the other. Four, a type of judgment at the point of is presupposed. On the latter point, Hebrews 9:27 offers further elucidation: “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” (It should be noted that some teach that Luke 16 is a parable. If so, it would be an unusual one, in that names are used. But even if it were, the truths taught would still be valid, for a parable takes an evident truth and gives it a further application. Jesus never used an *untruth* to teach a *truth*.)

As Jesus was dying, he said: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Similarly, it is said of Stephen: “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’” (Acts 7:59). The JW’s contend that the spirit of man is simply his breath, signifying his life, but the NT definitely counters this doctrine. The spirit has the characteristic of being able to choose. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41). The Holy Spirit can testify with our spirit: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16). And, our spirit can know things: “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11). Therefore, when men die, their spirits return to God, the Father of their spirits.

Acts 9:36-42 contains the story of the widow Dorcas, who was raised from the dead by Peter. In verse 37, we read: “About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.” Then in verse 39, we find: “Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.” Notice the last phrase. Even though Dorcas’ body was right there in their midst, her friends were talking about the time when “she was still with them.” In other words, her body was present but *she* was not, obviously a reference to the real her – the spirit.

Paul not only had much to say on our subject as he penned his epistles, but he recounted a personal experience that sheds further light.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. [3] And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- [4] was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

Paul was not sure whether he was in the body or out of it when this event occurred. Therefore, it could have been either. All he knew for sure is that he had seen and heard things that were not of this world. The third heaven in Jewish thinking was the realm of God’s presence. The first heaven was where the birds flew, earth’s atmosphere, and the second heaven was the abode of the stars. Hence, Paul may be saying that he was caught up to (as far as – *heos*) the third heaven, but then into (*eis*) paradise. This would mean that paradise is different than heaven, although certainly related and a wonderful place to be.

Consider next the Hebrew writer’s comments about the spirits of men: “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:22-23). It seems clear that the reference here is to

the righteous of the OT, who were ultimately cleansed by the death of Christ (see Hebrews 9:15). Hebrews 11 ends with these words about the OT worthies: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). From here, the writer goes on to talk about a “great cloud of witnesses” which surrounds us (12:1), which would likely include those just men made perfect.

Several other NT passages point to the survival of the spirit, the personality, when physical death occurs.

If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord (Romans 14:8).

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. [22] If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! [23] I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far (Philippians 1:21-23).

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. [7] We live by faith, not by sight. [8] We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment (2 Peter 2:9).

In conclusion, the Bible does teach that man’s inner being does not die at his physical death. (A related issue is whether the wicked do cease to exist after suffering adequately for their sins, but that is another study. Douglas Jacoby and Tom Jones have both written articles taking this position, and they convinced me.) It continues to exist in some state awaiting the final resurrection of the body, which in essence constitutes the re-uniting of the soul with a body, a spiritual body. Just what that intermediate state is like, we are told little or nothing. But for that matter, what are we really told about the final state of heaven? I seriously doubt that the “streets of gold” and “gates of pearl” are quite it! In one sense, life after death, whatever the state, is so unique to our physical realm that we will not understand much about it until we are there. But let’s not allow our conclusions to be either uninformed biblically or reactionary. The Greek teaching that life after death consisted only of the spirit traces back to their disdain of anything material. The biblical teaching of life after death, first in the spirit, and finally in a spiritual body, is quite a different issue. We cannot let our rejection of Greek philosophy on this point color our interpretation of the Bible itself. The Greeks were part correct and part incorrect. Let’s not throw out the truth when throwing out the error. With Paul, let us be confident that departing this body to be with Christ is very far better than anything this life has to offer!