

(12b) GHOSTS: Life After Death

J.B. Phillips, who paraphrased the New Testament in modern English, saw what looked like CS Lewis, the famous Christian philosopher, who had died some time before. Wondering what was going on, Phillips talked with another Christian leader, who told him, "This sort of thing is happening all the time, JB." Ghosts – apparently the dead trying to contact the living; near death and out of body experiences; and what about haunted houses? What happens at death? Do we go straight to heaven if we are good, and to hell if we are not so good? Others say they go to a halfway place called purgatory. Eastern religions, and now many in the west, believe the soul is recycled endlessly in a process known as reincarnation. Others believe death is like a sleep. Is there life after death at all? Can we really contact the dead? Can we find a hope that goes beyond the grave? Only the Bible provides the answers.

Jesus was helping people when a man sent from Martha and Mary burst through the crowd with a cryptic message, "*Your friend Lazarus is sick. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days*" (John 11:5, 6). Then four days too late Jesus turned up in the town of Bethany where Mary and Martha lived. And when He did, the Bible says, "*Jesus wept*" (John 11:35). God understands your loss today my friend and, He hasn't changed, He cares about you and your loved one who has passed away. Then Martha said to Jesus, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (John 11:21). At death we often blame someone, often ourselves: "*If only I had given him or her that medicine...*" or "*If only I had taken his hand and led him across the road....*" But above all we blame God. We cry ourselves to sleep as our tears soak our pillows, "*Why did you let him get killed.*" "*Why did you... Why, why?*" It is part of the grief process, and God understands our questions and our anger at Him. Jesus said to her, "*Your brother will rise again*" (John 11:23). Martha responded, "*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*" (John 11:24). Jesus responded, "*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. Do you believe this?*" (John 11:25, 26). "NEVER DIE?" "What do you mean, Jesus? Lazarus believed in you and he is dead."

Let's go back four days before this, to where Jesus was when he received the message that Lazarus was sick. Jesus responded, "*Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go, that I may wake him up.*" His disciples said, "*Lord, if he sleeps, he will get well.*" However Jesus spoke of his death: *but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead"* (John

11:11-14). Jesus called death a sleep as does the rest of the Bible. But why does the Bible call death a sleep? Solomon gives us the reason, "*For the living know that they will die: but the dead know nothing...Also their love, their hatred and their envy, have now perished*" (Ecclesiastes 9:5,6). And Job said, "*If his sons are honoured, he does not know it; if they are brought low, he does not see it*" (Job 14:21). Death is likened to a sleep because the dead know nothing – absolutely nothing! They have no sense of time or what is going on around them.

But someone says, "Don't our loved ones go to heaven at death?" However, the Bible says, "*The dead do not praise the LORD, nor any who go down into silence*" (Psalms 115:17). On the day of Pentecost Peter talked about King David, who is mentioned in Hebrew 11 with all those who turned from sin and will have eternal life. However Peter said David "*has NOT YET ASCENDED to heaven*" (Acts 2:34). This was 1000 years after his death. Let's go to Hebrews 11, which we said mentions the great people of faith like Abel, Noah, and Abraham. Speaking of all these people the Bible says, "*....They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly...for He (God) has prepared for them a city. These all died in faith...YET NONE OF THEM received what had been promised*" (Hebrews 11:16,39). Clearly none of them are yet in heaven at this point in time, which agrees with the rest of the Bible's teaching: "*So man lies down and does not rise: Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake, nor be roused from their sleep*" (Job 14:12).

So when will they wake from their death sleep? Paul, writing about death, said to his friends in Thessalonica, "*But I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep; so that you do not grieve like others do, who have no hope. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air and thus we shall always be with the Lord*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13,16,17). When Jesus returns the dead will be woken out of their sleep, according to the Bible. Imagine the reunions that will take place.

Someone says, "But isn't the soul immortal?" Soul and spirit are never called immortal in the Bible. There is no such thing in the Bible as an immortal soul. Only God is said to be immortal! "*... He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light...*" (1 Timothy

6:15,16). Notice the word ALONE – only God. No one else yet has it.

This brings us to an important question, what is a soul? Genesis provides the answer in the account of the creation of humans. *“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”* (Genesis 2:7). Notice the ingredients man was made from – the dust of the ground and the breath of life, and as a result he BECAME a living soul. Notice God did NOT put a soul IN man, rather he BECAME a living soul - Dust plus Spirit = a Living Soul, or, the Elements of the earth plus the breath = a living being. The Bible is informing us that there is no soul without a body, or elements. A living soul means a living person. Another name for “soul” in the Bible is “person” or a “life.” This is why the text, *“The soul who sins shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:4), is translated, *“The PERSON who sins is the one who will die”* (Ezekiel 18:4), in Today’s English Version. Thus according to the Bible a soul is a complete person and MUST have a body to be a soul. God did not put a soul IN man, man BECAME A SOUL.

Death is creation in reverse: *“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it”* (Ecclesiastes 12:7). The word translated spirit from the Hebrew Old Testament is “ruach”, which means, breath or wind. In the Bible the spirit and soul are different – they are not the same thing. Remember God breathed BREATH or SPIRIT into Man, and Man BECAME a living soul or person. At death the soul or person goes back to dust. The spirit or breath of life – the power of life - goes back to God. The Bible teaches that the breath and the spirit are the same thing: *“As long as my BREATH is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils”* (Job 27:3). You can see that the breath and the spirit are the same. No one believes that some ghostly thing lives in our noses. It means the breath or wind or air. Which is why the New Testament says, *“... the body without the spirit (or breath) is dead...”* (James 2:26). So a living person minus the breath is a corpse.

Will we ever be immortal? Absolutely, according to the Bible: *“For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality...”* (1 Corinthians 15:52,54). Immortality is "PUT ON" at Christ's return - not before.

So where did the teaching of the immortal soul come from and how did it come into Christianity? Tertullian, one of the early church fathers living after the time of the Bible, around 200-300 BC said, *“I use the opinion of PLATO, when he declares, ‘Every soul is immortal’”* (The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III, p 202). So it came into the church from Plato, who was a pagan Greek philosopher. Pagan Greek philosophy taught that the soul is immortal. The body they said was like a house. At death the body house crumbled, allowing the spirit or soul to leave the body and go elsewhere. The pagan Romans, Babylonians and Egyptians all believed in the immortal soul. But the

Bible reveals that its real origins came from a talking snake in Eden. When God made man He warned, *“And the LORD God commanded...‘in the day you eat from it (the tree of knowledge), you will surely die”* (Genesis 2:16,17). But in total contradiction to God, the devil snake said, *“...You shall not surely die”* (Genesis 3:4). He’s been repeating the lie ever since: “something - your soul or spirit - lives on after death - you don’t really die.” This is a lie of Satan!

Be assured, the devil can and does use these false ideas about death to deceive us humans. What about those out of body experiences (OBEs) that so many have – surely they are real? Many believe OBEs prove the existence of an immortal soul, but according to the BBC, researchers have found a way to trigger out-of-body experience in volunteers who are very much alive (BBC News August 23, 2007). Time Magazine recently reported that scientists believe near death there are altered states of consciousness, which cause people to hallucinate (Time, Sept 10, 2007). But above all, the Bible says, *“...the DEAD KNOW NOTHING...”* (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

So what about people seeing or talking to the dead? It is not the dead they are talking to. It may look and sound like the dead, but it is not the dead, because *“the DEAD KNOW NOTHING...”* (Ecclesiastes 9:5). What about haunted houses? Again it is not the dead, for the Bible says clearly, *“Those that go down to the grave...shall return NO MORE to their HOUSE, neither shall their household know them anymore”* (Job 7:9,10). According to the Bible it is not the dead. They are *“the spirits of demons performing miraculous signs...”* (Revelation 16:14). Which is why the Bible warns people not to try to contact the dead: *“Let NO ONE be found among you who...engages in WITCHCRAFT or MAGIC or who is a MEDIUM or SPIRITIST or who CONSULTS the DEAD. ANYONE who does THESE THINGS is DETESTABLE to the LORD”* (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Why the warning? Because we are not in contact with the dead at all, but rather with evil spirits - Satan and his angels.

The two necessary ingredients for life after death are found in Christ’s encouraging, hope-filled promise to Martha: *“I AM the Resurrection and THE LIFE. He who BELIEVES in ME though he dies, he shall live”* (John 11:25). To have eternal life there MUST be resurrection. Yet many sadly believe people have eternal life in heaven or hell now, before the resurrection at Jesus’ return. Secondly we must believe, or put our trust in Jesus. Why not lean on Jesus by accepting Him just as you are right now? When you cast yourself on His grace, you will long for the resurrection at His soon return.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dwight Nelson, *The Legend of Samara and the Truth About Death*, sermon 11 *“The Next Millennium Seminar”* (1998)