

The Soul after Death

When people die, we usually bury their bodies. In some countries, there is no process of embalming. A body is often buried the same day a person dies. In Australia, embalming of the body takes place to preserve it until the funeral has taken place. Cremation is an option that is also available. It is true that cremation of the body is practiced among some pagan religions (such as among the Hindus). It is also true that cremation was practiced by atheists on occasion. The idea behind it was, *“If there is a God, I will make it hard for Him to put me back together again.”* This association with paganism and atheism has given some Christians qualms of conscience in regard to cremation. It is not, however, a sin.

Though the body decays, the soul is immortal. It lives on after its separation from the body. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise”* (Luke 23:43). Note that the sentence is not written this way, “I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus was not telling the thief on the cross that at some time in the future he would be with Him in paradise, that is, heaven. Rather, He was telling him that on that very day he would be with Him in heaven. In the account of the rich man and poor Lazarus from our Gospel today, *“The beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side [heaven]”* (Luke 16:22). There Lazarus enjoyed the bliss of eternal life, while the rich man suffered torment in hell. There is life after death.

The Bible assures us that the souls of believers enter heaven after death. What is heaven? The word is used in different ways in the Bible. We read in Genesis 1: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”* (1:1). This refers to the “higher regions.” It includes the place where the birds fly. This refers to where God placed the heavenly bodies. In all these occurrences, heaven has a spatial, “this world” connotation. It is not a reference to where God lives but to a part of God’s created world.

In the Old Testament, heaven also described the dwelling place of God. Moses prayed, *“Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel”* (Deut. 26:15). Solomon prayed, *“Hear from heaven, your dwelling place”* (1 Kings 8:30,39,43,49). Solomon recognized that no spatial place could contain God. He had said, *“The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You”* (1 Kings 8:27). Heaven is spoken of as God’s dwelling place. The Old Testament also speaks of heaven as the place believers go when they leave this world. There is only one place in the Old Testament where it is specifically said that a person went to heaven. The Bible states that God wanted to take Elijah to heaven and took him to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-11).

It should be noted, however, that in most of the passages in the Old Testament where the word heaven is used, it refers to the visible sky above our heads. In the New Testament, heaven sometimes means the sky, but most often it refers to the dwelling place of God and the place where believers go to be with God. It is true that, just as in the Old Testament, so also in the New Testament, there is only one place where it speaks directly of believers going to heaven. In Revelation 11, John writes that he saw the two witnesses, who had been put to death for their testimony, brought back to life. Then he states, *“They went up to heaven in a cloud”* (v. 12).

How do we come to speak, then, of believers “going to heaven”? We do so for a number of reasons. The Bible says that Jesus came down from heaven (John 3:13) and ascended into heaven after His resurrection (Luke 24:51). Jesus has promised us, *“In My Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am”* (Joh14:2-3). It is only natural, then, that we speak of heaven as our home to which we shall go when we leave this world.

Believers, when they die, enter into a conscious enjoyment of seeing God. We must reject the error of any concept of soul sleep, the idea that believers are not conscious of the blissful state into which they have entered. Now it is true that the Bible does speak of death as a sleep (1 Cor. 15:18; Job 14:12; Dan. 12:2; Luke 8:52; 1 Cor. 11:30). Yet the meaning is that, just as we wake from sleep, so we shall wake from death.

Finally, the Bible says little of the state of souls between death and the resurrection. It directs our attention primarily to Judgment Day and the events that accompany it. Yet, from the perspective of time, believers can look forward to a blessed state of conscious enjoyment of bliss with God after they die.