

John 11:11a “Do We Sleep, Or Do We Live?”

JOH 11:11-16 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." 12 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. 14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

This passage is in the context of Jesus and the disciples receiving the news that their friend Lazarus was sick unto death. Jesus was in the area of the Sea of Galilee on the other side of the Jordan, while Lazarus was in Bethany of Judea about 2 miles from Jerusalem. And so, about a hundred miles separated them.

The messengers of Martha and Mary, the two sisters of Lazarus, were sent out to let Jesus know the condition of Lazarus and to encourage Him to come with them to heal Lazarus before he died. Jesus declined and instead remained where He was for two more days, after which time He then told His disciples that it was time to go to Lazarus.

What is interesting in our text this morning is that Jesus deliberately waited for Lazarus to die before He makes the decision to go to Bethany in Judea. And what seems apparent is that as soon as Lazarus dies is when the decision is made. Someone might ask how Jesus knew that Lazarus died, and the answer is quite obvious.

Jesus is God and knows all things. Now we know that He humbled Himself as a man and lived as a man among men. And therefore, as a man He grew in knowledge, He experienced the things men do in the way of needing food and sleep and so forth. But we're also told that He knew the hearts of men, He knows the beginning from the end and therefore He retains all of the deity He had before He took on flesh.

Now, it is certainly possible that in this case He may have deferred to the Father to alert Him to Lazarus' death but if that is the case it still wouldn't change anything of the nature of Christ who is

omniscient or all knowing, even though He laid certain aspects of His glory aside for His time on earth.

But having said that it is interesting that Jesus uses the choice of words He does. For as soon as He decides to go to Lazarus He uses language which might confuse some and certainly confused His disciples. "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

The term "fallen asleep" is a metaphor that is used throughout Scripture to describe the death of a person.

Job, for example, uses such language in connection with death.

JOB 14:11-14 As water disappears from the sea or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, 12 so man lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, men will not awake or be roused from their sleep. 13 "If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me till your anger has passed! If only you would set me a time and then remember me! 14 If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come.

David also uses this kind of language.

PSA 90:5-6 You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning - 6 though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.

Of course the New Testament also uses this type of language to show the effects of death.

ACT 7:59-60 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." ***When he had said this, he fell asleep.***

ACT 13:36 "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, ***he fell asleep***; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed.

1TH 4:13-14 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus ***those who have fallen asleep in him.***

Now, there are some reasons for this type of language as it relates to death, but before we look at a few of those reasons it's worth

noting how some people have taken such passages out of context and have devised doctrines which teach something other than what the whole counsel of the word of God teaches.

And so, you end up with what is sometimes referred to as soul sleep. And what this means is that when a person dies his soul goes into a sort of spiritual hibernation until he is roused from that sleep by God at the resurrection.

Again, this sort of teaching does not come from a thorough examination of the Scriptures but from a misunderstanding of the different forms of speech that are often used in the Bible, such as metaphors, similes, hyperbole and so forth which are all designed for making a particular point rather than to be taken literally.

For example, the metaphor where Jesus compares Himself to bread, as in the Bread of Life, is not meant to be taken literally in the sense that He's a loaf of Wonder Bread you might pick up at Publix. He's using such a metaphor to teach the spiritual truth of spiritual life and sustenance found in Him alone.

A simile is also a way of comparing two different things using the words, like, as, so is, or such as. One example is Rev.1:14, "His eyes were like a flame of fire."

It doesn't mean to teach that the eyes of the risen Christ are literally like flame throwers. It means that His eyes penetrate and are able to see all things.

But unless we recognize these certain forms of speech then we are more likely to misunderstand the passage at hand and end up with all sorts of strange doctrines like "soul sleep," which by the way is taught by the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventists.

The problem with such teaching is that it opens the door for a lax attitude about the way we study Scripture in general and ends up leading to an "anything goes" approach to where, for example, the Mormon's interpretation of Scripture is just as valid as orthodox Christianity.

There is a correct way to study and interpret Scripture. In theological circles this is referred to as hermeneutics and involves some of the things we've only touched on in the different forms of speech, but also includes looking at the context of a passage, along with comparing Scripture with Scripture and allowing less clear passages to be defined by the more clear passages.

But since we're on this subject of soul sleep I think it's important to understand what the word of God actually teaches on the subject, because quite honestly I've had Christians ask me what happens to believers when they die?

And the reason they ask such a question is because it makes a difference in our present lives as to how we live for the Lord and what we think of our God when we consider what is in store for us after we die.

Again, in theological circles this is referred to as the intermediate state of man after death. What does happen to we who are in Christ immediately after we die?

Well, the first thing we need to understand is that when the Scriptures use the term sleep for death it is a reference to our physical bodies. The idea of sleep brings with it a ceasing from natural activities.

When a person dies his physical body ceases to be active. When a deceased person is laid out in a casket at a wake it looks as though that person is asleep. How many times have we heard of grieving friends and family say things like, I went over to the casket hoping that this whole thing were a nightmare and that my friend would wake up.

It makes sense that the term sleep would be used in this fashion when describing our physical bodies which are laid to rest. And yet, to go beyond the obvious and attach to the idea of death that our spirits cease to be alive or active is not to understand death.

You'll remember that it was in the Garden of Eden when God told Adam in GEN 2:17, "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."

Well, what did He mean by that?

What the Lord meant was that death has a two-fold application, since we were created as flesh and spirit. And to understand this we need to understand what the word death implies. The idea of death implies to be separated from someone or something. And so, death, in a physical sense, is the separation of the spirit from the body.

But there is also death in a spiritual sense. In this sense death is a separation of man from God to where there is no fellowship, but

only wrath and condemnation forever. We see both of these deaths in Adam and Eve after they sinned.

Again, keep in mind the language God used with them. "When you eat of it you will surely die."

Well, what happened after Eve took of the fruit and then gave some to Adam and he ate?

GEN 3:6-7 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, *she took some and ate it*. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, *and he ate it*. 7 Then *the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked*; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

What happened in the moment they took of the forbidden fruit is they died spiritually, not physically. There was a spiritual disconnect with their God and they knew it. This is why they hid themselves from God.

And this is why God immediately pronounced judgment on them, along with pronouncing judgment on Satan as the Lord revealed His plan to reestablish fellowship with mankind as He would take death out of the way, as He promised a Redeemer to come into the world through the seed of the woman.

GEN 3:14-15 So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

The seed of the woman would crush or destroy the head of Satan, which is to say He would crush or destroy the effects of death which Satan introduced to mankind as he deceived the woman into disobeying God.

And so from a spiritual standpoint Adam and Eve were already dead in their trespasses and sins the day they rebelled against their God and Creator and yet their physical bodies didn't die for many years.

We're not told how long Eve lived but it's likely she lived to a ripe old age similar to Adam whom we're told in GEN 5:5 ... lived 930 years, and then he died.

He died spiritually in the garden the day he ate of the fruit forbidden by God, and then at the end of 930 years he died physically. It was all part of the same curse. It was all part of the same death or separation from God.

By the way, this does raise another question. We know that Adam and Eve died physically, and we know they died spiritually, but what about that promise from God to send a Redeemer to restore that fellowship with God? Were Adam and Eve restored to spiritual life, and therefore did not suffer the eternal consequences of their sin?

And the answer is a resounding, yes. How do we know this? Well, again the Scriptures make it clear. Right after the Lord pronounces judgment on the two we see that Adam believed the promise of God.

GEN 3:19-20 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." 20 Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

Adam's wife had a name before the both of them sinned. Her name was *Ishshah* in the Hebrew which simply means woman. Now we don't know what language Adam and Eve spoke and so her name in their own language may have been different.

But when Moses records this for us he uses his native tongue to describe Adam's wife. But, whether Hebrew or the language of Adam and Eve, the name was the same as it was woman, which essentially means the one taken from the man, and she must have been a very attractive person as she is named, Whoa - man!

But where we see the faith of both Adam and Eve is when Adam, not God, renames her and calls her Eve, or in the Hebrew, *Chavvah*, which means life-giver. They had both died spiritually, but in the promise from God as they believed the Lord, their spiritual life was restored in one sense as they awaited that day in which they would see their God face to face in a new paradise.

They believed the promises of God by faith as did Abraham, for example. And we know what God said of Abraham. Paul points this out when writing to the church at Rome.

ROM 4:3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Adam and Eve believed God and it was credited to them as righteousness. Adam changed his wife's name to Eve because he believed that God would be faithful to bring the Messiah through her seed knowing that her seed would crush the head of Satan as this seed would defeat sin and death once and for all, for them, and all men who believe.

In fact, Eve seemed to think that her firstborn child was the fulfillment of that promise.

GEN 4:1 Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man."

She acknowledges that this child is the product of God's faithfulness to give her children and possibly be the seed the Lord spoke of. But we know that Cain was not the promised seed nor the line through which the promised seed would come. And since Cain killed his brother Abel the seed would not come through Abel either.

It would be another son of Adam and Eve by the name of Seth through whom the promise of God would be fulfilled.

But, getting back to the intermediate state of man after death raises another question about death. If death involves the dual aspects of physical and spiritual, and we know that physical death separates our spirits from our bodies, then when our bodies die where do our spirits go if we are in Christ?

Do we sleep in the grave like some hibernating bear? And the answer is no. And by the way I haven't forgotten that our text has to do with Lazarus being raised from the dead. We haven't departed from our text; we are explaining our text in light of language our Lord uses of Lazarus' death; he is asleep.

Jesus simply meant that the body of Lazarus was dead, but his spirit continued to live. The spirit of man cannot be destroyed. Though you and I do not have an immortal nature as does God, we are created to live in immortality with God. In other words, we were created to live forever from a certain point in time.

And so, even though our physical bodies die our spirits continue to exist with the express purpose of being reunited to our bodies once again. Paul brings this to light in Corinthians.

1CO 15:53-54 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

He tells us how this death that Adam brought on all mankind has been crushed or defeated by Christ's resurrection from the dead.

2TI 1:10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

So, where does a believer go when he or she dies? Or we might ask, where did Adam and Eve go when their physical bodies died? And the answer is they went to be with the Lord.

Every saint, whether Old Testament or New Testament saint, every person who has died in faith in the promises of God goes to be with the Lord in heaven in a conscious and vibrant life before the Lord. We're not sleeping or even sleepy.

When Solomon spoke of the death of the body created from the dust of the ground he said this in Ecclesiastes.

ECC 12:7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Returns to God? Yes. And where is God. On His throne in heaven. Now that doesn't mean that all men will be saved simply because the spirit returns to God who gave it. But it does mean that all men at death will face their God in a form of judgment.

Those who trust God will return to God to be in His presence forever, while the unbelieving will return to God to be declared guilty and be placed in hell as they await the final judgment in the Lake of Fire.

But the point is that for a true believer, they will return to God to be in His presence. What are we told of an Old Testament saint in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus? The rich man went to hell while Lazarus was carried by the angels into the bosom of Abraham, which simply means Lazarus went to be where Abraham was, which was in heaven.

David says this.

PSA 73:23-25 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

What do we have at the mount of transfiguration where Christ was transformed into glory as He spoke with two Old Testament saints who were very much alive?

MAT 17:2-3 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Now wait a minute, we're told that Moses died in the desert without crossing over into the promised land. And yet, here he is very much alive speaking with Jesus. Elijah, on the other hand, never died. He was actually taken home to be with the Lord without ever experiencing death.

He was one of two men who never tasted death, the other being Enoch, both Old Testament saints who went home to be with the Lord in heaven.

HEB 11:5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

God had taken him away? Away to where? The dark side of the moon? No, He took Enoch away from this world to be with Himself in heaven.

By the way, when we make the distinction between an Old Testament saint and a New Testament saint it's usually in the context of one who is saved before the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and one who is saved after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

And so, John the Baptist, who died before the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ would still be considered an Old Testament saint under the law.

But just as Old Testament saints went home to be with the Lord at their death, so too, New Testament saints immediately go into the presence of the Lord when they die. In fact, the first New Testament saint was technically the thief on the cross. What are we told of that thief who came to faith in Christ that day?

LUK 23:42-43 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Sometimes Christians get very apprehensive of death because of what we perceive as the unknown. But the fact of the matter is that we know a great deal of death for a Christian. And again, keep in mind what death is. It is merely a separation of our spirits from our bodies.

Maybe we can explain death this way; it is not unlike going through a door. In the blink of an eye we pass from this world to the next. There is no sleep, there is no taking a number somewhere in limbo. In the moment it takes for the body to die we continue to live in the presence of the Lord. Isn't this what Paul says?

2CO 5:8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be [absent] from the body and at home with the Lord.

PHI 1:22-24 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; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Physical death is never a pleasant thing, but despite its abhorrence by all men it is only a wake-up call for the believer to life. But unfortunately it is a wake-up call for the unbeliever who, after death, is not given a second chance but is sealed for the great judgment.

Jesus made it clear.

JOH 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

JOH 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

But even if we die as believers and go home to be with the Lord, we still have the hope of the great resurrection where we will receive our glorified bodies just like our Lord's, who rose from the dead.

1TH 4:14-18 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep

in him. 15 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.

I really wanted to get a little further than the first half of verse 11 that we looked at today which sparked this teaching, but we always have next week.

In the meantime encourage each other with the hope we have in Christ and encourage the world to do the same as we encourage them to embrace Christ as Lord and Savior.

Let's take this attitude with us each day of our lives.

ROM 14:8-9 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. 9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.