

Awakening the Sleepers in Hell

***“Now is Christ
risen from the
dead, and become
the firstfruits of
them that slept.”***

—I Corinthians 15:20

FROM THE STANDPOINT

of human tradition it would be unthinkable that anyone could sleep in hell. The sacred Scriptures, however, reveal that all who are in the Bible hell are asleep, that they are in that state of unconsciousness which the Psalmist David described as “the sleep of death.” (Ps. 13:3) All who die succumb to this sleep, and the Bible shows them to be in hell—*sheol* of the Old Testament, and *hades* of the New Testament.

Jesus, the Redeemer and Savior of the world, went into *sheol*, the sleep of death, when he died. Jesus knew that his Heavenly Father would awaken him from this sleep, and said to his Father, as recorded in prophecy, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” (Ps. 16:10) Jesus was awakened from the sleep of death, and thus brought out of hell. On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter testified to this, quoting this same verse from the Psalms.—Acts 2:24-32

In our text, the Apostle Paul indicates the significance of Jesus' awakening from the sleep of death by referring to him as the "firstfruits of them that slept." This implies that there would be "afterfruits," that Jesus' awakening would, in God's due time, be followed by the awakening of others. Jesus' disciples will be the first thus to be awakened, and Paul speaks of these as being part of the firstfruits class. After that, during the period of Christ's Second Presence in the affairs of earth, will come the awakening of all mankind.—I Cor. 15:22-26

TRADITIONAL "VISION" OF HELL

Tradition disclaims that the dead are sleeping, in the sense that they are unconscious. These traditions claim, in fact, that there really is no death, and that those who appear to die are actually more alive than ever. The righteous who thus appear to die, it is claimed, go at once to a place of great happiness, and the unrighteous to a place of torment or, at a minimum, enter a state of conscious, eternal separation from God.

Traditional views concerning hell have taken on many forms over the centuries. Church history indicates that in the early centuries of Christianity very little was written about hell, and that most Christians did not think of it as a literal place. However, beginning around the fifth and sixth centuries, the "vision" of hell began to expand to a horrifying picture of a place of torture and torment beyond description. It is said, according to these medieval teachings, that those who go to this "place" are conscious and suffer literal pain and anguish eternally, with no hope of relief or even of

merciful destruction. To many, this vision of hell continues even today to be believed and adhered to.

Others, however, including many church leaders themselves, have modified their views and teachings concerning hell in more recent times. These say that hell, rather than being a literal place of eternal torment, torture, and physical pain, is a state, or condition, in which one is eternally separated from God. These teachings also include the claim that those in this state are conscious and eternally aware of their separation from God and from all good things.

Whether one holds to the older traditional view with its ideas of torment and pain, or the more modern view, that of eternal separation from God, or a view that perhaps lies somewhere in between, all of these “visions” of hell have two important features in common. First, they all hold that those in hell are eternally conscious; and second, that their fate is eternal, with no hope of change or release.

Unfortunately, none of these viewpoints on hell can be harmonized with the Word of God. Thus, we are faced with the necessity of deciding whether we will accept the testimony of the Bible, or continue to hold to human tradition, whether old or more modern. It is proper, then, that the testimony of the Bible be examined thoroughly in order that we may have no misgivings as to what it truly does teach. Does the Bible actually speak of the dead as being unconscious and in a condition properly likened to sleep? Does the Bible teach that both the righteous and the unrighteous are in this same state or condition of unconsciousness until

awakened in the resurrection? Let us examine these questions.

SLEPT WITH THEIR FATHERS

One of the often repeated statements appearing in the Old Testament when reference is made to the death of its various people is that they slept with their fathers. “David slept with his fathers.” (I Kings 2:10) “Rehoboam slept with his fathers.” (chap. 14:31) “Asa slept with his fathers.” (chap. 15:24) “Omri slept with his fathers.” (chap. 16:28) Some of these kings were righteous—some were not (see I Kings 16:25)—but in death they all “slept.”

If, according to tradition, the righteous go immediately to heaven when they seem to die, they would not be likely to sleep while enjoying themselves in the company of the holy angels. If, on the other hand, the unrighteous go to a place of torment, it would hardly be likely that they would be sleeping in the tortures which tradition says are inflicted upon them in such a state.

God, however, the author of the Bible, knows that in death there is no consciousness. This is revealed in a favor he showed to the good king, Josiah, of Judah. Because of the nation of Israel’s sins, great calamities were to come upon the people, but God said to King Josiah, “I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same.”—II Chron. 34:28

JESUS’ TESTIMONY

Jesus employed the same language with respect to the dead as that which we have quoted from the

Old Testament. When the brother of Martha and Mary died, Jesus said to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." The disciples misunderstood this, thinking that Jesus referred to natural sleep. Then he said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."—John 11:11-14

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, and referring to those who had seen Jesus after his resurrection, mentions five hundred brethren, "of whom," he said, "the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep." (I Cor. 15:6) These were "brethren" who were so faithful to the Master that he manifested himself to them after his resurrection. Surely if tradition were true, those among them who had died should have gone to heaven, but not so. Paul wrote that they had fallen asleep in death.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is another interesting case in point. He faithfully bore witness to the Gospel, and as a result was sentenced by the Jewish religious rulers to be stoned to death. His last moments of life, and his death, are described thus, "He kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:60) Nothing is said about Stephen being caught up to heaven. He simply fell asleep in death.

ALL CLASSES SLEEP IN DEATH

Job is one of the best known personalities of the Bible. James wrote, "Ye have heard of the patience of Job." (James 5:11) Job needed patience because of the severe trials which God permitted to come

upon him. They became so distressing that at one point in his experience he began to wonder if it might not have been better had he died at birth. Expressing this sentiment, Job said, "Why died I not from the womb? . . . For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest."—Job 3:11,13

One of the appealing aspects of the tradition that the dead are not dead, is the belief that infants and children, it is said, when they seem to die, go directly to heaven and become angels. However, Job did not have this understanding. He believed that had he died when he was an infant he would have "lain still, . . . been quiet, . . . slept, . . . been at rest." This hardly describes the life of angels in heaven. This tradition is, perhaps, a pleasing prospect for grieving mothers, yet it is much more comforting, and harmonious with Bible teaching, to think of these little ones as sleeping quietly until the resurrection, and then being returned to their families.

Job does not leave the subject with what would have been his own experience had he died as an infant. "Then had I been at rest," he continues, "With kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves; Or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver: Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light. There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest. There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor. The small and great are there; and the servant is free from his master."—vss. 13-19

There is no mistaking the meaning of this language. It reveals that the great, the small, the rich, the poor, the wicked, the weary, kings, princes, and babies are all in the same state or condition when they die. It is neither a state of happiness, nor of torment, nor of any conscious thought. No, as Job explains, it is a state of quietness—of sleep. That is why, a little later in his experience, Job asked God to let him die. He wanted release from his suffering and he knew that he would find it in death.

The record of Job's prayer for death is in chapter 14, verse 13: "O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me!" A most revealing fact in this prayer is Job's use of the Hebrew word *sheol*, which is here translated "grave." This word is translated "hell" 31 times, "grave" 31 times, and "pit" 3 times in the Old Testament, and it is the only Hebrew word thus translated.

In reality, the Hebrew word *sheol* describes the only hell the ancient people of God knew anything about. It is the only hell that God said anything about throughout a period of more than four thousand years—from creation to the First Advent of Christ. Nor was any change made then. The original manuscripts of the New Testament were written in the Greek language, and the Greek words translated "hell" do not describe the state of the dead any differently than it was understood by God's people during Old Testament times.

Job asked God to let him go to hell to escape suffering! In the hell of tradition, Job's suffering would have been greatly increased, and would have

continued throughout the endless ages of eternity. However, the traditional concept of hell had not developed in Job's day, or, if it had, he knew it was wrong. Job knew that hell was the state of death in which he would lie still, where he would sleep in unconsciousness, and be released from his suffering.

In his prayer, Job put a limit on the length of time he wanted to remain in hell. "Until thy wrath be past," he said to God. The tradition is that hell is a place where God visits his wrath upon sinners. Here was Job, though, a righteous servant of God, asking to go to hell to escape divine wrath. What did he mean by this?

Evidently Job was referring to the sentence of death which was resting upon all mankind—that judgment which fell upon Adam and his race because of sin. This wrath, or disfavor of God, is manifested by all the things which are associated directly or indirectly with sickness, pain, and, ultimately, death. Job felt that he had experienced his share of suffering in connection with this penalty of death, so he asked God to let him die and thus be free from further pain.

Job was one of God's faithful servants, and in this prayer we find him using language which reveals God's loving plan for the redemption and recovery of the human race from the sleep of death. He asked to be hidden in hell only until God's wrath was past. This means that the sentence of death would one day—in God's due time—be lifted. The Bible confirms this over and over again. Job believed it, and he wanted to remain in hell only until God's due time for destroying sin, pain, and death.

THOSE ASLEEP TO BE AWAKENED

Paul wrote that through Christ's kingdom death would be destroyed. (I Cor. 15:25,26) Isaiah prophesied that God would "swallow up death in victory." (Isa. 25:8) In Revelation 21:4, we are assured that a time is coming when there shall be no more pain and no more death. The Bible likens the long period of the reign of sin and death to a nighttime of darkness, and we read in Psalm 30:5 that while weeping may endure for a night, "joy cometh in the morning." Job looked forward to this morning of joy, and asked God to let him rest in hell until it dawned.

Having asked God to let him die, Job then asked, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14) Job did not desire to remain asleep in hell forever, nor did he expect to, for he continues, "All the days of my appointed time will I wait [in death], till my change [from death to life] come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands." (vss. 14,15) Job knew that those who die, and are therefore sleeping in hell, will be awakened from the "sleep of death" in the glorious resurrection day.

Daniel 12:2 reads, "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake." When God sentenced Adam to death, he said, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Gen. 3:19) Sleeping in the dust of the earth, therefore, would mean sleeping in death, in the Bible hell.

The "many" that shall be awakened from the sleep of death are actually the multitudes who have died. We need only to consult the testimony of God's Word to determine who and how many are included in this "many" who are to be awakened from the sleep

of death. The Bible likens the dead to captives in prison, and the Old Testament describes their awakening as a returning from their captivity.

In Ezekiel 16:53, God assures us of the awakening from death of the Israelites, the Sodomites, and the Samaritans. Jeremiah 48:47 reveals that the Moabites will be awakened. Jeremiah 49:6,39 includes the Ammonites and the Elamites as among those who will be released from their captivity in death.

In a prayer of Moses, recorded by the psalmist, he said, “Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.” (Ps. 90:3) Moses’ prayer reminds us of Paul’s words, “Just as all men die by virtue of their descent from Adam, so all such as are in union with Christ will be made alive again.” (I Cor. 15:22, *Williams Translation*) Jesus said that “all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth.” (John 5:28,29) Paul testified that there would be a “resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.”—Acts 24:15

In Revelation 20:13, we are informed that “death and hell” will deliver up the dead which are in them. Here, as throughout the Bible, those in hell are described as “dead.” They are not alive and being tortured, or conscious in any sense of the word. Being asleep in death, they are to be awakened, for this is the provision made for them by divine love, the provision of redemption through the shed blood of Christ.

“MANY”—ALL

So we see that the “many” referred to by Daniel as being awakened from death are really all the

dead. He explains that some of these shall come forth to “everlasting life.” Beginning with righteous Abel, and down through the centuries to John the Baptist, there were individual servants of God who proved faithful to him. Paul explains that these will come forth to perfection in a “better resurrection.”—Heb. 11:35

The disciples of Jesus in this age also come forth in the resurrection to “life”—to “glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.” (Rom 2:7) These, together with Jesus, are the “firstfruits” of the resurrection, and they will live and reign with him in his kingdom.—Rev. 3:21; 20:6

There are many, however, countless millions, who in this life did not qualify for these special classes. When these are awakened from their sleep in *sheol*, or hell, it will be, as Daniel says, to face “shame and everlasting contempt.” Because of traditional misconceptions of the future punishment for sinners, the expression “shame and everlasting contempt” has been thought to mean an eternity of torture. This is wrong.

A moment’s reflection will reveal clearly what the Prophet Daniel means. The awakening of those who will come forth to shame and contempt means that they will be alive again, as humans, right here on the earth. The Jewish people of Daniel’s day were taken into captivity because of their idolatry. Their captors were far from pleasing to God. In every generation of human experience, iniquity has flourished, and aside from those who have earnestly and sincerely endeavored to know and do God’s will, the vast majority would not be found praiseworthy when compared with the high standards of

righteousness which will prevail throughout the earth at the time they are awakened from the sleep of death.

In every generation there have also been thieves, murderers, exploiters, and oppressors. During the reign of sin and death those who have thus worked wickedness have usually been “delivered.” (Mal. 3:15) However, it will be different when they are awakened from hell. The authority of Christ’s kingdom will prevent a continuance of their wicked ways. Beside this, they will be mingling with those whom they injured, and will no longer be able to hide the facts from them. The person who was murdered will then be able to identify his assailant. How great indeed will be the shame of the wrongdoers, and how they will be held in contempt.

There will be very few, perhaps none, of those awakened from the sleep of death in the general resurrection who will not have some cause for shame. Thankfully, however, this will not continue for eternity. The word “everlasting” in the phrase “everlasting contempt” is translated from a Hebrew word meaning “age lasting,” or “lasting to a consummation.” It will continue until proper amends are made and the individual involved proves worthy of the respect and confidence of his fellows.

So it will be true, as Isaiah wrote, that “the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away,” because “there shall be no more death.”—Isa. 35:10; Rev. 21:4 ■