"There Shall Be No More Death"

Is This an Impossible Dream?

"I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."
—Revelation 21:3,4

NEWS HEADLINES ACROSS the country in recent months have included a wide variety of saddening and sobering events. The case of the death of Terri Schaivo in Florida, and its surrounding controversy concerning a person's right to live or die; the death of Pope John Paul II after more than twenty-six years as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church; the abduction and killings of children in Florida; the continuing war in Iraq and Afghanistan with its resulting death to both American soldiers, as well as innocent civilians, at the hands of terrorists' bombs;

the recent murder of two young playmates in a small Illinois town; and the apparent murder-suicide of a family of six in southern California, have all made their grim appearance on the front pages of our newpapers and in the top news stories of radio and television. While these, and other events like them, are seemingly unrelated on the surface, and have taken place in different parts of this country and the world, yet there is one common thread to each—the theme of death. Death preys upon everyone—young and old, rich and poor, healthy and diseased, doers of good and evil—it makes no distinction. Sooner or later, we each must face its reality, in our families and in ourselves. We cannot escape its clutches.

Perhaps the most all-encompassing example of this theme of death is that which is associated with war. In war, death is pervasive and indiscriminate. Those who fight on all sides of war—along with innocent men, women, and children—see death every day, and many experience it themselves. No one knows how many people have had their lives 'snuffed out' by war during the course of human history. Conservative estimates put the number in the hundreds of millions. Others estimate that over a billion people have lost their lives as the result of war down through the ages. Whatever the number, it is staggering to the human mind. Yet, one of the most disturbing things about man's reaction to war is that most people seem to be resigned to the belief that wars will always exist. Notice these quotes from a recent newspaper survey:

"There have always been fistfights, and there will always be wars."

"The only way there will be permanent peace on earth is if no one survives."

"I don't think I'll ever live to see peace in the world."

"War is inevitable; world peace is a delusion."

What do we make of this? If we believe in God, we must ask: Is he powerless? Does he care? Are we doomed, as so many people think, to a continued endless cycle of war, to say nothing of all the other causes of death which surround us? Can, and will, God do something about this?

The Bible gives us the assurance that God indeed does care, that he not only can, but will do something about man's seemingly unending experience with death. The Word of God, as stated in the title of this article, speaks of a time when, 'There shall be no more death.' When is this time? How will it come about? Who will bring it to pass? To know the answers to these questions requires an understanding of God's plan for man's salvation as taught in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It is that plan, which, among other things, will end all wars, killing, disease, and death.

MAN'S DESIRE TO LIVE

Man desires to live as long as possible, not to have life cut off by disease, accident, war, murder, age, or in any other way. Medical science tells us that the average life span in the United States is now nearly 80 years, up substantially from the average of just a few decades ago. Scientists tell us further that medical breakthroughs in coming decades may make it possible for man to live as long as 150 years. As promising as it may sound, however, all of

this pales in comparison to what the Bible teaches was God's intent for man. God's purpose concerning man was for him to live forever. It is true that Christians have hoped for everlasting life in heaven for centuries, and certainly the Bible contains many promises to that end—the Christian's hope. However, the Bible also holds out a hope of life—perfect and everlasting—right here on earth. This was God's design and purpose in the creation of our first parents, Adam and Eve.

In the book of Genesis, after the creation of Adam and Eve, God told them to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish [fill] the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (Gen. 1:28) The Bible account further states, "The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food." (chap. 2:8,9) Eden was to be a model for the whole earth, a dominion for its king, man. God's intent was not for life to be cut short, nor for man to live merely three-score and ten, eighty, or even one-hundred and fifty years, but for life to continue forever.

DEATH THE RESULT OF DISOBEDIENCE

The only reason God's purpose of giving everlasting life was not realized, is that our first parents transgressed God's law. The promise of everlasting life depended on obedience. This was an absolute requirement from God, and is evidenced by his command concerning the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil, that the fruit of it not be eaten, else "thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:17) When man disobeyed this command, the sentence was pronounced and began to be carried out. God said, "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."—Gen. 3:19

When God drove man out of the Garden of Eden, he made special provision so that he could not return. This provision proves that in the garden the sustenance was there to continue life everlastingly. The Bible says this provision was specifically to keep man out of the garden; but why? "Lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever." (Gen. 3:22) That was God's purpose for man—to live forever. The only reason this purpose was not attained was that man sinned. Having sinned, man was taken out of the garden condition which would have otherwise continued his life everlastingly.

Man fights the idea of death. He wants to live, still having this inborn desire with which he was created by God. In spite of illness, injury, and disease, man's determination to live is indomitable. The case is told of an elderly lady, racked with disease and pain, and sure to die soon, who received new medicine from her doctor and regained a measure of health. Although not permanently cured, her life was extended for a period of time. She was so happy to still be living that when she went back to the doctor in a few months, she thanked him profusely saying, "If not for you, I'd be in heaven now." Yes, man wants to continue life on this earth. Even among Christians, heaven is many times thought of as merely an alternative place to go when they

cannot live here on earth any longer. God created this desire in man to live here on earth.

SATAN'S LIE

For this reason—this desire to live—man has fallen easy prey to Satan's deceptions. Satan asked Eve about God's command that they would die if they ate of the forbidden fruit. She said that was true, confirming what God said. Satan, though, said through the serpent, "Ye shall not surely die." (Gen. 3:4) I Timothy 2:14 states that Eve was deceived, and so also has much of the human race succumbed to the same deception. Eve wanted to believe she wouldn't die. She wanted to live so much that she believed Satan's lie, 'Ye shall not surely die,' rather than God's command.

As the reality of death eventually made itself evident to our first parents, and as death actually began to take place among man, Satan expanded upon his lie. He thrust upon man the idea that what he was seeing and experiencing was only the appearance of death. He put forth the notion that man does not really die at all, that death is not what it seems to be, that, in reality, it is just a door into another part of an immortal existence. This erroneous thought is the basis of most religions of the world. It is the basis for the teaching of reincarnation, and many other 'no death' theories and religious doctrines. Even many professed Christians believe, and teach, that there is a part of you that does not die—an immortal soul—when by all other appearances death has claimed another victim. The bottom line is that, even here in the twenty-first century, the majority of people of all religious

faiths claim that really there is no death, unwittingly giving silent consent to the statement made so long ago by Satan, 'Thou shalt not surely die.' And the reason? Because, simply stated, no one wants to die!

The Bible, though, says death is a reality. In Romans 6:23, the Apostle Paul states, "The wages of sin is death." The prophet, in Ezekiel 18:4, says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Notice that this verse makes no reference to the soul being immortal at all, but that it is subject to death if found guilty of sin. The condition of death can simply be described as the absence of life, that is, complete nonexistence, or oblivion. Ecclesiastes 9:5 states, "The living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing." Here no distinction is made between the wicked dead and righteous dead, just that the dead, all of them, know not anything.

A HOPE FOR LIFE

Man's hope for everlasting life, based on God's promises, lies in a restoring of life by God through the resurrection of the dead. In I Corinthians 15:13-18, the Apostle Paul states, "If there be no resurrection of the dead, . . . your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." Paul is talking about Christians here. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then even Christians 'are perished' when they die, to say nothing of the remainder of mankind. Paul, however, assures us in this same chapter that there is to be a resurrection. "Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in

Christ shall all be made alive." (vss. 21,22) This resurrection for all, is based on the redemptive work of Jesus, which will make this hope a reality. Serious students of the Bible believe and claim this as the basis of their hope.

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

Notice what Paul says in II Timothy 1:10, speaking of Jesus as our Saviour, "[Jesus] brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Why does Paul use the two words 'life' and 'immortality?' He does so because there is a difference. Adam and his race were given life, and every provision for its continuance, if obedient, forever. Adam, though, did not have, nor was ever promised immortality.

What then is meant by the statement that Jesus 'brought life and immortality to light through the gospel?' To answer this, we must first know what the gospel is that is mentioned in this verse. This seems like a simple question, but it is surprising how few really know what the term gospel means. Briefly stated, gospel means good news, or glad tidings. The Greek word translated gospel in this scripture is the same as is used in the familiar words recorded in Luke 2:10,11, "The angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings [gospel] of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Those were indeed glad tidings—good news. However, this was not the first time the gospel had been preached. The Apostle Paul states in Galatians 3:8, "The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify

the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." What Paul refers to here took place over 2,000 years prior to the proclamation made by the angels to the shepherds. What was the gospel preached to Abraham? In this verse, Paul quotes the words spoken to Abraham by God as recorded in Genesis 28:14, "In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." We notice God did not say, 'In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be taken to heaven.' No, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. This, so many centuries before the angels' announcement, was the original full statement of the gospel of Christ.

All the families of the earth are to be blessed through a promised 'seed'—that seed being Christ. This theme is developed throughout the Old Testament by the prophets, and is associated with the thought of a kingdom. Speaking of a future kingdom through the seed—Christ—which would bless all mankind, Isaiah 9:7 states, "Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end." We notice the phrase, 'Of the increase,' thus indicating that this kingdom will expand, or increase, to include all nations—all the families of the earth. This progression of thought and prophecy continues until the birth of Jesus, culminating in the words stated earlier as recorded in Luke 2:10. In short, the Old Testament promised that the seed would come. The angels said the seed is born! Truly this was glad tidings to all people—all the families of the earth—spoken of throughout the Old and New Testaments. ■