
Death and Resurrection

by: Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about death?

It often comes as a bit of a surprise to find a scholar who disagrees with mainline Catholic and Protestant teaching. It shouldn't though. A scholar should follow the leads to see where they will go, after all, biblical scholars are like city buses, if you don't like where this one is going, just wait a while and another one will come along with a different idea.

What is really interesting is to find a scholar who is paying careful attention to what the first Christians taught and believed. Chances are many pastors and preachers see nothing wrong with the fact that today's Church doesn't believe exactly the same thing the primitive Christian Church believed and taught. This place no small amount of weight upon what succeeding generations of theologians believed and taught.

After all, these were learned men and the primitive Christians were, well, primitive. They were fishermen. They were tax collectors and one was a physician. What did they know about theology?

The problem is, these fishermen, doctors and tax collectors and one tent maker are the people who have told us what Jesus taught them. Their commission from the Master was explicit, you will find it in Matthew 28 and verse 18, "Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All power is given to me in heaven and earth. Go you therefore and teach all nations.'" Actually, it says 'To make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

Now it would seem that the people who heard Jesus teach, who camped out with Him on the road trips, gathered up baskets of food after Jesus had fed a few thousand people with a few loaves and fishes, you would think that these people would have a very good idea of what Jesus wanted them to believe and wanted them to teach.

Now, if we assume they had the authority to go beyond what they believed, we could easily get ourselves in over our heads and one thing for sure when you do that, you're on your own.

A Warning

In Hebrews, I think it was probably Paul who did actually write the book of Hebrews, in the second chapter he said this, "We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." Boy what a warning. You know, you really need to be attentive to what you have heard us say about Christ. At this time, he didn't say so much about writing because not that much had been written. They're talking about an oral transmission of the gospel.

He then goes on to say, "Because if the word spoken in the past by Angels were steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him."

Okay, it seems plain enough that in the first place, in any theological discussion should go to those who actually heard Jesus, and then, who confirmed to all of us the things that Jesus taught them. I think it's fair to say that if Christianity strays from the New Testament, it will find itself with no foundation and God only knows where it will go.

Death and the Afterlife

The interesting case in point is what the first Christians believed and taught about death and the afterlife.

Think about the last funeral you attended. How did the minister visualize the fate of the body that lay in the casket before him? I went to the funeral of a young man in his late teens. He lived down the street from our home. He killed himself with a shotgun. The funeral home was standing room only. It was full of the high school classmates of the deceased. I think he must've been a very popular boy.

The minister in his sermon pictured the young man now in heaven, driving a red convertible, fast, with the top down with the radio blaring with his favorite music. I think the minister was a youth minister at the teen's church and he was trying to be relevant to his audience that was full of teens. It didn't work! Nobody believed the picture that he was drawing as witnessed by the young girls who, after the funeral were clinging to one another and weeping like their hearts would break. You wouldn't do that if you really believed that the boy was in heaven driving around in a red convertible with the top down and the music blaring.

Death Compared to Sleep

As it happens, there is an abundance of evidence about what the first Christians believed about the state of the dead. I don't recall who said, "that the first Christians universally compared death to sleep." Well, I thought that ought to be easy to check out. I will just get out my handy concordance and look it up. And there are some interesting statements.

One case in point is the story about the death of one of Jesus' best friends and his name was Lazarus. His two sisters were particularly close to Jesus. It is in John chapter 11 and in verse 1 and it says, "Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. Therefore, his sisters sent to Jesus saying, 'Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick'. When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."

Now, this is kind of interesting because Lazarus did die. So, what did Jesus mean when he said, 'not unto death'?

John goes on with the story in verse five and says, "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus. And when He had heard that he was sick, He stayed two days beyond this in the same place where He was. Then after that He said to his disciples, "Let us go into Judea again.""

So, you have the two-day delay of going up and two-day delay going back. He said these things to His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I must go that I may wake him out of sleep. Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps, he must be getting better." However, Jesus spoke of his death. They plainly thought that He had spoken of taking rest in sleep. Jesus then said to them plainly. 'No, Lazarus is dead. I am glad for your sakes that I was not there to the intent that you may believe. Nevertheless, let's go to him.'"

All right so far, the Idea holds. Jesus equated death with sleep in the case of Lazarus. But why did he wait those extra days? It's a very curious thing. Well, it was to establish that Lazarus was not merely in a coma, or that he had just passed out, only to recover, that he was truly dead.

This is a custom among some Jewish people that the idea was that the spirit of the person who was dead, would hover about the body for a day or two, and sometimes came back. In fact, there was one fellow, that everybody thought was dead came back and lived out at full life and I believe begat six more kids in the process.

So, they waited, before they finally sealed up a person who was dead.

Okay, Jesus waited these extra days to demonstrate that what He was going to do with Lazarus was to truly raise a dead man back to life, which had bearing on why Jesus had to be three days and three nights in the tomb (Matthew 12:40). Less than that might have been considered recovery, not a death.

Paul Talks about Death Compared to Sleep

Another example, the apostle Paul is speaking in the synagogue in Antioch on his first missionary journey, and he was telling them about Jesus' death and resurrection, and in the process he cited David from the Old Testament, You will you'll find the story in Acts 13, verse 34, Paul is speaking, "And as concerning that He raised him (Jesus) up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption, he said on this wise,' I will give you the sure mercies of David. 'Wherefore He said also in another psalm, 'You will not suffer your Holy One to see corruption.'

Now David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption: but He, whom God raised again, saw no corruption."

The idea was that the corruption would begin after three days. Now, they did not believe that David had gone to heaven. They did not believe that he was swinging through the heavenly Palace with several new wives. This was not part of the picture. David fell on sleep.

Peter speaking on the day of Pentecost made the same reference. He also spoke about David in Acts 2 and verse 29, he says "Men and brethren, let me freely speak to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulcher is with us to this day."

The men standing there listening to him could have turned around and walked a couple hundred yards and actually touch the tomb of David. Later on, in the same sermon (verse 33), Peter would say, "Therefore Jesus being at the right hand of God exalted, having received of the father the promise of the Holy Spirit. He has shed forth this, which you now see." He's talking about speaking in tongues and the whole episode of the first Pentecost. "Then Peter said, for David is not ascended into the heavens, but he said himself, the Lord said unto my Lord, sit on My right hand until I make your foes your footstool."

Now it seems fair to say, none of the first Christians would've conducted a funeral in which the dear departed had joined the heavenly choir. You can read through the New Testament and you will not find any equivalent of the common funeral sermon.

Paul Talks about Those Who Sleep in Jesus

Writing his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul opens up another angle on this. It is in First Thessalonians 4 verse 13, he says, "I don't want you to be ignorant, Brethren, concerning those who are asleep, and that you sorrow not, even as others who have no hope." You know, it hadn't been very long since Paul had left there and in that short period of time, the persecution was so heavy in this little church that some people were already dead as a result of it. That's who's he is talking about. We don't want you to be sorrowful as if you have no hope. He said, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him them also which sleep in Jesus."

As I said, this adds another little point to it, that the dead in Christ, the dead who were Christians, who were Saints, are said to be asleep in Jesus. Those will God bring with him.

Continuing in verse 15, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain to the coming of the Lord shall not precede, or go before, those who are asleep."

Now, what he is saying is that nobody is going to get into the presence of Jesus Christ ahead of anybody else.

We who are alive and remain when the Lord comes back will rise and meet Him in the air, we are not going ahead of those who sleep in Jesus.

Continuing in verse 16, "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall 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 so, shall we ever be with the Lord."

Now, this picture is pretty easy to follow through here. Paul pictures the Saints that died since he was there as asleep in Jesus, and they will sleep until the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, then the dead in Christ will rise and the rest of us will be changed.

The Resurrection

This new aspect that Paul opens up here is the resurrection. Now, not a few people have wondered about this.

A lady had written about that she had lost her leg and her body was a mess in so many ways. She just wanted to be finished with it. The idea of her going off to heaven and being a spirit being and never having to put up with this body again was really appealing to her. If she's in heaven with the Lord, why come back and get stuck with this body all over again? Well, it seemed like a fair question, in light of this long standing Christian doctrine, the bodily resurrection, not only of Jesus, but also the Saints.

Now since the question was raised early on, we have a very good witness of the beliefs of the first Christians.

Our witnesses are Paul, and it's his first letter that he wrote to the Corinthian Church. In First Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 3, Paul says this, "For I delivered unto you first of all, what I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." This is a fundamental Christian doctrine that all of us would agree on and we understand that and also that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (Matthew 12:40).

"And that he was seen of Cephas (Peter), then the twelve, after that, he was seen of above 500 brethren at once; of whom the greater part are still alive, but some of them have fallen asleep." Here's that term again.

Verse 7, "After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles, and last of all he was seen of me also, as one born out of due time."

Now the resurrection is the foundation of the Christian faith. Was Jesus resurrected bodily? Well, the tomb was empty. That's a start. He didn't just rise up and leave his old body in a tomb to rot away, He was gone. The disciples actually touched Him after the resurrection. You know doubting Thomas, don't you? He was invited to put his hand in the wound in Jesus' side and to touch the nail prints in his hands. The bodily resurrection of Jesus? Of course.

Now Paul goes on in verse 12 to say this, "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Well, how indeed? "But if

there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then, our preaching is vain, and your faith is pointless." That's a stunning declaration that Paul makes here, because most of Christianity talks about the death of Christ, His blood cleanses us from all sin, but Paul is saying that if Christ is not risen, not just that He died, if He isn't risen then it is all pointless.

He goes on to make a sharper delineation, he says "Yes, not only that, we are found to be false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ whom that if the dead are not raised, He didn't raise. For if the dead rise not, then Christ is not raised: if Christ is not raised, your faith is vain, you are still in your sins." There's no middle ground here. Paul puts it all on a table. He says plainly that if Christ isn't raised, the sacrifice, the shed blood, His death, and all that meant nothing. Then he said, "They also which have fallen asleep in Christ are perished." They're just gone! Now this is tough stuff.

Two Important Ideas

There's two important ideas here that you need to get.

First Idea: Paul says "Not that they have gone to be with the Lord. But they have fallen asleep in Christ." This is the belief and the teaching of the first Christians.

Second Idea: Apart from the resurrection from the dead, they are gone forever. Then Paul said in verse 19, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept." There it is again, they're not wide-awake in heaven. They are asleep.

Then Paul says in verse 21, "For 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."

Yes, but when? Is it now? Is it when your funeral is over, and you've already gone to be with the Lord? No, Paul says in verse 23, "Every man in his own order: Christ the first fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming." That's the time of the resurrection, not before!

Paul continues in verse 24, "Then comes the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even to the father, when he shall have put down all rule and authority and all power, for he must reign, until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." Death is no friend to us. Death is not a friend that releases the soul from the prison of the body, as Socrates thought. Death is the ultimate enemy. In death man is separated from God except for those who sleep in Christ. But Paul had his detractors, just like some of the theologians that are telling us this today.

How Are the Dead Raised Up?

Paul was not always long on patience. He came to the place in verse 35, of First Corinthians 15, where he said, " But some man will say, how are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come? You fool, that which you sow is not quickened or energized, unless it dies, and that which

you sow, you don't sow that body that will be, but bear grain, it may be wheat, or some other grain, but God gives it a body as it has pleased him, and to every seed his own body."

As a matter fact, oftentimes you can recognize the seed when you put it in the ground. You have little packages of seeds and you look at them and you can say these are geraniums and this is something else.

Okay, what Paul is saying here, and this is very important, what we put under the ground is not is what comes up. Well, I learned that when I was very young when I got some seeds in a package and I went out and planted them in the ground and I watered them and padded them all down and then I went to bed. The next morning, I got up to see what was growing up, I didn't expect to see the seed coming out of the ground. I expected to see little green shoots and they weren't there yet. I was just a little too impatient.

But by comparison, we bury a body with a missing arm, false teeth, whatever else it is that old people have come to.

In the resurrection, he arises with a whole new glorified body. Paul says in verse 41, "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars, for one star differs from another star in glory. So also, is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory, it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."

What a picture he is drawing for us here and then he says this in verse 44, "It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."

Now I have 100 technical questions about this, but I understand it in the whole. What we bury in the ground is not what comes up, that I learned from the seeds I planted as a little boy.

Okay, I have learned that there's a natural body and a spiritual body, and the implication is that the natural body that we put in the ground of man is going to come up a spiritual body. Now the only way we can hope to understand this is to look at it in the whole and trying to explain details of it is an exercise in futility.

Explanation after explanation has been offered, or speculation I should say, about where we sleep, how we sleep. What happens to all that used to be us, but the truth is, we don't know. Paul goes about as far as any Biblical author goes in explaining it and he brands those who try to go further as fools. What can I tell you?

Paul went on to say in verse 45, "As it is written, the first man Adam was made a living being; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward that which is spiritual."

What he seems to be saying is that you have to go through this natural phase in order to get to be what God wants you to be.

Verse 47, "The first man is earthy, the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy:" That's you and me. We are like Adam, we're just flesh and blood. "And, as is the heavenly, such also, are they that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy." We look like Adam. "We shall also bear the image of the heavenly." We will look like Christ.

Verse 50, "Now I want to tell you the truth, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."

Okay, you and I can't get there like we are. It is not possible.

"Neither does corruption inherit incorruption, behold, I show you a mystery."

Okay, that's another important word to get in mind. There is a lot about these things that we don't know and will not know till that time.

We Shall Be Changed in the Resurrection

Paul continues in verse 51, "Behold, I show you a mystery, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."

You need to underline that in your mind and if you're a person who marks your Bible, you might underline it in your Bible.

As those who are alive will be changed, not left in the flesh, so those who died paraplegic, will be changed into a powerful glorified body and not as a paraplegic. This seems to be important for reasons that are not entirely clear, but this is clear, we will not see life as disembodied spirits, as ghosts. We will have a body and we will have a place.

When? Paul goes on in verse 52 and he says, "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

It all happens in the twinkling of an eye, in a split second.

A great trumpet is blown, the last of seven, and all of a sudden, we are different.

Paul continues in verse 53, "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So, when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, what happened to your sting? O grave, what happened to your victory?"

Well, thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Death is an enemy, but death is going to lose. We are going to win. There's a lot more to say about what those first Christians believed and what they taught, but that'll have to wait until later.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever relied on traditions rather than proving all things through the Bible when it came to what you believed and/or how you worshipped?
2. How can we as Christians motivate each other to learn what the Bible really says rather than only listening to ministers and teachers?
3. Have you ever asked someone that believes in going to Heaven after death what scriptures they use to support the idea? If you have, what were the scriptures?
4. Do you ever wonder what you may be like or look like when you become a spiritual body?
5. Isn't it neat that the scriptures state that creation reveals God, and here in scripture Paul easily uses a seed analogy to explain the resurrection? Can you think of other creation analogies that help us visualize the spiritual?
6. When do you think the belief of going either to Heaven or hell after death came about?
7. Was this belief another pagan belief that crept into the churches?
8. Doesn't the whole fact that there is going to be a resurrection prove that we do not go to Heaven after we die?
9. Some Christians will use Enoch as an example of someone that was taken to Heaven, what do you think happened to Enoch?
10. Another scripture that Christians may use to back up the idea of going to Heaven is Ecclesiastes 12:7, where it states that "the spirit returns to God who gave it" – does this imply that we go to Heaven, or is it just a way to say that God holds on to our spirit until our resurrection?