

7. Answering Afterlife Questions

Insights into Eternity

After teaching this series on the afterlife, I often get asked questions on various topics. In our study today, I will try to answer some of those questions:

Question: Who were the holy men that came out of the graves at the death of Jesus? Could they be those who died before Jesus came to earth?

This question concerns the passage in Matthew's gospel about holy men that came out of their graves at the death of Christ:

...and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy men who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people (Matthew 27:52-53).

Who were these holy men? Right from the very beginning chapters of the Book of Genesis, right after the sin of Adam and Eve, we find the Lord revealing that redemption and covering from sin comes through sacrifice. “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21). An animal had to be sacrificed to cover both Adam and Eve after becoming aware of being naked and hiding from God. Sin creates a barrier between God and man. Only through a sacrificial death on their behalf could man approach God. “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life” (Leviticus 17:11). In the Old Testament, we see the sacrificial system set up in the Temple of God in Jerusalem. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews talks about the Old Testament sacrificial system, saying that without the shedding of blood, there was no forgiveness of sin:

²¹And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood. ²²And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. ²³Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these (Hebrews 9:21-23).

Before Christ came, the Old Testament believers approached God with a sacrificial animal. However, this was only a foreshadowing of the visitation of God Himself to take away their sins through Christ's sacrificial death.

¹For since the Law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ²Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4).¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Hebrews 10:1-4). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

I believe these holy men who rose from their graves were men who had exercised faith and trust in the sacrificial lamb they had offered. The sacrificed lamb looked ahead to the finished work of Christ on the cross. Just as we look backward to the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ, they looked forward to what God was going to do in the eternal covenant spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). Jesus was the first fruit of those that slept (1 Corinthians 15:20). The first fruits were the first of the harvest offered to God. The holy ones risen from their graves gave witness until after the resurrection of Christ and then went to be with the Lord in heaven. Since the time of the resurrection of Christ, all believers go to be with Christ in heaven: **“absent from the body, present with the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Question: In the passage about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, how did the beggar, Lazarus, get into Paradise?

Good question! In our fourth study concerning the Truth about Hell, we said that the rich man wasn't sent to hell because he was rich, but that in his prosperity, he refused to see the needs of others around him, as in Lazarus at his gate. He was quite content without God, as are many today. The Lord does not condemn being rich, but with riches comes greater accountability, the same as in our notoriety and visibility in the world of men. Lazarus was the epitome of one who needed help. His name means “God is my help.” The text does not explain to us how Lazarus got into Paradise or at Abraham's side, but we do know that no one ever got into eternity without trust in a substitutionary sacrifice. No one was ever lost because he was rich; neither was any man ever saved because he was poor and miserable in this world. Satan has duped some people to think that, because of their poverty on earth, on the other side, it will be different for them. God will forgive no man's sins for the sake of what he has suffered in this world. The way of the cross of Christ is the only way (Acts 4:12).

Question: Can our loved ones in heaven look down and see us?

The Bible doesn't explicitly tell us if people in heaven can observe what happens on earth, but it is a possibility. For example, the writer of the book of Hebrews recalls the great people of faith who have gone before us and who are now in heaven. Then he adds, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us”** (Hebrews 12:1). Like spectators in an arena, he seems to suggest that they are watching and cheering us on as we seek to follow Christ. However, it is possible that the writer to the Hebrews is using the image as an illustration and not a revelation. He could be saying that Christians are to get rid of every sin weight that holds them down from running the race set before them, remembering that others have gone before them in like manner, and if they endured, so can we. We cannot be dogmatic about such things.

Some believe that those who have gone before us can influence things on earth. They pray to saints such as Mary, the mother of Jesus, and other saints, too. To pray to the saints asking for their help is never something that a Christian should be doing: **“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus”** (1 Timothy 2:5). All prayer should be directed to God.

Will our pets be with us? Do pets have the blessing of eternity, and will my pet be in heaven when I arrive?

Our pets getting to heaven is a critical question for some people because animals can be such an essential part of our families. Does an animal have a soul that can survive death's door? I think it is clear that animals do have a soul. That kind of statement begs the question, what do we mean by the word *soul*? Most Bible teachers use the word *soul* to describe the mind, will, and emotions, the invisible part of our nature; a man's spirit is what connects him to God (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Animals think and have reasoning powers, don't they? I have a fourteen-pound Italian Greyhound dog by the name of Rooney. In the winter in Ohio, he will not go out to do his business when he sees snow outside. We've trained him to do his business on pee pads which we dispose of after he has finished whatever he needs to do.

Occasionally, there will be an accident, and we have to clean up his mess from the linoleum where he missed the pee pad. When I tell him off, he hangs his head in shame, knowing he has done wrong. If he has no mind, will, or emotions, why does Rooney feel shame? Animals feel things. They have emotions. When I arrive home after being away working all day, he squeals loudly with delight and cannot stop jumping up at me like Tigger in the Winnie the Pooh cartoons. I cannot believe that these intelligent animals do not live beyond the death of their bodies. Let's look at one or two thoughts from the Scriptures:

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. It is the word used when God created animals:

And God said, "Let the land produce living (*nephesh*) creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so (Genesis 1:24).

The word *nephesh* is also used in Genesis 1:30, where we read that the creatures that move on the ground have the breath (*nephesh*) of life. It is clear that the word *nephesh* is a word that is translated soul, for King David says, "For thou wilt not leave my *soul* [*nephesh*] in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption" (Psalm 16:10 KJV). There are significant differences between an animal soul and a human soul; animals do not have a spirit as man does. Do animals feel guilty when they do wrong? My dog certainly does! Do they have a conscience? I don't know, but I don't think so. Conscience may be part of a man's spirit, for Scripture tells us that man is a tri-partite being composed of a body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). It seems clear to me, though, that animals are accountable in some way to God for what they do in this life. There is a passage in Genesis chapter 9, where God says:

I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man (Genesis 9:5).

Why would God hold animals to account if their lives are extinguished upon death? If there is an accounting for every animal, then it seems logical to assume that they will survive death and live beyond this world of flesh. If not, why would God hold them to account? We know that horses

exist in heaven, for white horses arrive with Jesus and the armies of heaven at the Second Coming of Christ:

¹¹Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him *was* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes *were* like a flame of fire, and on His head *were* many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. ¹³He *was* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses (Revelation 19:11-14).

I don't think horses are needed to get around in heaven, so I guess it is logical to assume that they are there for the sheer love of animals in heaven. As we have already said, the Bible says that the whole order of creation is changed after the Lord descends to earth. Little children will play with lions and snakes, and nothing will hurt them (Isaiah 11:8). If that is true for the new earth, why do we think heaven would be any different? I do believe that we will see our pets in heaven. I cannot imagine heaven to be without our beloved pets.

What happens to people who commit suicide?

One of the Ten Commandments says that we must not commit murder (Exodus 20:13). We do not belong to ourselves (1 Corinthians 6:20), so what gives us the right to take our own lives? God brought each of us into the world for a reason, and we have no right to end our lives, and we are in danger of judgment if we do so. God knows our reasoning and our motives, and why people abruptly end their lives. He is entirely just in His judgment, and so it would be wrong for us to make a judgment as to where people will go in eternity if they commit suicide. I cannot answer this one except to say that I believe that God, who has complete knowledge of each person's motives, will judge each one individually.

Is it okay to talk to those who have passed on? Can they speak to us or come to us in dreams or visions?

I believe it is very wrong and dangerous to one's eternal soul to interact with disembodied spirits.

¹⁰Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, ¹¹or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. ¹²Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

What is Divination?

Divination (from Latin *divinare* "to foresee, to be inspired by a god," related to *divinus*, divine) is the attempt to gain insight into a question or situation by way of a standardized process or ritual. Diviners ascertain their interpretations by reading signs, events, omens, or alleged contact with a supernatural agency.²

² Taken from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divination>

What is a Medium or Spiritist?

The King James Version uses the words *familiar spirits* to describe a person in touch with spirits that are disembodied (biblegateway.com brings up fifteen occurrences in the Scriptures). These evil spirits masquerade as dearly departed family members, which is why they are called familiar spirits (as in a family). In American Indian culture, one would call upon his ancestors to find direction from the world beyond. However, these spirits are not those of the family who have died, but evil spirits assigned by Satan to a family to make sure they are kept in bondage to dark invisible evil forces. In many Asian cultures, the “ancestors” demanded sacrifices to appease them, but unknowingly, these sacrifices were made to demons, not to departed family members:

They sacrificed to demons, which are not God— gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear (Deuteronomy 32:17).

King Saul’s Encounter with a Medium

When King Saul devoted the rest of his life to try to put to death God's chosen king, David, there was a point where God would not give him any direction through prayer or prophetic words. Being in a desperate place, he took the terrible step of seeking answers from a medium to consult a spirit for him, not telling her that he was King Saul. Samuel the prophet had died sometime before, and Saul went to the medium asking her if she would bring up the spirit of Samuel:

¹¹Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said. ¹²**When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice** and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" ¹³The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a spirit coming up out of the ground." ¹⁴"What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. ¹⁵Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" "I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do" (1 Samuel 28:11-15. Emphasis mine).

What strikes you about this passage? Why did the woman scream out in fear at seeing Samuel?

You may wonder why I am referring to this passage. I find verse 12 very interesting for this reason; it is clear that the woman didn't see what she usually saw. She was shocked by the spirit that came and knew instantly that the person enquiring of her was Saul, who had already expelled all the mediums in the land (1 Samuel 28:3). What did she see that shocked her? I believe that it was Samuel and not what she was expecting, a demon masquerading as a departed person. Samuel told Saul that he would die tomorrow with his sons and that God would give the Philistines the victory in the battle, perhaps giving Saul one more chance to repent before he would stand before God in judgment.

When people gather for a séance to call upon a departed family member, if a genuine spiritual encounter were to occur, it would not be with a departed family member but a deceptive demonic

spirit. Familiar spirits are demons. These demons masquerade as a loved one by recalling something only the person would know due to the spirit's everyday knowledge of intimate details between a departed loved one on earth. If you have practiced consulting demons in a séance, they usually have made inroads into a person's life in different ways. My advice is to get together with some members of an intercessory prayer team and have all spiritual ties and bonds broken by repentance, confession, and renunciation of all demonic influence.

Is cremation of the body after death acceptable according to God's Word?

Our God is the God of creation. I do not see any difficulty for the Lord, Who made the Universe through His spoken creative words, in giving a resurrection body to one cremated. Israel's first king, King Saul, had his body burned after death (1 Samuel 31:12). I don't think burning would have occurred if there could be no resurrection without his bones intact. During the Middle Ages, when the plague wiped out nearly a third of the population of Europe, I'm sure there were many of God's saints whose bodies were burned during the epidemic. Also, we know that many martyrs were burned for their testimony of Jesus. It does not matter what state a person's body is when God moves in His resurrection power. The dust of our bodies, even if they are ash, will be recreated into heavenly bodies, not merely restored (1 Corinthians 15:44). Is anything too hard for the Lord? (Jeremiah 32:27).

Will we remember our life on earth when we are in heaven?

Absolutely! Jesus tells us about the conversation between Abraham and the rich man in Luke 16:25, where Abraham says, “Son, **remember** that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things” (Luke 16:25). There are experiences on earth that cannot be learned in heaven or the New Earth. I can't believe that the lessons in overcoming our sinful nature will not be remembered and not be a part of our character in heaven. My past life of sin shapes my character today because I fear going back there when I remember how sin managed to get a hold of my life. Recalling and remembering will benefit us in eternity.

It is good for all of us to reflect on the person we used to be before we came to Christ and received His saving power in our lives. Our memories help to form our character. God spends a lifetime shaping our character. Although I believe a transformation occurs when He comes, and we go to be with the Lord (We will shine like the stars forever and ever –Daniel 12:3), I believe that our character lives on as part of who we are in eternity. It is what makes us all unique. The forming of our character comes at a high price, and it is precious to God. Author Randy Alcorn in his book, *Heaven*, has these words to say about remembering our lives in this world:

One writer claims, “We will not even remember this old world we call earth...nor will we even recall it! It simply will not come into our minds.” This common misconception confuses people. They think we won't remember our earthly lives, including the relationships so precious to us. This view that we will not remember our present lives usually comes from the interpretation of the following Scripture in Isaiah 65:17; “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” However, this verse should be viewed in context. It's linked to the previous verse where God says, "For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden

from my eyes." This doesn't suggest a literal lack of memory, as if the omniscient God couldn't recall the past. Instead, it's like God's comment to Jeremiah: "I will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). It means that God chooses not to bring up our past sins or hold them against us.³

We have many questions about eternity that will only be answered on the other side of death. Some concepts are beyond our comprehension right now. For example, can you imagine eternity going on forever or the sky and space stretching into infinity? I believe God has given us the truth as we can understand it now, but there is so much He is waiting to share with us in eternity.

There are a lot of questions the Bible doesn't answer about the Hereafter. I think one reason is illustrated by the story of a boy sitting down to a bowl of spinach when there's a chocolate cake at the end of the table. He's going to have a rough time eating that spinach when his eyes are on the cake. And if the Lord had explained everything to us about what's ours to come, I think we'd have a rough time with our spinach down here (Vance Havner).⁴

Prayer: Lord, we thank You for Your assurance that You have gone to prepare a place for us. If You are preparing a place for us, we know that You will bring us home. Whatever lies beyond, we trust You. We know that You are a magnificent creator, and we cannot begin to imagine what You have prepared for us. Help us, Lord, to live our lives in the light of eternity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCc7TCmKcwQ>

(Song by Casting Crowns – Scars in Heaven).

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³Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, Published by Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Page 331.

⁴Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Published in 2000 by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI. Page 184.