



PUZZLING QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH

THE late Clarence Darrow, famous criminal lawyer, once held a debate with a rabbi, a priest, and a minister on the subject of immortality. The clergymen summoned similes and allegories to set forth the theory that the soul of man is indestructible, not subject to death. When the lawyer rose he said, "These gentlemen never once used the Bible to prove their assertions, much less did they quote from its pages."

We who preach from a Bible text often wander a long way from Biblical teaching. Yet in all fairness it may be said that there are some things in the Good Book "hard to be understood" (2 Peter 3:15, 16). When there is apparent contradiction or seeming difference of meaning, two things should be borne in mind. One is that difficult texts should be studied in the light of the general teaching of the Bible; the other, that all lines of Bible doctrine should run parallel. For instance, if as the Bible teaches, judgment takes place after death, then we would be out of harmony if we believed God took good people to heaven at death and consigned bad people to hell at death, when as yet they had not been judged.

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

Did not Jesus on the cross say to the penitent thief, "Verily I lay unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise"? Luke 13:41 The answer is Yes. But it must also be noted that Jesus did not go to Paradise that day. Paradise is where the tree of life is (Revelation 2:7). That is in heaven at the throne of God (Revelation 22:1, 2). Jesus did not ascend to heaven on His crucifixion day. To Mary He said at that time, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." John 20:17.

What, then, did Jesus mean by His promise to the thief? Only this: "You ask me to remember you in my kingdom. I say to you today (in this dark hour), thou shalt be with me in paradise. The comma in this verse should be after today, not before it. When Luke wrote the record there were no punctuation marks at all. Men have supplied these. In this instance the comma is not in the proper place.

Puzzling Questions about Death

I saw three crosses lifted high;
And round one cross I saw the light
Of heaven's own glory beaming bright,
And from the patient Sufferer's side
A trembling voice in anguish cried:
'O Lord, and must I be forgot?
Thou pitying Christ, forget me not'
"And then above the din I heard
The Godlike Sufferer speak the word:
'Thou shalt be with me by and by,
Beneath the star bespangled sky,
When in my kingdom bright and fair
I reign in endless glory there."
-Mrs. L. D. Avery Stuttle

SHALL NEVER DIE

What did Jesus mean when He told Martha that those who believed in Him would never die? The full text makes it clear: "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." John 11: 25, 26.

Both righteous and wicked will be resurrected, but only those who believe in Christ will live forever. The rest will die the second death (Revelation 20:13,15).

THE SPIRITS IN PERSON

Some have thought that Peter believed that Christ, while His body hung on the cross, went and preached to human spirits in some mysterious prison or purgatory.

The scripture reads, "By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah." 1 Peter 3:19, 20.

This is a simple statement that Jesus preached unto the wicked people in the days of Noah, who were in the prison house of sin (Isaiah 61:1). Christ preached to them by the same Spirit of God that raised, or quickened, Him from the dead (1 Peter 3:18).

SAUL AND THE WITCH OF ENDOR

Did not King Saul consult a spirit. medium, and did she not bring up the dead prophet Samuel? The account is found in 1 Samuel 28.

God no longer heard the prayer of Saul (verse 6). The king disguised himself and sought counsel of a spirit medium at Endor (verses 7, 8). The medium was suspicious, but on promise that the inquirer would not tell King Saul she agreed to do business

Puzzling Questions about Death

(verses 9, 10).

The woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up?" Saul said, "Bring me up Samuel." Verse 11.

Now, if Samuel went to heaven when he died, why not call him down from heaven?

Samuel was a man of God. But this medium said, "I saw gods ascending out of the earth." Verse 13. And when Saul asked, "What form is he of?" she said, "An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle." Verse 14. Saul accepted that as Samuel.

You clearly see that Satan's old original lie was at work. "Ye shall not surely die: . . . ye shall be as gods." Genesis 3:4, 5. The spirit medium saw "gods" coming up, and one of them was Samuel, she said. Yes, this is the devil's work.

The message came through. "To morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me," 1 Samuel 28:19. That is, one day you and your sons will die and come where I am. If righteous Samuel were in heaven, how could rejected Saul go there?

Again, if Samuel were actually in heaven, would God permit him to go talk to the God-rejected Saul, and at the request of a spirit medium that Saul knew was condemned of the same God! Hardly, we think.

The simple fact is that Samuel was dead, and knew not anything. Saul went to a medium and received a mixture of truth and error. He heard what God had already told him, and he no doubt believed that Samuel actually sent a message. Saul was deceived.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

In the parable of Luke 16:19-31 the rich man died and went to hell. "Being in torments," he called to the beggar Lazarus, who had also died and was in Abraham's bosom. Read the account. First, let us observe that God sometimes speaks of the future as present. "God . . . quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were." Romans 4:17. However, the story of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable, and cannot be regarded as literal. It comes in a long series of parables. Parables often teach some main lesson but should not be held to every detail. (See Judges 9:6-20.) Jesus sought to rebuke the covetous Pharisees (Luke 16:14) by showing that the rich may fare well here but not hereafter. He used one of their own traditions. .

Let us first consider Lazarus and then the rich man. Lazarus is represented as being carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. However, it is at the second coming of Christ, not at death, that the angels gather the elect (Matthew 24:31). Furthermore Abraham would find it difficult to hold all the redeemed in his bosom. So this cannot possibly be literal.

Puzzling Questions about Death

There was another Lazarus, a literal one, who died (John 11:14-44). He was the brother of Mary and Martha. For four days he lay dead. When Jesus called him to life He said, "Lazarus, come forth," He did not say, "Come from Abraham's bosom." Jesus simply gave this literal Lazarus life, and he came forth from the grave. We note also that this literal Lazarus had nothing to say about Abraham's bosom. He had nothing to say about anything that occurred during those four days. "The dead know not anything." It is perfectly clear that when a literal Lazarus dies "his thoughts perish." It is evident that the Lazarus of the parable cannot be taken literally.

Of the rich man we read, "The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments." He further stated, "I am tormented in this flame."

The word "hell" used in this connection is the word hades, the grave. Since there is no fire in the grave, we here have still further evidence that this parable cannot be taken literally. The real lesson of the parable is that prosperity here does not guarantee prosperity hereafter. And also this life is the only lime we shall ever have to prepare for the next. "For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit [grave] cannot hope for thy truth." Isaiah 38:18. There is no second chance. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." 2 Corinthians 6:2. The little boy who wanted to be the rich man while he lived and Lazarus when he died, expressed the wish of many, but it is a wish that can never come true.

The story is told that when a maiden of the Seneca Indians died, her family imprisoned a young bird and held it captive until it began to sing. Then, loading it with caresses and messages, they released it over the maiden's grave. They believed that the bird would fly directly to spirit land and deliver their messages of affection to the loved maiden.

Now is the time to speak words of kindness. Today is the day to do deeds of love. This is the life in which decision is to be made as to where we shall spend eternity. All who would live forever with God must now learn to enjoy the things of God.

Susan Ertz, in *Anger in the Sky*, has aptly said, "Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon." How miserable such people would be if penned up in heaven for endless ages. It would be a prison house of eternal longing for the whirl of a sinful world.

Someone has said, "The more of earth we want, the less of heaven we'll get."

During World War II Col. Warren J. Clear was asked by his superior, officer to leave Corregidor just before it fell. He was to board a submarine at midnight. In his orders were these words "Be ready to go aboard. No personal baggage."

When we embark for heaven we can take only our character. That is the righteous character of Jesus Christ, imputed to us in forgiveness (justification) and

Puzzling Questions about Death

imparted to us through the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in sanctification.

**"Reconciled by His death for my sin,
Justified by His life pure and clean,
Sanctified by obeying His word,
Glorified when returneth my Lord."**

F. E. BELDEN