



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.2.3 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Time between Temporal Death and the Final Resurrection

God has not revealed very much to us on the state of departed souls between the moment of temporal (i.e. physical) death and the final day of resurrection, when the bodies of the dead will be raised from the dead and transformed into new bodies and rejoined with their souls. We can be sure these souls (or spirits) are not dead, for Jesus said to His followers: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”** (Matthew 10:28). Temporal death does not bring about the death of the soul. Jesus told the Sadducees: **“God is not the God of the dead, but of the living”** (Matthew 22:32). Therefore, since God is **“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”** (Matthew 22:32), therefore Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be among the living even though they died physically and their bodies were buried.

But the emphasis in Scripture is always on the eternal life we will enjoy with God in heaven after the general resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day. The Bible says very little about what is happening in the interval between temporal death and that day of resurrection. We must be on guard against applying everything that the Scripture says concerning the final state of the person after the resurrection of the body to the state of the soul that is separated from the body before the resurrection of the body.

The continued life of the soul with God after physical death is not our final goal. We are looking forward to Christ’s return when our dead bodies will be raised from the dead, and we shall live, with body and soul reunited, together with the Lord in eternal bliss and glory. Consider the following promises of our God, which direct us to that everlasting glory. The apostle Paul tells the believers in Corinth that they are **“eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 1:7-8).

In this same way Paul encouraged the Philippians: **“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body”** (Philippians 3:20-21). He does not tell them to eagerly wait for the day when their souls can be with the Lord without their bodies but to wait for the resurrection when their bodies will be raised from the dead and transformed to be like Jesus’ glorious resurrection body.

The same emphasis is found in other letters of Paul. To the Colossians he wrote: **“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory”** (Colossians 3:4). To the Thessalonians he wrote: **“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven. ... And the dead in Christ will 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 thus we shall always be with the Lord”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). To Titus he wrote: **“We should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”** (Titus 2:12-13).

What, then, can we say about the state of the dead after their temporal death and before their resurrection? According to the testimony of Christ and His apostles, we can say that they are with the Lord in heaven. For that is what Jesus said to the repentant thief crucified next to Him: **“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43). The body is buried in one way or another. As far as the body is concerned, its situation is like a sleep until the Lord awakens the body

on the day of resurrection. But the soul (or spirit) is with God in heaven. Jesus assured His believers, His sheep: **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ... No one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand”** (John 10:27-29).

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“We are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). It is not a demotion to be with the Lord and apart from the body. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he had **“a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better”** than continued existence on this earth (Philippians 1:23).

What we have been saying about the state of the soul after death is true only of those who trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation, that is, His sheep who listen to His voice and follow Him. As for those who reject Jesus, we have Jesus' parable about the rich man in torments (Luke 16:19-31) and Peter's words about **“the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient”** to whom Christ proclaimed His victory when He descended into hell (1 Peter 3:19-20). The soul of Judas Iscariot did not go to be with the Lord after he died; Peter said he went **“to his own place”** (Acts 1:25). That place was not heaven, for Jesus said: **“Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born”** (Matthew 26:24).

Through the years many strange teachings have been introduced among Christians concerning the state of the soul after death that have no basis at all in the holy Scriptures. The voice from heaven said to the apostle John: **“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on”** (Revelation 14:13). Those who die in the Lord, that is, as believers in Jesus and His work of salvation for them, need not fear any kind of torture or punishment after their death, but rather they will experience only blessing from the moment of their death.

But the Roman Catholic Church has developed various theories concerning the hereafter that they have taught as actual fact. Instead of only two possible destinies for human beings, i.e. heaven and hell, the Roman Catholic Church teaches the existence of five places: hell, purgatory, the limbo for unbaptized babies, the limbo for the Old Testament believers (now emptied), and heaven. The teaching of purgatory, in particular, has led believers astray and robbed many of the comfort they should have found in Christ. For according to Roman Catholic doctrine, purgatory is a place where almost all believers in Christ spend some time after death. It is a place of punishment, so that they can make satisfaction for all their sins for which they were unable to make satisfaction during their years on earth. The teaching of purgatory has been coupled with the notion that living relatives of the dead can pay money or do other things to shorten the time in purgatory for their relatives or friends who have died. For example, a relative can go to a priest and ask him to say a mass for his departed relative and pay the priest a certain amount of money for his efforts. The practice of buying indulgences for the departed in purgatory has also been introduced. But there is no basis for any of this teaching in Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church has used a passage in an apocryphal book, 2 Maccabees 12:43-45, to justify its practice.

From time to time Jesus Himself or His prophets and apostles have raised people from the dead. Jesus brought back to life the young man of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, and His friend Lazarus. The prophets Elijah and Elisha were given authority to bring persons back to life, as well as Jesus' apostles Paul and Peter. But in every case these persons were brought back to life only to die again later. But the Bible does tell us of two persons who were given the special privilege of escaping death altogether. These two are Enoch in the days before the flood, and the prophet Elijah in the days of the kings. No doubt God permitted these two men to escape death in order to give testimony that He has power over death.

The case of Moses is also unusual. We are told that “**Moses the servant of the LORD died**” and that God Himself “**buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day**” (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). In the New Testament book of Jude we read: “**Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’**” (Jude 9). Then we have the appearance of both Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:3).

What shall we say about the supposed appearance of the prophet Samuel after his death, when King Saul asked the witch of Endor to bring him back from the dead? Was this really Samuel, or was it just an apparition? The Bible doesn’t give a clear answer. In any case, what this Samuel said was the word of the Lord (1 Samuel 28:11-20).

There may be some questions concerning this topic that God has chosen not to answer at this time. If God has chosen to be silent on certain matters relating to death and dying, we should not present our human speculations as the Word of God. We are limited in our teaching to what God Himself has revealed to us in Scripture.

Questions

1. How can we be sure that the soul continues to live after the body dies?
2. What should we emphasize when we speak of our future hope?
3. What will happen to our bodies and souls on the Last Day?
4. What did Jesus say to the penitent thief on the cross? What is the meaning of this statement?
5. Why can we be sure that believers will not be tormented after they die?
6. What happens to the souls of believers when they die?
7. What happens to the souls of unbelievers when they die?
8. What places has the Roman Catholic Church invented for the dead?
9. How do Christians lose their comfort by believing in purgatory?
10. What is special about Enoch, Elijah, and Moses?
11. Are there any prominent beliefs about the hereafter in your locale that are not taught in the Holy Scriptures? What are they?