

Jesus' Teaching on the State of the Dead

by Gerald Brown

In the New Testament we find that Jesus uses the same “sleep” language as those in the Old Testament when He describes the death of Lazarus in John 11:11-15. As Jesus makes use of these concepts, He is at odds with the teachings of all three Jewish sects — the Pharisees and Essenes who taught immediate life after death, and the Sadducees who taught that there is no resurrection. But at the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection we find something very different from the record of dying in the Old Testament — Jesus deliberately waited until the fourth day before He resurrected Lazarus. Scripture doesn’t spell out for us why He waited until the fourth day, but we can speculate that He waited that long because He wanted to destroy the pagan teaching, which had also become part of the more sophisticated teaching of the Greek philosophers, that a person’s “spirit” hovers around the body, the home, and the burial site for three days before it flies off to the house of Sheol. The belief that a person has a conscious essence or spirit separate from the body that survives one’s death and goes on to live in the house of Sheol after death had become a pervasive understanding throughout the Hellenized world. Contrary to the writings of those in ancient Israel, there is a sharp contrast with Hebrew literature in the Second Temple period which is full of stories with this Hellenized concept that one has a conscious essence or spirit that survives death and continues to live on in another dimension after the body dies. Apparently Jesus wanted to demonstrate that the teaching of the Greeks and pagans regarding the nature of humanity, the condition of man in death, and the timing for life after death, which had become adopted into Jewish thinking by a large portion of the population of Israel, was contrary to God’s message of truth and warnings about how deadly sin is. After all, if one’s spirit doesn’t really die when the body dies, then sin doesn’t really kill. Satan’s claim to Eve in the garden of Eden is correct after all and God really is a liar.

When Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, hardly anyone expected to see Lazarus come walking out in the body he had before he died. By all Hellenistic teaching, as well as the teaching of the Pharisees, his spirit should have departed for the house of Sheol sometime during the previous day. Perhaps some thought that Jesus was calling his spirit back from Sheol and they would hear the fluttering like a dove as recognition that Lazarus was in a better place now that he had died. But Lazarus responded to the command from Jesus in his whole being — body and breath — wrapped in the grave clothes walking (of a sort) out of the tomb wrapped in grave clothes, and the people there in the crowd were standing with their chins on their sandal tops in disbelief. Rather than joyfully receiving Lazarus with hugs and cries of joy, Jesus had to tell them to unwrap him and let him go. John 11:44.

The witnesses were so surprised at this miracle that some went to tell the Pharisees of this event. John 11:46-47. I would expect that the Pharisees upon hearing this news would rejoice and be willing to give Jesus at least some subdued congratulations (a small ‘atta boy’) because He has just publicly demonstrated that the teaching of the rival Sadducees regarding their denial of the resurrection was absolutely false. The Sadducees could claim that the other resurrection stories weren’t really true, that Jairus’ daughter hadn’t really died (Mark 5:22-43 & Luke 8:41-55, Jesus identified that she was not dead, but asleep) and that the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17) had not really died, but was in a vegetative, comatose state. But no one could claim that Lazarus was not really dead. He had been sick, he had died, he had been buried, his sisters were certain that his

body had already begun to decay, and the miracle resurrection happened on the fourth day after his death well after his spirit should have departed. I expect that the Pharisees should use this miracle in a big PR campaign to bolster their status even more in Jewish society. But my expectations are left completely unmet. The Pharisees contact the High Priest who calls a full meeting of the Sanhedrin to discuss this new development. What seems unexpected to me is that the Pharisees use this miracle of life as the basis for cooperation with their rivals to kill Jesus, the life-giver.

What traditional Christianity fails to see in this story is that the Pharisees were defeated that day by the resurrection of Lazarus just as much as the Sadducees. Jesus demonstrated that the Hellenistic teaching that a person has a conscious essence or spirit that survives the death of the body is simply not true. Jesus demonstrated that He had power to restore breath even to a body in decay and thereby bring one back to life. If the rabbinic teaching were true that a son of Abraham goes to be with the Father in glory at one's death, then certainly the spirit of Lazarus would have been received in glory before Jesus arrived in Bethany to perform the miracle resurrection and would certainly have preferred to stay in heaven. But no such evidence is given in scripture that Lazarus was received in heaven during any of the days of his death. Lazarus offers not the slightest testimony that he had participated in anything upon his death. He hadn't gone anywhere, done anything, or met anyone. He says nothing about experiencing the joys of heaven in the presence of God or Abraham, nor the pain and sorrow of damnation during those four days. This lack of testimony is in perfect harmony with Solomon's statement regarding the condition of man in death given in Ecclesiastes 9:5-6.

Those Pharisees who had adopted the popular secular teaching about life immediately after death in spirit form were now willing to join forces with the Sadducees because Jesus had demonstrated that the teachings of both groups were wrong. The Christian church readily acknowledges that Jesus totally destroyed the teaching of the Sadducees regarding their belief that there is no life after death, but fails to notice that Jesus defeated the Pharisees with this miracle because most of Christianity has adopted the teachings of the pagans and Greeks regarding the nature of humanity, the condition of man in death, and the timing of life after death, and believes exactly what the Pharisees did in Jesus' day.

What did Jesus teach about the nature of humanity and life after death? In His preaching Jesus gave a warning about who to really fear. Matthew records the teaching in Matthew 10:28 and has Jesus recognize the generally held belief that there is a body and soul, but He did not subscribe to the notion that there is an essence within each of us that is immortal. According to Matthew, Jesus advised His listeners that they should not be afraid of those who can kill the body, but they should be afraid of "Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28. Matthew uses the words necessary to convey the understanding that being cast into hell results in total destruction. Jesus is explicit that both soul and body are destroyed in hell. However, according to Luke's account of this teaching, Jesus does not recognize a soul separate from the body. Luke 12:4-5 says we should have no fear for those who can kill the body and afterward do nothing more, but we should "fear Him who, after taking the life, has power to cast into hell." In this account the life of the person is taken before one is cast into hell. This tells us that God does not torture even the wicked by subjecting them to hell fire while they are alive. The anguish they experience is mental. Even though the Gospel writers are not in complete agreement that Jesus recognized a distinction between

body and soul, in neither account does He recognize a conscious essence, a soul, or a spirit that can function separate from the body. Indeed, His teaching is that any such entity thought to exist will be destroyed in hell.

Traditional Christianity points to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 as evidence that there is a presently burning hell where souls are captive in torment. But is that the lesson Jesus was teaching? Dr. Brad H. Young, in his book entitled *The Parables*, advocates that a parable is written to teach one lesson, that while there might be multiple points of comparison between the picture and the reality, the parable has one purpose. The lesson of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that the study of Moses and the prophets is vital to a correct understanding of reality regarding the realm of the dead, that if these people will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they would not be convinced by someone who rises from the dead. Jesus may have been hinting at his own death and resurrection yet to take place and their great unbelief. Regardless of that, there is another Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, who did rise from the dead, but Christians don't bother to notice that his testimony, or lack thereof, is a perfect match for what Moses and the prophets — especially Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 — said about the nature of humanity and the condition of man in death throughout the Old Testament. Christians actually promote Satan's argument when they cite the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as evidence that Jesus taught that there was a presently burning hell where souls are captive in torment. Jesus used that story because the elements were all familiar with the Jews of His day. But the point of the parable directs the listeners to search the scriptures to see what Moses and the prophets have written. Moses and the prophets are consistent and clear that when one dies, one is in a state of unconscious waiting in the dust of the Earth until the call of Michael. Jesus doesn't ask them to believe His teaching based on the strength of His personality, nor on His being the Messiah, but because of the record of Torah. Neither does Jesus direct His listeners to the teachings of the Rabbis of the Second Temple period and certainly not to the Greek philosophers and pagans, but to Moses and the prophets. It is Moses and the prophets who have written the inspired scriptures and we must learn from them.

Jesus explained to his disciples that the final end of sin and sinners would be like the weeds that were burned up in the parable of the wheat and tares. Jesus began this discourse when He told the parable of the sower and the four types of soil (Matthew 13:1-9), but the disciples question why Jesus teaches the people in parables. Jesus responds in verses 11-17 that these people listen and listen, but do not understand; they look and look, but do not see at all. In verses 18-30 Jesus elaborates on the meaning of the four soils and tells the parable of the wheat and tares as an explanation of the seed that landed on thorny ground. The disciples are still not satisfied that they understand the meaning of the parable of the weeds that are allowed to grow alongside the wheat until the harvest, so they asked Him for an explanation in verse 36. Jesus then explains the meaning for the different elements of the parable of the wheat and tares, and in verses 39-42 He tells them the part that applies to those who are lost. “³⁹ The enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age. The reapers are the angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send forth His angels and they will gather up out of His kingdom all those who offend and those who are guilty of lawlessness ⁴² and will cast them into the fiery furnace. There will be weeping and grinding of teeth there.” Jesus identifies that the devil and those who are guilty of lawlessness will be cast into hell fire and will be burned up just

as the weeds are burned up in His parable. The weeds do not burn forever. But when the weeds are burned up they are forever physically and chemically changed so that they no longer exist. This is the end result of sin and sinners. The souls or spirits of the wicked do not continue to live on after the destruction of their bodies.

The story of the conversation Jesus had with the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43) has been used as evidence of life everlasting immediately after death because Jesus supposedly promised that he would have eternal life that very day. However, there are two problems in the text with this position. First, the story shows that the thief asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom (v. 42), thereby demonstrating his understanding that Jesus was not yet in His Kingdom and that He would bring about the establishment of His kingdom at some time in the future. The thief did not anticipate that Jesus was establishing His kingdom that day. Second, the text is commonly translated to read, "Jesus said to Him, 'I assure you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" The problem with this is the placement of the comma. We must remember that the original Greek text was written without punctuation marks so that the translator is required to insert the punctuation marks when translating into English. The Greek text reads: Ἀμήν ἐγώ σοι σήμερον μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ, which translated into English without punctuation marks is "Truly I say to you today with Me you will be in Paradise." The sentence needs a comma and the only question is regarding its placement. The traditional placement before the word *today* promotes the notion that both Jesus and the thief will be in Paradise before this day is done. However, scripture is clear that Jesus did not go to Paradise that day because He died and was placed in the tomb before sunset. The thieves had their legs broken to accelerate the dying process so they, too, could be placed in their burial places before the Sabbath began. Neither Jesus nor the thief went to Paradise that day and the placement of the comma before the word *today* misrepresents the facts of the larger story. However, if the comma is placed after the word *today*, the statement promotes the notion that Jesus is giving His assurance right now while they're both on the cross that the thief's request for eternal life will be granted, that his eternal destiny in Paradise is secure in the words of Jesus. Placement of the comma after the word *today* gives the meaning that is in harmony with the facts of the entire story as they occurred that day. Moreover, placement of the comma after the word *today* makes the statement of Jesus compatible with the many other places in scripture that tell us that there is not a divine spark or essence or conscience spirit that continues to live in a different dimension after one dies. For these reasons the statement should be translated to read, "Truly I say to you today, with Me you will be in Paradise." The translation of Dr. George M. Lamsa, a native Assyrian who translated the scriptures from the Nestorian or eastern text of the Aramaic Peshitta, renders this verse with this meaning.

Jesus taught his listeners to study Moses and the prophets and thereby learn the truth about the final end of sin and sinners. Not only did Moses and the prophets teach the LORD's truth about what happens when a person dies, Jesus also taught the people what happens at death on several occasions. The fact that most Christians ignore the teachings of Jesus, Moses, and the prophets is an indication of how distant they are from God and how much we need to redouble our efforts to direct them to the words of life.