

Death, Immortality, and Heaven: No. 9

Have you been reconciled to God? If so, why do you still pray through a mediator? Will the reconciled person become alienated again by physical death? If you have been reconciled, why will you go to paradise/hades instead of heaven when you leave your earthly body? If you are truly reconciled, do you still have alienating sins for which you must give account and receive a pronouncement in judgment on a great, universal judgment day? My attempts to answer those questions while I held futurist expectations were as confusing and frustrating as trying to neatly fold a queen-size fitted sheet! Preterist eschatology adds clarity to answers about death, immortality, and heaven.

RECONCILIATION AND PRETERIST ESCHATOLOGY

The theme of the Bible is the reconciliation of man to God. It begins with man eating of the tree of life in unhindered relationship with God in Eden (a garden, park, paradise). Man turned his back on God in disobedience and started the course followed by all mankind. *“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear”* (Isa. 59:1-2). The account concludes with man being reconciled in permanent relationship with God, again eating of the tree of life in paradise in the last chapters of Revelation.

1. Why do you pray “in Jesus’ name”? Our only hope of reconciliation was by means of a mediator, one who interposes between two parties as the friend of each to effect reconciliation. Jesus filled that role, *“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all ...”* (1 Tim. 2:5). In manifesting himself in Christ, *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”* (2 Cor. 5:19).

God made his move toward man in Christ. Now man makes his move toward God in Christ also. Our transition is consummated through baptism into Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). Being thus accomplished, our reconciliation is maintained by the continued effect of his atonement as we walk in the light in our relationship in Christ (1 John 1:7). No longer is there alienation for such a person; hence, there is no longer need for someone to stand between us and God. We are in Christ and God while the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God dwell in us. Our prayers are not routed through Christ for we have direct approach to the Father. We have unashamed boldness to talk with the Father because there is no longer alienation. It is sad that most disciples do not really believe they are reconciled but that they must approach God by a sort of password “in Jesus’ name.” For more on this subject, read Ch. 1 of *Free To Speak, “Must God Plead With God?”* Now let us observe how this misunderstanding leads to other confusion.

2. Does physical death alienate us from God? Is that a silly question? If putting off this earthly body does not alienate us from God, how could one conclude that the spirit must go into an unseen hadean world awaiting a judgment before one can be united with God again? Do we “return to God” after death as though we were separated from him? Do

we “sleep in death in the unseen world” awaiting a supposed end of time and a universal call to judgment?

When Paul was writing to the Corinthians, the righteous dead of Israel and deceased disciples of Christ were “asleep” for the way into heaven had not been opened. While the outer tent of the Jewish system was still standing, the way into the sanctuary was not yet opened (Read Heb. 9). Addressing Corinthians, not you and me, and including himself – WE, not THEY centuries later, -- Paul exclaimed, “*Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.*” Some, but not all, would die before the parousia, the imminent coming of the Lord but all would not. He does not indicate that all would be changed at the same time. The trumpet sound was a call into assembly. The “last trumpet” for you and me individually may be as we draw our last breath on earth. That may be our time of “rapture” – being caught up -- so as to be forever with the Lord, reconciled eternally. When my Lea died, was she “caught up” to hades to await another reconciliation?

3. Sin and guilt alienated us from God. When we were forgiven, we were reconciled to him. Are we still held accountable for those sins? Are they still on our records so that we must appear at a universal judgment giving account for those forgiven sins? If so, we are still not reconciled, forgiven, saved. Let’s get real about this!

The Law of Moses offered no atonement of reconciliation, else Jesus’ death would have been in vain. Those ancients slept in death for the way into heaven (forgiveness, reconciliation) was not opened until Jesus, the High Priest, ascended, presented his sacrifice to the Father, and gave immortality for those awaiting at the end of the age. Matthew did not divide his writing into chapters. What we have divided as Chapters 23-25 are all in sequence. The judgment scene of Matthew 25 depicts their reconciliation or lack of it as they were judged according to their works of the Law. By applying that scene universally, we have a confused dichotomy – or something worse! -- disciples saved by faith apart from meritorious works but judged by meritorious works! This must be taken into consideration in interpreting other “judgment passages” like Romans 14:10-12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. The entire chapter of the latter reference is rich in assurance of our reconciliation. How could that be if our sins are still held against us?

Jesus took our place in death and judgment so that at his then imminent return which they were awaiting, he would not have to deal with sin but to give immortality. Please read that most revealing Chapter 9 of Hebrews again. That is all in harmony with Jesus’ declaration, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and DOES NOT COME INTO JUDGMENT, BUT HAS PASSED FROM DEATH TO LIFE*” (John 5:24).

There are various passages, such as John 5:22 and Acts 17:31, indicating that Jesus, rather than the Father, was to be the judge. There are various meanings of the words “judge” and “judgment”. I am not trying to make a thorough presentation here. I am convinced that we make the most reliable assessment about judgment from the study of reconciliation. Are we truly forgiven/reconciled or not? I think we are. I believe our forgiven family members who have died physically are still reconciled to God in heaven now. Do you object, saying that they must await a physical resurrection? The physical body has not sinned, been alienated, or been reconciled. It is not promised immortality.

Flesh and blood do not receive immortality – either literally or “spiritually” – as though there can be spiritual flesh and blood.

RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT OF THE WICKED

4. Revelation 21 & 22 pictures the culmination of reconciliation with the exclamation, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men.” Because we perceive physical relationships, prepositions are employed in the Scriptures to indicate spiritual relationships. As a disciple your life “*is hid with Christ in God*” (Col.3:3). We are in God when we are in Christ. We are baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). In being baptized into Christ, we put on Christ making us all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:27-28). We abide in the Son and in the Father (1 John 2:22). We live in the Spirit of God and he lives in us (Rom. 8:9-11). These positional expressions all indicate an intimacy and reconciliation with the One God as he manifested himself in three roles. In another essay we intend to explore this much more deeply.

Does the One God in us fluctuate, come and go, wane, or become lax, endangering our reconciliation? If not, why do disciples plead in song and prayer for the Spirit to fall on us again, fill our hearts again, and light the fire in our souls? If we need a new shot of adrenalin, is that due to withdrawal of deity and loss of reconciliation or is it not because of our own doubts, uncertainties, or laxity? Is the Holy Spirit an administrator of spiritual adrenalin?

5. A person who has never been reconciled to God has no promise of immortality being given at the time of physical death. A once reconciled disciple can cause his own alienation by denial of the faith, rejection of God, or living in impenitence so that immortality is not given at the point of physical death. At our physical death, if we die with him, that is, reconciled to him, we shall also continue to live with him without interruption eternally. Does God leave his reconciled ones when they exit this mortal body, consigning them to sleep in the unseen world until the supposed end of time and call to judgment? I think not!

Most of us evidently have been nurtured on so many fanciful concepts about death, immortality, and heaven that we have shrugged off any challenge to our physically oriented expectations. Unsubstantiated claims find reinforcement in repetition and dogmatism. That is unfortunate though not fatal. []

(Cecil Hook: January 2006)

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

VISIT Leroy Garrett and me at our booth at the ACU Lectures and Restoration Forum. Leroy will be a speaker and Sue (Ketcherside) Burton will be on a panel. This may be the rare opportunity to hear them that you have wished for.