

Our Life After Death (II)

By Rev. J. Kortering

The Conscious State of Blessedness

There must not be doubt in our minds that the believer immediately upon death enters into a conscious state of glory.

To make this clear we must expose the fallacy of what is commonly called “soul-sleep.” According to this view the soul becomes unconscious after death and is awakened in the resurrection. Proponents of this view seek support from Scripture by making reference to texts that describe death as sleep. “But we would not have you to be ignorant brethren, concerning them which are fallen asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope,” I Thess. 4:13. Or “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness,” Ps 17:15. Similarly Peter quotes from Psalm 16, “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” Acts 2:27. From these texts they reason furthermore that in the instance of those who were resurrected from the dead and brought back to this life, none describe for us or relate anything concerning the blessed life they experience after death. They would take literally the words of Jesus concerning Lazarus, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep,” John 11:11. Besides these evidences, they reason that it is impossible for a soul to function in this life without a body, it must also be true after death. It is irrational to imagine that a soul can be active and conscious without a body.

In answer to these conclusions by the Anabaptists and Russelites and all who follow this reasoning, we maintain that whenever Scripture speaks of death as sleep, it does so simply from the point of view of the body. Careful study of the texts that speak of death as a sleep will reveal that in every instance reference is made to the physical aspect of death. This is quite in harmony with reality. The force of physical death is likened to sleep, the body lies dormant, oblivious to all surroundings, to be laid to rest and raised in the resurrection. Hence burial of the body is described as being “sown in corruption, but raised in incorruption,” I Cor. 15:42. Concerning those who were raised from the dead and returned to this life, we need but remember that these were exceptions and cannot by any reasoning be made the rule. God had a special purpose for the raising of Lazarus, and it may well be that God preserved his soul in a dormant state while awaiting the return to this life. It would be quite contrary to God’s justice if He would so ordain that these should receive a taste of the heavenly glory and then return to the sphere of death only to die again.

Scripture provides abundant proof that believers expected immediate glorification at death. Even though we cannot fathom the wonder of how a soul can consciously exist without a body, yet we believe that with God all things are possible.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, “According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Phil.

1:20, 21. Asaph declares the same confidence in Ps. 73:23, 24, “Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory.” Christ Himself expressed this confidence when He shouted to the malefactor, “Today thou shalt be with me in paradise,” Luke 23:43. Both would immediately enter into this conscious state of glory for paradise is further described for us in II Cor. 12:2-4, “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell, God knoweth;) such a one caught up to the third heaven... How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” This obviously was the very throne of God. John saw a vision in the Isle of Patmos and behold, “the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God,” Rev.20:4, and they are not sleeping, but “Lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” This describes the present period in which the gospel is preached and the church gathered. There is no doubt, but that every believer may expect to awake and “still be with thee,” Ps. 139:18, at the moment of our physical death.

As glorious as this conscious state may be, it is not the final glory. Even then the whole church is not yet complete for the cry arises, “How long O Lord, holy and true, does thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” Rev. 6:10. Awaiting the resurrection of the body and the gathering of the complete church, these saints in heaven look forward to a still better day when, “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes... for the former things are passed away. And He that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.” Rev. 21:4, 5.

Punishment for the Wicked

There are some, the Roman Catholics, who claim that even the children of God may expect to experience conscious suffering after death. This is claimed in their doctrine of purgatory. The only Scriptural proof they allege is found in I Cor. 3:13, 15, “Every man’s work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is... If any man’s work shall be burned he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.” Their view is that through Baptism we are freed from original sin, by means of the Eucharist we are freed from mortal sins, and by means of penance and purgatory we are freed from venial sins (sins of the flesh, not directly against the law of God). According to this view there must yet be a sanctifying process after death. Their proof text nevertheless does not apply, no more than their reference to II Maccabees 12:42-45 of the Apocryphal books. The reference to I Corinthians does not even speak of a literal fire upon the person, rather a refinement as a fire and that too at the end of the world. The doctrine of purgatory denies the sufficiency of the one complete sacrifice of Christ that covered all our sins once for all, Heb. 9:25, 26.

The unrepentant wicked who are outside of Christ are the only ones that will experience conscious suffering at the moment of their physical death. God’s righteous judgments shall stand unto eternity. When God says the soul that sinneth it shall die, that shall take place in a temporary state of suffering and descend into a deeper state of woe after the judgment when all the wicked shall, “go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched, where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched,” Mark 9:43,44.

Our Personal Abode

You notice that the subject of this chapter is “Our life after death.” That makes it personal. It is not first of all an abstract idea of life after death, but personally my and our life after death.

This is extremely important for all who take the Word of God seriously. There is a state of conscious suffering or joy awaiting every man at the moment of physical death. Within the abode of joy, the people of God lift up their hearts in praise unto the God of Salvation and sing, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing,” Rev.5:12. Within the abode of suffering, there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, Matt. 24:21.

There is only one way into the state of conscious glory. That is God’s way of salvation in Jesus Christ. No man can earn entrance, for all our deeds are evil, we are by nature, “covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful; Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them,” Rom. 1:31, 32. The way of salvation is the way of perfect righteousness accomplished by our Lord Jesus on the cross, Eph. 2:1-10.

Confess your sins, repent of your evil way, and hear the voice of Jesus, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” Matt. 11:28. That rest is at the foot of the cross where He merited heaven for all His own.

As Christ dwells in us we shout triumphantly, “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me,” Gal. 2:20. In that life we shall never die, John 11:26.

Say this, and you surely may say with conviction, “O death, where is thy sting, O grave thy victory... thanks be unto God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” I Cor. 15:55-57.

Quote

“His mercy, His tender mercy, His free, eternal, and sovereign mercy, is the source of all this light in darkness, of all this life from death, of all this blessedness in our misery! ... And why? Why, O, why would he be filled with tender mercy to us, who are by nature the enemies of God, loving the darkness rather than the light? Why should His mercy touch you and me, while thousands perish in His wrath? Why? For His own name’s sake! Another answer there is not!”

Rev. Herman Hoeksema from God’s Eternal Good Pleasure