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WHAT IS DEATH?

What Scripture Teaches About the Sleep of the Dead and the Hope of the Resurrection

A Continuous Jubilee Calendar Study

"Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." — John 5:28-29 (KJV)

Introduction: The Question Everyone Faces

Sooner or later, every one of us stands beside a grave. Maybe it's a parent, a husband or wife, a child, a friend. And in that moment, the same questions come to almost everyone. Where are they now? Can they see me? Are they in heaven already, or somewhere else? Will I ever see them again?

People answer those questions in many ways. Some say the dead are watching over us. Some say they go straight to heaven or straight to hell the moment they die. Others say death is simply the end, and there is nothing more.

In this paper I want to set those ideas aside for a moment and ask a simpler question: what does Scripture itself say about death? Not what we've heard at funerals, or seen in movies, or been told by people we love and trust, but what God's Word actually says when we let it explain itself.

I'll tell you now where this study leads, because it's good news. Scripture calls death a sleep. The dead in Christ are resting, safe in God's keeping, and the next thing they will know is the sound of a trumpet and the face of Jesus. Death is real and it is an enemy, but it is not the last word. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Let's see how Scripture shows us that, one step at a time.

> **Before we begin.** This study explains my understanding of what the Bible teaches about death. My goal is to read each passage in a way that agrees with the rest of Scripture, and I hold the whole study to one rule: no conclusion here may contradict any passage of Scripture.

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> Where Scripture states something, I quote it. Where I draw a conclusion it doesn't directly state, I say so with words like "as I understand it." I quote from the King James Version and explain older words as they come up. Scripture references work like addresses, so "John 11:11" means the book of John, chapter 11, verse 11. In my own words I capitalize pronouns for God and Christ (He, His, Him); the KJV quotations are left as written.

A few older words you'll meet in the King James Version, and what they mean:

- **Thee, thou, thy, ye** mean "you" and "your." Endings like **-eth** and **-est** are old verb endings, so "sleepeth" means "sleeps" and "knoweth" means "knows."
- **Shew** means "show," and **spake** means "spoke."
- **Verily** means "truly."
- **Corruptible** means able to decay and die. **Incorruption** and **immortality** mean never decaying, never dying.
- **Sepulchre** means a tomb.
- **Quickened** means made alive.

Where other unfamiliar words come up, I explain them right after the verse.

1. What Man Is

To understand death, we first have to understand what it is that dies. So we begin where Scripture begins, in the garden.

Dust and breath

"And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7).

Notice the two things God brought together. First He formed a body from the dust. Then He breathed His own breath of life into it. And the result, Scripture says, is that "man became a living soul." In the original Hebrew, the word for "soul" here is *nephesh*. It means a living being, a whole living person. The same word is used just a chapter earlier for the animals, "every living creature that moveth" (Genesis 1:21), where "creature" translates the same word.

So in Genesis 2, Adam doesn't receive a soul as a separate part placed inside him. He *becomes* a living soul when God's breath meets the dust. Later Scripture does speak of soul and body as distinct. Jesus said, "fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" (Matthew 10:28). But

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Scripture never says the soul is immortal on its own, able to live apart from God.

Only God has immortality

That's the key point, and Paul says it plainly. He describes God as the One "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto" (1 Timothy 6:16). Immortality, in other words, is not something every human being carries inside by nature. It belongs to God alone, and He gives it as a gift.

Paul tells us when that gift is given. Speaking of the resurrection, he writes, "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:53). In plain words: this body, which can decay and die, must be changed into one that can never decay or die. We are mortal now. Immortality is something we put on at the resurrection. Paul even tells believers to seek it: "To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life" (Romans 2:7). And Christ is the One who opened the way to it: "our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10).

This matters a great deal for everything that follows. Teachings that hold the soul is naturally immortal usually also hold that it stays conscious somewhere the moment the body dies. But if immortality is God's gift, received at the resurrection, then death can be exactly what Scripture says it is: a sleep, until the One who gives life wakes us.

Many scholars have recognized this. F. F. Bruce, one of the most respected evangelical Bible scholars of the last century, noted that Scripture ascribes immortality to God alone, and speaks of immortality for people in connection with the resurrection of the body, not as a natural property of the soul (from his foreword to Edward Fudge's The Fire That Consumes). That's history and scholarship, outside Scripture, but it agrees with what the verses above say.

2. How Death Entered

If God made man to live, where did death come from? Scripture tells us exactly.

The tree of life and the one forbidden tree

In the garden, God gave Adam an open table, with one exception: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt

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not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

Notice that the tree of life wasn't forbidden. It stood "in the midst of the garden" (Genesis 2:9), and "every tree" was open to them except one. Yet it seems they hadn't eaten from it yet when sin entered, because afterward God said, "lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" (Genesis 3:22). As I read it, God was giving them time to live, learn and grow with Him, with life always within reach. Scripture doesn't tell us why they hadn't yet eaten, so I offer that only as my reading.

The first lie

Then came the serpent, and his very first words against God were a lie about death: "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). God had said, "thou shalt surely die." The serpent said, "Ye shall not surely die." That lie, that people don't really die, that something in us goes on living no matter what, is the oldest lie in the world. It's worth remembering whenever we hear a teaching about death. Does it agree with what God said, or with what the serpent said? Many sincere believers were taught otherwise by people they love, so this isn't about blame. It's about letting God's Word have the last word.

Unto dust

Adam and Eve believed the lie and ate. And God's sentence came, just as He had warned: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19). The body that came from the dust would go back to the dust.

Then, in mercy, God guarded the way to the tree of life, so that man would not live forever in a fallen state: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). (Cherubims are a kind of angel.)

Did Adam die that day?

A careful reader will notice something. God had warned, "in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Yet Adam lived on for many years: "And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died" (Genesis 5:5). So did God's warning come true that day? As I understand it, it came true in three ways.

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- **Sin entered that day, and death came with it.** Paul explains, “by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin” (Romans 5:12). The moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, sin entered mankind, and death entered with it. From that day on, their bodies began wearing out toward the grave. Their mortal countdown had begun.
- **The way to the tree of life was closed that day.** As long as the tree of life was within reach, never-ending life was within reach. But God said, “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” (Genesis 3:22), and He sent them out of the garden (Genesis 3:23-24). Without the tree of life, their death was certain.
- **They were cut off from God’s presence that day.** Before, they had walked with God without fear. Now “Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). Isaiah tells us why sin does that: “But your iniquities have separated between you and your God” (Isaiah 59:2).

Scripture also uses “in the day” to mean “at the time when,” not only a single 24-hour day. It describes the whole week of creation this way: “in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” (Genesis 2:4). And in the original Hebrew, God’s warning repeats the word for emphasis, literally “dying thou shalt die,” which stresses that death was certain. So on the day Adam ate, the sentence of death was passed. He did not die at once, but his death was now sure, and Genesis records that he died at the age of 930.

By one man

From that day on, death has reached every person. Paul explains: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Romans 5:12). Natural death is the result of sin entering the world through Adam. That’s why even good people die, and why little children die. We live in a fallen world.

But that isn’t the end of the story, and the tree of life isn’t gone. Jesus promises it back: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). We’ll come back to that promise at the end.

3. Death Is a Sleep

Now we come to the heart of it. When Scripture describes what death is like, it uses one picture over and over: sleep.

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Jesus called it sleep

When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus told His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11). The disciples thought He meant ordinary rest, so He spoke plainly: "Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead" (John 11:14). Then He went to the tomb, and after four days in the grave, Lazarus came out alive.

Here's something worth noticing. Lazarus had been dead four days. If he had gone to heaven, surely he would have had something to say about it. Yet Scripture records not one word from Lazarus about where he had been. Silence alone doesn't prove it, but it fits perfectly with what Jesus said: he had been asleep, and Jesus woke him.

Jesus said the same thing of a little girl who had died. "Give place: for the maid is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn" (Matthew 9:24). ("Give place" means "make room." "Laughed him to scorn" means they mocked Him.) Then He took her by the hand, and she arose.

The prophets said the same

This wasn't a new idea with Jesus. Daniel was told of the resurrection in the very same terms: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). The dead "sleep in the dust of the earth," and they "awake" at the resurrection.

The kings of Israel and Judah are described the same way, generation after generation: David "slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David" (1 Kings 2:10). To "sleep with his fathers" meant to die and be laid to rest, as his ancestors had been.

The apostles said the same

The apostles used the same word for believers who had died. When Stephen was stoned, Luke records: "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). Paul comforted grieving believers this way: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

What the dead know

If death is a sleep, then the dead aren't aware of what is happening on earth. Scripture says exactly that: "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory

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of them is forgotten” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:4).

These verses don’t mean the dead are gone forever. Remember, they are asleep, and God will wake them. They mean that between death and the resurrection, the dead are not thinking, watching, or knowing. They are resting.

Some read Ecclesiastes 12:7, “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it,” as saying a conscious spirit goes to God at death. But look at the words. The spirit returns to God “who gave it,” and what God gave at creation was “the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). In the original Hebrew, the word for “spirit” here is *ruach*, which also means breath or wind. The breath of life goes back to God, who holds every life in His hand, and the person sleeps in the dust until He gives that breath again.

Sleep is a picture of hope

Why would God choose sleep as His picture for death? Because sleep is temporary. No one goes to sleep expecting to stay asleep forever. You close your eyes at night, and the next thing you know, it’s morning. Eight hours passed on the clock, but for you, no time passed at all.

That is the picture God gave us. Death is real, and we grieve, but for those who belong to Christ it is a night with a morning at the end of it. Daniel was told this about his own death: “But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days” (Daniel 12:13). (To “stand in thy lot” means to rise and receive his share, his inheritance.) Rest now, and rise at the end.

4. Why the Next Moment Is the Lord

If death is a sleep, some will ask, then what about the verses where Paul says he would rather die and be with Christ? Doesn’t that mean believers go to be with the Lord the moment they die?

Those are fair questions, and the answer is beautiful. It depends on understanding two things: what Paul was really longing for, and what death is like from the sleeper’s side.

What Paul was longing for

The best-known verse is 2 Corinthians 5:8: “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” Many take that to mean the soul leaves the body at death and goes straight to heaven.

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But to understand any letter, we need to know who it was written to and what they believed. Corinth was a Greek city, and many Greeks of that time thought the body was a prison and that the soul was set free at death. Some in the Corinthian church had even started denying the resurrection altogether. Paul had to correct them in his first letter: “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:12). (The Greek background of Corinth is history, outside Scripture, but the denial of the resurrection is right there in the verse.)

So when Paul writes 2 Corinthians 5, he isn’t teaching the Greek idea of a soul escaping its body. He’s correcting it. Read the verses just before verse 8. Paul begins, “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1). Paul calls our body an “earthly house” and a “tabernacle,” which means a tent. A tent is only for a while. The “building of God” is the new body God gives. Then he tells us plainly that he does *not* long to be a bodiless spirit: “For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life” (2 Corinthians 5:4).

“Not for that we would be unclothed.” Paul doesn’t want to be “unclothed,” without a body. He wants to be “clothed upon” with his new, eternal body, so that “mortality might be swallowed up of life.” And in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul had already told them exactly when mortality is swallowed up: “So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54). That happens at the resurrection, “at the last trump” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

From the sleeper’s side, there is no wait

So how can Paul say that being absent from the body is being present with the Lord? Here is how I read it. Time as we know it doesn’t pass for the dead. As an illustration, Scripture tells us God doesn’t measure time the way we do: “But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). That verse is about God, not the dead, but it reminds us that time is not the same for everyone. And the dead “know not any thing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5), including the passing of years.

So when a believer closes their eyes in death, the very next thing they know is the trumpet, the resurrection, and the face of Jesus. Whether they slept one year or three thousand, from their side there was no waiting at all. That is why

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Paul could honestly say that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. For the one who dies in Christ, those two moments meet. (I explore this more fully in my paper *The Author of Time*.)

Paul says the same in Philippians: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better” (Philippians 1:23). (“In a strait betwixt two” means torn between two choices.) From Paul’s side, departing *was* being with Christ. And yet the same Paul knew his crown would come at Christ’s appearing, not before: “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

So we don’t have to choose between “death is sleep” and “to depart is to be with Christ.” Both are true. We sleep, and for us, the next moment is the Lord.

5. The Hard Passages

Some passages are often used to teach that the dead are conscious, and they deserve careful, honest answers. Let’s take them one at a time, and let Scripture explain each.

The thief on the cross

The question: Did Jesus promise the thief he would be in paradise that very day?

As Jesus hung on the cross, one of the thieves beside Him asked to be remembered, and Jesus answered: “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Many read that to mean the thief went to heaven that very day. But Scripture gives us two facts to weigh. First, where is paradise? Jesus tells us: “the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). Paradise is where God is. Second, did Jesus Himself go there that day? On the third day, after His resurrection, Jesus told Mary, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17). Jesus Himself had not yet gone to the Father, three days later.

So how do we read Luke 23:43? Here is something outside Scripture that helps: the original Greek manuscripts had no commas. Punctuation was added by translators much later. The verse can be read just as faithfully as, “Verily I say unto thee to day, shalt thou be with me in paradise.” On that dark day,

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when everything looked lost, Jesus gave the thief a solemn promise: you will be with Me in paradise.

Either way, the promise holds. The thief will be with Jesus in paradise. And from the thief's side, the very next thing he knows will be that promise kept.

The souls under the altar

The question: Are the martyrs awake in heaven right now, crying out to God?

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees "under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9-10).

Some take this as proof that the dead are conscious in heaven. But this is a vision full of temple symbols, and the altar is the key. In the temple, the blood of a sacrifice was poured out at the base of the altar: "and shall pour all the blood of the bullock at the bottom of the altar of the burnt offering" (Leviticus 4:7). And Scripture says the life is in the blood: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11). The martyrs' lives were poured out like sacrifices, so John sees them at the base of the altar.

Their crying out follows a pattern God gave at the very beginning. When Cain killed Abel, God said, "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). Abel's blood wasn't conscious. It was a picture of justice not yet done, crying out to God. Hebrews says of Abel, "by it he being dead yet speaketh" (Hebrews 11:4).

And notice what the martyrs are told: "And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (Revelation 6:11). They are told to *rest*, until God's people are complete. As I understand it, these are the martyrs of every age, from Abel onward, and their blood cries for justice that God will surely bring.

The rich man and Lazarus

The question: Does this story show that the dead are suffering in hell right now, and that the lost are tormented forever?

No passage is quoted more often to teach eternal torment. So it deserves a careful reading, in its setting, letting Scripture explain it. When we read it that

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way, it turns out to be one of the most hopeful stories Jesus ever told. It shows that God receives everyone who comes to Him in faith.

The story. Jesus said:

> *"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores." (Luke 16:19-21)*

Both men die. Lazarus "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried" (Luke 16:22). The rich man, "being in torments," sees Abraham far off and begs for Lazarus to cool his tongue with a drop of water. Abraham answers that "there is a great gulf fixed" between them (Luke 16:23-26). The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers. Abraham replies:

> *"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them… If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." (Luke 16:29, 31)*

(This beggar is a different Lazarus from Jesus' friend in Bethany. We will meet that Lazarus again below.)

Who Jesus was speaking to. This story is the last in a series. It began when tax collectors and sinners came to hear Jesus:

> *"Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." (Luke 15:1-2)*

Jesus answered with the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, whose older brother refused to come in when his father welcomed the sinner home (Luke 15:3-32). Then came the unjust steward, who lost the stewardship he had been trusted with (Luke 16:1-13). Luke tells us who was listening: "And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him" (Luke 16:14). Jesus told them, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16).

Every story in this series has the same theme: God welcomes the outsider who comes to Him, and those who think they are already in miss the feast. The rich man and Lazarus is the last and strongest of them.

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A parable, not a map of the afterlife. Notice when the story takes place. The rich man is already in the flames while his five brothers are still living on earth: “For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment” (Luke 16:28). His body has just been buried, and the world is going on as usual. Read as a literal account, the story would have the lost punished and the righteous rewarded right after death. Scripture places both at the resurrection. Jesus said, “the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28-29). The rest of the dead “lived not again until the thousand years were finished” (Revelation 20:5). Even Abraham has not yet received his reward: “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). And if the story were a literal picture, the saved would live within sight and hearing of the lost, which cannot fit God’s promise that “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain” (Revelation 21:4). Jesus took a picture His listeners already knew and brought the end of the age into the moment after death, to teach a truth they needed to hear while there was still time.

“Abraham’s bosom” was one of those familiar pictures. At a feast, guests reclined at the table, and the honored guest leaned close to the host, as John was “leaning on Jesus’ bosom” at the Last Supper (John 13:23). To be in Abraham’s bosom meant a place of honor beside Abraham at God’s great feast, the feast Jesus spoke of when He said many “shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11).

The rich man: the one who had everything. Look at how Jesus dressed him: “purple and fine linen.” Those were the materials of the high priest’s garments: “And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, and of purple, of scarlet, and fine twined linen, with cunning work” (Exodus 28:6). Purple was also the color of kings, and God had called Israel “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

He “fared sumptuously every day.” No people were ever fed more richly by God:

> *“Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came” (Romans 9:4-5)*

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Paul says their greatest privilege was God's Word itself: "unto them were committed the oracles of God" (Romans 3:2). The rich man pictures the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They sat at the head of God's table, wore its robes and ate its bread every day, while a hungry man lay at their gate.

Lazarus: the one who had nothing but God. The beggar is the only person Jesus ever named in a parable. "Lazarus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar, the name of Aaron's son (Exodus 6:23). It means "God has helped." The man had nothing else: no food, no health, no one to care for him. His name told his whole story. His only help was God.

He longed for "the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table," and "the dogs came and licked his sores." Jesus used that same picture on another day. A Canaanite woman, a Gentile, begged Him to heal her daughter:

> *"But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt." (Matthew 15:26-28)*

She asked only for crumbs, and Jesus praised her **faith**.

So Lazarus stands for everyone outside the gate who has nothing to offer God but need and trust: the poor of Israel, the publicans and sinners who drew near to hear Jesus, and the Gentiles longing for crumbs. Luke's Gospel opens with this very song. Mary praised God because "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Luke 1:52-53).

Carried to Abraham, the father of faith. Lazarus was carried to Abraham. Why Abraham? Because Abraham is the father of all who believe:

> *"And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." (Genesis 15:6)*
>
> *"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." (Galatians 3:7)*

The rich man calls out, "Father Abraham" (Luke 16:24), and Abraham answers him, "Son" (Luke 16:25). By birth he truly was Abraham's son. Yet he stood on the far side of the gulf. John the Baptist had warned the leaders of exactly this: "think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). Jesus told them, "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do

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the works of Abraham" (John 8:39). Being born into the family was never enough. What made someone Abraham's child was sharing Abraham's faith.

Moses and the prophets point to Jesus. Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). Hearing Moses and the prophets meant coming to Jesus, because they wrote about Him:

> *"For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (John 5:46-47)*

After His resurrection, "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

"Though one rose from the dead." Then the story's last line came true, twice. Jesus raised a real man named Lazarus, His friend in Bethany, four days after he died (John 11:43-44). Many believed. But the chief priests were not persuaded:

> *"But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus." (John 12:10-11)*

Then Jesus Himself rose from the dead, and the chief priests paid the guards to say His body was stolen (Matthew 28:11-15). One rose from the dead, and they still would not be persuaded, just as the story said. Many have also seen the high priest's family in the rich man: the five sons of Annas all served as high priest, and Caiaphas, who judged Jesus, was Annas's son-in-law (John 18:13). That is history rather than Scripture, and the parable does not name him. But it shows how sharply this story would have struck its first hearers.

Not replacement, but faith for all. Some have read this story to mean God cast Israel away and gave its place to the Gentiles. The story teaches the opposite.

The beggar carries a Hebrew name, and he is welcomed into the bosom of Abraham, the father of Israel. The gulf in the story is not between Jews and Gentiles. It is between those who trusted God and those who trusted their own standing. Paul explains it with God's own olive tree:

> *"Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear… And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be graffed in: for God is able to graff them in again." (Romans 11:20, 23)*

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There is one tree, Abraham's tree of faith, and every branch stands on it by faith alone. The door was never closed to the rich man's own people. The first believers in Jesus were Jews, and soon "a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). The very class the rich man pictures came through the gate. And God has promised that Israel's blindness is only "in part… until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:25-26).

"For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him" (Romans 10:12). That is the true riches the rich man missed.

What the story teaches. It teaches four things:

- **Faith, not standing, brings us to God.** Lazarus had nothing but God's help, and that was enough.
- **God's Word is enough.** Moses and the prophets point to Jesus. Those who will not hear them will not be persuaded even by a resurrection.
- **This life is the time to choose.** "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed" (Luke 16:26). Once a life is over, its choice stands.
- **It does not teach endless torment.** Jesus used a picture His listeners knew to teach these lessons. Scripture tells us plainly elsewhere that the dead sleep until the resurrection, and that the lost are judged and then come to an end in the second death (Revelation 20:12-15).

The story Jesus told to warn proud men is good news for everyone else. If you feel like the one lying outside the gate, with nothing to bring to God but your need, Lazarus's name is God's promise to you: God helps. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13).

"All live unto him"

The question: Did Jesus mean the dead are alive and aware today?

The Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, once tried to trap Jesus with a question about it. Jesus answered: "Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him" (Luke 20:37-38).

Some read "all live unto him" to mean the dead are alive and conscious now. But notice what Jesus was proving: "that the dead are raised."

Here is what that means in plain words. The Sadducees said no one would ever rise from the dead. Jesus answered them from the story of Moses at the

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burning bush, where God said, “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). By then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been dead for hundreds of years. Yet God didn’t say “I was their God.” He said “I am.” God doesn’t go on calling Himself the God of people who are gone for good. He still calls Himself their God because He is going to raise them back to life.

So “all live unto him” means that, in God’s eyes, the dead are as certain to live as if they were already alive, because He has promised to wake them. We see them as gone. He sees them as sleeping, waiting for the morning of the resurrection. Jesus wasn’t saying Abraham is awake in heaven right now. He was proving that Abraham will rise.

Saul and the witch of Endor

The question: Did the prophet Samuel really come back from the dead to speak to Saul?

When King Saul had turned away from God and God would no longer answer him, he went to a woman with a familiar spirit (a medium who claimed she could call up the dead) and asked her to bring up the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28). A figure appeared and spoke with Saul.

Some take this as proof that the dead can be contacted. But God had strictly forbidden it: “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer” (Deuteronomy 18:10-11). In plain words, God forbade every kind of fortune-telling, magic and trying to contact the dead. And Scripture tells us how God judged what Saul did: “So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD, even against the word of the LORD, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire of it” (1 Chronicles 10:13).

The account itself calls the figure Samuel: “And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice” (1 Samuel 28:12), and “Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?” (1 Samuel 28:15). So this is a fair question to ask. But notice a few details. God had already refused to answer Saul: “the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets” (1 Samuel 28:6). The woman said, “I saw gods ascending out of the earth” (1 Samuel 28:13), coming up from the ground, not down from God. And it seems Saul didn’t see the figure himself. He asked her what it looked like,

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and only from her description “Saul perceived that it was Samuel” (1 Samuel 28:14). The account tells the story as Saul and the woman experienced it.

As I read it, Saul was deceived by an evil spirit, not visited by Samuel. I recognize that this depends on how I read this account alongside the other passages about death. Since God had refused to answer him, He would not suddenly send a prophet through a forbidden medium. This is exactly why we must not put our faith in any power outside God. Satan has always been willing to impersonate, and Scripture warns: “And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

“The spirits in prison”

The question: Did Jesus go down to preach to the dead between His death and resurrection?

Peter writes that Christ was “put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: 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, while the ark was a preparing” (1 Peter 3:18-20). (“Quickened” means made alive. “Longsuffering” means patience. “While the ark was a preparing” means while it was being built.)

Some read this to mean Jesus went down into the place of the dead between His death and resurrection. But notice *how* He preached: “by the Spirit.” Peter tells us earlier in the same letter that it was “the Spirit of Christ” that spoke through the prophets (1 Peter 1:11). And notice *when* those people were disobedient: “in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing.” Peter calls Noah “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5).

As I read it, Christ, by the Holy Spirit, preached to the people of Noah’s day through Noah, while the ark was being built. The “prison” was their condition while they lived: they were bound by sin, even as Noah preached to them. They refused, and now they sleep in death until the judgment. “Prison” is a picture Scripture uses again and again for the bondage of sin. The Messiah came “To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house” (Isaiah 42:7). Jesus read His mission from Isaiah: “he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives” (Luke 4:18). My research holds that Jesus did not go down into hell. He preached through His Spirit to those bound by sin, as He still does today.

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6. Those Scripture Says God Took

If death is a sleep for everyone until the resurrection, are there any exceptions? Scripture records a few, and they are worth looking at carefully.

Enoch and Elijah

Of Enoch, Scripture says simply, “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (Genesis 5:24). Hebrews adds: “By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him” (Hebrews 11:5). (“Translated” here means carried from one place to another.) Enoch never died. God took him. Hebrews doesn’t name where, but as I understand it, God took him to be with Himself, as He later took Elijah “into heaven” (2 Kings 2:1). Some point to Hebrews 11:13, “These all died in faith,” which comes soon after Enoch. But Hebrews has just said Enoch was taken “that he should not see death” (Hebrews 11:5), and the “these all” of verse 13 are those who “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13): Abraham, Sarah and their family (Hebrews 11:8-12).

Elijah was taken the same way, in front of Elisha’s eyes: “behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11).

What about John 3:13?

Some point to Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” (John 3:13). If no one had gone up to heaven, how could Enoch and Elijah be there? It’s a fair question, and many debate it.

Look at what Jesus was talking about. The verse just before says, “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?” (John 3:12). Jesus was explaining why He alone could speak about heavenly things. No man had gone up to heaven and come back to teach what he had seen. Only the Son of man came down from heaven, so only He could reveal it. Scripture uses “ascending into heaven” this way elsewhere, as a picture of reaching heavenly knowledge: “Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?... what is his name, and what is his son’s name, if thou canst tell?” (Proverbs 30:4), and “Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?” (Deuteronomy 30:12).

Notice, too, that Enoch and Elijah didn’t go up by their own power. God took them: “for God took him” (Genesis 5:24), and “the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind” (2 Kings 2:1). Neither one came back to tell what

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heaven is like. As I understand it, John 3:13 means that no human being has gone up to heaven on his own and returned with its message, and that fits with God taking Enoch and Elijah. Christians have understood this verse in more than one way, but this reading lets both passages stand just as written.

Moses

Moses died, and God Himself buried him: “And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day” (Deuteronomy 34:6). Yet Jude tells us something unusual happened afterward: “Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee” (Jude 1:9). (Michael “durst not,” meaning he dared not, insult the devil. He left the matter to the Lord.) And centuries later, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration, where Jesus “was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). (“Transfigured” means changed in appearance; His heavenly glory shone through.) Luke records it this way: “And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30-31). (“His decease” means His death, which was soon to take place at Jerusalem.)

Here is how I understand these passages together. Scripture teaches that the dead sleep until the resurrection, so a dead Moses could not have stood on that mountain talking with Jesus. Yet there he was, “in glory,” beside Elijah, who never died but was taken up to heaven bodily (2 Kings 2:11). Peter, James and John saw “the two men that stood with him” (Luke 9:32). And Jude tells us the devil disputed over Moses’ body, which is exactly what a resurrection would involve. Scripture doesn’t say in so many words that God raised Moses. But as I understand these passages together, God raised him in a glorified body and took him to heaven.

Scripture also tells us what Moses and Elijah did there. They weren’t silent figures in a picture. They talked with Jesus: “And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him” (Matthew 17:3). Luke even tells us what they talked about: they “spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). They knew what was about to happen to Him. And when the meeting was over, they left: “as they departed from him” (Luke 9:33). Talking, knowing and leaving are what living people do.

Some point out that Jesus called it a vision: “Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Matthew 17:9). It’s true that a vision

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can show figures who aren't literally there, like the man who appeared to Paul: "There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (Acts 16:9). But a vision can also show real beings who truly are present. Cornelius "saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him" (Acts 10:3), and that angel was real. The word Jesus used, in the original Greek, simply means "something seen." It's the same word used when Moses saw the burning bush: "he wondered at the sight" (Acts 7:31), and that bush really burned. Mark and Luke don't call it a vision at all. They just say "what things they had seen" (Mark 9:9). And Peter remembered it as something he saw with his own eyes: "but were eyewitnesses of his majesty... when we were with him in the holy mount" (2 Peter 1:16, 18).

Someone may ask: doesn't Scripture say Christ was the first to rise? Paul did say that Christ "should be the first that should rise from the dead" (Acts 26:23). But in Scripture, "first" and "firstborn" often mean first in rank, not only first in time. Paul calls Christ "the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence" (Colossians 1:18). "Preeminence" means the highest place. God used the word this way of David: "Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth" (Psalm 89:27), though David was the youngest of his brothers (1 Samuel 16:11). And God said, "Ephraim is my firstborn" (Jeremiah 31:9), though his brother Manasseh was born first (Genesis 48:14).

Every rescue from death before the cross also rested on the cross that was coming. Jesus is "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), and God forgave "sins that are past" through His blood (Romans 3:25). So if God raised Moses early, He did it on the strength of Christ's coming victory. Christ is still first: first in rank, and the One whose resurrection makes every other resurrection possible. I recognize that applying this to Acts 26:23 and to an earlier raising of Moses is my understanding, not something either passage directly states.

So, as I understand it, Moses is one of the few exceptions Scripture shows us. Enoch and Elijah were taken to heaven without dying, and, as we'll see next, the saints raised at Christ's resurrection may have been taken too. As I understand these passages, one more group follows the same pattern in the last days: God's sealed messengers of the 144,000, slain for their testimony, are raised after three days and a half and taken up to heaven as firstfruits (Revelation 11:11-12; 14:4; see the note on firstfruits below). I explain how I reach this in my paper *The Seven Trumpets*. Apart from these few, death remains a sleep until the resurrection.

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The saints raised at Christ's resurrection

Matthew records something remarkable that happened when Jesus died and rose: "And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many" (Matthew 27:52-53). Scripture doesn't tell us that they died again. And Paul, quoting the Psalms, says that when Christ ascended, "he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" (Ephesians 4:8; Psalm 68:18).

What does "led captivity captive" mean? The picture comes from Psalm 68, where a victorious king returns from battle leading a line of prisoners behind him and sharing the spoils: "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men" (Psalm 68:18). In plain words, the one who held others captive has now been taken captive himself. When Jesus rose and ascended, He turned the tables on sin, death and the devil, the very powers that had held mankind prisoner. Hebrews puts it this way: "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Scripture often describes sin and death as a prison:

- **Sin holds us captive.** Paul felt it in himself: "bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (Romans 7:23). Jesus said, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34).
- **The grave is a prison, and Christ holds the keys.** God promised, "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death" (Hosea 13:14). The risen Jesus says He has "the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18).
- **Christ came to open the prison doors.** Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would come "to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus read that very passage in the synagogue at Nazareth and said, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21).

So "led captivity captive" can be read two ways, and both agree with Scripture. First, Christ conquered the jailers: sin, death and Satan. Second, He may have led a company of freed prisoners with Him. Many read it as Christ taking the saints raised at His resurrection (Matthew 27:52-53) into heaven with Him, as a token of His victory over the grave. That second reading isn't stated outright, but it fits the verses.

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A possibility: the twenty-four elders

This raises a question I am still studying, and I want to be clear that Scripture doesn't settle it. In Revelation, around God's throne, John sees "four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold" (Revelation 4:4). Who are they?

Some details suggest they may be redeemed people. Their white raiment and crowns are the very rewards Jesus promises to those who overcome: "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment" (Revelation 3:5), and "be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). ("Raiment" means clothing. In Scripture, white clothing pictures the purity and righteousness God gives His people: "the fine linen is the righteousness of saints" (Revelation 19:8), and "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).) They are distinct from the angels, who stand "round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts" (Revelation 7:11). And in the King James Version, their song says: "thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests" (Revelation 5:9-10). I should note honestly that some Greek manuscripts, followed by many modern translations, read "them" instead of "us" in those verses.

Scripture does give us some clues about why they might be there. Three things stand out:

- **In Israel, seated elders served as witnesses.** When Boaz redeemed the land of Naomi's family and took Ruth as his wife, "he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, Sit ye down here. And they sat down" (Ruth 4:2). Then he told them, "Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's" (Ruth 4:9). In Revelation, the elders are seated around the throne when the Lamb, our Redeemer, takes the sealed book, and they sing of being redeemed by His blood (Revelation 5:9).
- **They confirm God's judgments.** When the great whore is judged, heaven cries out, "For true and righteous are his judgments" (Revelation 19:2), and "the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia" (Revelation 19:4). "Amen" means "it is so." They bear witness that His verdict is right.
- **God gives His saints a part in judgment.** Daniel saw that "judgment was given to the saints of the most High" (Daniel 7:22), and John saw "thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them" (Revelation 20:4).

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Taken together, these suggest the elders may serve as witnesses from among the redeemed, there to see and confirm that every judgment God makes is true and fair. That is my reading of these verses, not something Scripture states directly.

If the elders are redeemed people, they could be among those God took early, such as the saints raised at Christ's resurrection. But Scripture doesn't tell us who they are, so I offer this only as a possibility, and I'll keep studying it.

How these unusual cases fit

Whatever we conclude about these few, notice that Scripture treats them as exceptions. They are recorded precisely because they were unusual. And even they don't receive the final inheritance ahead of everyone else. Hebrews lists Enoch among the faithful (Hebrews 11:5), and then says of that whole list: "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:39-40). Even Enoch, who never died, is waiting with us for the day when all of God's people are made perfect together.

7. Why Not Straight to Heaven at Death?

Many sincere believers have been taught that when a Christian dies, the soul goes straight to heaven, awake and with the Lord, to wait there for the resurrection body. Some teach that believers receive their new body right away. I understand why. It's a comforting thought, and it's often said with love. But a good way to test any teaching is to ask: if this were true, what would the rest of Scripture have to say? When I try that here, I find that going to heaven one by one at death runs into conflict after conflict, while a single gathering of all God's people at Christ's coming fits every verse.

1. The resurrection would lose its purpose. Those who believe the soul goes to heaven at death still believe in the resurrection of the body, and I respect that. But notice where Paul places the hope of the dead. Answering those who denied the resurrection, he writes: "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (1 Corinthians 15:17-18). If there were no resurrection, Paul says, the dead in Christ would have perished. He doesn't fall back on their already being in heaven. As I understand it, that's because their hope, and ours, rests on being raised. He even asks, "what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?" (1 Corinthians 15:32). ("Advantageth" means "profits.")

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2. Rewards would come before Christ returns. If the faithful were rewarded at death, they would receive their reward long before He comes. But Jesus said, “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works” (Matthew 16:27), and “behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me” (Revelation 22:12). Paul’s crown waits for “that day” (2 Timothy 4:8).

3. Paul centers his comfort on the resurrection. The believers in Thessalonica were grieving over loved ones who had died. If those loved ones were already awake in heaven, the simplest comfort would be to say so. Paul doesn’t. He points them to the trumpet and the resurrection: “the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16), and then, “Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

4. David would already be in heaven. On the day of Pentecost, after Jesus had risen and gone back to heaven, Peter preached about King David, the man after God’s own heart: “Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day” (Acts 2:29). (A sepulchre is a tomb.) Then he said plainly, “For David is not ascended into the heavens” (Acts 2:34). If anyone would have gone straight to heaven at death, surely it was David. Yet Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said David was still in his grave, waiting.

5. The dead would be praising God now. If the faithful dead were in heaven, they would be worshipping Him already. But Scripture says, “The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence” (Psalm 115:17), and “For in death there is no remembrance of thee” (Psalm 6:5).

6. Jesus names one day for raising His people. Four times in one chapter, Jesus says He will raise His people up “at the last day”: “and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40; see also John 6:39, 44, 54). Martha understood this when her brother died: “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (John 11:24). The last day, not the day each person dies.

7. Our bodies would be changed at death. If believers received their new bodies when they died, there would be nothing left to wait for. But Paul says we wait for the Saviour to come from heaven, “who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). (“Vile” here means lowly or humble.) And that change comes “at the last trump” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

8. The wicked would be punished before their trial. If the lost went straight to hell at death, they would be punished before they were judged. But

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Peter says, “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2 Peter 2:9). The punishment comes after the judgment, not before it.

9. The faithful would be made perfect one by one. As we saw above, the heroes of faith “received not the promise,” so “that they without us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40). They wait, so that all of God’s people are made perfect together.

10. The book of Revelation would not fit together. Without a clear understanding of what happens at death, putting Scripture together is nearly impossible, especially the book of Revelation and the bigger picture of God’s plan. Revelation places the raising and judging of the dead at set points in its timeline:

- The martyrs are told to “rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled” (Revelation 6:11). They wait.
- At the seventh trumpet comes “the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints” (Revelation 11:18). The dead are judged and rewarded then, not before.
- Those in the first resurrection “lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished” (Revelation 20:4-5). Two resurrections, a thousand years apart.

Some would answer that these verses describe the body’s resurrection, not the person’s condition. But notice how Revelation describes the waiting dead: they “rest,” they wait for “the time of the dead,” and “the rest of the dead lived not again” until the thousand years end. As I understand it, that is the language of sleep, not of people already living in heaven or hell. When we understand death as a sleep, these pieces fall into place, and Revelation’s timeline reads in order.

Every view has hard verses to work through, and we looked at those honestly in Section 5. The real question is which view lets all of Scripture fit together. I find the sleep of death, ending in a single gathering at Christ’s coming, the most consistent way to read all these passages together, because it lets each one mean just what it says. Other Christians understand them differently, and I respect that. I only ask that you weigh the verses for yourself. So let’s look at that great day.

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8. The Waking

Having looked at those few unusual cases, we return to the promise for all of God's people who sleep in death. So when do the dead in Christ wake? Scripture is clear: all together, at His coming.

One resurrection for God's people, at His coming

Paul gives the order: "But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming" (1 Corinthians 15:23). Christ rose first. His people rise "at his coming," not one by one as each person dies.

Paul calls Christ "the firstfruits." What does that word mean? Some teachers also call the saints raised early "firstfruits," but Scripture never does, and the word already has clear meanings in the Bible.

Firstfruits were the first part of the harvest, brought to God before the rest was gathered. God told Israel, "When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest" (Leviticus 23:10). That first sheaf belonged to God, and it was a promise that the full harvest was coming. Three uses of the word are important for this study:

- **For Christ.** "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Christ is first in rank among all who rise, "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18), and His victory is what makes every resurrection possible. His resurrection is God's promise that the whole harvest of His sleeping people will rise at His coming (1 Corinthians 15:23).
- **For believers born again through the gospel.** "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). ("Begat" means gave birth to, here meaning gave new life.) James means that those made new by God's Word are the first part of His new creation. The rest of creation will be made new later.
- **For the 144,000.** "These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb" (Revelation 14:4). These are God's sealed servants of the last days (Revelation 7:3-4), set apart to Him before the great harvest of the earth that follows in the same chapter (Revelation 14:15-16). As I understand it, they finish their testimony, are slain, and after "three days and an half" are raised and "ascended up to heaven in a cloud" (Revelation 11:11-12), presented to God as firstfruits before the harvest. Scripture doesn't say whether they receive the immortal body then or with all the saints "at the last trump" (1 Corinthians 15:52).

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So I don't call the saints raised at Christ's resurrection "firstfruits." Christ alone is "the firstfruits of them that slept," and Matthew is careful to say those saints came out of their graves "after his resurrection" (Matthew 27:53). I simply describe them the way Scripture does.

And Paul describes that moment: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

All together, in a moment

Notice that the living don't go ahead of the dead: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:15). ("Prevent" in the old English means "go before.") The dead rise, and the living are caught up "together with them." It's one great gathering of all God's people.

And it happens in an instant: "Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). ("Incorruptible" means unable to decay or die.) "We shall not all sleep." Some of God's people will still be alive when He comes. But all of us, the sleeping and the living, will be changed together.

Picture a husband and wife who both loved the Lord. She dies first, and for years he grieves and misses her. Then he too dies. From her side, she closed her eyes, and the next thing she knew was the trumpet, the face of Jesus, and her husband beside her. From his side, the same. Neither of them lived through the waiting in the grave. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

The resurrection is not past

Paul warned the church about anyone who taught that the resurrection had already happened: "Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2:18). The resurrection of God's people is still ahead. It is the great hope that every believer who has ever died is waiting for.

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9. The Two Outcomes

Scripture says everyone who has died will be raised, not only believers. Jesus said so in the verse at the opening of this paper: “all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28-29). So there are two outcomes.

Eternal life, the gift

For those who belong to Christ, the outcome is eternal life, and it is a gift: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). “And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (1 John 5:11-12).

So what does God ask of us to receive eternal life? First, Scripture is clear that we can’t earn it: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24). (“Justified” means declared right with God, and “grace” means His favor that we don’t deserve.) “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5).

What God asks is that we come to Him through His Son:

- **Believe in Jesus.** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). He is the only way: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).
- **Repent and turn to God.** To repent means to turn around, away from sin and toward God: “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). And when we stumble, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
- **Confess Him openly.** “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10:9).
- **Keep holding on to Him.** “But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). To the one who overcomes, Jesus promises, “I will not blot out his name out of the book of life” (Revelation 3:5).

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Where do good works fit, then? They don't earn salvation. They grow out of it. Right after saying we are saved "Not of works," Paul adds, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). A living faith shows itself in how we live: "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2:17). Works are the fruit of salvation, not the root of it.

That is how the judgment can look at each person's works without turning salvation into something earned. Our works are the evidence of what was really in the heart: "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). The one who truly trusted Christ shows it in a changed life, and his name stays in the book of life. (I explain the books of record and the book of life more fully in my paper *The Books Were Opened*.)

Everyone judged fairly

For those who reject God to the end, there is judgment, and Scripture says it will be perfectly fair. Every person is judged by their own works: "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (Revelation 20:12).

And the judgment isn't the same for everyone. Jesus taught that God measures it by what each person knew and did: "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:47-48). ("Stripes" are lashes, strokes of punishment.) Only God judges with perfect righteousness, and He will give every person exactly what is just. (I explore how God judges even those who never heard in my paper *Without Excuse*.)

The second death

Scripture calls the final end of the wicked "the second death": "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Revelation 20:14). (Here "hell" translates the Greek word hades, which means the grave. Death and the grave themselves come to an end.) Jesus told us whom to fear: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

The first death, the one we all face now, is a sleep from which God will wake us. The second death is different. It is final. As I read it, the fire of judgment is

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just, measured to each person's deeds, and it ends in a destruction that is never undone. Scripture's own pictures of the wicked's end are pictures of destruction: "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch" (Malachi 4:1). Paul calls it "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Some verses speak of punishment that is "everlasting" (Matthew 25:46) or smoke that rises "for ever and ever" (Revelation 14:11). I take those seriously; they are God's Word. As I read them, they describe a punishment whose result lasts forever. Scripture uses "eternal" this way when it speaks of actions: "eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12) doesn't mean Christ is forever redeeming us, but that the redemption He accomplished lasts forever. And Jude says Sodom suffered "the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 1:7), though Sodom isn't still burning; its destruction was eternal in its result. I explain these verses more fully in my paper *Fear Not the Second Death*. Sincere believers read them differently, and I respect that. What we can all agree on is that the judgment is real, it is final, and no one should risk it.

One more verse deserves a direct answer: "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). Notice whom it describes: the devil, the beast and the false prophet. As I understand it, "for ever and ever" here again means a judgment that can never be undone. Scripture used the same picture for Edom: "It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever" (Isaiah 34:10), yet the next verse says "the owl also and the raven shall dwell in it" (Isaiah 34:11). Ezekiel's lament over "the anointed cherub that covereth" (Ezekiel 28:14), which many understand as describing Satan, tells how his story ends: "I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee... and never shalt thou be any more" (Ezekiel 28:18-19). Daniel saw the beast's end the same way: "the beast was slain, and his body destroyed, and given to the burning flame" (Daniel 7:11). I cover this verse more fully in *Fear Not the Second Death*.

What about those we love who didn't believe?

For many readers, this is the hardest question in the whole study, and often the one they carry quietly. What about my father, my sister, my son, my friend, who never seemed to believe? How could I be happy in heaven knowing they are not

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there? It's a real fear and a real sorrow, and Scripture doesn't brush it aside. Let's look at how it answers.

God feels this more deeply than we do. When Jesus stood at the grave of Lazarus, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), even though He knew He was about to raise him. God takes no pleasure in anyone being lost: "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11). Peter says the Lord is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Whatever sorrow we feel for those we love, God felt it first, and more.

We don't see the heart, but God does. When Samuel looked at outward appearances, God told him, "for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). We often don't know what happened between a person and God, especially near the end of their life. The thief on the cross turned to Jesus in his last hours (Luke 23:42-43), and no one watching would have guessed it that morning. So Paul tells us, "judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (1 Corinthians 4:5). ("Make manifest the counsels of the hearts" means He will show openly what was really in each heart.) We can leave our loved ones in the hands of the One who knows them best, and who judges with perfect fairness. As Abraham asked, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25).

Now we know in part. Then we will know fully. Much of our grief comes from seeing only a small piece of the picture. Paul says that will change: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). ("Through a glass, darkly" means like looking into a dim mirror.) As I understand it, the questions that trouble us now will find their answer in Him.

The thousand years are a time of judging, and God's people take part. After Christ comes and gathers His people, John sees them in heaven: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them" (Revelation 20:4). Paul says the same: "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" (1 Corinthians 6:2), and "Know ye not that we shall judge angels?" (1 Corinthians 6:3). As I understand it, this is when God opens the record to His people. They will be able to see for themselves why each person who was lost was not saved: what light they were given, how God reached out to them, and what they chose. No one will have to take God's fairness on faith

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alone. (I explain more about how God judges each person by the light they had in my paper *Without Excuse*.)

At the end, God's people agree that every judgment was right. This isn't a forced or grudging agreement. Revelation shows God's people singing it: "Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints" (Revelation 15:3), "for thy judgments are made manifest" (Revelation 15:4). Again and again heaven says it: "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments" (Revelation 16:7); "For true and righteous are his judgments" (Revelation 19:2). In the end, even the lost will admit it, for "every knee should bow… And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11).

Then God Himself wipes away the tears. Notice the order. Revelation 20 describes the thousand years and the final judgment, and Revelation 21 places this promise after it: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4). Isaiah saw the same day: "the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces" (Isaiah 25:8), and "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind" (Isaiah 65:17). God doesn't ask His people to pretend they never grieved. As I understand these passages, God's people will first come to see the justice of His judgments, and then He heals the grief Himself. Scripture doesn't explain how every personal question will be answered, or exactly how He takes that sorrow away. It does promise that He will.

What this means for us now. If you are grieving someone you fear was lost, you can rest this with God. He loved them more than you did, He knew their heart better than you could, and He will judge them with perfect fairness. One day you will understand, and He will wipe away your tears. And for those still living, the door is open today: "behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). The best thing we can do for the people we love is to pray for them and point them to Jesus while there is still time.

10. The Tree of Life Restored

We began in a garden, where mankind lost access to the tree of life. Scripture ends with that same tree, standing in the city of God: "In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare

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twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2).

The way that was guarded by a flaming sword is open again: "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:14).

And the enemy that entered through one man's sin is destroyed through one Man's victory. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Conclusion: Comfort One Another

So what is death? Scripture's answer is both sober and full of hope.

Death is real. It entered the world through sin, and it reaches every one of us. The body returns to the dust, the breath of life returns to God, and the person sleeps, knowing nothing, until the resurrection. The dead are not wandering the earth or suffering in hell today, and apart from the few Scripture says God took, they are not watching from heaven either. They are resting in God's keeping.

But death is not the end. Jesus has the keys: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18). One day He will come with a shout and the sound of a trumpet, and every grave of every believer will open. The sleeping and the living will be changed together, in the twinkling of an eye, and from that moment on, we will always be with the Lord.

If you have lost someone who loved Jesus, this is your comfort. They are not lost. They are asleep, and for them, the next thing they will see is His face. And if you are in Christ, you will be there too, beside them, on that same morning.

And if you don't yet know Him, the door is still open. The same Jesus who raised Lazarus is calling you now: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24).

"Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

We must allow Scripture to unfold as it states.

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Summary: What Scripture Teaches About Death

1. **What man is:** dust and the breath of God, “a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). Only God has immortality by nature (1 Timothy 6:16); we put on immortality at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:53).
2. **How death entered:** through sin, by one man (Romans 5:12). “Unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). The first lie was “Ye shall not surely die” (Genesis 3:4).
3. **Death is a sleep:** so Jesus called it (John 11:11-14), and so do the prophets and apostles (Daniel 12:2; Acts 7:60; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). The dead “know not any thing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). David “is not ascended” (Acts 2:34).
4. **The next moment is the Lord:** Paul longed to be “clothed upon,” not “unclothed” (2 Corinthians 5:4). For the sleeper no time passes, so to depart is to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23). (My reading.)
5. **The hard passages agree (as I understand them):** the thief’s promise (Luke 23:43; John 20:17), the souls under the altar told to rest (Revelation 6:9-11), the rich man as a symbolic teaching on finality (Luke 16:26), “all live unto him” as proof of the resurrection (Luke 20:37-38), Saul deceived by a familiar spirit (1 Chronicles 10:13), and the spirits in prison preached to by the Spirit in Noah’s day (1 Peter 3:18-20).
6. **A few exceptions:** Enoch and Elijah taken, Moses raised in glory (as I understand it), and saints raised at Christ’s resurrection (Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11; Jude 1:9; Luke 9:30-31; Matthew 27:52-53). As I understand it, the slain sealed messengers of the 144,000 are also raised after three days and a half and taken up as firstfruits (Revelation 11:11-12; 14:4). The twenty-four elders may be among the redeemed, but Scripture doesn’t say (a possibility).
7. **Not straight to heaven at death:** going to heaven one by one would empty the resurrection of its purpose, give rewards before Christ returns, and leave Revelation’s timeline out of order. A single gathering lets every verse mean what it says (1 Corinthians 15:17-18; Matthew 16:27; Acts 2:34; John 6:40; 2 Peter 2:9; Revelation 6:11; 11:18; 20:4-5).
8. **The waking:** all God’s people together, at His coming, at the last trump (1 Corinthians 15:23, 51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Hebrews 11:39-40).

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9. **Two outcomes:** eternal life as God's gift (Romans 6:23), and for those who reject Him, a fair judgment by works (Revelation 20:12; Luke 12:47-48) ending in the second death (Revelation 20:14).

10. **The tree of life restored, and death destroyed** (Revelation 22:2, 14; 1 Corinthians 15:26; Revelation 21:4).

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