

DEATH

The first mention of death and dying in the Bible is in Genesis 2:17 where the Lord God commanded Adam regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, “when you eat of it you will surely die.” (1) It is interesting there was a choice of disobedience and death or continuing access to the Tree of Life.

From the very earliest references to death that we have in Scripture, it is apparent that death is more than the dissolution of the body, more than the cessation of bodily functions. Since man was made in the image of God, differentiating him from the animals, the breath of life given man means there is more to death than dissolution of the body.

In the Bible the themes of death and life after death emerge in two ways. The concept of life is tied to fellowship with God. Hence after the fall, the Biblical authors focus on the restoration of fellowship with the Creator who gives life. This implies life after death and the resurrection of the body.

While it is Satan who tempts with the words, “You will not surely die”, the traditional teaching in ancient Israel was that long life was a sure sign of fellowship with God who grants long life on the land. (Genesis 35:29 and Deuteronomy 5:16). Long life was associated with keeping the commands of God.

Job’s words sum up the Wisdom tradition in Israel/Judah regarding death.

“Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. . . man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more. . . man lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, men will not awake or be roused from their sleep.” (2) Job expresses a bit of longing for life after this life in that 14th chapter when he says, “At least there is hope for a tree: if it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail.”(3)

Job covers all the elements regarding death found elsewhere in Scripture. Death is the dissolution of the body; unlike the rest of nature, man does not naturally rise out of the ground after the death of winter. Death is tied to relationship with God whether broken or whole; and therein is the hope of resurrection, continued life.

Death also, from the human view, is tied to disobedience, impurity. Job recognized he had not the tools to save himself : “Who can bring what is pure from the impure?” (4)

In that same chapter Job expressed the most concrete hope of life after death to be found in the Old Testament. Job asks plaintively, “If a man dies, will he live again?” He answers his own question, in the midst of his pain and suffering, with this affirmation born of his lifelong experiences with the Lord God.

“All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made. Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. . . .you will cover over my sin.” (5)

Job confessed that God would be the savior; He would intervene in the natural course of the dissolution of the body and would restore the relationship with His creature even to the point of covering Job’s sin and bringing him out of the dust of death to life with God.

Job’s affirmation includes a proclamation of the Gospel. Job said prophetically:

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (6)

The death that humans experience on earth is not the final state of humanity. Revelation makes clear the physical death that man experiences is only temporary. John the Revelator has given us his vision,

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of

life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (7)

Revelation reiterates the ancient theme that God holds all souls in life and he will grant long life in the land. God has this promise for the faithful.

“He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ . . . He said, ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.’” (8)

The last word about death is that it is not the end. The last word on the subject from The Word is the following.

“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” (9)
“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (10)

Through the efforts of Jesus Christ, his faithful followers will be given the fruit of the tree of life and will live with Him in the New Eden.

- (1) The NIV Study Bible, p 9
- (2) Ibid: p. 749, Job 14:1,10,12
- (3) Ibid: p 749, Job 14:7,10,12,14
- (4) Ibid: p 749, Job 14:4
- (5) Ibid: p 749, Job 14:14-17
- (6) Ibid: p 749, Job 19:25-27
- (7) Ibid: p 1948, Revelation 20: 12-15
- (8) Ibid: p 1949, Revelation 21: 5-7
- (9) Ibid: p 1616, John 10:10
- (10) Ibid: p 1616, Revelation 2:7

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