

## CHAPTER 11.

### WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME WHEN I DIE?

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“Mommy, what will happen to me when I die?” This is the understandable and heart-wrenching question of a six-year-old girl dying of cancer. Emotionally, it is far more difficult if a child asks this question. Nevertheless, for our own spiritual well-being all of us—whether younger or older, healthy or sick—should be asking this question from time to time. As Psalm 90 reminds us, God is eternal, but we are not; therefore, we must learn “to number our days” (v. 12). Some choose to indulge in the sinful pleasures of this life without considering that a day of reckoning is approaching (Rom 13:11–14), but Christians must live differently. The well-known parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 prompts us to be aware of the brevity of life and the reality of death. For this reason careful attention to the intermediate state, the time after our death and before Christ’s return, is both helpful and necessary.

The study of the intermediate state is also called personal, or individual, eschatology. The origin of this terminology is easy to trace. This is the pertinent question: what happens to *me* after I die? Therefore the term *personal eschatology* is used as a counterpart to *general eschatology*, which deals with what happens to this world and all its inhabitants when Christ returns.

There is a drawback, though, to the term *personal eschatology*. It tends to focus our study of the last things on *me* personally. Already in the previous chapter we noted that eschatology, just like any other area of doc-

trine, should be theocentric, not egocentric. This means that we need to start asking slightly different questions. How does the Good Shepherd lead his sheep through the portal of death? If Christ has conquered death by his resurrection, how do we experience his victory as we return, time and again, with tears in our eyes, to the graveside (1 Cor 15:51–58)? How will Christ be “honoured in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil 1:20)? In fact, the entire second half of Philippians 1 is a remarkable example of personal eschatology with a decidedly Christocentric focus. The apostle Paul is in prison and he does not know whether he will live or die. Life is truly in the balance. Yet for him it is all about Christ. If he lives, then “to live is Christ” (1:21), but if he dies he will “depart and be with Christ” (1:23). So whatever happens, whether he stays on this side of the grave or steps over the threshold of death, it is all about Christ, not about himself.

Furthermore, when we, as Christians, face the reality of death, we must be aware that the world is watching with wide-open eyes. Resting in the hope of eternal life, members of Christ’s church do not need to grieve “as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). That being the case, other people should be able to see a difference in us, especially at the time of death. We should be able to give the reason for the hope that we have, both in days of gladness and in the hour of grief. In fact, the church should think purposefully about how she deals with death, also in the practical details of funeral arrangements, so that the world may hear the good news of God’s salvation, which is not merely temporal but most certainly eternal.

As we turn to look at the intermediate state more closely, we will pay attention to what Christ does with both our bodies and our souls in the hour of death. Then we will compare these truths with the teachings of some other world religions. Finally, we will interact with some false teachings that have crept up within the church over the ages. Throughout all of this, we will focus primarily on those who put their hope in Christ. The eternal state of those who reject the Saviour will be one of the topics in our next, and final, chapter.

## CHRIST AND OUR BODIES AT DEATH

As our Saviour explained, each one of us has a body and a soul (Matt 10:28). The body is the physical part of us that we can see and touch. The soul is invisible, but no less real. It was this way right from the beginning. God created human beings in a special, two-step process. First he took dust from the ground and carefully formed and fashioned Adam's body from it (Gen 2:7a). Next he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7b). Our lives and our souls are intimately connected, as many of the Psalms indicate (Pss 26:9; 30:3; 56:13; 74:19; 88:3; 119:25; 143:3, 11).

Of course, death was not part of God's good creation, so the original intent was for this body and soul, or spirit, to remain together. Due to sin, though, death entered the world, and now at the end of everyone's earthly sojourn, body and soul go their separate ways. The LORD already made this clear in the Garden of Eden, after he confronted our first parents with their transgression. He said to Adam, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). In other words, at death the body goes back to its source material, the ground. Yet what about the soul? In Ecclesiastes the Preacher exhorts us to remember our Creator when we are young, for life slips away quickly and at death "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7). In some sense, each part of us returns to its origin.

All of this is confirmed in a powerful way during the death of Christ. Just before he breathed his last, our Lord and Saviour said, in a loud, clear voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Thus his soul went to heaven, where his Father dwelt. Then a few verses later we read about what happened to his body, and it did not go into the hands of his heavenly Father. Instead, his body went into the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50–53). So at his death, Christ's soul and body went in different directions.

Delving into more of the revealed details, we note that Christ's soul obviously did not drift off into some nebulous, shadowy realm of the

departed spirits. Instead, his soul went somewhere personal, loving, and glorious, namely, to the caring hands of his own heavenly Father. If we may say it in this way, what awaited Christ's soul on the other side was not a question mark or an uncertain wandering, but rather a warm embrace.

Yet what happened to his body? His body was also cared for in a loving way. First Joseph of Arimathea boldly asked Pilate for the body. Then he took it down from the cross, wrapped it in linen cloth, and placed it in his own tomb, which was a dignified burial place, since Joseph was a wealthy individual (Luke 23:50–53; Isa 53:9). Some women who had been loyal to Jesus also intended to honour his body with a proper anointing of spices and perfumes, but they had to wait before acting on their intentions, for it was already the Sabbath day (Luke 23:54–56).

What is striking in this account is not so much what happened to Jesus' body, but who initiated the course of events, humanly speaking. Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Council, also called the Sanhedrin, which was the same judicial body that had originally condemned Jesus to death (Matt 26:66; Luke 23:1). Surprisingly, though, Joseph did not consent to their decision (Luke 23:50). Indeed, this was miraculous, because the peer pressure must have been enormous for Joseph to go along with the rest of the elders and chief priests, but he stood alone. Better said, God enabled him to stand alone. This also means that the Father in heaven, who made these special provisions, was not only interested in receiving the soul of his Son into his arms but also wanted to ensure that his Son's dead body was properly cared for. Why? Because on the third day he would arise from the dead (Mark 9:31; 16:1–7). In other words, death was not the end of the road for his holy flesh. There was a whole, glorious future in store for his body. In fact, King David already spoke of this future when he said, "Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption" (Ps 16:9–10; Acts 2:25–32).

Once we begin looking at our bodies at death from the vantage point of Christ's body at his death, a new window of understanding opens up. Indeed, this is the approach that the apostle Paul himself encourages us to follow when he reminds us that, through baptism, "we have been united with him in a death like his" (Rom 6:5). In other words, God has graciously made a connection, even a union, between Christ's death and ours. The more we focus on that, the more solid our hope will become, also concerning our physical flesh.

Some philosophers, notably Plato, have spoken of the body as the prison house of the soul. That sheds a negative light on our flesh. Scripture speaks differently. Not only did God fashion Adam's body with care, but he also purposefully weaves each of our bodies together in our mother's womb (Ps 139:13–16). To say it differently, already from the perspective of creation God has invested a lot in our bodies. Therefore our bodies are an integral, not auxiliary, part of who we are. In Paradise God even went so far as to identify us by our bodies when he said, "*You* are dust" (Gen 3:19).

However, to move from the perspective of creation to redemption, the value that God places on our bodies becomes even greater. God is redeeming our bodies. The apostle Paul explicitly speaks about the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). Redemption has been accomplished through the suffering of Christ on the cross. This explains, then, why Christ not only suffered so bitterly in his soul ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matt 27:46) but also so intensely in his body (being scourged and crucified, Matt 27:26). In this way he suffered in his body in order to redeem us, including our bodies.

In short, our bodies are not merely a long row of prison houses, or a large collection of frail soul-containers, that need only to be properly disposed of at the point of death. In Christ there is a whole, glorious future in store for our redeemed flesh. Death is not the end of the road for our bodies but the beginning of an entirely new phase. It is true, the first step of this new phase, burial, has a certain indignity attached to it. We are put back into the dirt from which we came. There is nothing to be

gained in trying to sugarcoat this reality. Our bodies are sown into the ground in dishonour and weakness (1 Cor 15:43). However, God's work of salvation often parallels his work within creation, including agriculture processes. As the apostle writes, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies" (1 Cor 15:36). If we long for a glorified body, a body free from disease, pain, and death, then we first need to go through the process of dying and being sown into the ground, for a seed needs to be planted before it sprouts into a new, splendid, and productive life. The only exception will be for those who are still alive when our Redeemer returns. Their bodies will be transformed into glorious bodies in the twinkling of an eye (1 Cor 15:50–53).

Even Job understood this basic truth in the old covenant. This righteous man from the land of Uz suffered much in his body, afflicted as he was with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:8). If anyone had good reason to look forward to the disposal of his body, certainly Job was such a person. But, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he saw beyond the grave and beyond the disintegration of his afflicted body to the day on which he could say, "Yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:26–27).

The apostle Paul adds a further detail when he remarks that one day Christ will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body (Phil 3:21). Note carefully the word *transform*, which is not the same as *replace*. To replace is to get rid of the old and bring in an entirely new alternative. To transform is to take an existing thing and renovate it in such a way that it is much better, perhaps even immeasurably better, than before. Strange as it may sound to our ears, even the decomposed dust of our buried bodies is valuable in God's eyes. He has a gracious plan for it, and one day he is going to put that plan into sovereign action.

Redeemed bodies with such a splendid future deserve proper care, also at the time of death. This brings us to the question of whether God's people should bury or cremate the bodies of those who die in the Lord Jesus Christ. Burial regulations vary from country to country. Also in this

matter we must show respect for the local governing authorities (Rom 13:1–3). Furthermore, there is no question that the Most High has sufficient power to transform the dust of any corpse into a glorified body, whether that dead body was buried or cremated. Rather, the question for believers is this: in the hour of death how can we best give a testimony, both within the church and within this world, to our conviction that one day this dead body will be raised? It is already clear that to be buried, even as our beloved Redeemer himself was buried, would be an honour. Added to that, in Scripture the dead body is compared to a seed, being planted in the ground and waiting to rise up in the spring of final salvation. Therefore it is certainly in line with God’s Word to “sow” the bodies of our dead into the soil of this earth (1 Cor 15:37–38, 42–44). Those who sow in sorrow look forward to the joyful songs of harvest time (Ps 126:5). In sum, cremation tends to focus on disposing that which is no longer alive in a hygienic and economical way. By comparison, when it is properly understood, burial highlights the future that God has in store for our redeemed bodies. Thus, if at all possible, burial is the preferred option for Christians.

#### CHRIST AND OUR SOULS AT DEATH

Just as philosophy has influenced how many people think about our bodies, so it has also shifted our understanding of the soul in a direction that is not entirely helpful. Whereas Plato and other sages tend to be unduly negative about the body, they are inclined to be overly positive about the human soul or spirit. In their minds one of the essential attributes of the soul is its immortality. For them souls are immortal simply because they are souls.

The Word of God, though, presents a different emphasis. It is true that the Lord does not give us a lot of detail concerning the essential nature of the soul; however, he does reveal what he can give to the soul. In Romans 2:7 we read, “To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.” Simply put, this means that immortality is not inherent within the soul; rather, it is a God-given inheritance to the soul. Moreover, just as it is God who makes

our bodies immortal (1 Cor 15:53), so it is he who also gives our souls immortality.

Rather than trying to dissect the essence of the soul, though, it is more important that we acknowledge the relationship of the soul to its Creator and Redeemer. Here the revelation of Scripture is rich. At death our souls return to the Creator who made them (Eccl 12:7). After all, he is the rightful Owner of our souls. More than that, at death a child of God, adopted by grace, goes to live with his Father in his heavenly house, which includes a room prepared for him by God's own only-begotten Son (John 14:2–3). As the apostle Paul so eloquently expresses, death is all about departing to be with Christ (Phil 1:23). At death we leave loved ones behind in order to move into the very presence of *the* Loved One, our Redeemer and our Bridegroom.

At this point, the Christocentric focus of eschatology once again comes into sharp relief. In the hour of death our attention naturally narrows to ourselves and our immediate family. At the same time, we should never forget that we are members of the church, which is the body of Christ (Eph 1:22–23). In a certain sense, the bond established among Christians in our Saviour's holy blood is even stronger than that which is found in the natural bloodlines of our earthly families (Mark 10:29–30). However, each member of the body of Christ properly belongs to, and with, the exalted Head, who is presently at the right hand of his Father in heaven. In this respect the death of each Christian is also one step forward in God's grand redemptive plan, which will not be complete until each and every member of the body is with the heavenly Head. The ascension of Christ introduced a physical, geographical distance between Head and Body, Groom and Bride. Deaths in Christ steadily diminish that distance, one member in Christ at a time.

Some may wonder, though, whether God's people in the old covenant enjoyed the same hope that we, in Christ, have in the new covenant. Part of the challenge in answering this question is tied to the meaning of the word *Sheol*. Sometimes Sheol is translated in a more neutral way, such as *the grave* or as some other reference to the realm of the dead. How-



ever, there are also many times in which Sheol appears to be a threatening prospect. For example, in Psalm 9:17 we learn that “the wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.” Even more striking is Deuteronomy 32:22, where God’s wrath is said to burn in “the depths of Sheol.” This sounds more like the New Testament description of hell (Matt 25:41). So what are we to make of all this? In the end, the most balanced conclusion may well be that in the Old Testament Sheol reckons with the miserable reality of death as a result of sin and that a shadow therefore hangs over it. Simply put, going to Sheol is not the way that God intended things to be, and thus it is certainly a sorrowful thing; for the wicked it is even a dreadful thing.

Having said that, though, is there anything more to say? Did God’s people in the Old Testament only know that death was sorrowful and that afterwards you go to a sad and shadowy place called Sheol? Or did God’s chosen ones in the old covenant also have some notion of the hope that Paul expresses when he says, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1:23)?

A closer look at Scripture reveals that the hope of the Old Testament saints was certainly on the same trajectory, although perhaps not quite as far along, as that of their New Testament brothers and sisters. Already in Genesis 5, in the midst of a genealogy that also doubles as a necrology, we hear about Enoch that he was no more “because God took him” (v. 24). This notion of God *taking* someone reappears in other significant locations in the Old Testament. A gem of gospel truth gleams in Psalm 49 when the sons of Korah sing, “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (v. 15). Something similar is heard in Psalm 73 where Asaph confesses, “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory” (vv. 23–24). In different contexts, one prophet, Jeremiah, asks the LORD not to take him away (15:15), while another one, Jonah, requests just the opposite (4:3). In the end, the point is simply this: in the Old Testament God’s people did know that after death their souls would go to be with the LORD. At

least, they could have known this if they were paying attention to the Word of God, especially the psalms that they were to sing unto him.

By the same token, it remains true that God's revelation of what he does with our souls after death becomes much more explicit in the New Testament. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus clearly teaches that those who trust in the Lord, and not in their riches, will be carried by God's angels into heavenly glory, there to enjoy communion with the Lord and fellow believers, such as Abraham (Luke 16:22). Likewise, Christ's unforgettable words on the cross assured the repentant criminal that he would be with the Son of God in Paradise, which is another word for heaven, that very day (Luke 23:43).

In addition there is Christ's promise about preparing rooms for his followers in the heavenly mansion (John 14:1-3), as well as Paul's instruction comforting us with the knowledge that death in Christ is like moving from a tent into a house (2 Cor 5:1-5). A tent is something to be thankful for, but it is still a temporary dwelling place. In line with this, even a mortal body is something worthy of our gratitude; it should not be despised. Still, we must reckon with the fact that it is temporary. When our outer nature wastes away (2 Cor 4:16), it is so encouraging to know that there is an eternal house in heaven, not made by human hands but lovingly prepared for us by God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In this way each death in Christ is really a homecoming to an abode that far exceeds our present expectation or imagination.

In sum, then, the body and soul are separated at death. The Lord takes the soul to himself in heavenly glory. The Lord also watches over the body in the grave, anticipating the day of the resurrection. Yet so long as we continue to focus on the Lord and his ever-progressing work of salvation, we can say, along with the apostle Paul, that "to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Clearly, our soul gains because we move to a location that is better by far, due to the absence of sin and, even more so, the presence of our Saviour. Yet, properly understood, our body also gains, for even though it is laid humbly in the earth, it has still moved one significant step closer toward its glorious transformation.

## WORLD RELIGIONS AND DEATH

Each world religion must deal with the reality of death in some way. Surveying all the major world religions on the topic of mortality would require an extensive study. For our purposes we will briefly survey and evaluate what is taught about death in three religions: Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism.

### **Judaism**

Seeing that Judaism today is based, at least in part, on the Old Testament, there are similarities between the Christian view of death and the Jewish one. The Jews, too, know of a World to Come after this life. Some will even speak of heaven and hell, although not every Jew is comfortable with that terminology. In general, there is a fair degree of latitude given within Judaism concerning the details of life in the World to Come. One thing that is consistent among all Jews, though, is a decided emphasis on righteous living in this present age. How one lives in *this* world also determines what kind of share he will have in the *coming* world.

### **Islam**

Whereas Judaism may be somewhat vague about life after death, Islam is certainly not. For Muslims the hereafter is divided into three stages: the interworld, the Day of the Resurrection, and eternal life either in the Garden or in the Fire. The interworld is a special kind of dream state. In this state a person receives a foretaste of either the final Garden or the final Fire; however, he has not entered the reality of either one yet. For this reason the period is called the interworld, since the individual has left this present world but is not yet in the world to come. The Day of the Resurrection may well be longer than a day, perhaps lasting even thousands of years. Nevertheless, it involves a period in which many events take place. Those destined for the Garden experience all of these events in a happy way, while those destined for the Fire experience them negatively. Finally, when the Day of Resurrection is complete, people enter either the eternal Garden, which has eight levels of delight, or the eter-

nal Fire, which has seven levels of agony. Their relative positions on this eternal scale are determined by their conduct in this present age.

## **Hinduism**

The Hindu religion has the most complex, and seemingly contradictory, view of existence after death. It teaches three distinct paths. The first path involves entering the World of the Ancestors with a new body after the body used in this life has been cremated. In this way the family life that the loved one leaves behind, due to death, can be regained, in a better way, after death and in the World of the Ancestors. The second path is the cycle of reincarnation. As described in the previous chapter, according to this view the soul, or spirit, leaves one body at death but then re-enters another earthly body, of a similar or different kind, shortly thereafter. The third and final path is release from the body at death in order to enjoy a personal relationship with a certain god or goddess in the heavenly realms.

Each of these three paths appears to be incompatible with the other two. We might be inclined to say that someone either goes to a realm of ancestors, or is reincarnated, or goes to be with the gods. Obviously all three cannot be equally and simultaneously true. However, the Hindu mindset is both polytheistic and multivalent from the start: it enjoys options and does not feel constrained by consistency. In fact, one emphasis within the Hindu religion is that everyone is free to choose which of the three eternal paths best suits him or her.

## **Evaluation**

If we briefly turn to assess these views of the afterlife, three things stand out. In the first place, they all include a desire for a life hereafter that will be better than our present existence in some way. This confirms what the Preacher said: “[God] has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl 3:11). Secondly, status in the afterlife is directly dependent on conduct in the present age. In Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism there is really no concept of sovereign grace when it comes to the ultimate crossroads

between time and eternity. Finally, the spotlight shines on human beings and their eternal well-being or woe. These religions may mention God or gods in connection with the afterlife, but human beings hold centre stage in their teachings. In other words, the theocentric focus of eschatology that we are endeavouring to develop in these chapters is missing from the religions surveyed above.

## ESCHATOLOGICAL TEACHINGS THAT OPPOSE THE GOSPEL

Understanding the life hereafter is challenging, not in the least because God does not reveal to us everything that we might like to know about it. As a result, even among sincere Christians there will be some differences in the way we anticipate the glory that is to come. At the same time, there are certain teachings that are opposed, at a more fundamental level, to the truth of the gospel. We will describe and evaluate three of them.

### **Purgatory**

According to the Roman Catholic Catechism, purgatory is “the state of those who die in God’s friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter into the happiness of heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Although it does not emphasize it as much as it once used to, the Roman Catholic Church today still teaches that this purification is done by a cleansing fire. In order to help loved ones exit purgatory’s flames sooner rather than later, family members and friends here on earth are encouraged to offer prayers, request masses, buy indulgences, and give alms.

There are two key problems with the idea of purgatory. In the first place, it is not found anywhere in Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church does refer to a passage from 2 Maccabees 12, which is part of the Apocrypha. This passage describes some Jewish soldiers who pray that their fallen comrades might be forgiven for their sins of idolatry (vv. 39–46). However, in addition to the fact that 2 Maccabees does not belong to the

1. *Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006) §210.

canonical collection of inspired writings (BC 4), there is no mention, let alone description, of purgatory in this passage. It is simply a record of what some soldiers did after a fierce battle.

The second and even more substantial problem is that the doctrine of purgatory undermines the complete sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, our sins are atoned for partially by the blood of Christ but also partially by the fires of purgatory. (And this leaves aside, for the moment, the redemptive assistance of Mary and the other saints.) In the book of Hebrews the Holy Spirit clearly teaches us that Christ "has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). What Christ has accomplished by his sacrifice of infinite value (CoD 2.3) does not need to be augmented in any way, shape, or form by the fires of purgatory. The very thought is utterly offensive toward God's own Son.

## **Soul Sleep**

According to the theory of soul sleep, the spirits of the departed do not go and consciously enjoy fellowship with Christ and his saints in heaven. Instead, they enter a slumber-like state in which they are not aware of much, if anything at all, until the day of the resurrection. In the sixteenth century, soul sleep was often taught as an antidote to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Today those who advocate this position are more likely trying to eradicate a Platonic influence in Christianity. They feel that the distinction between body and soul is not so much scriptural as it is philosophical. Accordingly, in their opinion the soul, much like the body, goes to rest until it is awoken in the resurrection. Moreover, they support their position by appealing to such passages as 1 Thessalonians 4:14, where the apostle speaks about those who have fallen asleep in Christ.

Again, there are two key concerns with this teaching. To begin with, 1 Thessalonians 4:14 uses the language of sleeping and awaking as a metaphorical description of dying and arising from the dead. This parallel is obvious when the complete verse is quoted: "For since we believe

that Jesus *died* and *rose again*, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have *fallen asleep*.” This also agrees with Jesus Christ’s own language when he said concerning a dead girl that she was “not dead but sleeping” (Matt 9:24). Of course, the girl had actually died (Matt 9:18), but, using metaphorical language, Jesus meant to emphasize that he could reverse death and restore life. Just as surely as we fall asleep with the conviction that we will wake up some hours later, so God has the power to wake up the dead and give them life again. The teaching of soul sleep confuses metaphorical and literal language in a way that Scripture itself does not defend.

More importantly, soul sleep leaves people with an impoverished view of the intermediate state. Does the apostle Paul sound as if he is looking forward to sleep after he dies? Hardly. He yearns to be *with Christ* just as surely as the psalmists of old anticipated being *with God* and *in glory* (Pss 49:15; 73:24). What is more, the spirit of Christ went to the hands of his Father (Luke 23:46), and the soul of Lazarus went to Abraham’s side (Luke 16:22). Besides, the souls in heaven, as described in Revelation 6:9–11, are most certainly conscious, for they are busy praying, not sleeping. All of these images are much richer and far more personal than some vaguely defined state of somnolence.

### **Ancestor Worship**

Honouring the departed spirits of family members is a tradition found in many places throughout the world. In some cultures the bereaved offer up prayers while others go through other cultic actions in order to help the dead on their journey through the afterlife. Often those left behind pray to their deceased ancestors, imploring family members to use their influence in the invisible realm of the spirits and so gain favour for those still dwelling in the land of the living.

Aside from the obvious injunction that creatures should never be worshipped (Rev 19:10), there is cause for more concern here. Ancestor worship also compromises the sufficiency of Christ’s work in various ways. No one here on earth can help someone who has died. Death has a certain

finality to it (Heb 9:26). This, then, gives even more impetus for the living to seek their help in Christ, for he is the Advocate who will never disappoint us, either in this age or the age to come (BC 26). Furthermore, if we have God's own, eternal Son as our Advocate before the Father, why would we even want to go to anyone else, even the spirits of our departed loved ones? "If, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than he who laid down his life for us, even while we were his enemies?" (Rom 5:8, 10; BC 26). Once someone has the help of the Lord Jesus Christ, who sits at the Father's right hand, he does not need any other heavenly helper, not even a deceased father or mother.

The spotlight that the Belgic Confession shines on Christ in Article 26 is an appropriate place to end this chapter. Anxiety about death is a common and understandable emotion (Ps 116:3; Heb 2:15). Yet in Christ, the one who conquered sin, Satan, and the grave, we can approach death with the comfort of knowing that "our death is not a payment for sin but . . . puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life" (LD 16, Q&A 42).

*Suggested Readings: Ecclesiastes 12:1–8; Philippians 1:19–30*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In heaven will we recognize the *souls* of our loved ones as the souls of our spouses and family members? (Please note that we are not yet speaking about the resurrected bodies of those who are near to us. That topic is coming in the next chapter.) To begin with, we know that marriage will not be entirely the same after this life (Matt 22:30). Yet at the same time, even the rich man seems to have recognized the souls of Abraham and Lazarus (Luke 16:23). How do we understand this?
2. Beyond the verses mentioned in this chapter, can you think of other Old Testament passages which indicate that God's people in the old covenant could also grieve death with the hope of eternal life and



glory? A good Bible dictionary or perhaps a concordance may help you.

3. In Ecclesiastes 3:21 the Preacher exclaims, “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” How do we square this with what he says later in the same book: “The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Eccl 12:7)?
4. How would you speak with children, such as the six-year-old girl dying of cancer, about death and eternal life? How do you express eternal realities in a way that is sufficiently concrete for young children to understand? How much do you tell them? Is it better to leave certain things unsaid, lest their young minds become unnecessarily overburdened?

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Christian funerals are usually shaped by family preferences rather than ecclesiastical requirements. Nonetheless, how can Christian families ensure that the funeral of someone who dies in the Lord also serves as a clear testimony to the atoning death and liberating resurrection of our Redeemer (1 Thess 4:13–18)? What things help to maintain this gospel-centred focus at our funerals? What things, although not wrong in and of themselves, tend to distract from this focus?
2. In some countries, such as Japan, burial is not only extremely rare but also exorbitantly expensive. Cremation of the body after death is by far the most common practice in these locations. Do Christians living in such countries need to bury their dead? Is this part of the oppression that they must endure as disciples of Christ? Or can an exception be made in their particular circumstances? As much as possible, use biblical principles in your answer.
3. Is the life hereafter, and the death that precedes it, an evangelistic topic par excellence? Or does it run the risk of attempting to scare people into heaven rather than cultivating true faith? On the one hand, nothing focuses the mind on the ultimate meaning of life quite like the reality of death. On the other hand, the fear of death is a tool

commonly used by Satan (Heb 2:14–15), whereas the gospel calls for faith in Christ (John 3:16). Discuss the pros and cons of using the fact of human mortality in our presentation of the gospel.

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