

The Cemetery

Happy Sabbath to everyone.

Tonight is a very appropriate subject for the Sabbath. It is a relatively simple study, but deliberately so, and one that I think we can appreciate for its review of the “basics.”

With regard to the Gospel, there is actually a question that one might reasonably expect both nominal Christians and born-again Believers to answer in the same way. The question is, “When do we stop sinning?” The answer that both may give, and be correct with their wording at least, is, “When we die.” If this answer is truly believed, then all we must do in order to teach true conversion to the partially educated is to explain the “reality” of what it means to be dead to self.

As in all things, the spiritual meaning of a doctrine is necessary to truly understand the physical one.

The Ten Commandments give instructions with regard to practical things: thoughts and actions. Yet they cannot truly be obeyed unless they are obeyed “in the Spirit.” If the Decalogue is truly an expression of Yah’s character, then we must expect that some version of them can be applied in full to the un-fallen beings, and even to the angels that do not have sustained physical forms as do we.

In the New Testament, we are particularly concerned with the “spirit” of the Law, for while we do not discard the letter of any commandment, we do acknowledge that our Father “hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit. For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” (2Cor 3:6)

We are ministers; we serve others, by teaching them the Spirit of the Law. This is what leads to salvation, for one may obey the letter of the law by a force of will to a very great extent; yet a man who does so, if he has no change in spirit, if he is not become an entirely new creature, he will only have lost the limited pleasures of this life as well as those everlasting ones of the life to come.

Of course, this teaching is not that the Spirit is “good” and the letter is “bad.” Many, indeed most, Christians read that verse from Paul and say, “God has taken away something bad, and given us something good in the New Testament.” That is not what this means at all. It is the New Testament, in fact, that speaks about the necessity of dying, because it is only when we die that we cease to sin.

Paul says, “For I was alive without the Law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.” (Rom 7:9)

To the carnal mind, the natural reaction is to say, “That’s terrible! The Law made him feel so guilty because of his transgressions that he considers himself dead.” This, this very place, is where the world is right now. They do not wish to hear about the judgment, or the divine will.

They do not want to hear that they are “sinners” because the life they inherited from Adam is incurably corrupt. There is no place in their hearts for the authority of the 10 Commandments, and the only one consistently able to set and evaluate moral and ethical standards is increasingly becoming the “self.” Because of this they teach humanism, secular philosophy, evolution... each of which denies these things in its own way.

The self is worshipped above all, to the degree that even the direct statements of Yahweh with regard to what is righteous or unrighteous are considered “hateful” and “intolerant,” merely because they go against the desires of the self.

One of the fundamental differences between the “new creature” that the convert becomes and the “old man” that lives in sin is that the new creature is open to the voice of Yah. He is “dead” to that which resisted the Father’s creative will, and being freed from his ignorance of the divine, he becomes a willing servant to righteousness. This is really what the First Angel’s Message is all about.

As I pointed out in the study that I gave to my SDA friend a short time ago, only the “living” can offer praise and worship to Yahweh in light of the coming judgment. Only those who have awakened to righteousness, so that they “sin not,” (1Cor 15:34) are prepared to meet the Savior in peace when He returns.

Those who “Follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” (Rev 14:4) must, after all, be willing to “follow.” They must be willing to let Yah guide them by His Spirit. They must be quick to hear the voice of conscience, even in the “little things” of life, letting nothing fall through the “cracks” that Satan will suggest, of neglect, of broken commitments, of spiritual laziness, of carelessness in the determination of the Father’s perfect will. These things are all snares of Satan to catch the unwary. Even the sincere may be lead away by any of these, therefore we must “watch and pray.”

But it begins with a death. We cease to sin when we die. We die when we accept the penalty of the Law, and acknowledge that we have been sinners, saved only by the continuous grace of the Father and Son through their Spirit.

For the nominal Christians, their view of death is a physical one; when we die of an illness, or old age, or an accident, then we will have ceased to sin. For the Bible believing Christian, in this generation we are not to expect this physical death at all. If time should linger, it will linger, but Yahshua, Paul, Peter, James, they all spoke of the day as imminent. Ellen White, also, spoke in the expectation that her generation was to be the last.

This was no error; it is the proper mindset of the true Adventist, therefore our view of death passes from the physical to the spiritual... and it is this that allows us to have victory.

For the Bible believer, we cease to sin when we die; and when we die, from the acknowledged penalty of the Law, from the ordeal of the Cross (for we are crucified with Christ, cf. Gal 2:20), from the darkness of baptism’s watery grave, then we have ceased to sin.

As we all know, the Scriptures tell us that the dead “know not anything.” (Ecc. 9:5) For those who might object that this is a “poetic” passage, one not reflective of reality, we have, “After that [Yahshua] saith unto them, ‘Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.’ Then said Yahshua unto them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’” (John 11:11, 14)

According to the Son of Yah, and several other Biblical authors, death is a “sleep.” It is a state of unconsciousness, not a release of the body into a spiritual state that enters Paradise, Purgatory, or Inferno. It is not drifting consciousness that lingers on the earth as a ghost, nor is it conversion to an angelic state by which we may watch over, protect, or guide, our loved ones. Paul, in comforting Christians who had lost their friends and family to death, wrote that “we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not [go before] them which are asleep. 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. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.” (1Th 4:15-18)

Some have said, “Of course, the bodies of the dead shall rise, but that is because the Lord will bring their souls with Him from Heaven.” They cite, in support of this, the verse just before this passage, which reads, “For if we believe that Yahshua died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Yahshua will God bring with Him.” (1Th 4:14)

“So you see,” they reason, “the bodies do ‘sleep,’ but God will bring ‘them,’ their true selves, their bodiless souls, with Christ when He returns.”

There are two issues, however, with that interpretation. First, the word “bring” there is not directional. It may also be translated “bring forth” or “bring up,” which is merely consistent with the teaching that the departed are brought forth from the graves, or up out of the earth, to unite with those who are yet living.

Notice that the second sentence begins with “Even so,” or “in the same way.” Yahshua does not come from Heaven as a spirit to inhabit a waiting body in the last days. He came forth from the grave AS a living body, (Luke 24:39) and “even so,” or in “in the same way” that He “died and rose again” will the departed be restored to life. This is the only true-to-text way to understand that verse.

Second, it accepts a pagan idea of the “soul” as an immortal (or at least spiritual) intelligence that operates independently of the body. The Scriptures tell us that the breath of life and the body together constitute a soul. (Gen 2:7) Furthermore, we are told that at the point of death, “their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished,” (Ecc 9:6) “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave,” (verse 10) and “his breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.” (Psa. 146:4)

Again, these are poetic passages, but this very language is used when Old and New Testament teachers alike address the concept of death. It is written that “Isaac [and various others] gave up the ghost, and died.” (Gen 35:29)

This does not mean that they released a spiritual being; it means they “exhaled,” or perhaps more literally they “expired,” which means to “breathe out,” just as to “inspire” is to breathe in, and to “respire” (in its original meaning) is to continually breathe.

In releasing the “breath” to return to Yah, both the patriarchs and the poets of the Bible tell us that the thoughts, the emotions, the wisdom and knowledge all end. It is not that they merely leave the body, but they “perish.”

Of the resurrection it is written, “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.” (Job 19:25-27)

Although Job is classed among Ketuvim, the “writings,” which in Jewish Tradition are given less doctrinal authority than the Books of Moses or the Major and Minor Prophets, this passage in particular is clearly prophetic in nature, and as plainly written as any other to be found in the Old or New Testaments.

Speaking by the Spirit, Job looks forward to seeing his Redeemer, not at the point of his death in paradise, but rather at the point when He stands on the earth in the last days. He will see Him when, even after his flesh is destroyed, it shall be restored so that he may behold the glory of Yahweh with his very own eyes.

As I said earlier, this portion is a review of the basics for most of us, but it is necessary to understand that this is the consistent picture of death and resurrection that the Bible presents in all other places.

Furthermore, just as with the commandments, the Convert to the religion of Yahshua the Messiah must understand it in the spirit as well as the letter. When the Law revives, when it is given authority in our lives, we immediately find ourselves guilty of sin, the transgression of that Law.

The natural consequence of this doctrine is, those who do not acknowledge the Law cannot be fully, completely born again, because they do not accept the Biblical standard for sin, and that is the first step in dying to self that they may be raised to the new life. Those who do not accept the Law must devise some non-Biblical definition of what “sin” is, therefore it is some false death that is experienced since the Law is not revived, and the sinful soul does not “perish” but is merely subdued at best. This is why, in the life that is supposedly the new one, the “flesh” yet abides, only to spring out and drag the poor victim into sin once and again. If the self is not truly dead, Christ cannot take residence in the heart, for He will not occupy a throne that is not yet vacated.

As we have read, “Force is the last resort of every false religion,” and there is an application to be made here as well. The Savior of mankind, as deeply as He desires each man, woman, and child to be saved, will not force His authority on anyone. He invites, we must accept. The sinner must cast “self” off the throne, to make a place for the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Sin ceases when an individual dies. That is the only thing that truly ends it.

“Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 6:11)

Sin revived, and Paul died. He does not mourn the loss of the old man. He was doomed to destruction anyway. He does not encourage his readers to mourn the death of the sinner that he was, but rather to rejoice with him in the life that he found after the self was slain by the wages of sin according to the Law.

The physically dead know nothing. The Spiritually dead “know” nothing of sin.

Paul wrote to the Roman congregation, telling them, “I am glad therefore on your behalf; but yet I would have you wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil.” (Rom 16:19)

The word “simple” there means uncorrupted, innocent, unmixed. We should be wise concerning how evil works, not being ignorant of Satan’s devices, (2Cor 2:11) but we should not “know” it in any intimate capacity.

Yahshua said of Satan, “the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me.” (John 14:30) Many modern Bible translations will render that “and has no power over me,” but the Greek preposition there is really “in.”

Yahshua does not say that Satan has no power over him; that is a marginally false doctrine, since Yahshua submitted Himself to demonic powers working through spirits and men that He should be slain for our sakes.

He said to Pilate, “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above; therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.” (John 19:11)

But the original language and the King James Version portray a different idea, indicating that nothing of the evil one is “in” Yahshua, no aspect of his rebellion, of his corruption. He was innocent of this knowledge from an internal standpoint, and this is the great Example whom we perfectly follow. We, who know these things, have the responsibility of teaching them to others.

We speak of “death to self,” but it must never be understood as merely struggling to suppress one’s desires due to an obligation to obey the Law. Many Adventists teach the Sabbath and the health message this way, believing that there is virtue in mere obedience.

But we teach the change, the new Creature, the one that delights itself in the Law of Yah, and obeys because obedience is our character, not because we are suppressing our “true selves.”

Now, it is true, there is discipline involved. As long as we are in this sinful flesh, there will be temptations, so that Paul writes, “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” (1Cor 9:27)

But consider this, with regard to the body of flesh... The early Christians had a name for graveyards, where the bodies of their departed brethren were laid to rest. They began to call them “cemetaries,” a name that we use to this very day, because of what they believed of death and resurrection. That word actually has a close history with the word “dormitory,” and both mean almost the same thing – A place for sleeping.

The early Christians had the view we have of death, that it is a place of resting until the return of Yahshua, when (as Job says) we shall behold the Redeemer with our very own, physical, eyes.

As we await that day, and work to hasten its appearing, this can be unto us a powerful symbol of the relationship of the flesh to the spirit. We may remember the symbolism of the place of sleeping, where the bodies know not anything, until they are raised to life by the Father and Son.

Let it remind us that our bodies, while active through the power of Christ, are truly “dead” in the spirit, having no power to take us out of the Way, merely being the source of temporary temptations that are swallowed up in victory, as even physical death shall be in the judgment soon to come.

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