

What Do People “Do” When They Die?

by Anne Mbeke

“Man is without conscious existence in death.”¹

I recently went through an experience that opened my eyes to the issue of the “sleep of the dead” in a way I had not imagined possible. My doctor said I had to undergo surgery to remove some uterine tumors that were growing too fast and too big and threatening other functions in my body. I must say I went to the hospital on that morning with great trepidation. I was not sure how this was going to turn out. I had been warned or as they say “informed” of possible complications, including death! Now, I’m not a brave person — not by a long shot! I was very nervous, though I managed to conceal this very well at the time. I kept thinking, suppose this was it? What if I did not make it back? What if something went wrong...I realized then how desperately I wanted to live and not die! To make matters worse, my surgeon had an emergency that required her to travel out of the country on the day of my surgery! Some confidence I got, knowing that she would not even be around by the time I “came back”!

Well, to cut a long story short, I’m writing this paper, so things could not have gone so badly! But the point of it is, when they administered anesthesia, I had no clue —the last thing I remember is saying that I was cold, and someone putting a warm blanket over me. Almost five hours later, I woke up and had a lot of pain. However, it was as if perhaps just a fraction of a second had transpired, and not a whole five hours! In fact, if it had been a thousand years between my last conscious thought and the point of waking up, it still would not have meant anything to me. I only remember that it was evening when I was wheeled into the recovery room, while my last “awake” moment had been mid-morning. My fears were only real to me then because I had conscious knowledge of the procedure before it was initiated. But I felt nothing, knew nothing, feared nothing, and even suspected nothing because I was not conscious!

No Knowledge at Death

So, what does this all mean? I must say I was comforted in knowing that we truly “rest” when we sleep/die. I did not die, but the process I underwent is that of shutting down all consciousness through anesthesia, while the surgery is performed. It is the deepest sleep I have ever had, and probably the closest I’ll ever get to the sleep of the dead before the real thing! There is no more thought, no pain, no worry, nothing. I

could no more share in the process of the removal of the tumors than I could in the conversation that must have taken place during this surgery, even if I wanted to. Why not? Because I was completely out of it, and my fate was in the hands of the anesthesiologist whom I was told stayed with the surgeons throughout the process, just to monitor and make sure I stayed out of it. For this I paid a handsome amount of money because my life was literally in his hands.

The writer of Ecclesiastes states, “For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecc. 9:5, 6). This verse obviously rules out one of the many deceptive expressions that people use when one dies — “he has gone to his reward” — wrongfully implying that man receives his reward at death. In a sense, this expression would be true, if by it is understood the fact that the next moment of consciousness after death will be the resurrection, the point at which believers will be rewarded. Unfortunately the proponents of this misconception are not thinking in this way. They eliminated or changed the reward/promise to mean “going to heaven” instead of inheriting the land/earth as was first promised to Abraham.² So, with a twisted understanding of what the reward is, how can they know where it is to be found?

I agree that “It is impossible to explain the Christian religion without clarifying the meaning of the term Kingdom of God.”³ Unfortunately not many preachers have invested their time and energy in explaining this. It is no wonder that a lot of well-meaning and sincere Christians are stuck with the notion that when one dies, he goes to heaven to receive his reward! It is amazingly simple, yet I must say that I too grew up with the same “going to heaven” preaching. But when I took the time to study the Scripture for myself, I began to realize that I did not have the correct picture of man’s destiny, and consequently what dead people do — i.e. *nothing*! Only Christ has the authority given him by God to do something for the dead — resurrect them at his Second Coming.

“Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to every man according to what he has done” (Rev. 22:12). This implies that the reward will be given at Christ’s Second Coming. In any case, one cannot receive a reward at death because as Alva Huffer correctly says, “To receive a reward, one must have knowledge. The dead, however, are unconscious.”⁴ Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that

² Genesis 12:1; 13:15; 17:6-8; Acts 7:5.

³ Anthony F. Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven*, Restoration Fellowship, 1999, p. 51.

⁴ Huffer, p. 158.

¹ Alva G. Huffer, *Systematic Theology*, Oregon, IL: The Restitution Herald, 1960, p. 155.

no one has received the reward yet, not even the patriarch saints of the Old Testament: “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb. 11:13). This promise/reward is not allotted to individuals when they die, but rather it will be conferred to all believers at the Second Coming. The Psalmist says, “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence” (Ps. 115:17). I imagine the excitement when the reward/promise is unveiled and awarded to the believers — it seems almost inevitable that there will be great rejoicing and praise, and celebration and shouting! The Psalmist reminds us that the dead cannot do this! The prophet Isaiah also says, “For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness” (Isa. 38:13). Resurrection, therefore, is the only way that those who die/sleep/go down to the pit or grave or Sheol or Hades can hope for God’s faithfulness. Again, the “heroes of faith” recorded in Hebrews would not have had to wait for their reward if this was conferred at death. We are informed of this by the writer of Hebrews: “And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect” (Heb. 11:39, 40). Believers being made perfect means having immortality awarded to them at resurrection. Christ is the “perfecter” of our faith. Why? Because he is the **first fruits** among all who sleep, and the first sample of an immortalized human being. God promises the same future life to all who fear him, for “we shall be like Christ,” the apostle John says. This means we shall be resurrected to immortality like Christ is. This is what many of our church fathers call “Conditional Immortality” — awarded on condition that one meets the requirements of the Kingdom.

During my surgery, I could not make any contribution to anything even if I willed it hard enough. I had no visions or dreams of any sort while in this state of “nothingness.” It is like power being turned off — only it was for just a few hours. Georgia Power can decide to turn off the main power supply, so that no amount of switching on of individual power switches in homes that use Georgia Power can bring any power into their homes. But a home owner may turn off the lights for a time, and then turn them back on. I felt like the main power supply — the breath of life that God breathed in Adam to make him a living being — was still on for me, except that the doctors, with the knowledge that God gave them, were able, so to speak, to turn off the switch so that there was no breath in me for a while. They waited and turned it back on when the procedure was complete. I guess if the main power supply — breath of life, which comes from God — had really been turned

off, I would not have awakened regardless of what the doctors did!

For those who say that believers go to heaven at death, there is strong evidence to the contrary. As quoted earlier from Revelation, Christ would not be coming back to earth with his reward for believers if they are already in heaven enjoying the reward! Again, it is written that only Christ ascended into heaven after he was raised from the dead and crowned with immortality. The apostle Peter, preaching after Christ had ascended into heaven, says, “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET”’” (Acts 2:34, 35).

Peter was obviously quoting from Psalm 110:1, which is also quoted by the writer of Hebrews as he explains who Christ is in relation to God, angels and man (Heb. 1:13). The author is referring to God speaking to Christ who alone is right now seated at the right hand of God, where, as the writer of Hebrews says, he is making intercession for believers before the Father (Heb. 7:25).

Death as “Sleep,” “Rest,” Even “Lying Down”

Death has been described as “sleep” in the Scriptures — not just in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament as well. In all the cases, the reference is clearly to death. Some express it as “rest,” while other translations use the expression “lie down.” Some of these verses are listed below:

Deuteronomy 31:16: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, you are about **to lie down** with your fathers...’” This was towards the end of Moses’ life, and echoes the prophet Daniel’s vision when he was told, “But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will **enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age**” (Dan. 12:13). This is a powerful statement about the sleep/rest of the dead! It further proves, as discussed earlier, that one has to “rise again” (after death) in order to receive his reward at the “end of the age.”

1 Kings 2:10: “Then **David slept** with his fathers **and was buried** in the city of David.” It is worth noting that the apostle Peter, speaking after Christ had ascended into heaven, said, “Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that **he both died and was buried**, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). Later Paul said, “For **David**, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, **fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay**” (Acts 13:36).

Job 7:21: “For now I will **lie down in the dust**; and You will seek me, but I will not be.” Again in Job 14:12 the writer says, “So **man lies down** and does not rise. Until the heavens are no longer, **he will not awake nor**

be aroused out of his sleep.” He will not be awakened or “called out” until the resurrection.

Psalm 13:3: “Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; enlighten my eyes, or **I will sleep the sleep of death.**”

Jeremiah 51:39: “And may **sleep a perpetual sleep** and not wake up.”

Daniel 12:2: “**Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake**, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.” Here is the picture of the resurrection — when the believers will be awakened from their “perpetual sleep” to receive their reward, and sinners to answer for what they did with the life God gave them.

John 11:11-14 gives the classic example of the use of the term “sleep” by Jesus himself. When Lazarus had died, Jesus said that he was “asleep.” He then “called him out of the tomb”— note that he did not call him down from heaven. The dead cannot already be “reclining” with Christ in heaven if he has to come back and call out all those who “sleep in Christ” to the resurrection life. “He said to them, ‘Our friend **Lazarus has fallen asleep**; but I go, so that I may **awaken him out of sleep.**’ The disciples then said to him, ‘Lord, if he **has fallen asleep**, he will recover.’ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he was speaking of literal sleep. So Jesus then said to them plainly, ‘**Lazarus is dead**’” (John 11:11-14).

Acts 7:60 records Stephen’s death: “Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, **he fell asleep.**”

1 Corinthians 11:30: “For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and **a number sleep.**”

1 Corinthians 15:6: “After that he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but **some have fallen asleep.**” Verse 20 says, “But now **Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.**” This gives me a lot of hope — knowing that just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too shall be raised from the dead if we believe in God, and Jesus Christ His Son whom He sent to preach the message of a future hope — the Kingdom of God as it was meant to be!

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15 we are given an explanation about death and resurrection in very clear language. Paul obviously faced questions and challenges to the faith as we do today, and in particular concerning the matter of human destiny. Moreover, a lot of his listeners did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. He uses the word “sleep” interchangeably with the word “death” when he says, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about **those who are asleep**, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him **those who have fallen asleep**

in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede **those who have fallen asleep.**” Paul compares those who are alive (his audience) with those who have fallen asleep (those who are dead).

1 Thessalonians 5:10: “...who died for us, so that **whether we are awake or asleep**, we will live together with him.” Awake or asleep, alive or dead would seem to be interchangeable in meaning here.

While making a comment on the differences between man and beast, Edwin Froom says that when beasts die, they cease to be, permanently — no future life. Of man he says, “redeemed and regenerated man will be **called forth from his sleep** by Christ...to a life that measures with the life of God, and in eternal communion thereafter with God.”⁵ This is the picture of resurrection. It seems clear that this author uses the term “sleep” to mean death, just as we have seen in the Scriptures. The redeemed will be called forth, just as Lazarus was called forth after he had been dead (asleep) four days.

I must say, in conclusion, that I am fascinated with the issue of the sleep of the dead, mainly because I realize just how misinformed I was as a young girl attending Sunday School. It is definitely easier for me to understand this, since even in my native language when one dies, we say he or she has “fallen asleep” (*onindo*), which is the same word as when we go to sleep every night. I thank God that I can make this connection, and find it easy to understand that the dead do nothing because they cannot! ✨

⁵ Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers*, Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1966, Vol. 1, p. 159.