

The Mystery of Death

One of life's grim certainties is that it will one day end...and then what? Much has been said—and written—about death and life after death.

In *The Mystery of Death, It Is Written* Speaker/Director John Bradshaw explores the Bible and discovers solid answers to some of life's most challenging and important questions. Inspiring, confident and hopeful—the mystery of death will be a mystery no more!

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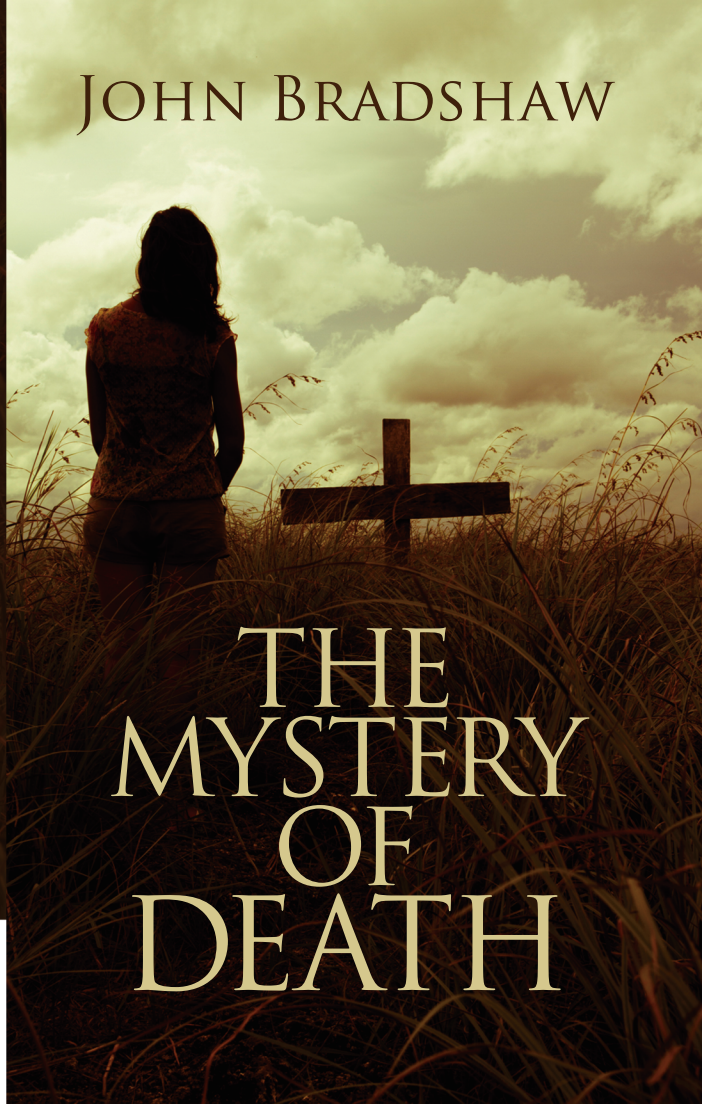
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Shortly before he died in 1981, American writer William Saroyan said something that has crossed the minds of many people.



He had cancer, and he knew he didn't have long to live. In an interview with the Associated Press he said, "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?"

Now there's a question: "Now what?"

The Bible talks about people living their "three-score and ten"—or 70 years—and today, many people do a little better. If you're born in Japan, you can expect to live on average about 82.5 years. Or in Spain and Sweden, about 81.

At the other end of the spectrum, the average life span in Cameroon is around 50 years, while

in Swaziland it is almost 40. The very idea of a life “expectancy” is chilling when you stop and think about it.

On average, you can expect to live only so long. In other words, you can expect to die after a given period of time. Human beings are only on the earth temporarily. James had it right when he wrote, “For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” (James 4:14)

But death was never part of God’s original plan. When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He created them with the capacity to live forever. Even after sin intruded into the world and brought death with it, Adam lived to be 930 years old. Adam’s son, Seth, lived to be 912, while Methuselah, who died in the year of the flood in Noah’s day, lived all the way to 969—almost a thousand years. But even Methuselah had to answer William Saroyan’s question: “Now what?”

The old saying is that there are only two things in the world that are certain—death and taxes. The fact is, many people cheat on paying their taxes. But other than those who are alive when Jesus returns, nobody is going to cheat death.

Not even fame and fortune can help a person avoid the certainty that is death. Elvis Presley died at the age of 42. President John F. Kennedy died at the age of 46. Fame and fortune couldn’t keep John Lennon from dying at the age of 40. Princess Diana died at 36. Death is no respecter of persons. Dr. Martin Luther King was only 39 when his life was snatched away. You can be a president or a pauper, famous or infamous, sinner or saint, and death is going to come. And then what?

Some Australian aboriginals believe that when a person dies, that person goes into the spirit world, and now as a deceased ancestor, that person is a spiritual guide who helps the living through life. New Zealand Maori mythology teaches that the spirits of the dead travel to the northernmost point of the country and from there return to their ancestral homeland.

Many people, including Sikhs and Hindus, believe in reincarnation. Death is viewed as a continuation of life, except that the deceased returns to the world in another life form.

The fabulous tombs of the Egyptians show that in that ancient culture, the afterlife was of high importance, with the soul of the deceased traveling to the kingdom of the dead.

One thing of which we can be certain: it isn't possible that all of those views could be correct!

What does the Bible say on the subject of death? And can the subject be clearly understood? Considering God created human beings to live forever, death appears in the Bible remarkably early. God spoke to Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:16, 17 and said: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'"

But death was introduced to the world after Satan deceived Eve, followed by Adam, into eating the forbidden fruit, the fruit which grew on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their conversation went like this:

"Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Has God indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden"?' And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, "You

shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" (Genesis 3:1-5)

Notice something important: in this discussion on the subject of death, Satan lied to Eve. God had said, "If you eat the fruit, you will die." But Satan said, "You don't want to believe what God said! In fact, He only said that because He was withholding something good from you!"

For reasons we cannot explain, Eve chose to believe the enemy of souls, and her eyes were indeed opened to the horrific reality of sin and death, and ultimately to all their attendant misery.

But beyond the reality of death, it is important to understand what happens to a person at death. Where do the dead go after they breathe their last? Just as surely as Satan misrepresented God in the Garden of Eden on the subject of death, he continues to do so today.

To really understand death—the end of life—we need to go back to the book of Genesis

and understand the genesis of life. Genesis 2:7 says, “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.”

Something absolutely vital to understand is that at Creation, God did not give Adam a soul. This is significant because the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Norse, and the majority of people today believe human beings possess a soul that survives bodily death. While that view is widely held today, we must ask ourselves if it is a view that is found in the Bible.

The Bible says that instead of giving Adam a soul, after forming him from dust and breathing into him the breath of life, Adam *became* a soul. A soul isn’t something Adam received from God. A soul is what Adam was—a living soul.

The same is true for people today. All people are the combination of body and breath. All people are living souls. People do not possess a spirit that exists independently of the body.

So what is it that returns to God at death, if not a soul? Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, speaking of death: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

And Job explained clearly what that spirit is that returns to God: “All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils.” (Job 27:3)

That which returns to God when a person dies is not a ghost, a spirit or a soul. When a person dies, that which returns to God is simply life-giving breath—the power granted by God to keep a person living. The Bible states that when a person dies and breathes his or her last, the spirit that goes back to God is that “life spark” granted by God to sustain life.

I was present when my father died. In fact, Dad breathed his last while I had my arms around him. I heard my father do something I had heard him do many times before. He exhaled. Except that on this occasion, Dad didn’t inhale shortly after he had exhaled, as he had all through his life. He “gave up the ghost,” and his breath left his body.

Did that breath literally return all the way to God? Of course not—it only left his lungs and went out into the room. But metaphorically speaking, his spirit—the breath of life God gave him—returned to God. Just as God had the power to bring my father’s life into existence in the first place, He now had the power to restore

life to my father should He choose to do so. Dad's breath returned to God.

So what happened to Dad's soul? Keep in mind that people do not possess a soul. My father—like everyone else who has ever died—simply ceased to live. Rather than being a living soul, my father was now simply dead. When body and breath are no longer connected, rather than being a living soul, a person is, simply, dead.

As a child I was taught that every person had an immortal soul. But when I investigated that in the Bible, I found something that revolutionized my thinking. The Bible actually says: "Which He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who *alone* has immortality." (1 Timothy 6:15, 16)

Only God has immortality! Therefore, it is impossible for a person to have an immortal soul. In fact, Paul wrote in Romans 2:7 that we are to "seek for" immortality.

It doesn't make any sense that people should seek for something they already inherently possess! If you search the Bible from front to back, you will find absolutely no mention of an immortal soul. None whatsoever.

I've been to many funerals where the minister has offered comfort to the grieving family by claiming that the deceased was now in Heaven praising God. While I can understand the motives of the speaker in that moment, I can find nothing in the Bible that substantiates that claim. In fact, the Bible says exactly the opposite.

Psalms 115:17 says, "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence." God makes it as clear as anything could ever be. "The dead do not praise the Lord."

Writing in his book of wisdom, Solomon stated: "The living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing." (Ecclesiastes 9:5) The reason for that is quite simply because the dead are resting unconsciously in their graves.

I've often wondered which great Bible characters I'll see when I get to Heaven. I'm certain that—in spite of his flaws and failings—I'll see King David in Heaven. Yet the Bible categorically states that David is not currently in Heaven!

No less a person than Peter made that remarkable statement when he was under the influence of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost.

Peter confidently said in Acts 2:29, “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.” In other words, “We know who David was, and we know where he is. He is dead and buried, and he occupies a tomb.”

Peter went on to say in verse 34, “For David did not ascend into the Heavens.”

David not in Heaven? That’s what Peter said while inspired by the Holy Spirit. So if David isn’t in Heaven, where exactly is he? And what is David doing? There’s a case study in the Bible that clearly answers these questions.

In John chapter 11, Jesus receives word that his dear friend Lazarus is ill. Two days later, He suggests that He and His disciples return to Judea, explaining, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” (John 11:11)

The disciples were happy to hear that Lazarus was asleep, believing sleep would be a boon for Lazarus’ health. But Jesus said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” (John 11:14)

Jesus equated death with sleep. In fact, He was emphatic that death was a sleep. And waking Lazarus up from the sleep of death would be “for the glory of God, that the Son of

God may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4)

Lazarus had sisters named Mary and Martha, and it was Martha who was first to meet Jesus when He arrived in their hometown of Bethany. Expressing her confidence that if Jesus had been present, Lazarus would not have died, Martha was given real assurance by Jesus when He said, “Your brother will rise again.” (John 11:23)

Jesus didn’t try to convince Martha that Lazarus was in Heaven, praising God and enjoying the companionship of angels. Martha knew Lazarus was not in Heaven. She understood the mystery of death. She responded to Jesus saying, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” (John 11:24)

Obviously, Martha understood the Bible’s teaching that death is a sleep—an unconscious resting between life in this world and life in the world to come. Martha understood that at a future time, she would see her brother again, but that for now Lazarus was resting in his tomb.

When Jesus asked where Lazarus had been buried, He was escorted to Lazarus’ tomb, at which time He made an unusual request. He asked the people to remove the stone that

concealed the opening of the tomb. Jesus' request was met with some resistance. "Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.'" (John 11:39)

The point of Martha's protestation was that there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that Lazarus was dead. After four days of death, nature has a way of letting everyone know that death has taken place.

Jesus' intention was to raise Lazarus from the dead. Nobody was going to be able to claim Lazarus had only been in a coma or a deep sleep. When the stone was rolled away from the tomb, Jesus spoke with a loud voice, saying, "Lazarus, come forth!"

Certainly nobody in the crowd that day had ever witnessed such a thing—a dead man being called to come out of his tomb! Except that in this instance, Lazarus actually came forth from the tomb! The Bible says he "came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go.'" (John 11:44)

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead! It was a token of what He is going to do on that last great day when the dead in Christ shall rise. We

notice Jesus did not call Lazarus down from Heaven. Neither did He call Lazarus up from hell¹, because Lazarus had been in neither of those places.

Commonly-believed Christian theology places the dead in Heaven or hell immediately after death. And while the Bible makes no mention of purgatory, many Catholics believe some dead go to purgatory at death, where they spend a certain time atoning for their sins before being permitted to proceed to Heaven.

Lazarus' experience clearly illustrates that the dead do not ascend to Heaven or descend to hell when they die. Lazarus bore no testimony of a visit to either place. And how cruel it would have been for Jesus to call Lazarus back from Heaven, if that was where he'd actually gone after he'd died! It is not only Biblically impossible, but unthinkable that Jesus would recall someone to the Earth after they had spent time in Heaven. Upon dying, Lazarus slept the sleep of death. Jesus interrupted death by waking Lazarus from that sleep, granting him further time on Earth.

¹ Be sure to read the book *Understanding Hell*, available from It Is Written.

The resurrection of Lazarus became big news. “Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him.” (John 11:45) But this clear demonstration of the Messiahship of Jesus aroused the Jewish religious leaders not only “to put Him [Jesus] to death” (John 11:53), but they made plans to murder Lazarus as well! (John 12:10)

And there’s an even greater truth in the story of Lazarus than the fact that the dead sleep, and do not travel immediately to Heaven or hell, and it is found in John 11:25. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.”

Unless a person has accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, death is all that a person can look forward to. The believer in Jesus can look forward to eternal life in Christ. Even though a person may die, that person has hope beyond the grave. Jesus makes the difference! He is the resurrection and the life.

Which raises a question: If a person were to go to Heaven immediately at death, what need would there be for a resurrection? It has been suggested that a resurrection would be needed so that the souls of those who have been in

Heaven could return to the Earth and receive a body, which would have been raised from the grave where the dead had been laid. However, the idea of the saved of all ages having to journey from Heaven to Earth in order to receive a body simply doesn’t make sense.

The Bible emphasizes the resurrection as being the hope of believers beyond life in this world. In fact, the Bible talks about two resurrections that will take place, and helps us understand when those resurrections will be.

John 5:28, 29 says, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

The Bible is remarkably consistent on this subject. Notice that the dead will be “in the graves” and will come forth after they hear Jesus’ voice. The Bible tells us exactly when that event—the resurrection of the saved—will take place.

“Behold, I tell 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 trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and

the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'" (1 Corinthians 15:51-55)

If one reads this passage and looks for the plain, clear intention of the Bible writer, one cannot help but see several beautiful, clear Bible truths.

We notice that the dead "sleep." In fact, the Bible refers to death as sleep dozens and dozens of times, while never offering an alternative scenario.

And the passage tells us exactly when the dead will be raised from their sleep. Paul wrote that this would take place "at the last trumpet"—in other words, at the Second Coming of Jesus (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16). It isn't until Jesus returns that the dead are raised to receive everlasting life.

The passage also refers to human beings as "this mortal." If the soul were immortal,

then Paul couldn't refer to human beings as "this mortal." What is again very clear is that rather than possessing an immortal soul, mortal human beings must rely entirely on Jesus to receive immortality—at the Second Coming of Jesus.

Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica on the very same subject. The Thessalonians believed that if a person was not alive when Jesus returned, they could not go to Heaven. Addressing this false idea, Paul wrote, "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 4:13) We see again that Paul describes the dead as sleeping.

Assuring his friends that there is hope for the sleeping dead, Paul goes on to write, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 4:14) In other words, Jesus will take the sleeping dead—who will wake—to Heaven with Him.

Verse 15 says, "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 by no means precede those who are asleep."

Even though some are dead and sleeping, the living saved will not go to Heaven before them. And then Paul writes some of the most powerful and hopeful words in the entire Bible.

“For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Again, the Bible makes clear that those who die will sleep until the resurrection. When Jesus returns “with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God,” the dead are raised to meet Jesus. And notice how Paul ended that moving portion of Scripture: “comfort one another with these words.”

How many times I have stood at a graveside with a grieving family and been able to offer this very comfort. When a person has died in faith in Jesus, comfort exists in the fact that one day soon, Jesus will return, and the dead in Christ shall rise, “and thus we shall always be

with the Lord.” In fact, the experience of one who dies *is* just as if that person goes directly to Heaven at death. The sleep experienced by the dead is an unconscious sleep, meaning that a person who dies is entirely unaware of the passage of time.

Therefore, someone who is dying might be aware that life is slipping away, and the next conscious thought they experience is that of seeing Jesus at the resurrection. Experientially, it is as if one dies and goes to Heaven, just as when a person goes to sleep at night and wakes in the morning, unaware of the passage of time. So what is the harm of believing that a person dies and goes to Heaven, rather than sleeping until the resurrection? For the deceased, there is no longer anything to worry about. But for the living, it is vital we understand the Bible truth on this subject.

In the middle of the 19th century, three young sisters claimed to have made contact with the “spirit” of a dead person. Mysterious rapping sounds convinced people that something supernatural was taking place, and in spite of the Fox sisters recanting their claims that they communicated with the dead—and later recanting their recantation—for all intents and

purposes, spiritualism was born. An increasing amount of people began to claim they were able to communicate with the dead.

The excitement around spiritualism was fueled in no small measure by fraudsters and showmen who found they could earn a living from spiritualism. And in spite of a significant amount of skepticism coming from various quarters, spiritualism caught on to the point that today it is widely accepted in modern society.

Popular culture is rife with spiritualistic ideas. Some of the bestselling books of all time (including the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series) deal with the notion of the soul surviving bodily death. Television and radio programs regularly feature spiritist mediums who contact the spirits of the departed.

On one television program I saw, a spiritist medium claimed to contact Nicole Brown Simpson, the slain wife of former American football star, O. J. Simpson. Ms. Brown Simpson's surviving sister, Denise, claimed that the supposed spirit must have been her sister, as only Nicole was privy to information that the "spirit" was sharing with her.

I vividly recall hosting a radio program one Friday night many years ago—before I

was a Christian—when my studio guest was a nationally-renowned spiritist medium. Not only was the program extremely popular—with all of the radio station's available phone lines being busy more than half an hour before the program started—but again, the medium in question shared insights that frequently amazed those who called. This was taken as evidence that the soul survives bodily death, and that in harmony with what Satan told Eve in the Garden of Eden, people do "not surely die." (Genesis 3:4)

Giving up the Bible position on the state of a person in death, and accepting commonly-believed but erroneous theories, leaves people vulnerable to the deceptions of Satan. As the media continues to miseducate society, as Eastern religions aggressively promote the idea of the existence of a personal spirit, and as mainstream religion popularizes the fallacy of a conscious soul that departs the body at death, Satan continues to work to convince the world of an entirely unbiblical and dangerous idea.

Christians the world over are taught by their church leaders that Mary, the mother of Jesus, appears in various parts of the world to share messages from God. The Bible truth is

that Mary is asleep in her grave, awaiting the resurrection along with God's people from all ages. Such supposed apparitions have left people more vulnerable than ever to the overmastering delusion the Bible says will come upon this world in Earth's final days.

Revelation 16:13, 14 says, "And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty."

Before the return of Jesus, Satan will employ spiritualism to deceive masses of people all over the world. For most people, the idea of people returning from the dead with messages from God will be entirely acceptable. But God's people, committed to standing on the Bible and the Bible only, will be at a crossroads in their experience: will they now stand on the Word of God, or will they choose to trust their senses rather than cling to the Scriptures?

In 2 Thessalonians 2:9, the Bible says that Satan will work "with all power, signs, and lying wonders." Few things can be more

deceptive than spiritualism. When a believer is confronted by a departed loved one with a message from God, that person's faith will be seriously tested.

Modern spiritualism is no laughing matter. People may think it harmless to dress up at Halloween and decorate their lawns with imitation tombstones and effigies of witches and zombies, but the message they are sending to the world is that people survive bodily death and go on living after they die. The message it sends is that the Bible is not true.

In fact, in Bible times, God commanded that spiritist mediums be put to death! While no such thing is advocated today, this demonstrates how thoroughly dangerous and ungodly God considers spiritualism to be. And it illustrates how important an accurate understanding of the subject of death actually is.

In 1 Samuel 28, King Saul visits a spiritist medium. And the results were disastrous for the king, and catastrophic for the nation of Israel. Under attack from the Philistines and no longer receiving communication from God, King Saul—unsure of what he should do—turned to a witch in order to find guidance for his immediate future. Some people believe that

in this exchange with the witch, Saul actually spoke to the spirit of the prophet Samuel. But there are many reasons why this cannot possibly be so.

To begin with, the Bible never says people have a “soul” that lives on after death. At creation, the combination of body and breath resulted in man becoming “a living soul.” (Genesis 2:7) Additionally, the Bible refers to the medium Saul consulted as a “witch.” One would not normally consider the practice of a witch to be founded upon reliable Bible truths.

The reaction of the witch to King Saul’s visit is interesting. She says to the king in 1 Samuel 28:9, “Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?”

The witch herself plainly states that the practice Saul was contemplating was in direct violation of the commands of God. If God had forbidden communication with the dead on the grounds that it is simply communication with evil spirits, what follows cannot possibly be King Saul talking with the late prophet Samuel. Consider the exchange that follows. “The woman said to Saul, ‘I saw a spirit ascending out of

the earth.’ So he said to her, ‘What is his form?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.’ And Saul perceived that it was Samuel.” (1 Samuel 28:13, 14)

King Saul did not see the prophet Samuel any more than Denise Brown saw her sister, Nicole Brown Simpson. Based on what was said by the witch, Saul perceived he was communicating with Samuel. The fact was, Saul was communicating with the devil himself.

I’ve been told by many people that the only way “Samuel” could have told Saul that he was about to die was if “Samuel” was speaking on behalf of God, and that this exchange, therefore, was between King Saul and the actual deceased prophet Samuel. However, when the passage is carefully read, several things become immediately apparent.

Owing to Saul’s disobedience, God had indeed torn the kingdom out of the hand of Saul. The reason Satan could accurately predict the imminent death of Saul was because Satan was fully aware that Saul—no more surrendered to God—was no longer under God’s divine protection. Saul was now at Satan’s mercy. Satan knew full well that Saul was about to die, because Satan was going to end Saul’s life.

Furthermore, the evil spirit that masqueraded as Samuel told Saul that within 24 hours, King Saul and his sons would be “with me.” Samuel, a faithful servant of God, undoubtedly died a saved man.

Saul was about to die as a lost man. The only way Saul was going to be with Samuel was inasmuch as both would be dead and in the grave—in which case, the Bible truth of the sleep in death is upheld by this passage, and not contradicted.

Shortly after his interview with the witch, King Saul was dead, and Israel was plunged into disarray. King Saul’s sorry saga gives no justification to the lie that the soul lives on after death.

Another Bible passage often quoted to support the immortality of the soul is 2 Corinthians 5:8. I should say, this passage is often *misquoted* in support of the immortality of the soul. I’ve heard preachers at funerals enthusiastically exclaim that “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord,” insisting that the deceased is now in Heaven with God.

The stark fact is, the Bible says no such thing. This is not to suggest that the Bible in-

deed says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, but it simply means something different. The Bible does not actually say what so many say it says!

It says in 2 Corinthians 5:8, “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” When read in context, it is seen that Paul is discussing the desire to be in the presence of God. “In this [body] we groan,” Paul writes, “earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from Heaven.” (2 Corinthians 5:2)

Paul’s burden is that while we are on Earth, in our earthly bodies, we are not in the presence of God. Nobody would argue that fact. He goes on to write that he would be “well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8), another statement few people would care to argue.

While on Earth, while in his human body, Paul was not “present with the Lord.” Insightfully, Paul declared exactly when he would be present with the Lord—writing to the very same group of Christian believers.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul said that all believers would be present with the Lord “at

the last trumpet.” (1 Corinthians 15:52) It seems highly unlikely that Paul would write to the Corinthians and advise them that they would go to Heaven when Jesus returns, and then write to them again—perhaps only a few months later—and tell them that they would go to Heaven the moment they die!

Faithfulness to the consistency of Scripture doesn’t allow for Paul to plainly contradict himself—and the entire canon of Scripture—and reverse his position regarding what happens when a person dies. So 2 Corinthians 5:8 is widely misquoted, yet its misquoting does not turn error into truth.

And then there’s the thief on the cross. Didn’t Jesus say to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise”? Didn’t Jesus assure the thief on the cross that hours after their conversation, the thief would be enjoying the bliss of Heaven?

There are several principles that must be kept in mind. When studying the Bible, there must be a consistency, a Scriptural integrity, that isn’t compromised by a verse here or a statement there. In other words, it isn’t possible for the Bible to clearly and repeatedly state that people sleep in death, and then blatantly

contradict itself with Jesus telling the thief on the cross quite the opposite.

Let’s carefully look at the exchange between Jesus and the thief on the cross. It’s found in Luke chapter 23. Jesus was hanging on the cross shortly before His death. In harmony with the prophecy in Isaiah 53:12, Jesus died in the company of sinners—in this case two thieves.

When one of the thieves began to harangue Jesus, the other came to Jesus’ defense. Then, recognizing his guilt before God, one of the thieves said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42)

Now, notice what the thief said to Jesus, and what he didn’t say. The thief didn’t ask if he could go to Heaven with Jesus that day. He said, “Remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

Jesus still hasn’t come into His kingdom! That won’t happen until the Second Coming! Jesus’ response to the thief is crucial. As recorded in most Bibles, Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Which, as written, is an impossibility, as Jesus didn’t go to Paradise that day. He went

to the tomb. In fact, when Mary Magdalene approached Jesus at the tomb Sunday morning, Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father.” (John 20:17)

Could the thief on the cross really have been in Heaven with Jesus on the day of the crucifixion, when a) he didn’t ask to go to Heaven, and b) Jesus Himself didn’t go to Heaven until Sunday morning? The answer is obvious.

So how do we understand what appears to be Jesus’ plain statement that the thief would be with Jesus in Heaven² on the day he died?

As mundane as it might seem, the simple answer to the question lies in the usage of punctuation. Consider this: as recorded in most versions of the Bible, Jesus said to the thief, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” That is, “Assuredly I say to you,” and then a comma, which leaves the

² And yes, Paradise is Heaven. Revelation 2:7 says the Tree of Life is “in the midst of the Paradise of God,” while in Revelation 22:1, 2, it’s clear that the Tree of Life is in the same location as the throne of God. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:4, reveals that Paradise is Heaven. Contrary to some theories, Paradise isn’t an intermediate dwelling place between this world and the world to come.

remainder of the phrase as, “today you will be with Me in Paradise,” which as we have seen, is totally unbiblical and utterly impossible.

But when the comma is shifted, we’re left with the following: “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

This has Jesus saying to the thief, “I say to you today,”—I’m telling you now—“you will be with Me in Paradise.” Now, instead of a contradictory and inaccurate statement, what Jesus says makes perfect sense.

The thief was dying in condemnation, but in the last minutes of his life, he reached out to Jesus by faith. And Jesus offered the thief the same remarkable assurance He offers any repentant sinner.

When a sinner repents, Jesus says to that man or woman, “I tell you now, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

“I tell you with certainty: even though you might deserve death and not life, because you have expressed faith in Me and yielded your life to Me, I assure you that your future is brightness and not darkness. You will be with Me in Paradise!”

What remarkable assurance. And this is what Jesus offers everyone. Death isn’t the end

for those who hope in Christ. The “Now what?” question posed by William Saroyan has a clear and definitive answer.

The blessed affirmation offered by Jesus is that for those who close their eyes in death, the best is yet to come. One day Jesus will return, and the dead in Christ shall rise—and together with the living saints will travel with Jesus to Heaven.

“Therefore comfort one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

“I am the resurrection and the life.” (John 11:25)