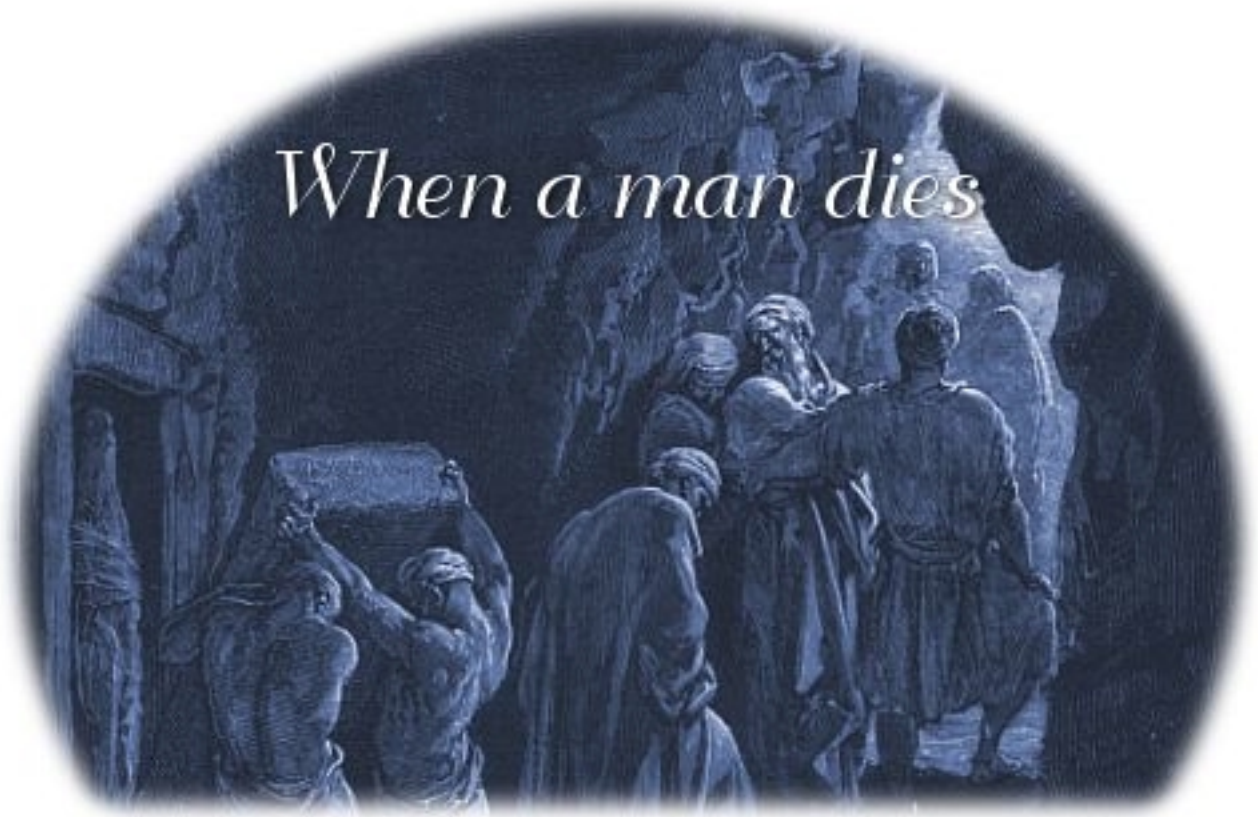


When a man dies



There are very few of the teeming millions of mankind who do not give some thought to what may be their lot when they die. Some wonder whether there is a future life. Others, believing in a future life, wonder whether it will be one of happiness or one of sorrow. The question, "Where will I spend eternity?" is one to which not many have found a definite and satisfying answer.

The question whether our eternal destiny is unalterably fixed at death is also of vital importance. If it is, then many questions are raised about God's justice and love, for millions have died who have never had a real opportunity to repent.

Many of these, by the standards of this world, are good and noble, yet they do not profess to be Christian. They are congenial as neighbors, fair in their business dealings, and are always ready to do a good turn to those in need; yet according to the Biblical conception of Christianity, they are not good enough to go to heaven when they die. On the other hand, they are too good to be forever lost, which to some means eternal torment.

Also, there are many who profess Christianity who frankly admit they do not always live as they should, yet they are not what we would call wicked people. What about these? There is a story of one who dreamed that he died and appeared before the Judge of all. Questioned as to his standing in the church, he could answer with assurance. Furthermore, he had enjoyed the study of the Bible. But it seems that when he got excited he did not always control his language as he should, and in his dream it seemed that this was to debar him from heaven. According to the story, he awakened from his dream screaming, "Don't send me to hell!"

Of course this is only a story and, according to the Scriptures, not in keeping with the actual experiences of those who die. It illustrates the fact that many people are uncertain about the future life. Besides, there are the millions who have died without even hearing the name of Jesus, the only name given under heaven or among men by which anyone can be saved. What about these? It is fitting that both believers and unbelievers ponder well this subject of the hereafter, for it is an issue which ultimately must be faced. Eventually the Grim Reaper gets around to all of us.

In our present examination we will appeal directly to the Bible. Is there any scriptural authority for anyone to fear being sent to hell to be tortured forever by fireproof demons? When we examine the inspired records, this is what we find:

In the Old Testament (King James translation) the English word "hell" appears thirty-one times. It is a translation of the Hebrew word sheol. In addition to the 31 times this word is translated "hell," it appears thirty-one times where it is translated "grave" and three times where it is translated "pit." It should be apparent to all that this Hebrew word must mean the same when translated by the English words grave and pit as when it is translated by the English word hell.

The scholars who translated the Standard American Edition of the Bible recognized this fact evidenced by their criticism of the English revisers, expressed in the preface to the American edition. We quote: "The uniform substitution of sheol for grave, pit, and hell in the place where these terms have been retained by the English revision has little need of justification. The English revisers use sheol twenty-nine times out of the sixty-five times it occurs in the original. No good reason has been given for such discrimination. If the term can be used at all, it is clear that it ought to be used uniformly."

The first of God's servants to use the word sheol was Jacob. This holy man of old was led to believe that his beloved son Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. It was heartbreaking news. When Jacob heard it, he declared that he would continue to mourn this tragic loss until he died. He said, "I will go down into the grave [sheol] unto my son mourning."—Gen. 37:35

The Hebrew word translated grave in Jacob's expression of grief is sheol—the only word translated hell in the Old Testament. By its use Jacob expressed his expectation of going to the only hell mentioned throughout the entire period covered by the Old Testament. Moreover, Jacob indicated that to his understanding Joseph was already in this hell, and would remain there, and that Jacob would join his son when he died.

Jacob was one of God's faithful servants; so was Joseph. It is unthinkable to suppose that when they died they went to a place of

torture such as hell is often claimed to be. Like many good people today, they were both entirely too good to go to a place of torture, and yet, according to Jacob's own testimony, he expected to go to hell when he died. What kind of hell was it to which Jacob expected to go?

Job's Prayer

Let us not assume to know the answer to this question, but instead pursue our investigation further. The Prophet Job was another godly man. The Bible tells us that he walked "perfect" before God. (Job 1:1) Here was a man so holy that it would seem he should be qualified to go immediately to heaven when he died. He was not only too good to go to a traditional hell of torment, but according to the record his integrity was such that ordinarily we would suppose he was worthy of going directly to heaven to be with God and the angels. But Job did not expect to go to heaven!

Although Job was accounted a righteous man, God permitted much calamity and suffering to come upon him. We have all heard of the patience of Job in bearing these trying experiences. (James 5:11) But on one occasion Job felt that it would be better for him to die than to continue enduring the tortures of disease and the ill will of his friends and relatives, including his wife. So he asked God to let him die. In fact, he urged God to destroy him, praying, "O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past."

The Hebrew word used by Job, translated "grave" in the prayer just quoted, was sheol, the Bible hell. Truly truth is stranger than fiction! Here was a man who already was suffering untold agony of both body and soul. His children had been destroyed. His flocks and herds were gone. His wife had turned against him, and he was covered with a loathsome skin disease. Surely he would not ask God to take him to a place where his suffering would be increased, and where there would be no hope of escape!—Job 14:13

Why did Job pray to go to hell? Because he knew, being one of God's inspired servants, that hell is a condition of quietness and of rest. Solomon, the wisest man of the Old Testament, and one of God's inspired writers, declared of sheol, or hell, that there is no "device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom." (Ecclesiastes 9:10) Without doubt Job knew this, hence the reason for his prayer that God let him die and go to hell.

Job was weary of suffering and he wanted it to end. He knew that in death he would find relief from suffering, not an increase of it. In death, Job declared, "the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest," and the dead "hear not the voice of the oppressor." (Job 3:13-19) It is apparent that his understanding of hell was quite different from that held by many today.

Still another point emerges from this inspired record. While Job prayed to go to hell, it was not with the expectation that he would remain there

forever. In his prayer he expressed his belief that later he would be called out of it. "O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave [sheol, hell] ... until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me! Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands." (Job 14:13,15) Job wanted to remain in the Bible hell only until God's wrath was past, and then be called back to earth again. That Job was justified in entertaining such a hope is borne out by Jesus' promise that a time would come when "all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth."—John 5:28,29

As the faithful and inspired Job viewed the matter, the traditional view of hell is wrong in at least three important aspects. (1) It is not a place where God's wrath is visited upon the sinner, but a condition in which both sinners and saints escape the suffering that is in the world due to God's wrath. (2) It is a condition of unconsciousness, hence of rest, and not a place of suffering. (3) Those who go to the Bible hell do not remain there forever, as usually believed, but will return and have an opportunity of living upon the earth at a later time.

Hell to be destroyed

Another truth-revealing promise of God recorded in the Old Testament is that of Hosea 13:14. Here the LORD assures us of his intention to destroy hell. "I will ransom them from the power of the grave [sheol, hell]; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues: O grave [sheol, hell], I will be thy destruction."

Hell, sheol, is simply the death condition, and the Apostle Paul tells us that Christ will destroy death. (I Cor. 15:26) This confirms the words of the prophet, and gives us the assurance that it is not God's purpose to torment nearly all the human race in hell forever. Indeed, it is not God's purpose to torment people at all. "God is love," the Bible tells us, and there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that he has prepared a hell of fire and brimstone to torture his human creatures. (I John 4:8,16) This view misrepresents the good name of the Creator of the universe.

Hell in the new testament

The New Testament records concerning hell agree with those of the Old Testament. Originally, the New Testament was written in the Greek language, and it employs three Greek words which are translated hell in our English Bibles. One of these is tartaroo, and it is found only once in the Bible. The passage in which it appears is not discussing the death state of human beings, so we will not digress from our subject to examine the meaning of this word. There are two other Greek words in the New Testament translated hell in our Bibles: one is hades and the other is Gehenna.

The Greek word Gehenna refers to the ancient Valley of Hinnom. This valley was located just outside the city of Jerusalem, and the people used it as a place to dump the refuse and offal of the city. Fires were constantly kept burning in this valley, since it served as an incinerator.

The hell fire of the New Testament is therefore actually the fire that was kept burning in this valley and used to burn garbage.

Many wondered where the hell of fire mentioned in the New Testament is located. The answer is that it was located just outside the city of Jerusalem. But of course those fires are no longer there, and Jesus knew that eventually they would die out. Jesus did not want us to believe that all wicked people of the earth were to be transported to Jerusalem when they died and cast into the fires of the literal Valley of Hinnom.

The Valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, does not represent a place. It is a symbol of destruction. We know this, for Jesus said to his disciples, "Fear not them which kill the body ... but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]"—Matt. 10:28

Hades in the new testament

Hades is also translated "grave" in some instances. This Greek word has the same meaning as the Hebrew word sheol, the state, or condition, of death. We know that hades (Greek) means the same as sheol (Hebrew) because the Apostle Peter quotes a prophecy from the Old Testament in which the word sheol appears, and he translates sheol by the Greek word hades.

Peter's quotation is in Acts 2:27,31. The prophecy he quotes is from Psalm 16:10, written by David. In this psalm the prophet forecasts the death of Jesus, saying that his flesh would "rest in hope" and indicates that when Jesus died his soul went to sheol, the Old Testament hell. Peter quotes part of the prophecy and uses it to prove that Jesus had been raised from the dead, for the prophet had foretold that Jesus' soul would not be left in hell.

This is very strange if hell is a place where wicked souls are tormented forever. According to the Prophet David and the Apostle Peter, Jesus went to hell when he died, and was delivered therefrom on the third day after his death. This proves, first, that holy, righteous people go to hell as well as sinners, and second, that those who do go to hell do not necessarily remain there. It also proves that hell is not a place of torment, for we cannot conceive that the Creator would permit his holy Son, Jesus, to be tormented by the Devil and the unholy angels—not even for three days.

The keys of hell

Traditionally, Satan was supposed to be the one who possessed the keys of hell. But this is also untrue. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus, speaking of his own death and resurrection, tells us that he has the keys of death and hell. This is both interesting and comforting; for we know that if Jesus possesses the keys of hell there is hope for those who are shut up therein. The loving Jesus who, without money and without price, healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, cast out demons from maniacs, and raised the dead to life, will surely one day use the keys of hell to

unlock its gates and set its prisoners free. This, as a matter of fact, is exactly what the Bible tells us Jesus will do. It is this glorious work that is described in the Bible as the "resurrection of the dead."—Acts 24:15

Just as hades, or hell, is symbolically said to have keys, so Jesus speaks also of its having gates. A reference to the "gates of hell" is found in Matthew 16:18: "... I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

In what sense, then, is it impossible for the gates of hell to prevail against the church? Every Christian, every member of the true church of Jesus Christ, will be awakened from the sleep of death in what the Scriptures term the "first resurrection." The gates of hell will not prevail to keep these in the death condition. Jesus himself was raised from the dead, and the power of God through him will be used to raise all his true followers from the dead, that they may "reign with Christ a thousand years."—Rev. 20:4,6

A first resurrection, however, implies more to follow. During that thousand-year Kingdom, the remainder of earth's dead will be raised again, on earth. This blessed assurance appears in Revelation 20:12-14. Here John tells us that in the prophetic vision given to him he saw death and hell giving up the dead which were in them.

They will return to be taught, corrected, and judged—to make amends for all misdeeds and willful transgressions. It will not be an easy road, for "God is not mocked ... whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Gal. 6:7) It will be a time of correction in righteousness under the iron rule of the great judge, Christ. No favoritism will be shown to rich or poor, great or small. All will have the opportunity, when humbly corrected, to enjoy everlasting life here on the earth, free of sickness, pain, and death. (Rev. 21:1-4) For then, "Death and hell [hades] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death."—Rev. 20:14

We have explained the general testimony of the Bible as it relates to the subject of hell, and have found that there is no authority from God for believing that a hell of torment exists anywhere in his great universe. There is no text of scripture, either in the Old Testament or the New, which is contrary to those we have examined, when properly understood. (See "The Truth About Hell," published by Dawn Bible Students Association, East Rutherford, NJ 07073. It examines every text in the Bible in which the word hell appears.)

The beginning of error

The origin of this teaching of torment is found in the first, the blackest, and the most far-reaching lie that ever fell upon human ears. This lie was formulated by the Devil himself and communicated to mother Eve through the serpent.

God had said to our first parents that if they disobeyed him by partaking of the forbidden fruit they would die. But Satan denied this, saying, "Ye shall not surely die."—Gen. 3:4

The Bible indicates that the Devil has deceived practically the entire world. Nearly all believe his lie, 'Ye shall not surely die'. They don't think of it in these words, but the same erroneous viewpoint finds expression in all the various no-death theories of both heathens and Christians. Nearly all religionists, wherever found, attempt to believe that when they die they do not actually die. There is no death.

All admit that the body dies. It is impossible to deny this fact. But the claim is that within our bodies there lurks an invisible entity which they call the soul, and the claim is that this soul escapes when the body dies and that it continues to live elsewhere. The claim is that the soul cannot die, that it is indestructible. It is often unscripturally referred to as the immortal soul.

"Is there such a thing as an immortal soul?" some may ask. To which we answer, "No!" This theory is purely an invention of misguided human wisdom. The expression immortal soul does not appear anywhere in the Bible. The term soul does appear in the Bible, but it is not descriptive of an invisible entity which dwells within us, and which can exist after the body dies. As used in the Bible, the term soul applies to our whole being and means a living, sentient being.

In Genesis 2:7 the word soul appears in the Bible for the first time, and in this text we are told how God created the soul, and of what it is made. We read, "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." Notice that God did not breathe an immortal soul into man, but rather, as a result of the union of the body and the breath of life, man became a soul.

Hence, when man dies, the soul dies, for man is the soul, or living being. This agrees with Ezekiel 18:4: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Adam, the first human soul, sinned, and the penalty of death came upon him. All his posterity have also been sinful souls; hence the entire human race has been dying because "the wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23) Death, not torment, is the penalty for sin, and it is this penalty that is being inflicted upon the entire race. Graveyards, funeral processions, sickness, and pain, are all evidences of the fact that the wages of sin are being paid by a dying race.

The sleep of death

Throughout the Scriptures, in both Old Testament and the New, death is referred to as sleep. Abraham, when he died, "was gathered to his people." (Gen. 25:8) Abraham's people were heathen, yet faithful Abraham slept with them in death. King David also is said to have slept with his fathers. (I Kings 2:10) When Lazarus, the brother of Martha and

Mary, died, Jesus said of him, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth." (John 11:11) When Jesus awakened Lazarus from the sleep of death, the account says "he who was dead came forth." (John 11:44) The Bible does not say that he who was in purgatory returned, nor he who was in a place of torture came back. The simple truth is that Lazarus was asleep in death—unconscious—and when he was awakened, he that was dead came forth.

We have the biblical record of several who were awakened from the sleep of death, yet none of them ever said a word about being either in hell or purgatory. Obviously they could not make a report on either of these places, for the simple reason that no such places existed; and besides, they had been unconscious in death. They had not gone anywhere. They had been dead!

When a man dies, "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish."—Psa. 146:4

There is hope in life after death—a glorious hope, not based on the error that there is no death, but on the great truth that God will restore the dead to life. Job asked, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14) Job knew better than to ask, "If a man die, is he really dead?" Job knew that those who die have gone out of existence forever unless God restores them to life. This is the teaching of the entire Word of God. Paul affirms it, saying, "If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen, ... then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished."—I Cor. 15:13-18.

The dead are to be restored as Jesus said to Martha, "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." (John 11:25, 26) Jesus has the keys of death. He will use them to unlock the great prison house of death and set its captives free.

Jesus' sacrifice necessary

The sinful race would have remained dead forever had not the love of God made a provision whereby the penalty of death could be paid by another. That provision was through his own beloved son, Christ Jesus. That is why Jesus is called the Redeemer. He is the one who ransomed the world "from the power of the grave."—Hos. 13:14

The Prophet Isaiah said concerning Jesus, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isa. 53:5) The apostle Paul said of Jesus, he "gave himself a ransom for all." (I Tim 2:6) Jesus said to his disciples, "The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (John 6:51) All of these inspired statements of the Word of God indicate that the first requisite to salvation and peace with God for any of the fallen human race is this provision the Creator has made through the sacrificial work of the

Redeemer. The Apostle Peter declares there is no other name given under heaven or among men whereby we must be saved.—Acts 4:12

The sacrificial work of Christ alone does not provide escape from death. In addition to this, it is necessary that the individual repent of sin and exercise faith in the atoning blood of Christ. Beyond this, it is also essential to strive against inherited sin and so far as possible to be cleansed from its defiling influence.

Cleansing before death

There is much said in the Bible about Christian cleansing from sin. But unlike the traditional view of purgatory, which claims that believers pass through purgatory after death and finally enter into heavenly bliss and glory, the Bible shows that the Christian's purgation or cleansing takes place before death.

"Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit," writes the apostle. (II Cor. 7:1) The Christian is expected to do this before he dies, not afterward. Jesus likened himself to a vine and his followers to branches of that vine. (John 15:1-8) Then he said that his Heavenly Father purged or pruned the branches in order that they might bring forth more fruit. Here again is described a work of purging which takes place in the Christian before death, not afterward.

The Apostle Peter said, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings." (I Pet. 4:12,13) Here is the unmistakable mention of fire in connection with Christian experience, but it has no reference to literal fire which it is alleged will torment people after death, but to the cleansing experiences which come to the Christian in this life.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "For whom the LORD loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." (Heb. 12:6) There is nothing in this text to indicate that the scourging mentioned is to take place after death. Rather, the apostle is telling Christians what to expect in this life. If we love the LORD, and he loves us and is dealing with us, we must expect to be scourged or disciplined, in order that we might learn his will more perfectly and be trained to do it more faithfully.

Some of the cleansing experiences of the Christian are of the LORD, for by his kind providence his people are properly trained. But the Christian is also expected to take himself in hand and do some of the purging on a voluntary basis. Paul wrote, "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."—I Cor. 9:27

All of these passages from God's holy Word indicate beyond doubt that purging work must go on in the life of every follower of the Master. The Scriptures also reveal that the great objective of this purging work is that

Christians may be developed into the likeness of their Lord. Paul writes that it is God's will that all who are called to him should be made copies of God's dear Son. (Rom. 8:28,29) There are many promises in the Bible to indicate that those who repent of their sins, accept Jesus as their Redeemer, and then follow faithfully in his steps of sacrifice, striving to be made like him, will, when resurrected from the dead, share his heavenly home and reign with him for a thousand years for the blessing of the remainder of the world of mankind.

Thousand-year kingdom

The cleansings which we have described involve but a very small minority of the human race. Jesus referred to this minority as a "little flock," but he said of these, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."—Luke 12:32

We have previously mentioned the thousand-year reign of Christ. Now we learn from Jesus that his true followers during the present age, in passing through their period of cleansing, are being prepared, not merely to enjoy a heavenly home with him, but also to work with him to rehabilitate the remainder of the human race. Together, they will restore mankind to a worldwide paradise. This is the work to be accomplished by the Kingdom of Christ. This gigantic undertaking, the Scriptures reveal, will require an entire thousand years for completion.

During that thousand years, mankind will go through their cleansing experiences—their purging, or cleansing, from the imperfection due to the fall of Adam. This thousand-year period, during which Jesus and his church will be reigning over the earth, is also described in the Bible as a judgment day.—II Pet. 3:8; Acts 17:31; Rev. 5:10

The judgment work of that day will involve disciplinary training, or, as the prophet puts it, the LORD will "rebuke strong nations afar off." (Mic. 4:3) The Prophet Isaiah declares that when God's "judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." (Isa. 26:9) Jesus will be the great judge of that day, and concerning him the prophet declares, "But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked."—Isa. 11:4

Sleeping ones awakened

The blessings of the kingdom age will be available for all who have died as well as for those who are alive when it begins, for those who sleep in death will be awakened to share in those blessings.

We have referred to some scriptures in Revelation which teach this, but other passages are equally clear on this point. The Prophet Daniel wrote, "... them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake."
—Dan. 12:2

Jesus said the time is coming when all who are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man and shall come forth, adding, "Those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."—John 5:28,29, RSV

Those who have done good are primarily those who have followed in the footsteps of Jesus—those who have been purged or cleansed from sin in this life. In the resurrection, these will be raised immediately to heavenly glory, to reign with Christ. Those who have not done good, but evil, will come forth to a resurrection of judgment, a corrective process of the one thousand-year Kingdom, designed to reclaim mankind.

Their awakening from death will be only the first step on the return road to human perfection. Other steps will be taken as they pass the tests of obedience which will be given all individuals at that time. Thus their resurrection, or raising up to perfection, will be by judgment, or krisis (Greek); all of their cleansing and disciplinary experiences serving as tests will, as those tests are passed, result in their being raised closer to the ultimate perfection which will be their goal.

There is every indication now that the time for the blessing of mankind—the living and the dead—is near. The prophecies of the Bible pertaining to the end of Satan's misrule are being fulfilled. This, of necessity, causes a great time of trouble throughout the earth, but soon the governing power of the Kingdom of Christ will manifest itself, and the blessings of peace and joy and life will begin to flow to the people.

It is this glorious consummation of the Divine plan of salvation that is expressed by those well-known words of the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Let us, then, continue to offer this inspired prayer, in faith, believing that the answer to it is near.