**THANATOPSIS**

***The Sleep of Death***

In the great hymn *Abide With Me* there are three lines that remind us of our appointment with death. Read them (or sing them if you have a mind to):

“…death and decay in all around I see, O Thou who chang’est not, abide with Me!”

“…where is death’s sting? Where, grave thy victory? I triumph still if Thou abide with me”

“…Heaven’s morning breaks and earth’s vain shadows flee; in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me”

William Cullen Bryant wrote a sobering poem that I read in high school English Lit. class called *Thanatopsis*. The word ***thanatos*** is the Greek word for “death.” The poem was written by Bryant when he was only 19 years old and is considered his greatest work. In the poem he describes death as very fearful by those who haven’t given it much thought, but then “Nature” speaks and reveals it is not a fearful thing at all, for everyone goes through it and finds ultimate peace. His last lines are the most memorable and oft-quoted:

So live, that when thy summons comes to join

The innumerable caravan, which moves

To that mysterious realm, where each shall take

His chamber in the silent halls of death,

Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,

Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed

By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,

Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch

About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

In spite of Mr. Bryant’s description, there is a real fear of death that haunts all mankind. God has told us that before Jesus came man lived in fear of the great unknown beyond the grave. Hebrews 2:14-15 puts it this way:

*14 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”*

Throughout the New Testament both Jesus and all His Spirit-inspired writers spoke of death in terms sleep. Do you remember how the Lord spoke of death in the resurrection miracles of Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter? He announced they were but asleep (John 11:11; Luke 8:52). Even the Old Testament writers like Solomon, Daniel and Job spoke of death in terms of being asleep. Read their thoughts:

“*For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing… for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going*” (Eccl. 5:10)

“…*and many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt”* (Dan. 12:2).

“*Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; then I would have been at rest. There the wicked cease from troubling and there the weary are at rest*” (Job 3:11-17).

Jesus reminded His disciples that there is an hour coming to earth where “*all that are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth*” – as if they had only been asleep and now, like Lazarus, hear the wake-up call to ascend from bed to rise and shine (Jn. 5:28-29).

The apostle Paul piggybacks on that concept when he explains the resurrection this way:

*"**13 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. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who* ***sleep*** *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 by no means precede those who*are **asleep**. *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"* (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

So, if the body is sleeping in the grave, what has happened to the spirit (life) of man? Solomon gives one answer this way: “*The dust* (body) *will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it*” (Eccl. 12:7). James says, “*The spirit without the body is dead*” (Jam. 2:26). The factual story of Jesus’ lesson concerning the Rich Man and Lazarus describes both men as dying, yet their spirits are carried to Hades (the realm of the dead – Lk. 16:19f). Jesus and the thief on the cross both entered Paradise at their death (Lk. 23:43). Therefore, we can scripturally conclude that at death the body goes to sleep while the spirit is placed by God in either a realm of comfort or torment to await the resurrection (Lk. 16:25).

William Cullen Bryant pictured death as an experience without fear, seeing it as only a wrapping the drapery of his couch about him and lying down to pleasant dreams. But he spoke only from the authority of Nature, which can only point a finger to God (Psa. 19:1-6), who is our higher source of authority for comfort. Christ “*holds the power of death*” (Heb. 2:14) and will one day “*abolish death*” (2 Tim. 1:10).

On earth Jesus could easily shout, “*Lazarus, come forth*!” to wake him from his four-day sleep (Jn. 11:43). From heaven He can just as easily shout, “World, come forth!” to awake every saint and sinner from Abel (the first man to die) to every man on earth who will be in tomorrow’s obituaries. Thank God that Jesus is “*Lord of both the dead and the living*” (Rom. 14:9).

If you are one of God’s saints you can RIP (**R**est **I**n **P**eace), knowing that your body, fallen asleep in corruption, dishonor and weakness, will wake up in incorruption, glory and power (I Cor. 15:42-44).

Brethren, comfort one another with these words. – Rick