

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES

A Comprehensive View of God's Great Plan from
Eternity to Eternity Illustrated with Chart

By

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF CHRIST AND THE HISTORY OF THE RIGHTEOUS DEAD

In our former studies we have seen that throughout Old Testament times there were two distinct lines of development in the earth:

- (1) The development of sin; and
- (2) the development of the Messianic promise.

We have seen that God's purpose in passing man through the various dispensations was to show him the enormity of sin, its blackness, its hellishness. And side by side with this line of sin, we have another line of development, that of the Messianic promise, which was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

In our last study we saw how Jesus died on Calvary as a Substitute for sinners. The purpose of the Old Testament' dispensations was to show man his utter failure, his helplessness, his utter inability to redeem himself; it was to show him that his redemption must be accomplished by Another, and God has provided that redemption in the person of His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In our study today, as we consider Christ risen and ascended into heaven, where He is interceding at the right hand of God for His blood-bought children, we shall see the marvelous provision that God has made in Jesus Christ to meet our need — in this life and in the life to come; not only for us as sinners, but also for us as saints and worshippers.

The History Of The Righteous Dead

When the Lord Jesus died on Calvary, His body rested in Joseph's new tomb three days and three nights, while His Spirit went to Paradise, the abode of the righteous dead from Adam to Christ. We have seen that through His death on the cross, Jesus opened the way into heaven, God's dwelling place.

And thereby He made it possible for the redeemed of the Old Testament days that were in Paradise, a waiting place, to ascend with Him into the presence of God.

In this lesson today we shall see that Paradise in Old Testament times was not identical with heaven, though it has been since the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. According to the Scriptures, Christ rose again from the grave; and the spirits of the righteous dead from Adam to Christ went to heaven, forever to be with him. Because death could not hold Him, all the New Testament saints go immediately into His presence the moment they die.

In order to understand what took place when Christ died, went to Paradise, and then ascended up on high, it is necessary for us to search the Scriptures carefully to see what they teach concerning the abode of the righteous dead in Old Testament times and since the cross. In other words, we shall find the answer to such questions as these:

- (1) What is meant by “Sheol” or “Hades”?
- (2) By “Paradise”?
- (3) Was Paradise identical with heaven before Christ died?
- (4) Is it identical with heaven now?
- (5) What are we to understand by the statement in Ephesians 4:8: “**When he [Christ] ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men**”
- (6) Where do “**the dead in Christ**” go now, since He ascended into heaven?

These are questions which God has answered for us in His Word; and before we consider the nature of the resurrection body of our Lord, with all the hope and assurance which such a study gives to the Christian's heart, we need to understand what took place when He went to Paradise, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and “**led captivity captive.**”

1. The Old Testament Saints Went to Paradise.

Abel, Noah, Abraham, David — none of the Old Testament saints went directly to heaven when they died. Their bodies, of course, went into the grave and are still awaiting the resurrection; but their spirits went to a place called Paradise, to the place where the Lord Jesus went while His body lay in the tomb, to the place where the repentant thief on the cross went when he died. Luke 23:43 is familiar to every Christian: “**And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in Paradise**”

But let us turn the pages of our Bible back to a remarkable prophecy, written by David as he was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God.

It is found in Psalm 16:8-11, and foretells the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead. Both Peter and Paul quote this prophecy to prove the resurrection of Christ. Pause here to read very carefully both the Psalm and these two quotations from it, as recorded in Acts 2:25-31; 13:32-37.

If you happen to be reading from the King James or Authorized Version, you will be perplexed as to the meaning of Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:27: “**Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.**” These words were spoken by the Son of God to His Father in heaven, as the following statement makes clear: “**Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.**”

We know that Jesus' body did not “**see corruption,**” for it arose from the dead. But did His soul go to “**hell**” during the three days and three nights following His crucifixion? The answer is, emphatically, “No.” And the explanation of this verse is this: The Hebrew word used in Psalm 16:10 is not “**hell,**” but “*Sheol*”; while the word used in Acts 2:27 is “*Hades.*” The Revised Version so translates them, accurately so. “*Sheol*” and “*Hades,*” therefore, refer to the same place, and are simply the names given by the two different languages, Hebrew and Greek, for “*the place of the departed spirits.*” According to this translation, the Psalm might well read on this fashion: “*Thou wilt not leave my soul in the temporary place of the departed spirits.*”

Just here let us look at our chart to see the diagram which sets forth the Bible teaching regarding Sheol. You will note that, from the time of Adam, the “death line” led to this place called “*Sheol.*”

You will note also that it is divided into two realms or compartments:

- (1) Paradise; and
- (2) an awful prison, a place of torment.

Between the two there is “**a great gulf fixed**” (Luke 16:26). The exact location of Sheol we do not know; but the Lord Jesus said that, as Jonah was three days and three nights in the great fish, so should “**the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth**” (Matthew 12:40). And Paul in Ephesians 4:9 wrote: “**He also descended first into the lower part of the earth.**” Jesus went to Paradise, we know, according to Luke 23:43. Paradise was one of the two realms of Sheol. But further than this, God has not revealed the location of Sheol. Certainly it is the place of death.

Turn to the story of Luke 16:19-31. This is not a parable, as some would have us believe. The Lord Jesus did not use personal names in His parables, and here he speaks of Lazarus, Abraham, and Moses. Moreover, He said: “**There was a certain rich man . . . And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus.**”

The one beheld the other, yet they were in the different realms of Sheol. They conversed with each other; yet one was in a place of enjoyment, comfort, and peace; the other, in a place of remorse, sin, and torment. Between them there was “**a great gulf fixed.**”

2. Christ “*Led a Multitude of Captives Captive.*”

That place of enjoyment was the place to which the spirits of all the Old Testament saints went when they died — from Adam to the repentant thief on the cross. But it was not heaven.

Since the cross of Christ, Paradise has been identical with heaven. In other words, it has been taken up into heaven. Paul identifies Paradise with heaven in II Corinthians 12:4, but Paul was writing on this side of the cross. On the other side of the cross Paradise was a beautiful place, a place of bliss; but it was a waiting place. How do we know this? Because the Lord who had said to the dying thief, “**To day shalt thou be with me in Paradise,**” said also to Mary three days later, after He rose from the dead, “**Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father**” (John 20:17).

At that time He had not ascended into heaven, and yet He had been in Paradise.

Do you not see, my friend, that before Christ rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, Paradise was one of the realms of Sheol? But with His ascension, He took Paradise up with Him into Heaven itself. Furthermore, all those who looked forward to the coming of the promised Redeemer went to Paradise to wait for “**the way into the holiest of all**” to be opened (Hebrews 9:8).

They were waiting for the rending of the veil of the temple; for no human being can stand before God, except on the basis of a finished atonement. As we have already seen in former studies, the rending of the veil was a type of “**his flesh**” that was bruised and broken for our sins at His crucifixion on Calvary. (See Hebrews 10:19-22).

Only when the redemptive work of Christ was actually accomplished, and He cried out in triumph, “**It is finished**” — only then was “**the veil of the temple . . . rent in twain**” (Matthew 27:51).

That veil separated the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt, from the Holy Place, where the priests ministered. It shut sinful man out from the presence of a holy God. But since that barrier has been done away, redeemed sinners may go directly into the presence of God — not only by faith through prayer, on the basis of a finished work on Calvary's cross; since the rending of the veil, the spirits of all the Old Testament saints and of all the New Testament saints have been able also to stand before a holy God — on the basis of a finished atonement.

Christ died and went to Paradise, in order to take out of that waiting place all who had put their faith in His shed blood as an atonement for their sins. And He took them out of that waiting place called Paradise when He “**ascended up on high**” and “**led captivity captive.**”

Turn now to Psalm 68:18, and read another prophecy of David concerning this very event: “**Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive.**” Now read Ephesians 4:7-10, where this prophecy is quoted, enlarged upon, and definitely applied to the ascension of Christ into heaven. How marvelous is fulfilled prophecy!

But who are those referred to by psalmist and apostle as a great multitude of “captives”?

They are the Old Testament saints, for many centuries kept in that waiting place called Paradise, now willing captives of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord. “**When he ascended up on high,**” then He “**led a multitude of captives captive.**”

Then Abel and Noah and Abraham and David and all the righteous dead of Old Testament times, even unto the thief on the cross — the spirits of all those went with the risen Lord into the presence of His Father. And since that day, Paradise has been identical with heaven, the very presence of God. (See chart).

What a sight that must have been! A great host of redeemed spirits ascending with the risen Lord into heaven! The very gates of Paradise must have reverberated with the shout of victory over death.

No wonder David was “**glad**” that his own soul, as well as the soul of the Lord Jesus of whom he wrote, was not going to be left in Sheol! No wonder Abraham rejoiced to see “**the day of Christ**” and was “**glad**”! (See John 8:56).

The saints of all the ages had access into heaven itself when the Lord Jesus died and rose again; for the veil of the temple was rent in twain, and a multitude of willing captives ascended up on high with Him who partook of “**flesh and blood . . . that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil**” (Hebrews 2:14).

3. *The New Testament Saints “Absent from the Body” Are “Present with the Lord” (II Corinthians 5:8).*

Paul wrote to his fellow Christians, saying that he had “**a desire to depart, and to be with Christ**” (Philippians 1:23). And where is Christ? At God's right hand. Do you want to know where Stephen and Paul and D. L. Moody and John Knox are, my friend? They are “**with Christ**.”

Stephen said as he was dying, “**Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God**” (Acts 7:56).

Do you want to know where your mother or father or son or daughter who died believing in Christ is today? Your loved one is with the Lord. And where is He? “**On the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens**” (Hebrews 8:1).

It is a false teaching that tells us of an intermediate stage, a purgatory, or a “soul-sleep.” “**The dead in Christ**” go immediately into His presence the moment they die. Their spirits wing their way into heaven itself, there to wait for the resurrection, when their bodies shall be raised, reunited with their spirits, forever to be “**with the Lord**.”

We shall go fully into the subject of the first and second resurrections when we consider the return of Christ to the earth; but here suffice it to say that in the first resurrection the righteous dead shall be raised; in the second resurrection, the unrighteous dead; and between these two events there will be the millennial reign of our Lord. (See Revelation 20:4-15).

It is a solemn thought that, while Paradise is no longer in Sheol, yet that awful prison, the place of torment, is still inhabited by the wicked dead of all the ages. It is a solemn thought that one day, at “**the great white throne**” judgment, that compartment, too, will be empty.

In that day “**death and Hades**” (or *Sheol*) will deliver up their dead, and shall be “**cast into the lake of fire**” (Revelation 20:13, 14; compare Matthew 5:22, 29, 30, and other references. The Greek word for “**hell**” in these passages is “*Gehenna*,” and refers to the lake of fire).

The only spirits now in Sheol or Hades are those of the lost souls of men of all times. A thousand years before the great white throne judgment, the first resurrection will have taken place. The “**dead in Christ**” shall have been with Christ already for a thousand years, body and spirit having been reunited — for all eternity.

But the souls of those who are now in that awful prison, who shall one day be cast into the lake of fire, body and spirit having been reunited — these shall be tormented day and night forever and ever.

My friend out of Christ, will you not **“flee from the wrath to come?”**

My Christian friend, indifferent to the lost souls of men all around you, will you not tell them of the Saviour who alone can deliver from eternal condemnation? One day we shall all stand before Him; for He is the Judge of all the earth. Shall it be **“forever with the Lord”**? Or shall it be **“in outer darkness”** — for all the endless ages?

The Nature Of The Resurrection Body Of Christ

We have seen what God's Word tells us about the abode of the righteous dead, but it tells us more than that. As we search the Scriptures, we find also very definite teaching about the nature of our resurrection bodies. They will be like Christ's own glorious body; for in Philippians 3:20, 21, we read: **“Our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.”** (See also Psalm 17:15; I John 3:2). **“We shall be like him!”** And we shall be satisfied when we awake with His likeness!

Concerning our Lord's resurrection body we know some certain truths. As we consider them, let us keep in mind the blessed fact that **“we shall be like him.”**

1. The Resurrection Body of Christ Is Real.

It is a body of **“flesh and bones”**; for He actually rose from the grave. The resurrection always speaks of the physical body, for the spirit does not die. The body without the spirit is dead, but the spirits of the saints are with Christ. Their bodies are in the grave, waiting the resurrection day.

“But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept . . . Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.” (See I Corinthians 15:20-23).

“But some will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?” (I Corinthians 15:35).

Since our resurrection bodies are to be like Christ's, we want to know what kind of a body He has. Luke gives us the clearest picture of the humanity of the Lord Jesus from the manger to the empty tomb.

Let us turn to the last chapter of his Gospel to find there the minute details concerning our Lord's resurrection body. He walked and talked with the two on the way to Emmaus. He showed the disciples His hands and His feet, saying, **“A spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have”** (verse 39). To prove to them that His body was real, He ate before them (verses 42, 43).

Just here let us remember that He did not have to eat for sustenance; He had His glorious, incorruptible, immortal body. Let us remember also that He did not say that He had a body of flesh and blood; He said that He had a body of **“flesh and bones.”**

In His human life on earth He partook of **“flesh and blood”** (Hebrews 2:14). **“The life of the flesh is in the blood”** (Leviticus 17:11). But the Lord Jesus had shed His blood on Calvary! **“It is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul”** (Leviticus 17:11). And in His death on the cross, He poured out His blood to redeem us from sin. In His resurrection body there was not a drop of that blood; it was a body of **“flesh and bones.”**

Further proof that His body is real is seen in John's record of Christ's words to Thomas.

After that disciple had doubted the fact of His resurrection, Christ appeared unto him, and said: **“Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing”** (John 20:27).

Then did Thomas still doubt? No; he cried out in words of worship and trust, saying to the risen Christ, **“My Lord and my God.”**

Do you want to know what kind of body your loved one whose spirit is now with Christ will have in the resurrection, my friend? It will be a body of flesh and bone — like unto Christ's glorious body. **“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”** (I Corinthians 15:50), but **“flesh and bone”** can!

2. The Resurrection Body of Christ Is a Spiritual Body.

It is not a vapor or a mist; it is real; yet it is spiritual — the same body, and yet not the same.

“That which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him” (I Corinthians 15:37, 38).

So it is with Christ's resurrection body and with ours.

His was a body of **“flesh and bones,”** and His disciples recognized Him; yet He was able to pass through closed doors after He rose from the grave. He was able also to vanish entirely out of the disciples' sight as He willed to do so.

Even as the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies before it brings forth fruit, **“so also is the resurrection of the dead . . . It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body”** (I Corinthians 15:42, 44). My natural body governs my spirit; in the resurrection my spirit will govern my body.

My spirit could not have come to the radio broadcasting station this morning without my body; but in the resurrection my spirit will take my body wherever it will. In my spiritual body I shall not be subject to physical laws.

3. The Resurrection Body of Christ Is an Incorruptible Body.

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He was weary; He was hungry; He wept; yet He was without sin. He partook of flesh and blood, that in His death and resurrection He might change our bodies of humiliation, and fashion them like unto His own glorious body. In His resurrection He is never weary; He never hungers; He does not weep. He has His incorruptible body. And in the resurrection we shall never know the sorrows and pains of the flesh.

I wonder if I am talking to someone who has a weak body? A sick body? My friend, your body is not redeemed yet. Every day it is being dissolved. Age leaves its impress on your face, your hair, your eyes. You are waiting for the redemption of your body (Romans 8:23). But one day you will have an incorruptible body — like Christ's own glorious body!

And **“as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly”** (I Corinthians 15:49).

In my family there were eight brothers and sisters, each with a separate personality; yet we all bore the image of our father. So also in heaven, we shall have our separate personalities; yet we shall be like our Heavenly Father. The garment of light which Adam lost when he sinned will shine again! We shall be very beautiful in heaven, with our glorified bodies!

And we shall know each other there. Paul, writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wrote: **“Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”** (I Corinthians 13:12). My friend, your loved ones and mine who have died trusting in the finished work of Christ are even now **“with the Lord.”** Their spirits are in His presence. They behold His face.

If the Lord tarries and you and I die before the church is caught away to be with Him, our spirits, too, will **“depart to be with Christ.”** But one day the trump of God shall sound, and **“them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him”** (i.e., the spirits of the righteous dead); **“and the dead in Christ shall rise first”** (i.e., the bodies of His saints shall rise and be reunited with their spirits).

“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” (I Thessalonians 4:13-18).

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2).

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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