

No More Tears

No experience brings more tears than the loss of a loved one, especially when that loss is a child. So much potential lay before the little one and now it seems all cut off. No matter what words of consolation are offered, the bereaved mother cannot be comforted.

In the scripture above Rachel represents all the mothers of the world. In a particular sense, she was the mother of all the tribes of Israel. Her descendants included both Benjamin of the two-tribe kingdom and Joseph's son, Ephraim, whose name came to stand for the entire ten-tribe northern kingdom.

Like Rachel, all mothers who have lost beloved children have wept bitterly. Death is indeed an enemy from which there appears to be no release. Yet that is just the message of hope which Jeremiah holds forth, "there is hope for your future." And that "future," the great resurrection hope of the Scriptures, will mean an end to all sorrow and crying.

God, through the prophet Isaiah, promises a time will come that will end all weeping. "He will destroy death forever. My Lord GOD will wipe the tears away from all faces and will put an end to the reproaches of his people over all the earth—for it is the LORD who hath spoken" (Isaiah 25:8).

The experience of death is universal; all feel its bitter pangs. This is why Isaiah, in the preceding verse, describes it as a "covering that is cast over all peoples" and "the vail that is spread over all nations." But he assures us, that in the mountain of his kingdom, this vail will be destroyed.

This destruction of death is the theme of yet another prophet: "From Sheol itself will I save them, redeem them from very death. Where, O Death, are your plagues? Your pestilence where, O Sheol?" (Hosea 13:14).

In order to understand death, we must first understand life—its origins and of what it consists. The Bible traces life back to the creation scenes of Genesis and the formation of man and woman in the Garden of Eden.

In simple words, the author of Genesis, describes precisely how life came into being: "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

No description could be simpler. A body, formed of the dust of the ground, was infused with "the breath of life" (or, power to live), and man became a living being."

There is no hint here of giving man a nebulous entity called "a soul." Man did not receive a soul. Man became a soul.

If life can be defined so simply, cannot death be defined just as simply? If the union of body and breath forms a soul, then the dissolution of body and breath ends the existence of that soul.

When the original couple lived in their garden home, they were given one command. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die" (Genesis 2:16, 17).

Again we note the simplicity of God's arrangements.

Obeys and lives. Disobeys and dies. Death, the dissolution of the soul, was to be the punishment for disobedience. As the prophet Ezekiel was later to say: "Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4).

After a period of 930 years that death sentence was carried out. Adam died. Not only did the first family die, all their descendants were condemned to death through them. As David wrote in the Psalms, "Indeed I was born with iniquity, with sin my mother conceived me" (Psalms 51:7).

How tragic it must have been for Adam and Eve to witness the first death, the murdered body of their beloved son Abel (Genesis 4:8). For the first time a mother had to bury her son. How she must have pondered the dreams she had invested in this youth. How she must have been thrilled with the Lord's acceptance of his sacrifice. Now, with one blow, her hopes were dashed. Not only had she lost Abel, but her firstborn, Cain, was a murderer.

Yet, side by side with those early tragedies, small glimpses of hope could be seen. While still within their garden home, God laid the ultimate blame for their transgression on the deceptions of the serpent. They must have wondered when God pronounced his sentence upon that offender with the words: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; they shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise their heel" (Genesis 3:15).

Proof that this promise was planted in the mind of Eve is indicated when she named the son she thought would replace Abel: "Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, meaning, God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain had killed him" (Genesis 4:25).

In their guilt and shame, Adam and Eve clothed themselves with the best garments they could make from the materials at hand, sewing together fig leaves. Yet the Lord, when sending them in exile to the land outside the garden, replaced these flimsy coverings with "garments of skins" (Genesis 3:7, 21). This, combined with the Lord's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice of a blood offering and his rejection of Cain's offerings of fruits of the ground, were small early hints that the release from the death penalty would come through a sacrifice of blood.

Not until the time of Abraham, over two thousand years later, did these small hints of salvation take more definite form. After calling Abraham to journey to an unknown land, the Lord gave him a number of opportunities to demonstrate his faith, culminating in the offering of his specially beloved son, Isaac. When he passed that test, the Lord conferred on him a most significant promise: "By myself I swear, the LORD declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed my command" (Genesis 22:16-18).

No longer were there vague hints. Now there was a definite promise; a promise confirmed by an oath, that it would be from Abraham's descendants that the promised seed would come who would bless "all the nations of the earth."

The hope of deliverance, not only for Israel but for "all the nations of the earth," would now be centered in the descendants of Abraham. This promise was refined even further, to the tribe of Judah, both by Jacob (Genesis 49:10) and by the author of the Chronicles (1 Chronicles 5:2). Once again the lineage of the "seed" was more narrowly defined to be of the line of David (2 Samuel 22:51). David, in turn, prophesies of a future descendant as the mashiyach, or "Messiah," the anointed one (Psalms 2:2). This belief in a coming Messiah kept alive the hopes of deliverance from the grave throughout the Hebrew scriptures, culminating in the prophecy of Daniel that Messiah would come after a period he describes as "seven weeks, and sixty- two weeks" (Daniel 9:25, 26).

The breadth of the Abrahamic promise, "in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed," is a recurrent theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

The patriarch Job asked specifically if there was life after death, and then proceeded to answer his own question. "If a man die, can he live again? all the time of my service I wait, until my replacement comes. You would call, and I would answer you; you would set your heart on your handiwork" (Job 14:14, 15). He spoke not only of his personal hopes but of those of the great ones of earth as well: "For now would I be lying in repose, asleep and at rest, with the world's kings and counselors, who rebuilt ruins for themselves" (Job 3:13, 14).

Moses foresaw the returning of man from the grave.

"You return man to dust; you decreed, Return you mortals!" (Psalms 90:3).

Ezekiel predicted that even the wicked men of such cities as Sodom and Samaria would once again return to life.

"Then your sister, Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state, and Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former state, and you and your daughters shall return to your former state" (Ezekiel 16:55).

This resurrection will evidently consist of two classes.

These are specified in Daniel 12:2, "Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence." The Hebrew *olam*, here translated "eternal," does not necessarily convey the thought of eternal, or being without end. It can also be used for any long indefinite period of time which does not have a predetermined end.

In this sense Daniel uses the word *olam*. Some, such as the faithful prophets of old, will be raised to perpetual life.

Others, such as the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, will be raised to bear their shame perpetually until they shall reform their lives in harmony with the laws of the resurrection arrangements.

What are these laws? The same laws as were given to Israel at Sinai. These precepts are eternal. They are the standards of righteousness for all time. But all men do not know these laws. How and when shall they learn them?

This question is addressed directly in #Isaiah 26:9, "At night I yearn for you with all my being, I seek you with all the spirit within me. For when your

judgments are wrought on earth the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness."

The judgments of the Lord are not punitive. They are educational. Men will "learn righteousness." The resurrection time will be a period of instruction in the laws of righteousness.

The results of that judgment will be universal: "No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, Heed the LORD; for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed me—declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 31:34).

"For the earth shall be filled with awe for the glory of the LORD, as waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14; Isaiah 11:9).

The standards will be strict: "And I will apply judgments as a measuring line and retribution as weights" (Isaiah 28:17).

Yet God will have compassion and will strengthen the weak hands and "make firm the tottering knees" (Isaiah 35:3).

Today man is born with iniquity and conceived with sin (Psalms 51:7); then every man will bear responsibility for his own behavior. "In those days they shall say no longer say, Parents have eaten sour grapes, and children's teeth are blunted. But every one shall die for his own sins: whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted" (Jeremiah 31:29, 30; Ezekiel 18:2-5).

The Hebrew Scriptures speak eloquently of conditions on earth during that resurrection time.

Sickness shall be no more: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame man shall leap as a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud: for waters shall burst forth in the desert, streams in the wilderness." —Isaiah 35:5, 6 Wars shall end: "Thus he will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war." —Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3 Nature and man shall be in harmony: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together; with a little boy to herd them." —Isaiah 11:6; 65:25 Economic security: "They shall not build for others to dwell in, or plant for others to enjoy. For the days of my people shall be as long as the days of a tree. My chosen ones shall outlive the work of their hands." —Isaiah 65:22; Micah 4:4 It will be a time when the earth yields her increase: "But what it sows shall prosper: the vine shall produce its fruit, the ground shall produce its yield, and the skies shall provide their moisture, I will bestow all these things upon the remnant of this people." —Zechariah 8:12 Even deserts shall blossom and bud: "The arid desert shall be glad, the wilderness shall rejoice and shall blossom like a rose. It shall blossom abundantly, it shall also exult and shout. It shall receive the glory of Lebanon, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They shall behold the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God." —Isaiah 35:1, 2 It will be an enduring government: "I will establish his line forever, his throne, as long as the heavens shall last." —Psalms 89:30

And it will be universal: "In token of abundant authority and of peace without limit upon David's throne and kingdom, that it may be firmly established in

justice and in equity now and evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts shall bring this to pass."—#Isaiah 9:6 With such a prospect before us, how can we help but cry, "When, O Lord, When shall it come?"

In the Scriptures death is spoken of as a sleep. Men sleep in the night. In the morning they awaken, refreshed and ready to live again. This is the analogy of the Psalmist when he writes, "For He is angry but a moment, and when He is pleased there is life. One may lay down weeping at nightfall, but at dawn there are shouts of joy" (Psalms 30:6).

The Bible abounds in signs as to when that morning will come. The prophet Daniel speaks of a "time of the end" when sin, iniquity, and death will come to an end. He gives two signs marking that period of time in Daniel 12:4, "But you, O Daniel, keep the words secret, and seal the book until the time of the end. Many will range far and wide and knowledge will increase."

Few words could better describe the day in which we live.

The information age has arrived. The world has grown smaller and smaller as jet planes carry millions through the skies daily.

The Internet is only the latest in the symbols of a knowledge explosion that seemingly has no end.

Daniel further describes this "time of the end" as one in which there would be "a time of trouble, the like of which has never was since the nation came into being." The horrors of two world wars and ethnic battles erupting throughout the world attests to the fulfillment of these words. They gain even deeper impact when we consider the technology of modern warfare, including nuclear weapons that possess the power to destroy all human life many times over.

Perhaps the greatest indication of all that we are nearing the bright "morning" of prophecy is the re-establishment of the nation of Israel upon her ancient homeland. "I will put my breath into you and you shall live, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I the LORD have spoken and have acted—declares the LORD" (Ezekiel 37:14).

This last passage comes from a vision foretelling the resurrection of the nation of Israel. This vision is popularly known as The Valley of Dry Bones. In the vision the prophet sees a valley filled with dry bones. He witnesses a great shaking which assembles the bones in order, and then he watches in amazement as sinew, flesh, and bones give the appearance of a field full of human bodies. As he continues to watch he sees four winds blowing, and from them a "breath of life" enters into the bodies and they live.

The prophet leaves no doubt as to the significance of the vision. He writes: "And He said to me, O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone: we are doomed" (Ezekiel 37:11).

Then, in the next verse, he connects this national restoration with an individual one. "Prophecy, therefore, and say to them, Thus said the Lord GOD: Behold, I am going to open your graves, and lift you out of the graves, O my people; and bring you to the land of Israel. You shall know, O my people, that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves" (Ezekiel 37:12, 13).

The return of Israel to their land is the ultimate harbinger of morning. It indicates that we are on the very brink of that resurrection time when all that are in their graves shall come forth. What a glorious time that shall be when families shall be reunited and funerals will be replaced with welcoming parties for the returning dead. Tears of anguish shall turn into tears of joy. Weeping shall be over.

This is the time of which Isaiah says, " And a highway shall appear there, which shall be called the Sacred Way. No one unclean shall pass along it, but it shall be for them. No traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, no ferocious beast shall set foot upon it—these shall not be found there. But the redeemed shall walk in it; and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come with shouting to Zion, crowned with joy everlasting. They shall obtain joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing flee" (Isaiah 35:8- 10).

This is the time of which Hosea sings, "From Sheol itself will I save them, redeem them from very Death. Where, O Death, are your plagues? Your pestilence where, O Sheol?" (Hosea 13:14).

One question remains. For over 6,000 years man has suffered the ravages of sin and death. Why has it been so long? Why does a God of love permit such indescribable evils as have prevailed upon the earth? What good does such prolonged suffering do?

Once again it is necessary to see from God's perspective.

Man's viewpoint is vastly different from that of the Creator. Of him we read, "For my plans are not your plans, neither are my ways your ways—declares the LORD. But as the heavens are high above the earth, So are my ways above your ways, and my plans above your plans" (Isaiah 55:8, 9). Among other things, our time perspective is different from his. "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night" (Psalms 90:4). Additionally, we must realize that, while sin and death have prevailed for over sixty centuries, they have not affected any one individual for that long. As a mercy to man for the present, his life span is limited to the "threescore years and ten" of Psalms 90:10.

However the question remains: Why does God permit evil? The Psalmist speaks directly to the point.

"Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep your word. ... It was good for me that I was humbled, So that I might learn your laws." —Psalms 119:67, 71 "That I might learn your laws" gives us the answer to our query. If we stand back and look at the whole of God's plan, as outlined in the Bible, we note that God permitted sin and evil as a learning experience with a loving purpose. In this life, full of woe, man has learned the real consequences of sin—sorrow, sickness, and death. In the resurrection life he will learn the consequences of righteousness—happiness, health, and life. Then the decision will be up to man. Which will he choose? Is there any doubt that he will choose righteousness with all its benefits? Men will have been rightly exercised by their experience with evil and will have learned the statutes of the Almighty.

Too frequently God is judged by what we see today. We fail to step back and look at the perspective of his completed plan. This is as unfair as judging an architect by his unfinished work.

When God's work with man is complete, when all have been raised from the graves and learn to live in harmony with God and each other, when man helps one another and all praise the Lord together, then will be the time to sing with the Psalmist, "Be at rest, once again, O my soul; for the LORD hath been good to you. You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. I will walk before the LORD in the lands of the living" (Psalms 116:7- 9).

The most beautiful thing about the Bible's vision of this near- future kingdom is what it will mean to you, and to all who have gone through the universal experience of losing a loved one in death.

Think what it will mean to greet your beloved ones once again. Believe in the promises of God that assure us all that there is a reality to the vision of life beyond the grave.

Making plans for an assured future will be wonderful, a future that is as bright as the promises of God. The prospects of what lies ahead will not be dimmed with the uncertainties of sickness, or tragedy, or death itself.

The length of eternity is impossible for our finite minds to imagine. Years will become centuries, centuries will fade into millennia, and these, too, will roll on and on as life continues forever.

This is more, however, than intellectual dogma. It affect our personal lives in many way, none more poignantly than in the experience of losing a loved one to the universal enemy, death.

Yes, dear friend, we sorrow with you. How can we not be touched with a sense of your loss for we will also endure similar losses. But we take heart, and you can too, in the fact that these losses are temporary. While we weep in sadness beside the tomb, at the same time we rejoice that it will not be long before that grave, and millions of other graves, will give up their dead. Then, truly, there will be no more tears.

The petals of a lovely rose May fall and die at summer's close And grief we feel for that brief hour—For it had been a lovely flower.

It lies at rest on dewy grass—So fragrant still to all who pass.

E'en though it die ... our Father knows That spring will resurrect the rose.

And So when death makes all seem vain Mankind like flowers shall live again.

"All in their graves" shall hear their King And rise in God's eternal spring.

Alice Ripper ~