

After-Death Changes

“Someone will ask: ‘How can the dead be raised to life? What kind of body will they have? You fool! When you sow a seed in the ground, it does not spring to life unless it dies. And what you sow is a bare seed, perhaps a grain of wheat or some other grain. not the full-bodied plant that will later grow up. God provides that seed with the body he wishes; he gives each seed its own proper body’.

I Corinthians 15:29-32 Good News New Testament

Having considered the circumstances following death, the question arises about the appearance of individuals after death. If they were “*spirit-states*” how did the poor man and rich man recognise each other? I mean, when I die my body and mind will cease to function, and my spirit will “*return to God who gave it*”, according to the Scriptures. Then, according to the Scriptures, “*After death (comes) the judgement*””; which, I take to mean,

the time of my accountability at “*the judgement seat of Christ*” regarding “*deeds and words*” during my lifetime. When this is completed there is either “*Well done, my good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of the Lord*”, or the rebuke of “*Depart from me . . . When did you ever give me a cup of water?*” and the appropriate rebuke. After my conversation with my Lord, I anticipate he will say, “*Here is your wife, mother, father, brother, sister,*” etc and all the others. But, what then? Is the spirit by which I see Jesus and my family members, and they see me, some form of regeneration which can be activated at will made possible by the “*new life*” I had received at my “*new birth*”, but never used during my earthly lifetime? Or is it something that only happens after death?

I found it an interesting speculation until I was reminded of another incident in the life of Jesus relating to this question. On this occasion Jesus took his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, up a nearby mountain with him.⁵ The three disciples had fallen asleep when they were awakened by voices—and found Jesus talking with two other individuals. What was startling to them was that the person of Jesus was totally transfigured from his normal appearance: his face shone like the sun, and his clothes were dazzlingly white, and he was talking to what looked like Moses and Elijah.

Moses had been dead for about two thousand years at this point, and Elijah about a thousand years, so how did the disciples recognise them? Also, why Moses and Elijah and not, say, Samuel and David? One answer could be that both Moses and Elijah were unique in that neither of them experienced death as we know it. At the command of God Moses left the people of Israel encamped in the desert of Sinai into a nearby mountain, died there, and was “*buried by God*”; Elijah was “*caught up to heaven in chariots of fire*” while his prophet colleague, Elisha, watched. It is recorded that Elijah’s cloak was left behind and used by Elisha to part the waters of a river,⁶ but no mention of what became of Elijah’s body. So the common experience of both Moses and Elijah was that their bodies were never recovered; also, Moses was a witness to the *Old Covenant* between God and Israel; and Elijah was to be a witness to the *New*

⁵Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2

⁶2 Kings 2 :12-14

Covenant yet to be initiated by Jesus. The subject they were discussing now with Jesus was the imminent death by crucifixion of Jesus and his eventual resurrection.

The first question that occurred to me was not why did the translucent person and clothes of Jesus change so rapidly, but how did the disciples know that it was Moses and Elijah? Also, it was not just the clothes of Jesus that had changed but "*As they looked, a change came over Jesus . . .*" The disciples knew it was Jesus, because they could identify him, but his normal earthly state had changed apparently into the same as that of Moses and Elijah, or vice versa. The word used in the Scriptural record for "*changed*", or "*transfigured*", is the Greek word for "*metamorphosis*", meaning "*to change from one essence into another*". But what had activated the metamorphosis? There was one intriguing difference in that it is recorded that the face of Jesus was "*shining like the sun*", but not used of Moses or Elijah who "*appeared in heavenly glory*", an indication that the incarnated God-like essence of Jesus was different from the spirit-state of Moses and Elijah, but significantly both were compatible and could co-exist after-death as the disciples saw and heard them converse.

Peter's reaction was to blurt "*Master, how good it is that we are here! We will make three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah*". The whole experience was obviously bewildering for the three disciples, James and John stunned into silence; but Peter, in his usual impetuous fashion, suggested encapsulating the three distinctive former functions of the three men as respectively "*lawgiver, prophet and Messiah*" in some kind of shrine to celebrate their after-death visitation for public demonstration.

While Peter was still speaking a voice reverberated from the cloud above them saying "*This is my son, whom I have chosen – listen to him!*" The three disciples were stunned as they tried to absorb all that happening around them. They had just heard the voice of God speaking. I repeat it for emphasis: *they had heard the voice of God speaking aloud to them!* This was something that had never happened in their three years' daily experience of companionship with Jesus, although it had happened apparently when John the Baptist was

baptising Jesus. Now, with the voice of God together with the transfigured appearance of Moses, Elijah and Jesus, they were chastened into silence. They had seen and done many miracles in their association with Jesus but now they were faced with the reality that God had just personally endorsed Jesus as His Son, they had seen a resurrected Moses and Elijah, had seen Jesus in a different God-like dimension., and heard them discussing the significance of the future death and resurrection of Jesus—which would not happen for another six months.

It is very significant that not only Jesus had the ability to change his appearance, but that Moses and Elijah had *“appeared in heavenly glory”* also, and their *“spirit-state”* capacities had retained their own distinctive identities. It can be safely assumed that Moses and Elijah had been selected to appear by Jesus, both for his own purposes and also as a revelation to his disciples at that time, and to us at this present time, as an indication of the eternal existence of a *“personalised”* God and His human creatures. It is also safe to assume that this was a further revelation by Jesus as to what all his followers could anticipate in their after-death futures, not only recognition of identities but also a transformed ability to appear and talk afterwards on earth if or when required. This had tremendous significance when Jesus spoke of the later aspects of the kingdom of God when his disciples would *“rule”* on earth, especially during the millennium period of peace and prosperity. For myself, it had growing significance as I considered my own after-death spiritual desire to *“rule with Christ”*, obviously during the prophesied period known as the *“millennium”*, or thousand-year ruling with Jesus in a post-Armageddon and purged earth, as will be described later.



How did the body of Lazarus get out of the tomb?

“What shall we do? Look at all the miracles this man is performing! If we let him go on in this way the Roman authorities will take action and destroy our Temple and our nation”.

John 11:47-48 Good News New Testament

While Jesus was in Bethabara on his final journey to Jerusalem he received a message from Mary in Bethany that her brother Lazarus was sick and could Jesus come quickly.⁷ His reaction surprised his disciples who knew of the close friendship of Mary and her family, as Jesus just said, *“This sickness will not end in death. It is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”* Then he stayed on in Bethabara for another two days. Finally, he said to his disciples, *“Let us go back to Judea.”*

⁷John 11:1-45

They looked at him in consternation. *“But, rabbi,”* they said, *“a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?”*

“Are there not twelve hours of daylight?” Jesus said in his teaching manner, and the disciples knew that he meant there was an appointed time for work; that the hours of the day were not affected by external circumstances; they were there to be used. Jesus continued:

“A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

The disciples were puzzled at the remark. *“Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better”*, they said, thinking that Jesus meant natural sleep and not understanding that he meant Lazarus was dead—but in a different state from what they understood: it was the possibility of a divine intervention into the natural world. It seems he wanted them to understand that from now on they should walk in the light of a world in which there were no apparent limits and they should adjust their spiritual attitudes in relation to this.

“Lazarus is dead”, he told them categorically; (that was the *“night”* in which an unbeliever walked) then added, *“and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe* (that was the *“light”* by which they must make judgements from now on). *But let now us go to him.”*

The disciples looked at each other in bemusement. If Lazarus was dead in Bethany, it was too late to do anything about it now. The disciple Thomas Didymus, always pessimistic, shrugged his shoulders fatalistically, and said, *“Let us go too, that we may die with him.”*

By the time they arrived at the outskirts of Bethany they heard the news that Lazarus had been dead four days already. Martha had slipped away from the house with its mourners to meet Jesus.

“Lord”, she said to him regretfully, *“if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”*

Those around Jesus noted the implication in Martha's petition: on the one hand, Lazarus was dead four days and beyond hope; on the other hand, Jesus was the master of life and death who had already raised others from death—the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain - but never after being four days' dead. In theory she admitted the possibility of a divine intervention, but in fact the situation was beyond retrieving.

Jesus noted the confusion, and the hope and restraint. *"Your brother will rise again,"* he told her gently.

Martha nodded her agreement. She knew from the Scriptures that there was a resurrection of the righteous to eternal life, so she answered Jesus confidently, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

"I am the resurrection," Jesus stated, emphasising his divinity, *"and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Martha and those nearby hearing the words were startled. This was beyond anything the prophets had written in the Scriptures. Jesus was actually claiming *to be the resurrection in person*, and not just expounding a doctrine.

Martha smiled at Jesus through her tears. *"Yes, Lord,"* she said firmly, *"I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."*

Jesus nodded his acknowledgement of her limited admission, and then sent her to call her sister Mary to meet him at the burial tomb of Lazarus outside the town. Mary left quickly, with some of the mourners running after her. When she saw Jesus, she knelt, choking with tears, at his feet and said like Martha, *"Lord, if you had been here, I know my brother would not have died."*

Seeing Mary weeping, and the people around also sharing her grief, Jesus was deeply moved, too. It was not because he simply identified with the sorrow at Lazarus' death, which was ludicrous after he had just stated he was master of life and death; but because his delay had been a source of their unbelieving grief.

"Where have you laid him?" he asked Mary. They had met in the garden burial place belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, and she led

him, with Martha and the other mourners, to the family tomb where they had buried Lazarus. It had been constructed out of a cave-like opening in the mountain with a few stone steps leading down into the interior, with shelves on each side where other bodies could be placed when required. According to the usual custom the family had anointed the dead body of Lazarus with myrrh, aloes, hyssop, rose-oil and rose-water on the linen shrouds wound around the body. The entrance to the tomb was closed with a large, circular stone set in a groove so that it could be rolled to open or close.

When they had reached the entrance of the burial tomb, and everyone was standing silently in respect, Jesus suddenly ordered, *"Take the stone away"*. There was a gasp from the observers at this unusual command, and Martha protested, *"There will be a smell, Lord. He has been dead for four days"*.

"Did I not tell you", Jesus reproved her gently, *"that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* Mary was too confused to notice that Jesus did not say *"You will see a miracle"*, or even *"You will see me raise Lazarus"*; but a much greater revelation: *"see the glory of God"*.

Martha remained silent, and some of the men mourners moved forward to roll back the stone from the entrance to the tomb. Jesus tilted his face heavenward, and prayed:

"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

Then to the incredulity of those watching Jesus declared in a loud voice, *"Lazarus, come out!"*

The ensuing silence was broken by a rising murmur from the crowd; then a startled cry of astonishment arose as the figure of Lazarus appeared, *floating above the ground because he was still wrapped with strips of embalmed linen and a cloth around his face*. Noting this incredible detail some authorities have speculated that the legs of the body of Lazarus had been bound separately so that he was able to walk out of the tomb, but that is not what the record states, as follows:

"He (Lazarus) came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave-clothes, and with a cloth around his face. 'Untie him', Jesus said, 'and let him go'".

Others, including myself, believe that Jesus, as Creator, "*Lord of Life*", had the power to cause the dead and clothed body of Lazarus to metamorphose from the dead state to life outside the tomb with the same powers he had demonstrated with the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain, both of whom would have been prepared for burial.

There was tense silence as they unwound the grave-clothes from Lazarus, noticing that there were vestige odours of the burial spices and perfume, but there was no smell of decaying flesh. When the grave-clothes were removed, and Lazarus stood in his undergarment, he was revealed to be healthy as ever, smiling now as the sisters embraced him. There was a rising murmur of astonishment from the surrounding mourners which became an excited barrage of questions, mostly directed at Jesus and Lazarus.

The only reply Jesus gave was, "*Did I not tell you that if you believe all things are possible?*"

Lazarus could only reply to the barrage of questions that he knew nothing of the four days; he just felt as if he had wakened from sleep. With meaningless irony, when the startling news was brought to the religious leaders, they called a meeting of the Sanhedrin Council to plot the death of Jesus, "*the Lord of Life*"!

"Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."

The resurrection of Lazarus caused the greatest controversy of all the acts of Jesus. On the one hand, it led many to become believers on the spot, because of the manifestation of divine power; but, on the other hand, it was an intolerable affront to the professional religionists. If Jesus were allowed to get away with miraculous actions like these in support of his claims to be the Messiah at the very gates of Jerusalem—each act more provocatively supernatural than its predecessor it seemed—then what might he not do next? Not only Jews in Palestine, but those scattered throughout the world would believe in him.

For me, the greatest truth emerging from the Lazarus episode is

not his raising from death, but the remark of Jesus to his disciples when the news of the death of Lazarus was first brought to them on the way to Jerusalem, when he said, "*Lazarus sleeps . . .*" The disciples naturally thought that he had made a mistaken diagnosis, but Jesus had really given a profound explanation of what happens immediately after death; namely, that Lazarus was really in the state similar to sleep, when the body is in a state of "*little death*", all actions suspended but the mind still active. Lazarus, instead of being brought to the usual after-death experience of facing "*the judgement seat of Christ*", was held in a form of sleep because his earthly state was only suspended for a few days until the earthly Christ called him back to life a few days later.

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will be available on this site on the 1st September 2008