

What Is Hell Like?

“If your right eye causes you to sin, take it out and throw it away! It is much better for you to lose a part of your body than to have your whole body thrown into hell. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away! It is much better for you to lose one of your limbs than for your whole body to go to hell.”

Matthew 5:29-30 Good News New Testament

Jesus and the Dying Thief

There is only one person who can speak authoritatively about heaven as well as hell, because he has been in both, and that is Jesus. The final stages of his journey to hell began when the Roman governor, Pilate, condemned him to death by crucifixion, because the pre-crucifixion flogging was a hellish experience often causing death.

The place for the crucifixion of Jesus was only a short distance from the Fortress where his trial and scourging took place, reached

by a narrow, stepped street leading past the rear walls of the Temple and exiting at the Damascus Gate. It was a Roman law that the criminal condemned to death by crucifixion must carry his cross to the place of execution. Usually this was only the cross-beam, the upright part having already been installed by soldiers sent ahead to prepare the site known locally as “*Golgotha*”, or “the place of a skull”. Two other condemned men, thieves, were also in the crucifixion procession with Jesus.

The crucifixions cross-beam to be carried weighed some thirty pounds and this, combined with the sleepless night, the hellish scourging which left his bones exposed and his skin in bloody shreds, the oppressive noonday heat, and the pressure from the gawking crowds in the narrow street, drove Jesus to the brink of unconsciousness and he stumbled. Some of the crowd jeered, and asked him to perform a recovery miracle now on himself. The Roman escort eventually picked out a burly Cyrenian from the watching crowd, known as Simon, and ordered him to help carry the Nazarene’s cross.

During the delay a group of women forced themselves to the front where Jesus had collapsed on the road. They wept as the Roman guards helped him to his feet, mourning as if at a funeral. The Sanhedrin representative, who was present at every sentence of death to observe that the Roman decision was being fulfilled, waved them away. He had been instructed to see that there were no public protests in Jesus’ favour.

Jesus stopped to recover his breath, and then gasped: “*Don’t . . . weep for me . . . weep for yourselves . . . and for your children . . . The time is coming soon . . . you will run and hide . . . If men do this . . . in a time of law . . . what will they do . . . when there is no law?*” He was giving them a final warning of the imminent national holocaust that would sweep them all away into despair and oblivion.

When the procession reached Calvary the transverse beam of the cross, which Simon of Cyrene had helped to carry, was placed on the ground and Jesus led forward. He was offered the usual drink by the soldiers—a bitter mixture of wine and myrrh, which had a numbing effect on the senses—but Jesus refused. His clothing was

removed and his bloody, shredded body was laid naked, with his hands outstretched on the transverse beam, his feet on the upright beam, facing forwards to the watching public. Only women were permitted to be crucified facing the cross and with backs to the public.

The soldiers first nailed the hands to the beam, and tied the arms with ropes around the wrists. The rope was passed over the shoulders and under the arms and the transverse beam lifted to fit against the upright beam, then was nailed and roped together. A small wooden seat-rest, with a jutting horn-like projection devised to pierce the rectum, was nailed to the upright beam, and Jesus' legs were straddled ignominiously on either side of this. Nails were driven through his feet on the foot-rest under the feet, to support the body in a knees bent position, when the excruciating agony of its weight on the nailed hands and feet caused the body to slump. The foot-rest and horned seat-rest were not there to comfort the criminal, but that death through strangulation from a collapsed rib cage would not occur too quickly, and so that the torturous agony would be intensified and prolonged for up to three days or more as a warning to the watching public. The body, suspended by the nails on the cross, contracted in spasms into agonizing rigidity; wounds swelled and festered in the fly-ridden heat; heart, lungs and head became congested, and breathing was agonizing and often impossible. In order to breathe the individual had to push downwards on the horned seat-rest—but this only served to brutally intensify the agony. The whole exercise of crucifixion was to utterly humiliate as well as cruelly intimidate the criminal being crucified in order to deter all others.

When the soldiers had finished the work of crucifying the three men - the two robbers on the right and left, and Jesus in the centre—they stood back to admire their work. Jesus, watching them out of pain-filled eyes, gasped, "*Father . . . forgive them . . . they don't . . . know what . . . they are doing.*" The soldiers ignored the words, and picked up the scattered bloody clothing to divide among themselves. Seeing that Jesus' garment was seamless they decided to gamble for it whole, instead of cutting it, while they waited for Jesus to die.

The crowds who had followed the procession began to disperse. Once the nailing of the individual on the cross was completed there was little left to hold their attention. They had to prepare for the imminent Passover celebrations, and the body of Jesus would have to be taken down before the Sabbath due in a few hours at midnight. Also, in their haste to get rid of the body of Jesus they were ignoring the historical irony that they were already killing the Scripturally true *"Passover Lamb"* at the exact time—*"between the sixth and ninth hours"*—ordained by God through Moses and the Tabernacle services about two thousand years before.

Those who had hoped for a miracle of some sort from Jesus were disappointed, and they jeered:

"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the Chosen One."

"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

"You who are going to destroy the Temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!"

"Messiah, king of Israel, come down now from the cross so that we may see and believe!"

"He trusts in God, so let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'

Even one of the criminals on the cross next to Jesus hurled abuse at him: *"Aren't you . . . the Messiah?"* he sneered with laboured breath. *"Save yourself . . . and us!"*

At these words the criminal on the other side gasped a rebuke: *"Don't you . . . fear God . . . We are . . . punished justly . . . This man . . . has done . . . nothing wrong."* Turning his pain-contorted face towards Jesus, he added, *"Jesus . . . remember me . . . when you come . . . into your kingdom."*

The shadow of a smile flickered on the torn and bloodied face of Jesus, and he said, *"I tell you . . . the truth . . . today you will be . . . with me . . . in Paradise."* The repentant criminal was only barely conscious with his own pain so that the promise of Jesus was not just physical release now, but to be present that day—not three or four days of torture later—with Jesus through death to the eternal Paradise beyond. By his own words the dying thief was dying justly, yet Jesus

had stated that before midnight the thief would be with him in Paradise—the same “*Paradise*” experienced by the poor man and rich man.

The Roman centurion in charge, who had seen thousands of these incidents, gazed inscrutably from the jeering Jewish religious leaders responsible for this man’s death to the face of Jesus: “*Surely this was a righteous man*”, he said wonderingly. He thought for a moment that Jesus had heard him, for he was gazing in his direction, but what had drawn the attention of Jesus was the small group next to the centurion, three women and a man. Unknown to the centurion this was Jesus’ mother, Mary, and the former courtesan Mary “*the Magdalene*” of Bethany, and another sister of Jesus’ mother, also called Mary, the wife of Cleopas and John, “*the beloved disciple*” of Jesus.

Tears streamed down Mary’s face as she gazed on the tortured form of her beloved son, and she remembered again, the words of the prophecy that had haunted her life: “*A sword shall pierce through your heart also.*” She had thought that meant the agony of separation from the one who was primarily God’s Son as he did his heavenly Father’s will, but she knew now that this was the sword—the nation of Israel’s brutalized and ravaged rejection of one whose only crime was that he loved too much. The women clung together, weeping and occasionally covering their faces at the spasms of agony wracking the body of Jesus.

Jesus looked from them to John. Addressing his mother he said in pain-rasped tones, “*Dear woman . . . here is your son.*” To John he gasped, “*Here is . . . your mother.*” John nodded his acceptance of the responsibility.

Although it was only past noon the sky began to darken inexplicably. There were none of the usual signs of a storm, and it was not an eclipse, for it was the time of the full moon. The spectators began to move away uneasily, less voluble in their jeering as they cast worried glances at the darkening sky. Was God going to intervene on behalf of Jesus after all? The religious leaders were less superstitious, but they had their own problems with the darkness, for it meant that someone might try to remove the still

living body of Jesus. Also, according to the *Law of Moses*, they had to make certain that the body should not be left hanging overnight, and the Passover Sabbath would be due at sunset only two or three hours away. They hurried from the scene to see Pilate, to request that the Galilean's legs might be broken to make certain that he died before the start of their Sabbath.

Pilate did not inform the high priest's messengers that he had already received an earlier delegation—also distinguished members of the Sanhedrin—with a request. This was the influential Nicodemus, captain of the Temple, and Joseph of Arimathea. They said they were friends of Jesus, and asked Pilate courteously if he would give them permission to remove the dead body of Jesus for private burial, and he had agreed.

On the cross Jesus, released from his last ties with earth in attending to his mother, entered his dark night of the soul—his God-prophesied “hour” and the “hour of Satan” when the “heel of Jesus” would be “bruised”, but the “head of Satan” would be fatally wounded in a contest that would result in destroying Satan's power over death for ever. As he struggled alone in the raging nightmare of Satan's onslaught a hoarse cry was torn from his lips: “My God . . . my God . . . why have you . . . forsaken me?”

Some of those standing near him, hearing the Galilean dialect “Eli, Eli” for “God”, mistakenly thought that he was calling for Elijah the prophet. One of them ran and got a sponge and dipped it in the mixture of wine and vinegar kept for the purpose, and offered it to Jesus. But the religious leaders pushed them aside, and said roughly, “Leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah will come and save him.”

As the day darkened still more it became difficult to see the features of the men on the crosses. When Jesus whispered hoarsely, “I thirst”, the man with the cup of wine and vinegar ignored the protests of the rabbis and gave it to Jesus. There was now an oppressive and ominous silence over the whole hellish scene. The usual noises of the city had disappeared as the unaccountable darkness drove people off the streets and stopped all normal daylight activities. There were only a few people around the crosses to hear Jesus shout triumphantly, “It is finished . . . Father . . . into your

hands . . . I commit . . . my spirit." Then, unexpectedly, and inexplicably in the appalling circumstances which were anticipated to last three or four days, his suspended body slumped and he died. So sudden and unusual was it that the experienced Roman centurion who had earlier observed that Jesus was "*certainly a righteous man*", exclaimed reverently, "*This man was certainly the Son of God!*"

As Jesus died it is recorded:

*"The earth shook, the rocks split apart, the graves broke open, and many of God's people who had died were raised to life. They left the graves, and after Jesus rose from death, they went into the Holy City, where many people saw them."*³⁷

Jesus in Hell

So, according to Jesus, while his body was on the cross and his mind dead with it, his spirit was in "*hades*" with the thief, as he had promised. But Jesus went on from there to the lower region of Hades to accomplish a divinely historic purpose—to confront Satan in his own domain. This entailed Jesus crossing "*the great gulf*" that was "*fixed*" in the account of the poor man and rich man. The physical agonies Jesus was experiencing on the cross were as nothing compared to the spiritual anguish of his unseen cosmic confrontation with Satan as he battled for God's redemption of the creation corrupted by Satan in Satan's own territory of hell.

The prophet Isaiah had recorded the overthrow of Satan:

*"How are thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, who weakened the nations. You said in your heart 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God . . . I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to hell (hades) . . ."*³⁸

To find out what happened in *hades*, and afterwards, we have to go forward some fifty days to listen to Peter preaching in the Temple. Speaking of the departed Jesus he said,

"God raised him from death, setting him free from its power, because it was impossible for death to hold him prisoner. For David said about him . . . 'you will not abandon me in the world of the dead, you will not allow your faithful servant to rot in the grave' . . ."

³⁷Matthew 27: 51-54

³⁸Isaiah 14: 12-15

Peter amplified this later when writing his *Epistle* and said,

“He was put to death physically, but made alive spiritually, and in his spiritual existence he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits. These were the spirits of those who had not obeyed God when He waited patiently during the days that Noah was building his boat . . .”

It is obvious from these statements that the experience of Jesus is not necessarily the experience of others. He had a specific mission to fulfil, primarily to take the “keys” or powers of death and hell from Satan in what Jesus had classed as “*the hour of Satan*”, and what God had described after the disobedience of Adam and Eve as “*the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the Serpent, and the seed of the Serpent would bruise his heel*”. That is, Jesus would be “wounded”, but Satan would be fatally defeated.

When Jesus went into hell one task was to “preach to the imprisoned spirits”. As the rest of the passage indicates these were those before the Flood who had not had the opportunity to repent and believe before the time of Christ. With these tasks completed in hell Jesus left the lower region in triumph over Satan. From now on he could function as an advocate before his Father in heaven on behalf of both Israel and the Gentiles, and with his relationships before God established in heaven he could make the “after-death” statements to the disciples regarding his bestowing on them the Holy Spirit from heaven.

Jesus After Death

Ironically, the professional religionists believed more in the possibilities arising from Jesus’ resurrection than did his disciples. From the time they took the lifeless body of Jesus from the cross, bathed the bloody and torn flesh, put on the spices and grave-clothes, his followers, without exception, accepted the finality of his death. Even the thought of removing his body, so feared by the religionists, never crossed their minds as they contemplated the inevitable physical corruption over the next few days of the Passover. If they expected anything, it was a vague memory of what he said about his “*second coming*” in the distant future. The disciples and other close followers had scattered, partly because of the Passover Sabbath requirements for families, and

partly in fear of the rabbis, to different meeting places in Jerusalem, and they were meeting behind closed doors for the inevitable arrests they anticipated following the death of Jesus. The startling news of the torn Veil in the Temple, at the time of the darkness, earthquake, opened tombs, and other raised bodies, only created further confusion and dangers.

The women—Mary the mother of Jesus, her sisters Mary and Salome, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s adviser, the wealthy and patrician Susanna, and Mary Magdalene—busied themselves with the burial spices they had prepared for a less hurried application to Jesus when the Sabbath was ended.

Early on the Sunday morning following the Sabbath, at the first light of dawn, Mary Magdalene left Bethany to go to the tomb in Joseph’s garden where she had arranged to meet with the other women the day before. There was some discussion as to who would help them move the tomb-stone, and it was suggested that Joseph of Arimathea would probably have a watchman or gardener at the scene to help them; but others pointed out that the tomb-stone was traditionally made so that several men would be required to move it. In the city, while they were on their way to find the disciples, they were terrified by the shudders of another earthquake, but it passed quickly and they hurried on.

The earthquake had preceded the arrival of an angelic messenger in Joseph’s burial garden, before whom the Roman and Temple guards reeled away, blinded and unconscious, and the heavy tomb-stone moved backwards at the angel’s command to open the way. When the guards recovered they saw the resplendent heavenly messenger sitting quietly on the rolled-back tomb-stone and, after a terrified glance at the obviously empty tomb, they ran from the garden to report to their superiors.

When the women arrived at the tomb, as they still gazed overwhelmed and dumbfounded at the open and empty tomb, a dazzling angel had appeared outside and addressed them confidently:

“Don’t be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, just as he said. Come and

see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him''. (my emphases)

After an initial hesitation the women had approached the open tomb—and saw another angel sitting where they had laid the body of Jesus, but no sign of Jesus. The women noticed that both angels took up positions where the head and feet of Jesus had been placed. Like most tombs of wealthy Jews, Joseph's tomb in the hill-side had a low entrance, opening into a deeper inner chamber, with shelves along each side for the bodies of the family. Because this was a new tomb prepared by Joseph, there were no other bodies on the shelves. The women had backed out of the tomb, filled with a diminishing fear and a rising tide of joy and excitement: Jesus had risen from the dead! There was no body! There was an empty tomb! There were angel witnesses with a clear and commanding message! They left the tomb and the angels to tell the disciples.

Meanwhile Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb, and she found the large stone sealing the entrance to the tomb rolled back, the soldiers guarding the tomb gone, and the tomb empty. Then Peter and John arrived and they discussed the significance of the removed body of Jesus, his folded burial clothes, the angels and the possibilities. Had the angels carried away the body of Jesus like Elijah? What did they mean by "*He has risen*"—his spirit from his body, or his spirit to his Father in heaven? Why was there no body? Had the angels taken the body away and then returned? Why leave the clothes behind? Somehow it was easier to accept that the furious religious leaders had stolen the body away from Jesus' friends in their own interests.

Mary had a sudden thought and went outside to look at the entrance stone. The violated Roman official seal—with death as the punishment for removal—was still there on the rolled back tomb-stone. She called to Peter and John to look at it, and after some discussion they left her at the tomb while they went back into the city to report to the other Apostles.

Mary sat on a stone outside the tomb, thinking and occasionally weeping with bewilderment and futility, and after a time went back

into the tomb—and found two angels, dressed in white clothing, sitting where the body of Jesus had been. She was gazing at them blankly in astonishment when one of them addressed her: *“Woman, why are you crying?”*

“They have taken my Lord away”, she said hesitantly, trying to adjust her mind to accept that she was talking with an angel, *“and I don’t know where they have put him.”*

She had a sense that the angels were looking past her, and turned to see who had approached. She saw only a figure outlined in shadow against the sunlight outside the tomb. She thought it was Joseph’s gardener arriving at last, and that he might know what had happened to the body of Jesus. But, before she could say anything to him, he said, *“Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”*

Mary gave a huge sigh of relief. At least, he knew she was looking for a body, so it must mean he knew what had happened. *“Sir,”* she pleaded with him *“if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”* She stepped forward to him in the urgency of her plea.

“Mary,” the man said to her quietly. There could be only one voice that spoke her name like that, Jesus her Lord.

“Rabboni! Teacher!” she called out joyfully and incredulously, stepping forward to throw herself into his arms.

Jesus held up his hand to hold her off. *“Do not hold me”,* he said to her warningly, *“for I have not yet returned to my Father. But go to the others and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”*

A week later all the inner circle of Apostles, except for the absent Thomas the Doubter, had gathered at the house of Mary of Jerusalem for the evening meal. They discussed excitedly the various reports of sightings of Jesus but no-one mentioned the fact that, in all his after-death appearances, Jesus had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and also had disappeared just as mysteriously. Could it just have been a spirit and not the resurrected real body of Jesus? Why had he not permitted Mary Magdalene to touch him? And what had he meant by giving as his reason that

he had not yet returned to his Father?

Probably this was the thought uppermost in everyone's minds when they were preparing to eat the evening meal, and once again Jesus suddenly appeared. They had carefully locked all doors against any surprising visit from the religious leaders, and the sudden appearance of Jesus among them convinced them that he was indeed an apparition who could pass through closed doors. Seeing their doubts and fears Jesus said consolingly,

"Peace be with you! Why are you so worried and suspicious? Look at my hands and my feet and see the nail-marks. Touch me and see; a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

He spread his obviously scarred hands and feet for them to examine, but nobody moved to accept his challenge. Their minds were racing with tumultuous thoughts as they tried to reconcile his sudden appearance at the tomb, his strange words to Mary Magdalene, the appearances to Peter, and the women near Bethany, and the two men in Emmaus, and now through closed doors here in Jerusalem. He had just said, *"A spirit does not have flesh and bones such as you see me have . . . Touch me and see."* Yet in the morning in the burial tomb he had said to Mary, *"Don't touch me"*.

What had happened between morning and evening, and between him and his Father? Reconciliation? Celebration? Consecration? All three? Was the meeting with his Father in heaven or on earth? His work on earth was completed. *"It is finished,"* he had said in his last words on the cross. He was no longer a person of time. God had created sun and moon, evening and morning, but time was a measuring device of man. Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man was no longer necessary. He was now Spirit, one with the Eternal Spirit—and he had promised to send the Spirit as *"Counselor"* when he had gone. Yet here he was saying he was both spirit and flesh and bones.

"Do you have anything here to eat?" Jesus asked, looking at the set table. The disciples wondered what would happen when the food was placed in front of him; it was well-known that a spirit could not eat food. Yet had not the Angel eaten a meal with Abraham?

Jesus was given a helping of broiled fish and honeycomb, and he ate it calmly, while the Apostles watched him in awed silence. If

anything they were more confused than ever. While it was accepted wisdom that a spirit could not eat food, they were puzzled what to expect from a body that had died, that had emptied itself of a great deal of its blood in scourging and stabbing, and if Jesus still had blood in his body. They knew the spirit released from the body returned to God at death—and now was able to appear and disappear at will, and even pass through locked doors and eat food.

Jesus seemed to understand their confusion, but looked beyond the present to the future.

“This is what I told you while I was still with you Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city here until you have been clothed with power from my Father in heaven.”

Then, lifting his hand, he breathed symbolically on all of them and said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* With these words once again he disappeared from sight—obviously some form of metamorphosis, one minute he was there, and the next he was gone. This must be what happened to everyone after death; it would be eternal life as a spirit with mental and physical faculties in a different dimension—heaven or hell—opened to everyone.

Before Jesus left his disciples he told them of another meeting he would hold with them shortly. They were to get the Eleven together, and proceed to the place in the foothills of Mount Hermon where he had gone with them for prayer occasionally in the past. He told them to invite as many of the other known disciples as were interested, and he would address them there.

At the appointed time there were five hundred people gathered together on the slopes of the mountain to meet with Jesus. There he gave them their great commission to fulfil God’s eternal purpose for His chosen people so often betrayed by Israel in the past—*“to enlighten all nations of the world.”* He was leaving them shortly, and

they would see him no more, but the gospel he had given to them they were to communicate to all men everywhere. He concluded:

*“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised by the Holy Spirit”*³⁹

But the disciples were still fixated on their own conception of their mission, and they

asked him: *“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

Jesus replied: *“It is not for you to know the times or dates the father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

When Jesus had said farewell to the gathering he drew the Eleven Apostles to one side and told them to return to Jerusalem immediately, so that they would be there for the *“Feast of Weeks”*, or *“Pentecost”*, occurring fifty days after the Feast of Passover, to celebrate the dedication of the first-fruits of the corn harvest, the last crop to ripen, God’s blessings of seed-time and harvest, of sun and rain. He would meet with them there and they would receive the promised empowerment of the Holy Spirit for their great worldwide task of *“bringing in God’s spiritual harvest”*, beginning at Jerusalem, then spreading into Judea and Samaria, and on into the furthest parts of the earth.

Then Jesus met with the Eleven Apostles and followers for the last time. They were gathered as usual in their favoured upper room, but, unlike the previous occasion, when they were petrified with fear, now they were discussing excitedly their plans for the future. He joined them in their meal, and then addressed them regarding the message they were to preach:

“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. This is what they say: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses that these things have happened as written. I am now going to

³⁹Acts 1:4-10

send you the Holy Spirit my Father has promised; but you must stay in the city until you have been clothed with this power from on high. John has baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (my emphasis)

When he had finished talking with them Jesus did not disappear as he had on the previous occasion. Instead he signalled for them to come with him, and he led them through the streets of Jerusalem on the familiar way to Bethany. They walked openly, returning the startled greetings of those who knew them and Jesus, but never stopping to talk with anyone. They crossed over the Kidron Valley, past the fateful Garden of Gethsemane, to the spot where they had so often stopped for a last look over the city of Jerusalem, on the ridge where the path dropped down to Bethany on the far side. Here Jesus stopped once more, and looked at the city he loved. Then, turning, he embraced each Apostle and follower.

They knew this was the last they would see him. “Lord,” one of them said, “Are you in the immediate future going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Jesus shook his head.

“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

With those words Jesus lifted his hands and blessed them and, as they watched, he disappeared from their sight into a cloud drifting above them. As they were still gazing skyward speculatively two angels appeared and announced to them:

“Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven”.

They returned to Jerusalem, rejoicing, making for the Temple to begin their task of bringing the Messiah’s message of eternal salvation to the world. They knew from personal experience of three years with Jesus that he was indeed the Son of God, that they had a message to the world from God, and that they, too, would join him again in heaven.

They had a message of salvation from sin and death a and hell for the world given to them by the Son of God himself. They had a promise from the lips of the Son of God that they would join him in heaven, and that the bodies they would have would be like his own. They had a vision of sharing the rule with him in a renewed heaven and earth. The door to the after-life following death had been opened by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Their task was to let the world know, and leave it to God, to reveal the details of the life after death through others in the future.



Personal Note

I had verified the words and promises of Jesus in my own lifetime of almost seventy years of Christian service in many lands but, as physical abilities declined, I was now intensely interested in what happens after death. Theoretically, I knew I would have a "spirit/body" vaguely "like Jesus", and the capacity to inter-change between one and the other like Moses and Elijah, but how and when would my lifetime commitments be evaluated in the hereafter? Moses had been defiant and a disappointment to God when he struck the rock angrily instead of speaking the words of God; and Elijah had fled from an angry Jezebel after God had miraculously answered his prayer to send fire and consume the altar offering. Yet Peter and the other two disciples had seen Jesus discussing his coming crucifixion with them as friends. What had happened in the meantime to explain this intimacy?



Chapter -6 -

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