

OUR BELOVED DEAD¹

By Paul Penno Jr.

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Everyone was wondering why the tragedy struck a school so swiftly and cruelly. Were the ancestral spirits angry and taking out revenge on helpless children?

It was in the afternoon when 400 students were in school. Then it began to rain, and then came bolts of silver-streaked lightning that ripped through the walls of the school. The third flash knocked half the children to the floor, leaving eleven dead.

The whole place was full of weeping people. One family lost six children, another lost four. One grieving father, shrugged his shoulders and said, "This is just God's work."

One wonders what kind of an idea of God this father had to think that God would delight in such savage cruelty to send lightning in an attempt to kill 400 innocent children?

The aftermath of inquiries and studies was that this was the work of angry ancestral spirits. This town was defiled and needed cleansing to appease the living-dead. The spirits of the ancestors are taking revenge through the use of lightning.

Millions of people believe that the dead exert direct influence over the lives of present-day descendants. Reverence for the spirits and the beliefs of Christianity are not contradictory but complementary, many believe.

This belief in "the living dead" ancestors is very deep-rooted. It *appears* to be rational and convincing. Mysterious things *do* happen, no one can deny that. And some are unquestionably miraculous. No person who faces the evidence can deny that there are indeed spirits of some kind who from time to time intrude into the present life and demand attention of some sort.

Human beings all around the world are afraid of malicious evil forces that lurk in the dark shadows beyond our knowledge. People say, You had better play it safe and appease the anger of the spirits somehow; and if you are mistaken, no harm done!

Why are these spirits so cruel and malicious? Why did they kill innocent children in the school? Parents, grandparents, even great-grandparents, never want to see any harm come to their children; what makes them change so drastically after they die that they come back in these menacing, murderous raids against the living? While they were living on earth, it would have been unthinkable for our elders anywhere to try to murder a group of innocents. Why do they try to do it after they die and become spirits? This is entirely out of character for their family personality?

One man had an uncle who was especially kind to him and raised him as a child in his own home. He paid tuition so his nephew could attend school, besides caring for him with food and clothing throughout his childhood and youth. The uncle loved the boy so much that he even paid for his wedding when the time came for him to get married. And after the nephew's marriage, the now aging

¹ 1 Cor. 15:3, 4. 27, 426.

uncle delighted in his grand-nephews and grand-nieces, and enjoyed doing all he could to help the young man.

When the old uncle became ill, the nephew tenderly cared for him. The uncle willed his possessions to his nephew. Their love and friendship continued until the man died.

Then the trouble began. All kinds of misfortunes seemed to afflict the young man's family—sickness, poverty, accidents. Someone told him that the deceased uncle was unhappy because he had not built a sufficiently elaborate tomb for him. Instead of spending his modest income on education and clothing for the children, the bereaved nephew spent his money building a fine tomb of cement, painting and decorating it as best he could. Still the troubles continued, and the counselor said the ancestral spirit was still not happy.

That was when this thoughtful man began to ask questions. While he was living, his uncle had been as kind to him and his family as any man could be; why should he change now that he was dead and become so cruel and selfish that he demanded money that was need for the children's education? "Who is this spirit? Is this *really his uncle?*" he asked himself.

We want to know the answer to the question, Who are these malicious spirits? The young man fortunately had a friend who showed him where the answer is. He found it in his Bible, and all his perplexities were cleared up. The evidence became overwhelming; this was *not* the spirit of his dead uncle at work. It was an evil angel, an associate of

Satan, who was *pretending* to be his dead uncle and who had fooled him all this time since his uncle's death. And the young man was so happy to learn the facts that he decided to give the rest of his life to passing on the liberating knowledge to others of his fellow men.

There is "good news" for people everywhere, who are concerned about what lies beyond death.

Disasters such as lightning strikes, diseases, and accidents are not "God's work." Satan can cause disasters; and often human carelessness is the cause.

There is an entire book in the Bible, Job, devoted to this problem. Job was a good man who suffered a series of losses and tragedies. First, some terrorists slew his farm employees and made off with his oxen and donkeys. Then lightning from the sky struck his shepherds and flocks in a ferocious storm and killed them. That was not all; pirates then fell upon his commercial caravan, killed the camel drivers, and escaped with the entire consignment of goods.

And if these terrible visitations of someone's anger was not enough, a tornado wind struck the house where Job's children were having a feast, and flattened the roof on them all, so that not one escaped.

Job's big question was: *who* is sending these freak disasters? The only one he could think of was God. Mankind is always blaming God for their troubles. Even insurance companies have a legal term for a natural disaster, an "act of God." But Job was wrong, and the insurance companies are wrong.

The first two chapters of Job tell the secret behind his troubles: Satan was the instigator of these disasters. His purpose was to break Job's faith in God; and to accomplish it he was willing to masquerade as God and make Job think that all this evil was God's fault. (See Job 1:16-19).

The Bible reveals God as a loving heavenly Father and wants us to be happy and secure. "I pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: therefore turn yourselves [be converted], and live ye" (Ezekiel 18:32); "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). If someone accuses you in court of a monstrous crime of which you are completely innocent, your best defense is your character and good reputation.

One of Satan's and his angels favorite tricks is to masquerade as the spirits of dead ancestors. This is a method he has used to fool millions of innocent people and to lead them to their ruin. He uses fear as a club to terrorize his victims all their lives. And this is the secret that explains why these supposed ancestral spirits are so cruel and malicious, and why the "spirits" of a man who was kind and generous in life suddenly becomes selfish and demanding after his death.

We read that when Satan fell from heaven after he sinned, he took with him one third of the angels (Rev. 12:4, 9). "God spared not the angels that sinned, he cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Peter 2:4). "These evils angels are our enemies, "for we wrestle not against flesh and

blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness" ["the spiritual hosts of wickedness," R. S. V.] "in high places" (Eph. 6:12). They are called "seducing spirits" (1 Tim. 4:1), whose success is due to their ability to deceive people who are ignorant of the truth taught in the Bible. The Lord said to his people, "Harken not ye to . . . your enchanters, nor to your sorcerers, . . . for they prophesy a lie into you (Jeremiah 27:9, 10). "Even Satan can disguise himself to look like an angel of light! So it is no great thing if his servants [fallen angels] disguise themselves to look like servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:14, 15, G.N.B.).

On one occasion Satan (or one of his evil angels) disguised himself to look and talk like the dead prophet Samuel, and fooled king Saul of Israel (see 1 Samuel 28:7-20). This evil spirit had no good news for the distraught king, but drove him to insane despair and ruin. We know the "spirit" could not have been the real Samuel, for God would never permit one of his faithful children in heaven to be snatched away by Satan or his fallen angels and dragged down to a dark cave on this earth, and command some devil-worshipping witch. What kind of a place would God's heaven be if Satan had this power to yank out anyone he chose as though he were the boss?

In fact, we know from what the Bible says: Samuel himself was not in heaven after his death. When Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, died, the Saviour said, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth. . . . Howbeit,

Jesus spoke of his death: but they [his disciples] thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead” (John 11:1-14). Paul speaks of the dead as those “which are asleep . . . in Jesus.” When Christ returns in the clouds of heaven, these “dead in Christ shall be first” (1 Thess. 4:13-16).

In death, a person knows nothing and can do nothing. “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:4). A dead man’s “sons come to honor, and he knoweth it not; and they are brought low, but he perceiveth it not of them” (Job 14:21). It is obvious that a dead ancestor can do nothing to torment his sons or their families. “The dead know not anything” (Eccl. 9:5). An evil spirit may indeed haunt a house, but it is not the dead man’s spirit, for the dead man “shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more” (Job 7:10).

This is comforting “good news”! The one who believes the Word of truth can shout for joy at his deliverance from the spiritual slavery that fear of angry ancestral spirits imposes on him.

So what of the people of the town whose school was struck by lightning?

Storms and lightning are part of the weather. Rain falls alike on the just and the unjust. There are scientific reasons why lightning is attracted to certain hills more than others. What the town needs is simple lightning arrestor rods fitted to their school building. Then the charge of electricity in the lightning will pass harmlessly to the ground. Offerings to the “spirits” won’t help!

Where did this fear of ancestors begin? We find the beginning of this wrong idea in a lie which Satan the deceiver told in the Garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve free access to all the fruit trees throughout the glorious garden, but of one tree He said, “Of this tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Gen. 2:17). Satan lied to Eve, for he said, “Ye shall not surely die. . . . In the day ye eat thereof, . . . ye shall become gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4, 5). This was a direct contradiction of what God had said. This is the source of the almost universally held belief in the natural immortality of the soul.

Which shall we believe—the Word of God or the word of Satan?

Even some Christians who say they believe the Bible have inherited this false concept of natural immortality, and try to mix it with their Christian beliefs to make a kind of religious stew. It is flavored with Christian terminology while its basic element is the ancient pagan idea of a natural immortality. If the false idea is cherished, it will eventually work like slow poison to corrode all other Christian understanding.

For example, if the soul is naturally immortal, then Christ is robbed of his glory as the great Life-giver, for the Bible says there is no life apart from Him (John 1:4; 1 John 5:11-13). And the resurrection becomes an unnecessary extra if the righteous go directly to their reward in heaven at death. Yet Jesus said that there are two resurrections, one for

the righteous and one for the wicked (John 5:28, 29).

More than that, if the soul is naturally immortal, one cannot die; and that means that Christ Himself did not truly die for our sins on the cross. Furthermore, if He did not die for us on the cross, He could not have been truly resurrected. The apostle Paul corrects all this by saying plainly, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; . . . and . . . he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3, 4).

If Christ did not truly die for us on the cross, then, he did not sacrifice Himself for us, and the love revealed at the cross is robbed of its true dimensions of grandeur. It seems that John 3:16 is wrong when it says that “God so loved . . . that he *gave* His only begotten Son;” He only *lent* Him. That cannot be true; He *gave* Him, even to the uttermost, the equivalent of what the Bible calls “the second death” (Rev. 2:11; 20:14).

What “fierce temptation” “wrung” Christ’s heart on His cross? *To leave us to perish*. He faced a “horror of great darkness,” for never had anyone died the kind of death He knew He had to die.² He had the added capacity for suffering that divinity combined with humanity made possible, the distilled horror of all earth’s billions who die their own second death,

² No human being has ever died bearing the combined guilt of the world, even the poor wretches who were crucified in the ancient Roman Empire. Even the unrepentant thief who died on his cross with Jesus did not feel the full wrath of God against sin. Doubtless he took the pain-killing drug that Christ refused.

all compressed into an exquisite agony felt by one divine-human soul. His sacrifice would be meaningless and helpless were He not divine. “Now the tempter had come for the last fearful struggle. . . . Terrible was the temptation to let the human race bear the consequences of its own guilt.” (DA 687, 688).

Because Christ “became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross,” “therefore God also has highly exalted Him” (Phil. 2:8, 9; Isa. 53:11, 12). Since no one else has ever been so highly “exalted,” it’s obvious that no one else has ever died the death He died. The highest honor given Him presupposes the lowest death—for “every man.”³ “Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror.”⁴ His subsequent resurrection could not invalidate the extent of that self-emptying sacrifice. Thus His *agape* demanded His resurrection. How can one not rejoice forever?

His greatest temptation was the fear that He had not been successful in His sacrifice by which *we* might have eternal life. Psalm 22 discloses Christ’s second death experience on the cross and His final victory just before He took His last breath: He rejoiced that *we* would live forever, not that *He* would (see vss. 22-31). Wonder, O heavens!

³ If Jesus in His incarnation had not taken man’s fallen, sinful nature, He could not have died for us. His death was a total “condemnation of sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). He could not have “condemned sin” in a sinless nature.

⁴ *Desire of Ages*, p. 753.

Did Ellen White teach the “moral influence of the atonement doctrine”? No, but it appears on the surface according to her inspired words that she came close:

“A true sense of the sacrifice and intercession of the dear Saviour will break the heart that has become hardened in sin; and love, thankfulness, and humility will come into the soul. . . . This is the true religion of the Bible; everything short of this is a deception.”⁵ “The atonement . . . was made as a manifestation of the love that was ready in God’s heart. . . . *The death of Christ was expedient in order that mercy might reach us with its full pardoning power*, and at the same time that justice might be satisfied in the righteous substitute.”⁶

The “moral influence” doctrine is right in what it says; it’s wrong in what it doesn’t say. A sense of justice must permeate the universe of God, not vindictively demanding the death of the transgressor as revenge, but demanding that sin be eradicated. The lost will perish only because they cling to sin. Love cannot perpetuate their existence when it would only heap up more misery for themselves and for everybody else.⁷

So let’s present the atonement as not only a great legal accomplishment, but a heart-winning love that delivers us from the selfishness of our sin.

⁵ *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, p. 625.

⁶ ST May 30, 1895, obviously written under the influence of the “most precious message” of the 1888 era.

⁷ See A. T. Jones, *The Consecrated Way*, pp. 83, 84 (original printing, p. 117).

What we call death, is not the real thing—it is what the Bible calls “sleep.” The real thing is that “second death” which is for ever and ever. And Christ truly tasted that “death for every man” (Heb. 2:9). Such “perfect love casteth out fear.” Light, sunshine, freedom from fear, joy, all spring up in the human heart when this beautiful truth is seen and believed. No more nagging doubts and secret anxieties.

Another thing: we don’t have to worry about the condition of our loved ones in death. So often we read in the newspapers funeral notices that say, “May God rest his/her soul in peace.” Mourners pay enormous sums to have priests pray for the souls of their dead loved ones, fearful that they may be suffering in some place of torment, or they may be angry if the living don’t ransom them by expensive sacrifices. All this, the Bible says, is in vain, for God loves the dead one more than we could ever have loved him/her. We don’t need to beg Him or bribe Him to give peace to the dead, they are “asleep,” quietly waiting at peace until the resurrection day. Those who have believed in Jesus “sleep in Jesus” (1 Thess. 4:14). Even if they rest in the grave a thousand years, it is like a twinkling of an eye to them.

The next moment for the one who dies in faith will be the moment of awakening when he sees his Lord at the resurrection day. Says Job, “All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change comes.” “If I wait, the grave is my house” (Job 14:14; 17:13). As the sun rises in the morning and the birds sing their beautiful songs to awaken us after a refreshing night’s sleep, so, says Isaiah, “thy

dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust; for the earth shall cast out the dead” (Isaiah 26:19).

How will this grand event take place? “The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16). This is what Jesus called “the resurrection of life,” or the “first resurrection” (John 5:28; Rev. 20:5). He says, “I am the resurrection, and the life” (John 11:25). Who would try to snatch that hope away from us and make us believe that we don’t need Him because we supposedly have life naturally in ourselves? Can you recognize the slimy trail of that liar who has been deceiving the world ever since the Garden of Eden? All the dead are prisoners in their graves, awaiting liberation at the second coming of Christ. Our only hope is in Him—and that’s a good place to place our faith.

What about our ancestors’ salvation? Some who discover the glorious truths of the Bible wonder about their beloved who died without this precious knowledge. Again, God’s love “casteth out fear.” Remember that God loved your ancestors as much as He has loved you! You must trust them in His care. He will do what is best, and we can rejoice in His mercy as well as in His justice.

The man had been a bachelor until late in life; then he met the woman of his dreams. She responded and the two seemed as happy as twenty-year-olds. They were married in a civil ceremony.

Then she came down with cancer. C. S. Lewis was devastated; but then some good news—the cancer went into remission and once again they felt they had discovered Paradise. Now they were married by a Church of England priest. It seemed that God smiled on them; but again the cancer returned and Joy died.

Says one author: “Lewis experienced a devastating sense of distance from God, . . . ‘the dark night of the soul.’ Lewis wrote: ‘But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside After that, silence.’ . . . The danger was not that Lewis would become an atheist. Instead, he wrote: ‘The real danger is coming to believe such dreadful things about Him’.”⁸

Before you condemn Lewis, take a good honest look at our own Judeo-Christian Bible: numerous of our Psalms express the same desperate feelings (88, 22, 69, for example; and of course Job). The greatest Psalmist of all eternity once cried out, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). But what Lewis could not understand was that Christ endured that soul agony so that we might never have to endure it; but his soul was darkened by the belief he had inherited of the immortality of the soul. That doctrine derived from ancient paganism but taught in the Christian church had darkened his view of the cross of Christ. Hundreds of millions now suffer likewise. God has called a

⁸ Art Lindsley, *Case for Christ*, pp. 60, 61, Inter-Varsity Press, 2005.

people to tell the truth about the cross, what happened there. It's what Malachi says "Elijah" will proclaim to our darkened world—reconciliation of soul with God and with one another (4:4, 5).

It's been some time since your beloved died. Some may assume that this is time enough for the grieving to be assuaged, but it's not. You loved them dearly—tears still come.

But the Lord is with you through the Holy Spirit. Tears in grieving are painful; but thank the Lord for His "comfort of the scriptures." The sooner you know about that "comfort," the happier you will always be.

We are assured that in the life to come, which is ours through Christ, "God shall wipe away all tears from their [our] eyes; and there shall be no more . . . sorrow, nor crying" (Rev. 21:4). Why not choose to believe this good news?