



THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD

PART 1 & 2

By R. Baruch, PhD

The Firstborn from the Dead: Part 1

What happens to a person when he or she dies is a very important question. The Bible speaks in a most clear manner to this issue. In this article we will take a brief, but comprehensive look at what Scripture declares on this subject. Death was mentioned in the very first book in the Bible, Genesis. G-d informed Adam and Eve (Chavah in Hebrew) that if one disobeys His command and eats the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, then this one would die (see Gen. 2:17). It is very important to note that G-d said, "...for on the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die." What did G-d mean? There are a couple of interpretations. The first is that on the day Adam and Eve ate, their bodies began a process that made it susceptible to disease and age and life, which was suppose to be eternal, now would eventually end. Although this was one of the outcomes of Adam's and Eve's disobedience (sin), it is the next interpretation which is preferred. This interpretation says that Adam's and Eve's sin caused their relationship with G-d to be changed. This is clearly seen by G-d casting them out of the Garden of Eden (see Gen. 3:23). Therefore, one can define death as a separation between man and G-d caused by sin.

This broken relationship can only be mended by a process know in the Scriptures as "redemption". More will be said about redemption later on in this article. We shall continue our focus on death.

A careful study of the Scriptures reveals that although G-d does not change, there are changes in what G-d makes known to man and based on these changes how G-d relates to man. Let's look at one classic example. In the book of Romans one read,

"For until the Law (was given) sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law."
Romans 5:13

Therefore the Scripture reveals a different reality for man before the Torah was given to that which was after the Torah was given. Let's now look at what the Scripture says about the place called Sheol. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word Sheol represents the place to where the dead descended. (It is important to know that it is only the soul of the dead person that descends to Sheol). The word appears 65 times in the Bible and in the book of Psalm this word is parallel with words such as grave, pit, and the like. One learns more about this place in the New Testament. There one learns that there are two compartments, so to speak, in Sheol. One is called Abraham's Bosom and the other is called Hades. Yeshua Himself spoke of Sheol in Luke 16 when He tells of the "Rich man and Lazarus". It is important to note that this account was not a parable. Yeshua reveals that these two men saw, spoke, and had all their senses while they were in Sheol (see Luke 16:19-31).

Why were there two compartments in Sheol? The first, Abraham's Bosom was where people of faith went when they died. It was called Abraham's Bosom because Abraham was known in the Scriptures as a man of faith. What type of faith does one need to have descended to this place when he or she died? The answer is faith in G-d's promise to Abraham of a Redeemer, i.e. Messiah. Peter also spoke of Sheol in his first Epistle. The context of this passage is extremely important. Peter, in discussing the death of Messiah, says that Yeshua went to Sheol and proclaimed to spirits in prison (see 1Peter 3:19). This verse makes it clear that those who died prior to Messiah's resurrection descended to Sheol. Those who believed that G-d would fulfill His promise to redeemed mankind through the Messiah went to Abraham's Bosom, while those

who rejected this promise and did not have any hope in the coming of Messiah went to Hell/ Hades (Hebrew Gehinom).

The verse says the Yeshua proclaimed to spirits in prison. This means He confirmed to them why they were there. What about those in Abraham's Bosom? The Epistle to the Ephesians answers this question. In chapter four Paul is speaking about Messiah's ascension into the heavens. He says that prior to His ascension Yeshua first descended into the lower parts of the earth (Sheol). There were two purposes for this. The first was to proclaim to the faithless why they were in Gehinom (as we have already discussed); the second purpose was to "lead captivity captive" (see Ephesians 4:8-9). What does this expression mean, "...to lead or take captivity captive"?

The Gospel of Matthew answers this question. In chapter 27 of Matthew the author is speaking of the exact time that Yeshua died on the tree. We are told,

"And behold, the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to the bottom, the earth shook, and many of the bodies of the saints which slept arose; they came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the Holy City (Jerusalem), and appeared to many."

Mt. 27:51-53

These verses are packed full of vital information to assist the reader in understanding what G-d's revelation to man is about death. First, one learns that although the soul of a dead person descends to Sheol, the body remains on earth and is buried. Death is just that, the separation of the soul from the body. While the body decomposes and returns to dust, the soul remains unchanged, but is confined to Sheol. As has been previously stated when Yeshua died He descended into the lower portions of the earth, i.e. Sheol, and took those in Abraham's Bosom captive; that is He revealed that He was the promised Redeemer and as Matthew says in chapter 27 after Yeshua rose from the dead, so too did the saints that were formerly in Abraham's Bosom.

Because Yeshua has emptied Abraham's Bosom, there are not any souls there today. Today when a believer dies he ascends to be immediately in the presence of Messiah Yeshua. Paul announces this when he says,

"We are confident, I say and am willing to be absent from the body and to be present with the L-rd." 2 Cor.5:8

The context of this verse is very important. There is a discussion taking place about death. It is interesting that the emphasis is on the soul of the person. The discourse says that if our earthly habitation is destroyed i.e., the body, then we will have an eternal habitation in the heavens (see 2 Cor. 5:1). If a believer immediately goes to heaven when he dies then what is Paul speaking about in First Thessalonians chapter four? In this chapter Paul uses the phrase "those who sleep" It is clear that like Messiah Himself, Paul is speaking about those who are dead.

There is a tendency in the Bible to refer to those who have died as merely asleep. The reason for this is to emphasize the resurrection. In the same manner that one who is sleeping will awake, so too the dead. For Daniel says,

"And many that sleep in the dust of the earth will rise; some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel 12:2

The error that many people make is to believe that the word "sleep" is used to convey a state of unconsciousness. This is not the case. As we have discussed, those in Sheol think, see, feel pain, and can communicate. Paul is speaking of a specific event in this fourth chapter of First Thessalonians. In order to understand what Paul wants to reveal one must first pay close attention to whom he is speaking; new believers that are in need of being taught about some of the implications of their faith. Paul is addressing the condition of those who have died in the faith. Paul states that the loved ones of those individuals who died in the faith should not be sorrowful (see verse 13). He says in the next verse,

"For since we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so they also which sleep in Yeshua, will G-d bring with Him." (I Thess. 4:14)

Please pay close attention to the phrase "... will G-d bring with Him." This means that there is a time coming when Yeshua and those who have died in the faith will come together to do something. What is this? To receive the promise of a new body, a spiritual body. Paul writes about this new spiritual body in 1 Cor. 15:35 to the end of the chapter. One of the questions that he addresses is when one will receive this spiritual body? Paul answers,

"Behold I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep (die) but we all shall be changed. In a moment, in a twinkling of the eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we (those who are still alive) shall be changed." 1 Cor. 15:51-52

This is the same event that Paul is writing about in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4,

"For since we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so they also which sleep in Yeshua will G-d bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the word of the L-rd, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the L-rd shall not precede them which are asleep. For the L-rd Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of G-d: and the dead in Messiah shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the L-rd in the air: and so shall we forever be with the L-rd." 1 Thess. 4:14-17

Therefore one can conclude the following: After Yeshua has taken captive captivity and emptied out Abraham's Bosom, there are now two possible locations for the souls of those who die. These two possibilities are Hell or Heaven. Those who perish without the proper faith in the Messiah and His work of redemption have their souls depart to Hell, while those who have believed in the Gospel have their souls immediately to go to Yeshua. Therefore there are three places for souls to be. The first is in the body of one alive on earth, the second is in Hell, and the third is with Messiah. The book of Revelation speaks clearly to this truth.

In speaking about the Scroll in chapter five the reader is told that no one (except Messiah Himself) is worthy to break the seals and read the Scroll,

"And no man in heaven, or in earth, nor under the earth, was able to open the Scroll, or to even look at it." Rev. 5:3

This verse makes most clear that there are those in heaven, and on earth and under the earth (Hell). John, the writer of the book of Revelation uses the word "man" not to refer to the body, but rather to the soul. 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 are speaking about a time when Messiah, with those whose souls are with Him in the heaven will meet in the air with those believers who were alive on earth; for the purpose of receiving a new body- a spiritual body. In other words, Messiah will depart the heavens and appear in the sky with the souls of those believers who died in faith. At this time the tombs of those believers will open up most similar to what was discussed in Matthew 27:51,

"... and many of the bodies of the saints which slept arose; they came out of the graves after His resurrection..."

The difference here is that the graves will open, but the remains (dust) will in an instant be transformed into a new spiritual body which will be reunited in the sky with the soul. Then immediately after those who are still alive on earth will rise into the sky and their current bodies will also be transformed and they too will receive a spiritual body. This event is not an awaking of those who have laid dormant in their tombs in some state of "soul sleep", but as Paul emphasizes, a time when that which is corruptible (our flesh) will be transformed into incorruptible (the new spiritual body). This will serve as a testimony to those who are left on the earth.

Before this article is concluded a few Scriptures which appear to offer some conflicting information will be addressed. Some have said that the Bible says that there are not any real differences when a human being dies to that of an animal. They offer Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) chapter 3,

"I said in my heart concerning the speech of human beings that G-d would clarify to them that they are beast. For a happening to mankind and a happening to a beast, there is the same (one) happening to all; an advantage of man over that of a beast there is none! For all is vanity! All goes to one place, all were from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows a spirit of man arises upwards and the spirit of a beast descends downwards to the earth? Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 3:18-21

The mistake that is often made in quoting this passage is that the reader does not pay attention to the phrase "concerning the speech of human beings". This view which is voiced in this section of Scripture is not G-d's truth, but, it is clearly stated, the view of men. The King James Version translates this phrase "the estate of the sons of men", but the phrase which is used is the Hebrew: דְּבַרַּת בְּנֵי אָדָם. Furthermore the text states "that man has no advantage over a beast" and that "all is vanity." Surely there is no one living today, who believes in the True G-d who believes that everything is futile and that man has not any advantage over animals.

Those who believe in "soul sleep", a state of spiritual unconsciousness of the soul until the resurrection, often point to Ecclesiastes 9:5 and quote "The living know that they will die, but the

dead know nothing." They say, "Here is the proof, when one is dead they do not have any knowledge, it is as they are asleep." The problem with their assertion is they do not quote the entire verse nor do they understand the context. If one reads the verses surrounding this quotation it is clear that the main idea is hope. If one is alive there is an opportunity to repent and do the right thing, but after one dies he has no potential to change, his fate is sealed. Ecclesiastes 9:5 actually reads,

"For those who alive know they will die, and the dead do not know anything, and they do not have a reward for their memory is forgotten."

This verse is not saying that one who has died has lost the ability to think. Jonah the prophet dies and descends to Sheol (see Jonah 2:3, verse 2 in English). The Hebrew word Sheol is translated in the KJV as Hell) and he continues to pray. The point the Ecclesiastes 9:5 is making is that such people in Sheol do not have any knowledge of what is going on in the world of the living. Those in Sheol are cut off from what the Rabbis call the "world of doing". The phrase points out that while on earth one has the opportunity to do the commandments, but after one dies that opportunity passes. This is why the text says that "...they do not have any more reward..." Often the word translated "reward" means "payment" or "that which is earned". The verse ends with the phrase, "... for their memory is forgotten." This phrase is to emphasize that the dead are cut off from the land of the living. If one continues to read in the next verse he would find the phrase, "...neither have they (the dead) any more portion... in what is done under the sun."

Another verse that is used to say that the dead are in a state of unconsciousness is Psalm 88:12 (11 English),

"Shall Your mercy be declared in the grave and Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?"

This Psalm is written by a man who most commentators believe has leprosy. He is cut off from family and friends and is forced to live in the cemetery because of his state of contamination. This man, called He'man, is simply asking questions, not revealing theological positions. He does not know the answers to such questions. It is most significant that in the next Psalm one reads verses such as,

"And my mercy I will not take from him, nor will I allow my faithfulness to fail. My covenant I will not break, nor alter the word which has gone out of My lips. Once I have sworn My holiness, that I will not lie unto David." Psalm 89:34-36 (33-35 English)

It is not an accident that David is mentioned in this passage. The name David often hints to the promises of Messiah. It is through His promises that Paul could proclaim in Romans chapter eight that nothing, including death, could separate the believer from the Love of G-d, which is in Messiah our L-rd.

Some will say, "What about Psalm 115:17, which says, 'The dead will not praise the L-rd, nor all who descend (in) silence.'?" This verse is speaking about those who are dead spiritually. For why else would the next verse read,

"But we will praise the L-rd from now and forever Hallelujah."

How would those who interpret Psalm 115:17 as to mean the dead cannot praise G-d, respond to Psalm 23:6, "...and will dwell in the House of the L-rd forever."? If one is present with G-d in His House certainly this one will be worshiping Him.

Finally there are those who raise the question of Yeshua being the First Born of the dead. This is an important title and will be the subject of Part II in our discussion.

The Firstborn from the Dead: Part 2

The Bible states in several places that Messiah Yeshua is the Firstborn from the dead. Just what does this phrase mean? There are some who say that although others were raised from the dead that they all eventually died again; like Lazarus, the widow's son, etc. ; therefore Yeshua was the first to rise from the dead never to taste death again. Although this is true, this expression is much more involved than this. In the previous article we showed Biblically that the doctrine of "soul sleep" is errant and after Yeshua emptied Abraham's bosom in Sheol there are only two possibilities for the dead. The first is in hell and the second is to be with Yeshua in heaven. In both places there is a consciousness.

The term "firstborn" is a technical one in Judaism. It does not refer to just any child born first to a set of parents. The firstborn had to be a male; therefore if a daughter was born first, that family would not have any firstborn. The Bible makes it clear that this term is a right or privilege more than a description of an order of birth. We all know the story of how Esau sold this right to Jacob and how Rueben forfeited the same to the son's of Joseph (see I Chronicles 5:1). So again just what does the term "firstborn" mean and why was it applied to Yeshua?

The first thought that should enter one's mind when the term "firstborn" is employed is heir. This is the foundational idea of the right itself, the firstborn would receive a double portion of his father's estate (see Deuteronomy 21:17). What does this concept have to do with the Messiah? Let's look at Colossians 1:15 to assist in answering this question.

"And He (Messiah Yeshua) is the image of the invisible G-d, Firstborn of all creation"

What is this verse revealing? That Messiah Yeshua will inherit all creation. This idea of inheriting and the purpose inherent to it becomes clearer when one considers a similar text,

"And from Messiah Yeshua, the Faithful Witness, the Firstborn of the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth, for He is the One that has loved us and freed us from our sins in His blood."
Rev. 1:5

When Yeshua is called the Firstborn of the dead, the phrase is instructing the reader that not only will He inherit all creation but that He will also rule over all of creation. It is by His death, which He freely chose that He received the right to be given the name that is above all names and to which every knee will bow and every tongue will confess (Philippians 2:8-11). This passage shows that Yeshua, Who eternally being the very nature God i.e., divine (see Philippians 2:6), humbled Himself and received (inherited) the right to rule over all creation. It is not an accident that those who believe in Yeshua are also called firstborn,

"To the assembly and congregation of the firstborn having been written in the heavens,..."
Hebrews 12:23a

This verse declares that believers will inherit the right to live eternally in the Kingdom of G-d. Not only will Messiah's followers be in the Kingdom, but also we will share in a portion of Messiah's rule.

"...they lived and ruled with Messiah a thousand years." Rev.20:4b

Therefore the usage of the phrase "Firstborn from the dead" in regard to Messiah emphasizes His authority and relationship to all those who have died. What type of death is being referred to here? The same type of death, which is referred in Romans 6,

"Do you not know that all of us who were baptized in to Messiah Yeshua, that into His death we were immersed. We baptized with Him into an immersion of death." Rom. 6:3-4a

And why were we united with Him in the likeness of His death?

"...in order that we should walk also in new life." Rom.6:4b

How does this "new life" look? What is its character? It is the life of Yeshua we are called to embrace; it is His character that must become our character. Therefore the fact that the term "firstborn" is used for Messiah and His followers teaches that there ought to be a unity between Him and us in every aspect of life. As believers this is our biblical destiny.

It is a shame that all too often one focuses on what he expects G-d to do for him; rather than how one can serve Hashem and carry on the work of the Kingdom. The concept of the "firstborn" is related to the Kingdom. How so? The Kingdom represents a new reality, which is superior in every way to the world in which we now reside. This idea of superiority is seen in the term "firstborn" in the following verse,

"He (Messiah) is the head of the body—that is the congregation. He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, in order that in all things He should have Preeminence." Col. 1:18

Although these two words are translated with two very different words in English, firstborn and preeminence; the two Greek words are inherently related to one another: πρωτότοκος and πρωτεύων. Hence the Messiah Who is superior in all things calls the believer to share in this same quality of life, i.e. His life. It is this Kingdom life that the believers are called / commanded to live now in this world. It is this quality of life that is superior to the life that nonbelievers live that will cause the glory of G-d to be manifested in the believer and through him. It is this manifestation that bears witness to the change that has happened to the believer by means of the Gospel message.

Also related to these concepts is the idea of victory. The term "firstborn" obviously is related to the resurrection. Both in Judaism and in the New Covenant resurrection is based on the idea of victory over death. Since death and sin are parallel concepts, what is being referred to is a victory over sinful behavior. Messiah Yeshua died as an outcome of sin, but not His sins (as He never committed any sin); rather the sins of humanity. When He rose from the dead He demonstrated His victory over sin in which the believer is commanded to share. It is this victorious lifestyle (apart from sin) that is superior and what the believer inherits. There is another term that refers to this type of life; it is eternal life.

It is wrong to think that this is something that the believer receives after he dies physically. Rather he receives this eternal life the moment he accepts the Gospel. The concept of eternal does not imply any interruption. That is, one does not begin to demonstrate this life for a while and then die and enter into a state of "soul sleep" for an undetermined period of time only to

wake up and continue this quality of life. Rather physical death only changes the location of where one lives a life focused on serving / worshiping the Living G-d. Those who have died in Messiah are in the heavens worshiping HaShem. For one reads in the book of Revelations about those who were in the heavens and were waiting for their fellow believers to join them (see Rev. 6:10-11).

For many believers there is a lack of knowledge of this great potential one has now through Messiah Yeshua to begin to live a victorious life inheriting the resurrection power to turn away from sin and embrace the superiority of Messiah so that we can demonstrate our relationship with Him now and forever more.