

Jesus Is Our Life. What Does This Mean?

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Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the **life**. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26)¹

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the **life**. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Introduction

Jesus makes two statements about life, quoted above, both of which bear sustained reflection. Each has a context. Each, considered apart from its context, could lead – and has often led – to incorrect conclusions. Let us consider these two statements.

The resurrection

Our primary focus will be on vs. 25 in this section, but there is much to learn also from vss. 24 and 26.

Verse 25

When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), some leave off the first term. But He does not say only, "I am the life." He says, "I am the resurrection and the life." There is some theology here. Do our departed loved ones live in at death, or do they sleep in Christ until a day of bodily resurrection?

In John 6 Jesus repeats four times the assertion that He will raise those who follow Him "at the last day." Here are four passages:

"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up **at the last day**." (John 6:39)

"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up **at the last day**." (John 6:40)

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"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up **at the last day**." (John 6:44)

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up **at the last day**." (John 6:54)

Verse 24

Let no one think that these parallel passages from chap. 6 are irrelevant when we come to chap. 11. We quoted John 11:25-26 above, but consider vss. 23-24.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection **at the last day**." (John 11:23-24)

In saying this, Jesus either means what He says or does not. There is a theology which would take the core of His meaning out of such statements. He will raise the dead at the last day, true enough, but they won't need raising when He does this. Such a theology is misguided. Jesus does nothing needlessly. He speaks no word idly (see Matt 12:36). What He says, He means. What He says, He will do. And when He does it, it is needed. He says again,

There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him **at the last day**. (John 12:48)

Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist theology of death is based squarely on the concept of resurrection – both the reality of the resurrection and the need for it. Our loved ones sleep in the dust until Jesus comes to wake them.

Verse 26

Jesus is not finished yet saying what He has to say. He goes on to add, "and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (vs. 26) Does vs. 26 negate what we have just learned from vs. 25? What does He mean when He says that those who believe in Him will never die?

But that is not actually what He says. The statement is not that whoever believes in Him will never die, but that "whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (vs. 26). Is there a difference? Does it matter if we include or leave out the word "lives"? How could one believe without being alive? Of course those who believe in Christ are alive. Why say it?

Context will help us here, if we allow it to. Jesus has just spoken about the resurrection. The resurrection is for those believe in Jesus and die. And now He says that whoever lives and believes in Him will never die. Is there a difference between being dead and being alive? Some of those who believe in Christ will have died by the time he comes for them, others will be alive to see Him come. Those who remain will be "caught up together with them [i.e., those who died] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (see 1 Thess 4:17). Jesus' intent in John 11:26 is that whoever among His followers is alive at the time of the resurrection will never die. Some will die and be raised. Other will go to heaven without tasting death, as in the case of Elijah (see 2 Kgs 2:11).

To suggest that John 11:26 means every living person who believes in Jesus will never die goes beyond the context. It is not the case that when they breathe their last they keep on living, but in another place. Jesus does not negate in vs. 26 what He has asserted in vs. 25. Both statements are in perfect agreement with each other and with many other passages of the New Testament. But both must be understood within their context. Otherwise they will be misunderstood.

The way and the truth

Another way to misunderstand the concept that Jesus is life is to remove His status as the Source of our life from His status as both the Way and the Truth.

Notice the sequence. First the Way, then the Truth, and only then the Life. Jesus is the Way to the Father for everyone who comes, with or without prior knowledge. He leads those who do not yet know Him. If He did not, He wouldn't lead anyone. But once we know Him, He guides into more and more truth through the work of the Holy Spirit.

If we come to know Jesus as the Way, but refuse to grow in our knowledge of Him as the Truth, that is not a saving relationship. Jesus is Life only to those who come to Him (as the Way) and who abide in Him (as the Truth). This is the meaning of another statement, found in the next chapter of the gospel of John.

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:4-5)

Discussion

We receive life from Christ only by receiving Him as the Source of life. We do not have life in ourselves and do not go to heaven unaided when we die. Christ must come and personally escort us there. Nor does He come separately for each believer at the moment of death. He died once for all (see) and He comes once for all.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

It is important to take Paul's words in their context, just as it is important to take Jesus' words in their context. When Paul says "that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen

asleep in him" (vs. 14b), he does not mean that those who have fallen asleep in Christ are already in heaven and that Jesus brings them from heaven back to earth to be raised.

He has just said "that Jesus died and rose again" (vs. 14a). Was Jesus coming from heaven to earth when He rose again? No. He was going, in a broader sense, the other way – from earth to heaven. He had just spent "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt 12:40). When Jesus rose from the tomb He was leaving "the heart of the earth." And when He brings with Him "those who have fallen asleep in Him" (1 Thess 4:14b), they also will be leaving the heart of the earth.

Conclusion

Let us take Jesus' words (and Paul's words) just as they read. These words do not come to us in isolation from each other. They were uttered in sentences and those sentences were called forth by situations. Such things can be taken into account, or ignored, but they are there.

Those who fall asleep in Christ – including just yesterday morning (at 6:05 a.m.) my wife and beloved companion of 32 years – are not already in heaven. They are out of Satan's reach, at perfect rest in Christ, until the Savior comes to wake them and personally escort them to the place He has prepared for them (see John 14:3). They are His, but He comes at one time to claim them all – together with those of us who remain, and remain faithful.

"Therefore encourage each other with these words" (1 Thess 4:18).

How could we take courage from these words, or from any other, if courage were something we already had? No. It is when our hearts break that we need Scripture's precious promises.