

MILLIONS NOW LIVING MAY NEVER DIE!

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Recently in Bible Class we discussed Hebrews 11.5, which says, "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God."

Enoch, one of the Bible characters who lived before the Great Flood, pleased God through faith, and as a consequence, he was translated bodily out of the world into Paradise. At a time when death was reigning supreme, left this world without dying. Hebrews 11 is written to demonstrate that the faith of the Christian Church is in true continuity with the faith of the Old Testament patriarchs, who are examples of the benefits of faith in the Lord. Through faith, Enoch was delivered from death. His story appears in Genesis 5.21-24:

"And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah: And Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah three hundred years, and begat sons and daughters: And all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty and five years: And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him."

He walked with God, that is, he had a true faith in the Lord, which found expression in a godly and devout life. And because he was taken out of the world, he was spared from the judgment of the Great Flood.

Now, Enoch was not the only person in the Old Testament to go bodily to heaven without first dying. Elijah was one of the greatest prophets in all the history of Israel. In the Old Testament he is second only to Moses renown. At the end of his prophetic ministry, God took him directly, bodily to heaven, delivering him from physical death. We read in 2 Kings 2.11:

"And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."

So, there were two people in the Old Testament who went to heaven without dying. What does this mean for us? Enoch and Elijah were two men of faith, who, out of all other people of faith, were granted a special privilege of being translated bodily out of this world. From the days of Jesus' earthly life until the present, all Christian believers have left this world by means of physical death. Their spirits are now present with the Lord Jesus in Paradise as they await the resurrection of their bodies on the Day of Judgment.

We Christians know that when we die we go to be with Christ, which is far better than remaining in this fallen world, and this is a great consolation. But there is more. The Bible teaches us very clearly that the generation of Christian believers alive on earth at the time of the Second Coming of Christ will never die at all, but will be taken bodily up to the presence of Christ immediately after the resurrection of the dead. Just like Enoch and Elijah! In Matthew 24.37-41 we read:

"But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left."

The Great Flood is compared to the "coming of the Son of Man", and we learn that at His

coming, "one shall be taken, and the other left". This is further illuminated by 1 Corinthians 15.51-53:

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."

Here Paul assures us that we shall not all sleep; that is, not all Christians will undergo physical death. Those who are alive at the time of the "last trumpet" shall be instantly changed, becoming imperishable and immortal, and this will happen immediately following the resurrection of the dead. Let's look at one more passage: 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17:

"For 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: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

The Lord will descend with a shout, the trumpet shall sound, the dead will be raised first, and then believers alive on the earth at the time shall be "caught up" and be with the Lord forever. Now, we don't know when Christ is going to return, but we are encouraged repeatedly in the New Testament to live and act as though he were coming in our lifetime. That is, we are urged to make diligent use of the Word and the Sacraments, and, being built up in the faith, bear fruit in a life of good works and devotion. It may be that the Lord will return in our lifetime. Think of it: millions now living may never die. They may, like Enoch and Elijah, be translated bodily to heaven. But either way, whether we are translated escaping physical death, or whether we experience physical death, our home in heaven is guaranteed by the fact that Jesus Christ, who took away our sins when He died for us, rose again from the dead and conquered death for us. His victory and promise are our hope!