



Do the Dead Listen?

by Dale Fincher
www.soulation.org

Imagine if God had never revealed Himself to the world. It would bring a thought of hopelessness to us. If God had never spoken, we would not know that He is knowable; we would not know He made a way for us to know His love in Jesus; we would merely be left with the natural world around us and our intuitions within us.

I think one of our deep intuitions speaks of life after death. Life seems too short. And we speak of Time as if we expect to go on and on and on. We do not surrender to death easily, unless we know there is a life to come. This thought has led humans in communities around the world to embrace the religion of Animism or some forms of it.

Animists believe there are spirits that govern every natural thing. These spirits must be appeased in order to bring immediate peace over life's affairs. Along with these spirits is the belief that those who have died before us are also part of the spirit world

to be honored and sought for help. Why would an Animist believe their ancestors are also part of the spirit world that hears them? The reasoning of an Animist could be something like this: the only people I know in the afterworld are my parents. And since they know me and love me, they can show spiritual favor to all my circumstances on my behalf.

It is easy to see why someone, without the Bible, can be led to such conclusions and pray to the dead.

But this, interestingly enough, is a belief that has been syncretized into many world religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

I recently visited Rome on a study tour and visited the catacombs under the Church of St. Sebastian. There were prayers chiseled on the walls dating back to the ancient days of Rome. These prayers were addressed to Peter and Paul—not to Jesus as one would expect from the Christian community. Its ritual was closer to Maximus in the movie, *Gladiator*, than it was to the New Testament.

But it would be unwise to think this is a view held only in ancient days or in mystical cults. It is

something that comes to the present day in our popular media.

In the Disney cartoon movie, *Mulan*, the title character and others in her family are found praying to the dead ancestors to help *Mulan's* immediate needs of keeping the family honor as she visits the matchmaker. "Please, please be with *Mulan* today," they whisper.

With our Western moral and spiritual values rapidly becoming vacuous, the rise of spiritual needs and purposes in our everyday lives is opening doorways to animistic thinking. Though it may appear harmless, it is a present danger that ignores the reality of a God who is revealed, personal, alive, and near.

Dean Halverson, religions expert at International Students, Inc., writes that Animists believe organized religion is unhelpful when it comes to immediate practical problems. That is why Animism is attractive even to those who are involved in any of the formal religions of the world as well as those who visit the local Shaman, Witch Doctor, or neighborhood fortuneteller. The immediate needs and feelings of those who feel lost turn worshippers to this illusory help.

Why the fascination with the dead? Why suppose they are near? Why do some believe that only the dead, or our beloved ones who have left the earth, have the love to hear them, the power to help them, or the ultimate purposes to guide them?

This preoccupation with the dead has stemmed from a wrong view of God. The Animist assumes God is silent, removed, or impotent. But, truth is, God has actually spoken. We don't have to guess what He is like nor how He can help us. Our quest for our own apparent immediate needs can obscure our sense of God and His white-hot concern for His children. Perhaps our loved ones beyond the grave, like in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, have such a burden for our ultimate needs that our immediate needs pale in comparison. God leaves the testimony of His Word to make that declaration.

God makes a bold promise: "'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6). Paul writes, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). These promises are better than any Animist can offer.

The intellectual preacher, Jonathan Edwards, said, "It is the character of the Most High, that He hears prayer. Herein He is distinguished from all false gods."

The Father raised up Jesus from the dead. And it is the exactness of His testimony, the generosity of His love, the largeness of His knowledge, and the cosmic satisfaction of His purpose that brings Him near to us and asks us to pray. He is willing to hear and capable to lead us so we may say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."

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