

Question: As Halloween comes around again, we hear a lot about ghosts. Do ghosts really walk about the earth? What does the Bible say about ghosts?

The word “ghost” does not occur frequently in the Bible. We do find the phrase “gave up the ghost” as the translation of one Hebrew or Greek word that means “to die.” Some of the oldest English translations of the Bible, including the King James Version, translated words “spirit” and “ghost” from the same Greek word. This word is found 379 times in its various forms in the New Testament. The King James Bible translated it as “ghost” 98 times and as “spirit” 281 times. When the King James Version of the Bible was written in 1611, the word ghost meant the same thing as the word spirit does today: it represented the ethereal or spiritual part of man as opposed to the material body. However, as with other words in the English language, the word ghost carries different connotations for people today. In 1611, reference to the Holy Ghost did not communicate the idea of something eerie or spooky that was to be feared. Instead of being feared, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is given to Christians as a blessing (Acts 2:38; 5:32).

The only case of a human spirit coming back into this world is that recorded in 1 Samuel 28. Although King Saul had expelled all mediums and spiritualists, as the law of God commanded, he disguised himself and visited the witch (or medium) of Endor and asked her to call up the prophet Samuel. To the surprise and horror of the woman, Samuel did appear. Most Biblical students have concluded that God brought forth Samuel for the special purpose of telling Saul that because of his disobedience he and his sons would soon join him in death. This event was exceptional and in no way confirms the idea that spirits are allowed to walk the earth as they please.

In reading the New Testament account of the death of Jesus on the cross we learn that “tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life,” and “after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people” (Matthew 27:52-53). But these were not disembodied ghosts. They were bodies which had been raised up miraculously just as Jesus had raised up Lazarus from the dead (John 11) and as Jesus himself was raised (Luke 24:6-39). Jesus told his disciples that “a ghost does not

have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). Finally, Jesus told a story of a rich man who was being tormented in hades who wanted to send a warning to his brothers. He asked that someone from the dead be sent, but he was told that “if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). No one was sent.

All of the above seems to confirm that spirits of dead people, or ghosts, do not freely roam around on the earth. The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews says that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Since there is no appointment between death and the judgment, there is no reason to expect human spirits to be wandering about the earth.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2007/10 repub 2010/10/29