

From Shadows to Light:

A Biblical Response to Zomi Beliefs about Death and the Spirit's Journey

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Introduction

Until recently, I never considered the question “Where do we go when we die?” through a Zomi lens. During a visit to Singapore, a Zomi believer shared a deeply troubling experience. She told me, “I have been disturbed by the dead spirit of my loved one for over a week.” She continued with a theological concern rooted in Zomi tradition: “According to our Zomi belief, don’t the spirits of the dead remain on earth for only three days? Why have I been disturbed even after a week?” I paused, recognizing the gravity of her question, and suggested we meet at church to discuss this matter.

This conversation prompted me to reflect on my own oversight. I realized I had neglected to examine a profound question: “Where do we go when we die?” How should Zomi Christians reflect on this from their cultural perspective and in light of biblical teaching?

The question “Where do we go when we die?” ranks among the most profound inquiries that Zomi people ask. Indeed, it is a universal human concern reflected throughout Scripture. We find this question echoed in Job’s words and in the existential longings of believers across the ages.

For Zomi people, this question carries particular weight because it touches upon deeply held traditional beliefs that have shaped their understanding of the spirit world for centuries. Central to this worldview is the belief that the spirit of a deceased person remains on earth for three days after death. Some Zomi believe that certain spirits may transform into malevolent beings, devils or demons, that roam the earth, bringing harm or

misfortune to the living. These traditional animistic beliefs, rooted in pre-Christian Zomi culture, continue to influence the worldview of many contemporary Zomi Christians, creating significant tension between inherited spiritual frameworks and biblical teaching.

In this article, I will address this critical theological question with biblical clarity and pastoral sensitivity. As the Zomi church continues to mature in its faith, there is an urgent need to examine how traditional beliefs align with Scripture. I do not intend to denigrate Zomi culture or heritage; rather, I aim to ensure that the gospel transforms every aspect of life, including our understanding of death and the afterlife. My goal is not cultural imperialism but theological faithfulness: to present what the Bible actually teaches about death, spirits, and eternity in a way that speaks meaningfully to the Zomi context.

This discussion is important because misconceptions about what happens after death can lead believers astray and undermine their understanding of the afterlife. These misunderstandings may rob believers of the profound hope and comfort that the gospel offers in the face of death. Moreover, these beliefs raise fundamental questions about the nature of spirits, the reality of demons, and the sufficiency of Christ's mediation between God and humanity. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, Christians should not "grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13, ESV). My primary aim in writing this article is to illuminate that hope by exploring biblical teaching on death and the afterlife, while respectfully engaging with Zomi traditional beliefs and offering practical pastoral guidance for Zomi Christians navigating these important theological waters.

Understanding Traditional Zomi Beliefs about Death and Spirits, Pre-Christian Zomi Animism, and the Spirit World

Christianity was first introduced to the Zomi people in 1899.¹ Before the

¹ Robert Johnson, "The Church in the Chin Hills," *Burma Baptist Chronicle*,

arrival of Christianity, the Zomi people adhered to a complex animistic worldview that profoundly shaped our understanding of death, spirits, and the afterlife. Pu Vumson, who himself is a Zomi, writes, “Zomi believe in life after death, although it is said that a person can be reborn only if death is violent and instantaneous. The dead live forever as ghosts and keep their social status.”² This worldview was not merely a set of abstract beliefs but a comprehensive framework that organized social life, ritual practices, and communal identity.

Central to Zomi animistic belief was the concept of spirits inhabiting the natural world. These spirits, known by various terms such as *Dawi* (spirits inhabiting natural elements), *Kha or Sa* (the spirit or life force of a person), and *Si-kha or Misa* (the spirit of the dead), were understood to exert considerable influence over human affairs. According to Pu Sing Khaw Khai, “Si-kha seems to be the real soul of a person, which is immortal. His departure from his physical body marks the event of his death. He is the life force that continues his existence in the next world. The next life begins at the moment life departs from his body. The account of spiritual movements before the moment of death and the rites of funeral ceremonies suggests that the dead spirit does not go to his abode at once, but stays at home or in this world for a certain period of time. Tradition simply maintains that the dead spirit goes to his abode called *Misi-Khua*.”³ Moreover, the Zomi cosmovision divided existence into three realms: *Vantung* (the realm beyond the sky where the heavens lay), *Leitung* (the realm of land above the ground where humans dwell), and *Leinuai* (the underworld). Within this cosmological structure, spiritual beings occupied

eds. Generieve Sowards and Erville Sowards (Rangoon: Myanmar Baptist Convention Publication, 1963), 384.

² Vumson, *Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture* (Mizoram: N.T. Thawnga, 1995), 17.

³ Sing Khaw Khai, *Zo People and their Culture* (Churachandpur: Khampu Hatzaw, 1995), 130.

various positions of power and influence.

The traditional Zomi understanding of human nature reflected a dualistic view in which the physical body (*ci*) and the spiritual essence (*sa* or *kha*) were distinct yet intimately connected during earthly life. The spirit was understood as the animating force that gave life to the body. Significantly, this spirit was believed to temporarily leave the body during sleep or illness, explaining why people experienced dreams and why illness occurred when the spirit wandered too far from the body. This belief system established the conceptual framework for understanding what happened to the spirit after physical death.

There are testimonies of people leaving their bodies when they were very sick. Years ago, a man from my village became so ill that he was almost dead. He could neither speak nor open his eyes. However, when he recovered, he claimed to have left his body and visited the people he loved. He also said he could see everyone who talked about him or came to visit his dying body.

Beliefs about the Three-Day Period and Spirits becoming Devils

In an interview, Zam said,

In animistic beliefs, it is believed that when a person dies, the spirit of that person roams the earth for some time before moving on to its final destination. They believe they can still communicate with the dead person, and they even place valuable items in the coffin with the deceased, believing that the spirit of the dead will be satisfied.⁴

One thing that surprises me is that there is a group of Zomi Christians

⁴ Pau Lian Mung, *The Impact of Zomi Culture on the Transition from Animistic Beliefs to Christianity* (Manila: APNTS, 2025), 84.

who believe “the spirit of a dead person becomes a demon forever.”⁵ Some Christians today believe that the spirit of a dead person roams the earth for three days from the time of death before going to its final destination.⁶ These are animistic beliefs, yet many Zomi Christians still firmly believe them. Within Zomi animistic belief, death is not seen as the complete end of existence but as a passage from one mode of life to another. In Zomi understanding, when a person dies, the physical body begins to decay, yet the spirit *si-kha* does not immediately leave for its final destination. Rather, in the traditional view, the spirit is believed to remain close to the body or to familiar places for about three days. During this in-between period, the spirit of the deceased is thought to retain a certain link with the world of the living, possibly watching the funeral rituals and the grief of family members.

Even more disturbing is the belief that under particular conditions, especially in cases of violent death, murder, or when the proper funeral rites are neglected, the spirit of the dead could become unsettled, angry, or harmful. Such spirits are believed to become dangerous beings that roam the earth, bringing misfortune, sickness, or even death to the living. As a result, an atmosphere of fear has surrounded death and the dead, since families feel compelled to perform elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices to ensure the spirits of their loved ones would pass safely to *Misikhua* (the land of the dead) rather than turning into vengeful or demonic powers.

The idea of *Misi-khua* itself is very significant. This “land of the dead” was imagined as a place where the spirits of those who had died went on living in ways very similar to their former earthly existence of eating, drinking, marrying, and taking part in familiar activities. Crucially, traditional Zomi belief held that people’s moral character in this life shaped their condition in *Misi-khua*, implying a kind of moral evaluation.

⁵ Nang, interview by Pau Lian Mung, Kalay Myo, Myanmar, March 06, 2025.

⁶ Zam, interview by Pau Lian Mung, Kalay Myo, Myanmar, Oct 01, 2025.

As Pu, Sing Khaw Khai remarks, “According to the Tedim practice of funeral custom, the body of the dead is taken in the evening of the funeral day to the grave where it is placed lying down. Then one of the deceased’s relatives personally offers the dead two pieces of the cattle’s liver, one of which is placed in the right hand and the other one in the left hand, instructing the dead as follows: ‘Give the piece of the liver in your left hand to the one who you first meet on your way, and bring the other piece in your right hand to your grandfather so and so or your grandmother so and so.’”⁷ He further explains that “the word, ‘the one whom you meet on your way’ in the instruction indirectly refers to *Shah nu*, and the words ‘your grandfather and grandmother’ refer to the grandfather and grandmother who have already died.”⁸ Killing many enemies and achieving great renown during one’s lifetime is believed to determine one’s reign in the next life. “Traditional belief further implies that the dead could bring to the *Misikhua* all that is given to him at his funeral occasion and all the riches and social prestige that he accumulated in his lifetime. If he had obtained many human heads in this world, he would have many slaves in the next world.”⁹

Cultural Practices and Social Impact

These traditional beliefs about death and spirits profoundly shaped the Zomi people’s social practices and cultural identity. Elaborate funeral rites were regarded as essential to ensure the peaceful transition of the deceased’s spirit. Even today, the values of honoring the dead and centering life around spiritual respect remain deeply rooted among Zomi Christians. Funerals are often seen as occasions of social display, where families sometimes slaughter animals despite limited financial means, even taking on debt to uphold cultural expectations. As a result, some families suffer heavy

⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁹ Ibid., 132.

financial burdens after the death of a loved one. This reality is reflected in a common Zomi saying, *nuntak haksa lua zongh a ki si zo lo hi*, meaning “Life is so difficult that we don’t even have enough money to die.”

The fear of angering spirits or failing to honor the dead properly created a complex web of ritual obligations that governed much of traditional Zomi life. Decisions about village location, the timing of agriculture, and community affairs were often made based on spiritual considerations and through divination practices. Even today, many people respect certain taboos, believing they can endanger their lives. Such taboos include “Extending or enlarging one’s house or farmland is prohibited because doing so will bring a curse. Farming two farms that can be seen from each other is thought to be a risk to one’s life. Seeing a squirrel crossing the road is a bad omen. If someone is on a journey or hunting, they might even cancel their plans after seeing a squirrel crossing.”¹⁰

What the Bible Teaches about Death: The Reality and Finality of Physical Death

Biblical teaching portrays death as a definitive, God-ordained event that stands in clear contrast to many traditional Zomi views. Death is not merely a transition to another similar spiritual existence, but a profound division where the human person experiences a separation of body and spirit due to sin.

A key New Testament passage explains that each individual dies once, after which comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27). This establishes that there is no repetition of death or cycles of reincarnation; instead, what follows death is immediate divine judgment, not a period of wandering.

The Old Testament reinforces this understanding by describing humans as formed from the earth and destined to return to it, emphasizing

¹⁰ Pau Lian Mung, *The Impact of Zomi Culture on the Transition from Animistic Beliefs to Christianity.*, 84

the fragility and temporal nature of physical life. At death, the body decays and returns to the earth, while the spirit departs to face God, a truth reflected in wisdom literature that speaks of the dust returning to the ground and the spirit returning to its divine source, as stated in (Eccl 12:7).

Crucially, biblical teaching distinguishes clearly between the fate of the body and that of the spirit or soul. While the body returns to dust and awaits resurrection, the spirit has an immediate and distinct destiny, which leads to the next fundamental biblical teaching about life after death.

The Immediate Conscious State after Death

One of the most important and reassuring truths in biblical teaching is that death does not lead to unconsciousness, soul sleep, or a state of suspended animation. Instead, Scripture consistently affirms that at the very moment of death, the believer's soul or spirit immediately enters into conscious fellowship with God.

The Apostle Paul powerfully expresses this truth in his letter to the Corinthians: "We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8, NKJV). Paul presents death as a direct and immediate transition from physical existence to spiritual presence with Christ, with no intermediate wandering, no waiting period, and no lingering near the earthly body. When a believer is "absent from the body," they are instantly "present with the Lord."

Paul further reinforces this idea in his letter to the Philippians, written while he was imprisoned and facing possible death. He states: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain... I am hard pressed between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil 1:21-23, WEB). By calling death "gain" and describing being "with Christ" as "far better," Paul shows his confidence that death means immediate, conscious, joyful communion with the Lord, which would be meaningless if death involved unconsciousness or a fearful, wandering spirit. Perhaps the clearest example of this immediate conscious fellowship is found in

Jesus' own words to the repentant thief on the cross: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43, ESV). Jesus did not say "in three days," "eventually," or "after wandering," but "today," that very day, the thief would be with Jesus in Paradise. This promise definitively refutes any idea of spirits lingering on earth or undergoing a period of uncertain wandering after death.

Where Believers Go When They Die

A Zomi historian said, "Zomi Christians need to reconsider our Bible and beliefs. *Sunglut* (i.e., reincarnation to a human being): Until today, I cannot accept that Missionary Thangngin was incarnated. It is believed that he was incarnated, but I wonder why so-called Christians believe in that when the Bible never mentions such a thing."¹¹ This belief remains in our minds to this day. That is why, when a baby is born with a mark or scars, the parents kill a white local chicken to help the baby forget the previous life.¹²

Scripture teaches that when believers in Jesus Christ die, their souls or spirits go immediately to be with the Lord in heaven. Heaven is described not primarily as a location but as the dwelling place of God, where believers experience the fullness of Christ's loving presence in a wholly new way. It is the place where sin, sickness, and sadness are no more, and where believers live in perfect fellowship with Christ and with one another (Rev 21:3; Heb 12:22; Ps 11:4; Matt 6:9). The biblical vision is not of isolated individual spirits but of a community of believers, the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) enjoying communion with God and with each other.

Where Unbelievers Go When They Die

Just as Scripture is clear about the destination of believers, it is equally clear

¹¹ Nang, interview by Pau Lian Mung, Kalay Myo, Myanmar, March 06, 2025.

¹² Pau Lian Mung, *The Impact of Zomi Culture on the Transition from Animistic Beliefs to Christianity.*, 84

about the fate of those who die without faith in Christ. The Bible teaches that unbelievers face immediate separation from God and conscious existence in a place of torment. Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) provides a sobering picture of this reality. In this account, both men die. Lazarus, the poor beggar, is “carried by the angels to Abraham’s side” (v. 22), a place of comfort and blessing. The rich man, however, finds himself “in Hades, where he was in torment” (v. 23). Several crucial details emerge from this account. The rich man is fully conscious, aware of his surroundings, able to see Lazarus in comfort, capable of conversation, and experiencing real torment. He remembers his earthly life and cares about his living relatives, requesting that Lazarus be sent to warn them. Abraham explains that “between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (v. 26). This great gulf is unbridgeable; there is no crossing from one realm to the other, no second chances, and no possibility of spirits returning to earth to communicate with or influence the living.

This intermediate place of torment (Hades) is distinct from the final lake of fire (hell) described in Revelation 20:11–15, but it is nonetheless a real and conscious state of separation from God. After the final judgment, death and Hades themselves will be “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14), and those whose names are not written in the Book of Life will face eternal separation from God.

What Does Not Happen after Death: Correcting Misconceptions

In light of clear biblical teaching, we can state with confidence what does *not* happen when people die:

Spirits do not remain on earth for three days (or any period).

The Bible teaches immediate transition to either the presence of God or separation from God (Luke 23:43). There is no biblical basis for believing that human spirits linger on earth after death.

Human souls do not become demons or evil spirits.

Scripture absolutely clearly states that demons are fallen angels, spiritual beings who rebelled against God under Satan's leadership, not the spirits of deceased humans. The distinction between human spirits and demonic beings is maintained throughout biblical teaching. When Jesus and the apostles encountered demons, these were always identified as fallen angelic beings, never as departed human spirits (John 8:44; 1 Tim 4:1-2; 1 Pet 5:8).

The dead do not mediate for the living.

The Bible explicitly states, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5, ESV). The dead cannot and do not act as intermediaries between God and living people. Practices of praying to ancestors or seeking their mediation directly contradict biblical teaching and constitute a form of idolatry.

There is no reincarnation or second chances after death.

Hebrews 9:27 (NIV) declares that "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." The Bible offers no support for reincarnation, multiple lives, or opportunities to improve one's spiritual state after death through rituals performed by the living.

The Spirit returns to God.

One of the most frequently cited verses in discussions about what happens after death is (Eccl 12:7): "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." In Hebrew, the word translated "spirit" is *ruach*, which can mean "breath," "wind," "spirit," or "life force." Many biblical scholars understand this verse to refer to the animating life force, or breath, that God gives to bring about physical life. When God created Adam, he "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen 2:7). Similarly, throughout Scripture, God is described as the source of life, the one who gives breath and life to all creatures (Job 33:4; Acts 17:25).

When Ecclesiastes 12:7 says the spirit "returns to God who gave it," it

affirms that the life-giving force comes from God and returns to God at death. Most importantly, many scholars understand this as referring to the accountability and judgment that follows death. The spirit returns to God for judgment, as the very next verse confirms: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (v. 8), and later, “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:14). Initially, this verse does not teach that spirits wander the earth, linger for days near the body, or have any intermediate existence between death and standing before God. The language of “returning to God” emphasizes immediate accountability.

Combined with the New Testament’s explicit teaching about immediate presence with the Lord for believers (2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23) and immediate separation from God for unbelievers (Luke 16:23), Ecclesiastes 12:7 should be understood as affirming the immediate transition from earthly life to standing before God, not as supporting any notion of spirits remaining on earth.

Biblical Teaching on Demons and Evil Spirits

A crucial aspect of addressing the traditional Zomi belief that spirits of the dead become demons is understanding what the Bible actually teaches about the origin and nature of demons.

The Origin of Demons: Fallen Angels, not Human Spirits

Scripture consistently identifies demons as fallen angels, spiritual beings created by God who rebelled against him under Satan’s leadership. They are neither human nor were they ever human. Several passages make this clear.

John describes a war in heaven in the book of Revelation (Rev 12:7–9), “Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong

enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.” These angels form the demonic forces opposing God and his people.

Jude 6 speaks of “the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling, these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day,” indicating that demons are fallen angels who abandoned their original place in God’s order. Similarly, 2 Peter 2:4 states, “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment...” The Apostle Paul describes spiritual warfare, emphasizing this distinction: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). These are not departed human spirits but powerful angelic beings who chose rebellion against God.

Jesus’ Authority over Demons

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly encounters and casts out demons, who are identified as fallen spiritual beings, never as deceased humans. When Jesus cast demons out of the Gerasene man (Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39), the demons acknowledged their nature, asked permission to enter pigs, and recognized Jesus’ divine identity. In Mark 1:23–27, Jesus casts out an “impure spirit” from a man in the synagogue, and the demon recognizes Jesus as “the Holy One of God.”

Importantly, Jesus gave his disciples authority over demons (Luke 10:17–20), and this authority continues through the church by the Holy Spirit’s power. However, Scripture does not show Jesus or the apostles dealing with wandering spirits of the dead. The biblical worldview clearly distinguishes that human spirits go immediately to their respective places, either with God or separated from him, while demons are fallen angels who continue opposing God’s plans until the final judgment.

Implications for Zomi Believers

This biblical teaching has deep significance for addressing the traditional Zomi belief that spirits of the dead become demons. According to Scripture, this cannot happen. Humans, created in God's image (Gen 1:27), have a different nature and destiny than angels, whether faithful or fallen. When people die, their spirits immediately face God; believers enter his presence, while unbelievers are separated from him (2 Cor 5:8, Luke 23:43). But human spirits do not turn into demons or harmful spirits roaming the earth (Heb 9:27; Matt 25:46).

Any spiritual oppression, harassment, or attack experienced by the living comes from demons, who are fallen angels, not from the spirits of deceased relatives or community members (Ephesians 6:12 and James 2:19). This means the fear that dead relatives become harmful spirits lacks a biblical basis. Furthermore, rituals meant to appease the spirits of the dead or to keep them from causing harm are unnecessary and contradict biblical teaching (Isa 8:19; Deut 18:10–12).

The Blessed Hope: Resurrection of Believers

The Apostle Paul addresses the Thessalonian Christians' concerns about believers, who had died, with a powerful promise of resurrection. He writes: "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For 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" (1 Thes 4:13–14).

Paul then describes the sequence of events at Christ's return: "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. 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" (1 Thes 4:16–17).

Believers who have died are described as “asleep,” a metaphor for the death of the body, not for the state of the soul, which is consciously with Christ (Luke 23:43). When Christ returns, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:42–44). Living believers will be “caught up together with them,” experiencing bodily transformation without passing through death for “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20–21). The result is that all believers “will always be with the Lord” the eternal state of fellowship with God in resurrected, glorified bodies (John 14:2–3). The resurrection body is transformed, glorified, and immortal, freed from decay, death, and the limitations of our current mortal existence (1 Cor 15:53–54).

The biblical teaching on resurrection transforms how Christians understand death. Death is not the end, nor is it primarily to be feared (though grief is natural and appropriate). Rather, death is a defeated enemy as the apostle Paul claims. Christ has conquered death through his own resurrection, and believers can face it with confidence, knowing that it is merely a transition to the presence of Christ and, ultimately, to resurrection glory.

This hope should deeply affect how Zomi Christians approach death, both their own and that of their loved ones. Rather than fearing that deceased spirits might linger, become harmful, or need appeasement, believers can rest in the biblical promise that their loved ones who died in Christ are immediately with the Lord and will be resurrected to eternal glory when Christ returns.

Pastoral and Contextual Application for Zomi Christians

The Danger of Mixed Beliefs

As I reflect on the present situation of the Zomi church, one of the most serious challenges it faces is the pull toward syncretism—the quiet blending

of biblical Christian faith with traditional animistic beliefs. This blending often happens without conscious intention, because deep-seated cultural assumptions about the spirit world continue to shape how many believers think and respond, even after their Christian confession.

The belief that the spirits of the dead remain on earth for three days, or become demons, is a clear example of this syncretistic mindset. In such thinking, people try to hold on to a Christian identity while still relying on traditional animistic categories that stand in tension with, and ultimately contradict, the teaching of Scripture. This kind of syncretism slowly erodes the sufficiency of Christ, feeds unnecessary fear and spiritual bondage, and keeps believers from walking in the full freedom, assurance, and hope the gospel offers.

Responding to this reality calls for patient and loving pastoral discernment. I do not aim to attack or dishonor Zomi culture, which carries much that is beautiful, rich, and worth preserving. But rather, I want to help my people distinguish between inherited beliefs and practices that can be received and transformed by the gospel, and those that must be lovingly set aside because they oppose biblical truth. The story of Christianity among the Zomi already shows that the gospel does not erase cultural identity; rather, it purifies, redirects, and fulfills our deepest cultural longings in Christ.

Contextualization Vs. Syncretism: A Faithful Path Forward

As I think about leading the Zomi church forward, I see a clear distinction between faithful contextualization and the trap of syncretism. To me, “contextualization” means taking the unchanging truth of the gospel and expressing it in ways that connect deeply with our Zomi culture, making it understandable and alive for my people without ever altering its content. Syncretism, on the other hand, happens when we blend biblical faith with incompatible animistic ideas, diluting the power of Christ himself.

For us, Zomi Christians, good contextualization looks like this:

worshiping in our own Zomi language, songs, and rhythms that lift up Scripture's truth, tackling the real fears and questions from our cultural background, like what truly happens after death, shaping Christian funerals that offer biblical hope, while honoring our ways of grieving together as a community, and writing theological teachings in Zomi that speak directly to our traditional worldview, showing how the gospel answers our deepest longings.

But contextualization must never become a compromise. It cannot mean holding onto rituals to appease spirits of the dead, living in fear of ancestors who supposedly demand our attention, turning to them for help instead of to Christ alone, or seeking out diviners who claim to speak with the departed. My calling as a pastor is to guide us along this faithful path, where the gospel transforms our culture from the inside out, preserving what is good while rooting out what opposes God's Word.

Practical Guidance for Zomi Pastors

As a pastor among the Zomi people, I carry the weighty responsibility of guiding church leaders, including myself, to teach biblical truth with clarity and compassion, helping our believers make the shift from traditional worldviews to the freedom of faith in Christ. One key step is committing to clear, consistent preaching on what Scripture says about death and the afterlife, always drawing direct lines to those old beliefs that need gentle correction, while lifting high the hope and comfort that only the gospel brings, rather than just criticizing the past. Many of our traditional death practices stemmed from deep fears, but the good news is that Christ sets us free from all that. I urge fellow leaders to emphasize this in our teaching: believers do not need to fear death itself, lingering spirits, or demonic powers, since Jesus has triumphed over them all. As Paul reminds us, "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). This truth can transform anxious hearts into bold witnesses.

We also need to shape biblically faithful funeral practices that proclaim the hope of resurrection and the believer's immediate welcome into Christ's

presence, while still making room for our cultural ways of grieving together and supporting one another as a community, without any hint of rituals suggesting the spirit wanders or needs our help. When sudden or tragic deaths strike, I'm always ready to walk alongside families through counseling, offering firm yet tender reassurance from God's Word to keep them from slipping back into old fears and syncretistic habits.

In the end, my heart as a shepherd beats with the Christian hope that defines us: for those in Christ, death is not a fearful end, a vague wandering, or a turn into something evil; it's the door to being "at home with the Lord," far better than this life, just as Paul described. This glorious reality should fill our funerals, our care for the dying, and every word of comfort we speak to the bereaved, drawing our people deeper into the joy of eternal life with him.

Conclusion

As I conclude these reflections, the question "Where do we go when we die?" grips my heart not as abstract theology, but as a daily reality shaping how we Zomi live, face death, and comfort the grieving. We must honestly engage our traditional beliefs, honoring cultural heritage where it aligns with truth, while letting the gospel transform what contradicts it.

Scripture gives clear answers: human spirits don't linger on earth for three days, nor do they become demons; believers go immediately to Christ in heaven, unbelievers face separation from God; the dead don't mediate, only Jesus does, and all await resurrection for judgment. These truths free us from fear, comfort us in loss, knowing our loved ones are with him, redirect prayer to God alone, and promise eternal life in his renewed creation.

Many of the first believers in Pangsak Village, such as "Piangngin (1915), Kimngin (1917), Zamngo (1935), Khai Khaw Ngin (1948), Suak Lian (1948), and Piang Za Kham (1956), happily embraced the teachings of

Scripture.”¹³ They were overjoyed to abandon old religious practices, as Augustine said, “The things I once feared to lose became my joy to put away.” They let go of anything that did not align with Scripture, strengthening their relationship with God.

Embracing this doesn’t erase our Zomi identity; the gospel transforms culture from within, as history proves. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, I urge us: don’t grieve without hope, for God will bring back those in Christ, encourage one another with this word (1 Thess 4:13–14,18). For believers, death means to be present with the Lord, a far better state, until our glorious reunion at his return; light in shadows, hope in grief, and freedom from fear.

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¹³ Sum, interview by Pau Lian Mung, Kalay Myo, Myanmar, Nov 06, 2025.