

Is There Really Life After Death?



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Would you really like to know about life after death? Are you *really* sure? What if I told you that there is nothing after this life: that when we die we stay dead? Or if I said that we might be roasted in the fires of hell forever, unless we do something about it now? Would you *really* want to know?

Hope Springs Eternal

The intriguing thing is that every civilisation has had its own view about what might happen when we depart – whether it's the Red Indian off to his happy hunting ground; the Buddhist migrating from one form of reincarnated life towards Nirvana; the Christian going to heaven; or the Muslim going to Paradise.

If you've been to a funeral recently, even people who have no religious convictions like to think of the departed as having started life again in a happier environment. It's an in-built hope that we all seem to have: the hope that there is something afterwards. And perhaps we have that hope because life can be such an exciting and fulfilling experience. Nobody wants to think that it just ends when we die; like switching off the light and going to sleep forever.

How Can we Know?

Some people think that the only real way of knowing, one way or the other, is by getting a message from someone

who has already died and who is able to get through and tell us what it's like. But the messages that appear to be coming across, if they are coming from anywhere beyond the medium, paint a vastly different picture of what the departed are experiencing.

One psychic researcher concluded that, by and large, whatever the departed enjoyed on earth was what they were supposedly enjoying in the afterlife. If they were enthusiastic coffee drinkers – the coffee in heaven was marvellous; if they loved sport – the sporting opportunities were wonderful; and so on. It seemed that the enquirer, who knew the departed, was projecting such thoughts in the hope that a really good time was being had by all.

Harry Houdini, the escapologist, was also an illusionist and after his mother's death he took a keen interest in spiritualism, attending many séances before his untimely death. He became convinced that they were all a set-up and was very critical of the whole movement. Before he died, he had told his wife Beatrice (known as Bess) that if anyone could get across the divide and communicate, he would. But although she attended many séances in the years that followed, she died in 1943 without ever hearing anything from him.



Back from the Dead

There are people who have had near-death or out-of-the-body experiences, in the operating theatre or after life-threatening accidents, from which they later recovered, and they sometimes have recollections. One lady said that she felt that she was “swept into a peaceful, loving place of brilliant golden light and warm comfort.” She saw, “for the first time, the meaning of life and death”. But again, different people have different recollections, and no coherent or convincing picture emerges of the afterlife. For some, the experiences are deeply distressing: they can involve experiencing absolute emptiness, or an encounter with frightening or evil forces.

Some think that these various happenings come from the subconscious mind. But how can you know for sure? Even if you had such an experience yourself, could you really be sure that it is an experience of what life after death will be like when your time comes? Getting an authoritative and absolutely convincing view of the subject is hard. And there is something else.

Deep-Seated Hopes

We all have preconceptions which spring from deep-seated hopes, desires and beliefs. Changing those is likely to be hard for all of us, and because there are widespread beliefs about certain things, it takes a lot of personal courage to go off in a new direction. So, even if you were told something different, if it was new to you, the chances are that you would be wary and suspicious. You might need an awful lot of convincing. That's something common to human nature in all ages.

Jesus once told a parable which was based upon the beliefs which some Jews then had about what to expect after death. They believed that the faithful went to 'Abraham's bosom' – a place of comfort and rest; and the unfaithful went to eternal torment. In the parable, Jesus told how a beggar who had lived outside a rich man's home ended up in luxury, while the rich man was in misery. The rich man asked if the beggar would come across the divide and bring him some water, but the beggar could not help.

You can see the point of the story at once. Unless we help one another in this life, we may lose out in the life to come. But here's the punchline. In the parable, the rich man asks if a message can be sent back to his brothers who are still alive to warn them, so they can change their lifestyle while there is still time. But Abraham – the father of the Jewish nation – says this:

“They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them’. And he (the rich man) said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’” (Luke 16:29-31).

What Jesus was saying was that if we have very fixed views, nothing will change them unless we can really approach the issue with an open mind and are ready to accept what God has to say about the matter. That's the real value of the Bible – it gives us an insight into the mind of God and answers our most profound and far-reaching questions. So, if you really want to know the truth about life and death: read on!

The Secret of Life

Life is a very precious gift, so it is as well for us to know how it came about, where we have come from and what we are made of. And we also need to know if there is anything in us that can survive death. Otherwise corruption and decay appear inevitable.

“Wonderfully Made”

We now know far more about the working of our bodies than ever before. The human genome project has catalogued the genetic structure of the body and scientists have discovered the amazing workings of the single cell. You no longer hear people talking about a ‘simple cell’, as they used to do; for the marvel of God’s creative power has become ever clearer. Here’s an extract from an encyclopaedia explaining about DNA:

Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) is a nucleic acid that contains the genetic instructions used in the development and functioning of all known living organisms and some viruses. The main role of DNA molecules is the long-term storage of information. DNA is often compared to a set of blueprints or a recipe, since it contains the instructions needed to construct other components of cells, such as proteins and RNA molecules. The DNA segments that carry this genetic information are called genes, but other DNA sequences have structural purposes, or are involved in regulating the use of this genetic information.

(Wikipedia: article ‘DNA’)



Long before any of this was known about or even guessed at, one writer made this profound comment as he pondered human existence:

“I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in your book they all were written” (Psalm 139:14-16).

Now we know so much more about how everything works, we should marvel even more and praise the God who has made us. But times have changed. Now people marvel instead at the cleverness and skill of the scientists who have worked all this out. They worship and praise mankind, rather than the Creator of all.

God’s Thoughts

The same Psalmist went on to say this: *“How precious also are your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!” (139:17)*, and the prophet Isaiah added this message from God Himself:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,” says the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9).

God who created our vastly complicated and wonderfully formed bodily structure has far superior intelligence and knows so much more than we can ever know. So, if we want an answer to

the deepest questions in life, He is the only source of that knowledge. The prophet Isaiah goes on to say that just as the rain falls to refresh the earth, so God has given us His Word – the Bible – so that we can be refreshed, and grow in knowledge and understanding of divine things. And God adds this reassurance:

“As the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (55:10,11).

God who made the world can help us understand what we really want to know, and He will not fail in that endeavour, if we do our part.

Creatures of Dust

So just what are we made of and of what do we consist? The Bible has a clear account of how man was first formed. In the simplest possible terms it explains that:

“The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

And when man had broken God’s law, the death sentence passed upon him was a reversal of that process:

*“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; **for dust you are, and to dust you shall return**” (3:19).*

Adam had come from dust, which had been energised by God’s breath, and when he breathed out his last he would return to the dust from whence he had first come. It was a sobering sentence and spelled out a simple truth, which was later expressed in poetic form like this:

*“Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well. Then **the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it**” (Ecclesiastes 12:6,7);*

*“If (God) should set his heart on it, if he should gather to himself his spirit and his breath, All flesh would perish together, and **man would return to dust**” (Job 34:14,15);*

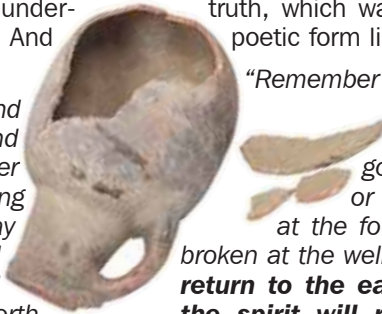
*“You hide your face, they are troubled; you take away their breath, they die and **return to their dust**” (Psalm 104:29).*

God’s Gift

Whilst it is easy to focus on the mention of dust, and to think of the bodily corruption that occurs when anybody dies, think instead about what is being told us about life.

Life is a gift from God. He energised Adam in the Garden of Eden and made it possible for mankind to come into existence and He has perpetuated the race that Adam and Eve fathered. Someone once said about God: *“He gives to all life, breath, and all things”* (Acts 17:25), and that generosity is evident all around us, all the time.

Life is the most marvellous thing we possess: it is God’s free gift to all of us.



He made the world, but He has allowed us to inhabit it, and has given us the freedom to use and enjoy it, as we have seen fit.

He gives and we receive. He is the source of life and we are creatures dependent upon Him. When our breath leaves the body, try as we might, we cannot get it back. Nobody can bring a dead body back to life: when it is dead it is dead. So here is a stark reminder of the difference between God and mankind: He is immortal and we are not. The Bible often makes that distinction and that is hard for some people to accept, but see for yourself

➔ **God: Immortal and Eternal**

*“Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, even **from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.** You turn man to destruction, and say, ‘Return, O children of men’” (Psalm 90:2,3);*

*“He (Jesus at his return to earth) will manifest in his own time, he who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, **who alone has immortality**, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power” (1 Timothy 6:15,16);*

➔ **Man: Mortal**

*“Do not let sin reign in your **mortal** body, that you should obey it in its lusts” (Romans 6:12);*

“For we who live are always delivered

*to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our **mortal flesh**” (2 Corinthians 4:11);*

*“Here **mortal** men receive tithes...” (Hebrews 7:8).*

It may come as a surprise, but nowhere in Scripture do we read of an immortal soul. In the early days of computer software, I was present when a group of Christadelphians visited Bible Research Systems in Austin, Texas and, when asked by the operator for a phrase, one visitor cheekily suggested “immortal soul”. The operator obliged and could not understand why we burst out laughing when the machine declared “Search Value Not Found”. We laughed because we already knew that the phrase did not exist, although it seems that the demonstrator did not know!

However nice it might be to think that we have an immortal capacity, the Bible makes it clear, as we have seen, that God alone has inherent immortality. We are mortal – dying creatures. But God, who first gave mankind the breath of life, can also give us life that lasts forever. The Bible calls this “eternal life” or “immortality”. Here’s one of God’s promises about that wonderful prospect:

“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

The bad news is that we could earn death; the good news is that there is an alternative. We could be given eternal life: the chance to live forever in a perfect world. What a choice and what an opportunity!



No Way Out?

The first time I visited a Christadelphian Meeting Room, I spotted a notice which said: “*What Christadelphians Believe*”. The very first statement on that notice board was: “*Man is Mortal*”, and it struck me as a strange thing to say. Would you really want to be reminded, every time you went to worship, that you could die, any time, anywhere, anyhow?

Years later, I can see why that is so important. Knowing that we might die and cease to exist forever is a huge stimulus for wanting to do something about it, especially if we find out that it doesn't have to happen. There is an alternative and once we know that, we can do something about it. It's a bit like a doctor telling you that you are seriously ill and will die before long, but that he can cure you. In fact, what God offers is much better than that. The choice is between eternal death and eternal life.

Surely Not!

The bit about eternal death doesn't sound very attractive, of course, for nobody wants to think that they might cease to exist. That's why so many civilisations have thought up their own form of afterlife. I was once at the funeral of a very nice man who had never had any interest in religion at all, but who was very interested in cricket. A friend of his, who was also a keen cricketer, said a few words and expressed the hope that his colleague



Another Christadelphian Notice Board: this one in Acocks Green, Birmingham, England

was now playing cricket in heavenly surroundings. It was a nice thought, meant kindly; and we comfort ourselves with such ideas when faced with the reality of death. But is it true? Do we go to heaven at death? Do we continue to live in some other form, in some other place? Or do we cease to exist?

Remember what God said to our first parents when they were warned not to break God's law. Adam had been made from the dust of the ground, when God

breathed life into him and the warning was that if he ate of the forbidden fruit, he would die. The existence of that law gave Adam and Eve a chance to show that they loved God and would obey Him, rather than just do their own thing. But, should they break the law, God said they would die, and He later defined death like this:

"In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

The Oldest Lie

Death, as God defined it, is a return to the ground; the body turning to dust. But the serpent who tempted Eve, and whose words led to their downfall, said that she didn't have to believe that. His subtle suggestion was that God wasn't telling her the whole truth but was hiding the real facts from her:

"You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4,5).

It's the oldest trick in the book! If you don't like what you're being told, make up your own mind and live according to what you think is right. That's what mankind has always wanted to do and, because Eve wanted to eat the fruit and wanted to be made like God, she ate; and so did Adam. But the choices they made don't alter the facts. Adam was given a reprieve, when God provided a covering for his sins, but the sentence eventually caught up with him:

"The days of Adam were eight hundred years; and he begot sons and daughters. So all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died" (Genesis 5:4,5).

It's like the sounding of a death knell in Genesis chapter 5, for the words *"and he died"* apply to all the generations listed there: Seth, Enosh, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, and so on. It happens all the time: in every generation people pass away and are laid to rest. But does anything survive? Do they really die, or is it just their bodies that perish, whilst their soul or spirit survives? It comes back to that old question: are we mortal or immortal?

Greek Philosophy

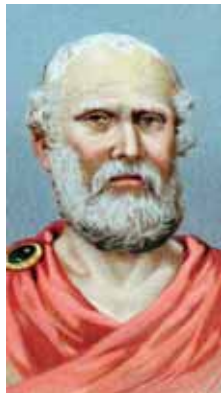
The ancient Greeks had a very well-developed notion about the afterlife in which, as they saw it, there was an



immaterial part of man which would survive death and live forever. It was not as elaborate a belief-system as that of the ancient Egyptians, who used to bury their pharaohs with models of servants and workers, who could continue to keep them in the style to which they had become accustomed in life.

Being Greeks, they preferred abstract thoughts and conjured up a picture of an immaterial part of man surviving death – an immortal soul – and thought of it continuing to live in bliss. Here's a short extract from Plato's dialogue *Phaeto*, which imagines what Socrates might have been thinking on the day he drank poison. According to Plato, Socrates believed:

"The soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable ... That soul, I say, herself invisible, departs to the invisible world to the divine and immortal and rational: thither arriving, she lives in bliss and is released from the error and folly of men, their fears and wild passions and all other human ills, and forever dwells, as they say of the initiated, in company with the gods."



Plato the Greek philosopher

Plato believed that the material world as it seems to us is not the real world, but only a shadow of reality. It was inevitable for someone with that view to conclude that as the body is mortal, there must be an invisible immortal part. The four reasons he advances in *Phaeto* are equally unconvincing. But they have had a very considerable influence on Christian belief, simply because the notion that we are immortal appeals to us so much.

All Mixed Up

Over the years many Bible students, from many different religious backgrounds, have concluded that true Bible teaching has got mixed up with other such beliefs and the result is confusion.

- ➡ An **Anglican Commission** reported in 1943 that: *“The idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, not to Bible, sources”;*
- ➡ **Professor Oscar Cullmann** wrote in 1958: *“how widespread is the mistake of attributing to primitive Christianity the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul”;*
- ➡ **Leon Morris**, a widely read author, said in 1983: *“The Christian idea of life in the world to come is not that of immortality of the soul (an idea that was held by certain pagan Greeks) but that of the resurrection of the body”;* and
- ➡ **Tom Wright**, the present Bishop of Durham, wrote in 2007: *“In much Western piety, at least since the Middle Ages, the influence of Greek philosophy has been very*

marked, resulting in a future expectation that bears far more resemblance to Plato’s vision of souls entering into disembodied bliss than to the biblical picture of new heavens and new earth”.

Comments like that could be multiplied many times over but the key question is, ‘What does the Bible teach?’ For if it is a matter of mere human opinion, Plato’s philosophy might be as good as anyone’s. This is where Bible teaching offers such help and guidance, even when the message is hard to accept at first. For God, who first initiated human life, knows all about our human condition and our prospects for the future. He wants us to understand how important it is that we do something about our mortal state. He does not want us to travel up a road which has no way out.

Life not Death

The apostle Peter explained God’s desire like this:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Do you notice the key word about our natural condition? It’s the word “perish”. We have to turn to God and accept His offer of salvation (the real meaning of ‘repentance’), otherwise we might cease to exist.



For Bible teaching is that death means death. When Adam and Eve were told what would happen if they broke God's law in Eden, they would have understood that death was God's punishment for disobedience.

It meant a return to dust, as we have seen, and the end of all conscious existence. When people die they simply cease to exist: they are unconscious in the sleep of death. Here are just a few Bible passages that make that plain; but remember that this is told us so that we can do something about it, with God's help:

"Return, O LORD, deliver me! Oh, save me for your mercies' sake! For in death there is no remembrance of you; in the grave who will give you thanks?" (Psalm 6:4,5);

"Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit (life) departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish" (Psalm 146:3,4);

"Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day ... For David did not ascend into the heavens" (Acts 2:29,34);

"For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption" (Acts 13:36);

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:16,17).

Heaven on Earth

Nowhere are we promised an afterlife in heaven. Notice that in the passages listed above, even a man like King David (who wrote many of the Psalms) did not go to heaven at death. He died, like all of us, was buried, and saw corruption; he is presently unconscious in the sleep of death. Both the apostle Peter (Acts 2:29) and the apostle Paul (13:36) agree about that. For everyone who has ever lived has also died (Romans 5:12 and Hebrews 11:13) and nobody has ascended to heaven, with one glorious

exception:

"No one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven" (John 3:13).

The Bible promise is that heaven is coming to earth and the real hope of life after death is that we can be raised from that unconscious state to be present with the Lord Jesus Christ when he comes to establish God's kingdom on earth.



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Alive for Evermore

The Book of Revelation – the last book in the New Testament – begins with a glorious portrait of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in heavenly splendour. He says this to the apostle John, before giving him a prophecy about things that were to happen:

“I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (Revelation 1:18).

If we want to be sure about life after death and want to have a real and living hope, we need to examine what happened to Jesus. That will explain our own prospects, with God’s help and favour.

Jesus Died

Many people die in the privacy of their own homes, but Jesus died publicly and awfully. He was crucified by the Romans and was left to die in the full gaze of those who came to taunt him and to jeer at his execution. He did not deserve to die like that, for he was the best of men and went about doing good all through his life. He was a remarkable teacher too, and expounded a new way of life, one that is centred on love and real consideration for others.

Yet this undeserved fate was necessary, in the wisdom of God, to save us from our sins and to give us the hope of everlasting life. Among other reasons, it also demonstrated the certainty of life after death; for God raised Jesus from the dead. The events associated with that

miracle have been carefully studied by many historians, including some who wanted to show that it was really a hoax. Many theories emerged to try to explain it away; one being that Jesus was never really dead at all. Instead, it was alleged, he was still alive when he was brought down from the cross and in the cool of the tomb he is said to have revived and struggled out of the grave. How important it was, therefore, to disprove such allegations, that Jesus should have died in the public gaze, his execution supervised by Romans who knew all about this horrendous form of torture.

Man Alive!

Thousands of people were crucified by the Romans: it was a way of enforcing obedience and they knew well enough when a person was dead. In the case of Jesus one of them even thrust a spear into his side to make doubly sure and out flowed water and blood. The friends of Jesus saw it happen too, and they were absolutely convinced that a tragedy had occurred. For them it was life-shattering: a big enough disaster to threaten their conviction that Jesus was the Son of God.

Certainly those who took his bruised and battered body down from the cross would have known that he was dead. Do you think they would have left him in a cold tomb, carved out of the rock, if there had been even the slightest suspicion that he was still alive? Of course they would not.



Yet days later, when the women went early in the morning to anoint his body for burial, they were amazed at the sight that confronted them. The grave was empty, the huge stone had been rolled away and the Roman guard had fled. The grave clothes were still there, but the body was gone; they could not believe what had happened. A man who had been crucified: who had been known to be dead, was now alive. It was more than they could believe and the first century followers of Jesus took some persuading that it had happened.

- ➔ *Angels appeared to announce the great event: “He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay” (Matthew 28:6);*
- ➔ *Disciples came to examine the grave clothes and were persuaded by what they saw. No grave robber would take the time to unwrap a body, and these clothes did not appear to have been unwrapped (John 20:5-8);*
- ➔ *Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalen (John 20:14-18);*
- ➔ *He appeared to two disciples who were leaving Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-35);*
- ➔ *He showed himself alive to the disciples in the Upper Room (24:36-49);*
- ➔ *He invited doubting Thomas to examine his wounds (John 20:25-29);*
- ➔ *Jesus appeared to more than 500 followers in Galilee (1 Corinthians 15:6).*

One writer sums up this remarkable demonstration of immortal life in these words: *“He also presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs” (Acts 1:3).* Another says

that when he experienced the risen Lord, he was conscious that he was experiencing the very embodiment of eternal life. Before he had heard about it; now he had seen it and was therefore able to bear witness to it (1 John 1:1-3).

Far-reaching Consequences

The resurrection of Jesus made a huge difference to the first century Christians. When he was crucified, they thought that everything he stood for had been lost. One of them summed up his feelings when he told a stranger (who turned out to be Jesus):

*“We **were hoping** that it was he who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21).*

They had been hoping that, but they had lost that hope; now he was dead and gone! But when Jesus demonstrated to them that he was alive and that he had triumphed over death – not just survived it – his followers became a transformed community. Nothing could stop them from telling everybody they met that Jesus was alive and well, living in heaven, and that he was coming again to rule on earth.

Imagine what it was like when someone who had opposed everything that Jesus stood for, and had persecuted his followers, became convinced that Jesus was indeed alive. It was a transforming discovery.

The apostle Paul was such a man. Once an ardent opponent of Christianity, he became one of its most zealous exponents. He went across Asia and Europe seeking to persuade people that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, and that he had risen from the dead. It was the sort of message you couldn't keep quiet about.

It is just the same today! Death has been conquered by a man who now sits at his Father's right hand in heaven. Listen to Paul's testimony:



*Christ would suffer, that he would be **the first to rise from the dead**, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (26:22,23).*

The Resurrection

For the apostle, the resurrection of Jesus was an absolutely vital part of his message. It was the guarantee that Jesus was who

*“Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the **Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead**, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ’” (Acts 17:2,3);*

*“These times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. **He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead.**” (17:30,31);*

*“When Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning **the hope and resurrection of the dead** I am being judged!’” (23:6);*

*“According to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that **there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust**” (24:14,15);*

“Having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come – that the

he claimed to be – the Son of the living God. But it was also Paul's personal guarantee of life after death.

Paul was also executed by Roman command but, because he was a Roman citizen, he was not crucified, but beheaded. In the last letter he wrote to his convert Timothy, he says just what he was expecting to happen to him after his death, and from this you can see how important the hope of resurrection really is:

*“I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which **the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day**, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).*

As great a man as he was in the Lord's service, Paul was not expecting to go to heaven. He expected to be raised from the dead when he would be given “a crown of righteousness” on the day when Jesus returns from heaven.

That is the true gospel message and that is the hope we too can share.

The Resurrection of the Dead

If you have ever attended a funeral service when someone talks first about the departed enjoying life in heaven and then reads a Scripture passage about the resurrection of the body, you might be wondering what's going on. If there is an afterlife without the body, why would you want your body raised from the dead?

Asleep in Dust

By now you should know that this sort of mixed-up thinking – immortality without a body – has nothing to do with Bible teaching, but just confuses everything and everybody. What the Bible teaches is that when the breath leaves the body, a person dies; and unless that life force returns, the person will stay forever dead. The prophet Daniel expressed that clearly when explaining the final act of God's gracious purpose with mankind. Carefully note what he said:

“There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.



Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:1-3).

Awake from Sleep

Daniel speaks about those who “sleep in the dust of the earth” and, throughout the Bible, death is described in those very terms. King David once prayed: “Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death” (Psalm 13:3) and, as we have seen, the New Testament uses the very same language. King David died, about 3000 years ago; or, as Scripture describes what happened, “David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, **fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption**” (Acts 13:36).

Jesus once heard that his friend Lazarus was ill but was unable to visit him in time. By the time he and his disciples arrived Lazarus had been dead three days. This is how he told the disciples that Lazarus was dead:

*“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.’ Then his disciples said, ‘Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.’ However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that he was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, **‘Lazarus is dead.’**” (John 11:11-14).*

Lazarus had two sisters who were grief-stricken and who had longed for Jesus to come sooner to heal their brother. This family was very hospitable to Jesus and his disciples; they knew a

lot about the teaching of Jesus. What they expected is a key pointer to the true Christian hope. Did they expect Lazarus to have gone to heaven, where he was now enjoying a better life that he could ever have had on earth? Or were they hoping for something else? When Martha met Jesus, this is what she said:



“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, *“Your brother will rise again.”* Martha said to him, **“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”** Jesus said to her, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live”* (John 11:21-25).

So saying, Jesus went to the cave where Lazarus had been buried three days before and called Lazarus forth, whereupon the dead man arose. It was a stunning fulfilment of what Jesus had just claimed to be: *“the resurrection and the life”*. And it was a foretaste of what Jesus said will happen at the last day, when he returns from heaven. Just as Daniel says:

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt” (12:2).

Many, not All

Everybody will not be raised from the dead. Some people will never regain consciousness, but are forever dead. In Bible language, they are asleep forever in a perpetual state of unconsciousness. They know nothing and will

never again see the light. If they lived without God, they will die without God; knowing nothing about Him, and not wanting to know about His purpose, they will spend eternity knowing nothing.

In a devastating analysis, the Psalmist describes people who live proudly and heedlessly throughout life and who then die forever:

“This is the way of those who are foolish, and of their posterity who approve their sayings. Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling” (Psalm 49:13,14).

These are people who have no understanding of God and His ways (49:19,20). They will perish, or cease to exist, just as animals do. But the Psalmist himself had better prospects:

“But God will redeem my soul (my life) from the power of the grave, for he shall receive me” (49:15).

His hope was founded upon the promise of resurrection and that is the teaching of the Bible all the way through. Foreseeing national calamity that was coming, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a time when his people would be overrun by enemies who would bring great destruction. But he also predicted that those enemies would be obliterated by God:

*“O LORD our God, other masters besides you have had dominion over us; but by you only we make mention of your name. **They are dead, they will not live; they are deceased,***

they will not rise. Therefore you have punished and **destroyed** them, and made all their memory to perish” (Isaiah 26:13,14).

But this was his hope and expectation:

*“Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. **Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust;** for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and **the earth shall cast out the dead**” (26:19).*

Wherever you look, in the Old or New Testaments, the hope that God offers of life after death is the hope of bodily resurrection from the dead. If there is no resurrection, there is no hope of an afterlife.

Shame or Glory

The prophet Daniel said that when the dead are raised, at the coming of Jesus, some will be given everlasting life and some will suffer “*shame and everlasting contempt*”. This too is consistent Bible teaching: that when the dead are raised they are to be judged. The apostle Paul was expecting “*a crown of righteousness*” (2 Timothy 4:8) and said that God would give that to all those who have loved Jesus and have put their hope in him and his Return. He said:

“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

What happens to those who are rejected? In what way are they to be held in

everlasting contempt? The Bible does not teach that such people will be punished eternally, whether in the fires of hell or wherever. As we have seen, death is itself a punishment; and some have gone already to everlasting death. There are others who will be raised, who will see the Lord Jesus in glory; and who will then die again – this time forever. What a shame for them: to have seen what might have been, and then to have been excluded. Jesus warned his contemporaries about that very prospect;

*“There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, **and yourselves thrust out**” (Luke 13:28).*

The apostle Paul, who held out the prospect of a crown to those who loved the appearance of Jesus, issued this warning:

*“... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with **everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power,** when he comes, in that Day, to be glorified in his saints and to be admired among all those who believe” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).*

That is the choice that confronts everyone: to be welcomed into God's Kingdom, or to lose out on the most wonderful opportunity that is now on offer.



How to Live Forever

How can we make sure that we will be raised to glory, be allowed to enter the Kingdom of God and there enjoy God's gift of eternal life? This has to be the most vital question in life, and only the Bible has the answer.

The Resurrection Chapter

In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, the apostle Paul gives a detailed explanation of why resurrection is important and what it will be like. It is well worth reading. Among other things, he says that people who put their trust in some other form of afterlife are deluded:

"If Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ... If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain" (1 Corinthians 15:12-14).

The resurrection of Jesus, Paul says, is absolutely vital, and without the hope of resurrection Christians are hopeless. That would mean that: *"those who have **fallen asleep** in Christ have **perished**"* (15:18). You will see that he too talks about death as a sleep, and describes the ultimate consequence of death as perishing, or ceasing to exist.

As you read on, you will note too that he describes our present state of existence as *"mortal"* and *"corruptible"* (15:53). In our natural state we are weak creatures of the dust, born in Adam and therefore in need of help for, says Paul, *"in Adam all die"* (15:22). So how do we escape?

First of All

Before saying anything about resurrection, the apostle outlined his gospel message:

*"I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures**, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:3,4).*

There is no prospect of life unless our sins are forgiven. Death was originally a punishment for sin (Romans 6:23) and we need to find forgiveness and to be pardoned before we can hope for anything. God has made that possible by causing Jesus to be born and now we can be reborn – by belief and baptism.

The pattern for all first century believers was that they had to believe in the promises of God and then be baptized into the saving name of Jesus. The apostle Paul explains that by being buried in water, we identify ourselves with the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus:

"Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection" (Romans 6:3-5).



By baptism – notice it is the immersion of informed adults that Paul is describing – we associate ourselves with the saving work of Jesus. He died on the cross, was buried, and rose again. By being buried in water, for just a moment or two, we declare openly and publicly that we want to live with Jesus, both now and for evermore. It's that straightforward and that important. One of the last things Jesus said to his disciples was:

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

Living “In Christ”

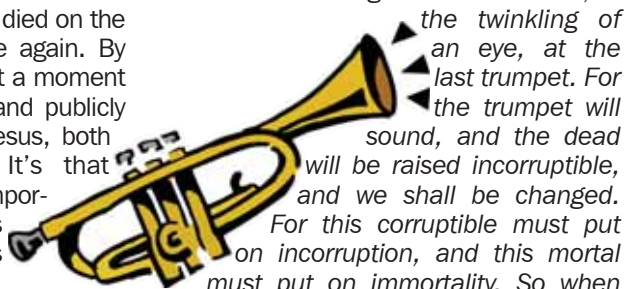
Once we have been baptized “into Christ”, we have to live “in Christ”. Baptism changes our status before God, for by it we become members of His family. That means that we must then live differently, no longer living for ourselves, but living in a way that pleases God. In Romans chapter 6, the apostle describes that as a death to self and a new life as obedient servants of Jesus Christ the Lord.

It requires daily discipline and constant attention to God’s Word, which is a guidebook to life. Reading it regularly, we will become knowledgeable in the things that really matter – how to serve God, how to live with other people, how to prepare ourselves for the coming Kingdom. But what a transformation the apostle describes:

“In Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22);

“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit

incorruption. Behold, I tell 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 trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (15:50-54).

Total Transformation

When Jesus returns to call to himself all those believers who are still living, and to summon from the sleep of death all those who are to join them in the glory of his Kingdom, the world as we know it will be totally transformed. All the things that now cause us distress – like illness, famines, earthquakes, cyclones, suffering and death – will be removed. The world will once again be in harmony with God and will become subject to divine law.

God is offering us eternal life in a perfect world, if we are willing to accept the challenge and enquire more carefully into what we have to do, if we are to live in a way that pleases Him and is in obedience to the commandments of Christ.

We must do everything we can to prepare for the great changes that are about to happen, and that change must start now: in our own minds and in our own lives.

Tecwyn Morgan

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