

Life After Death - The Wonderful Facts

(All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version)

A friend of mine from Texas reckons that he's the luckiest man alive.

He was eating dinner at a hotel in Holland when he felt himself blacking out. His horrified wife sprang to her feet, too late to prevent him keeling over and crashing to the restaurant floor.

She could only guess what was wrong with him. In fact, her worst fears were justified: his heart had suddenly stopped. By any normal standards, she had become a widow.

But by a happy coincidence a doctor was sitting at the next table. Within seconds he was examining his unexpected patient, and quickly diagnosed the trouble. Moments later, he was applying the kind of organised battering of the chest that doctors sweetly describe as "heart massage". This does not always get a stopped heart going again, but this time it did.

After being as good as dead for a minute or two, the fortunate Texan came back to life.

Two Views of Death

He has no fancy tales to tell of that strange gap in his life. So far as he was concerned, he was out for the count and that was all there was to it.

In contrast, Mrs. Eze-igbo, whose tale of a somewhat similar experience was told me in Nigeria, has a very different recollection. She told the Nigerian *Sunday Observer* (25 October, 1970) how she made a brief trip to another world, which was peopled by monsters and winged men. Fact, or hallucination? All Nigeria wondered - and so might we.

These two very different experiences of "temporary death" illustrate the two most usual views of death. On the one hand there is what you might call the atheist view: "When you're dead, you're gone for ever. End of story!"

On the other hand, the view of most religious people is something like this: "Death is not what it seems. Life - that is, consciousness - continues after death. For some folk the afterlife is a happy one, for others less happy. But somehow, somewhere, the dead are still alive."

There are countless variations on this basic theme. The ancient Greeks consigned all their dead to a shadowy Underworld. In parts of India, people believe the dead are promptly reborn in the bodies of other living things: a bad man might come back as a tiger cub, whilst a good-living hen that was run over could reappear in the form of a baby girl. Spiritualists think that the spirits of the dead float around this world invisibly, and that a good medium can make contact with them when conditions are right.

Catholics have long believed in four alternative homes for the dead: Heaven, Purgatory, Limbo and Hell. Protestants have never had any time for Purgatory or Limbo. Traditionally they have believed that the choice lay squarely between Heaven and Hell. Nowadays many Protestants are not so sure about Hell, either - that seems altogether too nasty a place for a loving God to tolerate.

Others again ... But why go on? It is all too obvious that the religious world is in chaos. People wonder, and guess, and argue about what happens after death. But does anybody really *know*?

The purpose of this booklet is to set out a number of little-known facts. We shall examine evidence which shows that the truth lies midway between two extremes. Atheists say there is life after death for *nobody*. Most religious people say there is life after death (of some sort) for *everybody*. But as we shall see, the fact is that there is a prospect of life after death for *some* people, but by no means all.

Good News - and Bad

For the moment we shall assume that what the Bible tells us is true. (Later on, we shall see that there is a good reason for accepting this.) And the Bible says, time after time, that those who follow Jesus faithfully will live again after death. Here are a few examples:

“My sheep [said Jesus] hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.” (John 10:27, 28.)

This is what he has promised us, *eternal life* ... God sent his only Son into the world, so that we *might live through him*. (1 John 2:25 and 4:9.)

God gave us eternal life, and *this life is in his Son*. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life. (1 John 5:11,12.)

Thus we have it on good authority that those who really belong to Christ will live again, after death. But what about those who don't belong to Christ? For them the future is much darker. As the last of those quoted passages puts it, “he who has not the Son of God *has not life*.” It seems from this that unbelievers cannot expect to go on living after death.

This stern teaching is confirmed in other parts of the Bible. For example, King Solomon describes the position of ungodly men (whose hearts, he says, “are full of evil”) like this:

The living know that they will die, but *the dead know nothing*, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished. (Ecclesiastes 9:3,5, 6.)

Solomon's father, King David, had already said much the same thing. In reading his words that follow, remember that in the Bible the word "wicked" does not mean exceptionally bad - it refers to anyone who is not obedient to God.

Yet a little while, and the wicked *will be no more* ... the wicked *perish*; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures, *they vanish* - like smoke they vanish away ... transgressors shall be *altogether destroyed*. (Psalm 37:10, 20, 38.)

In the words of the New Testament:

Those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus ... shall suffer the punishment of *eternal destruction*. (2 Thessalonians 1:8,9.)

These [the unrighteous] ... will be *destroyed* in the same destruction. (2 Peter 2:12.)

So the basic facts are quite simple and straightforward. For Christ's genuine followers there is everlasting life. For everybody else there is everlasting death.

Now we can begin to fill in some of the details.

Dead Christians are Asleep

It is a common mistake to think that Christ's followers enter the afterlife as soon as they die. This is far from the truth. The Bible says that one day there will be a Day of Judgement, and only then will God's people be given eternal life. In the meantime they are completely unconscious. In Bible language, they are "asleep", waiting for the day when God will "awaken" them. For example:

Then he [Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have *fallen asleep*. (1 Corinthians 15:6.)

For David, after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, *fell asleep*, and was laid with his fathers, and saw corruption. (Acts 13:36.)

At that time your people shall be delivered ... many of those who *sleep* in the dust of the earth shall *awake*, some to everlasting life ... (Daniel 12:1,2.)

Many other Bible passages refer to Christ's disciples having to wait until the Day of Judgement for eternal life. For instance, Jesus himself said:

"There is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and *in the age to come* eternal life." (Luke 18:29, 30.)

Just before he died the apostle Paul wrote:

I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me *on that Day*. (2 Timothy 4:8.)

What About the Soul?

Some readers might, by now, be feeling somewhat puzzled. “But what about the soul?” they will be wondering. “Isn’t it only the body that dies, and remains ‘asleep’ until the Day of Judgement? Doesn’t the soul leave the body, and go on living in Heaven, or somewhere?”

The short answer is, “No”. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the soul, and much of it is due to a curious trick of the English language. For several hundred years the word “soul” has been used in two entirely different ways.

To illustrate the problem, consider these two well-known snatches of verse:

- (1) Old King Cole was a merry old soul
And a merry old soul was he.
- (2) The Knight’s bones are dust,
And his good sword rust;

His soul is with the saints, I trust.

The difference is quite striking. King Cole *was* a soul. His soul was himself - all there was of him. When Cole died, the merry old soul was dead.

But the Knight’s soul was only *a part* of him. It was something immortal, invisible, dwelling mysteriously within his body. When the Knight died, it was only his body that lay dead. His soul lived on, and went to be “with the saints”.

Obviously, the writers of these two verses held different views about the soul. To the first, a soul was simply a person, like Cole. To the second, it was an immortal spirit living *inside* a person, as with the Knight. This raises a very important question: do we find both these views of the soul expressed in the Bible, or only one of them? And if only one, which one is it?

The answer is quite clear. Religious leaders and scholars have often pointed out the truth. (Unfortunately, because the truth is unpleasant, not many people have taken notice of them.) For example, a high-level committee of the Church of England published in 1945 a widely circulated book, *Towards the Conversion of England*. On page 23 they said:

The idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, not to Bible, sources.

In other words, it is only the “King Cole” school of thought about the soul that comes from the Bible. The “Knight” school of thought comes from ancient Greek philosophers. Here is one example of how the Bible speaks of the soul:

Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people, and keep other souls alive for your profit? ... putting to death persons who should not die and keeping alive persons who should not live ... (Ezekiel 13:18,19.)

Notice how “hunting down souls” is explained in this passage as meaning “putting persons to death”, and “keeping souls alive” as meaning “keeping persons alive”. Now another example:

“Behold, [said God] all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: *the soul that sins shall die.*” (Ezekiel 18:4.)

The Bible even speaks of the soul of the Lord Jesus Christ as dying. The New Testament tells us that this verse from the Old Testament is a prophecy of his sacrifice on the cross:

He poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many. (Isaiah 53:12; Luke 22:37.)

So we see that there is a good reason why the Bible speaks of dead people as asleep. The soul does not live apart from the body. When the body dies, the soul dies, too.

To avoid a long digression I have given only a brief treatment of a big subject. There are, in fact, a few passages in the Bible that are often thought to contradict what has been said. But they do not really do so, as is shown in the Appendix to this booklet.

Jesus Leads the Way

The idea that there can be life after death is certainly delightful. But is there anything in it? How do we know that it is not just wishful thinking, or a giant confidence trick by ancient religious leaders?

These questions are fair enough. But there is a good answer to them. We know that there is such a thing as life after death, because of what happened to Jesus Christ. He was tortured to death; his body was buried; and three days later *he rose from the dead*.

Some readers will no doubt think, “A likely tale! Why should anyone believe that any such thing happened? Couldn’t it be just a legend from long ago? Is there any real evidence that such an incredible miracle ever happened?”

Rest assured. It so happens that there really is evidence for it - lots of it. Here is just a small sample of the evidence.

Believers and unbelievers are at least agreed on one thing: *something* astonishing happened in the Land of Israel, during the first half of the First Century. In the year A.D. 25 the Christian religion did not exist. By A.D. 50 it was spreading like a forest fire across the ancient world. That much is a matter of history. *Something* must have happened to spark it off. But what?

There have, of course, been other great religions that arose rather suddenly. But these others have all been the kinds of religion that might have been expected. They have all been almost tailor-made to suit the environment in which they sprang up. The teaching of Mohammed, for instance, was just right for the fiery Arabs of the Seventh Century; that of Gautama Buddha was equally suited to the contemplative people of ancient India.

But the teaching of Jesus was different. It simply did not suit any section of society.

His fellow countrymen, the Jews, were outraged, he said their religion was only a perversion of the true Jewish faith, and that their religious leaders were hypocrites. What was more, Jesus implied that God was about to change some of His own laws. In fact God abolished the rules about keeping Saturday as a day of rest, or "Sabbath", and about avoiding pork and various other foods, at the end of Christ's ministry (John 5:16-18; Mark 7:20; Colossians 2:14.)

The Jews would have none of it, either then or later. Even today a religious Jew will not eat meat unless it is "kosher", and in modern Jerusalem and Tel Aviv everything shuts on Friday night for 24 hours. The First-Century Jews showed what they thought of Jesus by having him executed.

The pleasure-mad Greeks and Romans also hated Christ's teaching, but for different reasons. It was far too demanding for their taste. Their standards of morality were so incredibly low that our permissive society seems almost prudish by comparison. They were hardened in cruelty, too. Their favourite spectator sport was fighting to the death by gladiators, and the recognised method of family planning was to abandon their unwanted babies near the dens of fierce wild animals.

Into this evil age came Jesus, preaching absolute purity of mind and body, preaching love and forgiveness, and even pacifism. Forecasters would have said he had no more chance of success than a central-heating salesman in the Sahara.

As his mutilated body hung on the cross, those forecasters would doubtless have remarked with satisfaction, "I told you so. He's finished. He had only a few real followers, and they've all run away. We shan't hear any more of him or his strange teaching."

Yet within a few years those demoralised followers had burst into the pages of history. They and their converts had become the most spirited, most determined, most effective minority of their age. Many of them had suffered imprisonment or torture because of their faith, and others had been put to death.

A Miracle Behind a Miracle

Historians regard the uprise of Christianity as a sort of historical miracle. Psychologically, it ought never to have happened. Yet, against all the odds, it did so. What made those men and women risk their lives to pioneer such a strange, unpopular, new religion?

Only one answer has ever been offered that makes sense. They gave their lives to the perilous cause of Christ because they *knew*, beyond any possible doubt, that Christ had come back to life again. Let one of them explain their position in his own words:

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins ... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead!” (1 Corinthians 15:17-20.)

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8.)

It is important to realise that we are not dealing here with a religious legend. Scholars - including unbelieving scholars - are agreed that this book, and others of the foundation books of Christianity, belong to the middle third of the First Century. These words by Paul were certainly written while many of those hundreds of witnesses to the Resurrection of Christ were still alive.

Another early New Testament writer is Luke. He is widely regarded as one of the finest and most accurate historians of his age. Yet he, too, speaks of the Resurrection as a historical fact:

“To them [his followers] he [Jesus] presented himself alive after his passion [crucifixion] *by many proofs*, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:3.)

Other books of the New Testament supply more details. The disciples at first were most reluctant to believe in the great miracle. But the evidence was so powerful that, in the end, they were compelled to believe. The risen Jesus ate and drank with them, and spent much time instructing them what they must teach and do.

Moreover, the torn, bloodstained body of Jesus mysteriously disappeared from its tomb, despite the presence of an armed guard. The Jewish leaders could have strangled Christianity at its birth, if only they had produced that dead body. But they failed to do so. Why? Evidently because they could not.

The best they could manage was to put out a cock-and-bull story about the disciples bribing the guards, stealing the body, and then hiding it. Such an explanation is almost too feeble for words: just as if any men would carry out a trick like that, and then go cheerfully to their martyrdom proclaiming a lie! Yet modern Jewish historians still quote this as the best available explanation of the emptiness of the tomb.

Clearly, the disciples' own explanation is the only one that makes sense. They gave their lives to plant Christianity in the world because Christ rose from the dead - and because they *knew* that he did.

Following the Leader

Wherever the Leader leads, the followers may follow. As we have already noted, some of Christ's first followers followed him in the most literal way possible, to crucifixion or other forms of martyrdom. So have many others, right down to the present day.

Most of us, however, are asked to follow him to a "crucifixion" of a less literal kind. Consider these words of his:

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done." (Matthew 16:24-28.)

Read the passage several times, and think deeply about it. Jesus is asking a great deal of us, here. But he is promising a great deal, too. The gist of his appeal is something like this:

"If you want to, you can live your own life exactly as you please, in your own selfish way. But one day that worthless life will come to an end, and you will die without any hope of a future. On the other hand, you can volunteer to follow me. I don't promise you an easy life; I want your all! But if you do decide to dedicate your life to me, then I promise you this: when I come back to the earth on the Day of Judgement, I will give you what God gave me at my Resurrection - everlasting life."

In other places, Jesus makes it clear that we may enter everlasting life exactly as he did: through a miraculous resurrection of the body. Here is one of them:

“Truly, truly, I [Jesus] say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.” (John 5:25-29.)

This hope of bodily resurrection when Christ returns is the Bible promise of everlasting life. It is hinted at in the first book of the Old Testament and stated plainly in several later books of the Old Testament. In the New Testament it crops up again and again, until on almost the last page of the Bible we reach a glorious vision of the resurrection and its sequel:

Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power ... and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 20:6 and 21:3,4.)

The two halves of the Bible’s teaching on death and life fit together beautifully. As we saw earlier, death is real; it is the complete absence of life. That is why bodily resurrection is so important: without it there could be no life after death for anyone. But, thank God, there is such a thing as resurrection. Christ rose bodily from the dead, and so can we, on the Day of Judgement, if we follow him faithfully now.

The First Step

Before we finish, one most important point must be made clear. We can never *deserve* eternal life. Still less can we put God in our debt and *earn* eternal life. We are all so imperfect that we all deserve eternal death. Eternal life is a gracious gift, from a merciful God to unworthy men and women. As Paul put it:

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

There is only one way in which this free gift can come to us. Our sins can be forgiven because Christ died on the cross, to provide what the Bible calls a “sacrifice” - that is, a way for sinners to be brought close to God.

To drive this point home to us, God has instituted the ceremony of baptism. When a person believes the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, and wishes to follow him, the first step is to be baptized. Many passages in the New Testament illustrate this. Here are two to them:

[They] said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins ... “ So those who received his word were baptized. (Acts 2:37-41.)

When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. (Acts 8:12.)

This act of baptism is designed to teach several powerful lessons. As we are plunged under the surface of the water, this reminds us forcefully of death and burial. It makes us think of the way our Lord died, willingly, for our sakes.

Then, as we come out of the water and draw a new breath, it makes us think of resurrection. First, of our Lord’s resurrection, and secondly, of his power to raise us from the grave at the Last Day.

Baptism is also a time for exchanging promises, in much the same way as a bride and bridegroom make their wedding vows. In effect, we say to God, “As I go down under this water, I shall say goodbye to the old selfish way of life; that will, so to speak, be dead and buried. And as I emerge, I shall start a new life of service to my Lord.”

With the eye of faith we can see God watching with approval as we break surface, and telling us, “Through the sacrifice of Jesus I now forgive all your sins. And if you keep your promises, I will surely raise you from the dead when he comes again.”

In the actual words of the Bible:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, *we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.* (Romans 6:3-5.)

Let us rejoice in this wonderful promise, and accept God’s gracious offer while there is still time.

Appendix

SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO A FEW PROBLEMS

There follows a discussion of several profound theological questions concerning life after death. This has been put into an appendix because it will not be of equal interest to all readers. Those with an orthodox Christian background will probably consider it essential reading, but those without any religious background might find it unnecessary.

Does God Torture People in Hell?

“Hell” is an English word which has been greatly misused, and is consequently much misunderstood. At the risk of oversimplifying a rather complicated subject, the main facts about Hell can be summarised like this.

1. In the Old Testament, the word “Hell” always means “the grave”. To be more precise, it is a translation of the Hebrew word *Sheol*, which is a poetical word meaning “The dwelling-place of the dead”, or, more simply, “The grave”.

Modern translators of the Bible often avoid using the word “Hell” in the Old Testament, and instead leave the Hebrew word *Sheol* untranslated. For example, take Proverbs 23:13, 14. The ancient King James Version (1611) translates it in these words:

Withhold not correction from the child: For if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, And shalt deliver his soul from hell. The modern Revised Standard Version (1952), which has been used throughout this booklet, replaces the last line with, “You will save his life from Sheol.”

Yet there are some passages where the Hebrew word *Sheol* so obviously means “the grave” that both the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version translate it that way. For instance, “Jealousy is cruel as the grave.” (Song of Solomon 8:6.)

2. There is nothing in the Old Testament to suggest that the souls of wicked people are tormented in a fiery hell.

In the New Testament there are two quite different Greek words translated “hell”. One of these, *Hades*, is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Sheol*, and consequently this also means “the grave”.

A good example of the New Testament use of this word is in Acts 2, where Peter quotes Psalm 16 and says it is a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ. The prophet David, the author of this Psalm, wrote:

Thou dost not give me up to Sheol,

Or let thy godly one see the Pit.

When Peter quoted this in a speech, he declared:

“For David says concerning him [Jesus], ‘For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, Nor let thy Holy One see corruption ... ’ ... he [David] foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.”

Clearly, what David and Peter are both telling us is that Christ rose from the dead: his body did not remain in his tomb, that is, in “Sheol”, or “Hades”, and so it did not “see corruption”.

It is so obvious that the Greek word *Hades* does not mean “hell” that modern translations usually leave it untranslated. The RSV does this in most places, but in Matthew 16:18 it translates it as “death”.

3. The Greek word *Gehenna* is altogether different. Modern translations do translate this word as “hell”, and at first glance it seems as if they have good reason for doing so. To begin with, the word always refers to a place of punishment. It occurs twelve times in the New Testament, all but one of them in the sayings of Jesus, and in several of these places it is associated with fire. It does rather look as if Gehenna refers to the classic idea of hell, as a place of fiery torture.

However, when we take a closer look at the twelve “Gehenna” verses, a very different picture emerges. In only one of them (Matthew 10:28) is there any mention of *souls* going to Gehenna. And even there it does not suggest that the soul is *tormented* in Gehenna; on the contrary, it says that the souls are *destroyed* there.

Moreover, in seven of the twelve passages it refers to the *body* - or parts of it such as feet, eyes and hands - going into hell. What are we to make of that?

Reference to any good dictionary soon solves the riddle. *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* says:

GEHENNA, the valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem, in which the Israelites sacrificed their children to Moloch, and to which, at a later time, the refuse of the city was conveyed to be slowly burned:

hence hell ...

So when Jesus spoke of Gehenna he was talking about a place that everybody who had ever been to Jerusalem would know. He was making a sort of parable out of it. In effect, he was saying something like this:

“You know that horrible place, Gehenna, where the people of Jerusalem get rid of their rubbish by burning it? Well, let that be a lesson to you. On the Day of Judgement, God will rid the world of what He regards as ‘human rubbish’ - people not fit to be given everlasting life. Instead, they will be sentenced to an

everlasting death. Body, soul, feet, hands, eyes - *everything* belonging to an evil person will be destroyed on that Day, as surely as the fires of Gehenna destroy Jerusalem's rubbish nowadays."

4. To recap, in all the Old Testament references to Hell, and some of the New Testament references, the word simply means "The grave". In the other twelve New Testament references to Hell, the word means "The place where the wicked will be wiped out of existence on the Day of Judgement."

These facts fit in with the Bible teaching that "God is love". (1 John 4:16.) It is hard to see how a loving God could possibly torture wicked people for ever and ever! But it is altogether reasonable that, on the Day of Judgement, our Maker should "unmake" (destroy) those rebellious people who refuse to accept His way of salvation.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

There is a commonsense rule of Bible study which runs like this. When we find large numbers of Bible passages pointing clearly to a certain conclusion, we must accept that conclusion. If there are a few other passages that seem to teach the opposite, we must examine them carefully. The Bible does not contradict itself, and we generally find that the passages which *appear* to be contradictory are ambiguous. In other words, they can be read in either of two ways: to contradict the plain teaching of the rest of the Bible, or to harmonise with it. There is no doubt as to which of these ways is the right one!

A good example of this principle is found in Luke 16. This contains a lengthy parable about a rich man, who lived a life of luxury, and a man called Lazarus, whose sad life was a struggle against poverty and illness. When they died, the tables were turned. The rich man went to Hades where he was tormented by fire; Lazarus went to "Abraham's bosom", where he found comfort.

Some people regard this as a realistic picture of the after life - and in so doing, they make it contradict all the plain Bible passages set out in this booklet (and dozens of others, too). But that would be a shallow way of viewing this parable. As the Anglican scholar, John Wenham, says in his book, *The Goodness of God*:

The passage is pictorial rather than literal. It would be precarious for any school of thought to draw literal conclusions from it about the topography of the next world.

As soon as we look at the details, it is obvious that Wenham is right. There is no mention of Heaven, nor of Hell (Gehenna). There is no mention of souls, and the rich man's plea for a finger dipped in water to cool his tongue suggests that *bodies* are involved. The place of torment is in full view of the place of comfort, and near enough for the occupants to speak to each other across the gap.

The entire scene is set in Hades (= *Sheol* in the Old Testament), which we have already seen means "The grave". It reminds one of Isaiah 14:15-21, where the prophet portrays the decomposing bodies in Sheol as carrying on a conversation with each other. Like many Bible passages this is a highly imaginative picture, not based on literal facts.

Some of Christ's parables, of course, were based on real life, but others were not. In the same chapter, Luke 16, there is a parable about a steward who repeatedly robbed his master. When the employer discovered what had been going on, in real life he would have been furious, but the parable says he "commended the dishonest steward for his prudence"! (Luke 16:8.) This is most unlikeliest, and what is more important, it certainly is not intended to teach that God approves of dishonesty. But nevertheless the parable goes on to make its real point brilliantly, which is that "you cannot serve God and mammon [riches]". (Luke 16:13.)

Similarly, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not based upon what really happens. It rather seems to be based upon a legend of Hades accepted by some of the Pharisees, and reported by the First-Century Jewish historian Josephus, though we cannot be sure of that. What is certain is that the parable works up magnificently to its "punch-line", which is a condemnation of unbelieving leaders of the Jews, in these words:

"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." (Luke 16:31.)

There is an obvious reference here to Christ's greatest miracle, which was to raise from the dead *a man called Lazarus*. The Pharisees and Sadducees (who had already rejected what "Moses and the prophets" had said about Christ) were still not impressed. Similarly, even when Christ himself rose from the dead, most of them remained unmoved!

John tells us that the mighty miracle of the raising of Lazarus only infuriated the Pharisees and Sadducees; it made them determined to kill Jesus (John 11:53) and to kill Lazarus as well (12:10), so as to destroy the evidence of the miracle. The whole point of the parable is to expose this wickedness of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and not to show what happens to the dead.

The Thief on the Cross

Two criminals were crucified alongside Jesus. One of them repented of his mis-spent past, and accepted Jesus as his Lord. Jesus assured him:

"Truly, I say to you, *today* you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43.)

Translated in that way, it does indeed look as if Jesus and the thief both went into a new life the moment they died. However, things are not always what they seem. Not all translations put the Lord's words like that. The Rotherham New Testament renders them:

“Verily, to thee I say, this day, with me shalt thou be in the paradise.”

Observe how this translation puts commas *on both sides* of the words “this day” (“today” in the RSV). There is a reason for this. In a footnote the translator says with scholarly open-mindedness, “It is left for the reader to determine whether the words ‘this day’ should be joined (A) with the former part of the sentence, or (B) with the latter.”

In other words, he tells us that the Greek is ambiguous. There are two possible ways to translate it, both equally correct, thus:

(A) “I say to you this day - you will be with me in Paradise.”

(B) “I say to you - this day you will be with me in Paradise.”

There is good reason for saying that (B) cannot possibly be the right translation. *That day Jesus was not in Paradise*; he lay in the grave until the third day. And even after he rose from the dead, he could still say, “I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:17.) So Jesus could not possibly have promised the thief *immediate* entry to eternal life.

In any case, that was not what the thief had asked for, he had said to Jesus, “Remember me *when you come* in your kingly power.” (Luke 23:42.) As we have already seen, that is what Jesus had promised his followers: resurrection to eternal life when he “comes again in his kingly power”, on the Day of Judgement.

So it was that Jesus promised the thief there and then - “today” - a place in that glorious future. “Paradise”, he called it, using a word that Greek-speaking Jews regularly applied to the Garden of Eden. (Jesus used it that way in Revelation 2:7, where he promised, “To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life [compare Genesis 2:8, 9], which is in the paradise of God.”)

When the Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the new world will be like another Garden of Eden. And the thief who died beside him will be raised to everlasting life, that he may enter that glorious kingdom.

The Father's House

The evening before he was crucified, Jesus comforted his disciples with these words:

“In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2.)

This saying is often quoted at funerals, and many a mourner has been comforted with the thought that their loved ones are already in Heaven. It does almost look as if that is what Jesus meant. For “my Father's house” sounds like Heaven; and Jesus certainly went to Heaven, presumably to “prepare a place” for us, so that we could follow him there.

But we must not be in too much of a hurry to draw such conclusions from the well-known words of Jesus. The very next sentence makes it clear that he was saying no such thing. He went on to tell the disciples:

“And when I go and prepare a place for you, *I will come again* and will take you to myself.” (John 14:3.)

Once more we are brought back to the basic teaching of the New Testament: eternal life will be given to Christ's followers *when he comes again*, and not before.

Moreover, there is no reason to think that the phrase “My Father's house” meant “Heaven”. Elsewhere in the Bible the expression “God's house” is *always* used of some place on earth where God could be said to dwell, and never of Heaven. In particular, when Jesus used the same expression, “My Father's house” (in John 2:16), he was undoubtedly speaking of God's temple in Jerusalem, and not of Heaven. This fits in with the following sayings:

He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in *the temple of my God*. (Jesus, in Revelation 3:12.)

You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone ... you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Paul, in Ephesians 2:19-22.)

Do you not know that you are *God's temple* and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:16.)

Thus, in the picture-language of these passages, the true church is like a “house”, or “temple”, in which God dwells, spiritually. Each individual member is like a pillar, or a building stone, or even a room, in it.

At present the building materials are a mixture of good and bad. (1 Corinthians 3:12.) Because of this, Christ went to Heaven as our mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), to make it possible for faulty people like us to fit into this divine structure. One day he will come again and give his followers eternal life.

When that happens the unsuitable materials will be cleared away (1 Corinthians 3:13-15), the living “house of God” will become a perfect one, and the Father and His Son will dwell in it for ever.

ALAN HAYWARD.



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