

Focus on the Kingdom

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Some of our readers have expressed their agreement with the doctrine of Conditional Immortality covered in previous editions, but they request further elaboration of the subject. We hope that this and the last article in the current "Focus" will build further confidence in this area of truth. Our hope is that readers will seek out opportunities to teach others these basic biblical themes. We are impressed, and I think chastened by the remark of the writer to the Hebrews that "in view of the time you have been a Christian you ought to be teachers" rather than just learners.

Death, Resurrection and Rewards: The Biblical Timetable

The Bible and its study, a daily investigation (Acts 17:11), presents us with a challenge. It provides numerous statements which bear on the question of our future: what happens at death and when Jesus returns. The biblical teaching on this important subject must be collected from across the pages of Scripture and synthesized to give a harmonious picture. Fatal to this process are three factors:

1) We prefer to believe what we have always believed, or perhaps what is popular, despite the clear evidence of the Bible against us.

2) We choose to examine the subject selectively, relying on a small portion of the relevant evidence and ignoring the rest. (You can prove almost anything from the Bible, provided you use tunnel vision and confine yourself to a tiny handful of verses.)

3) We prefer not to examine the subject at all and rely on a trusted instructor or tradition.

As Christians we are being trained to weigh evidence fairly, dispassionately, objectively and to arrive at Truth, even if such Truth disturbs our comfortable "status quo," or perhaps puts us at odds with others.

In order to examine what Scripture teaches us, we start with the Hebrew Bible. It is a fundamental methodological error to ignore the clear teaching of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) in regard to the nature of man and his destiny. Someone might object to this principle by saying that in other matters, such as the observance of some laws, the Old Testament has been superseded by the New Testament. In that case, however, there is extensive New Testament teaching about our Christian relationship to Old Testament Law. But no New Testament teaching suggests that the Old Testament prophecies concerning the future of man and especially his resurrection from death are canceled by the New Testament.

According to Scripture in the Hebrew Bible, man at death descends to Sheol/Hades, the world of all the deceased (Ps. 86:13; Prov. 15:24; Ezek. 26:20). All the dead go downwards at death. No one ascends to the throne of God in heaven as a disembodied, immortal soul.

Secondly, Sheol/Hades is a place of complete inactivity. Conscious fellowship with God has been severed. "Existence" in Sheol is really not life at all: "One fate befalls both wise and fool" (Ecc. 2:14). "The fate of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. There is no advantage for man over beast. All go to the same place. All come from the dust and all return to the dust" (Ecc.

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3:19, 20). (The writer then poses a question about where the breath or life force of a man or beast may go. But he does not answer the question. His point is that everyone at death returns to dust.) The condition of the dead is then described with crystal clarity: “The living know that they are going to die: the dead do not know anything, nor any longer do they have any reward, for their memory is forgotten” (Ecc. 9:5). So the wise policy for the living is this: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no activity, nor planning or wisdom in Sheol/Hades where you are going” (Ecc. 9:10). “Mortal man’s spirit departs, he returns to the earth. In that very day his thoughts perish” (Ps. 146:4). “Enlighten my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death” (Ps. 13:3). “Sheol/Hades cannot praise You. Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness” (Isa. 38:18).

What hope then does the Hebrew Bible offer for the dead? “The Lord kills and makes alive. He brings down to Sheol/Hades and raises up (resurrects)” (I Sam 2:6). “God will ransom me [literally, ‘my soul’] from the power of Sheol/Hades” (Ps. 49:15). And now the classic passages in the Old Testament (from the 6th and 8th centuries BC) which promise us rescue from Sheol/Hades by resurrection from death: “Many of those who are sleeping in the dust of the ground will awake, some to everlasting life [literally, the life of the age to come]” (Dan 12:2). “Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust of the ground, awake and shout for joy” (Isa. 26:19).

This consistent teaching about the afterlife from the Hebrew Bible, the Bible in which Jesus was thoroughly trained, as was Paul (Luke 24:44; II Tim 3:15), tells us:

1) At death everyone goes down to Sheol/Hades, a place of inactivity and silence.

2) Only by a future resurrection of the whole person from death/Sheol/Hades can the sleeping dead be awakened to “everlasting life.”

New Testament Christianity, not surprisingly, confirms this clear teaching unmistakably. Jesus echoes Daniel 12:2 and sees the dead in the same location until their rescue via resurrection: “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming in which all who are in their tombs will hear the voice of the Son of Man and will come forth to a resurrection of life; others to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28, 29). The pattern is utterly clear. There is no recovery from

death apart from a future collective resurrection. Resurrection means coming out of the tomb. And this will not happen until Jesus returns to effect that rescue at the last trumpet.

A large number of New Testament passages fit hand-in-glove with what we have seen so far. The essential point to be grasped is that future rewards are not gained at the moment of death, but only at the future resurrection, an event which cannot occur until Jesus’ return to the earth: “The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with the angels and *then* he will reward every person according to his deeds” (Matt. 16:27).

“You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:14). “Those who are considered worthy to attain to that [future] age and the resurrection of the dead...will be sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:35, 36). Christians will receive eternal life in the Age to Come (Luke 18:30). The faithful will be resurrected at Jesus’ coming again (I Cor. 15:23). “In the future there is laid up for me a crown of glory which the Lord will award me on that day, not only to me but to all who have loved his appearing” (II Tim. 4:8). The Bible concludes with an impressive statement declaring that it is only at Christ’s return that rewards are to be granted: “Behold, I am coming quickly and my reward is with me, to render to everyone according to what he has done” (Rev. 22:12).

This survey of biblical evidence, which can be presented easily to inquiring friends and neighbors, convinces us that popular views of rewards and punishments at the moment of death, misrepresent the Bible. They are false to the Christian Scriptures. The biblical timetable has suffered a terrible distortion. This happened when church members began to lose their grip on biblical teaching and “caved in” to the alluring suggestion that a person does not have to wait until judgment day at Christ’s return to gain immortality and receive his reward, or suffer punishment. Under the influence of pagan Greek philosophy the notion crept into the church that a man can gain life and rewards in an afterlife, prior to resurrection at Christ’s return. This rival model or paradigm threw the biblical evidence into confusion and inevitably weakened the enormous biblical emphasis on the future resurrection of the dead from the sleep of death, as our only escape from death (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28, 29). In fact resurrection at

Christ's future coming became, under the noxious influence of usurping philosophy, an appendix in God's Plan rather than the great defining moment of glory, as the Bible sees it.

What we have stated here is actually well-known to many biblical scholars of various denominations. Yet it does not easily gain ground amongst those who sit in pews, most of whom have not involved themselves in a systematic scriptural examination of these central issues. Many presumably expect their chosen leaders and teachers to instruct them in biblical faith rather than popular mythology. Apparently things are not in fact as they seem: the vast majority of those who attend funeral services are entirely unaware of any discrepancy between the teaching of their church and the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles.

George Eldon Ladd, celebrated author and conservative theologian who taught at Fuller Seminary, began a chapter on our subject as follows:

*"There is a land beyond the river
That they call the sweet forever,
And we only reach that shore by faith's decree.
One by one we reach the portals,
There to dwell with the immortals,
When they ring those golden bells for you and me."*

Ladd then says: "This old evangelistic song expresses the idea many Christians have of life after death. When we die 'we go to heaven.' The popular idea is that heaven is a state of blessedness — 'the sweet forever'— through whose portals the man of faith passes when he dies, and crosses the river of death. There, in a state of disembodied blessedness, he will 'dwell with the immortals.' This thinking, popular thought it is, is more an expression of Greek thought than of biblical theology" (*The Last Things: An Eschatology for Laymen*, Eerdmans, 1978, p. 29).

Ladd could have spoken even more directly. The facts are that this "popular teaching," cherished by millions, is in complete collision with Jesus and the Bible and reflects popular pagan philosophy, the paganism of ancient mystery religions. Paganism has always been — and the situation is no different today — the greatest threat to a relationship with God "in spirit and truth." May churches everywhere awake to the ever-present threat of "Christopaganism," a relapse into alien systems of belief which masquerade as "Christian."

Next month we will deal with those few verses which some try to pit against the texts we have assembled above. ✧

Mankind: What Is He For?

By Jim Kunz

The existence of mankind has been an intriguing, continual enigma down through the centuries. The fact that he exists has engendered a never-ending debate about his origins and development.

Evolutionists have him in a progressive, upward mobility, over timeless ages, from lower forms of life to that of a higher order of being. Creationists take the opposite tack, pointing out that he was a higher order of being, through creation, from the beginning.

Phillip E. Johnson in his book *Darwin on Trial* (InterVarsity Press, second edition, 1993) shows that the theory of evolution is based on faith, not fact, and argues that there is no vast body of empirical data supporting the theory as is generally supposed.

In the heat of this controversy the question of what mankind is for has been largely overshadowed by arguments about his inception and progression.

Yet God has made it clear what man is for. It is perhaps the most encouraging, uplifting revelation he has been given. It is essential that he understand.

First, God tells us about our origins. He created us (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; Deut. 4:32; Ps. 100:3; 119:73; Isa. 45:12; Jer. 27:5; Mal. 2:10; Mark 10:6, etc.). He wants us to understand where we came from.

In man's primal, pristine state, he was a marvelous, highly developed physical and intellectual creation, created by and made in the image of God (Gen. 5:1-2; Ps.139:13-15; Job 10:3-12). Being in God's image, his innate capacity was awesome. God's expectations for him are awesome.

He made man with the potential to fulfill those expectations which are clearly laid out: Psalm 8:6 (updated NASB): “You made him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet.”

The creative work of God, the heavens, the moon and stars, all spread out before man in its vast array, shrinks him in his own eyes to total insignificance (Ps. 8:3-4). But what is God’s answer? “Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty” (v. 5).

The term *God* is translated *angel* in the King James Version and comes from the word *elohim*. Peter C. Craigie states, concerning verse 5, “Nevertheless, the translation *God* is almost certainly correct, and the words probably contain an allusion to the image of God in mankind and the God-given role of dominion to be exercised by mankind within the created order” (*The Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 19, p. 108).

Hebrews 2:5-8 gives an updated meaning, understood by the early church, to Psalm 8. Man had failed in his mission to rule (Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 5:12). Jesus qualified to fulfill this role. This is made plain in Hebrews 2:9 and 3:6. Jesus had successfully completed his ministry (John 17:4, 6-8).

After his death, God, in a majestic demonstration of His incomprehensible power, raised Jesus from the dead and set him eternally at His right hand above all rule, authority, power and dominion, and put all things in subjection under his feet (I Pet. 3:18, 22; Rom. 8:34). After his resurrection, Christ told his disciples, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18).

Is Christ to be the sole fulfillment of Psalm 8? No, he is the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). Christ’s position is a preview for those who conform to his image (see this in Eph. 2:1-7). In Christ, we are still to fulfill the purpose of our creation (Eph. 1:9-14; Col. 3:1-4).

Let’s examine a little more closely why God created man and what he is for. As we have seen, he was created in God’s image. In Genesis 1:26-27 quite a point is made of this: it is stated three times in two verses. What does it mean? God gave us, His image and likeness, the intellectual potential, the capacity to understand His purpose.

Such capacity was not given in the animal world. When converted, while still in the flesh, enough of God’s image, mental likeness, is there that man’s mind can comprehend and be prepared for the spiritual world (I Cor. 2:12-14). That understanding will be carried with him, intact, when he is given eternal life (“the life of the age to come”) at Christ’s return. This fact tells us why man’s potential is so great.

II Corinthians 3:18 illustrates this: “And we, all of us, with faces uncovered, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image [of God] from one degree of glory to another; this is the work of the Lord, who is the Spirit” (translated by Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 40, p. 57).

In the case of the unconverted mind, this process has stagnated: “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world [age] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:3-4). Christ is the full image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Our renewal process consists of taking on that image (Col. 3:10).

Let’s look for a moment at the vast, remarkable complexity of the human body. According to the Genesis account of man before the flood, this extraordinary being appears to have been designed to live a thousand years.

A successful medical doctor, a few years ago, told my wife and me that doctors understand about 15% of the human body and think they understand that much fairly well.

The human structure is so elaborate and complicated that man fathoms only a small part of it. Even that understanding entails years of study and training.

The human mind, which also has been intensely studied, is even less understood. Science does not deal with nonmaterial entities, yet human thought processes, though nonmaterial, are the most evident attributes of man's existence. There is more to human life than the flesh.

Dr. Lewis Thomas, one of the greatest life scientists of our time, says, "We know a lot about the structure and function of the cells and fibers of the human brain, but we haven't a ghost of an idea about how this extraordinary organ works to produce awareness" (Lewis Thomas, *On Science and Uncertainty*, Discover 1, Oct. 1980, p. 59).

Speaking of man's ability to communicate, Thomas states, "but we do not understand language itself. Indeed, language is so incomprehensible a problem that the language we use for discussing the matter is itself becoming incomprehensible" (Ibid.).

Interestingly, the Targums translate Genesis 2:7 ("man became a living soul") as "man became a speaking spirit," i.e. a rational being with the power of expressing thought" (*The Soncino Books of the Bible, Psalms*, p. 8).

Man is such a marvelous, complex creation that it is beyond his ability to understand his own makeup and structure. This should be a warning about his limitations: "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). Remarkable as he is, he needs instruction, guidance and direction.

In the beginning, God told Adam and Eve to rule the earth (Gen. 1:26-31). Yet, there is an indication that his beginnings in Eden were an apprenticeship. He was allowed to partake freely of all the trees good for food, including the tree of life. A training and testing period? Initially, death was not implied. Yet, imbibing of the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil carried the death penalty. In such an eventuality, his commission would be revoked and his life forfeited.

His status was firm and secure under God, yet tentative in the sense that he could choose, which he did, to turn from God. He accepted the serpent's offer of a quicker, easier course with a higher position (Gen. 3:4-5). He incurred the death penalty (Gen. 3:19). His commission and status were terminated (Gen. 3:22-24). And, he was degraded (Rom. 1:28).

It is probable that full rulership was to be worked in gradually, conditioned on an apprenticeship which, upon successful completion, would have, in God's time, included eternal life. This follows the pattern Christ set. It was not until after Christ's resurrection that all power was given into his hand.

It is also the pattern set for mankind. After conversion, a time of successful training and apprenticeship are required. At Christ's coming, eternal life will be included to enhance and give full scope for his converted, trained capabilities (I Cor. 15:50-58). Only then will he realize his full potential. His tenure as king will be permanent.

We have seen the remarkable physical and mental capacity God gave man. Yet his human limitations constrain him. Of himself, he is not capable of fulfilling his purpose (Rom. 8:7-8). Something is lacking — God's holy spirit.

Christ promised that the Father would send the spirit of truth which would be a guide to understanding and knowledge (John 14:16-17). It would imbue him with the spirit of a sound mind (II Tim. 1:7; I Cor. 2:6-7, 11-14). God would begin to write His laws, His ways, on his mind and heart (Heb. 10:16). By expanding his mental capacity and understanding through His holy spirit he would truly, for the first time, begin to grow in, and take on, God's spiritual comprehension, which is not available to the natural mind.

The holy spirit in him is his assurance of his promised future (Rom. 8:11). He is sealed with the spirit of promise which is a pledge, guarantee, of his inheritance (Eph. 1:13-14).

God, in His infinite wisdom, created the heavens and the earth. He has a whole order of created spirit beings, far above the human level, to assist His every need (Rev. 5:11; Dan. 7:10). Yet He predestined a point in time in His plan when He would bring into His realm an even higher order, right under Him, to carry out His purpose, ruling under and for Him. His rule will be on this earth (Rev. 5:10). God ensured that man knows not only where he came from, but also what his purpose will be, and where it will be carried out. It started with the creation of man, and, at the appointed time, the work of Christ bringing many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10; Gal. 4:4-7).

In his human state man is a little lower than the angels (Heb. 2:7). In his spiritual state he will be made a little lower than God (Ps. 8:5). One translation says that man is “made to lack but little of God” (*Hasting’s Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, p. 226). Under his jurisdiction, for the first time there will be continual happiness, freedom, prosperity and universal peace on earth (Isa. 2:1-4; Mic. 4:1-3). The earth will be restored (Isa. 35). When God wants a higher level of assistance, He creates it. This is what man is for.

How high an order will he be in God’s realm? God wants us to understand: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:18-21).

He is to be far above the rest of God’s created order, directly under God, with God Himself being the only exception (I Cor. 15:27-28).

The story of his purpose is almost beyond human comprehension. The glory and benefits that go with such a position defy the imagination, “but just as it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him,’ for to us God has revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God” (I Cor. 2:9-10). ✧

Do Souls Go to Heaven? (continued from January)

Modern scholars realize that the view of death which has prevailed (and is now promoted in church constantly) is not biblical. Far from it, it is, amazingly, actually “pagan” and “Gnostic.” Moreover, as the previous quotations from the early apologists for Christianity show, the idea of going to heaven or hellfire immediately at death was a novel, heretical doctrine not taught by the church for some three hundred years after Christ. In a standard text of Christian Dogmatics we read:

“The hellenization process by which Christianity adopted many Greek [pagan] thought patterns led in a different direction as the eschatological hope came to be expressed in Hellenistic categories. Irenaeus said: ‘It is manifest that the souls of His disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall go away **in the invisible place** allotted to them by God, and **there remain until the resurrection**, awaiting that event. Then receiving their bodies and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come into the presence of God.’ Irenaeus’ statement contains the concept of an abode or purgatory in which the soul of the dead **remains until the universal resurrection**. We should not denounce this as a deviation from biblical teaching, since the point of the assertion is **antignostic**. **Irenaeus wanted to reject the Gnostic idea that at the end of this earthly life the soul immediately ascends to its heavenly abode. As the early fathers**

fought the pagan idea that a part of the human person is simply immortal, it was important for them to assert that there is no rectilinear ascent to God. Once we die, life is over” (Braaten/Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, p. 503, section written by Hans Schwartz, Professor of Protestant Theology, University of Regensburg, Federal Republic of Germany).

There is a further impressive protest against the popular idea that the dead survive as conscious “souls” in heaven. One might expect that such protest would initiate a wide-scale reform amongst the clergy. Alan Richardson writes in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (pp. 111, 112, emphasis added):

“The Bible writers, holding fast to the conviction that the created order owes its existence to the wisdom and love of God and is therefore essentially good, **could not conceive of life after death as a disembodied existence** [*as millions of sincere believers are now taught in church to think of it!*] (“we shall not be found naked” — II Cor. 5:3), but as a renewal under conditions of the intimate unity of body and soul which was human life as they knew it. Hence *death was thought of as the death of the whole man*, and such phrases as ‘freedom from death,’ imperishability or immortality could only properly be used to describe what is meant by the phrase eternal or living God ‘who only has immortality’ (I Tim. 6:16). **Man does not possess within himself the quality of deathlessness**, but must, if he is to overcome the destructive power of death, receive it as the gift of God who ‘raised Christ from the dead,’ and put death aside like a covering garment (I Cor. 15:53, 54). It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that this possibility for man (2 Tim. 1:10) has been brought to life and the hope confirmed that the corruption which is a universal feature of human life shall be effectively overcome.”

The fundamental confusion about life after death which has so permeated traditional Christianity is brilliantly described by Dr. Paul Althaus in his book *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 413, 414):

“The hope of the early church centered on the resurrection of the Last Day. It is this which *first* calls the dead into eternal life (I Cor. 15; Phil. 3:21).

This resurrection happens to the man and not only to the body. Paul speaks of the resurrection not ‘of the body’ but ‘of the dead.’ This understanding of the resurrection implicitly understands death as also affecting the whole man...**Thus [in traditional orthodoxy] the original Biblical concepts have been replaced by ideas from Hellenistic, Gnostic dualism.** The New Testament idea of the resurrection which affects *the whole man* has had to *give way to the immortality of the soul*. The Last Day also loses its significance, for souls have received all that is decisively important long before this. Eschatological tension is no longer strongly directed to the day of Jesus’ Coming. **The difference between this and the Hope of the New Testament is very great.”**

That difference may be witnessed in contemporary preaching at funerals which, though claiming the Bible as its source, reflects a pagan Platonism which both the New Testament, the early Church Fathers and modern informed scholars reject.

Can belief in pagan ideas, promoted in the name of Jesus, result in a knowledge of Truth which leads to salvation? Is not this obvious paganism of Christianity a cause for alarm and a reason for returning to the Truth of the Bible?✧

Comments

“I just completed your article ‘The Simplicity of the Christian Message’ (see our website www.mindspring.com/~anthonybuzzard). It made my heart swell with joy and love. What you’ve said is wonderful and ‘new’ to me. It makes me excited about learning more about the Hebrew Scriptures and the first three Gospels. And it makes the church epistles even more exciting!”

We remind readers who have access to the Internet that a daily Bible study in the form of our radio program “Focus on the Kingdom” can be heard weekdays, by going to acn-network.com (you will need the free RealPlayer from real.com). Our program airs at 2:00-2:15 EST.