

The Bible and the Afterlife: What Happens When We Die?
II Corinthians 4:16-5:9; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57
April 19, 2009

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows St. Peter standing behind his desk at the Pearly Gates with an open ledger and a quill pen. He begins addressing those before him with these words: "Welcome aboard. You are now exempt from federal, state and local taxes."

Taxes have been on our minds this past week – one of the two things in life we can't escape. The other is death. In this holy season of Easter, I invite you to reflect with me on what the Bible tells us about the afterlife. Today we are beginning with the question "What happens when we die?" Next Sunday we will look at what the Bible really says about hell, and you might be surprised! Then we'll examine what the Bible means by the idea of the Last Judgment. Finally, we'll check out glimpses of the heavenly paradise given in the scriptures.

Belief in the afterlife is common among North Americans. A Barna report in 2003 found that 8 out of 10 (81%) Americans believe in an afterlife of some sort. Another 9% said they believed that life after death may exist, but weren't certain. One out of every ten adults (10%) contend that there is no form of life after one dies on earth. Nearly one in five adults (18%) believes that people are reincarnated after death.ⁱ

Given the fairly prevalent belief in reincarnation, let me share a brief word about it. Reincarnation is the idea that upon death souls are reborn in new bodies or other forms of life. While some sects of Judaism believe in reincarnation, it is primarily found in Eastern religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. The basic idea is that souls are reborn in another life in order to deal with the consequences of their previous lives. If they come into their new life with bad karma from the past, they might be reborn into a lower status; if they enter with good karma, they are given a life with more status. Thus, the prospect of an endless series of rebirths is not necessarily comforting. The ultimate goal is to reach the realm of true being and true freedom called Nirvana, and one becomes like a drop of spray merged into its mother sea.

One underlying difference between resurrection and reincarnation is the Christian belief that we are saved by grace through faith; we are not embraced by God through our works, but works are important in achieving a higher status in one's next incarnation. Another question I would ask is does God really put us through life all over again – both the good and hard experiences, fresh joys and experiences we've never had before, but also pimples and puberty, suffering and loss, aging and the dying process? Do we really want to go there again?ⁱⁱ In contrast to reincarnation, the Christian view of resurrection offers an end to the

suffering of the present world and a glorious transformed existence in the presence of God.

Let's move on to the biblical teaching about resurrection. In order to address what happens when we die, we start with the purpose of life. The Bible tells us that humans are created for fellowship with God. Because God is beyond mere time and space, the possibility for our relationship with God goes beyond time and space as we know it. This is our understanding of eternal life; it begins here and now in our relationship with God and continues beyond life as we currently know it.

There are two things that threaten our relationship with God: sin and death. Sometimes things go wrong in our relationship with God. We humans have a tendency to put ourselves rather than God at the center of our lives, disrupting that relationship and preventing its fulfillment. The Bible calls this sin. The second thing that threatens our relationship with God is death, for in death life itself is broken into pieces.ⁱⁱⁱ

Resurrection is the way that God answers the threat of death. Late biblical Judaism displays a belief in a general resurrection of all the dead. The idea of resurrection is most prominent in the Christian scriptures. The early Christians are in a real sense "the community of the resurrection." They know that God's power is greater than death, because God has conquered death by raising Christ from the dead. This is the charter of their existence. And it changes everything.

No longer is the idea of God's power over death a pious hope. Christ has been raised from the dead, and those who believe in him can be "partakers of the resurrection."

What is the resurrection? Does resurrection mean our physical and spiritual bodies are raised as they are on earth? What about bodies that are cremated? One fact to keep in mind is that the questions we ask are not questions even considered by the authors of the biblical texts. We cannot necessarily find the answers we want in the Bible, but we can seek to understand what the Bible tells us.

It is helpful to clarify what resurrection is not. It is not the resuscitation of a corpse that returns to this life as we know it. Nor it is a continuation of this life.

One of the common views of life after death is "immortality of the soul." This idea comes from the Greeks. When Greek thought and Hebrew-Christian thought came into contact in the Early Church, the Greek view often seemed to predominate. This view says that there is a portion of me - my soul - that will continue to exist. During my lifetime here on earth this immortal soul is lodged in a mortal body. At death my body dies and turns to dust, while my immortal soul is

released and freed to continue its immortal existence without being confined in a body.

It sounds good, doesn't it? I've found myself often thinking along these lines. When we consider it carefully, however, we find something troublesome. It implies that my body is a nuisance to my soul, something that confines it, limits it, hampers it, and subjects it to temptation. The Greeks themselves said, "The body is the prison house of the soul." Essentially it means that life on earth is a waste of time, an unpleasant interlude in the life of the soul, something to be over and done with as quickly as possible. The aim of life is to escape from life, get rid of the pesky body, in order to resume a free and unfettered existence in eternity. Human life has no final significance.^{iv}

The Bible affirms that God created human life and called it "very good" (Genesis 1:27, 31). Paul affirms that the human body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (I Corinthians 6:19). The Bible affirms the sacred worth of the human body. The idea that the soul is more important than the body is not biblical.

Resurrection is not resuscitation of the bodies we inhabit on earth, nor is resurrection the immortal existence of the soul without our body. So what does Paul mean when he writes of the resurrection of the body?

On opening his new store, a man received a bouquet of flowers. He became dismayed on reading the enclosed card, which expressed deep sympathy. While puzzling over his message, his telephone rang. It was the florist, apologizing for having sent the wrong card.

"Oh, it's all right," said the storekeeper. "I'm a businessman and I understand how these things can happen."

"Unfortunately," added the florist, "I sent your card to a funeral party."

"Well, what did it say?" asked the storekeeper.

"Congratulations on your new location," was the reply.

In writing about the resurrection of the body, Paul envisions not only a new location, but an entirely different existence with a fresh form of being. If we believe that ultimate reality is not nothingness, but that reality is held in the hand of God, death is not so much destruction but metamorphosis. Paul uses the image of a seed and the plant it produces. While the seed that is planted in the ground contains the DNA, the character, if you will, of the plant that emerges from it, the form and shape of the seed and plant are entirely different. The resurrected body is imperishable, a spiritual being that lives in an eternal dimension not fully known to us now. There is some consistency with our current character, but there is also a radical transformation, the exact shape of which is unknown to us. Theologian Hans Kung wrote, "Death is a passing into God, is a homecoming into God's

mystery....In death, a new, eternal future is offered to man, to the whole, undivided person.”^v

We wonder when resurrection happens – at the moment of death or is it delayed until the reign of God comes in all its fullness? Is our last breath on earth our first breath in heaven? Or do we sleep until Jesus comes again and raises all the dead? The Bible gives us both answers, making it confusing.

In I Thessalonians 4, the idea is presented that the dead sleep until the Lord comes, when they will be raised first, followed by those who are alive in Christ. But there are other biblical examples such as Elijah being taken by a chariot of fire immediately to heaven. In Luke’s parable of the poor man Lazarus and the rich man Dives, upon their deaths one is immediately transported to heaven and the other to hell. There is no period of sleep in between this life and the next. Thus, the Bible gives contradictory answers about the timing of resurrection.

The first followers of Jesus believed that Jesus would return immediately, within their lifetimes and consummate the kingdom of God in all its fullness. It was not important for them to clarify what happens after death, for they knew that they would be raised up soon upon Jesus’ return. It is nearly two thousand years later and that return has not happened as they anticipated. Our rational minds ask, “What purpose would there be in waiting for resurrection for hundreds or thousands of years?” Lacking a reasonable answer to that question, I tend to believe that eternal life in the presence of God goes on immediately upon our death.

A frequent question is about cremation. Given that we will have a different kind of body in eternal life, we need not worry about those who choose to have their earthly remains cremated. We won’t need these physical bodies in the eternal realm.

What can we affirm that the Bible says about what happens when we die? The Bible recognizes the reality and finality of death. It doesn’t avoid death but acknowledges the limited nature of the human lifespan.

Our Christian faith affirms that we are created for relationship with God that continues beyond earthly life. Eternal life with God begins here and now and continues once our earthly bodies cease to breathe.

Eternal life is a gift. The Bible doesn’t try to “prove” eternal life because it cannot be proven. Belief in eternal life is a consequence of belief in God. It is not earned by “works;” this belief is a gift from God to those who know and believe in God.

Eternal life is a rebirth. We die and we are reborn. Resurrection is a powerful act of God who raises up and transforms the total personality of an individual, not just the soul.

Given this understanding of what happens when we die, that eternal life with God begins now and continues on beyond our lifespans on earth, we can understand Paul's affirmation, "Death is swallowed up in victory. Oh, death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

A fable tells of a boy and his father driving down a country road on a beautiful spring afternoon. Suddenly out of nowhere a bumblebee flies through the open car window. Because the boy is deathly allergic to bee stings, he is petrified. But the father quickly reaches out, grabs the bee, squeezes it in his hand, and then releases it. But as soon as he lets it go, his son becomes frantic. His father gently extends his hand to show his son that there, still stuck in his skin, is the stinger of the bee. "Do you see this?" he asks. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. There's no more sting in that bee!"

Although the death of a loved one causes us much grief and anguish, and even our own deaths can sometimes be painful processes, the promise of Easter is that we too are partakers of the resurrection. Our life with God goes on eternally. In that we can rejoice. Alleluia!

ⁱ "Americans Describe Their Views about Life after Death," October 21, 2003, Barna Research Group, Ltd., www.barna.org.

ⁱⁱ Rev. Adam Hamilton, Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, Kansas, www.cor.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1955), p. 222.

^{iv} Ibid, 221-222.

^v Hans Kung, *Eternal Life?* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 113.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA