

Life after Death

by the Revd Neil Broadbent

Neither death nor life... nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God. Rom 8.38-9

Today you shall be with me in Paradise. Luke 23.43

We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Nicene Creed

This leaflet shows that belief in life after death is consistent with biblical and church teaching.

In the Bible

Just as the church's doctrines of the Trinity and of Infant Baptism have been fairly and honestly deduced from scripture, so we may make similar deductions about life after death - at least as far as it refers to its earliest stages.

By the second century BC, King Saul had spoken with Samuel after the prophet's death and belief in a rich after-life had grown as the numbers of Jews killed in battles rose. We find care for the dead, in 2 Maccabees 12:38-45: 'Judas had this expiatory sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sin.'

Amongst other instances, we find in the New Testament that: Moses and Elijah were recognized by the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration; Dives and Lazarus are both described as in Hades, an intermediate state of life; Jesus' word to the penitent thief on the cross shows a continuing relationship after physical death, a transitional incident which one need not fear; Christ preached to the spirits in prison after he had died. In John 5:25-30, Jesus refers to his relationship with the dead. The 'judgement' is a disciplinary, corrective time of punishment. The 'many mansions' of John 14:3 are wayside 'caravanserais' or roadside shelters for resting places along the journey after death and, in John 17, Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only God".

In the Bible, there is only one God, one Saviour, and one humanity; that is all mankind was considered as one in its collective humanity. There was one Adam, representing the fall of humanity, and only one 'second Adam', Jesus, who shows the way for the return of this one humanity back to at-one-ment with the Divine. The popular focusing on Jesus by Christians makes sense when Jesus is seen as the representative man, standing for any and all humanity. Similarly, for the hope that God will bring all creation home to himself see Rom 5&11, 1 Cor 15, Eph 1, 1 Tim 2&4, and 1 John 2. The story of Zacchaeus, in Luke 19, shows that in the presence of Jesus, the Saviour, we judge ourselves.

In the Tradition of the Church

In Liturgy (i.e. the work of the people), the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and some branches of Protestant churches pray regularly for the dead and ask the dead in Christ to pray for them. Early Fathers who prayed for the dead, in accord with “they shall not be made perfect without us” (Heb 11), include St Augustine, Epiphanius, St Chrysostom, Eusebius, Arnobius and Tertullian. As just mentioned, the dead pray also for us. From the 20th century, St Thérèse of Lisieux wrote, in her autobiography, ‘I shall spend my heaven doing good on earth.’

Part of the churches ministry of deliverance consists in ‘healing the haunted’ by praying for a ‘dead but not departed’ soul that they may continue their journey towards the light of Christ and so release the afflicted, incarnate soul from their influence. The key is always love.

The Key Relationship

As God’s love is absolute so is his commitment to all. In both life and death, God’s love will not let us go. As death was not the end of the matter for Jesus nor is it for us. The resurrection of Jesus gives us a sure and certain hope of resurrection to a new life.

Death will not change our being, only our environment. We will be the same personality one minute after we die as we were one minute before. Only we will have left behind our earthly bodies, our biological pyjamas, which were necessary for the education of the soul in this life. The soul is an overlying intelligence which makes itself known through the body, and then detaches itself when the body dies, for as St John of the Cross wrote, ‘The soul lives where it loves, not where it breathes’. ‘Life is God living and working in the soul.’ So much so that, ‘we are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.’

Continuing Growth towards the Divine Spirit

Differences in the next life are moral differences arising from variety in character and spiritual attainment wrought in this life. We shall reap in the next life what we have sown in this life. Indeed, the spiritual body of 1 Cor 15 consists of the attitudes, opinions and actions of the person while he or she was still alive in the flesh. The chastening of our selfishness is Fatherly, remedial and finite resulting in enlarged consciousness and compassion. Such purging is a preliminary to ascending to more heavenly realms, one of which is the traditional ‘paradise’.

St Catherine of Genoa wrote that, except in paradise, no joy can be ‘compared to the joy of the souls in purgatory. This joy increases day by day... since the impediment to God’s love is worn away daily. This impediment is the rust of sin. As it is consumed the soul is more and more open to God’s love.’ Such knowledge strengthens our ‘faith which is reason grown courageous.’ Bishop Gregory of Nyssa went further when he wrote, ‘The desire of those who thus rise never rests in what they can already understand; but by an ever greater and greater desire, the soul keeps rising constantly to another [grace] which lies ahead, and thus makes its way through ever higher regions towards the Transcendent.’

Life and death are continuously happening. We may truly pass from death to life, now, as we turn from self-centredness to self-sacrificing service of others. Our choices determine whether we are moving towards death, separation from others, or towards greater life; headed for hell or heaven. In loving service, lies our consciousness of immortality for 'God is Love'. Heaven and hell may be seen as one spiritual world perceived differently according to our own spiritual state. Hell as a state of despairing isolation; heaven a state where one experiences complete trust and mutual acceptance in total openness. It follows that heaven cannot truly appear until all creation is 'one in Christ', then Christ shall be 'all in all' and heaven revealed.

Faith, Hope and Love

Have no misgiving; if one has not responded to Christ's love in this life, it may yet happen in the next. Though there may be considerable correction and cleansing needed, nothing can separate us forever from the Love that is God.

Helpful Resources

Pointers to Eternity Dewi Rees, Y Lolfa, 2010.

About Death Martin Israel, CFPSS, 2000.

Life Eternal Martin Israel, SPCK, 1993.

Life Unlimited, the Persistence of Personality Beyond Death Allan Barham, Volturna Press, 1982.

The Communion of Saints Martin Israel, CFPSS, 1980.

The Soul After Death: Contemporary "After-Death" Experiences in the Light of the Orthodox Teaching on the Afterlife Seraphim Rose, St. Herman of Alaska Press, 1980.

Death and Eternal Life John Hick, Fount Paperbacks, 1979.

Afterlife, the Other Side of Dying Morton Kelsey, Crossroad, 1979.

"And the Life of the World to Come" Martin Israel, CFPSS, 1977.

Christian Beliefs about Life after Death Paul Badham, SPCK, 1976.

The Resurrection of Man Michael Perry, Mowbrays, 1975.

In the End, God... : a study of the Christian doctrine of the Last Things John Robinson, James Clarke, 1950.

After Death Leslie Weatherhead, Epworth Press, 1923.

There is No Death Basil Wilberforce, Elliot Stock, 1913.

Our Life after Death, The Teaching of the Bible Concerning the Unseen World, Arthur Chambers, Charles Taylor, 1894.

After Death: An Examination of the Testimony of Primitive Times respecting the State of the Faithful Dead, and their Relationship to the Living Herbert Mortimer Luckock, Rivingtons, 1879.