

# **What Comes Next**

*Can We Be Certain About Life After Death?*

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of a talk given by David Gooding in Bray, County Wicklow (Ireland) in 1974.

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust  
PO Box 2216  
Belfast, N Ireland  
BT1 9YR

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: doc.016/jf

## Is There Life After Death?

The subject of life after death is a topic that has been debated on this earth ever since there were people on the earth to debate it. A very early poet, some thousands of years ago now, had been looking at nature. He observed, for instance, that if you cut down an old tree and just leave the stump of it in the ground, sometimes, though it looks dead, it will begin to sprout again. As a farmer, he had watched what happened to the seed he put in the ground. You sow a grain of wheat or barley, and what looks dead presently begins to sprout and grow up as another living plant. And he asked himself, 'Well, if you find that kind of thing happening in nature, is it possible that it happens also to human beings? When people die, do they live again?' He framed it like this:

For there is hope for a tree,  
if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,  
and that its shoots will not cease.  
Though its root grow old in the earth,  
and its stump die in the soil,  
yet at the scent of water it will bud  
and put out branches like a young plant.  
But a man dies and is laid low;  
man breathes his last, and where is he? (Job 14:7-10)

Millions of men and women have asked themselves that basic question at some time or other, and the vast majority have come to the conclusion, and firmly believed that, yes, there is life after death. The more thoughtful among them have not come to their conclusion because they have begun to believe in ghosts or anything spooky, but for far more weighty and serious reasons. Allow me to give you one of the main reasons why multitudes of people (and not just Christians but folks of all different kinds of beliefs throughout the world, and throughout the centuries) have come to believe this.

### **The fact of right and wrong**

One of the basic and fundamental reasons most people believe that there is such a thing as life after death, is a human being's own innate sense of right and wrong. There is not one of us who does not have a deeply seated sense that there ought to be fair play. There is such a thing as justice. There is such a thing as right and wrong. The workman at his work believes it. The

trade unions believe it. The capitalist believes it. Humans are forever claiming their rights, because they feel there is such a thing as rights that other people ought to acknowledge.

When we think about these things, we all observe that that kind of feeling we have in our hearts is not something we invented ourselves. I daresay you have sometimes caught yourself about to do something a bit shady or wrong. I certainly have, only I want to do it because it is to my advantage. And when I propose to myself doing this thing I know is wrong, then I find my conscience takes sides against me, and I feel ashamed of myself. I feel an old cad for doing what I'm about to do. That kind of feeling is universal in humankind. Humankind, as a whole, has taken it that this sense of right and wrong inside us is not something we invented but, like everything else, comes from an almighty creator.

Having decided that, humans have looked around their world, and then taken another step forward in their thinking. They have observed that justice is not always done in this life. In fact, in some senses it is rarely done.

There was Hitler, for instance, to take a glaring example of something we all know about. Hitler decided to get himself vast power, and with his jackbooted storm troopers he oppressed millions of people, along the way gassing six million Jews, to say nothing of the other millions that he slaughtered. And for a while he enjoyed his power and strutted up and down the stage of history. Then, when things got too hot for him, and he'd had his fling, he just put a bullet through his brain and disappeared.

And people have said, 'Look, if our sense of right and wrong is not something that we invented ourselves, but comes from God, and there is a God who cares for justice, then there must be a life after death when this God who cares for justice settles accounts with men and women.' That is why you will find, I think universally, that all people who believe in a life after death also believe that, after death, there will be some kind of judgment when life's injustices are sorted out.

I don't know how that appeals to you. You may find that a very gloomy notion. Of course, the Bible repeats that it is true: 'It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb 9:27). Though it is solemn, that is far from being gloomy, if you will think about it for a moment. The fact that a judgment comes after death is the biggest compliment that God ever paid to humankind. God takes us men and women seriously. God holds the view that what we do really matters, and matters eternally. And because what we do matters, we ourselves matter.

I want to put it to you right at the beginning of what I have to say, that though believing in a judgment after death may seem to be a very gloomy view, it is the atheist, who denies that there is a God and denies that there is a world to come, who is the fearful pessimist. Atheists offer you the biggest insult they could possibly offer you. The atheist says that when the day is done and life is over, it will all be seen then that what you have done never really mattered, for when you die you're finished. Not only what you *did* didn't matter, but what you *are* doesn't matter.

I for one would take a lot of convincing that that is the true estimate of humanity. If I have any wishful thinking in the matter at all, you can begin to see that it would lead me in the direction of wanting to believe that we humans are significant: that what we do matters and that what we are matters. And, therefore, there must be a life after death.

## Certainty about life after death

I am not proposing to discuss with you what people have thought, and the various kinds of philosophies that have argued for a life after death. Our topic is whether there can be certainty about life after death. And the answer to that question is, yes, there can be certainty, but there is only absolute certainty from one source. That source is Jesus Christ our Lord. So the answer to my question about certainty after death is that, in Christ, there is absolute certainty, and certainty on two counts. I would like us to get both of these things.

Christ can give us certainty about the fact that there is an existence after death. But even more important than that, Christ can give to each one of us certainty as to our own personal destiny after death.

I mention that second thing for this very real and practical reason. There are many people who hold, with some certainty, the view that there is life after death, but they are not certain of this second point. If you were to put to them the general proposition, 'Do you think there is life after death?' they would say, 'Yes, I suppose there is.' If you were to say to them, 'And are you personally sure of where you will be after death?' they would probably say, 'No.' And some of them might even add, 'But then nobody can be sure where they are going to end up after death.'

For that reason, I want to make these two points. Jesus Christ, our Lord, can give us certainty both as to the fact that there is life after death and also the individual and personal assurance of what is going to happen to each one of us after death. How can Jesus Christ give us assurance about the fact of life after death? Well, first of all, let's remember exactly who he is.

### Who Jesus Christ is

It seems to me there are many people who have not quite thought through who Jesus Christ is. We celebrate Christmas every year, and people talk of Jesus as the baby in the manger; and they say a lot of sentimental things about being kind and loving and nice to children. But if we are going to understand what Jesus Christ says, we must first of all observe who he claimed to be. To use his own language, his basic claim was that he 'came from above'.

Talking to his contemporaries, he said on one occasion, 'Look, gentlemen, you are from beneath; that is, you are born by the normal processes of birth. You are of this earth. In that sense, I am different. I came from above' (see John 8:23). On that same occasion, he said to these men, 'You remember your forefather, Abraham.' And as they thought of him, they looked back down centuries, right down the mists of time into ancient history. Yes, they'd certainly heard about Abraham. But he said, 'Let me tell you, before Abraham was, *I am*' (see vv. 48–59). He was claiming to be the eternal God, come down from his heaven into our earth, in order to link us up with his eternity. That is why we can be certain of what he says about life on the other side of time, of what it means to be in eternity. He is not theorizing. Talking to a learned theologian one day, and urging upon that theologian that he needed to be born again if he were ever to enter the kingdom of God, Christ said, 'Look here, old chap, what I'm telling you is what I actually know. I'm not spinning you a theory. I'm not philosophizing on the possibilities. We speak that which we know' (see John 3). Jesus Christ speaks from first-

hand experience, as the Son of God come down out of God's heaven. He says that there is that other world; there is something beyond our time.

### **Knowing what Jesus Christ says is true**

You might ask, 'But then how can we be sure that Jesus Christ, in making that claim, was telling the truth?'

One answer to that question is that his own personal resurrection from the dead affords us abundant evidence that his claim was true. I will not discuss in detail here the evidence that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a historical fact. To survey it, even sketchily, would take too much space. But the resurrection of Christ is not something that you have to make up your mind to believe because you are determined to believe it. It is not a matter of taking a step of faith in the dark without any evidence. There is overwhelming material, psychological and historical evidence that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Let me simply mention one tiny strand of that evidence among the many that could be mentioned. The very fact that in the town where I live, as throughout Europe, as throughout the world, there is a Christian church that worships on the first day of the week is, when you ponder it, a very powerful piece of evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. For you will remember that the early Christian disciples were in fact Jews. They had never celebrated the first day of the week permanently, every week, every year. They were Jews, and their regular day of worship was a Sabbath, a Saturday as we call it. When Jesus Christ was here on earth with them, they did not observe the first day of the week. It is the fact that, for nearly two thousand years, people all over this world have worshipped on a Sunday.

Why do they do that? Why did these Jews change their practice? You can trace it back right to those early Christians who suddenly started to celebrate the first day of the week. Let me point out to you again that, when they started to do so, they did it in spite of tremendous persecution, which they drew to themselves almost at once, in part for this very custom. Why did they do it then, if it brought such a furore of persecution? You have got to account for it starting somehow. It would have been so much more convenient just to have gone on as they were before, as Jews, and escape all the persecution. The answer to that great and colossal historic phenomenon is the great and powerful historical fact that they changed because, one Sunday morning, Jesus Christ rose from the dead and began that movement that we call Christianity that has flourished ever since.

But, as I say, to discuss in great detail all the many strands of evidence would take me far beyond my topic. I want to come to another line by which we may attain to certainty.

### **What Christ has done about death**

We may have certainty as to the fact that there is an eternity, that there is an existence beyond death for every one of us. As we have said, we may be certain about the fact because of the person of Christ—that he is who he has told us, and because of his resurrection that proves it.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of this evidence, see Chapter 7—'The Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ' in *Christianity: Opium or Truth?* by David Gooding and John Lennox. <https://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com/en/book-series/encounters/books/11/christianity-opium-or-truth>

Now we come to the second bit of our question: 'How may I personally attain to certainty, and certainty not merely that I shall survive the grave, but that I shall survive, to put it crudely, in the right place?' We can begin to find that certainty if we will look at what the Bible says that Christ has done about this thing called death.

There are two prominent things that the Bible says Christ has done. It says first that, for the believer, for those who trust him, he has removed *the sting of death*. Secondly, he has made powerless the one who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and so he has delivered people who all their lifetime were subject to bondage because of the fear of death. So, he removes the sting of death, and he removes the fear of death and the bondage that is associated with that fear.

### **Christ removes the sting of death**

What is this thing that the Bible calls the *sting* of death? The Bible says the sting of death is sin. Let's get things clear in our minds. *Dying* is a slightly different thing from *death*. Dying can be a sudden thing. We can die without noticing it, or it can be a long, protracted and nasty thing. But the Bible says the *sting* about death is not the nasty process that leads up to physical death. The sting is sin, because there is no denying the fact that when men and women face the challenge of physical death, it rivets home upon our consciences the fact that each one of us is a sinner.

We have noticed already that there is an inseparable bond in the human mind between an eternity out there, beyond life, and the fact that there is also a judgment out there, beyond life. To find a loved one who has struggled unsuccessfully against illness, and at last has died, is a very sorry thing; but there can be a terrible sting behind that, and that is to be uncertain what God is going to say about that loved one's sin. This is the reason why many people try to brush the whole topic of death under the carpet, and the reason why many people try and prove that there is no life after death, because if there is a life after death then there is a judgment after death. And when people are uncertain how they stand in relation to that judgment, then the thought of death appals and frightens them and makes their conscience uneasy. There is a sting in death.

The way we come to personal assurance on this matter is to allow Christ to take away the sting from death. After the Bible says, 'The sting of death is sin,' then it adds, 'and the power of sin is the law' (1 Cor 15:56). That means simply that when I have sinned, and I think of its possible eternal consequence, then I naturally get afraid, and I want to wriggle, and I want to try and tell myself that it doesn't matter. When I try to do that, God's law witnesses to my conscience: 'But, old chap, you can't get out of it that way. Sin *does* matter.'

Let me use a somewhat sensational example. Suppose I'm a bit of a show-off, and I've got a new car, and I love driving my car down the cul-de-sac at 100 mph and then seeing whether I can stop it within an inch or two of the fence. And you have warned me about the danger to the toddlers who play in the cul-de-sac; but I'm such a show-off that I won't listen to you. Then one of these days, I come down at an extraordinary speed, and I run over your children! Now I have sinned and sinned grievously. Are you going to listen to me when I try to tell you that it doesn't matter, in the end? No, you have the common sense to see that it matters. And God's law is on your side. God's law also says it matters.

So the strength of sin, the power of sin, is *the law*. Now, it is *that* sting that Christ removes for those who trust him because the Bible says when he died, 'he . . . bore our sins in his body' (1 Pet 2:24). He died to atone for sin. He died to pay the penalty of sin and, in a wonderful way, his death has made it possible for God to forgive the sins that we have done and to wipe them out as though they never existed. And with sin forgiven, and my heart and conscience put at rest that God has been perfectly just in forgiving my sin, I can face death knowing that the whole question of my sin, and the law's just punishment for it, has been dealt with forever. I can know, before I die, that the law has been satisfied, and so the sting of death has been removed.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

'Death is swallowed up in victory.'

'O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:54–57)

### **Christ removes the fear of death**

God also says that Christ delivers people from the fear of death. This fear is a very real thing. It will pervert people's personalities. It can make them very selfish. It can also make them very religious. Men and women will toil at all sorts of backbreaking works in the name of religion, because behind what they do is a fear of death.

Christ has come so that he might deliver us from that fear of death. The Bible says he has done it by dying himself. By dying he has made powerless the one who had the power of death, that is the devil, so that he might deliver from bondage those who all their lifetime feared death (Heb 2:14–15).

Since Christ has died, the very nature of death is changed for those who believe in him. The other afternoon, I was walking down the road when I heard an air-raid siren. It took my mind back to the days of the Second World War when there was an air-raid siren about six houses down from the house I lived in. I remember quite well what I felt like when I heard that first air-raid siren, with its fearful wail and grim warnings that the Nazis were coming with their bombers. I vividly remember the nights we spent in fear in the east of England, when the air-raid sirens went. And when I heard this air-raid siren it was the same sound, but no shivers went down my spine. There was no fear, no sweat.

You say, 'Why not? Was the sound itself any better?'

No, the sound was still the old 'wailing, wailing' of the siren, but it meant a different thing for me now than it did all those years ago.

Christ delivers those who trust him from the fear of death because, for the man or woman who believe Christ, death is a different thing. It has a different significance. For the man who is not saved, for the woman whose sins are not forgiven, for the person who has no peace with God, physical death is not only unpleasant in itself, but it is the fearful introduction to an eternity of misery. But for those who have received Christ and been forgiven and are at peace



with God, physical death is no such thing. It is but the gateway into the presence of God, into the presence of Christ—the very Saviour who died for them. One of the early Christians said that to depart like that and to be with Christ is far better than anything that you have ever known in life (Phil 1:23).

So Christ begins to give us personal certainty in our own hearts, when we trust him, by doing these two things for us. He removes the sting of death through his cross, through his forgiveness, through his redemption. He removes the fear of death, because in this way he transforms death into a gateway into God's own heaven.

But there is another ground for certainty, and I want to go slowly here, because it is a wonderful thing, but perhaps a little bit difficult to understand.

### **Certainty through an eternal relationship**

How can I be certain that there is a life beyond the grave? How can I be certain that when I leave this life, I shall be with God, in God's heaven? Our Lord Jesus himself was asked the question at one stage, by some people called Sadducees. They complimented themselves on being rather intellectual, and they posed a question to Christ about the resurrection, which they thought was going to prove that any resurrection to a life to come was utterly impossible. Among other things Christ said in his answer was this: 'Now, gentlemen, I will prove to you that there is a resurrection, that there is an eternity of life with God after this life is done, and I will prove it from what God said to Moses way back in Old Testament times, which is recorded in the book of Exodus. When God came down to speak to Moses, God said to him, "Moses, I am the God of your fathers. I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." You may deduce from that that there is a life beyond the grave.'

And you might say, 'How on earth do you deduce that there is an eternal existence beyond the grave from the simple fact that God said, "I am the God of Abraham"?'

Well, let's think about that.

When God said, 'I am the God of Abraham,' he didn't just mean, 'I am Abraham's creator,' because he is everybody's creator. When God said, 'I am the God of Abraham,' he meant that he was related to Abraham, and that Abraham was personally related to him. Abraham was a man with whom God had personal dealings. Abraham was a man who himself had personal dealings with God. They knew one another. The Bible describes Abraham as the 'friend of God' (Jas 2:23). He walked, day-by-day, in fellowship with God. He knew God, even in this life. There was a relationship between them.

Now, what are you going to think about that kind of relationship that God sets up with men and women? Christ said, 'The only thing you possibly can think about it is that that relationship is an eternal relationship.'

God doesn't pick up friends and then ditch them after a few days. If God became Abraham's personal friend, and there was a relationship between them, you may be utterly sure that that was a relationship that is eternal; because God is eternal. And the nature of his friendship is that it is eternal. We don't think much of a friend who takes us up and is keenly friendly with us for three months and then suddenly ditches us. God wouldn't be God if he did the same with men and women.

There is an advertisement I can think of. I mustn't call it a silly little advertisement, because you will contradict me. But this advertisement sometimes presents a glowing young couple choosing their engagement ring, and the diamond is pictured all sparkling. The caption underneath says, 'Diamonds are forever'. Of course it's a bit of sentiment, aimed at increasing the jeweller's income; but for all its sentimentality, it is saying something, isn't it? It is saying that when a man and woman fall deeply in love, they feel they want to pledge themselves, one to another. They feel this relationship is a relationship that has got to be permanent, not merely because they enjoy it, but because they feel that the relationship itself is one of those things that, to be a true relationship, has got to be permanent.

Sadly, this life doesn't always live up to that kind of feeling, but it may serve as an illustration of what this relationship is that God forms with men and women who come to him through Jesus Christ. It is a personal relationship, a personal friendship; one that by its very nature is eternal. That is why the Bible calls that relationship 'eternal life'.

So let me point out an exceedingly interesting and important fact. The Bible rarely talks of people 'going to heaven when they die', though it teaches us to believe in it, and if people do trust Christ, they do go to heaven when they die. The Bible far more frequently talks about 'receiving eternal life' here and now, in this world.

### **What is eternal life?**

Let Jesus Christ define eternal life for you. Eternal life is to know the only and true God, to know him as a friend knows a friend, as a man knows his wife. It is to know God personally and intimately. It is to enter a relationship with God. And Christ says that relationship is eternal life already begun, a relationship that, having begun in this life, is utterly unbreakable (John 17:3).

That is the glorious relationship that Christ offers to every single one of us. 'I came,' he says, 'that they may have life and have it abundantly' (10:10). And he goes on to say,

I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (vv. 28–29)

This is the relationship of which Paul speaks when he says,

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39)

So we find that although death seemed to be a gloomy subject when we started, it is in fact a subject to be welcomed. It focuses our minds very keenly, not merely on what lies beyond the grave, but what this life is about. I will be so bold as to say that no man and no woman has ever understood fully what this life is about until they have faced the fact of death and the consequent eternity. For this life is a much bigger thing than just going to work and coming home, going to work and coming home; eating your carrots and your currants; getting married and setting up a home; being successful in business and, in the end, falling into a

grave. This life itself is bigger, for it is in this life, Christ says, that we can begin this relationship with God that is eternal life.

Let me show what I mean by a simple illustration. This Christmas time you will probably go into a home, and you will see the rather pleasant sight of a father with his ten-year-old boy on the carpet, in front of the fire, playing with his Christmas present. The Christmas present is a train, and the ten-year-old is enjoying it, and I fancy father is enjoying it just as much (if not more). They are playing with these trains and, of course, it's a jolly interesting thing to play with trains on the floor; but as they play with those trains on the floor, something else is happening. There is a relationship now beginning to build up between that ten-year-old boy and his father. The boy is coming to understand his father, coming to love his father, coming to know his father; and the father is getting to know the boy. And, please God, if things go well, that relationship that is growing up is going to be a thing that will last through the whole of life. It will last long after the old train set has been put in the bin, and long after the boy wants to play with trains. The relationship with his father that was formed then will last.

This is what Jesus Christ is saying to every one of us men and women. Let death focus your attention on what this life is about. It is not enough to have some crude idea: 'Oh, well heaven? I'll think about that, you know, when I come to die.' That is to miss the most significant thing, even in this life. I say it reverently, God has come down to our earth to play trains with us on our very carpet, so that life's experience in the here and now will begin to be the basis upon which we may find God and enter into a personal relationship with God. To receive eternal life now, to have it and to know it, so that when this life is done the relationship remains eternally.

If I were to be asked where I would put the biggest emphasis on how a man or woman can be absolutely certain of eternal life after death, I would say without any hesitation that the greatest certainty comes through entering into this personal relationship with God through Christ, here in this life. If I were to ask one of you husbands how you know your wife will be faithful to you until death, as she promised, you wouldn't be able to prove it to me logically or by some arithmetical formula. You would reply, 'But I know my wife.' And if you asked me how I can be sure of life after death with God, in God's heaven, I would say that, of course, I can't prove it to you by a mathematical formula. But I know it, because I know God through Jesus Christ. I have received that relationship, that very life of God that Christ has brought into being. I know him.

### **What happens at death?**

I shall have to divide my answer to this question into two parts. Eternal life has been made possible because of what Jesus did at the cross. If eternal life is something we receive now in this life, through faith in Christ, then it is going to be very obvious that what happens at death will be different, according to whether you have or you have not entered into a personal relationship with God in this life.

### **For those who have received eternal life**

Let's take the man or woman who has received Christ personally, in true repentance and faith. They have personally received the Saviour and received this gift of eternal life and entered into a relationship with God. What happens to them when they die? The Bible describes what happens to their body as a *sleep*. That's all. They fall asleep. It's a lovely word, isn't it? When children get too tired and they become fractious and difficult to deal with, and they are full of tears at the slightest provocation, a wise parent sees they can't stand any more, and they just put the child to bed; and the child goes to sleep. Being asleep isn't the highest form of life you could imagine, but it's not a disaster. When a man or woman who has trusted Christ physically dies, all it is, the Bible says, is a sleep. That too is not the highest form of life you could imagine, but it is not a disaster either. It is something that, in certain circumstances, can be positively welcome.

But what happens to that person's *soul* or *spirit* (however you like to describe it)? Well, the Bible is very clear. The moment a believer physically dies, the real inner man, his soul or spirit, goes to be with Christ that very moment. The Apostle Paul says when we are at home in the body, in that sense, we are absent from the Lord; but to be absent from the body is to be at once and immediately present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-8). You will remember that that is what our Lord told 'the dying thief' (as he has come to be known). That man, in true repentance, turned toward Christ and said, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Luke 23:42). Our Lord didn't just say, 'Yes, I will at last remember you, in that very final day when I come in my kingdom.' He said to the thief, 'My good man, this very day you shall be with me in Paradise' (see v. 43).

That is a glorious thing. Talk about taking away death's sting! It positively puts a radiance around death. Absent from the body — present with the Lord. No interval. No long years of waiting and suffering, but immediately absent from the body and present with the Lord.

I had occasion to feel its thrill when my own father died. As we, his sons and daughters, gathered round his bed and watched this elderly man come to the end of his days and enter into the Father's home above, it was a glorious thrill. Yes, we cried (we're not Stoics). Yes, we sorrowed at the thought of leaving him, at the thought of the actual physical suffering he was going through. But what a thrill it was, when we bent over and said, 'Dad, you're going home,' to see the old man's face light up with joy and gladness! And he lifted his hand and tried to sing. We stood round his bed and sang with him those lovely words of that old-fashioned Christian hymn: 'We go to meet the Saviour, | His glorious face to see'.<sup>2</sup> Death has lost its sting!

Then, finally, the Bible says there comes for the believer the very resurrection of his or her body. For when Christ comes again, the Bible roundly declares that the dead in Christ shall rise, and the living Christians will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and with bodies like the glorious body that our Lord now has, they shall forever be with the Lord (1 Thess 4:16-17).

But with that same certainty, we have to face the solemn reality of what happens to the man or woman who dies without this personal relationship with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), 'We Go to Meet the Saviour.'

**For those who have not received eternal life**

What happens to those who die unforgiven, unsaved, without ever having been born again, and so unreconciled to God? For them, physical death is a horror. How could it be anything else?

Let me hasten to point out to you that when physical death comes along in such a case, it only makes permanent a kind of death that those people have already been living. The Bible declares that until a man or a woman has personally come to know God, has personally been saved through Jesus Christ, he or she is, in a very deep and profound sense, already dead. That is to say, spiritually dead.

You can test it any day of the week you like if you want to try and understand why it is that multitudes of men and women, though they are God's creatures, have no interest in God whatsoever and get embarrassed if you start to talk about God. If you were to say to them, 'Do you personally know God? Are you saved?' they would think you were a little bit cranky and get awfully embarrassed, or else think you rude and that you shouldn't ask such questions. Why is it that men and women get so horribly embarrassed when they're asked about their creator? The Bible says it is because they are dead to him.

You say, 'In what sense dead?'

They are separated from him. There is a big gulf between him and them—the gulf of sin that has not yet been forgiven. The old story tells us that when Adam and Eve sinned and God their creator then came down, as he'd frequently come down into the garden to talk with them, they ran off. And to run away from God as a somebody you would be embarrassed to meet, that is death. God is all there is of life. He has given us physical life in order that we might come to the possession of spiritual life; but if we run away like Adam and Eve did, because of our sins, we are already spiritually dead.

When physical death overtakes a person who has always been running away from God, someone who has never personally come through Jesus Christ and been saved and reconciled to God, it makes permanent that state of spiritual death. And in describing it, our Lord said that between them and the presence of God, there is, eternally, a great gulf fixed (Luke 16:26).

Perhaps you say to yourself, 'Well that's very hard. It sounds to me very cruel. How can I believe in a God who will allow anybody to perish, to exist in some kind of hell eternally? Why doesn't God do something about it? Why doesn't God give them another chance in the life to come?'

My good friend, if it were possible to give them another chance, you may rest upon it that the God who loves us so much that he gave his Son to die for us would give us every chance it were possible to give. The fact that Jesus Christ says there is no chance after death means that it is impossible even for God to give it.

Tonight I preach to you no magic. If I preach miracle, I preach no magic. God offers us his salvation in Christ. He offers it freely. It cost him the death of his own Son. But it is a relationship he is offering, a one-to-one relationship. If we want that relationship, we may receive it; we may receive Christ personally through an act of our will and faith. But there is one thing that God will never do, because he loves us too much to do it. He will never force us and overwhelm our own decision, and crush our own personality and receive Christ. For if he took away our free choice, then we should cease to be humans and become simple

machines; and God loves every man and woman too much to turn them from being human beings into mere machines.

Christ indicates that *time* is the period when we have the opportunity to change, the opportunity to decide. If I decide to say, 'No,' to Christ, to keep my distance from God, and I die like that, there is no magic. God has no fairy wands. As a man or woman dies, so shall he or she be, eternally.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.