

Life After Death

by Mike Bull



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Death and dying are things that most people don't like to think about very much. Occasionally a relative or friend dies, and we are sad. We cannot escape thinking about how final death seems, that it is an end of life.

At such times many people think and speak about a belief in life after death, about a new kind of existence. This is a natural thing. It is often hard to believe that someone close to us is not alive any more. We remember their voice, their look, their touch, and their presence. It is easy to wonder if somehow they are still present with us.

There are many world religions, and many have a belief in an afterlife, some form of continuation after death. This includes most Christians around the world. Many have faith in a reward in heaven following death.

Is this the one true hope of the Bible? Is this the teaching of Jesus Christ, founder of Christianity? Does this teaching rest on a firm foundation? We will examine these questions in this booklet.

Preparing a Place

Jesus of Nazareth told his disciples shortly before he himself died, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms ... I am going there to prepare a place for you."*¹

Jesus was speaking to his most dear friends in an upper room. He was telling words of comfort to them. He was speaking words of love and kindness. Jesus wanted them to know that even though he was going to die, there was hope. He would be with his disciples again.

¹ John 14:1-2

What was this hope? What was Jesus talking about when he spoke of his Father's house?

Before we answer these questions, let us look at how Jesus himself viewed death.

Jesus' Teaching about Death

As others before and after, Jesus experienced the death of those close to him. We are not told of the death of Joseph, the husband of his mother Mary, but it can be inferred that he had died before Jesus began to preach, because his mother, brothers and sisters are mentioned during that time, but Joseph is not. The death of the man who had nurtured and supported Jesus as he grew, and had no doubt tutored him in his trade of carpentry, would have been a great sadness to Jesus.

We do have a first hand account in the Bible of the death of one of Jesus' close friends. There was a home in the town of Bethany where he often stayed during his preaching in the south part of the land. Two sisters and a brother lived there, named Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Lazarus fell sick, and the two sisters sent word to Jesus, since they knew he had healed those who were sick in the past. Instead of coming immediately, however, Jesus lingered where he was for two more days before taking the road to walk to Bethany.

As they were about to journey to Lazarus' house, Jesus told his disciples, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."*²

² John 11:11

Jesus' disciples did not understand him. They did not realise that Jesus was saying that Lazarus had died, and that Jesus would raise him from the dead. "*Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better,*"³ they replied.

The Bible goes on to say, "*Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead... but let us go to him.'*"⁴

They went on their journey to Bethany.⁵ By the time they arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days. His sisters were overcome with grief. They could not understand why Jesus had not come sooner. Jesus asked to see where Lazarus' body had been laid. He was overcome with emotion, weeping tears of love as they reached the tomb.⁶ Jesus asked for the stone to be removed. After a moment of prayer to God, Jesus shouted, "*Lazarus, come out!*" The man who had been dead walked out of the tomb, raised again to life!

A Figure of Speech?

Jesus had spoken of his friend as asleep, even though he was dead. Was this really Jesus' thinking on the matter? Was he using a figure of speech for his friend, or was this the language that he used of death at other times?

³ John 11:12

⁴ John 11:13-15

⁵ Read the rest of this story for yourself in John chapter 11

⁶ The Jews often buried their dead in rock caves or small rooms excavated out of stone. A large stone that could only be removed by the united efforts of several men often closed the mouth of such a tomb.

There is another incident in the life of Jesus when someone died. One of the synagogue⁷ rulers named Jairus pleaded with Jesus to come and put his hands on his daughter and heal her, because she was sick.

“When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, ‘Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.’ But they laughed at him.”⁸ Jesus went inside the house to where the girl was, took the dead girl’s hand, and asked her to get up. She did, to the amazement of her parents and the disciples who had accompanied Jesus there.

Once again, Jesus spoke of death as a sleep. He talked of the girl as asleep while she was dead. Why would this be? Was Jesus teaching his disciples that death can be compared to sleeping?

Yes, he was. As we see later in the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus’ followers spoke of death as if the one who was dead was asleep.

The Teaching of Jesus’ Followers

Paul the apostle preached to people throughout the Roman Empire. Once converted, he was a powerful force in convincing Jews and non-Jews alike of the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ. He travelled on several missionary journeys from his home base north of Israel. Paul’s normal practice was to preach first in each city to the Jews in their local synagogue.

⁷ A Jewish place of worship

⁸ Mark 5:38-40

During his first missionary journey, Paul spoke to some Jews in Antioch. He wanted to convince them that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah that they had been waiting for. He pointed out that God had said in the Old Testament Psalms, “*You will not let your Holy One see decay.*”⁹ King David wrote many of the Psalms. Was God speaking about him? Paul wanted to show that God was talking about Jesus Christ, not David.

Paul told those who were listening, “*for when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed.*”¹⁰ Asleep! King David certainly had died, but Paul spoke of him as having fallen asleep in death.

How then is death like sleep? Jesus and his followers taught that someone who is dead is unconscious. They are unaware of what is going on, just like someone who is asleep.

Was this a new teaching that Jesus was bringing to the world, or had God already taught this to his people in the Old Testament?

Old Testament Teaching

King David, who wrote many of the Old Testament Psalms,¹¹ was called “*a man after God’s own heart.*”¹² He knew God’s ways and was a faithful follower to the end of his life.

⁹ Psalm 16:10; Acts 13:35

¹⁰ Acts 13:36

¹¹ A *Psalm* is one of the Old Testament holy writings that was a Hebrew poem set to music.

¹² 1 Samuel 13:14

In one of the Psalms that he wrote, David asked God to save him. He acknowledged that he did not have the strength to save himself, but trusted in God. David did not want to die, because *“no one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”*¹³ Like Jesus acknowledged later, David knew that a dead person is unconscious. There is no way to praise God once someone is dead and buried. David did not want this – he wanted to remain alive so that he could continue to serve God.

In a later Psalm, David wrote that it is good to praise God, and to put one’s trust in him, and not in mortal men, because once someone is dead, their plans come to nothing, and their *“thoughts perish”*.¹⁴

Like few before or after him, this king had an awareness of how short life was, of how truly passing the opportunity he had to rejoice in the grace of God. David summed up his feelings when he said, *“show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath. Hear my prayer... that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more.”*¹⁵

Like David’s descendant Jesus, David wanted to follow God truly. He wanted to dedicate his life to God. He knew that his time to serve the creator was limited, as afterwards when he died, there was no remembrance of God, no thinking on his goodness, and no chance to show his gratefulness. Death was the end of the opportunity.

¹³ Psalm 6:5

¹⁴ Psalm 146:4, KJV

¹⁵ Psalm 39:4-5,12,13

Earlier in the Bible, Job was a man who suffered very much, though he was patient in his sufferings. He also spoke of death in terms of being asleep when he talked about his own decease with the words, *“now shall I sleep in the dust ... I shall not be.”*¹⁶ This man whom God said was righteous knew that once he died, he would cease to exist.

Another example in the Old Testament of the Bible of the same teaching of death being unconscious is in the words of “The Preacher”¹⁷ in the book of Ecclesiastes. Following the books of Psalms and Proverbs, this book examines the meaning of life: what is important and what is futile.

The writer, usually associated with King Solomon, came to the conclusion that whatever you do must be done to the fullest. The reason he gives is that once the end of life is reached, there is no more opportunity to do these things, because death is the end of our consciousness.

*“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”*¹⁸

*“Anyone who is among the living has hope – even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!”*¹⁹ The preacher was right. Now is the opportunity to serve God. Now while we are alive is the time to seek him out, to search for what is right and to live for what is honest and right.

¹⁶ Job 7:21, KJV

¹⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:1

¹⁸ Ecclesiastes 9:10

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 9:4

If this is true, however, what hope *is* there? If we live out our lives, and then die, and are truly unconscious, what do we have to look forward to? Is this in fact the end of our existence forever? What does the Bible teach about a future reward if it teaches that death is like an unconscious sleep?

Awaking from Sleep

King David, who was abundantly clear about what death was all about, did not despair. He had a hope for something more. He longed and waited for a time when he would awake from the sleep of death, when he would be truly righteous and pure before God.

David wrote of this longing, in contrast to the wicked, who had their reward. Their wealth and happiness were passing, in the present life only.

“Save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life. You still the hunger of those you cherish; their sons have plenty and they store up wealth for their children. And I – in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.”²⁰

Yes, death is like a sleep, but there is a time coming when many of those that sleep in death will awake – to a new life. This is the Bible teaching of resurrection, of God bringing to life those that have died. There is overwhelming proof that this is a central teaching of the Bible. It was not the hope only of King David, but of God’s faithful down through the ages. They all looked forward to a better time, a time when God would wipe away the pain and suffering

²⁰ Psalm 17:14-15

caused by wickedness, and begin a time of everlasting joy in the earth.

Resurrection Teaching in the Old Testament

As we saw earlier, the man Job believed that his death would be a sleep, when he would lose consciousness. He did have a hope of something more, however. Like King David, he longed for the time when he would awake from this sleep to truly serve God in strength and perfection.

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”²¹

This man who patiently endured his suffering hoped for a new day. He knew that he would die and that his body would decay in death, like anyone else who died. But he had a hope for a future, a day he longed for. At “the end”, when he would live again, and see his redeemer with his own eyes.

This hope of resurrection, of a new day when God would re-make the bodies of those who have died was not unique to King David and Job. A later prophet named Ezekiel²² was shown a vision by God of the future day when this resurrection would take place.

²¹ Job 19:25-27

²² Ezekiel was a prophet of Israel who was exiled with many other Jews to Babylon about six hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Ezekiel lived at a time when many Jews had a feeling of hopelessness. They were depressed because they had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians. *“Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone”*²³ they said.

God told them something different. He took Ezekiel in a vision to a valley full of bones. They were very dry. However, that was not to be the end. There was hope.

*“This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”*²⁴

Death was not to be the end. God could, and would, make people again. Just as God was the creator, who made all life in the beginning, so he would make life again – he would bring people who had died back to life. This was the hope of those who put their trust in God.

Again, God spoke to another prophet a little later named Daniel.²⁵ The same hope was revealed to him also, that there would be a future time when those who were asleep in death would be raised to a new life. *“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”*²⁶

²³ Ezekiel 37:11

²⁴ Ezekiel 37:5-6

²⁵ Like Ezekiel, Daniel was also exiled to Babylon. He was a very wise man, and served in the courts of foreign kings, but remained true to the God of Israel throughout his life.

²⁶ Daniel 12:2

Here was the same hope that had been embraced by others before him, that the dead would live again, and not only for a short time, but forever. Truly something to hope for!

The disciples of Jesus in the New Testament held this same belief also. They firmly believed that those who had died had hope of a new life, a life forever with Jesus their master.

Jesus himself was the first one to be raised from the dead²⁷ by God²⁸ to show this hope to all that would follow him as his disciples.

So fundamental is this teaching, that Paul wrote to the Corinthians in Greece that if they denied it, their faith was useless. *“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... your faith is futile.”*²⁹

Yes, there *is* a hope of life after death! This was the great driving force behind the preaching of the Christians in the first century! Jesus was alive! God had raised him from the dead – the same hope for all Christians!

This same hope is the reason for comfort when a Christian dies. Of course it is natural to be sad when someone that we are close to is gone, or “falls asleep”³⁰ as the

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:20

²⁸ Acts 13:34; Ephesians 1:20

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:12-14, 17

³⁰ Acts 7:60; 2 Peter 3:4

expression is often used in the Bible. But there is hope for the future! Here is how the Thessalonians³¹ were comforted about those who had died:

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him... For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”³²

There is a true hope for those who have died! Jesus will come, and there will be a resurrection, a bringing again to life of believers who placed their trust in him.

When will this be? When will these people come out of the graves? This will take place when Jesus returns from heaven, as promised in the Bible. Peter spoke the following words when he was preaching to the Jews in the temple after Jesus had been raised from the dead and rose to heaven:

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and the he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time

³¹ Thessalonica was a large city in the first century located in the area of modern-day Greece and Macedonia, where the apostle Paul had preached during his missionary journeys.

³² 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14,16

*comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets... Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days.*³³

Jesus will come again, and return to “restore all things”, in other words, to return the earth to the paradise that God intended it to be. That is when the dead will be raised. That is when those that sleep will awake. That is when there will be joy forever more.

My Father’s House

Returning to the words of Jesus that were mentioned earlier, *“in my father’s house are many rooms...”*³⁴ Jesus was speaking words of comfort to his disciples about their future. What was he promising them? Was he speaking about a time when they would be raised from the dead as we have seen? What did he mean when he spoke of *“my father’s house?”*

Jesus had spoken of his father’s house before. It was on the occasions when he was in the temple³⁵ and found people selling cattle, sheep and doves in the courtyard area. *“Get these out of here! How day you turn my Father’s House into a Market!”*³⁶

³³ Acts 3:19-21, 24

³⁴ John 14:2

³⁵ The temple was a large building in Jerusalem and was the Jews’ most sacred place of worship. Just prior to the time of Jesus it had been built by Herod the Great, a king of Judea appointed by the Romans.

³⁶ John 2:16

The Father's house was the temple in Jerusalem. It was not only the centre of worship for the Jews, but it was truly the heart of the future of the world, the hope for which all believers looked to.

The prophets had long foretold that the temple was a centrepiece of the restitution of all things, not only for the Jews, but also for the entire world:

“This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”³⁷

This is what Jesus was talking about! He was indeed going away from his disciples. Not many weeks after he spoke to them, he rose to heaven, sitting at the right hand of God.³⁸ It is in heaven that the plans and preparations are being made. The place being prepared is not in heaven it-

³⁷ Isaiah 2:1-4

³⁸ Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 10:2

self, but on the earth at his return, in the new temple, God's house, to be built in Jerusalem.

The One Hope

Yes, there is a hope of life after death! The same hope of the faithful throughout the Bible is available to us!

King David, who had begun his career as a shepherd, spoke of his hope in the following way:

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures...
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the
days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the
Lord forever."³⁹*

The house of the Lord! Here was the same hope as Jesus, much later, was telling his disciples about. Jesus wanted to comfort them, to give them hope. He knew that he was leaving them, and he wanted to make sure they understood what he was promising them.

The promise was very great. Life for evermore. An end of disease and pain. No more heartache and suffering.

These same disciples of Jesus went through a lot of pain and suffering during their lifetimes. They endured many hardships and persecutions because of the promises that Jesus had made them. They were so absolutely certain that the promise of life after death was sure and true that they took Jesus' message far and wide, preaching Christianity and the good news of Jesus as far as they went.

That same message of hope is available to you, today.

³⁹ Psalm 23:1-2, 6

Read God's word the Bible for yourself. Understand its message, and see that the promise of resurrection is the hope of all true believers of Jesus Christ.

Paul the apostle when writing to believers in Ephesus⁴⁰ spoke of the one hope. *"There is one body and one spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given, as Christ apportioned it."*⁴¹

Of this hope, he wrote to them later in the same letter, *"Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."*⁴²

This is the hope of the faithful through the ages. Faithful Abraham⁴³ left his home town and travelled to a strange new place, never inheriting the land that God had promised,⁴⁴ but confident in the hope of a new life to come. Moses, who led the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land,⁴⁵ never set foot in it, but saw it from afar,⁴⁶ knowing that he would receive God's promise in the future.

⁴⁰ A large city in Asia Minor located today in Turkey

⁴¹ Ephesians 4:4-7

⁴² Ephesians 5:14

⁴³ Genesis 12

⁴⁴ Acts 7:5; Hebrews 11:10

⁴⁵ Read the book of Exodus

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 34:1-4; Hebrews 11:24-26

Take hold of God's promises for yourself today! Embrace the hope of God's promise of eternal life in the beauty of this earth, when all suffering and pain will be gone!⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Revelation 21:4; Isaiah 35:10