

# LIFE AFTER DEATH: WORLD VIEWS AND BIBLICAL THEMES

## **Pagan Underworld**

Each culture in the ancient world had its own version of gods of death, visions of a highly populated underworld ruled by capricious characters in complex dramas, often connected with the cycles of the seasons.

## **Hebrew *Sheol***

In contrast to their pagan neighbours, the Jewish faith denied all other gods, and the after-life. Hebrew scriptures speak about the finality of death (e.g. Psalm 49). *Sheol* ("the pit") was a dark shadowy nothing place, perhaps a return to the nothingness before creation. In Jesus' day the Sadducees stood for this traditional conviction.

## **Jewish "End of Days"**

The 'apocalyptic' strand in Judaism looked forward to a great 'Day of the Lord', when the Messiah will come, when the dead will rise, and all mystery will be revealed. A belief in a future resurrection of the righteous was held by the Pharisees, and strongly influenced the early church.

## **Maori *Hawaiiki Roa***

In Maori mythology spirits of the dead travel along 90 Mile Beach, and on to Hawai-iki, the ancestors' homeland, ruled by the Goddess of the Dark, *Hine Nui o te Po*.

## **Buddhist Reincarnation**

Increasingly popular in today's world is the ancient notion that all living beings (including people) are part of an ongoing recycling and transition from one form to another, based on the laws of Karma.

## **Chinese Ancestor-honouring**

In a Chinese world-view the dead join the ancestors, who continue to be very much part of every-day family life, often with physical objects in some way containing or symbolising their presence.

## **Islam: "Day of reckoning"**

Muslims believe in the continued existence of the soul and a transformed physical existence after death. Islam teaches that there will be a day of judgment when all humans will be divided between the eternal destinations of Paradise ("the Garden") and Hell (a fiery crater, in which Allah will punish non-believers).

## **Secular: Death is the end**

The Humanist Manifesto state: *"There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body. We continue to exist in our progeny and in the way that our lives have influenced others in our culture."*

"Human problems in the here and now must be solved by human efforts in the here and now." We have to accept that this life is all we have, and make the best of it.

Secular science claims that experiences by dying people of seeing light or other people are simply an oxygen-starved brain sparking wildly prior to extinction.

## **Western Popular: Family Reunion**

Over the past few decades, Western culture has rejected 'hell', and mostly failed to embrace a secular finality, and gone for an all-inclusive vision, in which when you die you enter a spiritual dimension where your loved ones will be waiting for you. This has been influenced by the experience of people who almost died, who often report walking a tunnel of brilliant light and seeing the people they love up ahead.

*It's been a long day without you, my friend  
And I'll tell you all about it when I see you again  
you gonna be with me for the last ride  
So let the light guide your way, yeah  
Hold every memory as you go  
And every road you take, will always lead you home*

from "See you again", the longest running hit rap song, written in 2015, for boy racer movie 'Furious 7'. This song has defined grief and loss for young people today.

## **Traditional Christian: Heaven and Hell**

When our bodies die, our soul (the non-material essence of our identity) is judged by God and sent either to Heaven (where the faithful join the angels in eternal joy and praise) or Hell (where Satan & the demons cause eternal torment).

Biblically this is based on:

- Jesus's words about judgment, esp. the metaphor of burning the prunings on the fire. The word translated 'hell' is '*Gehenna*', the rubbish dump outside the town where rubbish is burned.
- the dramatic parable of the rich man and a beggar man called Lazarus, where the rich man (often called Dives) burns because he failed to care for the poor.
- Jesus' words on the cross to the man beside him; "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" (Luke 23:43)

Do we have an 'immortal soul'?

In accommodating to the Roman Empire, the church absorbed dominant ideas of the Roman world, including the belief that human beings possessed an immortal soul. While not explicitly a Biblical claim, this has been mostly unchallenged until recent decades, and is still firmly held in 'evangelical' circles.

### Questions to discuss:

Do you recognise these different world-views in our culture today?

Do you believe that all people have an "immortal soul"? Why or why not?

What does it matter? How do our beliefs about life after death affect the way we live life?

# LIFE AFTER DEATH: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible does have a lot to say about death and eternity, but much of it is written in metaphor, and different parts of scripture say different things. However, I believe there are big ideas that are expressed many times, in many ways, that I am confident in.

## 1. There is one God

All of our scriptures affirm the existence of a God who is beyond the universe, with a particular nature, who is the only immortal being. All other gods are myths and illusion. The Christian church has come to believe that the best way of understanding this God is as Father, Son and Spirit, a community within oneness. God has created a spiritual dimension, which may include spiritual beings what exist outside of time & space (i.e. angels & evil spirits), but these do not have independent immortality.

*John 5:26 "For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself."*

## 2. Death is real

The Bible never portrays death as a illusion, or merely a passage from one state to another. Death is linked to sin, as part of humanity's essential fallenness and disconnect from God. In Luke 20 Jesus rejects the question about who we are married to in heaven, suggesting that after death we might become *"like angels, like children of God"*. Does this suggest that we lose our identity and relationships at death?

## 3. Jesus' death and resurrection changed everything

According to John, Jesus made the claim that *"I am the resurrection and the life."*

The Christian claim is that through his dying and rising again Jesus broke the power of death. As he himself became the death-less one, so through him death is not the end. From the earliest days after Jesus' crucifixion, his followers were getting into trouble, in Acts 4:2 with the priests and Saduccees, who were: *much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.*

According to Paul, our lives are transformed by entering into the life of Jesus, crucified and risen. There is a strong continuity in Paul's writing (eg. Romans 6), between being fully alive in this life and in an eternal time-frame. He describes a distinctive quality of life, both here and in the here-after, that is possible because we share in the death and resurrection of Christ. This he calls "salvation".

## 4. We are invited into eternal life through faith in Christ

The Bible promises "everlasting life" for those who trust in God. The scandal of the gospel is that we have no right to salvation - it cannot be earned or achieved by a good life - but that it is a free gift, won for us by Jesus on the cross. It can be accepted by faith, a simple entering into a loving relationship with God.

*John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

The Christian world-view around life after death hinges on how we interpret the word "perish". I believe that this means what it obviously means, to die, to cease to be. I do not believe that human beings in and of ourselves have immortality. I believe that the only eternity we are offered is a participation in the life of Christ Jesus, in fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

"Heaven goes by favor; if it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in."

✓ Author : **Mark Twain**

My vision of the river flowing into the sea

introduce world-views of our eternal destiny ...  
glory & delight  
punishment and pain  
a drifting, haunting the present,  
a place of reunion with those you love  
or simply a final ending with your last breath