

Eternal Life

What is eternal life about? From the writings of the Apostle Paul, and in John's Gospel and Epistles, we do not necessarily know what the nature of eternal life will be about; indeed it is as if that very understanding is beyond our comprehension. What is important is what eternal life is not; but also that we can receive intimations of what it will be like through the promise of Resurrection.

ADOPTION & PROMISE

Secular Atheists will often decry 'religious' people for wishing that their lives continued beyond the grave. They tell us we must accept life as it is — face our mortality, our finite condition and not lose ourselves in wishful thinking while ignoring the problems of this world. Ironically C.S. Lewis said pretty much the same thing — he commented about the ancient Hebrews that they were adopted as God's chosen people, an identity they could not escape from, forged often through suffering *but* they were denied the reward of eternal life!

The ancient Hebrews had to learn how to live in this world as God's own chosen people, to bear witness to the one true living God, ignoring all the multitudinous Pagan 'gods' and 'idols' that surrounded them as they sheltered and huddled in a narrow, small, promised land next to the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean, always on the edge of disaster and annihilation at the hands of massively powerful enemy nations — the Babylonians, the Persians, the Philistines, the Amalekites, then the Greeks and the Romans.

The ancient Hebrews were not promised eternal life but made to focus on this life and learn to be God's people through a long period of arduous salvation history. Ironically these criticisms of religious people by secular atheists (escapism and wishful thinking), which if we take all of the world's religions together, are to a degree true. Yet God has, through the Hebrew people, forced us to face the true reality. Ironically the very criticisms secular atheists level at religious people are also true to a degree about secular atheists! Why? Think of the money and effort that goes into curing the ageing process, billions and billions of dollars and pounds to prolonge life, prevent death, live forever — but this is to be continuation in this world, this life. This secular atheistic obsession with the continuation of life is usually associated with a philosophical movement called Scientism, which we will look at overleaf.

THE TRUE REALITY

- Both religious and secular people hide from the truth of the reality humanity is in.
- Eternal life — immortality — is a gift from God, a promise to all humanity, a yet to be fulfilled promise.
- The situation we are in issues from the Fall, humanity is infected with death due to original sin.
- Death follows on from the Fall, it is our innate reward for rebellion (Genesis 3).
- Death led to a diminished existence, this was the thin near-to-nothingness of the person's continued life after death in the Hebrew Sheol, or the Greek Hades.
- Resurrection restores the unity of body and soul; we are not *post mortem* a disembodied soul.

This true reality is attested to in The Letter to the Hebrews—

'And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated — the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Hebrews 11:32-40

SCIENTISM — THE ALTERNATIVE

In the decades around the mid-twentieth century a movement in scientific philosophy called 'Scientism' offered an alternative to religious concepts of immortality. Born from the confidence in Modernism that the human intellect could solve the problem of humanity, Scientism was a pseudo-religious worldview derived from Naturalism. Naturalism is the belief that all there is to reality is what we perceive with our senses; there is nothing else, no 'other', no eternity, no heaven, and no God. Further, that all our ideas and thoughts are the product of evolutionary processes, the random chance occurrence of chemicals, atoms, electrical charges. We are part of Nature and all our thoughts and actions are governed by the same set of deterministic laws that govern the behaviour of falling apples and beams of light and neutrons and clouds of intersidereal gas (!).

Scientism is often seen to be an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science, methods which must then be seen as universally justified and applicable, whereby the findings and conclusions are taken as absolute. This leads to a belief in the omnipotence of such scientific methods and techniques which are then deemed applicable to theology and philosophy. Therefore - in its ultimate form subscribed to by scientists, philosophers, anti-religionists and anti-theists, to a greater or lesser degree - the belief that scientific knowledge is the foundation of all knowledge becomes a dogma, akin to religious dogmas. Thus Scientism is seen as the absolute and only justifiable means of attaining truth.

For the self-confessed Naturalist, atheist and scientist, Professor J.B.S. Haldane (1892-1964) the survival of the human race in the context of global degradation, war and disaster was the prime goal of humanity. This was the categorical aim - even if only a scientific elite survived, an oligarchic intellectual elite. (The emergence and survival of a super-species, derived from a reading of Darwin's theory of evolution through survival of the fittest, was for many the ground of not just Scientism, but also twentieth century totalitarian regimes such as National Socialism and Stalinism.)

***For Naturalism and Scientism
immortality, eternal life, is achieved
through the perpetuation of the human race
by whatever means necessary.***

THE PERSISTENCE OF OPTIMISM

Scientism and Naturalism are persistent. A couple of years back Stephen Hawking generated an online debate about how to save the planet and humanity from the inevitable destruction caused by climate change, environmental degradation and pollution. Thousands took part in this 'blogaholic' debate; but inevitably the emerging conclusion was that nothing could be done to save the planet. The only solution was for a scientific elite to speed up the development of inter-stellar spacecraft whereby a chosen few could re-establish humanity on the nearest habitable planet, and presumably other planets from that one. Immortality, eternal life, lay in the perpetual continuation of humanity saved by a scientific elite.

THE NATURE OF ETERNAL LIFE

There is a fundamental problem in theological anthropology (the nature of humanity from a theological perspective) and a doctrine of human ontology (the theory of the actual nature of people — human nature). This problem is the perennial assertion of a Graeco-Roman dualism between body and soul: i.e. that the soul is separate from the body. The Hebrew tradition in the Old Testament, was that each human is a *whole* (i.e. a unity of soul and body. From the NT Greek - ψυχή (psyche, or soul) and σῶμα; (soma, or body). A Patristic theologian by the name of Maximus the Confessor used the term εἶδος ὅλον, a 'complete entity', or 'complete figure', Maximus also uses ἐκπλήρωσις - 'completeness'). This unity is from the moment of conception (not from the point of birth, or from some random point during the baby's development in the womb). However, original sin has ravaged this unity of body and soul because it has led to a debasement of the flesh, the body. Therefore at the point of death the person will lead a diminished existence, this was the thin near-to-nothingness of the person's continued existence, their persistent endurance, in Sheol (see Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Job), or to the Greeks, Hades. The form this death took was conditioned by original sin; the corruption of the body led to this diminished continued existence. Christ's resurrection changes this - we are restored to a unity of psyche and soma (an εἶδος ὅλον, of body and soul) after death, we pass through death, we are raised-up, in judgement, by Christ.

Questions to Consider

- What is eternal life about?
- What is eternity?
- What is immortality and how does it relate to time
- Is heaven created, by God?
- What does the Book of Revelation tell us about the 'What is to come'?
- What is the 'life immortal'?
- What is resurrection as compared to resuscitation, or re-birth?
- Heaven and Hell: if heaven why not hell?
- How is eternity decided - i.e. judgement?

Quotations to Ponder

C.S. Lewis, from a sermon, 'The Weight of Glory'
'We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words - to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves. For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy. At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.'

Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) commented that *'The flames of hell may be no more than the love of God as perceived by a sinner'*. What does this mean?

'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.' John 3:36 NRSV

'So that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'
Romans 5:21 NRSV

'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'
John 17:3 NRSV

'For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled ... O death where is your sting?'
1 Corinthians 15:53-55 NRSV

'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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.'

John 3:16-18 NRSV

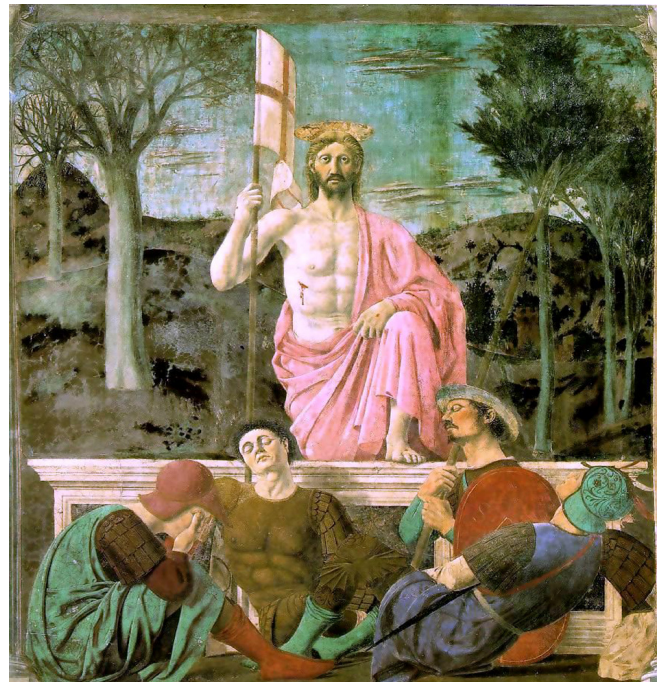
'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?m And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.' John 14:1-3 NRSV

Books to Read

C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. A short but stunning book about eternal life, heaven and hell, and 'purgatory' (the title is nothing to do with marriage and divorce!), and about how we make the choice in the end, a choice that matches God's judgement on us.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (though there is nothing funny about it!)



Piero della Francesca, *The Resurrection*, 1450-1463

Resurrection is not a resuscitated corpse, or a reconstitution of the atoms possessed by a person, but is a new creation intimately generated by the old, a 'spiritual resurrection' (1 Corinthians 15:35f) but equally real, physical and corporeal, eternal life is not a disembodied soul.