
Life After Death

by: Ronald L. Dart

I lived in England back in the 60s and it seemed like every spring, one or another Bishop of the Church of England, would publish a new outrageous doctrinal idea about God. After a while I figured out what was going on, I think that every spring, early maybe January, the bishops would draw straws to see whose turn it was to create a big controversy in the news before Easter. It got everybody thinking about the church and about Christianity and probably increased the attendance at church on Easter Sunday morning.

Well, I never did figure out for sure what was going on, but a couple of years ago, it sounded like Bishop N. T. Wright, who is Bishop of Durham, drew the short straw, because he published a book titled, "Surprised by Hope, Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church." After two thousand years, we are going to rethink all that.

Christians Do Not Go to Heaven When They Die

Now to boil down his most provocative idea, are you ready for this, here it is: Christians do not go to heaven when they die. Time magazine's David Bambina interviewed Wright by phone, and I found the Bishop refreshing in his willingness to go to Scripture for answers. I gather from what I read about him that this is nothing new for Tom Wright.

Time Magazine asked this, "At one point you called the common view of heaven a distortion and serious diminution of Christian hope." Wright said, "It really is. I've often heard people say, " I'm going to heaven soon, I will not need this stupid body there. Thank goodness."" That is a very damaging distortion and all the more so for being unintentional.

Funeral of a High School Student

Now I am not sure what Tom Wright means entirely, but lest you think he's overstating the case, I went to a funeral a few years ago where a young boy in his late teens had killed himself in our neighborhood. My wife came home from work one day and found a helicopter sitting on the corner and she had to wait a while because they were moving the body out. The police were there. The boy had killed himself with a shot gun. My wife was in real estate at the time and she knew the family.

So, we went to the funeral. The Chapel was full, wall-to-wall, standing room only and heavily populated with the young man's fellow high school students. Well, the pastor of his church gave

the funeral service, and talked about how happy and much better off the young man was now. He pictured him, believe it or not, in heaven driving around in a red convertible with the music blaring from the radio, Now I suppose he was trying to be relevant and somehow comforting to his audience of teenagers. All I can say is he didn't make it. He failed completely.

There is just no way to turn a tragedy like that, of a wasted young life, into some kind of a spiritual triumph. Teenagers, you know, are very sensitive to hypocrisy in any form. They know when they're being massaged, and they recognize it for what it is. It was evident to me, after the funeral when the sobbing girls clinging to one another, in grief, they had not been comforted in the least, by what that preacher had said.

Not only that, he missed a golden opportunity to talk straight to these teens about the value of life and loss of death. One of the famous sayings among the teens is "get real." What they mean by that is, let's talk about the truth, and the way things really are, and they knew that they knew, that this preacher had not done that. He was irrelevant.

Talk Straight About the Bible

When I heard what Bishop Wright of England had to say, I was profoundly relieved to hear a church man, talk straight about what the Bible really says. He called the statement "I'm going to heaven soon and I will not need this stupid body, thank goodness," he called it a damaging distortion and I have an idea you have heard some version of this statement, at nearly every funeral you have ever attended.

It seemed to me like a good idea to consider what the Bishop had to say. Time Magazine followed up and asked, "How so?" It sounds like a typical sentiment. Right?

What Happens When You Die?

There are several important aspects in which it is unsupported by the New Testament. First, the timing. In the Bible, we are told that when you die, you enter an intermediates state. Saint Paul is very clear that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead already (1 Corinthians 15:12), but that nobody else has yet. Now you couldn't ask for a clearer statement than that and one that can readily be checked in the pages of the Bible. Actually, it isn't just Paul who says this, it is a common theme in the New Testament.

Now it's always a good idea to look at the context of anything Paul says and one of the best places to start is with First Corinthians chapter 15 where Paul says what the bishop says he says and develops it more fully.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in First Corinthians 15 and verse 3, "What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, {4} that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, {5} and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. {6} After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."

Now this should be striking to anyone that this does not say, "Those brothers have gone to heaven" or "Gone home" or "Gone to be with the Lord." It says plainly, "They have fallen asleep." But what does that mean? I think it is taken as a metaphor for death, but what if it is more than a metaphor, because I think, Bishop Wright, thinks it is more than that.

In any case, the resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to the gospel. That is as orthodox as you can get.

Paul continues in verse 12 of First Corinthians 15, "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Strange doctrine, Paul includes no details, but one wonders if it's connected somehow to the modern belief that we go straight to heaven when we die, and I have often wondered why? If my mom is in heaven, why is there any need for a resurrection? Why does she need her body? She is there. She's looking down, watching me live my life and at times in great distress.

Boilerplate Funeral Sermon

Well it seems fair to say that the boilerplate funeral sermon leaves no room or need for a resurrection. It is pointless. After what Paul says, no Christian preacher can say that the resurrection isn't ahead of us, but it is all but assumed.

Paul refuses to mince words on it. He just won't leave it lie. He says in verse 13 of First Corinthians 15, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. {14} And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."

What Paul is saying is, without the resurrection of Christ, Christianity is pointless. More than that, he says. "We are found to be false witnesses about God, for if we testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised." Paul is becoming a little heated on this.

Paul says frankly, "If the dead are not raised, then we are liars."

Later Paul says, in verse 17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. {18} Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost."

They haven't gone to heaven. They have fallen asleep. Not only that, but the resurrection of Christ is what finally removes our sins, not merely His death.

I really wonder, if you stopped a Christian on the street, or talked to him after church, and say, "What is it, actually the final thing, upon which the forgiveness of our sins depends?" Most would say "The death of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ."

But Paul says, that without the resurrection we are still dead.

When Will We Be Resurrected?

He is not through yet. In First Corinthians, he says further in verse 21, "Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. {22} For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. {23} But every man in his own order: Christ the first fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming."

Now just to remind you of what Bishop Wright said, he said, quote, "Saint Paul is very clear that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead already, but nobody else has yet." And this is precisely what the apostle Paul says. Christ first, afterward, they that are Christ's. When? At His coming.

A Mystery

Now Paul is still not finished. He says in verse 51 of First Corinthians 15, "Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, {52} In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, (When?) at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. {53} For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. {54} So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory."

Paul calls it a mystery and, in many ways, it still is!

Continuing to Answer

Bishop N.T. Wright, continuing to answer the questions from Time Magazine said, "Secondly, our physical state, the New Testament says that when Christ does return, the dead will experience a whole new life, not just our soul but our bodies. Finally, there's the location. At no point do the resurrection narratives in the four Gospels say, "Jesus has been raised and therefore, we are all going to heaven." It says that Christ is coming here, to join together the heavens and the earth in an act of a new creation." He is right about that, you know.

Jesus is Preparing a Place

I think he may have been referring to John 14, that long speech of Jesus to His disciples, the night of the Last Supper. You will find this in John 14, verse one, "Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe in me. {2} In my Father's house are many rooms: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. {3} And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

Now it seems plain enough from what Jesus said, that the reunion with Him takes place at His coming.

Does Your Minister Believe in the Return of Christ?

I found it comforting to realize that a ranking churchman still believes in the return of Christ. You would probably be surprised to know how many don't. Time Magazine went on to ask, "Is there anything more in the Bible about the period between death and the resurrection of the dead?" And I fully expected, as I have gotten this far, that you have had that same question nagging at you in the back of your mind wondering where is this going?

The Bishop answered. "We know that we will be with God and with Christ resting and being refreshed. Paul writes," says the Bishop, "That it will be conscious when compared with being bodily alive, it will be like being asleep." "The wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text from about the same time says, "Jesus says, the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God."" That seems like a poetic way to put the Christian understanding as well.

Now I can't recall Paul saying anything about our being conscious. He plainly says, we will be asleep.

The Dead in Christ Shall Rise First

Take his statement in First Thessalonians chapter 4. This is the other chapter in the Bible that deals with the resurrection. In verse 13, Paul says, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you sorrow not, as others who have no hope. {14} For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them who sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

So, what is going to happen? Paul goes on to tell us. "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord."

I take it from this that Paul had no idea when the coming of Christ would be, it could be in his lifetime.

Paul said, "That we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep. {16} For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: {17} Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so, shall we ever be with the Lord." And where is the Lord? He is here on the earth!

You know there really isn't much room for misunderstanding here, this is about the fundamentals. And I assume that's what motivated the Bishop to write his book.

Traditional Christian Assumptions Often Don't Match Scripture

Traditional Christian assumptions often don't match Scripture. As comforting as those assumptions may seem to be. I think some of our assumptions arise out of what I call over interpreting Scripture. We are not willing to leave a mystery unanswered, so we offer our own solutions, which as often as not, miss the mark.

Frankly, you are just a whole lot better off to recognize the fact that you were dealing with things that are beyond our revelation and to attend your mind to the things that are revealed.

The Bishop went on to explain to Time Magazine, "Jesus' resurrection marks the beginning of a restoration that He will complete upon His return. Part of this will be the resurrection of all the dead who will awake, be embodied and participate in the renewal."

Analogies of Sleep

John Pokinghorn, a physicist and priest put it this way. I thought this was fascinating. "God will download our software into his hardware until the time He gives us new hardware to run the software again for ourselves." This gets to two things very nicely. The period after death is a period when we are in God's presence but not active in our own bodies and also the more important transformation will be when we will once again be embodied in administering Christ's Kingdom. I think that's interesting. I had never thought of that analogy, but it is a good one. Assuming that you understand computers, which may not be a valid assumption.

What we have to understand is that there are marvelous passages of poetry in the book of Ecclesiastes that looks ahead to the days of growing old in the last moments of life, and it actually says something similar that our physicist friend said.

This is in Ecclesiastes chapter 12 and verse one, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them."

I remember Jimmy Stewart, when he was being interviewed by Johnny Carson, and he was getting older and he said, "You know, after the age of 70, it's just patch, patch, patch." He talked about not finding any pleasure in life anymore.

This is what this poem in Ecclesiastes, is all about, he said, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"-- {2} before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; {3} when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim." Remember the song, "This Old House." The human body in that song is compared to an old house, that trembles in the storm. I think the composer borrowed the idea from right here in the Bible.

He talks about the time when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades when men rise up at the sounds of birds, but all their songs grow faint. In fact, when you are on up in years, you don't hear as well as you used to, and there are certain frequencies, as I know in my case that I don't hear any more. My wife will say, "What is that beeping?" and I will say, "I don't hear anything."

Let's continue in verse 5, "When men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. {6} Remember him--before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well." What an image of the passing of an old man.

Then he concludes by saying in verse 7, "And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." I think this lies close to the root of the computer analogy.

In an earlier time, I heard that spirit compared to a recording, the information on the recording is only accessible when played through the right equipment so the idea was that this recording goes back to God who holds onto the recording. It is not conscious, it cannot think, it is sleeping until such a time that it is put back in some equipment.

In the professor's analogy, our software with all of this data, returns to God. I think it is better to say that it is uploaded than downloaded to God, when our flesh returns to dust, but I don't see anything to suggest consciousness.

On the contrary, Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 4, "Anyone who is among the living has hope -- even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! {5} For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten." I don't think we are going to have any consciousness when we are dead.

There is another solution to the question and the problem.

Deep Sleep

There is an odd thing about really deep sleep. There is no awareness of the passage of time. One minute it's bedtime, and you are snuggling in under the blankets. The next moment, it's morning.

I remember as a child when something exciting was coming the next day, I was very anxious to get to sleep because I knew that morning would come quicker. Of course, it didn't, but for me it did.

There was a song popularized by Tennessee Ernie Ford some time ago that included this line, "When this feeble life is over time for me shall be no more." I thought that was interesting. I thought about it a great deal. Bishop Wright postulates an intermediates state, which he calls "Life after life after death." It is one solution into the mystery of death.

Suspension of Time

But in "The Lonely God," a book that I had published a couple years ago, I postulate the suspension of time. I had a friend named Ted. He lived in Ted time. I live in Ron time. Ted died a few years ago and for him, time stopped. For me it went on. At some time in the future Ted

will be raised from the dead to appear before the Lord in Ted time. Not one second will have passed. In Ron time several years will have passed. One-minute Ted was looking up at a nurse in the hospital and the next moment in his time, he is looking at the face of God. For him there is no time between these two events. Standing next to him before God will be all of us who survived him. We will have parted in time, but we will come together again in time, even though, for Ted, time stopped, and for the rest of us, it went on.

Preachers Are Fond of Picturing People Up in Heaven

This analogy addresses a misconception in the popular religious culture. Preachers are fond of picturing people up in heaven able to look down on us in real-time, but if you read the Bible that is not possible. For them time has ceased to be and only starts ticking again at the resurrection of the dead. The picture of people who have died going straight to heaven, and looking down on us dissolves into absurdity if you think about it logically, after all, aren't people in heaven supposed to be happy? How could they be happy looking at the mess that we are making of things.

We Have a Job to Do and It Sounds Like Work

Bishop Wright went on to say, "Never at any point do the Gospels or Paul say that Jesus has been raised and therefore we are going to heaven. They all say that Jesus is raised, therefore, the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do."

Time magazine asked, "That sounds a lot like work." Bishop Wright replied, "It is more exciting than hanging around listening to nice music."

In Revelation and in Paul's letters, we are told that God's people will actually be running the new world on God's behalf. The idea of our participation in the new creation goes back to Genesis when humans are supposed to be running the Garden of Eden and looking after the animals. If you transpose that all the way through, it's a picture like the one you get at the end of the book of Revelation. Amazing!

Disappointment in Not Going to Heaven

Time Magazine asked, "Does anyone that you talk to express disappointment in the loss of the old view?" The Bishop said, "Yes, you might get disappointment in the case where somebody has recently gone through the death of somebody they love and their wanting simply to be with them." I would say that's understandable, but the end of Revelation describes a marvelous human participation in God's plan. In almost all cases when I explained this to people, there's a sense of excitement and a sense of why haven't we been told this before?

Why Haven't We Been Told This Before?

In answer to the question why we haven't been told this before, I think tradition is an awfully strong force among Christian people. I don't know where the original ideas got started. I think Bishop Wright thinks they started with Greek philosophy, intruding into Christian doctrine, and that may be so, but the fact is, I think a lot of theologians have known this for a long time and

they just haven't seen a particular reason to rock the boat. Some preachers, I believe, think that the desire for heaven and hell are better motivators for some people.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. With so many books about 'seeing heaven' during a near death experience, do you find yourself questioning what happens after death?
2. What do you think is really happening during these near death 'visions'?
3. What other scriptures do you use to reveal the mystery of what happens after we die?
4. Why would we need a resurrection if people went to Heaven after they died?
5. Wouldn't it be kind of depressing if we did go to Heaven after death, and we could look down to watch our loved ones after we died?
6. Have you encountered Christians that actually do not believe in the return of Christ?
7. What do you think of John Pokingham's analogy of the period of death being like software that is uploaded back to God, and then downloaded to our new form during the resurrection?
8. What do you think of the example of "Ted time" and "Ron time?" We don't immediately go to Heaven, but we are resurrected without it ever feeling like years have passed since we died.
9. Where do you think the idea of going to heaven after death came from?
10. Are there other Christian assumptions that really don't have any backing in scripture?