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**A CHRISTIAN
LOOK AT THE
AFTERLIFE**

A CHRISTIAN LOOK AT THE AFTERLIFE

By: Samuel Emadi

Nobody enjoys a funeral. Death is a constant reminder that something is wrong—terribly wrong—with the world. Our frustration with death comes not only from the miserable pain it brings, but also from the fact that death and the afterlife are such [mysteries](#). The afterlife evades our test tubes and refuses to subject itself to our experimentation. Everyone must experience the transition from life to death without the benefit of knowing exactly what that transition looks and feels like. To call the afterlife “the great unknown” is an understatement.

Yet it is this element of the unknown that has made death and the afterlife constant subjects of both obsession and fear. The launching of EosTV is the most recent evidence of our inability to stop obsessing over death. This cemetery-laden TV station serves up “24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week” programming “devoted exclusively to aging, dying and mourning.”¹ Then there is the perennial publication of dozens of books by men, women, and even children who claim to have visited heaven, hell, or some other alternative afterlife locale.²

Of course, there is no shortage of opinions about what happens in “the great beyond.” Quite frankly, we’re fascinated by it. Every worldview—whether religious or irreligious, western or eastern—has something to say about [life after death](#). Yet somehow many of us still feel unsure about what to say to the grieving couple who just lost their only child or to the wife who just lost her husband of fifty-six years. The banal platitudes like, “They’ve gone to a better place,” or the Forrest Gump line, “Death is just a part of life,” just don’t seem to give anyone the emotionally satisfying response to death that our souls crave.³ Then there is the more frightening notion that death is simply *the end*, an abrupt termination of [a pointless existence](#).

Life After Death?

Christianity’s response to death, however, is not stoicism, emotionalism, or escapism. In fact, [the Bible](#) fights the tyranny of death with a message of hope. In some respects the entire Bible is the story of life’s victory over death, of death’s ultimate demise through [the cross and resurrection of Christ](#). According to the Bible, death is an aberration in the world, the chief evidence that something is terribly awry. That is, Forrest Gump was wrong; death is *not* just a part of life—at least, it wasn’t meant to be.

**EVERY WORLDVIEW HAS
SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT LIFE
AFTER DEATH.**

¹ For more information, see Charles Hawley, “Dead Air: New TV Channel Takes on Death and Dying,” *Spiegel Online International*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/dead-air-new-tv-channel-takes-on-death-and-dying-a-490174.html>.

² For a sampling of these books, see Bill Wiese, *23 Minutes in Hell: One Man’s Story About What He Saw, Heard, and Felt in That Place of Torment* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2006); Don Piper and

Cecil Murphy, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2004); Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent, *Heaven Is for Real* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010); Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

³ *Forrest Gump*, directed by Robert Zemeckis (1994: Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures).

Death is [the consequence of our sin](#), a poison that permeates our world like a vicious cancer.⁴ The story of Scripture is the story of how God, through Jesus, conquers death, undoes its power, and—to use the words of the great author J. R. R. Tolkien—makes everything sad come untrue.⁵ In fact, the Bible says that when Jesus died and rose from the dead, he “destroyed death and . . . brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”⁶

**ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE,
DEATH IS AN ABERRATION IN
THE WORLD.**

Of course, this all sounds wonderful but what, if anything, does it mean? It means there is hope for life after death. Contrary to popular belief (and the beginning of many funny jokes), Saint Peter will not be standing guard at the pearly gates deciding whether our goodies outweigh our baddies. Those who hope in Christ share in his life and immortality. Those who [trust in Christ](#) share in his victory over death. Christ has broken the chains of death and gives eternal life to all who place their faith in him.

Life In Heaven

According to the Bible, those who hope in Christ are immediately with Christ in heaven when they die. The Apostle Paul told early Christians that whenever he died he would be “away from the body and at home with the Lord.”⁷ That is, though the body may be put into the ground, the spirit (which includes identity and self-consciousness) is immediately present with Christ in heaven, which Paul describes as being “better by far” than our troublesome, pain-filled existence on earth.⁸

The Bible also teaches that when Christians pass into heaven they are immediately “made perfect.”⁹ This means that heaven’s inhabitants are no longer riddled with sin—selfishness, hatred, pride, anxiety, injustice, discontentment, unfaithfulness, dishonesty, or any of the other actions and attitudes that poison our lives on earth. It also means that heaven’s inhabitants will no longer experience any sense of brokenness, loneliness, depression, panic, or insecurity. Heaven’s inhabitants know only joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

**THE TRUE HAPPINESS OF
HEAVEN COMES FROM THE
UNRESTRICTED FLOW OF GOD’S
GRACE TO ITS INHABITANTS.**

The Bible tells us everything we need to know to be eager for heaven but not necessarily everything we want to know. Questions still remain: [What will heaven be like](#)? Will I know my family? Will my spouse and I still love one another? Will I see my dog again? Will there be golf? Many people cannot imagine heaven as anything other than the caricatured portrait of thousands upon thousands of men and women sitting on clouds, playing the harp, and—in my opinion—enduring the perpetual boredom of a placid, harp-infested eternity.

⁴ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Genesis 2:16–17, Romans 5:12.

⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 283.

⁶ *The Holy Bible*, 2 Timothy 1:10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 Corinthians 5:8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Philippians 1:23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Hebrews 12:22–24.

**THIS PROMISE OF REDEMPTION
AND RESTORATION IS THE
ETERNAL HOPE OF THE
CHRISTIAN.**

Scripture regularly refers to heaven as paradise.¹⁰ It is the place where God's grace and glory are most fully enjoyed.¹¹ Heaven is a place without wickedness or grief, sadness or despair.¹² Furthermore, while heaven's residents may have left behind their earthly bodies, they certainly keep their identities and enjoy reunion and fellowship with one another. These relationships will be without any modicum of bitterness, resentment, or disappointment. As Jonathan Edwards, one of America's greatest theologians, described it, the community of heaven is "a world of love."

The Bible also teaches that heaven will be anything but boring. The Apostle Paul said that in heaven God will "show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus," which is another way of saying that God makes heaven's inhabitants ever-increasingly happy in God.¹³ Far from being a placid, cloudy, 24/7 harp-ensemble practice, heaven is a place of explosive joy. According to Paul, ultimately heaven is not great because the clouds are soft, the food is good, and the golf is fun—though the streets are made of gold.¹⁴ The true happiness of heaven comes from the unrestricted flow of God's grace to its inhabitants. In heaven, we truly come home to our "father's house."¹⁵

Life After Life After Death

Heaven sounds so wonderful that many people are surprised when they discover that the Bible teaches that heaven is not the final chapter. We are so accustomed to the notion that Christianity is all about "getting into heaven" that many people find it hard to imagine that the Bible says anything else about the afterlife. However, when the Bible talks about the final destiny of Christians, it rarely talks about heaven. Instead it focuses on something even better: resurrection from the dead.

**THOSE IN HEAVEN AWAIT
THE RETURN OF CHRIST, THE
RESURRECTION OF THEIR BODIES,
AND THE REDEMPTION OF THEIR
WHOLE PERSON: SOUL AND BODY.**

Perhaps a little clarification is in order. When the Bible speaks about God's people in heaven, their existence is "spiritual." In other words, when believers die, their souls go to heaven to be with Christ, while their bodies remain on earth. Again, in the Apostle Paul's words, heaven is a place where people are "away from the body" but yet "at home with the Lord."¹⁶ However, this body-less existence is provisional. Those in heaven await the return of Christ, the resurrection of their bodies, and the redemption of their *whole* person: soul and body. At that time, the souls and the redeemed bodies of believers will reunite. As Paul states, our perishable bodies will become imperishable and our mortal bodies will be clothed with immortality.¹⁷

¹⁰ Ibid., Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 12:4.

¹¹ Ibid., Isaiah 66:1.

¹² Ibid., Matthew 6:10, Revelation 21:4.

¹³ Ibid., Ephesians 2:7.

¹⁴ Ibid., Revelation 21:21.

¹⁵ Ibid., John 14:1–4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2 Corinthians 5:8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1 Corinthians 15:53.

Earlier I mentioned that the story of the Bible is the story of how Jesus conquers death. The point of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is not to give people a way off a sinking ship. Jesus came to actually fix the ship. The resurrection of Jesus means that death's power has been undone. Christians don't just look forward to going to heaven after they die; they eagerly anticipate their own resurrection from the dead—the day when Jesus will “wipe every tear . . . [for] there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”¹⁸

JESUS CONQUERED DEATH NOT ONLY FOR HIMSELF BUT FOR ALL WHO HOPE IN HIM.

The idea of resurrection from the dead may sound a bit odd, if not downright bizarre. Do Christians have a “zombie-theology”? Not quite. When the Bible talks about resurrection it is describing something entirely different than mere resuscitation. When believers are resurrected from the dead, they are part of “a new earth.”¹⁹ Unlike our current world, this new creation will not be poisoned by death, decay, sickness, and sadness.

Seem confusing? Even unbelievable? Paul explains this most fully in 1 Corinthians 15; I recommend checking out the whole chapter. The gist is this: The Christian hope of future resurrection is rooted in what Jesus accomplished for us in his own resurrection. To say that the resurrection of bodies is impossible is to say that even Christ was not resurrected. But, Paul says, Christ was raised; in fact, Jesus was the “firstfruits” of a resurrection harvest.²⁰ Jesus conquered death not only for himself but for all who hope in him. Therefore just as Jesus rose again from the dead with a very real yet perfect, imperishable body, so also will Christians rise from the dead with perfect, imperishable bodies at the second coming of Jesus.²¹ At this time, the spirits of the believers will be united with their resurrection bodies.

The Bible also indicates that God will renew, repair, and restore this world. The dead are not raised just to inhabit the same old fallen, decaying cosmos. Believers are raised to a new creation, “a new heaven and a new earth.”²² The Apostle Paul once described our world as “groaning” with pains.²³ The imagery is not hard to understand. Earthquakes and tsunamis, war and pestilence, famine and drought are all aberrations from the good world that God made—all indications that creation is “groaning.” However, when Christ returns and believers are raised from the dead, Paul says that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.”²⁴ This means—to put it rather bluntly—God will fix everything. He will extricate the poison of death and decay from every square inch of the cosmos. Christ and his people will live in new bodies in a glorious new creation. Not only will death itself be defeated, but its effects will be entirely undone. The hope of Christianity is not simply life after death, but “*life after life after death.*”²⁵

¹⁸ Ibid., Revelation 21:4.

¹⁹ Ibid., Isaiah 65:17.

²⁰ Ibid., 1 Corinthians 15:20.

²¹ Ibid., 1 Corinthians 15:42–44.

²² Ibid., Isaiah 65:17.

²³ Ibid., Romans 8:22.

²⁴ Ibid., Romans 8:21.

²⁵ New Testament scholar N. T. Wright coined this phrase in his book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 148.

Pastor and author Tim Keller explains why the resurrection is such good news:

On the Day of the Lord—the day that God makes everything right, the day that everything sad comes untrue—on that day the same thing will happen to your own hurts and sadness. You will find that the worst things that have ever happened to you will in the end only enhance your eternal delight. On that day, all of it will be turned inside out and you will know joy beyond the walls of the world. The joy of your glory will be that much greater for every scar you bear.²⁶

What About Hell?

By now you might be thinking, *Heaven seems great, and a perfect life with no death sounds even better. But what about hell? Does the Bible really describe a place of fire and brimstone, of eternal suffering? Would a loving God really send someone to hell? What is hell all about anyway?*

**THE HOPE OF CHRISTIANITY IS NOT
SIMPLY LIFE AFTER DEATH, BUT
LIFE AFTER LIFE AFTER DEATH.**

Whether we like it or not, the Bible talks about hell. In fact, no one in the Bible talks about hell more than Jesus. In Matthew 25:41 Jesus even indicates that he will be the one who stands as the judge of those who enter into heaven and those who are condemned to hell: “Then [the King] will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”²⁷ Hell can certainly be a troubling topic, to say the least. Unfortunately, popular misconceptions about what the Bible teaches, as well as a fair bit of emotionalism, don’t help bring much clarity to the issue. In fact, even Christians have disagreed about [the nature of hell](#).

For example, one popular notion of hell held in some Christian communities is referred to as annihilationism. Annihilationism asserts that those who die without a saving faith in Christ cease to exist (i.e., they are annihilated) upon death or after an undisclosed period of judgment in hell.²⁸ Theologians and Christian pastors have posited numerous exegetical, theological, and even moral arguments for annihilationism. For example, some annihilationists believe that God would not punish a temporal sin for eternity because the disparity between the offense and the punishment would be unjust. Others find traditional understandings of hell morally out of touch with the rest of Scripture’s ethics or simply inconsistent with the character of God. These are just some of the many arguments Christians have used in favor of annihilationism.

**NO ONE IN THE BIBLE TALKS
ABOUT HELL MORE THAN JESUS.**

As attractive as annihilationism is, I don’t believe it does justice to the theology of the biblical authors themselves.²⁹ As always, Christians must answer any theological question on the basis of the biblical text. A detailed analysis of each passage goes beyond the limits of this article. Instead, let’s construct a brief composite picture of what the Bible says about hell.

²⁶ Tim Keller, *Jesus the King* (New York: Riverhead, 2011), 246.

²⁷ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 25:41.

²⁸ For a defense of annihilationism see Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994).

²⁹ For a more thorough rebuttal of the claims of annihilationism see Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial:*

The Case for Eternal Punishment (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 161-182; Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 195-218; John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 133-176.

First, hell exists because God's nature stands in stark opposition to sin and injustice. The Bible never portrays God as a petulant, irritable deity who casts people into hell on a whim. Hell exists because God is irrevocably opposed to wickedness. Second, hell is a place of just judgment. Hell exists so that true evil is punished justly. Jesus himself called hell a place of "punishment"³⁰ for sin, and the Apostle Paul spoke of God's "righteous judgment."³¹ Indeed, "there will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil."³²

THE BIBLE NEVER PORTRAYS GOD AS A PETULANT, IRRITABLE DEITY WHO CASTS PEOPLE INTO HELL ON A WHIM.

Third, hell is eternal suffering. Once again Jesus himself asserts this more forcefully than anyone else in the Bible. He describes hell as a place of "unquenchable fire,"³³ a "place of torment."³⁴ There is some question as to what causes suffering in hell. The Bible uses many different images to describe the unpleasantness of hell: fire, darkness, weeping, the gnashing of teeth, and even undying worms. Whether or not these descriptions are literal is ultimately irrelevant. Whatever the details of hell may be, it is the place where God exercises his just judgment against sin. Succinctly put, the Bible describes hell as God's just judgment of human wickedness.

Regretfully, many people assume that if hell is real then God is not loving. One unfortunate caricature of hell depicts God as an uptight ogre who flies off the handle and casts people into eternal torment when they displease him. Worse yet is the notion that if hell is real then God must be sadistic, a tyrant who delights in inflicting pain on helpless creatures. While these descriptions may characterize pagan deities of the ancient world, nothing could be further from the biblical portrait of God—the God who goes to every length possible to rescue his creation from sin and death.

HELL EXISTS BECAUSE, LIKE US, GOD LOVES JUSTICE.

One of the most important things to remember is that hell exists because, like us, God loves justice. Nobody likes to see true villains get away with real evil. Our hearts ache when malicious, life-destroying rapists are not held accountable for their actions. Our souls wince when we helplessly watch wicked institutions oppress the poor for the sake of the rich. We hurt when people are mistreated, abused, and taken advantage of.

³⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 25:46.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Romans 2:5.

³² *Ibid.*, Romans 2:9.

³³ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version © 2008, Mark 9:43.

³⁴ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Luke 16:28.

Why do we yearn for justice when we hear of someone opening fire on a room filled with elementary-school children? Or when we remember the atrocities of the Holocaust? On some level, every human being longs for justice and knows it is good. We cannot bear the thought that the world is so unfair. Nothing is more disturbing than the notion that both oppressed and oppressor, perpetrator and victim will meet the same end. The human heart craves justice because it recognizes that there are real wrongs in the world that simply must not go unpunished. Hell is the place where God makes wrongs right. Hell exists because, like us, God loves justice. And if we who are so flawed crave justice, how much more so does God, who is perfect. We will not understand everything about God's justice, but the Bible teaches that hell is God's guarantee that his world will be fair and that all wrongs will one day be put right.

A World Made New

The Bible obviously has a lot to say about death and the afterlife.³⁵ According to the Bible, in eternity God will put his grace and his righteous justice on full and magnificent display through saving some and judging others. The reason Christians are so confident of this is because at the very heart of the Bible's message is the story of the death and resurrection of a savior. The Bible teaches that we can have confidence about what will happen to us in the afterlife because Jesus, our forerunner, has already blazed a trail through the valley of death and has come out the other side in victorious resurrection glory.

Jesus' resurrection was a "firstfruits." The full harvest of resurrection is yet to come. The question now is whether we will trust in the Risen One for our own salvation from the eternal penalties of sin. Will we hope in the one who can make all sad things come untrue by raising us from the dead into a world made new?

**THE FULL HARVEST OF
RESURRECTION IS YET TO COME.**

³⁵ For a more thorough treatment of what Christians believe about heaven, hell, the resurrection, and the afterlife in general see Michael Rogers, *What Happens After I Die?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

³⁶ Photo Credit: [DANIST | Unsplash](#)