

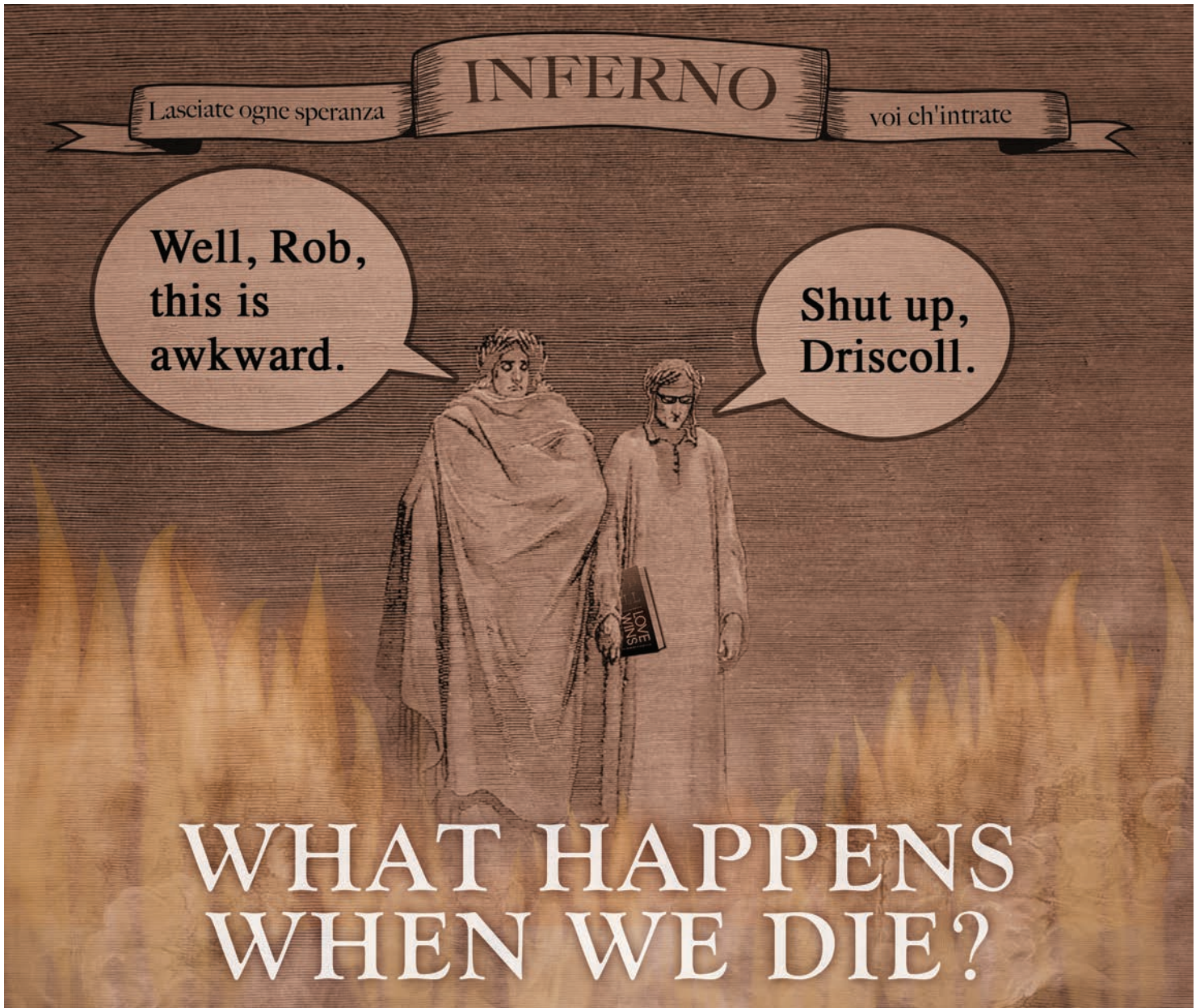


MISSION

ISSUE 1 2013

CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT DEATH

06// *Eternal conscious torment, resurrection on the new Earth and even Purgatory examined.*

02//WHY DEATH MATTERS 03//'DYING WELL'
04//Q&A: TOM WRIGHT 09//TALKING WITH
YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT DEATH 10//JOHN
POLKINGHORNE'S PHYSICS OF RESURRECTION
12//JUDGEMENT AND HOPE AFTER DEATH
14// THREE IMAGES OF HEAVEN AND HELL
15// FURTHER READING 16// BOOK REVIEWS

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE? & WHY DOES IT MATTER?



*THE POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD IS TOO OFTEN
A POST-CONFRONTING-DEATH WORLD. BUT
WHAT COMES NEXT STILL MATTERS.*

Our cover may be a humorous take on the tension between the universalist and conservative tendencies that different writers espouse, but our intent is quite serious. What do we believe about life after death? The Western world was once predominantly Christian and now it isn't. Most people once believed in God and now they don't. In the past, religion at least offered some answers about life after death but, for most people, that source has now dried up. It's an interesting conversation in the pub after a few drinks, but Paul's letter to the Corinthians will feature less than Buffy the Vampire Slayer! God help us!

Life after death doesn't feature in schools, other than maybe a comment on what different faiths believe. It isn't spoken of too frequently in churches either, other than entirely appropriate reaffirmations of 'the resurrection'. But even then, the resurrection is the end of the journey, isn't it? People might like to know about the stops along the way!

And because most people don't

believe in God, most people will be making the inner assumption that if there is a God then that God will be a bit like us, but a better version of us. God will be kinder than we are, better than we are, so we don't need to worry do we? So let's sing "The Lord is my Shepherd" and share a few stories about how wonderful Aunt Mabel was.

But then someone close dies. Someone's child or lover or soul-mate. The 'what happens now?' bit is suddenly real. Death is suddenly real.

Most people in the UK today have not seen a dead body at close quarters, let alone sat with someone as they wheezed their last breaths.

Today, dying people are often to be found in hospitals and hospices where the extra care that modern medicine can offer is to be found. That's good. But in the past, people often died at home, their bodies laid out in the front parlour, washed by the family, dressed in her favourite dress or his best suit.

Even our language carefully avoids

mention of the facts. We can say 'the cat died' (I've never heard anyone saying the cat has passed away) but it's harder to say 'Grandad died'. So we speak of having 'lost' our parents, or those who 'passed away'. Death has been domesticated, cleaned-up, tidied away.

At the thanksgiving service often there is no body present. John Rackley writing on *The Baptist Times* website in October 2012 asks whether the absence of the body is a 'running away from the truth'. Is the purpose of a Christian funeral only to laud the dead person's life, or is it to declare that in Christ we have the hope of bodily resurrection? The dead body gives substance to the occasion!

I don't make these remarks in any way to criticise the choices others have made. I have no doubt at the moment they would likely be my choices too. But along the way these things have changed how we handle the gentle art of dying.

The question is why? I hope this edition of *Catalyst* helps answer that question.

David Kerrigan
General Director



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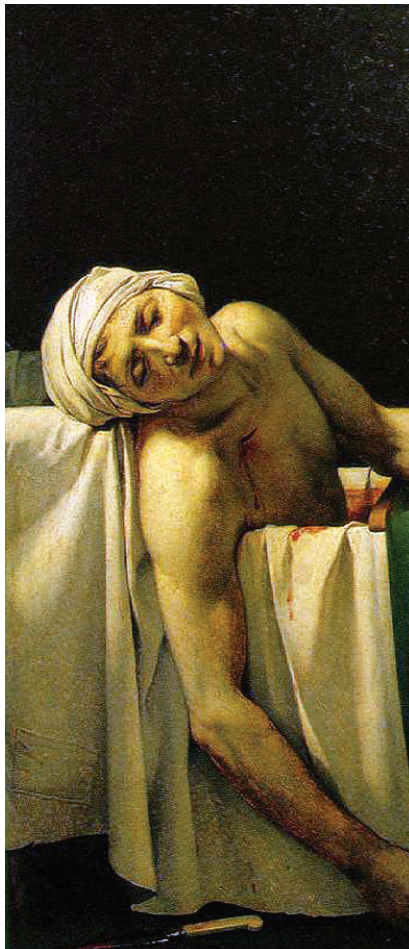
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By Rev Lucy Berry

Pastor of Bethnal Green Meeting House URC and popular poet, whose work has been featured everywhere from the Baptist Assembly to Radio 2. She also writes the popular Single Mum column in Reform magazine.

‘DYING WELL’: A DANGEROUS SENTIMENT

A POET LEARNS
FROM HER ATHEIST
FATHER’S DEATH
THAT THERE ARE
NO EASY ANSWERS
WHEN IT COMES TO
DYING.



Original artwork by Jacques Louis David-Murat

My father died two years ago. He was an atheist. His life had been lived both in open, unashamed selfishness and in spectacular generosity done in secret. After his death none of his many rejected women were glad to see the back of him. None of the many men he’d outshone were happy he’d gone.

He lay dying, bit by bit, over too much time, in his sterile bed in a barren, efficient white ward. Day by day I drove from London to Southampton to be with him. One spring morning, under deadly strip-lighting, we talked for the first and last time about judgement. He asked whether “do as you would be done by” was an accurate summation of what I believe God expects of us. No, I said, it was more difficult than that; it was “love one another”. He frowned, nodded. That was the end of that.

He had viewed my faith as something idiotic, impractical and dangerous to the self; the warping and smothering of personality. But he was non-rigorous in his thinking about this. Like so many hyper-intelligent souls who value the power of their own minds, he feared faith as the surrender of sense. He had mistaken my religion for religiosity and my faith for religion – and had never adequately listened as I tried to explain the difference.

But there was much we agreed on. He knew his Bible well enough to know that the smelly, the odd, the deranged, the shabby, the furious and those Christians who must belong bodily together without church-wedding-ratification – are precisely the heavy-laden whom Jesus loves. And so he loathed (as do I) the huge dishonesty which churches, both local and

denominational, can show towards those they choose time and again to marginalise. As an advertising man, he saw how easily and how well we churches talk the talk; and how seldom we deliver. My father was many difficult things, but he was not a hypocrite.

I was asked to write here my thoughts on ‘dying well’. I have watched deaths; awful ones and calm ones. But I don’t believe we have the choice to die ‘well’. The phrase is another of our hypocrisies; a dangerously sentimental judgement made by people who yearn to believe we can control what we can’t.

Actually, the phrase has about as much meaning as ‘being born badly’. It suggests an independence, agency, autonomy which is not granted us. On Christian lips I have heard it imply that the life we’ve led affects the death we get; as if death can also be ‘led’.

This is monstrously sloppy thinking. And it is ugly judgement. Taken to its ultimate conclusion it suggests that my father’s slow and dreadful death was simple justice for his selfish/selfless atheistic life. More than that; taken to its nastiest little limit it means that *anyone* dying brutally, tragically, painfully,

deserves all they get. Lord! If this were true, what would it say about Jesus’ death?

One day my body will stop. If I’m lucky, regardless of the life I’ve lived and the good/bad I’ve done, it will stop while I’m sleeping. Failing that I hope it stops quickly. But

neither I nor anyone else will be able to control, at my end, whether I die in panic or peace.

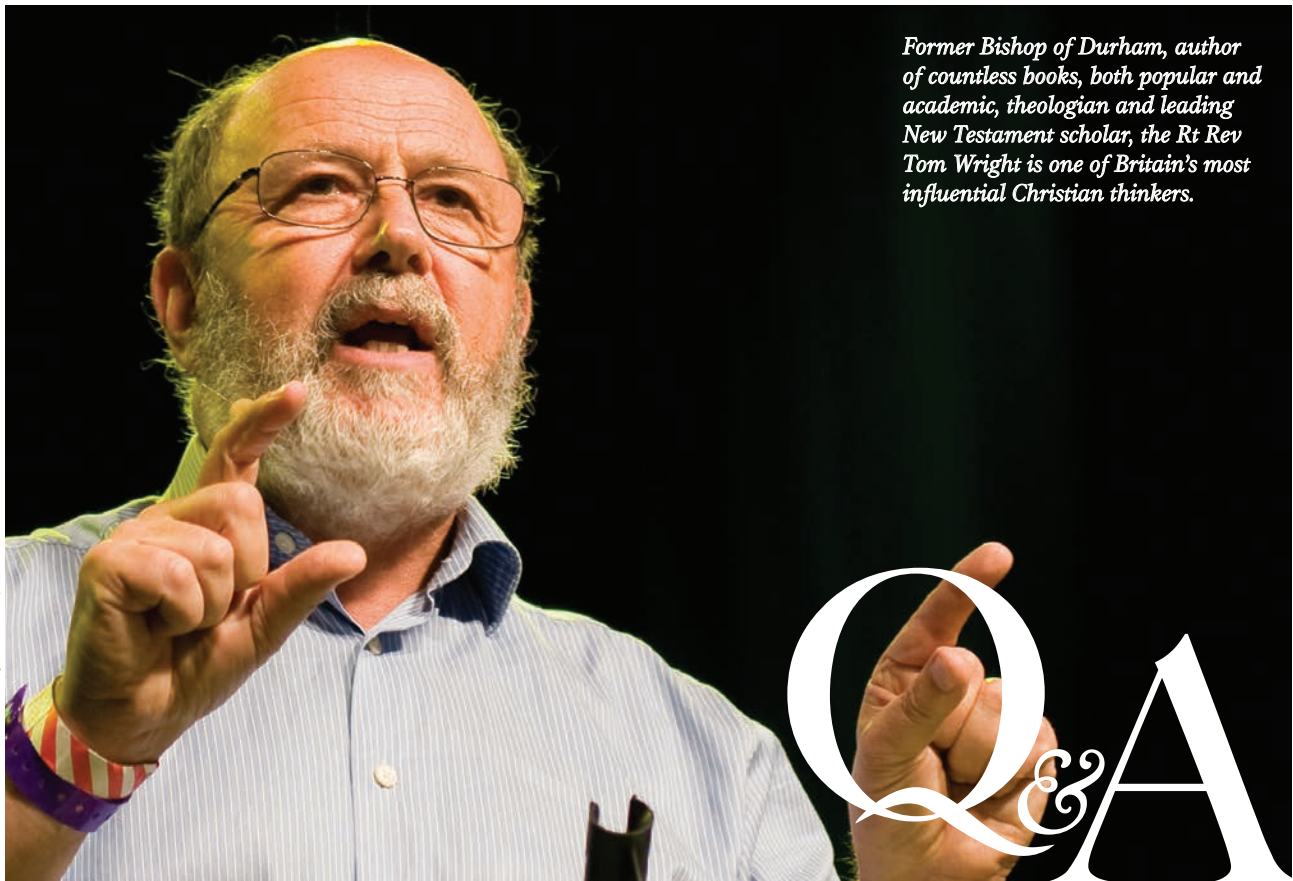
The rain falls on the just and the unjust*. All we can do is reserve judgement – and love one another.

“DYING WELL
MAKES AS MUCH
SENSE AS BEING
BORN BADLY”

*Matthew 5: 45

Former Bishop of Durham, author of countless books, both popular and academic, theologian and leading New Testament scholar, the Rt Rev Tom Wright is one of Britain's most influential Christian thinkers.

Photo © Alex Baker (www.studiojstizen.com)



Q&A

RT REV TOM WRIGHT

JUDGEMENT AFTER LIFE, PHARISEES AND RESURRECTION AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION: TOM WRIGHT TALKS ABOUT DEATH.

You've written before that the apostle Paul's background as a Pharisee meant he believed in bodily resurrection. How does that affect Christian thought?

For many Evangelical Christians, often the word 'resurrection' simply functions as a metaphor for life after death or going to heaven. And really, when you examine the way the New Testament uses it, it's not like that at all. There are lots of hymns which have instantiated this: 'may we go where he is gone, rest and reign with him in heaven'. Excuse me, the reign is not in heaven. The reign is on the new earth, as it says in the book of Revelation.

The point about resurrection is that it's part of a very this-worldly view of

salvation. God is going to redeem this world. He's going to transform this world. So, then, if great uncle Joe is persecuted for his faith and burnt at the stake, or whatever, when God makes the new world, great uncle Joe is going to have to be raised from the dead.

Actually, the great Old Testament emphasis on the goodness of creation and on God's love for creation and God's celebration of creation comes right the way through that. When you put that together with persecution, horror, war and death, you're going to end up with resurrection. Which is where [the Pharisees] do end up.

However, the thing to remember is

that what Paul articulates about Jesus' resurrection is significantly different from anything that he'd believed as a Pharisee. Partly because nobody imagined that one person would be raised from the dead ahead of time. It was something that was going to happen to all God's people at the end. And Paul has it that it's one person now and everyone else later. The resurrection of Jesus only makes sense within a Pharisaic worldview, but it also bursts the Pharisaic worldview itself apart.

Christians have grown up in a world which still resonated with a lot of medieval stuff and a lot of Victorian stuff about hell and hellfire and demons torturing people. A lot of that language goes back in the first century, not to early Christian literature, but to the pagan literature of the time. And it's very interesting that Lucretius, the great Roman philosopher who wrote *De rerum natura* (the great poem about Epicureanism) in the middle of the first century, did that as a reaction against

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 and Romans 14 that we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ or of God so that we may each receive the things done in the body. Now, you can see that in terms of a kind of lining up for the Great Assize: "Okay you did the following 93 naughty things and 25 good things, therefore..." I don't think that's really what it's like. We are all in the process of, by our choices and behaviour patterns, making ourselves who we are becoming. We are choosing to become a certain type of person and everything is cumulative.

[Judgement is] God's proper, truthful testimony to 'this is the sort of person you have made yourself. And that is very scary. Christians find it hard to talk about that because we believe in justification by faith. We believe that God has grabbed you by his grace, saved you, and Paul says, "therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ". Nevertheless, the same Paul who says that also does talk about standing before the judgement seat. Somehow, if we are to be true to the balance of Scripture, we have to tell both of those stories at the same time.

With that in mind, it seems fairly reasonable to fear death.

It seems reasonable to have a proper reverence before God today, tonight, tomorrow morning. Because I'm just as afraid of doing something stupid, wrong, idolatrous and wicked in the next 24 hours, which would really mess up what God wants to do in me and through me, as I am of what then happens afterwards. In some ways, Woody Allen's famous line, "I'm not actually afraid of dying, I just don't want to be around when it happens" – that's actually quite a profound thing. It's partly because we know death is often, either briefly or sometimes more long and drawn out, very unpleasant. Of course it is. But that's the process. If, in this life, we have come to find ourselves grasped by the God we know in Jesus, then ultimately that ought to mean that death, or rather, what comes after death, ought to have no terrors. And I have been privileged to be at the bedside of people who have died who have been in that position. Who have been happy to resign themselves to a merciful God. I hope I will be like that when my time comes. But it's important to have a proper respect and reverence for it. But then we should [have that] for every moment of our lives. It's the same thing.

Jonathan Langley was talking to Tom Wright at Greenbelt Festival (www.greenbelt.org.uk)

“THE RESURRECTION MEANS MISSION NEVER GOES INTO ENTIRELY VIRGIN TERRITORY”

John Polkinghorne speaks of the soul being an incredibly complex bundle of information about who we truly are. Is that something that resonates with you?

Yes. I am always wary about using the word 'soul' because, for generations, Christians have used it in a thoroughly Platonic sense, which is without justification in Scripture. In Scripture where the word occurs it is used basically heuristically, just as a way of talking about who you really are in the presence of God. But it doesn't define it as 'the soul is immortal, you had it from all eternity and you will have it to all eternity'. In fact, Paul himself says only God has immortality and he gives it to people rather than everyone being born with an immortal soul already. So, the word 'soul' is quite a useful word for talking about the 'real us' which God looks after between our death and resurrection. I've heard Polkinghorne himself use the computer metaphor: that God will download our software onto his hardware until the time he gives us new hardware to run the software again. Fine. That's another metaphor. We need to explore these possible ways of saying it while recognising that there is an appropriate reticence. We need to say something about this, but part of being creatures is admitting there are things that we actually don't know, but towards which we can put up signposts.

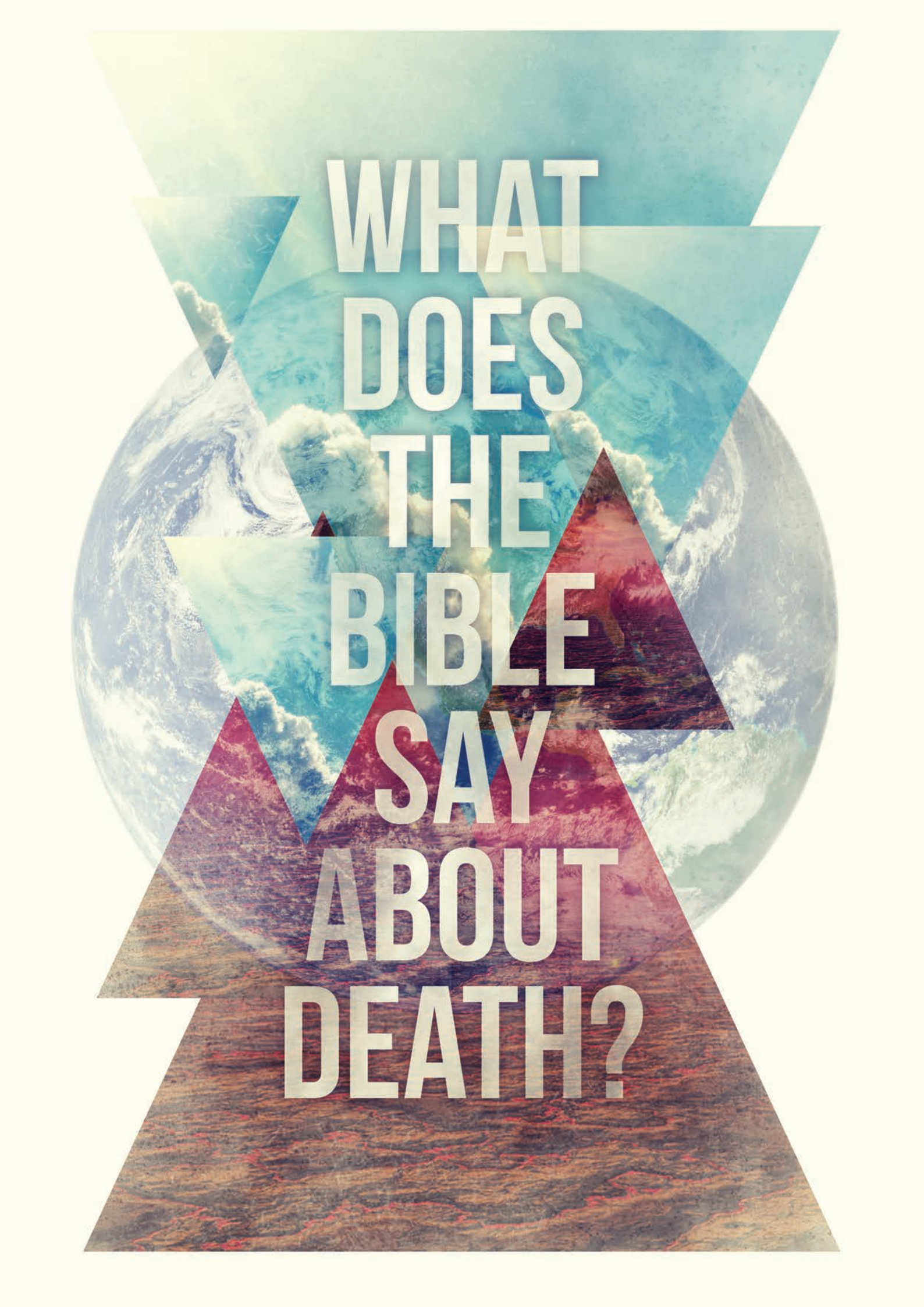
There's been a lot written recently about judgement after death. Some of us are quite reticent to talk about it and others focus almost entirely on it. What form does judgement take for Christians?

It's difficult to talk about judgement because those of us who are Western

Roman pagan visions of hell and post-mortem judgement. He wrote it to say, like that famous misquote from the sermon 100 years ago: 'death is nothing at all. Don't worry about it'. And so the pictures of hellfire and judgement *and* that reaction to them are both there in ancient paganism. So, when Christians talk about judgement, we shouldn't confuse it with those visions – which sadly has often been done.

It's quite clear that if the new creation is a creation in which God's life and love will be fully and finally instantiated forever, then all the things which corrupt, deface, distort and destroy God's amazing beautiful creation – including, particularly, his amazing beautiful human creatures – must be ruled out. And if people, including Christians, have bought into behaviour patterns or systems which have contributed to the defacing, destroying and corruption of creation, then God has to say no to that.

Now, in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul has an image which is actually about Christian teachers who are building on the foundation: what sort of Church are you building? We can cautiously apply that to Christians in general, though Paul doesn't do that. But if we do, what we see is a picture where he talks about the fire which is coming as a purifying fire and all the stuff that you built into the building which actually can't stand, the fire is going to be burnt up. Though he then says: "yet he himself will be saved but only as through fire", which, as a Christian teacher myself is a very very scary thing. You think: "What have I been teaching people? What have I been doing? What kind of a Church have I been helping to build?" Elsewhere,



**WHAT
DOES
THE
BIBLE
SAY
ABOUT
DEATH?**

WHAT THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY ABOUT DEATH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL CARE

Let's start with some bold assertions. The Bible never speaks of death as part of God's intention for creation. The Genesis narrative paints an evocative picture of the way in which humankind has become alienated from God, a drama summarised by Paul when he says "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned". (Rom 5: 12)

There is also the certainty of dying. Death spares no-one "... people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...". (Heb 9: 27)

And whilst death often comes as a sweet release after a time of suffering,

death is never welcomed in scripture. The 'good news' for those who die in Christ is expressed in the triumphant cry: "Where, O

death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15: 55)

But what do we mean by death anyway? It might seem obvious to say that death is the absence of life, but the Bible distinguishes between more than one kind of life and more than one kind of death.

There can be *physical life but spiritual death*: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world..." (Eph 2: 1-2); but there can also be *physical death but spiritual life*: "and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Ecc 12: 7)

This distinction between body and spirit helps us to see that whilst physical death is the separation of body from spirit, spiritual death is the separation of the person from God.

Distinguishing between physical death and spiritual death helps us address the question that has been debated at least from Augustine's time: was eternal

physical life part of God's original pre-fall creation? Paul seems to support the argument that this is the case for he speaks of death having entered through the sin of Adam: "For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man." (1 Cor 15: 21)

From this verse one might conclude that if Adam had not sinned, all people born would have lived forever. That is not without its challenges as we seek to relate scripture to other academic disciplines. If we consider the emergence of modern *homo sapiens* as happening about 50,000 years ago, then it is estimated that, since then, 108 billion people have been born.

If we argue that physical immortality was part of God's original creation, there is the need to explain how the earth could sustain the 108 billion people estimated to have lived since that time.

These puzzling factors notwithstanding, it remains a clear strand of scripture that death was not God's creation intention, and through the fall, through sin, death entered into creation.

Death is bad news!

It is undeniable therefore that scripture speaks of death as an offence to God and for this reason Paul refers to it as the enemy. (1 Cor 15: 26) But this reality is tempered for the Christian who can speak of the enemy as the one who has been vanquished. The curse is no more because Christ became the curse for us through his death. Paul can say confidently of the tension between life and death, "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." (Phil 1: 23)

For the unbeliever death holds none of these assurances. The best option can be oblivion, the natural resting place for

today's materialists. The sentimentalist might hope that if there is a God then maybe he, she or it will look benevolently upon them. It's an understandable hope but it lacks substance.

As the West has lost its faith so also it has lost the resources to cope with death and dying. Maybe this is why death has been airbrushed out of modern life.

The 'where are they now?' question

But some do ask serious questions, and the first to appear will be the practical pastoral questions that get asked when someone dies. Whilst we must concede that all things are not clear, this should not be the time for a mish-mash of wishful thinking or a lack of confidence in the Bible.

There are many reasons for such hesitancy. We want to comfort people rather than offer disquieting news. We simply can't be sure and so we don't want to appear less than expert! And in truth there is relatively little in the Bible that refers to what theologians call the intermediate state between death and resurrection. This may be because the early Church expected the gap between death and the return of Jesus to be short, and frankly they were more concerned with the 'what happens at the resurrection' than the in-between times.

We can probably identify four distinct understandings that have been adopted. Firstly, early Christian belief held to the *separation of the body from the soul* at death. (See Ecc 12: 7 and Eph 2: 1-2 above) Thus we could speak of the mortality of the body (which decomposes and is later recreated or renewed at the resurrection) but the continuance of the soul (which would be reunited with the body at the resurrection). This position was later rejected by those who argued that it owed more to Greek dualism than biblical Greek, but even modern out-of-body or near-death experiences would offer support for such a view.

In more recent centuries other views have emerged. Some early Anabaptists

“ ETERNAL CONSCIOUS
TORMENT IS DESCRIBED
IN SCRIPTURE ”

spoke of *soul-sleep*, as do many Seventh-day Adventists today, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. A number of verses in scripture speak of death as sleep: John 11: 11-14; Acts 7: 60; 13: 36; 1 Cor 15: 6, 18, 20, 51. There are other verses that argue against this soul sleep, such as Luke 16: 19-31, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which presupposes conscious existence between death and resurrection.

The Catholic Church speaks of the intermediate state as purgatory. Beginning with Hebrews 9: 27 ("Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...") Catholic teaching is that one's eternal destiny is fixed at the point of death. Those who are wholly wicked go to hell, those who are full of grace to heaven and those in the middle go to spend time in purgatory where their less-serious sins are expunged. However, this doctrine is not backed up by the Canon of scripture recognised outside of the Catholic Church and is referenced only in the Apocrypha. (2 Maccabees 12: 43-45)

A fourth concept in recent years is one of *instant resurrection* whereby on death the believer is immediately re-clothed in the promised resurrection body. The words of Jesus to the dying thief saying, "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23: 43) might seem to support this option.

What then can we say with any degree of confidence? Millard Erickson in his systematic *Christian Theology* (Marshall Pickering 1983) turns to Joachim Jeremias who points out that the New Testament speaks of two post-death places, Hades and Gehenna. Hades is the home of the unrighteous for the period between death and resurrection.

In Luke 16: 23 again we read of the rich man and Lazarus and in particular the rich man,

"In Hades, where he was in torment..."; Gehenna on the other hand is described in Mark 9:43 as the "...hell, where the fire never goes out", the place of eternal punishment that follows the final judgment.

Further, there are signs that the righteous dead do not descend into Hades but are received into paradise. In the same story the rich man cries out to Abraham imploring that Lazarus be sent to relieve his agony in Hades. "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus

received bad things, but *now he is comforted here and you are in agony*'." (Luke 16: 25)

Erickson summarises Jeremias, somewhat tentatively, as saying that "upon death believers go immediately to a place and condition of blessedness" as Lazarus did, and "unbelievers to an experience of misery, torment and punishment" (p1183).

Erickson accepts there is no reason why we cannot embrace the concept of personal existence that is without a body. So he concludes that the Bible speaks of an intermediate state that is without body but where the believer enjoys the presence of God and the unbelievers the absence of God. Neither condition is as intense as it will be post the final judgment, when the presence or absence of God will be final, and where the soul of the righteous is re-clothed with a renewed resurrection body.

The second coming

The Bible clearly speaks of Jesus' return. Both the righteous and unrighteous will experience resurrection and the final judgment will occur. There are differing views as to the sequence of events but these need not trouble us here.

Post-judgment the unrighteous are condemned eternally. Many today find it impossible to hold the view that this condemnation entails eternal conscious torment, believing that this would be irreconcilable with belief in a loving God. John Stott famously changed his mind on this and accepted instead that annihilation was a more likely understanding of eternal separation from God.

Nonetheless eternal conscious torment is described in scripture, for example in Matt 25: 41, 46 and Rev 14: 10-11. If we feel we must interpret these verses other



"The Roads to Heaven and Hell," a religious tract produced in 1896. People depicted taking the road to Heaven by helping the poor, praying and so forth, and others taking the road to Hell by drinking, being violent and engaging in various sinful activities.

© R.J. Stock, Cincinnati, Ohio

than literally, which I do, then this must have implications for holding to, or letting go of a literal understanding of other parts of scripture, a view to which again I would concur.

Words of hope?

So what can we say to those who, in the face of death, look to us for hope? I have long concluded that however we struggle with the details of post-death existence and events, it seems irrefutable that outside of Christ is a precarious state in which to die.

Whilst I cannot deny that the love of a righteous God will always be capable of surprising us by its capacity to reach far beyond the family of faith, it is both foolish and wicked to say anything other than it matters whether someone is in Christ or not.

In the face of the death of a loved one, I will say that their life has now ended and they are in the hands of a God whose mercy will surely always surprise us. But to the questioner, whose life still beats in their breast, I would hope that if you ask me that question in all seriousness, then my answer must be 'turn from your sins, believe in Jesus as Lord, and be baptised'.

“ THE LOVE OF
GOD IS CAPABLE OF
SURPRISING US ”

By Nick Luxmoore

School counsellor, trainer, teacher, youth worker and UKCP registered psychodrama psychotherapist with over 35 years' experience. Author of Young people, death and the unfairness of everything.

TALKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT DEATH

THE INTIMIDATING PROSPECT OF WHAT TO TELL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT DEATH, FROM A PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC POINT OF VIEW

We avoid talking with young people about it. "Death's the last thing on their minds," we tell each other. "They've got their whole lives ahead of them. Why would they want to be thinking about death? That's morbid! They'll worry about that when they're much older."

The truth is that young people think and worry about death far more than adults would like to believe. Not only

that life is worthwhile.

"Why is it worthwhile?"

"Because it is!"

"Yeah, but why?"

We might trot out some standard Christian responses: the trouble is that religion can be as defensive a way of

“ FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, DEATH IS A QUESTION UNDERPINNING EVERYTHING ”

do they think about dying physically and what that'll be like but they think about the fact of life being finite – finite *despite* all that adult talk about the future, the future, the future and the exciting opportunities waiting for those who work hard. Why bother to do anything when we're going to die anyway?

It's a good question, a really good question. Young people are sometimes rebuffed with answers about the importance of having a family, of making money, of being successful, of serving God... But more often adults avoid the question of "Why bother...?" for fear of not having The Answer. "Why bother...?" rattles our cages. We feel as if we ought to know; we ought to be able to put young people's minds at rest and reassure them

(not) thinking about death as it can be a helpful way. For young people, death is a question underpinning everything. If I'm going to die, then why should I bother to behave? Why should I save my money? Why should I respect other people? Why should I invest in the future or revise for my exams?

Without opportunities to talk about these things, and feeling that they should have their own answers by now, young people's anxieties about death seep out. They go round trying to look tough and courageous, as if they're afraid of nothing. Or they attach desperately, merging with other people in order not to feel alone. Or they take physical and sexual risks, defying death. Or they fight with other authority-figures because they can't fight with Mr

Death, the greatest authority figure of all. Underneath so much of their behaviour they're forever asking why – "Why do we have to die?" – but no one will engage with the question for fear of not being able to provide The Answer.

It's important for adults to join young people in their questioning without feeling obliged to have an answer. When adults admit that they don't know either or at least they're not sure – they're still puzzling away – it means that the question is a good question, an intelligent question, not a subversive or stupid question. It's a question young people *should* be asking.

Kenny's grandmother has cancer. I ask, "Why do you think that some people – good people like your grandmother, Kenny – get cancer?"

He says he doesn't know.

I say I don't know either.

He looks at me, worried but also – I sense – relieved.

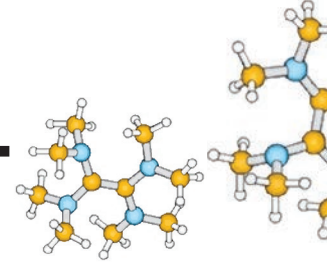
I suggest to him that I'm not giving him the answers he wants.

"That's okay," he says. "It's helping."

"How's it helping?"

"I don't know," he says. "It just is. I'm not used to talking about stuff like this."

Lots of young people would say the same thing. What they mean is that they've never been in a relationship with an adult who doesn't try to make everything all right, an adult who doesn't pretend to know, and yet talking with an adult who doesn't know or at least isn't sure is oddly reassuring.



By Professor Sir John Polkinghorne

Former professor of mathematical physics and President of Queen's College, Cambridge University, John Polkinghorne written and lectured extensively on science and Christianity.

THE PHYSICS OF RESURRECTION

RESURRECTION WILL MEAN AN END TO DECAY, BUT WHAT OF OUR NATURES WILL PERSIST AFTER DEATH?

Every story that science has to tell ends ultimately in decay and futility. This is due to the second law of thermodynamics which says that, without external intervention, a physical system will become increasingly disordered. The reason is statistical. There are many more ways of being disorderly than of being orderly, so that entropy (the measure of disorder) inevitably increases with time.

We all know that we are going to die on a timescale of tens of years and the cosmologists tell us that the universe itself will eventually die on a timescale of many tens of billions of years. As it continues to expand it will become progressively colder and more dilute, so that all life must eventually disappear from everywhere within it. The distinguished theoretical physicist Steven Weinberg notoriously said that the more he understood the universe, the more it seemed to him to be ultimately pointless.

Weinberg is a staunch atheist, with only the 'horizontal' scientific story of the unfolding of current physical process to tell. I believe that there is also a 'vertical' theological story to tell, of the creator's everlasting faithfulness. This story is the sole, and sufficient, ground of the hope of a destiny beyond death, both for ourselves and for the universe.

This is exactly the point that Jesus made in his argument with the Sadducees about whether there is a human destiny beyond death. He reminded them that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, commenting incisively 'The God, not of the dead, but of the living' (Mark 12: 18-27). The point is a powerful one.

If the patriarchs mattered to God once, as surely they did, they will matter to the faithful God forever and will not be cast aside at their deaths like broken pots thrown onto a rubbish heap. And, as a Christian, I believe that this faithfulness, which is stronger than death, has actually been demonstrated within history by the resurrection of Jesus, as the sign and guarantee of what awaits all of us beyond history.

Dis/continuity and 'animated bodies'

But can we make sense of the notion of a human existence beyond death? A little thought shows that this requires the satisfaction of criteria of both continuity and discontinuity. It really must be the individual patriarchs who live again and not just new persons given the old names for old times' sake. This requires a degree of continuity between life in this world and life of the world to come. Yet there would be no point in making the patriarchs live again simply for them to die again, so there must also be a criterion of discontinuity.

In much Christian thinking the carrier of identity beyond death has been seen as the human soul, conceived in a Platonic fashion as a detachable spiritual component, released at death from entrapment in the body. Today, considerations such as the effects of brain damage on personality, and our evolutionary kinship with animal life convince many of us that this dualist

picture of human nature as a combination of distinct and separable body and mind is unpersuasive. Instead, human beings are a kind of package deal, psychosomatic unities, with mind and body complementary aspects of a single integrated nature. This idea would not have surprised most of the writers of the Bible for, in the famous phrase, Hebrew thinking regarded humans as being 'animated bodies', rather than 'incarnated souls'. We are not apprentice angels awaiting release from the flesh.

Information-bearing patterns and the 'real me'

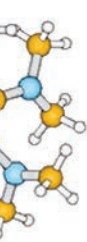
Have we then lost any notion of the human soul? I do not think so, but the idea will have to be reconceived. What we are looking for is 'the real me' and it is almost as difficult to know what that may be within this life as it might be beyond it. What makes me, a bald and elderly academic, the same as the schoolboy with the shock of black hair in the photograph of long ago? It might seem that material

continuity is the answer, but in fact that is an illusion. The atoms in our bodies are changing all the time, through wear and tear, eating and drinking, and I am atomically distinct from that young schoolboy.

What is the true essence of my continuing personhood is hard to express with any precision, but it must be something like the almost infinitely complex information-bearing pattern (memories, dispositions of character, relationships, etc) carried at any one time by the atoms then making up my body. The soul is this dynamic 'pattern', not a detachable spiritual component.

The idea has some resonance with ideas just beginning to be developed within science as it starts to study the behaviour of complex systems treated in

“ A NEW FORM OF 'MATTER', RELEASED FROM BONDAGE TO DECAY ”



their totalities and not simply decomposed into their constituent parts. These systems are found to display astonishing powers of spontaneous self-organisation, creating holistic patterns of behaviour unforeseeable in terms of the properties of their constituents. Holistic ‘information’ is a concept that, I believe, will prove fundamental to a proper understanding of physical reality.

New bodies, renewed matter

This ‘pattern that is me’ will dissolve at death with the decay of my body, but it is a perfectly coherent belief that the faithful creator will not allow it to be lost, but will preserve it in the divine memory. This in itself would not amount to a life beyond death, for I believe that it is intrinsic to human beings that we are embodied, so that a true destiny beyond death requires the re-embodiment of that ‘pattern’ by a divine act of resurrection. The true Christian hope is not a kind of spiritual survival, but the resurrection of the body.

This re-embodiment will have to be in a new form of ‘matter’ with different properties from the matter of this world and thus released from bondage to decay. This is the criterion of discontinuity. Scientifically, it seems perfectly coherent to believe that God can bring into being a form of ‘matter’ endowed with such strong self-organising principles that it is not subject to the thermodynamic drift to disorder that characterises the matter of this world. However, this idea raises two further questions.

The first is to ask why, if the ‘matter’ of the world to come is to be free from transience and decay, did God first create the matter of this world of mortality? Putting it more bluntly, if the new creation is going to be so wonderful, why bother

with the old? I believe that the answer lies in the recognition that the divine creative purpose is intrinsically two-step.

First, creatures must be allowed to exist at some distance from their creator, as finite beings free to be themselves and to ‘make themselves’ (the theological understanding of the evolutionary exploration of potentiality) without being totally overwhelmed by the naked presence of infinite deity. This veiling of deity is why the character of the old creation is evolutionary, a world in which the death of one generation is the price of the new life of the next. However, God’s final purpose is eventually to

draw creatures into a freely-embraced closer relationship with their creator. That will be the world of the new creation. This world contains sacraments, covenanted occasions in which the veil over the divine presence becomes thinned; the world to come will be totally sacramental, fully diffused with the revealed presence of God. That is why the character of its physical ‘matter’ will be so different.

Creation ‘out of the old’

The second question is where will this ‘matter’ come from? I believe that it will be the transformed matter of this world.

God has a purpose for the whole of creation and all creatures will participate in the new creation in appropriate ways. Human destiny beyond death and cosmic destiny beyond death lie together. The new creation is not God wiping the slate clean and starting over again. It is not creation ‘out of nothing’, but creation ‘out of the old’. For the Christian, the paradigm is the resurrection of Christ. The Lord’s risen and glorified body is the transform of his dead body – that is why the tomb was empty. The resurrection is the seed event from which the new creation has already begun to grow.

So what will the life of the new creation be like? People sometimes say that, though they would like a lot more life than we get in this world, they would not want to live for ever. Eventually it would get too boring. If the life to come were just a matter of sitting on a cloud and endlessly chanting ‘Alleluia’, that might well be so. But the life beyond death will be the endless exploration of the inexhaustible riches of the divine nature, progressively unveiled. It will be a world of redemptive process.

I think that humans are intrinsically temporal beings and there will be ‘time’ in the world to come as well as ‘matter’.



Ancient of days by William Blake via Wikimedia Commons

Part of that redemptive process will be judgement and purgation, both hopeful words if understood correctly.

Judgement is not appearing before a testy celestial judge, eager to condemn, but a coming to terms with the reality of our lives, including the dross that has accumulated in our characters, from which we will be cleansed by the action of purgation by divine grace.

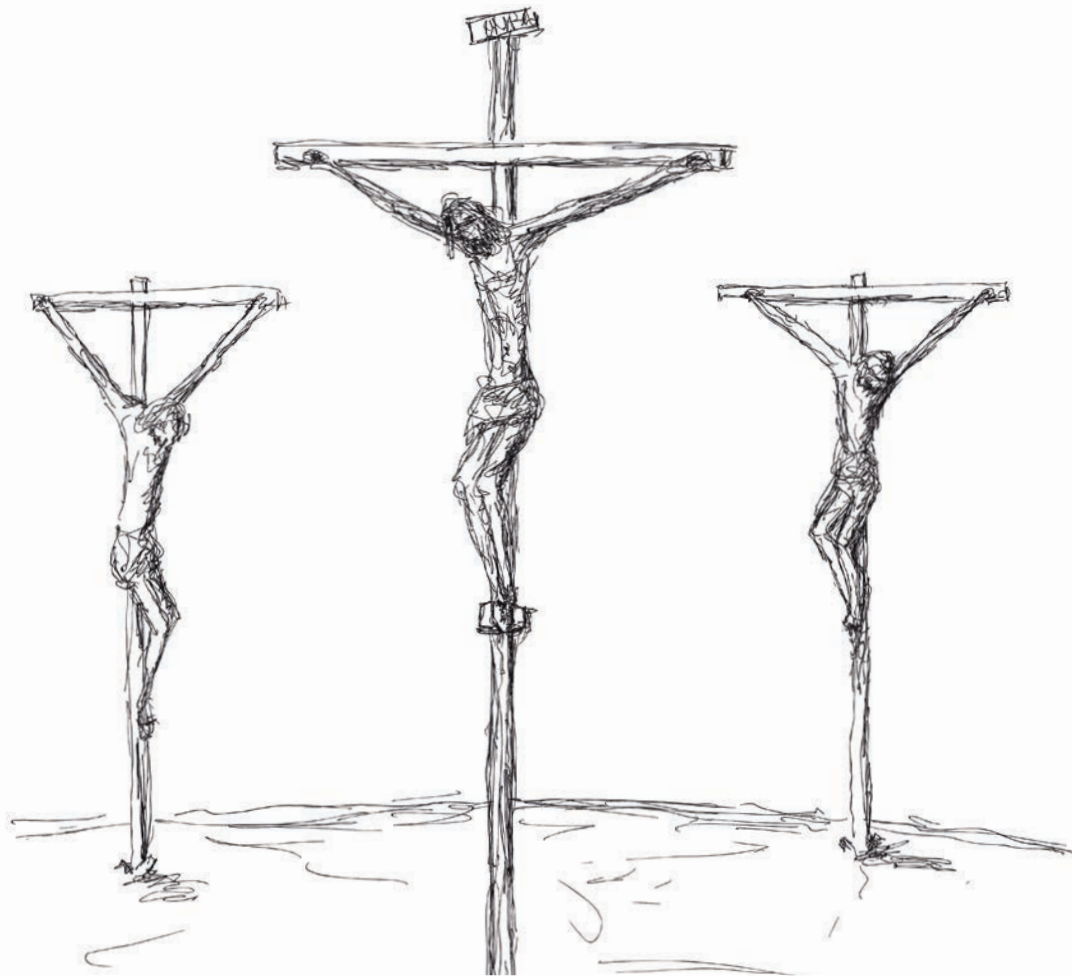
There is clearly much speculation in what I have been trying to say. In many respects, of course, we shall just have to wait and see. Nevertheless I think that this tentative exploration has a valid point. It is important not to lose our nerve in believing in a destiny beyond our death. Fundamentally the issue is whether the universe truly makes sense, not just now but always, or whether it is ultimately pointless, as Weinberg thought. Whatever the details may prove to be, Christian belief affirms that the creation is everlastingly significant, resting this belief on the twin foundations of trust in the faithfulness of God and the resurrection of Christ.

This piece first appeared in Third Way magazine under the title Physics and the final frontier and is reproduced by permission. To read more of Third Way magazine, visit: thirdwaymagazine.co.uk

“ IT IS INTRINSIC TO HUMAN BEINGS THAT WE ARE EMBODIED ”

By Rev Dr Simon Woodman

Co-minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London, member of Baptist Union Council and moderator of the Faith and Unity executive. Editor of The 'Plainly Revealed' Word of God: Baptist hermeneutics in theory and practice.



'WITH ME IN PARADISE' HOPE AFTER DEATH?

JUDGEMENT AFTER DEATH AND THE HOPE IN ANOTHER LIFE DEVELOP AS CONCEPTS THROUGH SCRIPTURE

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
Macbeth: act 5, scene 5

So says Shakespeare's Macbeth after hearing the news that his wife has died. And in his despair he strikes right at the heart of the fundamental question of life: What does it count for? What is it

good for? What, if anything, is its value? Is it all just destined for destruction?

Such thoughts were certainly on the mind of the criminal who found himself being tortured and executed next to Jesus of Nazareth. We don't know his crime, but Rome had deemed that he should die before his time. In contrast to those standing around the cross watching on, and in contrast to the occupant of the third cross, this criminal still sought meaning to his life even as it ended: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23: 42). The hope expressed here was that one day, at some future

point when wrongs are righted and balances balanced, there might be a place for this man in Jesus' messianic kingdom. In his reply, Jesus gave the man far more than he was expecting: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23: 43). The criminal's hope for participation in a future kingdom became the promise of a present paradise. The word *paradise*

shall see God even after the destruction of his skin (Job 19: 25-27). It is within the apocalyptic tradition that a view starts to emerge of the afterlife as a place of reward and judgement, as those who have been faithful in this life, but have experienced nothing but trials and persecutions, start to look to eternity as the place where justice and vindication might be found (Daniel 12: 2-3).

Eden is the stripping away from creation of all that has no eternal value, with God's ultimate judgement on evil and all its works emerging as a key theme. The concept of 'hell' in the New Testament is most often expressed in terms of the valley of *Gehenna*, a burning rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem, where the worthless refuse of the city was consigned to the flames (Matthew 5: 22-30; 10: 28; 18: 9; 23: 15, 33; Mark 9: 43-47; Luke 12: 5; James 3: 6). All human activities which displace God from the centre of creation are shown to be futile as God's eternity comes into being in the midst of those communities that name Jesus as Lord. Ultimately even death itself is consigned to the flames of destruction (Revelation 20: 14).

“SALVATION IS NOT ABOUT WHERE THE SOUL GOES”

derives from the Persian word for a walled garden, and Jesus' use of this word brings to mind the garden of God, an image familiar to us from the story of the garden of Eden (Gen 2: 8). But the divine garden is more than a place now lost, it is a way of life, and a state of soul. The paradise into which Jesus invites the criminal is the eternal garden which is open to all those who seek it, as the curse of Eden (Gen 3: 23-24) is reversed and the unrighteous find life everlasting within God's garden (Revelation 2: 7, 21: 25-22: 2). This criminal's life was not, it seems, wasted. He received forgiveness and his life was found to have eternal value. He entered into eternal life through his encounter with the crucified messiah.

Developing the afterlife

The idea that life may have some eternal quality to it, that it may be more than 'a walking shadow' that leaves no trace, is a key theme within the biblical witness. But the concept of 'afterlife' only develops fairly late within this tradition. In the Old Testament, divine reward and punishment are predominantly depicted as taking place within this world, with faithfulness to God bringing blessing, and disobedience misfortune. However, there are occasional glimpses of an emerging belief that, whilst at death the body returns to dust, the spirit of life returns to the God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12: 7). Enoch and Elijah are said to find a place in the heavenly realms after their earthly lives have finished (Genesis 5: 24; 2 Kings 2: 1-18). The Psalms provide a clearer basis for a Jewish hope in an afterlife (Psalms 1: 3; 16: 10-11; 49: 15; 73: 24; 139: 24) and Job states his belief that in his flesh he

Life eternal, now

In the New Testament, eternal life as articulated by Jesus is less about a hope for the future, and more about present lived reality for those who are in Christ. Life eternal is life lived in all its fullness, freed from slavish devotion to those powers and principalities that distort and demean God's image in each created being. Jesus promises 'eternal life' to anyone who 'believes' (John 6: 47), and in the Lazarus story declares

Creation and the Spirit

The witness of the New Testament is that for those who are 'in Christ', life eternal begins here-and-now. The goodness, mercy and forgiveness offered and received today are eternity in the present moment, as the world is re-created through the faithful witness of those who have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

“AN EMERGING BELIEF THAT THE SPIRIT RETURNS”

himself 'the resurrection and the life' in complete fulfilment of the traditional Jewish eschatological expectation (John 11: 23-24). Paul emphasises the immediate implications of having been united with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6: 5), and believes that once he 'departs' he will be 'with Christ' (Philippians 1: 21-24). The dawning eternal kingdom of God into which Christian believers are invited, and for which they are asked to pray (Matthew 6: 10), becomes manifest in the lives of those who live it.

Gardens and Gehenna

It is again the apocalyptic tradition that gives us the most compelling images of the afterlife in the New Testament, with the book of Revelation portraying the ultimate destiny of creation as a return to the garden of God in the midst of the eternal city (Revelation 22: 1-6). Part of this recovery of that which was lost at

Salvation is not about where the soul goes after death, neither is resurrection about what happens to the body after it stops breathing. According to Paul in Romans 8, salvation and resurrection in Christ are about the renewal of all creation through the gift of new life by the Spirit: "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Romans 8: 10). By this understanding, the question "where do we go when we die?" becomes redundant, because death has no power or meaning for those who are 'in Christ'. As Paul puts it: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" because nothing, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:1, 38-39).

Katherine Mannion

Researcher for BMS World Mission.

THREE BIBLICAL IMAGES OF HEAVEN & HELL

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HEAVEN, HELL AND THE LIFE AFTER THIS ONE?

The Nicene Creed, which is accepted by all major Christian traditions as the core beliefs of the faith, ends with the phrase “we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come”.

How we view that world to come, our concepts of heaven and hell, will have a profound impact on our personal faith, our mission imperative and our understanding of God himself. Here are a few images the Bible uses to describe that world.

THREE VISIONS OF HEAVEN

1 A renewed creation

God will ‘create new heavens and a new earth’ and there will be a ‘new Jerusalem’. Isaiah proclaims it (Is 65: 17-25), Peter reminds the believers about it (2 Pet 3: 13), John describes his vision of it (Rev 21: 1). They are places where God’s blessing is unhindered: the past is forgotten, there are no middlemen and workers get their full reward, premature deaths are unheard of and there is no more suffering.

2 Eden reclaimed

Jesus said to the criminal crucified next to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23: 43); Paul describes some kind of experience where he was ‘caught up to paradise’ (2 Cor 12: 4); and in the prophetic

letter to the Church in Ephesus there was a promise that “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2: 7). The word ‘paradise’ derives from a Persian term describing a park or pleasure garden, and was used by the Jews to describe the Garden of Eden. This place is one of unexplainable wonders and the sweetness of life after trials and suffering are overcome.

3 Unexpected riches and reserved rooms

Many times Jesus taught ‘the kingdom of heaven is like...’. All these similes – a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, fine pearls, a catch of fish, a merciful king, banquet invitations for nobodies, equal pay for workers – speak of unexpected

good coming from seemingly unlikely situations. Another image is of endless safe hospitality: “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” (John 14: 2) The portions of grace we experience now are part of the heavenly kingdom.

THREE VISIONS OF HELL

1 Darkness and death

Hell has been frequently translated from the Hebrew Old Testament word ‘Sheol’ and the Greek New Testament word ‘Hades’. They both allude to the realm of the dead, the grave and the pit.

2 Judgement

Our familiar pictorial representation of the fires of hell comes from references to Gehenna, the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem. Bodies of animals and criminals were thrown there and fires were kept alight to burn the refuse. It was also historically a place of human sacrifice. These carry symbolism of destruction and God’s judgement.

3 Punishment and separation from God

Paul aimed to discourage the Thessalonian believers from taking personal revenge on those who were persecuting them, by reminding them that ‘God is just’ (2 Thes 1: 6) and will deal appropriately with those who deliberately cause trouble for believers. His words are unashamedly harsh on unbelievers, saying ‘they will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might’ (2 Thes 1: 8-9).



Hortus Deliciarum's 12th century depiction of Hell

DEATH & DYING

Not the ideal focus for a bit of light holiday reading, perhaps, but these books may well be a helpful starting point on an important subject

BOOKS:

The great divorce

CS Lewis

The classic allegory for heaven, hell and a fictional bus journey between them is as powerful today as it has been for generations of Christians. A fascinating view of the role of human choice in salvation.

Young people, death and the unfairness of everything

Nick Luxmoore

Largely secular and mostly psychological in nature, this exploration of talking to young people about death by *Mission Catalyst* contributor Nick Luxmoore is both fascinating and pastorally useful.

Surprised by hope

Tom Wright

Following on from his earlier *The resurrection and the son of God*, Tom Wright accessibly sets out his understanding of Christian hope as opposed to Platonised views, based on our coming resurrection.

The Christian art of dying: learning from Jesus

Allen Verhey

A theological ethicist from Duke University reflects on his own experience of illness and examines how Christians can reclaim death from the world of medicine and from non-Christian philosophies.

Our greatest gift: a meditation on dying and caring

Henri Nouwen

The great contemplative Christian writer tackles issues of grief, dying, ageing and loss and finds beauty and goodness even within pain and helplessness.

Speaking of dying: recovering the Church's voice in the face of death

Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith and Joy V Goldsmith

A collection of essays encouraging the Church to draw on its traditional, theological and liturgical resources in dealing with end of life issues.



Trouble with Church

Lucy Berry

Poet, URC minister and sometime Radio 2 regular, Lucy Berry's collection of poems deals with many aspects of the Christian life, including matters of life, death and the life to come with wit and grace.

More:

Seven storey mountain – Thomas Merton; *Heaven* – Paula Gooder; *For all the saints* – Tom Wright; *Heaven* – Randy Allcorn; *Living well and dying faithfully* – John Swinton; *Suffering presence* – Stanley Hauerwas; *When the kings come marching in* – Richard Mouw; *Christ and the judgement of God* – Stephen H Travis; *The coming of the son of man* – Andrew Perriman; *The last things* – Paul Helm; *Matters of life and death* – John Wyatt; *The gospel according to St John (Black's commentaries)* – Andrew T Lincoln; *The last things: a new approach* – Anthony Thiselton; *Justification: God's plan and Paul's vision* – Tom Wright; *On death and dying* – Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

WEB:

SPCK Publishing: spck.org.uk

Nick Luxmoore: nickluxmoore.com

Lucy Berry: lucyberry.com

Third Way magazine: thirdwaymagazine.co.uk

FILM:

Departures (2008) Director: Yōjirō Takita

Gentle meditation on death and dying through the lens of the Japanese tradition of the *Nokanshi* – professional 'encoffiners' who prepare the deceased for burial in Japanese tradition.

Tree of life (2011) Director: Terrence Malick

Epic and fantastic exploration of God's answer to Job, focusing on a family of fallible people dealing with loss. With an eternal perspective and dreamlike structure, 'prophetic' is a possible description.

RELEVANT READS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS, ASSESSED BY A BROAD RANGE OF REVIEWERS

**RED LETTER CHRISTIANITY:
Living the words of Jesus
no matter what the cost**

By Shane Claiborne
and Tony Campolo
Hodder and Stoughton, 2012,
Price £10.99
ISBN 978-1-44474-538-2

Reading this book is like discussing the essential truths of Christianity and today's hot topics with a very sound and scholarly uncle (Campolo) and a wildly passionate and inspirational cousin (Claiborne). If you've read either author's previous works you'll encounter no surprises on economics, homosexuality or community here, but discussions on saints, liturgy and hell are given a new life and 'lightness'. Claiborne recounts a friend going to a music festival where he is greeted by placards saying: 'Bob Marley is in hell' and 'Janis Joplin is burning in hell', to which his companion says: "I don't know much about hell, but it sounds like they've got some good music down there". Not focused on hellfire and brimstone, this book calls us to follow what Jesus actually taught.

Sally Buchan is mission writer at BMS World Mission

FINDING HOPE AGAIN

By Peter Millar
Canterbury Press, 2003,
Price £12.99
ISBN 978-1-85311-438-0

Peter Millar's wife died suddenly within an hour of waking up in their Scottish highland home. Peter has charted his journey with grief in a number of books and in this one he describes his discovery that, no matter the depth of the loss, there is no avoiding the power of hope. Here is a collection of prayers, meditations, and letters drawn from his writings and those of others. This is not a systematic analysis of Christian hope but rather a reflection on what he describes as "a gentle companion whose hands are on my shoulder when my eyes fill with tears and my heart laments for myself and our wounded world". In the company of hope he discovers the God of ancient calm who touches our empty spaces when we are vulnerable enough to meet him.

John Rackley is a City Centre Minister for Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath

**FOR ALL THE SAINTS:
remembering the
Christian departed**

by Tom Wright
SPCK Publishing, 2003,
Price £7.99
ISBN 978-0-28105-620-0

This short book is ostensibly a critique of the celebrations of All Saints' and All Souls' days within the liturgical year. It was first published prior to Tom Wright's fuller and longer discussion of death and the Christian hope in *Surprised by hope*, and it is an excellent brief introduction to his thinking on the subject. Both theologically and biblically, it addresses issues such as heaven and hell, belief in purgatory, praying for the dead, human consciousness beyond death, the nature of the soul, the resurrection of the body and the final consummation of God's purposes for humanity. You do not need to care about the calendar of the Christian year to find this an interesting, accessible and nourishing read.

Bill Miller is senior minister at Maidstone Baptist Church

HEAVEN

By Paula Gooder
SPCK, 2011, Price £7.99
ISBN 978-0-28106-234-8

Why did second century rabbis ban the reading of Ezekiel's vision of God's throne/chariot? What's the difference between angels, Metatron, seraphim and cherubim? What do the words the Bible uses to describe heaven really mean? These and other questions are answered in fascinating style with an impressive level of scholarship and reverence in Paula Gooder's wonderful overview of biblical teachings on heaven. What emerges is a broad range of traditions and beliefs, unified by a sense that the importance of heaven lies in its impact on life before death, either in our thinking or the 'thin places' we access through worship and prayer. From natural curiosity about "weird" material in the Bible" to serious theological and pastoral concerns, Gooder's *Heaven* supplies interesting answers and more interesting questions. Informative, accessible and entertaining.

Jonathan Langley is editor of Mission Catalyst

