

8. Is there an afterlife?

Unless in every conversation you've ever had, death's been treated as the ultimate taboo subject, you'll know as well as I do people's different opinions about what happens after we die. They range from those who hold to the view that says 'when you're dead you're dead'. El Finito. No wake-up call ever. Then there are those who think we come back here again in some shape of form depending on how well we did first time round. And then there are those who do believe we have some conscious experience somewhere else after death - even if their culture regards heaven as the happy hunting ground or whatever.

How can we know anything about an afterlife? While some draw support from the sense the ancients had of an afterlife; more recently some have cited the strange case of NDEs, in which heart attack victims have the sensation of either floating upwards or being pulled downwards. Whatever you make of these, we really need to be considering what Jesus said on this subject. Having thought through His claim to be the Son of God, what He has to say about life after death is all-important.

To a man being crucified next to Him, Jesus said 'you'll be with Me'. But He also spoke of the need for pre-registration - the need for our names to be written in heaven while we're still alive here. And by the way, the way the Bible describes the hereafter it's anything but eternal boredom!

But when Jesus said all these things He wasn't talking to just anybody, He was talking to people who were following Him. We can't assume it's for everybody. The Bible tells us this 'it is appointed for [men] us to die once, but after this the judgement.' In the rural communities where He taught Jesus likened the judgement that we must be faced after death to separating sheep from goats or separating wheat from chaff.

It wasn't because the sheep were better behaved than the goats that they were to be preferred, instead - it was a question of what they were by nature: they were sheep not goats. So it is with us. God doesn't look to see how many sins we've done or who's not done too many really bad ones, but whether or not we've been forgiven.

Have you ever been warned to take a waterproof, but you said 'Oh, I'll be all right'. And home you came soaked to the skin and dripping wet. Who could you blame but yourself? - you'd been warned. It sure wasn't the rain's fault you got wet. And neither can it be God's fault if our sin keeps us out of heaven one day. We've been warned. Jesus spoke a whole lot about the judgement our sins deserve. Just as we once rejected the waterproof and got wet; if we reject the (cover of) forgiveness available to us through Jesus' death, our sin will keep us out of heaven. Who will blame but ourselves? - for not having believed.

But what is faith or believing? It's not as one little boy put it: 'believing in something you know isn't true'. That's not at all what faith is. Nor is it like a placebo pill, true faith is something with a realistic foundation. We probably use the word in at least three different ways. There's the run-of-the-mill kind of faith, for example like you all employed as you sat down - you believed the chair would take your weight. But that's not Bible faith, nor are we thinking about the sort of faith that millions of people appear to have in the lottery - one of these times they just might win it - but it's more of a forlorn hope. What we're talking about is saving faith, like leaping into the arms of the fire-fighter to escape the burning building. That's the kind of faith that transforms your life.

Above all, it's what we place our faith in that matters. My friend Joanne's mum does parachute jumps for charity. Imagine she had a choice of which parachute to use: there are three to choose

from - one with blood stains all over it, labelled 'second hand, previous owner deceased'; another packed by a group of sweetly smiling Girl Guides who say they've done it in order to raise funds; or an expertly packed parachute being offered to you by your professional instructor. I think I know what you'd choose. I know I wouldn't swap a little bit of faith in the right equipment for a whole lorry-load of faith in the wrong equipment.

I think we should also say that faith involves action. I've read the illustration of someone whose hands and face were caked in mud and they were saying 'I believe in soap'. Ask what they mean and they explain: I believe soap is a good thing, much to be admired. I believe soap has made a great difference in world history. It has a lot to offer. I believe soap would get me clean if I were to use it. That's a silly example, perhaps. But I do know people who say: I believe in Christianity. I believe Jesus Christ was a good man, his teaching is really much to be admired. There's no question but that the influence of Christianity has shaped world history. It has a lot to offer people as a point of view. But that's not saving faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for you!

The best illustration I know of the type of action God's looking for is a Bible one. It comes from a story by Jesus in Luke's Gospel ch.15. The one in which a young man demands his inheritance money early and then goes away and blows it all. When he's reduced to feeding pigs, he realizes his need, decides to ask for forgiveness, turns from his past mess, and returns home to throw himself on father's mercy. He father receives him and he accepts the welcome, with the relationship restored. Those are the simple steps to putting saving faith into action: to realize our need because of sin which has broken our relationship with God; to decide to ask God for forgiveness; to turn from the mess of our past; to throw ourselves on God's mercy; to accept His welcome through Jesus back into a relationship with Him.

But lots of folks wonder if it can really be that simple. We know this world we live in. There's no such thing as a free lunch, we say. But, let me tell you, this is the way it's got to be. We must never think we could even so much as contribute to the cost of our forgiveness. Have you heard of the world's least successful kite-flyer? He was a Californian whose kite hit a high voltage power cable. It caught fire and came crashing down to earth where it started a fire that damaged 385 homes, 740 acres of brush, and caused 3,000 people to be evacuated. The bill? Twenty million dollars. Now what does your average guy do? Reach for his chequebook - no I don't think so; nor is it realistic to offer to come every weekend with your paintbrush and tools. Meeting that kind of debt is overwhelmingly beyond us. In terms of our spiritual bankruptcy, we're in the same kind of mess.