

24) OUR HOPE BEYOND, Part 2

In this chapter of Theology 101, we focus on the reality we must all face, namely death. Also, we will explore the concept of immortality and the biblical faith in resurrection. (We'll save heaven, hell and a last judgement for part 3).

1) Death. Death is something we all face as human beings. Death is also something we cannot escape as healthy and protected as we may be. And the fact that we cannot control when we die (even as we can choose to end our lives) exposes a core vulnerability in our humanity. As the philosopher Martin Heidegger among others has said: we are "beings unto death." Of course, this doesn't capture the height and depth of any human life - the possibilities, experiences, relationships and the love that bind us to others in life, death and beyond. And yet, there comes a time when we cease to exist in our embodied totality.

So, is death a flaw in creation, or is it an intentional part of God's creation? Is it a "judgement on sin" and what's been called "the fall"? Christian theology through the centuries has not been consistent in how it has read and interpreted the bible or what it has taught when it comes to death. The challenge is that the bible says many things, and when it comes to death and our hope beyond it speaks more imaginatively than literally.

While much of the bible sees death as a natural part of the human journey as God has created us (like the rest of nature), the apostle Paul, for one, sees death as also a symbol of our fallenness in need of redemption. "The sting of death is sin" as he says (1 Corinthians 15:56). Some theologians, especially in the first centuries, believed that should Adam and Eve not have fallen for the banned fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would have eaten of the other tree: the tree of life, and lived forever because forever was and is our human destiny as God has intended it. But now, because of our fall, we need to be redeemed in order to live in the beyond.

But what does the rest of the bible say? In the first part of our older testament (Hebrew Bible), there is no concept of an afterlife beyond death. Death is terminal and it is final. There is a shadowy existence called "Sheol" (the ancient Greeks have a version of this called "Hades"). It is no happy afterlife living like shadowy ghosts in Sheol.

But later in the history of the Hebrews, and as grave injustices and atrocities were experienced under the brutalities of colonial domination, the concept of an afterlife began to arise. There would be a time of judgement and justice for all the justice that never happened in this life. This also meant there would be some kind of resurrection. Some would find their eternal rest after their torment and suffering in this life, while others would experience judgement and the condemnation of hell for their contribution to the injustices in this life. More on all this to come in Part 3.

But for the purposes of our reflection here, it is important to note that a life after death began to be imagined, and rather than become a cause for people to escape the reality of their life here and now under suffering, faith in life beyond death empowered believers to trust a higher justice, vindication and comfort to come past life lived here and now. Faith in an afterlife gave people resilience, endurance, patience, but also empowerment to resist even to the death here and now, believing and hoping in a life beyond death and a justice beyond injustice suffered here and now.

So what about Jesus and the New Testament? Here, the life after and the concept of resurrection take on a whole new meaning.

2) What is resurrection? Before we discuss more specifically how Jesus reimagines resurrection, we need to understand what it is. Jesus didn't invent it. Most Jews in his time and place believed in a resurrection after death. But they believed there would be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of time (whenever that was) not in the middle of time. Even as those who die now may await the final resurrection of the dead, in the meantime they inhabit a temporary resting place called heaven. Heaven is a dimension of reality where God is. Heaven is a place of peace and rest, free from trouble and strife. Heaven was also imagined as a place of sleep, a long sleep to be ended when the resurrection happened (more on heaven in part 3).

So what about bodies? Did the spirit of a person separate from the body in the heavenly state given that bodies buried on earth decay? Or would bodies be reconstituted in some way at the resurrection of the dead to be reunited with their spirits even though bodies here face all kinds of cruelties? For Jews, the body mattered. Our identities have a bodily dimension to them. We are not just spirits. We know and recognize each other through our bodily forms, expressions and so forth. Full resurrection has to include the body in some way as much as the Spirit of a person. But in Jesus' time there was no deeper clarity or consensus on the details.

3) The resurrection according to Jesus and the New Testament. What Jesus introduces about the resurrection that is new, is the idea of resurrection happening beginning now, and his resurrection inaugurating a new age of the Spirit in anticipation of a fuller resurrection to come later. What does Jesus tell Martha in John 11? "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me, will never die" (25-26). This means that not only is death not terminal but now a transition into a new stage of living, but such a transition begins now, in this life. The apostle Paul refers to this more specifically as "the first fruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23), where even though our bodies here and now will decay and die, our spirits are already experiencing the resurrection in eternal communion with our risen Lord. Once we die physically, and while our bodies are being reconstituted for eternal life whether buried, cremated or whatever, we are joined to God in

the heavenly dimension to live in joyous and restful communion with others until the final resurrection of the dead whenever that time comes in the eternal future.

This is imaginative talk but it doesn't mean it isn't true or real. We live today, here and now, in our suffering and our joy, in eternal hope of what is to come beyond death, and we live such hope here and now anticipating what is to come whenever that time will be for each of us.

OK, but what happens in the beyond? We mentioned heaven already. What about "hell"? And what about a "last judgement"? And is resurrection something for everyone or only for those in the heavenly dimension? Part 3 will address such questions.