

A Certain Hope

**For those who are interested in the question of life
after death or want to prepare for death and what
lies beyond.**

by

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Life after life?

This booklet is for people of all ages from 9-99 who are interested in the question of life after death or want to prepare for death and what lies beyond.

Introduction

We prepare carefully for all the major experiences of life: the birth of a child, the education of a child, marriage, retirement, etc. We even make financial provision in connection with death: life insurance, writing a will. But we seldom prepare for death itself and what follows. Yet death is the most certain thing in life. It comes to all of us sooner or later.

Since death can come suddenly at any time of life, this booklet is not just for the elderly or the chronically sick.

Why do we not prepare ourselves for death itself? There seem to be various possible reasons:

We are simply too preoccupied with life to think about it.

We think death is the end and so doesn't need much thought.

We are afraid to think about death

We assume that we all go on beyond death but there is nothing we can do to prepare for it.

But these attitudes raise the following questions:

Is it wise to ignore something as important as death and beyond?

Can we be sure death is the end and does not require careful thought and preparation?

Is there a way of reaching a positive attitude to death and beyond?

Is it wise to make assumptions about something as important as what lies beyond death?

Is there life after this life?

Belief in life after death is taught by Christianity and all the world religions and almost 90% of the world's population belongs to one of those religions.[1] A more recent survey by Theos (the Christian think tank) discovered that 66% of Britons believe in life after death.[2] On a world scale 2 billion people claim to be Christian and so believe in the resurrection and millions more who are adherents of other religions believe in some form of life after death. So, in terms of statistics, a huge majority of the world's population believe in life after death. Why is that? It suggests that they are recognising a spiritual reality. There is something in the human psyche which does not accept that death is the end. There seems to be a deep awareness that human beings are such remarkable and dignified creatures that the idea we snuff out like candles with nothing beyond death is repellent.

[1] A survey in 2000 estimated that only 12.7% of the world's population are non-religious (US Center for World Mission).

[2] 44% believe that "your spirit lives on after death," with a further 9% believing in the physical resurrection and 13% believing in re-incarnation.

Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead (over 57% of Britons - 30 million people - believe this)[3] and I have written elsewhere that the evidence for this having happened is overwhelming (see the Appendix). This is the basis for the Christian hope of life after death. The New Testament teaches that it is not just our spirits that survive death, but when Jesus returns to earth in the Second Coming those who believe in him are 'clothed' in risen, indestructible bodies 'like his glorious body.'

But the New Testament also teaches that God the Son, the Holy Spirit and God the Father are one God, who is infinite and eternal. So the Trinity is the Source of life and is Life, hence all who place their trust in this God also have eternal life and can never die eternally.

How can I be sure of life after death?

The fundamental Christian teaching about God is that he is love. St John says: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love." (1 John 4:16). So to meet God is to meet someone who is infinitely, perfectly and eternally loving. Like anyone who loves wants their beloved to be with them, God wants us to come to him. In this life we come to him in worship and prayer. But how can we prepare to meet him face to face?

After all, God is also absolutely pure and holy. He is perfect, and failing human beings like us can no more come into his heaven as we are than darkness can dwell in the same place as light.

We may not have committed some serious crime. In fact we may be quite respectable. But the New Testament refers to things like anger, jealousy, envy, hatred, greed, slander, selfish ambition, sexual immorality and says "those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" or enter heaven. (Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). In fact "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So what hope is there for us? On the one hand, God in his love is beckoning us to come to him in this world and the next. On the other he is saying none of us is worthy to come into his presence.

There is hope because God, who is absolutely just and so must perfectly uphold his own law, decided he would himself satisfy the demands of his law that sin must be punished. He decided to suffer the punishment himself, in our place. Just imagine a situation where a thief broke into someone's home and stole many valuable things. The thief was caught, convicted by a judge and fined many thousands of pounds. Then imagine that the person whose house had been robbed, because he believed in forgiveness, paid the fine for the thief. That is an illustration of what God has done, except he paid the death penalty. God cannot die so he became man – Jesus – at the first Christmas in order to be able to bear humanity's death penalty on the cross on the first Good Friday. Jesus cried out on the cross: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" God-forsakenness is Hell. So Jesus suffered Hell for us. By rights we should go to Hell but God in his love has made it

[3] According to the Theos survey.

possible for us to escape that fate.

But God requires us to respond to his sacrifice. Forgiveness is not automatic – it requires a response of faith. And faith is a wholehearted response to God: mind, emotions and will. Someone said: “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for him.” In other words, it just isn’t possible to believe that Jesus died that terrible death on the cross for me and not to respond in wholehearted faith – giving myself over to him.

The most important preparation for death is to make this wholehearted response to Jesus. It is an essential preparation and it brings a sure and certain hope of eternal life.

Listen to what Jesus said: “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:24). “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” (John 11:25). “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:40). “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:28)

St John wrote: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16). “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36). “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:11-12). “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” (1 John 5:24).

St John goes on to show that *we can be certain we have eternal life (ultimately in heaven) through faith in Jesus*. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13). So eternal life starts now and continues beyond the grave for ever.

Similarly St Paul makes it clear that *eternal life is a gift given to those who trust in Jesus*. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23).

Jesus made it clear that what is needed is a child-like (not childish) faith in him. “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15).

So the best preparation for death and beyond is to put your faith and trust in Jesus, to receive him into your life, and with him the gift of eternal life.

A Prayer

Dear Father, thank you for your love. Thank you that Jesus died in agony for my sin. I turn away from all that displeases you in thought, word and deed. I put my faith in you, Jesus, and ask you to enter my life, to take it over and to give me the gift of eternal life. Help me to live for you. Amen.

[One other thing: in addition to asking for God's forgiveness, it is an important preparation for death to ask, where possible, for forgiveness from people you have hurt or wronged, or to express forgiveness to those who have hurt or wronged you].

How can I prepare for death and what follows?

1. Recognise that Jesus is with you now and always

This will help you to face up to death without fear. In human terms death is a profoundly lonely experience. No-one can go through death with you. Whether relatives and friends are with you when you die, even if you are aware of their presence, you leave them behind as you embark on the journey of death.

But Jesus can go with you through death. He experienced death and conquered it through his resurrection. He is able – and willing – to accompany you through the transition from this world to eternity. I have often pictured that, for a believer in Jesus, dying is like falling asleep on a dark and stormy night then waking up on a glorious morning to see a majestic figure in front of you, welcoming you – Jesus.

The presence of Jesus in all his love and resurrection power before, during and after death is the ultimate antidote to fear of death. For the believer death is a partnership – an unbroken, eternal partnership.

The divine promise is: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus is God in the flesh. He has infinite divine power. There is nothing to fear in death if he is taking you through it.

A Prayer

Lord Jesus, I recognise that you are with me now, and as I trust you, you always will be with me, even through death. Please strengthen my faith. Draw near to me and help me sense your presence. Amen.

2. Accept that you are going to die sooner or later

Against the background of Jesus being with you before during and after death, if you trust in him, it is now easier to face up to the sure fact of your own death.

Your death may be totally unexpected and you may have no awareness of what is happening until after you have died. But if you are spiritually prepared by trusting in Jesus there is nothing to fear.

You may however be aware of your approaching death and this is where you need to remember, as you trust in him:

Jesus is with you to strengthen and comfort you.

Jesus will be with you through death.

Jesus will be ready to welcome you on the other side of death into eternity.

Jesus will be with your family and friends to comfort them and care for them in their grief.

The New Testament says that Jesus “shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

A Prayer

Lord Jesus, I recognise that, sooner or later, I am going to die. You conquered death when you rose again. Help me to face up to death now and later without fear but with the peace that comes from trusting you. Amen.

3. Think about heaven

Although we need to face up to death and remember that we are going to die sooner or later, we need to dwell not on death but on eternal life and heaven. Eternal life begins now. Jesus said “this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John 17:3).

However eternal life goes on beyond death into heaven. Death has been conquered by Jesus’ death and resurrection. St Paul writes: ““Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). Jesus “has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Timothy 1:10). “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

But what is heaven like? We don’t know the details but here are some things we do know, although they may be difficult to imagine fully.

The Bible speaks of God creating a new heavens and a new earth with all the imperfections of the old one removed. It pictures heaven coming down to earth. So I believe heaven will be on a transformed earth, within the universe. But it will be a world without wrongdoing, violence, division, poverty, injustice and hatred. It will be a world without suffering, pain and death. It will be an unspoiled world in all its God-intended beauty: a world of peace, unity and positive relationships. “[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Rev 21:4).

Christians believe in the resurrection of the body, not just the immortality of the soul. It seems to me that this will mean God creating a new body for us, but somehow it will be related to the body we had in this present world. We shall be recognisable. But all the results of human sin: disease, pain, ageing will be absent.

We can get some idea of what our new bodies will be like by reading about Jesus' body after he was raised from the dead. His disciples could touch his hands and they were just as real and substantial as they were before his death. He could make breakfast for his disciples and eat it with them. He was no ghost! However, he could appear and disappear at will at whatever location he chose. And he could move through solid objects. I believe our new bodies will be like that and have the same powers, which, by the way, could afford protection from any natural turmoil such as earthquakes, floods etc, if they still happen. The stuff of science fiction? No, I believe this is real. Maybe the very existence of positive science fiction is an indication that deep down we humans have a yearning for eternity and for heaven. The Bible says that God has "set eternity in the human heart."

The New Testament also teaches that all the "riches of the nations" will be present in heaven. I think this includes all the art, music and culture and good human achievements which will be present to enrich life in heaven. I also don't think that the fulfilment of being in heaven (what the Bible calls eternal life) means that we shall be without positive challenges and sit around in perennial boredom! I think there will be exciting and satisfying things to achieve.

More wonderful than all this is that we shall see Jesus and be able to communicate directly with him. We shall live in the glory of God. It is difficult to imagine what this means although the Bible describes it poetically as a wonderful light which replaces sunlight.

I have kept using the future tense because this is something which will happen in the future. But where are our loved ones who have died trusting in Christ? As far as we can understand from the New Testament, they are currently in a peaceful disembodied state in the visible presence of Christ, awaiting the resurrection of the body.

A Prayer

Dear Father, your Word says no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what you have prepared for those who love you. Thank you for the joyful prospect of heaven. Help me always to see beyond this life, its preoccupations, its problems, its suffering and death to what you have prepared for all who trust in Jesus. Help me to live this life to the full in the light of the glory of heaven, in Jesus' name. Amen.

How can I overcome fear of dying

Many Christians who believe in life after death still have fears about the process of dying. With modern medicine, most pain can be controlled. It is legitimate to pray that if one is terminally ill the process will not be too drawn out. But we all need our faith strengthened in dark times, so I suggest reading (or asking someone to read to you) an encouraging verse or short passage from the Bible to comfort you. Here are some suggestions. These will help you build up your faith as does the knowledge that you are not on your own but God sends the Holy Spirit to comfort you.

Readings

Reading relevant passages from the Bible and quietly praying about what they say is an excellent way of inspiring trust, peace and hope. Here are some passages and prayers. They are divided into seven sections and could be used as readings for each day of the week, if you wish:

1. BELIEVERS HAVE ETERNAL LIFE THROUGH JESUS

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." (*John 3:13-18, 36*)

Jesus said: I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. (*John 5:24-29*)

Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." (*John 8:51*) "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (*John 11:25-26*). St Paul adds: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans 6:23*).

A PRAYER

Dear Father, I thank you that Jesus died and rose again so that he could give me the free gift of eternal life. I believe that eternal life is in Jesus so I receive him (have received him) into my life. Now I know I have eternal life already and when death comes I shall enter into a much more glorious experience of it. Strengthen my faith, in Jesus name. Amen.

2. JESUS HAS OVERCOME DEATH FOR BELIEVERS

Jesus said: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." (*Revelation 1:18*)

Peter said to the crowd: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." (*Acts 2:23-24*)

Paul writes "We know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God." (*Romans 6:9-10*). He refers to: "our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (*2 Timothy 1:10*)

A PRAYER

Dear Father, I thank you that Jesus conquered death and controls it. It did not overcome him. He is Lord. Thank you that Jesus has conquered my death so that death will not be able to keep me. Instead it will be a transition to the glory of eternal life. Help me to look beyond death as I trust in him. Amen.

3. NOTHING CAN EVER SEPARATE BELIEVERS FROM CHRIST

Jesus declared, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (*John 6:37-40*)

Paul writes: "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (*Romans 14:8*) "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans 8:38*). "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." (*1 Thessalonians 5:10*).

Paul describes what will happen to those believers who have died when Jesus returns: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud

command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” (1 Thessalonians 4:14-16)

A PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you that Jesus has promised to keep me as a believer until he raises me up on the last day. Thank you that nothing in heaven or on earth, in the past or the future can separate me from him. Help me to remember this and to believe it always. Amen.

4. RESURRECTION IS CERTAIN

Paul asks: “How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:12-26)

He continues: “The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15: 52-57)

Peter writes that this prospect of resurrection is sure and certain: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” (1 Peter 1:3-6)

A PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you that the resurrection of Jesus proves that those who die trusting in Christ will be raised from the dead. Thank you that I shall be imperishable and immortal. Thank you for the glorious victory of Jesus over death. Amen.

5. BELIEVERS ARE DESTINED FOR HEAVEN

Paul contrasts the suffering in this life with our heavenly reward, which includes a new resurrection body: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” (*Romans 8:18-25*)

He adds: “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.” (*1 Cor 15:42-44, 51-52*)

He writes elsewhere: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (*2 Cor 4:16-18*)

John had a vision of heaven as a great city “the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” Its twelve gates “were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.” (*Revelation 21:10-11, 21-23*)

He continues: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear

from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Rev 21:3-4)

Paul writes that every faithful believer will receive a crown of righteousness: “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Tim 4:8)

A PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you for the prospect of a new resurrection body not subject to pain, disability and ageing. Thank you also for the glorious prospect of living in the beauty of heaven for ever, and of enjoying a renewed and perfect universe. In times of difficulty help me to remember “eternal glory that far outweighs” all pain, distress and fear, in Jesus name. Amen.

6. BELIEVERS CAN OVERCOME FEAR OF DYING

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus died and rose again to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Paul urges us to set our minds not on death as an end in itself but to “set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Col 3:1-4)

Jesus taught that we should live in the light of heaven and think more of our reward there than of earthly riches. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt 6:19-21)

A PRAYER

Dear Father, help me to overcome any fear of death by setting my heart on heaven where Jesus is in his risen glory. Help me to think about heaven regularly every day and to anticipate the joys which await me there, in Jesus name. Amen.

7. JESUS HELPS AND PROTECTS US ALWAYS

I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip— he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121)

Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (*Matt 11:28*)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (*Heb 4:14-16*)

A PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you that Jesus is with me always, keeping a constant vigil over me, morning noon and night, understanding and protecting me. Thank you that he will always be with me, even when I die, and that he will welcome me on the other side of death. Help me to trust in him and rest in his peace. Amen.

Appendix: Jesus rose from the dead

People have tried to explain the resurrection of Jesus away as a myth or even a con. Some have claimed that the stories of Jesus’ resurrection are copied from pagan stories. But if you read these pagan stories you see that they are fundamentally different from the story of Jesus’ resurrection. They were not about real historical individuals but were symbols of the crop cycle (the “death” of winter and the “resurrection” of spring). They were not one-off events but repeated constantly each year, linked with secretive rituals. Some have questioned whether the tomb was really empty on the third day after Jesus’ crucifixion. But if it hadn’t been, the Jewish leadership and the Roman military would soon have displayed his dead body to disprove the Christian claims which were a major problem to them both.

Instead the Jewish leadership put around the story that the disciples had stolen the body, which indicates they knew the tomb was empty. By the way, this story is incredible. Firstly, Jesus’ disciples were clearly honest, sensible people who were highly unlikely to have been dishonest enough to make up such a story. Secondly, are we really to believe that they would be willing to be tortured and suffer terrible deaths for a story they knew to be untrue? The disciples said they saw the risen Jesus, but could they have been hallucinating? The problem with this idea is that hallucinations arise from preconceived ideas already present in the mind. But, first century Jews didn’t expect individual resurrection and the disciples didn’t expect Jesus to rise. In fact, to begin with, they refused to accept reports that he had risen from the dead. Also it is highly unlikely that 500 people would all hallucinate at the same time. In any case, hallucination doesn’t account for the empty tomb.

But, if the disciples didn't steal the body, could someone else have done so? Some people say the Jewish leadership or the Romans stole the body. But, as I've already said, they wanted to destroy Christianity and would therefore have displayed Jesus' dead body.

Another theory is that Joseph of Arimathea (who got permission to bury Jesus) stole the body. But Joseph was a respected member of the Jewish ruling council who had everything to lose by following Jesus. He wouldn't do that for a lie. And, as a follower of Jesus, he wouldn't have allowed his fellow-Christians to die terrible deaths for what he knew was a lie.

But did some unknown person steal the body? The question is, why would someone do that? As we have seen, a follower of Jesus wouldn't have done so, nor would a loyal Jewish person or Roman. Besides, the tomb had a military guard on it to prevent anyone stealing the body!

Another suggestion is that the disciples went to the wrong tomb by mistake! What, all of them?! The Jewish authorities certainly knew which tomb it was: they set a guard on it.

Another theory is that Jesus wasn't really dead and he revived in the tomb and stole away. This theory requires us to believe that though Jesus was flogged within an inch of his life (many died under such flogging), was nailed to the cross for six hours losing blood, was speared by an experienced Roman soldier yet he survived! Not only that, he was totally bound in tight grave clothes from neck to foot. The tomb was sealed by a stone which took more than one man to move and guarded by soldiers yet he got away! It also requires us to believe that his disciples lied or believed this half-dead man was conqueror of death, the prince of life and that they were totally transformed by this belief, even being willing to suffer and die for it.

These theories are all incredible and when you think of the impact Jesus has had on the world for 2000 years (with 2 billion people currently believing in him) there is only one credible conclusion: Jesus rose from the dead, after dying a terrible death for your sins and mine. Will you respond to him in penitence, trust and love and share in his eternal life?

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Tony Higton has been an Anglican Minister in Newark, Cheltenham, Essex, Jerusalem and now near King's Lynn. He and his wife produced church development strategies and resources, and have spoken at conferences around the world.

For 14 years Tony stood for biblical doctrine and morality in the General Synod and frequently witnessed on TV, radio and in the press. He has also written several books.

Later he became General Director of the Church's Ministry amongst Jewish People (CMJ), and also Rector of Christ Church, Jerusalem. In addition to evangelism, he emphasised reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. His email newsletter (tony@higton.info) informs Christians to pray about the Holy Land, taking the need, pain and fears of both sides seriously.