

# **"WHEN YOU'RE DEAD YOU'RE DEAD! THERE IS NO MORE!"**

By Mike Burnham

Death runs counter to the vibrant flow of life. When we encounter it, we shrink from it in horror. We use our finest cosmetics to disguise its impact. When death strikes it always leaves the question, "Is this the end?" Is there absolutely nothing more to hope for?

Perhaps the most ancient question of all is the question, "Is there life after death?" we think of Job in his misery crying out, "When a man dies, will he live again?" (Job 14:14). Hamlet, musing over the question of suicide, "To be, or not to be?" he contemplates the mystery of the grave and weighs the burdens of the alternatives of life and death. He retreats from suicide asking if man would "rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of? From Job to Hamlet to the present day the question persists, "Is there life after death?"

A sense of despair and hopelessness characterizes much of our culture. The issue is not simply a religious question. It is the issue of the meaning of all of life. If death is ultimate, then life becomes a cruel and mocking joke. Eccl. 1:2,3

From ancient times the keenest minds of mankind have sought intellectual evidence for the survival of the soul or spirit beyond the grave.

## **"Does nature teach that there is life after death?"**

Plato explored the question primarily from analogies found in nature. He detected a kind of cycle that was common to nature. He noted that spring follows winter which in turn moves always toward another winter. Winter does not terminate in itself but yields again to spring. The cycle goes on as day follows night.

He examined the drama of the germination of the seed into flowering life. For the seed to bring forth its life it must first go through a process of rotting. The shell of the seed must decay and die before the life that is locked within it can emerge. He saw here an analogy to life and death. Just as a seed must die and disintegrate before the flower emerges, so the human body must die before the life of the soul can come forth.

He then looked beyond the realm of flowers to the animal kingdom. The beauty of the butterfly begins in the grotesque form of the caterpillar. The caterpillar appears as a worm, bound to earth, virtually immobile and unattractive. The worm forms for itself an insulated cocoon, withdrawing from the outside world. The cocoon remains dormant and inert for a season. In time the drama mounts as a new creature begins to scratch and stretch its way out of the cocoon. Wings and a body begin to appear and suddenly the woven prison yields a magnificent soaring creature of multicolored beauty. From the "death" of the caterpillar comes the new life of the butterfly!

Plato understood that they were but analogies that provide hope in the face of mystery. He was aware that butterflies do not live forever. But he wanted man to move with caution in the face of his skepticism.

### **"Must we live as if there is a god?"**

In later times, the late 1700's, another philosopher approached the question from a different perspective. Immanuel Kant, though skeptical about man's ability to prove immortality by reason alone, offered an ingenious argument for life after death. His argument offers practical "evidence" for the existence of God and for life after death.

Kant observed that all people seem to have some concern for ethics. Though morality differs from person to person and society to society, all people wrestle with questions of right and wrong. All human beings have some sense of moral duty. Kant asked, "What would be necessary for this human sense of duty to make sense?" Are our moral senses merely the by-product of parental discipline or the imposition of society's standards? Rom. 2:14. Kant thought it went deeper than that. He noticed that we have such a sense of duty and asked what would make it

meaningful? Kant answered his own question by saying that ultimately for ethics to be meaningful there must be justice. From a practical perspective he asked, "Why be ethical if justice does not prevail?"

But he noticed, at the same time that justice does not always prevail in this world. He observed, that the righteous do suffer and the wicked do often prosper in this life. His practical reasoning continued by arguing that since justice does not prevail here in this world there must be a place where it does prevail. For justice to exist ultimately there must be several factors accounted for.

"We must survive the grave"...for there to be justice, there must be people to receive it. Since we do not receive it in this world, we must survive the grave. Justice demands life beyond death, if ethics are to be practical.

"There must be a judge"...justice requires judgment and judgment requires a judge. But what must the judge be like to ensure that his judgment is just? Kant answered that the judge himself must be just. If the judge is unjust then he would be prone to pervert justice rather than establish it. The judge must be utterly and completely just to insure ultimate justice. But even just judges are capable of perpetrating injustice if they make a mistake. Honest judges have convicted innocent people who were framed or surrounded by an overwhelming amount of circumstantial evidence. Our just judge must be incapable of such mistakes. To render perfect justice, he must have a perfect knowledge of all the facts and mitigating circumstances. A perfect judge must be nothing less than omniscient.

"There must be judgment"...a perfectly just and omniscient judge is necessary for justice but is not enough to insure it. Once the perfect judge offers his perfect verdict, the sentence must be carried out. If proper rewards and punishments are to be meted out, the judge must have the authority and the power to carry them out. If our just and omniscient judge is impotent, then we have no guarantee of justice. Perhaps an evil power would prevent the judge from carrying out justice. Thus, the judge would have to have perfect power of omnipotence.

Thus, for Kant, practical ethics require life after death and a judge whose description sounds very much like that of the God of Christianity. Kant recognized

that his arguments were of a practical nature. He did not think that he had provided an airtight case for the existence of God or for life after death. But he did reduce the practical options for man to two. He said we have either theism with life after death or we have no meaningful basis ultimately for our ethical decisions and actions. Without ethics life is chaos and ultimately impossible. Without God ethics are meaningless. Thus Kant's conclusion was: "We must live as though there were a God."

### **"What if life is meaningless?"**

Kant's practical optimism was not universally welcomed. Maybe there is no justice. Why should we live as though there is a God if in fact there is no God? These are the penetrating questions of modern man. All attempts to maintain faith in God and faith in life after death may be only exercises of wishful thinking for those not courageous enough to face the grim facts.

America listened to playwrights like Ingmar Bergman and his film "the seventh seal" and poets like Edgar Allen Poe and his poem "The Raven" as they flooded the nation with cries of despair. This film and this poem both end in despair. No hope is given for the future.

The interest in the occult, the new age movement, and recollections of people brought back from clinical death are protests of modern man to the prophets of despair. They have given new hope that tangible evidence of survival may be available to science.

### **"What is the biblical case for life after death?"**

The strongest case for life after death comes to us from the New Testament...Christ was resurrected from the dead. Paul summarizes the evidence for the resurrection of Christ in his first letter to the Corinthians. His epistle comes partly in response to skepticism that arises in the Corinthian church. Notice how he deals with it.

1Co. 15:12,13. The logic of this is almost humorously simple. If Christ is raised, then obviously there is such a thing as resurrection from the dead.

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On the other hand, if there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ cannot be raised. The question of Christ's resurrection is crucial to the entire issue of life after death. The apostle follows with an interesting line of reasoning. He considers the alternatives to the resurrection of Christ. He uses the "if-then" formula of logical progression...1 Cor. 15:14.

Paul gets to the heart of the matter quickly. If Christ is not raised then it is clear that the preaching of the early church is an exercise in futility. The preaching becomes empty words and the faith that follows is worthless...1 Cor. 15:15-18

The implications of the Corinthians' skepticism continue. If Christ is not raised then the apostolic witness is a false one. God has been implicated in a false claim. Again Paul mentions the futility of faith and adds to it the serious result that man is still without a redeemer. Then, almost as an afterthought, Paul touches the emotional nerve of his readers by reminding them of the fate of their departed loved ones. They have perished. Without resurrection, death is final.

Paul continues his discourse by saying, 1 Cor. 15:19. Paul concludes his exercise in "what if" thinking by saying...1 Cor. 15:32. No resurrection? Then we may as well sleep in tomorrow. Eat, drink, be merry while you can before it's too late.

There is a similarity between the way Paul approaches life after death and the approach of Kant. Both are aware of the alternatives to life after death. However, Paul does not leave us where Kant does. Kant reduces the options to two and then encourages us to choose the more optimistic one. Paul examines the alternatives to resurrection but does not build his case on these alternatives. Instead he says...1 Cor. 15:3-8.

Paul moves beyond speculation, beyond analogies, beyond philosophy. He

offers two kinds of evidence. First, he appeals to the prophetic predictions of the Old Testament scripture that are fulfilled with uncanny accuracy in the person of Christ. Secondly, he offers the testimony of numerous eyewitnesses to the event. Christ does not appear on one occasion to a secret audience but reveals himself on several different occasions.

Paul's final appeal is that he beheld the risen Christ with his own eyes. As John remarks in 1 John 1:1-3, "We declare to you what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears"

Paul then rehearses the history of his personal life following his sight of the risen Christ. He speaks of his trials, his imprisonments, his labors, all of which give credence to the impact his visual experience of the resurrected Jesus had on him.

**"The best argument for life after death is the record of history"**

The act of resurrection is as well attested to as any event from antiquity. Jesus himself predicted it and spoke in an authoritative way concerning our own future life...John 14:2 "if it were not so" Jesus is saying that had his disciples believed in an empty hope for the future, Jesus would not hesitate to correct it.

Paul summarizes the implications of Christ's resurrection in 1 Cor. 15:51-56.

The triumphant summary ends with a sober conclusion: 1 Cor. 15:58 your labor is not in vain. That is the essence of the New Testament message. Death is not ultimate. The answer to the raven is "nevermore." the answer of Christ is "forevermore."