

10

MISTAKES

People Make About

HEAVEN

HELL AND THE AFTERLIFE

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10 Mistakes People Make About Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife

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What Lies Beyond the Grave?

It didn't require a thoughtful theologian to famously observe that "the statistics on death are quite impressive; one out of one people die."¹ Sadly, this is the inescapable and universal human problem. Everyone knows it. Everyone at some point feels the weight of it. And most of us, if we are honest, would love to do something to avoid its encroaching reality.

Speaking of nontheologians, it was Woody Allen, the wry comedian, who said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying."² But of course the odds are clearly not in his favor. He must face the prospect of his own mortality, as did his parents and grandparents, and every other generation that has ever come before him.

The dread of leaving the familiarity of this life for thought of what lies beyond led Shakespeare to pen the famous words of Hamlet's pensive soliloquy:

To be or not to be: that is the question. . . . To die; to sleep;
To sleep? perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub; For
in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we
have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause.³

To say death gives the average person “pause” is to put it lightly—*panic* might be a better word. It is fair to say that people are generally fearful when forced to consider their own passing. The Bible goes so far as to say that death is the “king of terrors” (Job 18:14), to which the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon commented, “. . .and the terror of kings!”—which aptly reminds us that no matter who you might be, death makes no exceptions for the rich and famous.

Christianity, however, claims to have the answer to this worldwide problem. The message of Jesus, with the empty tomb as its centerpiece, is presented to a dying world. You may be tempted to think that the cross of Christ is the focal point of Christian preaching, but were you to examine the biblical record of that first generation of New Testament evangelists, you would find more time spent emphasizing Christ’s resurrection from the dead, over and above any other feature of Jesus’s ministry. That is not to take anything away from the profound importance of Jesus’s death on the cross. Were Christ not to have suffered and died to absorb the penalty of our sinful deeds, the Bible tells us, there would be no hope for fallen people to have acceptance before God. On the other hand, to quote God’s word directly: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

There would be no assurance, confidence, or reason to trust in the fact that Jesus’s substitution for us was adequate or acceptable were it not for a verifiable victory over the grave. In other words, if the wages of sin is death (both relationally and biologically), as the Bible says, and if Jesus came to once-and-for-all deal with that sin problem by his substitutionary death, then we would rightly expect a confirmation that the death problem has been overcome as well.

You can sense the apostle Paul’s elation and relief when he says that the first coming of Christ has in effect “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). The writer of Hebrews rejoices that the divine Jesus took on the fullness of human nature so that he might “deliver all those

who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:15). For the Christian, all the sweeping effects of death—the pain, the loss, the separation—have been transformed from permanent calamities to temporary inconveniences.

This perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:53-57).

A SEA OF OPINION

Given the universality of the problem of death, it shouldn't surprise us that there are a variety of solutions suggested by the vast number of people longing for a remedy. Christianity lays out a logical and systematic explanation for why death exists in the first place, the manner in which God repeatedly promised to rescue us from this predicament, what exactly God did to accomplish the fix through the coming of Jesus, and how we are to go about appropriating the benefits of Christ's work. All of this is derived from data found in the Bible. And for millions of people through the centuries, this was the first place they would think to go to learn of answers to questions regarding life and death, and heaven and hell. But times are changing.

In the secularized culture of today's Western nations, the Bible is increasingly neglected as a source of truth. The problem of death remains, the quest for answers is largely unabated, but the Bible as a book that has serious answers is being cast aside. Because biblical Christianity is the only source that provides a verifiable solution

to the problem of death, its information about the afterlife should be trusted. But instead, the masses of dying men and women seek insight in the philosophies and theories found in various religions, gurus, mediums, and psychics. Or perhaps in your neighborhood, workplace, or social circle your friends look to pop culture, Hollywood movies, talk shows, or hip celebrities to inform them about what lies beyond.

Either way, we can be sure that when the authoritative data found in the Bible is cast aside, the deciding factor of what is considered true ends up being everyone's own sense of what "seems right to them." If a movie script or a best-selling book resonates with one's intuition, then it is embraced as "the way things are." "This is what I believe about the afterlife" usually means "I feel like this is the way things ought to be." If we are to know with certainty what lies beyond this life, we must look to the information provided by the One who made us, initially mandated the problem in response to human rebellion, and then lovingly and graciously provided us with a way out.

GOD HAS SPOKEN

The Bible does not claim to be a book of people's best thoughts about God. Rather, it asserts that it is a precise record of God's thoughts to people. The reason we can profitably gain truth from its teaching, have our lives authoritatively corrected and redirected by its sentences, and be trained by its information to think and live as we ought, is because it claims to be God's own words.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Just as words are breathed out from a person's mouth when he speaks them, the written sentences given through the human

authors of the Bible are declared to be God's very words. The Old English word translated "breathed out" was *inspired*, which came from the Latin word *inspiro*, meaning to "breathe out." Some English translations of the Bible still translate this verse from the original Greek language with the phrase "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (KJV, NKJV) or "All Scripture is inspired by God" (NASB, NLT, RSV). Many books written about the uniqueness of the Bible regularly utilize the phrase the "the doctrine of inspiration" to describe the fact that the Bible's data is information given to us from God.

These days, unfortunately, using the word *inspiration* in this way creates a problem. In modern English, we are accustomed to employing the word *inspiration* when we are stirred by a feeling or emotion to do something—often something creative. We might speak of what inspired an artist to paint a picture. Or what an amazing "stroke of inspiration" a musician had to write that song. Or maybe even something as mundane as "feeling inspired" to get up and clean the garage on Saturday. Because we so frequently use the word *inspiration* this way, most people think the Bible is *inspired* in the way a great novel is inspired. They would assume that what we mean is that the authors were "inspired" to write it. Or that like a thought-provoking painting, a moving book, or a rousing song, "it is inspiring"—as in the Bible "inspires" the person who reads it.

Those things may be true, but the claim of 2 Timothy 3:16 is that the written biblical information is as though God himself "breathed the sentences out," as someone breathes out words when speaking them to someone else. In other words, we can count on the teaching of the Bible to be profitable to accurately inform, correct, and direct our thinking on any matter it addresses because it is God's "breathed out" information. Yes, there were human authors who served as messengers of these words, but the claim is that they were conduits of God's information. That is why they are called *prophets*. The word, in the Old Testament, simply means "a mouthpiece." The picture is one of God picking up a human megaphone and speaking

to the people of the world through the prophet. It is the triune God speaking by the agency of the biblical author.

In the following verses, notice the pattern of understanding the words of God's Spirit *through* the written words of the biblical authors like David or Isaiah:

...the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David (Acts 1:16).

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: "Go to this people, and say..." (Acts 28:25-26).

While the God-breathed writings of David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Moses bear the stylistic distinctions of the human authors, the claim is that God recorded precisely what he wanted to say through these prophets in a way that preserved *his* unvarnished truth. The Holy Spirit's work over these human authors leaves us with a true and accurate written product of God's disclosed thoughts and instructions to mankind. This is much the same as when the Bible claims God's Spirit overshadowed Mary, the human mother of Jesus, so that God could bring the *living Word* into the world—arriving with the human characteristics of Mary, yet without any fallen traits or sinful deficiencies. So too the written word comes to us bearing the characteristics of the human authors, yet without deceptive data or flawed information.⁴

This claim extends beyond the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the apostles made the same assertion regarding the work of God's Spirit through them in order to declare God's truth about the work of Christ and all of its implications exactly in the way that God wanted.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand

the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

Peter equated God's message-giving work through the New Testament apostles to the same work of God's Spirit through the Old Testament prophets (2 Peter 3:2). He went on to warn that disregarding God's messages through apostles like Paul is as perilous as disregarding the information from God given through the Old Testament prophets (verse 16).

Any book can claim to be a record of God's words. Any person can claim to be a prophet of God or an apostle of Christ. For that matter, anyone can claim to be God. Obviously, anyone can claim anything. But the Bible has stood out through the centuries as unique because it bears the expected characteristics that God is its author. Romans chapter 1, for instance, tells us we should heed the information in the Bible and obey its message because it is punctuated by data that only God could provide—namely, a detailed set of predictive statements that came true.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh (Romans 1:1-3).

God “promised beforehand” a number of specific details “through his prophets in the holy Scripture” that came true just as they were recorded. This introduction doesn't afford us the space or opportunity to look at a list of these, but if you have never researched the predictive prophecies concerning Jesus's arrival, the fate of nations, or the forecasted chronology of various events, be sure to pick up a book that chronicles some of these promises and their fulfillments.⁵

Just to give a sample of the kind of specificity some of these prophecies contain, consider Micah 5:2, wherein after many specific revelations regarding the details of the first coming of Christ, God's Spirit—through the agency of the prophet Micah—tells us that the everlasting Ruler of Israel was to be born in the little dusty town of Bethlehem. By itself, a promise 400 years before its fulfillment, concerning a birthplace that was statistically unlikely, may not seem overly convincing. But when you add to this the stack of other biblical prophecies that are verifiably settled centuries before they took place, you are eventually forced to concede that only the infinite and eternal God could be “declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done” (Isaiah 46:9-10). In the words of Wilbur Smith, the Bible

is the only volume ever produced by man, or a group of men, in which is to be found a large body of prophecies relating to individual nations, to Israel, to all the peoples of the earth, to certain cities, and to the coming of One who was to be the Messiah. The ancient world had many different devices for determining the future, known as divination, but not in the entire gamut of Greek and Latin literature, even though they use the words prophet and prophecy, can we find any real specific prophecy of a great historic event to come in the distant future, nor any prophecy of a Savior to arise in the human race.⁶

After pointing out that the data in God's book should arrest our attention and be trusted to inform and direct our lives, Romans 1:4 points us to the verification found in Jesus's resurrection from the dead. Especially as it concerns the knowledge we are seeking about heaven, hell, and the afterlife, we should take note of the fact that the information in the Bible regarding the afterlife comes with the endorsement of an extraordinary life-after-death event. This foretold centerpiece of Christian teaching is one that is hard to believe

because it defies natural law, but it is also hard to dismiss because of the manner in which it took place.

Here was a biological resurrection of the One who claimed to be here to defeat the problem of sin and death. The Old Testament had previously spoken of him living after he was slain (Isaiah 53:10-12). Jesus is recorded as speaking repeatedly about being killed and coming back to life (Matthew 16:21; 20:17-19; John 10:18). His death was a very public execution, carried out by professionals (Acts 26:22-26). His resurrection was openly attested by physical postmortem interactions with many—often many at one time (Luke 24:36-43; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7). Subsequent reports from those who testified to being eyewitnesses of a bodily resurrected Jesus refused to recant their testimony under pressure, and most ended up being executed as well.⁷ Were the bodily resurrection of Christ a fabricated lie by his disciples, not only does their key assertion regarding Christianity contradict their Teacher's and their own repeated ethic for righteousness and honesty (Acts 5:3; 2 Peter 1:16), but it would seem next to impossible not to see a defector reveal the cover-up. Just as the former counsel to President Nixon during the 1972 Watergate scandal, Chuck Colson, contended about what happens when loyal conspirators are put under pressure:

Watergate involved a conspiracy to cover up, perpetuated by the closest aides to the President of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, "to save his own skin"—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The real cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all that those around the

President were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake.⁸

ACCEPTING GOD'S TRUTH

All of that to say, if we are looking for trustworthy information about heaven, hell, and the afterlife, we can go to the Bible to find it. Any idea, proposal, theory, or intuitive thought can and should be weighed against the God-breathed information laid out for us in its pages. If Scripture addresses a topic clearly, the case is settled. If a suggestion about the afterlife doesn't square with the principles found in God's Word, then it has to be rejected. If the Bible doesn't give us any clue about a matter related to what lies beyond this life, then we are left to speculate, which is rarely worth our guesswork.

The Bible may not tell us everything our curious minds want to know about what lies beyond the grave, but it has given us plenty of data to dispel a ton of popular misconceptions, to keep us from believing misleading myths, and to assure our hearts when the appointment with our Maker arrives. So let us be thoughtful and discerning students of the Bible, faithful to cherish, guard, and pass on our biblical discoveries so that in the end it might be proven that in this life we were rightly informed and well prepared for the next one.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever (Deuteronomy 29:29).