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Does The Christian View Of Death Need Reviving?

MELVIN TINKER

Introduction

Although it may be something of an exaggeration to say that whereas for our Victorian forefathers sex was the taboo subject in polite company, today it is death, this is a saying which nonetheless contains more than a grain of truth. Twentieth century Western man finds death a difficult subject to handle. Accordingly, there are three broad approaches commonly adopted in dealing with death. First, death, is romanticized. One not only sees this with blockbuster films like 'Ghost', but with the increased popularization of the belief in reincarnation. Secondly, death is trivialized as being of no consequence: 'when you're dead, you're dead' the saying goes—or as Bertrand Russell put it—'When I die I rot'. If one can accept the philosophical conundrum posed, death is simply part of life. Thirdly, death is dramatised. This is particularly seen in the works of the French existentialists like Camus and Sartre. Here, death is seen as the ultimate absurdity in a world of absurdities, and either one capitulates to a meaningless existence in the face of death or one creates some sort of significance for one's life in defiance of death. For many people the prevalent attitude towards death is best expressed by that oft-quoted saying of Woody Allen: 'It's not that I am afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.' Christians of all people should not be surprised at this reaction, for it touches a very important part of the human *psyche* as God has made us—he has put 'eternity on our minds'.

What follows is a presentation of the key elements which constitute a biblical view of death and the afterlife, elements which must be grasped if Christians are to be preserved from drifting along with the prevailing currents of thought on the subject and are to retain a cutting edge in evangelism. We shall take as our starting point the nature of man.

The Nature of Man

The psalmist in Psalm 8 ponders the question 'What is man?'. He feels towards an answer in terms of creation: God has made him 'a little lower than the angels'. The writer to the Hebrews also ponders this question in chapter 2 and refers to the same psalm, but he considers the question Christocentrically against the two further dimensions of the fall and redemption. Throughout the bible those three interlocking themes of cre-

ation, fall and redemption, are crucial for understanding ourselves in relation to God and especially in obtaining a fully rounded picture of the Christian view of death.¹

Man at creation

At creation man is presented as the image bearer of God: Genesis 1:26–27 ‘God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him—male and female He created them’. We are not given any precise explanation of what the term ‘image’ means, but as Christ is the fulfilment of this (Col. 1:15) we can work backwards from him and suggest that it at least embraces the ideas of ruling and caring for the world under God and relating to each other in a dynamic of love (*cf.* Heb. 2). Some commentators, notably Karl Barth, see in the male-female relationship a reflection of the trinitarian relationship and thus it is together as male-female that the image of God is expressed.

Man is more than a physical body. In that wonderful picture of intimacy and dependence in the second chapter of Genesis we see the life-giver God breathing into Adam so that he became a ‘living being’—*nephesh*—a soul, or as moderns might say prosaically, a psychosomatic unity. The term *nephesh* throughout Scripture has more than one meaning, but whatever the varied nuances of terms like *nephesh-psuche* (soul) and *ruach-pneuma* (spirit)—the overall direction of biblical evidence (let alone experiential evidence) is as C.S. Lewis stated, that man cannot be reduced to being either wholly a material or an immaterial being, he is both.² Put simply and generally, the terms soul/spirit refer to man’s immaterial aspect, describing the relationship of man’s immaterial dimension to God and the world. (In some contexts the terms soul and spirit are interchangeable, *cf.* Is. 26:9; Lk. 1:46, 47.)

Man at the fall

However, it is the account of the fall, man’s rebellion against God, which provides the most fundamental understanding of the origin and nature of death: Gen. 2:17: ‘When you eat of the fruit you shall surely die’. Death is nothing other than God’s judicial sentence. It is not an accident; it is God’s doing, and so Moses boldly writes

You turn men back to dust saying: ‘Return to dust O sons of men!’ For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by or like a watch in the night. You sweep men away in the sleep of death (Psalm 90:3–6).

Or as Paul puts it in Romans 6:23 ‘The wages of sin is death’. In Scripture, the verdict of death embraces three dimensions. First, spiritual death—alienation from God. This was immediately experienced by Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:10). Everyone born into this world is in this state (Eph. 2:1). Secondly, there is physical death—the lot of us all, a fact made plain by

Psalm 90. It is upon physical death that the essential unity of man is torn apart, *cf.* Ecclesiastes 12:6–7; James 2:26. Thirdly, there is the second or eternal death which occurs on the final day of judgment—Revelation 20:14.

The question arises: why did God choose death as the judicial punishment upon our rebellion? In a very helpful discussion on this point, Don Carson³ draws attention to the fact that death is presented as God's limit on his creatures whose rebellion consisted in them wanting to become like gods (Gen. 3:4–5). God is such that he will not be relativized. We are human and death destroys all our pretensions to the contrary. The out-working of this is that death is not something to which we relate passively. We die because we are sinners attracting God's judgment for our transgressions. Death is therefore God's personal response to my personal rebellion. This does not mean that we should not grieve or rage at death. The theological point is that our anger should not be directed against God, as if he were being unfair in pronouncing death; this would be as unreasonable as a thief shaking his fist at a judge for delivering his sentence against his crimes.

Thus, against the backdrop of God's original purpose for man and his judicial verdict upon our rebellion, death is an 'abnormal-normal'. It is linked to the moral and spiritual pollution of sin. Does this mean, therefore, that the Christian response is one of passive resignation? If this is God's decree, is it only right to acquiesce and not fight it? Surely the answer is no. For it is the biblical concept of redemption that provides the key to understanding how death is transformed by God and, in one sense, is opposed by him. Here we come to the heart of the paradox which runs throughout Scripture, *viz.*, that the God who is against us because of our sin is also the God who is for us because of his grace. It is only the one who is our judge who can be our Saviour. What is more, that which is man's undoing—death—becomes, through the death of another man—the God-man Jesus Christ—the means of eternal life.

Man at redemption

There are several biblical passages which focus this for us. We begin with Hebrews 2:9 '[Jesus] suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone', v. 14 'Since the children have flesh and blood, he [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy 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'. 1 Cor. 15:21 'For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive'; then v. 54 '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"'. Paul describes death as the last enemy which in principle has been conquered

by Christ's death and resurrection, so Jesus is described as the first fruits of the harvest; but death will finally be abolished at the general resurrection of the dead when Christ returns and a new heaven and earth is established, 1 Thess. 1:3:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep [a metaphor for death], or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. 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.

It is because the Christian recognizes that he is caught between the now and the not yet, between the first and second coming of Christ, that he has an ambivalent attitude towards death. On the one hand it is still an enemy, it retains a sting, it is an abnormal-normal. Christians, therefore, grieve and find death disgusting. There is no question of romanticism about death for the believer. But on the other hand, death, through the redeeming work of Christ, has been transformed into a doorway into heaven and there will come a time when the sting will be removed. Thus, while he will grieve, the Christian will not grieve as those who have no hope. Tears are still shed. Grief is no less profound, but there is no grim despair, instead there is that quiet reassurance that the best is yet to be. Carson states this well when he writes:

Because death is fundamentally God's imposed limitation on human arrogance, his stern 'Thus far and no farther', the deepest terror of death is being cut off from him forever. But where there is reconciliation with God, where faith in the Son of God and his death on the cross has brought a man or a woman into vital union with the living God himself, death no longer holds all its old threats. Death has not yet been abolished, but it has been stripped of its power (1 Cor. 15:57).⁴

It is at death that the authenticity of Christian belief is put to the test, a belief which admits no superficial triumphalism of the 'name it and claim it' variety, but a sure determination that God will keep his promise which is assured in Christ. One of the most moving and poignant expressions of such faith is found in the account of Martin Luther and his daughter Magdelene. In September 1542, as Magdelene lay dying, her father weeping by her side asked her 'Magdelene my dear little daughter, would you like to stay here with your father, or would you be willing to go to your Father yonder?' Magdelene answered 'Darling father, as God wills'. Luther wept, holding his daughter in his arms, praying that God might free her; and she died. As she was laid in her coffin, Luther declared, 'Darling Lena, you will rise and shine like a star; yea like the sun. I am happy in spirit, but the flesh is sorrowful and will not be content, the parting grieves me beyond measure. I have sent a saint to heaven.'

Life after death

But what happens at death? While no precise details are given by Scripture there are passages which indicate two important points. First, that the one who dies *in* Christ goes to be *with* Christ. This is sometimes referred to as an 'intermediate state', a term which is a little misleading as we shall see. Secondly, when Christ returns and history is wound up, all believers will be given a resurrected body and then redemption will be complete.

When the phrase 'intermediate state' is used it does not mean that the Christian who has died inhabits a place in between heaven and hell, a special intermediate resting place for the departed. Rather, it refers to the fact that although the believer is constituted as a centre of awareness (as a self), that centre of consciousness is not corporeal—that is, embodied. As the Westminster confession puts it, believers at death 'being then made perfect in holiness will be received into the highest heavens'. We refer to some New Testament passages which indicate this. First, Mt. 17:1–3. Here we are told that Moses and Elijah met and conversed with Jesus who was transfigured before them. Whatever mysterious circumstances surrounded Elijah's departure from this world, the evidence is quite clear that Moses died (Dt. 34:5). Yet here is Moses in our space and time, conscious in the afterlife.

The passage in the New Testament which most clearly indicates that a believer goes to be with Christ in heaven after death is Philippians 1:21–32. 'For to me life is Christ and death gain; but what if my living on in the body may serve some good purpose? Which then am I to choose? I cannot tell. I am torn two ways: what I should like is to depart and be with Christ; that is better by far.' (New English Bible). Here Paul is wrestling with the inner conflict of desires: the desire to be with Christ and the desire to continue serving him on earth for the benefit of God's people. He makes it quite clear which he would prefer—to die and be with Christ. Since no allusion is made to the resurrection, *prima facie*, one must take this to mean that Paul considers that consequent upon his death he will be 'with Christ' in a heavenly state. Note too, that Paul uses the personal pronoun 'I'—the self, ego, or the soul—dwelling in his body which departs at death.

Hebrews 12:22–24 is also suggestive:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus. . .

When believers on earth congregate, they congregate before and with the heavenly church-present. F.F. Bruce thus writes

No distinction in meaning can be pressed between 'spirits' here and 'souls' there. It is plain that, for him, the souls of believers do not need to wait until

the resurrection to be perfected. They are perfected already in the sense that they are with God in the heavenly Jerusalem.

However, there is a minority of evangelical scholars who are challenging this traditional understanding by propounding the idea of 'soul sleep'.⁵ This is the way in which one writer describes it:

Probably the best solution is the view that the moment of death for the believer is the last day for him or her because in death the Christian moves out of time, so that death is experienced as the moment when Christ returns.⁶

There are several problems associated with this view. The first is that it does not do justice to the texts just cited. Exegetically it is found wanting. Secondly, it assumes a certain relation between time and eternity which is difficult to square theologically with the Bible, for what happens is that for each believer who dies the 'second coming of Christ'—the Parousia—takes place, that is it occurs outside time, when the whole thrust of the Bible is that it takes place in time. But thirdly, this position largely rests on a forced interpretation of the term 'sleep' as it is used to describe those who have died 'in Christ', for example, 1 Thess. 4:13–18. But why is the term used? Are there limits to its intended sense? Surely, it is a term which functions as a metaphor primarily to describe the posture of the deceased and possibly to indicate a lack of finality about their state. Greeks and Egyptians used the term to describe their dead, and they certainly believed in continued existence immediately after death. J. Jeremias summarizes the evidence as follows: 'The notion of soul sleep is just as foreign to the New Testament as to Judaism; the image of sleep is introduced . . . simply as an euphemistic description of death'.⁷

A bodily resurrection?

Nonetheless, for the Christian the story does not end there, for central to the biblical scheme of the flow of creation-fall-redemption is the belief that there will be a *bodily* resurrection. In one of the most extensive passages in the whole of the New Testament which deals with the question of the resurrection—1 Cor. 15, the apostle Paul writes in v. 53 'The perishable *must* clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality'. Why this emphatic emphasis on the *must*? It is tied to the certainty of God's promise and the nature of redemption achieved by Christ. Earlier in the chapter Christ is described as the 'first fruits'. His resurrection, which in 1 Cor. 15 and the Gospels is conceived as a bodily resurrection, is a pledge of what will follow with those who have died in him. How do we know that believers will rise again at the end of time? It is because Christ has been raised from the dead in time. What is more, if there is no bodily resurrection but only some disembodied spiritual existence, then redemption will not be complete, for death will have gained the

victory in that it will still reign over our bodies. Death, as we have seen, occurs because of sin, and if death is not reversed in resurrection, then sin has triumphed. But Paul's argument is that Christ has conquered sin and the consequences of sin including death.⁸ As we have already established, God's judicial verdict on sin is death—spiritual, physical and eternal. Christ by his substitutionary death and resurrection reverses all of these and so reverses the effects of the fall. Therefore, when a person becomes a Christian, spiritually they are made alive and reconciled to God (Eph. 2:5), physically they are given a resurrected body at the Parousia (1 Cor. 15:52ff.) and they need not fear the second death on the Day of Judgment (Rev. 20:5).

It is helpful to follow the apostle Paul's line of argument in 1 Cor. 15 as he tackles the question: 'How are the dead raised? With what *kind* of body do they come?' In essence Paul stresses both continuity and discontinuity between our present and future state. He uses three analogies to put over this point.⁹

First, there is the analogy of the seed in vv. 37–38. The point is that the resultant plant is markedly different from the seed from which it has sprung. Furthermore, the burial of a seed is reminiscent of the burial of a man in a tomb.

Secondly, attention is drawn to the different kinds of bodily forms in the world—v. 39. There are differences within the created order in terms of bodily composition—'flesh', each suited to its own environment. Therefore, why should there not be a resurrected body composed in such a way that it is suited to its new environment? (Paul's target here is crass literalism).

Thirdly, a distinction is drawn between terrestrial and celestial bodies to make the same point (vv. 40–41), with the conclusion, 'so it will be with the resurrection of the dead.'

There then follows a series of contrasts between our present fallen bodily existence and our future resurrected existence—one is perishable, subject to decay, the other imperishable. Our fallen body dies in dishonour, but will be raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, but will be raised in power. However, the fourth and final set of contrasts has caused much perplexity as to whether Paul is in fact talking about a 'spiritual' rather than a bodily existence at the Parousia, for he says that our body is sown a 'natural body but raised a spiritual body.' We must understand however that Paul is not setting a spiritual existence over and against a corporeal bodily one. The terms Paul uses are these—it is sown a soulish body (*soma pseuchikon*) and raised a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*). Here Paul is referring to orientation and not composition. By speaking of a soulish body, or a natural body, Paul is referring to the orientation of fallen man which is away from God, and towards self. This is the dominating principle by which we live our lives. However, at the resurrection, that orientation will change, then it will be the Holy Spirit who will dominate as

we are orientated towards God as we were originally meant to be.

But what are we to make of v. 50 which says that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable'? Here we have a semitic idiom which simply means 'fallen human nature'. It is a summary of all that Paul has said so far that this body, frail and weak, with selves warped in their basic scheme of priorities, cannot as presently constituted enter the world to come, it has to be transformed so that it becomes like the body of Jesus Christ himself. It will only be at that point that the fullness of redemption will be experienced:

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.

All that has been spoken of so far refers to the believer in Christ, but what of the unbeliever? Here we enter upon the awesome and delicate question of judgment and hell.

Eternal Punishment or temporal?

The consistent testimony of the New Testament is that there is to be a future judgment and that God's judicial sentence upon the unpenitent is eternal punishment. Although such a teaching may sound alien to our liberal western ears, it is woven into the fabric of the Gospel itself and is an irreducible part of Jesus' message: Mt. 7:21ff.

Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven. Many will say to me 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them 'I never knew you, depart from me, you who practise lawlessness'.

Mt. 10:28, 'And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to destroy both body and soul in hell . . .'; Mk. 9:47 'It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'; Mt. 25:31, 'Then he will say to those on his left, depart from me you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'; 2 Thess. 1:8 'He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord'.

These are just a few sample texts which are not simple 'proof texts' taken out of context. The plain meaning of Scripture is clear and sobering—'man is destined to die once and then to face the judgment' (Heb. 9:27).

Lack of general acceptance is not to be mistaken for lack of truth. Belief

in judgment and hell has been weakened. This is part of the general weakening of belief in the Gospel. Also, it is difficult to grasp because we in the West tend to think of punishment as essentially being corrective and remedial rather than punitive and penal. With such a mindset, the doctrine of hell seems to serve no purpose, except, according to the late John Robinson¹⁰, acting in Jesus' teaching as an existential thunderbolt designed to make people take his message seriously. (But obviously not that seriously, if there is no objective hell!) Another factor which has led to a weakening of belief in hell is the widespread diminution of *personal* responsibility in our society, for the whole basis of judgment proceeds from the premise that we are all personally accountable for our actions and will be judged accordingly (Rom. 2). However, for those who profess the Christian faith it is the difficulty of squaring this doctrine with a certain view of the character of God that constitutes the major problem. The cry thus goes out: 'How can an all loving God ever consign people to eternal perdition?' If the character of God were to be reduced to pure benevolence, then one would be forced to agree with the sentiment contained in such a question; it does seem incongruous. But the Bible does not engage in such reductionism. God's love is a holy love, a righteous love. Love and justice are not two opposing traits in God, rather the justice of God expresses the love that right be done and seen to be done. God's wrath is his measured response to our rebellion. Some of that wrath is being revealed now as God gives up rebellious human beings to the consequences of their godlessness (Rom. 1:18ff.). But the full extent of God's reaction is reserved for the end of time. It is in this sense that the doctrine of judgment and hell is integral to the Christian Good News, for it is precisely from this 'wrath to come' that we are saved (1 Thess. 1:10). What is more, without this doctrine the cross of Christ makes little sense and certainly does not accord with the Bible's own explanation of this event, *viz.* that Christ is offered as a 'propitiation for our sins' (1 John 2:2; Rom. 3:25).

Sin is to be punished. Either it is punished in Christ on our behalf or it is punished in ourselves, and that is hell. Hell is the place of absolute justice which is dispensed impeccably by the one before whom everything is 'uncovered and laid bare' (Heb. 4:13). The arrangements will be just, because God is just and no one will have the least cause to complain.

Why should hell be without limit? The simple answer is that God has decreed it to be so. But, following the various biblical strands through, we might suggest that it is because the offence being punished is against one of immeasurable holiness. Does this mean that all will suffer equally? No. Not only is that alien to the idea of justice revealed in Scripture, but also to what is explicitly stated in Scripture—for example, Luke 12:48, where we read that those who did not know the Lord's will are beaten with *few* stripes, that is, the punishment is commensurate. This may also be behind the discussion in Romans 2 that all those who have sinned outside the

law—that is, in ignorance of the revealed law of Moses, will be judged outside the law, that is, they will be tested against their own standards of morality. This does not mean that they will escape punishment ('all who sin apart from the law shall perish apart from the law'), rather they will be rendered culpable for their sin and punishment will be meted out accordingly.

It is sometimes pointed out that the language which the Bible uses to describe hell is figurative, with the implication that somehow its force and meaning are weakened. While it is self-evident that the language is figurative, then so is the language used to describe heaven. However no-one would take this fact to mean that heaven does not exist or is less of a reality than the language used to describe it. To say that a statement is metaphorical or figurative only tells us something about the *nature* of the language used, not the ontological reality to which it refers. Indeed, the metaphorical nature of heaven and hell language only serves to highlight how much *more* awesome the reality will be; the imagery is but a feeble attempt to describe the indescribable.

Universalism and Annihilationism

Theologically, the traditional doctrine of hell has come under attack from two quarters. The first is universalism: that all will be saved in the end. This view takes a variety of forms.¹¹ But whatever the particular variety, universalism does not do justice to the Biblical revelation, let alone the theological framework founded upon that revelation. The universalist teaching acts like a Procrustean bed, upon which biblical texts which do not fit are lopped off or grossly distorted in their meaning. The second attack comes from those who argue that the unbeliever is annihilated after judgment, a position referred to as conditional immortality. This has some notable evangelical proponents, writers like John Stott,¹² P.E. Hughes,¹³ John Wenham¹⁴ and Michael Green.¹⁵ Formidable names indeed! However, it must be said that the arguments adduced remain unconvincing, of which in the main there are two.

The first is that the idea of the 'immortality of the soul' is more platonic than biblical. Only God is described as having 'immortality' (1 Tim. 6:16). While it is true that immortality is intrinsic to God in a way that it is not intrinsic to men, it does not follow that it is not bestowed upon man and maintained by divine *fiat*. The reading of texts such as Mt. 10:28; Dan. 12:2; John 5:27 suggests that it is so. What is more, as Prof. Macleod has stated,

We still have the huge improbability that the soul should be preserved alive through death, resurrection, judgement and the dissolution of the universe only to founder at some point not even mentioned in Scripture.¹⁶

The second major argument is that the terms the Bible uses suggest annihilation—fire, for example, destroys. Indeed the term destroy, *apol-*

lumi, is the very term applied to the fate of the wicked in the texts already quoted. Thus John Stott writes 'If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is the extinction of being'.¹⁶ The language of *Gehenna*, hell, argues Michael Green, is also suggestive of annihilation as this was the local rubbish dump

where the maggots were always active and fire smouldering. It says nothing at all about constant unending torment; rubbish does not last long in a fire. The image indicates total ruin.¹⁸

Ruin yes, but annihilation no. This rabbinic metaphor taken up and used by Jesus has its origins in Is. 66:24. It did indeed mean torment as is evidenced by the intertestamental book *Judith* and *Ecclesiasticus*:

Woe to the nations that rise up against my kindred. The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgement in putting fire and worms in their flesh, they shall feel them and weep for ever. (*Judith* 16).

'Humble thy soul greatly; for the vengeance of the ungodly is fire and worms' (Eccl. 7:16). W.E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* states that the idea behind such words as *apollumi* 'does not mean extinction but ruin, loss, not of being but of well being. This is clear from its use'.

While both Stott and Green shun any literalistic interpretation of hell passages, it is such literalism that drives them to the conclusion of annihilationism, so 'fire destroys totally'. Surely we must consider how the language functions in the light of other Scriptural statements regarding the nature of man, death and judgment. When this is done we see that such language points to ruination, which involves sorrow, pain and loss. It is an undue literalism which also renders some scholars incapable of holding together what are perceived to be two irreconcilable concepts—destruction and ruin; for if the former is taken as exhaustive, that is, absolute destruction, it leaves no room for the latter. But why cannot something be destroyed (even continually) leading to its perpetual ruination? For example, at the end of the Second World War Germany was 'destroyed', and so ruined at practically every level. The survivors were 'destroyed' and continued to suffer but were not annihilated. No contradiction is involved.

This is not a subject on which one wishes to dwell. However, a fair amount of space has been devoted to it because it is a point of contention between evangelicals, and the Bible does speak clearly on the matter. We therefore should avoid two extremes. The first is going further than the Bible in describing this state. The second is falling short of what the Bible says, modifying and curtailing its teaching to make it say what we would prefer it to say.

Solid hope or shifting sand?

A month before his death, Jean Paul Sartre wrote these words in his journal:

With this third world war which might break out one day, with this wretched gathering which our planet now is, despair returns to tempt me. The idea that there is no purpose, only petty personal ends for which we fight! We make little revolutions, but there is no goal for mankind. One cannot think of such things. They tempt you incessantly, especially if you are old . . . the world seems ugly, bad and without hope. There, that's the cry of despair of an old man who will die in despair. But that's exactly what I resist. I know I shall die in hope. But that hope needs a foundation.

How true! But what a contrast to the words of another 'old man' about to die:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day—and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing' (2 Tim. 4:6–8).

Here is hope based upon a solid foundation indeed.

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NOTES

- 1 Cp. R.A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Bethany House, 1984), for a thorough study of this subject.
- 2 C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Fount).
- 3 D.A. Carson, *How Long O Lord?* (I.V.P., 1990).
- 4 *Op. cit.*, p. 129.
- 5 John Yates, "'Immediate or Intermediate?'" The State of the Believer upon Death', in *Churchman*, 1987 (Vol. 101:4).
- 6 K. Giles, quoted by John Yates, *supra*.
- 7 J. Jeremias, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Kittel), Vol. 1.
- 8 See Paul Helm, *The Last Things* (Banner of Truth, 1989).
- 9 See W. Craig, 'The Empty Tomb of Jesus', in *Gospel Perspectives*, Vol II, ed. R.T. France and D. Wenham (J.S.O.T., 1981), for an elaboration of this text.
- 10 J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God* (James Clarke, 1950).
- 11 See Richard Bauckham, 'Universalism—a historical survey', in *Themelios*, Vol. 4, No. 2.
- 12 John Stott and David Edwards, in *Essentials* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1988).
- 13 P.E. Hughes, *The True Image* (I.V.P., 1988).
- 14 John Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (I.V.P., 1974).
- 15 Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Hodder, 1990).
- 16 D. Macleod, 'Must we all become annihilationists?' in *Evangelicals Now*, June 1991.
- 17 *Op. cit.*, p. 315.
- 18 *Op. cit.*, p. 70.