

Living and Dying

Week 5

Last week, we looked at how Paul was talking about whether he lived or died. As we read this today, most of us begin to think then about eternal life. We think of heaven and hell. The ways in which we understand this are not quite the same as how people in the first century understood. Here's a quick bit of info, a video, and some food for thought.

I'll start with the video, because for some of us, that's all that we are looking for:

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/eternal-life/>

The ancient Hebrews, like many cultures of their day, believed in a “shadowy underworld, a land of the dead called Sheol where departed spirits go (Deut. 32:22, Amos 9:2, Prov. 9:18)” (Robert E. Van Voorst). This was not life after death as we think of it. The first place where eternal life first appears is towards the end of the Old Testament and was understood as a place for martyrs.

In Second Temple Judaism, the time period of the second temple in Jerusalem that includes our New Testament, there were several different groups who practiced the faith. For Pharisees and some others, there was an understanding of the resurrection. In this, those who lived according to Torah would experience the resurrection. For another group, the Sadducees, they did not believe in the resurrection. J. B. Green writes that “these views of the afterlife cannot be organized along a spectrum, as though they represent different points along a continuum. Like the stars in the sky, they form instead a constellation of beliefs. This means that, when we turn to the Gospels, we cannot depend on ‘prevailing Jewish beliefs’ to guide interpretation; there were no ‘prevailing beliefs,’ apart from general belief in an afterlife and the all-important claim that one’s experience in the afterlife would be a reflection of one’s conformity to Torah in the present.” Jesus and the early Christians were closest to the Pharisaic understanding of resurrection and eternal life.

Further Resources

N.T. Wright in *The Day The Revolution Began* speaks beautifully of how we got to our understanding of heaven and personal salvation. He also explains what was happening with Jesus and how this can be understood differently, and honestly, in a way that is more freeing and energizing. Below I will string together four different quotes. I recommend this book. Particularly if you are looking for a Lenten book to prepare for Easter.

“Humans are made not for ‘heaven,’ but for the new heavens and new earth... The human problem is not so much ‘sin’ seen as the breaking of moral codes-though that, to be sure, is part of it...but rather idolatry and the distortion of genuine humanness it produces...The ‘goal’ is not ‘heaven,’ but a renewed human vocation within God’s renewed creation. This is what every biblical book from Genesis on is pointing toward” (74).

In writing of how doctrines and theologies would develop in response to one another, Wright states that the West became “Focused not on God’s kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, but on my sin, my heavenly (that is non worldly) salvation, and of course my Savior” (35).



In offering us a different way of thinking, Wright says “What might happen if, we were to start with the eschatology of Ephesians 1:10, with God’s plan to sum up all things in heaven and earth in the Messiah? What if, instead of a disembodied ‘heaven’ we were to focus on the biblical vision of ‘new heavens and new earth,’ with that renewal and that fusion of the two created spheres taking place in and through Jesus himself?” (49).

“If we start with the idea simply of ‘going to heaven,’ what the New Testament says about the cross won’t quite fit, but if we start instead with the new creation, it all makes sense. The same is true about the view of humanity. If we start, as millions of Christian have done, with the idea that humans are meant to behave themselves, to conform to God’s standards, so that they can be good enough for fellowship with him here and hereafter, once again what the New Testament says about the cross won’t quite work. But if we start instead with the idea of reflecting the divine image, of worshipping the true God and serving him in his world (the ‘royal priesthood’), then the message of the cross (with Jesus himself as the ultimate ‘royal priest’) will make full sense” (406-407).