

. . . and Time Shall Be No More – ?

“When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair;
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore,
And the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.”

James Black (1893)

Time is a thing that we take for granted, but it is a vital ingredient for every part of our lives. In reality, it actually **is** our lives – our whole lives! We all theoretically acknowledge that our lifespan is limited and that one day each one of us will die but, in day-to-day life, we usually live as if our lives will continue for ever. Moses (who lived to be 120 years old!) asked the LORD: “So teach us to number our days, that we may present to you a heart of wisdom.” (***Psalm 90:12***) If you sit down and try to work out how many days you have lived, you may get a surprise. Maybe more than you think!

My current total is more than 28,000 days, but I remember clearly the impact on my life when, at the age of about 19 (total days by then about 7,000), I realised that one day I would die. Of course, I had known that fact in theory for a long time, but it took the sudden, unexpected death of a young Christian, only a few years older than me and whom I only knew slightly, to bring the truth into focus.

I had been a Christian believer for about 8 years and had recently begun to hear the Lord’s call of discipleship on my life. Now I began to see that, in order to make sense of living as a follower of Jesus, I needed to learn to ‘live life in the light of death.’ That was a major factor in my significant change of direction a few months later. After all these years, the same imperative is still there; not a heavy, legalistic obligation but a sharper focus on the limited time we have in our natural, physical human lives on this earth. Perhaps the focus is even a bit crisper since I passed ‘threescore years and ten’ some time ago!

My advancing years have inevitably meant an increasing exposure to the reality of death, the most certain thing about every human life. The realisation has been gradual, first with the passing of grandparents, elderly relatives and then my own parents, along with the totally unexpected deaths of younger relatives and friends and the deaths of some of my own contemporaries in more recent times. As a friend remarked to me a few days ago: ‘people are dying who are younger than I am!’ Yes. Sharp focus!

So, what about the end of our lives on earth? There are many Christian clichés, such as ‘going to heaven’, ‘going to be with the Lord’, ‘receiving our reward’ and (my favourite) the old Salvation Army phrase: ‘promoted to glory’. But what does the Bible actually teach?

First of all, we may be surprised to find that there is no clear biblical teaching that states categorically that believers in Jesus ‘go to heaven’ when they die. In fact, the word ‘heaven’ itself seems to have very physical roots. In the Old Testament, it is apparently always in the plural, ‘the heavens’ – what is ‘up there’ **above** the visible sky, the domain where God may be found, but not a precise ‘geographical’ (or perhaps, more accurately, ‘cosmic’!) location. The hymn-writer referred to it as ‘beyond the skies’. In today’s language, we would call it ‘space’!

Translators of the New Testament have customarily done readers the dis-service of making no distinction between singular and plural, between ‘heaven’ and ‘the heavens’. In almost every case where the Greek word is in the singular (‘heaven’), the passage makes perfect sense if we read it as ‘sky’. In the plural, it means the same as the Old Testament version, ‘the heavens’. Probably the most well-known example of this unhelpful translation is in the so-called ‘Lord’s Prayer’, which is usually repeated as ‘Our Father (who art) in heaven (singular)’. The Greek is plural, meaning that the Lord Jesus was encouraging us to speak to ‘our Father in the heavens’. On every occasion where our English-language New Testaments print ‘the kingdom of heaven’, the Greek actually says ‘the kingdom of the heavens’.¹

The Bible portrays the almighty creator God as presiding over **all** of his creation, and modern space science informs us of the apparent endlessness of the universe. Some scientists (and, incidentally, some religions) suggest that there are multiple universes (the ‘multiverse’). No-one can suggest an end to the universe (or universes), but equally no-one can properly conceive ‘endlessness’. ‘If there is an end to it, what is there beyond the end?’ but ‘It can not possibly just go on without an end.’ Solomon summed up this paradox and the inability of the human mind to grasp endlessness: *“He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work*

¹ For a series of simple studies about the Kingdom of God / Kingdom of Heaven, see ‘[Revolution on Earth](http://www.justonecandle.uk)’ from www.justonecandle.uk

which God has done from the beginning even to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) We have this idea of endlessness in our hearts and minds, but we can’t get ‘outside’ it to see it all from start to finish.

So, if all the creation is endless (as far as we can understand it, anyway), the God who created it all can not be restricted to a little corner of it which we might conveniently label ‘heaven’. He is truly ‘our Father in the heavens’. And if heaven is not a ‘place’, what can we mean by ‘going to heaven’ when we die?

The apostle Paul has some things to say about death, both in a general way and personally. In both cases, he is very positive, emphasising resurrection and ‘being with the Lord’. . .

The well-known chapter about resurrection is **1 Corinthians 15**, which is definitely worth reading as a whole, but let’s look especially at **verses 50-58**. Paul writes about ‘inheriting the kingdom of God’, and he is evidently speaking about what happens to believers “*at the last trumpet*” (**v.52**). “*The dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality*” (**v.52,53**). When will this happen? Back in **v.22-24**, he tells us: “*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at his coming, then comes the end . . .*”

Four times in this chapter, Paul refers to death as ‘sleep’, and it is a common description in the New Testament. Jesus himself used it when referring to the death of Lazarus in **John 11:11-14**. Luke tells us that Stephen ‘fell asleep’ when he had been stoned to death in **Acts 7:60**.¹

Again, in **1 Thessalonians 4**, Paul writes about the same coming event, when “*the Lord himself will descend from the sky with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord*” (**v.16,17**). In **v.13, 14 & 15**, he again refers to the dead as “*those who have fallen asleep.*”

No mention of ‘going to heaven’ in any of these passages, but rather an emphasis on resurrection into a new and different body as ‘waking from sleep’. So – unless Jesus returns in our lifetime – resurrection is clearly coming in our future experience, but what do we actually experience when we die, and what about the time between death and resurrection? Do we have any clues? Only a few, as far as I can see.

Stephen, just before he ‘fell asleep’, declared confidently: “*Behold, I see the heavens (plural) opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God*” (**Acts 7:56**). In the preceding verse, we read that “*being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven (singular = ‘the sky’) and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*” I have often heard it said that ‘Jesus stood up to welcome Stephen to glory’, but that seems just a little fanciful to me, especially as we know that he is ‘seated at the right hand of God’ (**Luke 22:69 & Colossians 3:1**) and we have no reason to think that he will move from there until his return to earth in glory. We’ll come back to that shortly.

Stephen’s nearly last words were “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*” (**Acts 7:59**). He evidently expected exactly that to happen, but we have no indication of what that meant in terms of his own experience, other than that ‘he fell asleep’. No biblical character who died and then came back to life has passed on their experience; not Lazarus, not the son of the widow of Nain, and certainly not the Lord Jesus himself. So we are left guessing, and I am quite happy with that, although of course I am still inquisitive!

Paul gives us a clue when he writes: “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake*” (**Philippians 1:21-24**). He clearly expected that his next conscious encounter after death would be with the Lord Jesus himself.

The truth is that we simply don’t know – not in any greater detail, anyway – what it will be like to die, or the unfolding of our experience after death. But we **can** share Paul’s confidence that when we ‘depart’ we shall be ‘with Christ’. However, we find ourselves caught by our habitual slavery to time; it is all that we have known from our earliest awareness of life. Time has always been there for us, and it seems to me that the moment of death will be the end of that awareness – at least temporarily. We shall have entered eternity, so words such as ‘next’ and ‘then’ (which have marked every step of our lives so far) will cease to be quite so relevant and may not have any real meaning at all!

¹ Other passages are **Matthew 27:52, Acts 13:36, 1 Corinthians 11:30, 1 Corinthians 15:6,18,20, 2 Peter 3:4** and **1 Thessalonians 4:13,14,15**.

We have probably heard frequent references to believers who have recently died having ‘entered the presence of God’, having ‘received their reward’ and ‘being with the Lord right now’. In the past, I have certainly used those words myself, and of course they offer some consolation to those who have been bereaved. But, in considering my own eventual passing, I am not 100% certain that such ‘time-centeredness’ is really in harmony with what I see in the Bible. Like Paul, I trust that the next thing I know will be the presence of the Lord Jesus but it makes no difference to me whether that will be on ‘resurrection morning’ or at some point (in time!) before that.

In the absence of anything much clearer, I have found myself thinking along these lines:–

When I die, I shall leave the realm of time and enter eternity. Yes, I know that actually I am already in eternity, but at the point of death I shall be only in eternity and not in time as well. So time will become meaningless to me, as it will have become to all believers at that transition point. So also to Stephen, entering eternity as he *“gazed intently into the sky and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”* He looked into timelessness and saw something that would happen at a future point in time as measured in this world – Jesus, standing up from his seat beside the Father and about to return to earth in glory!

But then, what about that return of Jesus to the earth? *“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven (literally, ‘from the sky’) with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”* (**1 Thessalonians 4:16-17**) That will certainly be at a definite **time** in earth’s history, and those who have died in the meanwhile will be very clearly involved. So, if I have died before then (and if my understanding is correct), I shall have left time at my death and shall then re-enter it at the point of resurrection. ‘Sleep’ and ‘waking’ seem like good comparisons.

The return of Jesus to rule on the earth lies ahead of us in time, and his reign will then continue, but for how long? The often-repeated (and biblical) phrase is ‘for ever and ever’, which sounds like once more conjuring up that unfathomable word, eternity. But again, the Bible translators have been faced with an almost untranslatable Greek phrase, literally ‘into the ages of the ages’. The Greek word for ‘age’ in this sense is ‘*aiōn*’, from which we get our English word ‘aeon’ – dictionary definition: ‘an immeasurably or indefinitely long period of time’. So again, we find ourselves defining eternity in terms of time!

In **Daniel 9**, Gabriel gives Daniel a prophecy: *“Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city”* and those 70 weeks are often interpreted as 70 ‘weeks’ of years, i.e. $70 \times 7 = 490$ years. Should we look at ‘the ages of the ages’ in the same way? How many years in an age? An immeasurable number! So, how many years in ‘the ages of the ages’? Immeasurable numbers of immeasurable numbers! At this point (if not before!) our minds begin to boggle, and that is just the right point at which to leave it, with ‘eternity in our mind’ but knowing that we are simply unable to fathom its depths.

As far as I can see, Christian believers in New Testament times were expecting – and waiting for – the return of Jesus to reign on the earth. The passages we have already looked at make no mention of any intermediate events, and I have never been convinced by the suggestion of a ‘rapture’ of believers into ‘heaven’ before the moment when that reign begins. Some have tried to suggest that, when we are lifted up to ‘meet the Lord in the air’, the Lord himself would change direction and, instead of continuing his glorious descent to establish his kingdom on this earth (now accompanied by a countless host of his followers, some resurrected and some simply ‘changed’), he would inexplicably whisk the whole assembled company off into some ethereal realm for an unspecified period and for an unknown purpose.

Picture the visit of a ruler to a village or small town. As he rides on his magnificent horse towards the outskirts of the town, the town leaders ride out to meet him and then turn around to accompany him back into their town. What a privilege, to be able to share in that triumphal entry!

Just after Jesus had been taken up into the sky and ‘a cloud received him out of their sight’, two men assured the disciples that *“This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into the sky, will come in just the same way as you have watched him go into the sky”* (**Acts 1:11**). This relates very clearly to prophecies in **Daniel**, which look forward to the time of the beginning of the Messiah’s rule on earth and to the fact that ‘the saints’ will share in that kingdom *“for all ages to come”* (**Daniel 7:13,14,18,27**). What Paul writes in **1 Thessalonians 4** relates equally clearly to that same return to reign, not to some sort of intermediate ‘visit’ to collect believers in a supposed ‘rapture’. I apologise if that offends, but I simply cannot find consistent evidence to support it!

I (and, I hope, you also) can look forward with confidence to being on the scene when ‘the trumpet of the Lord shall sound’. Time as we know it now **will** have come to an end, but the roll will definitely **not** be called ‘up yonder’, it will be here on this earth. We will **not** gather to ‘our home beyond the skies’, ‘all of life’ will **not** be ‘over’ and ‘our work on earth’ will certainly **not** be ‘done’ – in the sense of ‘finished’. It will be about to start in earnest! It seems to me that time itself will have been re-started in a new eternal framework.

Jesus tells a parable in **Luke 19**, the parable of the minas. Similar to the better-known parable of the talents in **Matthew 25**, but distinctly different. A nobleman is going to a distant country to receive a kingdom, and evidently that kingdom will include the locality where he currently lives with his household. The unfavourable comments of the local citizens in **v.14** are meaningless if they will not be part of his kingdom. The responsive slaves in this parable are not told that they will ‘enter into the joy’ of their boss (as in the ‘talents’ parable), but are rewarded by being made governors of cities in the kingdom which he has just received and which includes the locality where he and they are based. Rewards, yes – but with ongoing responsibilities!

We are left in no doubt as to the reason why he told this parable: *“Jesus went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11)*. He was speaking about the coming of the kingdom of God, so the identities of the ‘players’ in this parable are fairly obvious. The ‘nobleman’ is Jesus himself, based on this earth as he speaks. The ‘slaves’ are his disciples, and the ‘citizens’ who reject his kingship are 1) specifically the Jews who do not acknowledge him as Messiah and, 2) more generally, all others who refuse his rule.

The Lord Jesus wants to make it clear that the arrival of his kingdom is not imminent; he needs to go away from his current locality (earth) to receive his kingdom, and leave his disciples to carry on his business in his absence. At some point in the future, having received the kingdom, he will return to his household and see how his slaves have got on. Those who have responded well will be given positions with more responsibilities, but where? In the kingdom which includes the current locality – here on earth!

Dave Taylor November 2024

MANIFEST

In the morning of the world,
When all creation wakes to a new dawn
And man’s best dreams are found and battles won,
My King will stand.

As a man – he will ever be a man –
He will command the nations and control
And in his rule earth’s nature will be free,
Released from futile servitude to failure.

His government, his children, his selection,
Will start to find in full their true commission:
Not simply rescued;
Not even merely totally transformed
But, born and shaped and gradually transfigured,
Now utterly revealed to their true purpose.

Like him in human form on earth’s familiar platform,
Yet heirs with him to all that always has been his.
Inheritors of earth, the heavens and a new beginning,
An Eden full of choice and lacking only evil,
To do with as we will and serve him freely –

A new day.

Dave Taylor October 1990