



"Any man's life will be filled with constant and unexpected encouragement if he makes up his mind to do his level best each day."

—Booker T. Washington

02-Apr-10

Death Is Not the End (Part Four)

[This world](#) views death as more than just an end of life—as *the* end. While the various religions and some philosophies dangle an afterlife of some sort before their adherents, the fear of the unknown after we breathe our last breath transforms death into a dark and brooding Grim Reaper. To superstitious minds, death is written with a capital *D*, and on his skeletal frame he wears a hooded black cloak and in his cadaverous hand he carries a massive scythe, which he uses to cut down humanity. This terrifying specter, an avenging demon with eyes of hellfire, travels the earth, constantly reaping a harvest of human souls. No wonder people fear death!

A common definition of death—right out of *Webster's Dictionary*—is "a permanent cessation of all bodily functions." Obviously, because the word "permanent" is in it, a Christian did not write this definition. Death truly is a cessation of all the body's vital functions, but it is not permanent for anyone. Including "permanent" in the definition denies the power of [God](#), who says He will give life to the dead through the act of resurrection ([John 5:21](#); [Romans 4:17](#); [Revelation 20:12](#)).

To reach a proper understanding of death, we should consider what two of history's wisest men, Solomon and Job, wrote about death, starting with Solomon in [Ecclesiastes 3:18-19](#):

I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals." For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over beasts, for all is vanity.

This is quite a cynical perspective of death. Solomon penned Ecclesiastes in his old age, when he could look back on his wearisome years of searching for answers and experimenting and come to a few conclusions about life. An inference about death appears in [Ecclesiastes 3:20-21](#): "All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animals, which goes down to the earth?"

Again, his outlook seems negative. He concludes that in many ways human beings are no better than animals, which is certainly the case when they try to live without God. Men simply die like beasts; like animals, people are air-breathing, fleshly creatures, and when we can no longer breathe or our flesh is starved, diseased, wounded, or exhausted, we die like them. When we die, our bodies decompose, returning to dust just as their bodies do.

Yet, in [Ecclesiastes 3:21](#), Solomon raises a question (paraphrased): "What do we really know about the human spirit as opposed to the spirit of a beast?" Do we really know that a man's spirit goes upward and a beast's spirit returns to the earth? What can we observe? If we use scientific methods, what can we really find out? Nothing, because such a question involving spiritual matters is beyond science, beyond man's ability to measure or record.

Previously, in [Ecclesiastes 3:11](#), Solomon had written that God has put eternity in man's heart—a yearning to live forever—so he has already conceded that God gives man the edge over beasts. He realizes that man is a special creation of God, made after the God-kind, who has been given dominion over the earth and all in it ([Genesis 1:26](#)), so his skeptical question

conceals the fact that he believes that man's chances for life after death are far better than an animal's.

[Ecclesiastes 12:7](#) reveals that, by the time he reaches the end of the book, Solomon has made up his mind on this question. He writes, "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." His conclusion is that, yes, there is a possibility of life after death for humanity. A person's spirit returns to God for safekeeping, yet that is as far as his understanding can take him. He does not know what happens next. However, he is wise enough to know that his conclusion leads to a truth: Since we do have a chance to live again, depending on God's judgment of our works, we had better fear God and keep His commandments ([Ecclesiastes 12:13-14](#)).

If any of the Bible's writers are gloomier than Solomon, it is Job, who begins his discussion of humanity's potential after death with marked negativity: "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and fades away; he flees like a shadow and does not continue" ([Job 14:1-2](#)). Clearly, he woke up on the wrong side of the ash heap that morning! In [Job 14:7-12](#), he compares man's chance of an afterlife unfavorably even to a tree's:

For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its tender shoots will not cease. Though its root may grow old in the earth, and its stump may die in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and bring forth branches like a plant. But man dies and is laid away; indeed he breathes his last and where is he? As water disappears from the sea, and a river becomes parched and dries up, so man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep.

Like Solomon, Job is probably referring to man without God; he sounds doubtful that anyone cut off from Him will live again. Due to the severe trial he is enduring, he views life with a terribly jaundiced eye. Why would a man want to live again after a life like this one? This life is so brief and full of turmoil that a tree seems to have better prospects of living again than a man does! Unlike a tree, a person who has died does not shoot out new and green

to live again; if a man is planted in the ground, he does not pop out of the soil after gentle rain and sunshine! No, without God, a dead person just lies in his grave.

Notice, however, what he believes are his own chances for an afterlife:

Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, that You would conceal me until Your wrath is past, that You would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands. ([Job 14:13-15](#))

He desires to die and rest in his grave until God recalls him to life! If nothing else, Job understands that with God is the power to give life even after death. Many commentators see this as Job's *wish* that there were an afterlife, but it is his hope. At the time, it was his only and most fervent expectation. He hoped that God would judge him as a righteous man and call him from his grave to live again, changed from dust to something far better, because God would desire to see him and engage in a close relationship with him again.

Despite their cynicism regarding mankind in general, both Solomon and Job conclude that death is not the end of the line for those who fear God and have a relationship with Him. Next time, we will see that even those who now live apart from God will have the opportunity to live again.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Ecclesiastes and the Feast of Tabernacles \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Love for this world will inevitably bring disillusionment. Realizing that the world is passing away, our priorities should be on fearing God and keeping his commandments. The temporary booths (short lived and quickly

deteriorating) at the Feast depicts our temporary and impermanent, often unpleasant and disappointing earthly pilgrimage, contrasted with the permanence of Christ's rule and our future eternal life. Without living for God's purpose for us, this life is absolutely meaningless.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Elements of Motivation \(Part Six\): Eternal Life](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

If you knew you would live forever, how would you live? John Ritenbaugh explains that, biblically, eternal life is much more than living forever: It is living as God lives!

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
