

Issue 56
MAR
2013

from death to life

in 5.24



- **The mortal God: Would Jesus have died anyway?**
- **The stewardship from God.**
- **Why care about the Bible and what it says?**
- **What happens at death?**

life · death · resurrection · eternal destinies · bible teaching

Welcome to Issue 56.

On page 1 we have “What happens at death”, an extract from Chapter 2 of Life Death and Destiny by Warren Prestidge, which explores the biblical perspective of death:

“Certainly we are created “in the image of God”, with an exceptional God-given purpose. But we are in no sense divine. We are creatures, part of God’s creation, not part of God. Furthermore, we are indivisibly whole “living beings”. The clear implication, as far as death is concerned, is that the death of the body must mean the death of the whole person.”

On page 5 “The stewardship from God” by Jefferson Vann examines the wider context of one of the great proof-text of conditionalism: 1 Timothy 6:16.

“Are we taking that text out of its context?”

I appreciated Doug Smith’s article “Why care about the Bible and what it says?” on page 11. He includes an excellent list of resources. It is an article you will want to pass on to others considering Christianity’s claims.

From Death to Life Issue 56 concludes with Dr. Glenn Peoples’ article on “The mortal God: Would Jesus have died anyway?” which provides some thought provoking views on Jesus’ humanity:

“So the answer is yes. Jesus certainly was mortal, and the fact that God the son became a mortal human being, subject to all of our weaknesses and limitations, and raised and glorified that human life through the resurrection, is precisely what assures us that our own mortal, frail selves will be raised and glorified with him. Our God really became one of us in all of our frailness and brokenness in every way except sin, so that he could raise us up and restore us.”

May you be filled with thankfulness and joy this Easter as you recall His goodness and love to us in sending His Son.

Tarnya Wessels

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What Happens at Death ?

By Warren Prestidge

(This is extract from Chapter 2 of Life Death and Destiny. See the end of the article for details on how to purchase the book.)

In the first chapter of *Life, Death and Destiny*¹, a whole Christian doctrine of death was sketched. It is time to investigate in detail the question: According to the Bible, what becomes of a person at death?

The answer is likely to surprise many who assume that, being a “religious” book, the Bible “spiritualises” the whole issue. Not at all. Here is the answer: At death, the whole person ceases, and would go out of existence forever, were it not for the fact that *“there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous”* (Acts 24:15)

In the Bible (and I contend that the Bible is entirely consistent on these matters), death is “the death of the whole person”.² A leading Evangelical Bible dictionary has stated: “... nowhere in the Bible do we get a view of man as existing apart from the body, even after death in the future life...”³ George Carey, who was recently Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote, in an excellent study: “...it is a false trail to look within the human

body for an immortal ‘soul’, mind or residual self which somehow survives the destruction of the flesh.”⁴ Death is entirely real. Only through Jesus Christ, by resurrection, is there any solution to it.

ADAM AND EVE

The essentials of a biblical view of humanity, life and death are presented right at the outset, in Genesis 1 – 3. Here, in one sense, is a “high” view of mankind:

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

Human beings are created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26-28), with a calling and potential far grander than is possible to conceive on any pagan or merely humanistic premise! However, the “image of God” is not a separable part of us, but a description of what we are as a whole.

Later, under the influence of Greek philosophy, many came to understand the “image of God” as an immortal, even divine, soul within us. This is how it is seen in



some non-biblical Jewish writings (e.g. The Wisdom of Solomon, 100-130 B.C. – not actually by Solomon, of course!) and later in many early Christian writings (e.g. Tertullian's *The Soul*, c.200 A.D.). As the great Old Testament scholar Walther Eichrodt protests, this approach is an "invasion of an alien spirit into the world of Old Testament thought".⁵ What Genesis 1:26-28 means is that, in our entirety, whether male or female, we humans are intended for a relationship with God, to know Him and to represent Him in the world. A human being as a whole is "created as the counterpart of God".⁶

In Genesis 2:7, the Bible continues to envisage the human person as a unity, not as a temporary conjunction of "soul" and "body", but as an indivisible "living soul" (KJV), or "living being" (NRSV),⁷ animated by the "breath of life":

Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Claus Westermann comments: "This sentence is very important for the biblical understanding of humanity: a person is created as a (living soul); a 'living soul' is not



put into one's body. The person as a living being is to be understood as a whole and any idea that one is made up of both body and soul is ruled out." "The breath of life, then, means simply being alive, and the breathing in of this breath, the giving of life to humans, nothing more (cf. Ps. 104:28-29; Gen. 7:22). And so there are no grounds for the opinion that God created humans immortal..." "...it is not at all permissible...to read into the sentence that something of the divine was given to humans at creation...."⁸

Certainly we are created "in the image of God", with an exceptional God-given purpose. But we are in no sense divine. We are creatures, part of God's creation, not part of God. Furthermore, we are indivisibly whole "living beings". The clear implication, as far as death is concerned, is that the death of the body must mean the death of the whole person. Whether or not our mind and our brain are the same thing, the point is that, in any case, according to the Bi-

ble, functionally at least we are inseparable whole beings and there can be no question of personal activity or consciousness after the death of the body. ■

References

¹You can read an extract from Chapter 1 The problem of death in Issue 55 or on the website or in the book.

²F. J. Taylor, "Immortal", in A. Richardson (Ed), *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1975, p.111.

³B. O. Banwell, "Body", in J. D. Douglas (Ed), *The New Bible Dictionary*, London: I.V.P., 1963, p.162.

⁴George Carey, *I Believe in Man*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980, pp.171-2.

⁵W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, London: S.C.M. Press, ET. 1972, Vol.2, p.150.

⁶C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, London: S.P.C.K., ET. 1984, p.158.

⁷KJV, *King James (or Authorised) Version*, 1611; NRSV, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁸C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: S.P.C.K., ET. 1984, p.158. A Commentary, p.207.*



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***Life, Death and Destiny*
2nd Edition**

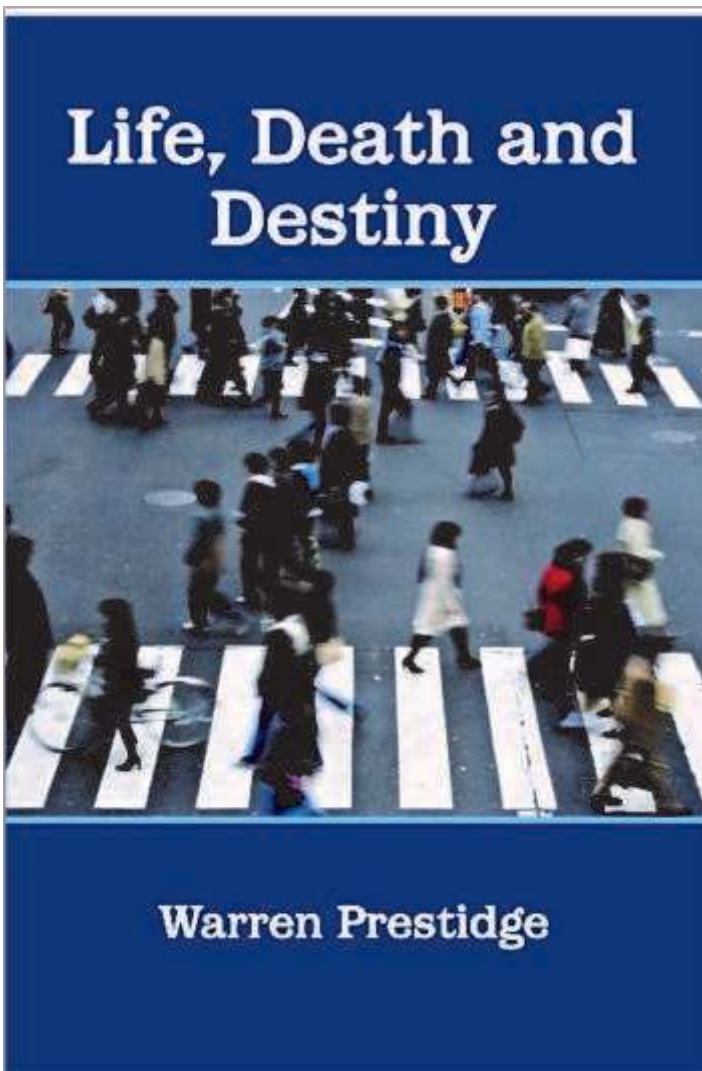
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From a Reader:

I just finished reading your book *Life, Death and Destiny*. You obviously researched it very well with an extensive Bibliography and I have to say that I agree with your conclusions almost entirely. As I read I had the sense that the further progression I made into your writing that the strength and momentum of your arguments seemed to accelerate dramatically, which really captured my desire to finish the book before putting it down even for a while.

~ R



The Stewardship from God

By Jefferson Vann

The epistles in the New Testament offer readers a picture of the gospel in missions and church context. We seldom read them that way, choosing rather to pick a verse here, a paragraph there, and try to apply those isolated texts to our personal lives. That usually works, though, because God's word does have implications for our personal lives. It would be helpful, however, for us to read through an entire epistle every once in a while, and try to figure out its message to the people it was written to.

We conditionalists often quote 1 Timothy 6:16, because it teaches that God's immortality is exclusive. That is a great proof-text for our message, because it blows a hole in the concept of innate immortality in humans. **But are we taking that text out of its context?** The only way to answer that question is to actually look at the epistle as a whole. Once we understand the message of 1 Timothy, we can then see how 6:16 fits within that message.

the context

Ephesus was a major city in the Roman world during the first century, and the church founded there would be a major player in the task of evangelizing that world. We read about Ephesus in the book of Acts,¹ 1 Corinthians,² Ephesians,³ the epistles to Timothy,⁴ and The Revelation.⁵ Ephesus was an important city financially for the empire, located on a port at "the greatest harbour in Asia,"⁶ and serving as an economic centre for the province of Asia Minor. Roman inscriptions from the time of the emperor Claudius indicate that the city had a problem with corrupt leaders, stealing funds earmarked for the preservation of its great temple.⁷ Ephesus had bad stewards.

the apostle

Reading the letter, it is not difficult to point out the major characters it presents. There is, of course, Paul the apostle, sent by God and seeking to obey his command to spread the gospel and plant churches among the Gentiles. Paul was never the "pastor"

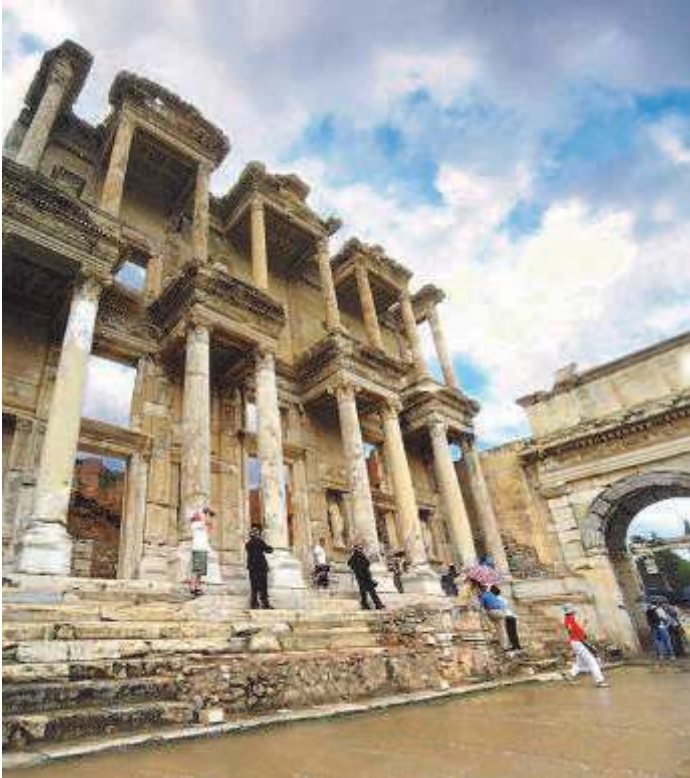


Photo: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Celsiuslibrary-DK.JPG

of the church at Ephesus. Neither was he a duly registered representative of a governing body of elders. His authority was his message, and the fact that many in Ephesus first heard the gospel as a result of his ministry.

the missionary

He addresses the book to Timothy, whom he regards as his true child in the faith. Timothy is a disciple of Paul as Paul is of Christ. He was sent by the apostle to proclaim the gospel, to evangelize, and to maintain the work of the churches already planted. He served as a representative of the churches to Paul, and a representative of the apostle to the churches. Timothy was not

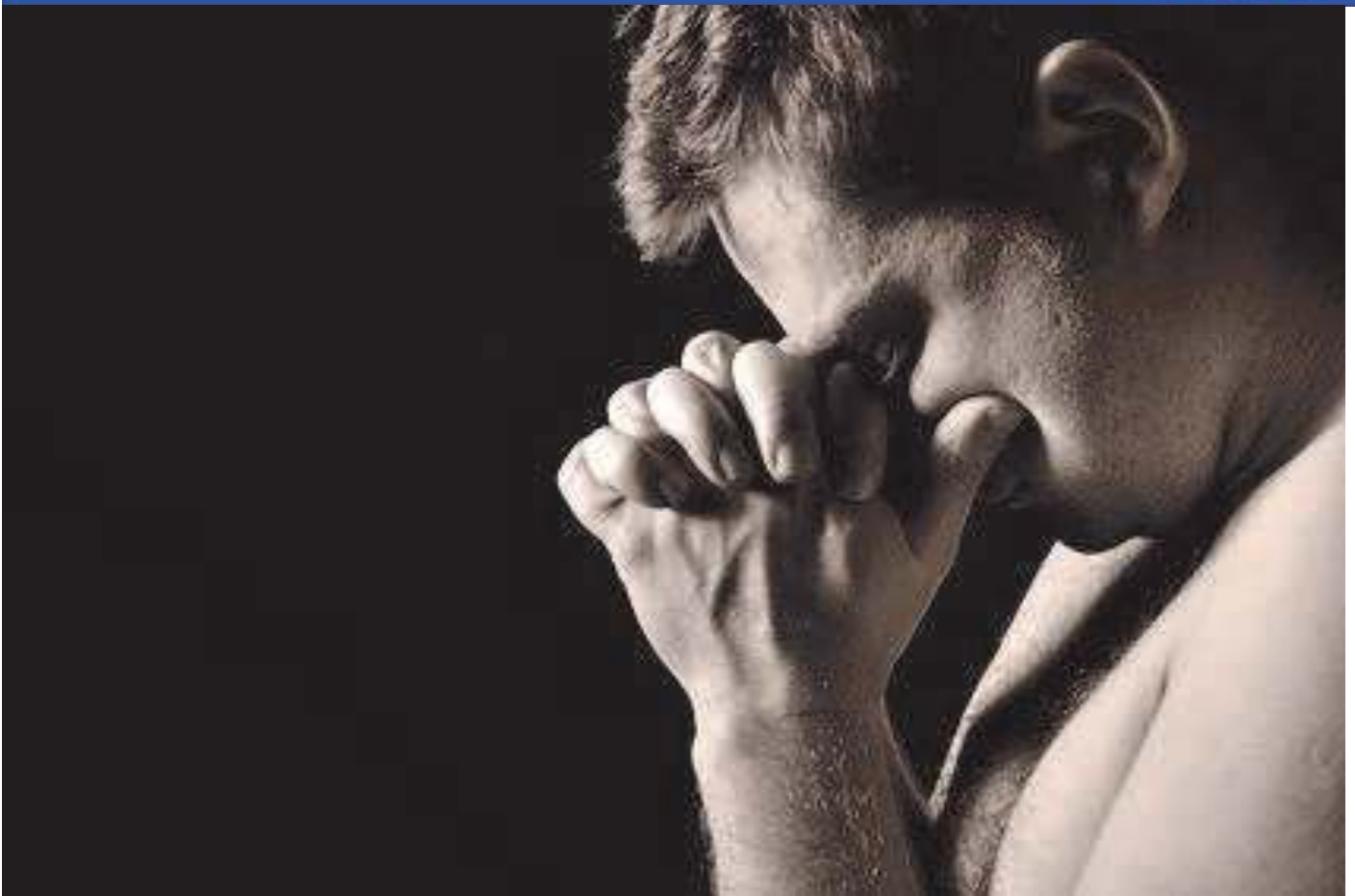
the “pastor” of the “church in Ephesus.” He was more of a missionary, seeking to further establish the church – which consisted of several congregations meeting in several places throughout the city.

the false teachers

The antagonists in 1 Timothy are a group of people who are influencing the church to be something other than what God and Paul intended them to be. They are referred to as “certain persons” who are teaching a “different doctrine.”⁸ They are false teachers, but the exact content of their false teachings is not revealed, and has been a matter of a great deal of speculation. It is not too difficult to get an idea of what they taught by paying close attention to what Paul said against them. They are people who know the gospel message, but swerve from it,⁹ wandering away into vain discussion.¹⁰ They do not understand what they are talking about,¹¹ but still keep talking. They have rejected their former faith and have shipwrecked it.¹² They lie like demons,¹² perpetuating silly myths¹⁴ instead of the gospel. These guys are bad news, yet they are teaching within the congregations of Ephesus.

the gospel as truth entrusted

1 Timothy proclaims the good news



of life only in Christ as the most valuable thing the world has ever known. This “glorious gospel” is a truth which has been “entrusted” to Paul, and he has passed it on to the Ephesians.¹⁵ Paul was formerly a blasphemer, rejecting that truth, but he was forgiven, and is now charged with proclaiming it. He tells the world that Christ came to save sinners,¹⁶ and that whoever believes in him will gain eternal life.¹⁷

As he declares this truth, Paul cannot help but stop and glorify the only God, who is the King of ages, immortal, and invisible.¹⁸ God wants all people to be saved and to come to know this gospel truth.¹⁹ He wants

his church to serve as a pillar and buttress of this truth.²⁰ If people within the churches do not discipline themselves to act appropriately, it is like they are denying their faith.²¹ The truth entrusted is the message that the church must pass on to their generation, and the next. Anything that people do within the church that hinders that proclamation needs to be confessed and corrected.

stewardship as a motif

Paul describes that obligation to protect and proclaim the gospel as the theme for the epistle. Scattered throughout its six short chapters are terms that reflect the

concept of stewardship. The false teachers are promoting speculations (distractions) rather than the “stewardship from God which is by faith.”²² The term stewardship in Greek is a combination of the word for house, and the word for law. It is also the word from which we get the English term economy. Stewards in rich households were usually trustworthy slaves that were given management responsibilities. When Paul used the term, he was referring to the valuable gospel that has been entrusted to the church. The false teachers were not living up to that trust.

By contrast, Paul says that God found him faithful, and appointed him for service (as a steward of the gospel).²³ Paul, in turn, entrusted that mission to Timothy,²⁴ who was commanded to entrust it to the faithful leaders in Ephesus.²⁵ These leaders must not be lovers of money or greedy for dishonest gain.²⁶ They must have proved themselves by managing their own households well, before being appointed to manage God’s household.²⁷ These leaders are valuable assets to the church as well, and should be well provided for financially, because the Scriptures teach “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The la-

bourer deserves his wages.”²⁸

Key to the strategy of winning Ephesus to Christ was the personal godliness of the church members. While training for physical fitness is valuable, training in godliness is valuable in every way.²⁹ That godliness is not just spiritual piety. It works its way into everyday life, by producing a love for family that takes care of aging parents.³⁰ By properly managing their households, believers “give the adversary no occasion for slander.”³¹

Those members of the congregations in Ephesus who actually are slaves should do well by their masters, and not take advantage of them if they are believers as well. Instead, “they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.”³² Their masters, the “rich in this present age” are encouraged not to put their hopes on “the uncertainty of riches” but on their Master, God, “who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”³³

The false teachers are described as people known for their heated arguments and personal vices, and for their mistaken assumption that godliness will necessarily make someone rich.³⁴ Paul encourages Timothy to be financially content, but to pursue the attributes of

godly living: “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.”³⁵ These attributes point people to the LORD who made them possible by his grace. This was the stewardship from God, the strategy to win people to eternal life by means of showing God’s miraculous work in the lives of believers.

1 Timothy 6:16

The point of mentioning God’s exclusive immortality in this epistle is to show that the only thing of real value in this life is the promise that we, too, might someday share that attribute. Presently, God is invisible, immortal, and dwells in unapproachable light. But those who

are being saved have his promise that someday we, too may share in his immortality. Since that is the case, the last thing believers would want to do is get sidetracked by false teachings, and miss out on the only thing of eternal value this life offers – hope of the next life.

Sharing the gospel is a stewardship from God. We are called to manage his household by providing for the needs of those within it, and by bringing others into it. Like Timothy, we are charged with the task of guarding the deposit entrusted to us.³⁶ The gospel is our resource. Faith in Christ is our currency. ■



References

¹Acts 18:19, 21, 24; 19:1, 17, 26, 35; 20:16f.

²1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8.

³Eph. 1:1.

⁴1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:12.

⁵Rev. 1:11; 2:1.

⁶Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 296.

⁷Robert McQueen Grant, *Gods and the One God*. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 27.

⁸1 Tim. 1:3,6

⁹1:6; 6:21.

¹⁰1:6.

¹¹1:7.

¹²1:19.

¹³4:1.

¹⁴4:7.

¹⁵1:11.

¹⁶1:15.

¹⁷1:16.

¹⁸1:17.

¹⁹2:4.

²⁰3:15.

²¹5:8.

²²1:4.

²³1:12; 2:7.

²⁴1:18.

²⁵3:1-13.

²⁶3:3, 8.

²⁷3:4, 12.

²⁸5:18.

²⁹4:8.

³⁰5:4.

³¹5:14.

³²6:2.

³³6:17.

³⁴6:2-5.

³⁵6:11.

³⁶6:26.



Jefferson Vann, missionary with Advent Christian General Conference, and elder at McAlpin Advent Christian Church in Florida. He is pictured above with one of his grandsons Jeffrey. You can find more of writings on www.afterlife.co.nz

Why care about the Bible and what it says?

By Doug Smith.

A majority of the articles on this site present arguments for truth based on interpretations of the Holy Bible. The authors share a common respect and appreciation for the Bible as a foundational source of truth. We believe that the teachings of the Bible are so important that they need to be correctly understood and taught, and errors need to be exposed.

Some readers may not see the Bible as an authoritative source of truth. Our use of Holy Scripture is irrelevant to those who don't see the Bible as we do. Certainly, much of Western culture has drifted away from a respect for the Bible as the inspired Word of God. For those without an understanding or appreciation of how unique and valid the Bible is, we may as well be claiming that Aesop's Fables can predict future events.

I come from a science-minded background, having been a software engineer for over 20 years. I

consider myself a very logical, reasonable thinker, not one who is driven to believe things based on personal feelings, charismatic speakers, or the winds of popular opinion. I did not come to my position of respect for the Bible lightly. As you can see from some of my [other articles](#), I'm willing to challenge long-held church teachings because I respect the Bible more than traditions.

I know many of my fellow pragmatic realists have heard arguments that throw the claims of the Bible out as unscientific. Perhaps you've visited churches that teach strange things or behave like crazy people. Maybe you've heard that the Bible has contradictions, that it was written by men with a hidden agenda, or that church/state conspiracies of the past made everything up.

If those things were true, you'd be right to reject the Bible. My question to you is:

Do you know whether those things are true?

Have you searched out the Bible's va-

***lidity or lack thereof for yourself?
If not, how “scientific” is your approach to discovering truth?***

Obviously, the authority of the Bible is a huge subject. Countless scholars over the centuries have devoted their lives to studying and writing on every aspect of Biblical authenticity, including studies of history, archaeology, and linguistics. It seems possible to find scholars that defend almost any perspective on the Bible, from those who assert its authority to those who dismiss it as complete myth.

Given the complexity of the analysis and contradictory statements from many sides, how can you decide whether you should trust the Bible as an authoritative source of truth? I recommend this approach:

Start with a willingness to follow truth wherever it leads. Whether you're an atheist, agnostic, or come from another faith tradition, an honest truth-seeking attitude is absolutely required. That's not to say that you need to bring an empty head—quite the contrary. The Bible itself expects people to study hard ([2 Timothy 2:15](#)), to check facts ([Acts 17:11](#)),

and to not be deceived ([James 1:16](#)). However, if you come to the Bible with an unwillingness to learn or change, you're wasting your time. If the Bible is true, are you willing to believe it?

Next, look to the fact that Jesus Christ really existed. According to the best scientific techniques used to research any other historical figure, we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was a real Jewish rabbi named Jesus Christ. (For example, see this [recent ABC news article](#).) He really lived and died around 2,000 years ago.

From Jesus' existence follows the fact of his actual, physical resurrection. The Bible makes the incredibly bold claim that if Jesus Christ didn't actually rise from the dead, everything else in the Bible is irrelevant ([1 Corinthians 15:3-19](#)). I believe the evidence that shows Jesus died, was buried, the tomb was empty, and many people willingly gave their lives—unwilling to deny that they saw Jesus alive. Several books

document the evidence for the resurrection very well, including some listed at the end of this article.

1. Given the fact of Jesus' existence and resurrection, he becomes the clear authenticator for the validity of the Bible. With credentials like that, I'm going to take Jesus' opinion over anyone else's. In the New Testament gospel of Matthew, Jesus quotes the Old Testament more than 40 times, quoting from at least 19 Old Testament books. That's nearly half of the Old Testament books referenced by Jesus in just one gospel. It's clear that Jesus held the Bible in very high regard.
2. With Jesus' validation, the remaining question is: how accurately has the Bible been translated? How can I know that the Bible I have in my hand is a faithful reproduction of the original? Fortunately, archaeological evidence for the accuracy of the Bible is stronger than nearly any other historical document. Near the Dead Sea, for example, ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament were found that date back to 150 B.C. New Testament

manuscripts have been uncovered and verified to be within 40 years of the original writing. These dates are hundreds of years closer than documents about historical figures like Caesar, where earliest known specimens are within 900 years of the originals.

This is a huge area of study with vast amounts of evidence and research. I challenge anyone to investigate the Bible's historicity and accuracy as deeply as you desire. I will list several books at the end that you should consider in your research. Once you study and consider these five things, there remains an action on your part: faith, or choosing to believe the evidence. Faith doesn't mean that you shouldn't think about things deeply, or you accept irrational or false ideas. It does mean that with all the possible, rea-



sonable evidence, you come to a conclusion, then step out and decide.

Do you reject the Bible based on hearsay? If what it claims is true, it is the most important book you'll ever read. Do you take the unscientific approach of rejecting it without actually reading it and studying the evidence for yourself? Will you allow the false teaching of both secular and religious leaders to drive you away from personally investigating its message? Or will you, with a willingness to follow truth wherever it leads, research the scriptures and the evidence and come to your own conclusion?

Resources for your consideration (with thanks to Dr. Bobby Harrington for his excellent library and suggestions):

John Ankerberg, John Weldon, and Walter Kaiser, Jr., [The Case For Jesus The Messiah](#)

F. F. Bruce, [The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable](#)

William Lane Craig, [Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus: Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity](#)

Douglas Jacoby, [Compelling Evi-](#)

[dence for God and the Bible: Finding Truth in an Age of Doubt](#)

Walter Kaiser, [The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant](#)

Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, [Evidence for the Resurrection](#)

Jeffery Sheler, [Is the Bible True? How Modern Debates and Discoveries Confirm the Essence of the Scriptures](#)

Lee Strobel, [The Case For Christ](#)



Doug Smith is a grateful follower of Christ and an avid Bible student who is willing to believe the Bible, even when it contradicts tradition. Doug writes at www.endlesshellended.com. He is blessed by his wife Lynetta, who is also a professional editor. Doug and Lynetta share four daughters and live near Nashville, TN.

The mortal God: Would Jesus have died anyway?

By Dr. Glenn Peoples

Jesus died to save people from their sin. That has always been at the heart of the Gospel. But was Jesus mortal, like us?

This is a question I've seen posed a number of times. On the face of it, the question seems a bit strange. Jesus had arteries. He had a brain. He had lungs and internal organs. Things can go wrong with these things; cut them, hit them too hard, inhale the wrong things or fall from too great a height, and you'll die, guaranteed. But to die in these ways is not just to die. Jesus didn't just die. He was killed – crucified, as the Creed recalls, “crucified, died and was buried.” Obviously he was killed. The question is about what would have happened if nobody had killed Jesus. What would have happened then? Maybe he was immortal in the way that the elves of Tolkien's Middle-Earth were immortal. They can be killed, but if they're not killed, they won't die. Was Jesus like this? If he had not been crucified, would he still be walking around among us today? Could he ever have gotten sick – perhaps even terminally ill? Would he have gotten grey hair or tooth decay?

Some of the examples may seem to trivialise the important question, but

they don't – they draw attention to the sort of question we're asking. The question is asking us whether or not Jesus, when he lived his earthly life in Judea, suffered all the limitations and afflictions, including death itself, that the rest of us are lumbered with. The question, I think, represents the worry that if Jesus could have died of old age (or gotten sick, or perhaps any number of “human” things), then somehow his uniqueness is undercut. If he could have done any of those things, then he's not really the divine son of God, he's “just” a man. This way of thinking about Jesus, in my view, reaches its absurd heights in the Christmas carol: *Away in a Manger*. I'm sure many of you have sung: “The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” Are you kidding me?

An ancient error

This isn't just a modern sentimental error. It's a view of Jesus that the orthodox Christians condemned in the early church, a view called docetism. This view was closely associated with the



broader point of view called gnosticism. In this view, Jesus wasn't really one of us. He wasn't human, because a really divine being just can't be human. The physical world was a nasty, inherently corrupt thing, and the idea that a divine being could become a person who inhabited this place – or even worse, who was part of it – was unthinkable (this is the wider Gnostic view). Docetism comes from the Greek term δόκησις (dokēsis) meaning “apparition” or phantom, something that only seems to be there but isn't really. That's exactly what Christ did, in the docetic view; he seemed to be human, but he wasn't really human. Popular versions of docetism can be seen

in, for example, the Ebionite movement. Here, Jesus was seen as a normal human man in every way, until his baptism. At his baptism, the spirit of Christ descended upon Jesus, empowering him for his incredible ministry. But since gods do not die, the Ebionite view taught that as Jesus hung on the cross, the spirit of Christ departed, leaving the mere man Jesus to die.

As soon as the early Church started to wrestle with the question of God in Christ, living and dying among us, it rejected docetism. Jesus was really a man. And yet, it's often the case that we verbally reject things that we know we should reject, while being influenced by them all the same. This is true in terms of sin

– we condemn materialism, lust and pride, but we still know full well that these things affect us. The same is true of ideas. Yes, Christianity condemned docetism, and yet at the same time there has always been a reluctance to make Jesus “too low,” or too human.

Jürgen Moltmann described the tension like this:

The christology of the early church had to come to grips with ... objections derived from the concept of God assumed in antiquity. The more it emphasized the divinity of Christ, making use of this concept of God, the more difficult it became to demonstrate that the Son of God who was of one substance with God was Jesus of Nazareth, crucified under Pontius Pilate. Consequently, a mild docetism runs through the christology of the ancient church. Anyone who began with the question about what was ‘above’ in terms of the question of God and salvation, as posed in antiquity, found it hard in any real sense to find an answer ‘below’, in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, and even harder to find an answer in the abandonment by God of the crucified Jesus.¹

In other words, the more strongly people emphasised the idea of a God who is changeless, aloof and entirely “other,” the more difficult it

was to think of God coming to us in the form of this man in sandals who wandered around the Israeli landscape and who was nailed to a cross.

For the biblical writers, the death of Jesus, the son of God, was horrible, perhaps even terrifying and mysterious, but a fact of history. The “sun’s light,” says Luke, “failed,” signifying that something truly unthinkable had occurred. Before his death, Jesus saw it coming and agonised in Gethsemane. The Apostles were adamant that the saviour they proclaimed, the truly divine son of God, had really died. It is there in Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, the first public proclamation of the risen Lord: The one who was crucified and had been dead is the same one who was raised up and given the name above all others. Docetism is off the table as real option for believers in Jesus. Jesus didn’t just appear to be a mortal man, he really was.

The emptying of Christ

The human condition isn’t simply the fact that others can kill us. It’s a loss of harmony; with God, with each other, with creation. After God drove Adam and Eve from Eden in the story of creation and the fall, the climax of the curse that God pronounced was that they would return to the dust from which they were

taken, for “dust you are, and to dust you will return.” The penalty was separation from God and therefore from life, resulting in death.

This is (partly) why it is important to see that Christ’s humiliation, his act of lowering himself is not just about the fact that he gave up his life. Of course that’s the thing we all remember for obvious reasons, but when Paul called on Christians to follow Jesus’ example in serving others, he didn’t go straight to the crucifixion. Here is how he described that example, in Philippians 2:

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Yes, Jesus’ humility included his obedience all the way up to the point of death, but it started before then. The very fact that Jesus be-

came human at all was the big step here. He lowered himself, or as the Greek term used in verse 7 (ἐκένωσεν, *ekenosen*) indicates, he emptied himself (a concept referred to in theology as *kenosis*). He took on a status that was lower than what was his by right – and not just a status, but he took the very form of a servant. This was no mere illusion. The New Testament writers made it clear that Jesus didn’t commit any sin (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:21 or 1 Peter 2:22), but in order to save us, he had to truly become one of us and be treated as though he had sinned (or as Paul told the Corinthians in the passage just cited, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us”). It would have done no good for Jesus to identify with an immortal, glorious, invincible version of us – people like that hardly need redeeming. In becoming one of the people he came to save, Jesus came, as it were, “all the way down” to where we are.

Jesus identifies with those he came to save

One thing I say every time I talk about the incarnation is that in it, Jesus identified with us, embracing the very thing he would raise up and glorify, namely broken, finite, frail, mortal humanity. The writer of

Hebrews (whoever they were) opens the book by talking about Jesus the great high priest. In making a point that might seem a bit strange to our ears, the writer stresses that in Christ, God wasn't setting out to save angels, but human beings (specifically, the children of Abraham, as mentioned in 2:16). But in order to become a priest for us, we are told, "he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." In every respect! The same writer stresses, perhaps more than any other New Testament author, the way in which Jesus truly identified with us as one of us. In chapter 5 it is explained that Jesus was like a high priest, who acts "on behalf of men in relation to God" (v. 1), and who "can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness" (v. 2). Most likely referring to Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane just prior to his execution, the writer went on to say in verse 7:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because

of his reverence.

Part and parcel of Jesus emptying himself and becoming one of us – and showing us what "us" should look like in the process – was the example that he set for us in being entirely dependent on his Father. The writer of Hebrews is not alone in saying that even for his very life, Jesus looked to the Father to provide and sustain. Jesus' dependence on his Father is seen in his trusting his spirit to him in death (Luke 23:46), relying on him to receive it back again in resurrection, just as we too as followers of Christ can face death in the hope of resurrection. This is what did Stephen as he was being stoned to death, praying "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit (Acts 7:59)." Similarly, Paul reassured the church in Rome in Romans 8:11 with these words:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

The purpose of these words was clearly to give the reader hope in the face of death, not to offer a detailed explanation of Christology, but Paul lets slip what appears to have been taken for granted by the Christian community: Jesus was a

mortal dependent on the Father, who raised him back to life just as he will also do for us. In fact, Paul's entire theology of the resurrection of believers is informed by his understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15, the most lengthy discussion of the resurrection of the saints in the New Testament, Paul describes Jesus as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," a term illustrating the way that Paul saw what happened to Jesus as a sample of what will happen to those who belong to him – the rest of those who have fallen asleep but who, unlike Jesus, are still asleep. And what will happen to those people, Paul went on to say, is that "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." Jesus was – just as we will be – transformed from corruptible and mortal to incorruptible and immortal. What these passages of scripture show us about Jesus is that he stood in our place in receiving conditional immortality. By making himself absolutely subject to the sustaining power of God, not relying on being inherently but instead depending on the one who could raise him from the dead, Jesus not only becomes like one of us, but in doing so he shows us precisely

what we are.

So the answer is yes. Jesus certainly was mortal, and the fact that God the son became a mortal human being, subject to all of our weaknesses and limitations, and raised and glorified that human life through the resurrection, is precisely what assures us that our own mortal, frail selves will be raised and glorified with him. Our God really became one of us in all of our frailness and brokenness in every way except sin, so that he could raise us up and restore us.

References

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 89.



Dr. Glenn Peoples runs Say Hello to my Little Friend, a popular blog and podcast on philosophy, theology and social issues. You can also find him at Afterlife.conz and RethinkingHell.com

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Statement of Faith

1. We believe in God and His one and only Son, Jesus the Christ. Heb. 11:6; John 14:1; 3:16; 20:31; Mat. 16:16.
2. We believe in the Holy Spirit. 2Pet. 1:21; 1Cor. 6:19; Jude 20; Eph. 3:5.
3. We believe that Jesus died for us and gave himself a ransom for all. Rom. 5:8; 1Cor. 15:3; 1Tim. 2:6.
4. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead; that by resurrection He became Lord of both the dead and the living, and the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep; and that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. Rom. 10:9; 14:9; 1Cor. 15:20; John 3:16.
5. We believe that baptism is commanded by Christ, was practiced by His Apostles, and is taught in the New Testament. Mat. 28:18,19; Acts 8:12,38.
6. We believe that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the people of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2Tim. 3:16,17.
7. We believe that human beings are by nature mortal. Gen. 2:7; 3:19; 1Tim. 6:16; 2Tim. 1:10; Rom. 2:6-7.
8. We believe that human beings in death are unconscious. Psa. 6:5; 115:17; Ecc. 9:5,10. This is likened to "sleep". Job 14:12; Psa. 13:3; Jer. 51:39; Dan. 12:2; John 11:11-14; 1Cor. 15:51.
9. We believe that immortality is obtained only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. 1Cor. 15:21-23; 2Tim. 4:7-8; 1John 5:9-12.
10. We believe that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, to be followed by the Judgment. Acts 24:15; John 5:25,28,29; Rev. 20:12,13.
11. We believe that evil and evil-doers shall be finally destroyed. Psa. 145:20; Mat. 10:28 Rom. 6:21; Phil. 3:19; Heb. 2:14; 1John 3:8; Rev. 22:3.
12. We believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Acts 1:11; John 14:3; 1Thes. 4:16.