

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND BEYOND

As we did last week, we'll start with a reminder for those of you who have joined this course for the first time today, or who have forgotten what we said we are looking to do over these four sessions. The theme of this BRICK course is the afterlife: our aim is to look critically at the notions that we have inherited about what happens to us after we die, and especially regarding Heaven and Hell; and to test a number of the assumptions that we have developed around these concepts.

One of our first observations was that the very words Heaven and Hell come from Norse mythology, and that Hel is not a place, it is a she: Hel is a goddess who guards the Norse underworld, the lowest of all their nine worlds. In realising this, we decided that we needed to go further and deeper to examine what lies behind these fundamentally pagan words and concepts, in order to discover the true nature and extent of the cosmology that we as Christians maintain.

We've been doing this to date by examining the Biblical evidence. In Week 1 we began with the Old Testament, where we found a developing picture with lots of different strands of belief, some of which were complementary, others which appeared to contradict each other. In these there was a direction of travel towards a belief that there might be consequences in the afterlife for the faith and deeds that are demonstrated during a lifetime. And, latterly, we found a new and rapidly developing narrative that death is the precursor to a corporate resurrection of the dead at the end of time at God's command, and a sorting which will lead some to eternal life, and some to shame and contempt.

Last week we looked at the words of Jesus as quoted in the Gospels, in an attempt to discern definitively what he believed with regard to death and the afterlife. The conclusions we drew were sevenfold – which is a great Biblical number:

1. First, we found that Jesus's words confirm and develop the eschatological narrative which appears in Daniel 12, and which we looked at in Week 1. This says that there will be a moment at the end of time when the Son of Man returns to earth, there is a final time of conflict and tribulation, the dead will rise, a final judgement will take place, and there will be a separation between those who are bound for eternal life in a new creation, and those who are bound for eternal punishment
2. Both Luke and John's Gospels give us sound reason to believe that, at the time of this resurrection, the faithful dead will pass straight into eternal life, without the need to go through the judgement that awaits the remainder – and that they are predestined to do so from the moment that they decide to trust that Jesus is who he says he is
3. Eternal life in this regard will be the reoccupation of the Garden of Eden, the paradise that Jesus speaks of in his last moments on the cross – a symbol of the new heaven and the new earth which is foretold in Isaiah 65.17 and 66.22
4. As for the remainder, the final judgement will sift out those who have committed good deeds, τὰ ἀγαθὰ, during their lifetimes, from those whose lives are marked by the commission of τὰ φαῦλα, σκάνδαλα, or ἀνομία – careless, thoughtless deeds, insufficient good, failure to keep the law, falling into the traps that are set for them
5. Those who have done good will join the faithful in eternal life in Eden, where Luke 20.34ff implies that the form and function of our existence will be very different – again recalling the prophecies in Isaiah 65, where illness, death, want and war are alien concepts
6. Those who have not done good, however, will go into Gehenna, a place of fire and darkness and eternal punishment, where the only sound will be a wailing and gnashing of teeth
7. We said that, while it is tempting to see the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke's Gospel as a framework for Jesus's view of what happens between death and resurrection, it is

probably more illustrative of the contemporary beliefs of his audience than of Jesus's own cosmology. These beliefs would appear to include that, prior to this resurrection, the faithful dead will exist in the afterlife in a state of comfort which is nicknamed "Abraham's bosom", while there is an alternative and altogether more uncomfortable waiting room for the unfaithful and/or sinful dead.

Finally, we took comfort from John 14.1-4, where Jesus states that his father's house has many rooms, that he has shown us the way towards it, and he will come back to collect us so that we can also be where he is.

Tonight, as we move on from the Gospels and into the remainder of the New Testament, this passage from John gives us a good place to start. There is actually comparatively little in the New Testament that enhances our knowledge of what happens to us after we die. In his excellent book *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright says that the predominant interest of New Testament writers is in "life after life after death", that is, the resurrection of the dead, and what happens thereafter. It's certainly true that Paul's correspondence to the early church gives us few concrete additions to what we have previously learned from the Gospels.

However, there are a number of key passages in Paul's letters which, wittingly or unwittingly, have given rise to or been taken to support new or developing strands of belief. These strands include the following:

1. The nature of Heaven, as the place where God dwells and – potentially – to which the faithful dead go after their death;
2. The definition of the good deeds, τὰ ἀγαθὰ, which will get us through the final judgement – and, conversely, the definition of their opposite, τὰ φαῦλα, σκάνδαλα, or ἀνομία, which lead to our condemnation;
3. The estimation of the extent to which humanity can expect to make it through the final judgement, i.e., will it be an inclusive process, or exclusive around a chosen few? And
4. Finally, if faith is the thing that allows us to pass directly into eternal life, faith in what exactly?

Let's start with the first of these, the nature of Heaven. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians has in chapter 12 verses 1-5 a somewhat opaque passage which says this:

"Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses."

This passage has intrigued scholars for centuries. In it Paul is presumed to be talking about himself, and his own journey to what he describes first as the third heaven, and then as paradise, where he heard "inexpressible things" which he believes he is not permitted to tell. Infuriatingly, the letter does not dwell on this point, but moves on quickly from it, leaving us frustratingly short of an explanation.

In attempting to unravel it, we can immediately identify within it the Jewish belief that the heavens, the Shamayim that we have talked about in previous weeks, were plural, i.e., that there is more than one. This is a belief that is carried forward from the Old Testament into the New, in the frequent use of the Greek plural οὐρανοί to denote the domain, the dwelling place of God. We know from contemporary Jewish writings that by this time there was a multitude of theories as to how many

heavens Shamayim actually comprised. The numbers vary widely, from two to three to five to seven to ten, even as many as 955 in one particular source.

Paul's apparent ability to access these heavens, and to reach the third one, runs contrary to the belief that we identified in Week 1 when we looked through the Old Testament, which was that the Shamayim are a place reserved solely for God. Instead, it echoes the belief that we looked at last week in the book of Enoch: this suggests that the Shamayim include a place which is reserved for God – but there are also other places in the heavens, or different levels of heaven, which are reserved for other things, and which are possible for people to visit while alive. As the passage that we started with from John's Gospel says, "in my Father's house are many rooms ..."

And not just the book of Enoch: we know from other contemporary writings that the heavens were increasingly being seen as including spaces where the faithful dead might expect to go. One of these writings is the Apocalypse of Paul, a second-century work attributed to but almost certainly not written by the apostle himself. This picks up from the point where Paul leaves off in 2 Corinthians and imagines his journeys through the afterlife towards that third heaven.

In it the apostle has a dream or a vision in which he witnesses the death of a number of different men, whose lives have been lived in different circumstances. Paul sees the soul of each man taken by angels from his body and immediately tested for its purity or otherwise. At the same time the angels warn each soul to remain mindful of its body, as it will need to return to it at the time of the resurrection.

There are different experiences related for each of the different souls. For one whose life has been unremittingly good, his guardian angel witnesses to the other angels that he has done the will of God in his life, and so they recommend that his soul should go on to a place where he can worship in the sight of God. The man's soul then comes before God, who says: "Inasmuch as this man did not grieve me, neither will I grieve him; as he had pity, I also will have pity. Let it therefore be handed over to Michael and let him lead it into the Paradise of joy, that it may become coheir with all the saints." And so the soul joins angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, and 24 elders, singing hymns and glorifying God. This is a scene highly reminiscent of those in Revelation (7:13-17) where the great multitude of witnesses dressed all in white wave palm branches and sing hymns of worship to God.

The book then has Paul taken on from here and shown the third heaven, through a door of gold, where only those with goodness and purity of body in all respects may pass. As he journeys on from there he is shown a land brighter than silver where the souls of the righteous await the coming of the Kingdom of God. In it there is a river flowing with milk and honey, and trees full of thousands of different kinds of fruit which are the rewards that the good receive.

Further along Paul sees the city of Christ in which are dwelling the multitude of those who are saved. In front of it is a lake of milk called Acherusa, in which repentant sinners are washed clean of their sins before they can finally enter the city. Around the city run four rivers, of honey, milk, wine and oil: on the banks of each one sit different groups of people – the patriarchs, the prophets, the innocents killed by Herod, those who have kept lifelong chastity, those who have been hospitable to strangers. Taken inside the city, Paul is then shown the thrones set aside for those who devoted themselves to God during their lifetime with no thought for themselves.

Paul is finally taken by his angel guide into Paradise, which is the Garden of Eden. Here he meets Adam and pretty much every subsequent significant person within the Bible, from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through Moses and Elijah to Mary the mother of Jesus. As the angel then returns him to his present life on earth, Paul is commissioned to tell people what he has seen, as a blessing to his generation.

The Apocalypse of Paul not only feeds off the mention of the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12. It also draws out the distinction between the fates of those who do good deeds, τὰ ἀγαθὰ, and those who do the opposite, τὰ φαῦλα, σκάνδαλα, or ἀνομία, which lead to condemnation. Paul's other letters, of course, provided some significant source material for this distinction between good and evil, as indeed did other New Testament writers. We started this series of talks by recounting Galatians 5.19ff, with its list of the sins and the sinners who will not inherit the Kingdom of God:

“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

To this can be added a quite striking number of other, similar passages which seek to give clear and unequivocal guidance on the nature of τὰ φαῦλα, σκάνδαλα, or ἀνομία which would keep a person on the wrong side of the dividing line:

“Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” 1 Cor 6.9-10

“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” Ephesians 5.3-6

“It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” 1 Thess 4.3-8

“... you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.” 1 Peter 4.3-5

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practises falsehood.” Rev 22.14-15

These passages both feed and reflect a remarkably large volume of early, non-canonical writings that survive, such as the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas and others, which we know to have been in wide circulation, and were under serious consideration for inclusion in the New Testament. These are primarily concerned with setting out the behaviours and characteristics which comprise what they describe as the Way of Light or Life, which leads to salvation; and then to contrast these with the kinds of deeds which put us on the opposite Way of Darkness or Death, along the lines of the passages that we have just highlighted.

What these writings in turn feed into is a somewhat graphic and gruesome genre in early church literature which plays extensively on the theme of the punishments which await those on the Way of Darkness or Death. Collectively these use Jesus's words in Matthew's Gospel about Gehenna, the place of fire and darkness and eternal punishment, where the only sound will be a wailing and gnashing of

teeth; and the words of Revelation 20:12-15, that the dead whose names are not in the book of life will be thrown into a lake of fire where Satan is tormented day and night forever. And they allow their imaginations to take very colourful flight.

It is in these writings, rather than in the Bible, that we find what we would perhaps most readily recognise as the Hell of popular conception. The Apocalypse of Paul, for example, alongside its depiction of the heavens which await the righteous, has even more lurid descriptions of the punishments inflicted on the sinful – including but by no means limited to corrupt priests and bishops having their bowels pierced with tridents, or pelted with stones in a pit of fire. Meanwhile, in a work called the Acts of Thomas from the third century, we read of a woman who is killed for adultery, is brought back to life by Thomas, and recounts a whole host of terrible punishments that she has seen meted out to sinners in the afterlife.

Then there is the pseudonymous Apocalypse of Peter, which was included within at least one of the earliest approved collections of Biblical literature, the second century Muratorian Canon. This takes as its starting point the story of the transfiguration in Matthew 17, and it imagines what else Peter might have seen when he, James and John journeyed up the mountain with Jesus, and saw Elijah and Moses come to meet his Lord. In it Peter is shown the judgement that awaits those “who have fallen away from faith in God and have committed sin”, in an afterlife where a river of fire carries “the unrighteous, the sinners and the hypocrites” to “a place wherein they shall be punished forever, each one according to his transgression.” Here the worshippers of idols are pursued up to a high place, then cast down from it, then pursued back up again, round and round for eternity; those who did not honour their father or mother similarly roll down a mountain into the fire, and then are forced to climb back up to roll back down again, and so on; blasphemers are hung up by their tongues over burning flames; murderers are condemned to a place full of venomous beasts who torment them without rest; slanderers gnaw their own tongues and are prodded with red-hot pokers; liars have their lips cut off, and fire poured down their throats; those who pursued riches at the expense of all else are clad in filthy rags and bound to a pillar of fire; and so on, and so forth, in ever more gory detail.

These writings reflect an increasingly hard line which developed within the early church. This required the highest of standards of piety and purity to be maintained in order to contemplate entry into the heavens, and to avoid the punishments which faced the wicked. To give you some idea of the spirit in which these expectations were framed: there is a passage in a work entitled *de Spectaculis* by Tertullian, an early Christian apologist from the late second/early third century AD, wherein the theologian contemplates that one of the greatest rewards for the righteous will come after their death, when they will be able to sit in heaven and take joyful satisfaction from watching sinners being tortured in hell for their misdeeds.

Yet this was only one of the lines being taken at the time. There were others – including one which continues to cause controversy to this day. Once again, it finds support from the writings of Paul, in 1 Cor 15:26-28, where it is said: “*The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he ‘has put everything under his feet’ ... When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.*”

The statement in this passage that everything is subject to the Son of God, and that God will be all in all, has been interpreted alongside others such as Acts 3.21 (“*Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets*”). The conclusion drawn is that all things will be restored: and so, ultimately, not just the good and faithful but all of us will be saved at the time of the resurrection. This is a theory which is now called universalism, and it stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the viewpoint of Tertullian and

his ilk, who stressed the exclusivity of heaven for only those few who were wholly righteous, chosen and predestined.

Universalism found early expression in the writings of Origen, a theologian from Alexandria in the third century AD. Using 1 Cor 15:26-28 and Acts 3.21 as his startpoint, Origen worked his way through two logical deductions, which can be summarised as follows:

1. First, God is intrinsically and unremittingly good and so is incapable of wishing or inflicting harm upon His people. Therefore the suggestion that He has created a universe which abandons some people to eternal harm in Hell runs contrary to what we know of God's nature
2. Second, God wishes to save all His people and is all-powerful. The suggestion that anyone is condemned to eternal punishment in Hell suggests that God is incapable of saving them, i.e., that He is impotent instead of omnipotent. Again, this runs contrary to what we know of God

The theory of universalism gathered support through other scriptures, especially 1 Peter:

- *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built." (1 Peter 3.18-20)*
- *"But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit." (1 Peter 4.5-6)*

These passages are taken to suggest that the Gospel has been preached and will continue to be preached to the dead even after their death. The implications of this are that our opportunity to come into the faith that we need to win eternal life does not end with our death. Instead, there is an ongoing opportunity for us even after we die to hear the Good News of Jesus, to recognise him for who he is, and so to qualify ourselves for entry into paradise.

So universalism emerged from an accumulation of factors: the words of 1 Corinthians and of Acts that everything will be restored to God, and not just some people; the logic that God has both the love, the goodness and the power to save all people; and the idea that the Gospel can in fact continue to be preached to and heard by people even after they die. What it represents is a wholly radical departure from two previous strands of thought that we have identified: first, the Old Testament belief that all our deserts are meted out to us in our lifetime; and second, the later doctrine that it is only what we do in life prior to our death that determines what happens to us in eternity.

This extension, this deferral of judgement, this second chance if you like, represents very different thinking – but it was not unconditional. At the same time as promoting this universalism Origen believed that all are sinners, and all will die with some degree – greater or lesser – of unconfessed sin. In his words: *"The end of the world and the consummation will be given to us, when everyone will have been subjected to the punishment of his sins. At that time, which only God knows, everyone will have paid his debt."* (De Principiis 1.6.1)

In other words, Origen was one of the originators (pardon the pun) of the doctrine of purgatory, the belief that we will be subject to some process of purification after our death to burn away the traces of the sins we have committed, to make us fit for paradise. There may be some discomfort to go through to ensure that we are fit to enter paradise, to eradicate the sin that we had previously been

carrying. But this process should be viewed as remedial, and in our own interests, and not punitive or destructive.

One of the bases for the doctrine of purgatory is a reinterpretation of a passage that we looked at last week, in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25. This concerns the end of times, the resurrection, and the final judgement, the sorting of the sheep and the goats, culminating in verse 46, which is usually translated as "Then they [i.e., the goats, the unworthy] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

In pursuit of Origen's logic that we have just described, the doctrine of purgatory would have us read this verse quite differently. The point of focus here is the word which is translated as meaning "eternal", which in Greek is αἰώνιος. It's from this that we get our English word "aeon", which generally means an indefinite period of time, but one which is undoubtedly very long. In Greek, the word αἰώνιος has a similar meaning: it's an adjective denoting something which lasts for a very long time, without specific limitation. Therefore it could be used to denote eternity – or it could equally denote a shorter period of time, one which is longlasting but which definitely has an end.

In the doctrine of purgatory, the punishment to which the "goats" are subject is lengthy, but time-limited. It lasts for an aeon, or a generation, or some other long period, but then it is finished. And it has a purpose – and this purpose is defined through linkage with passages found elsewhere in both the Old and the New Testament, including (again) in Paul's letters. These passages talk of a process of refinement, a journey through fire, as a necessary precursor to our being able to present ourselves as fit and acceptable to God:

"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. (Malachi 3.1-4)

"... each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames." (1 Cor 3.10-15)

This theory of universalism, that all will be saved but only after undergoing a process of purification in the afterlife, was strongly held within the early church. Not just by Origen, but by a number of other influential bishops and theologians whose writings survive from the first two or three centuries after Christ. These include Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, the wonderfully named Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Diodorus of Tarsus, who wrote this in the fourth century AD:

"For the wicked there are punishments – not perpetual, however, lest the immortality prepared for them should be a disadvantage – but they are to be purified for a brief period according to the amount of malice in their works. They shall therefore suffer punishment for a short space, but immortal blessedness having no end awaits them ... the penalties to be inflicted for their many and grave sins are very far surpassed by the magnitude of the mercy to be shown to them."

However, as we have seen, these views conflicted with more conservative voices elsewhere in the early church. As time progressed, the more militant views came to dominate, especially those of St

Augustine who, although equivocal about the doctrine of purgatory, specifically refuted Origen's universalist theories in his definitive magnum opus of Christian doctrine, *City of God*. Eventually Origen was formally denounced as a heretic in the sixth century, 300 years after his death.

Meanwhile, the doctrine of purgatory was ultimately discredited in the Middle Ages through the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences, which offered the wealthy an opportunity to buy their way out of having to undergo that fiery process of purification. The practice became so corrupt that it led indirectly to the Reformation – and the Church of England felt obliged to distance itself from it and everything associated with it, making this rather fabulous pronouncement in 1562 in its Articles of Religion which still has force today: “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory [and] Pardons ... is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”

St Augustine is also a key contributor to the discussion of the fourth and last question that we posed at the start of this investigation of early-church writings: namely, if faith is the thing that allows us to pass directly into eternal life, faith in what exactly? This is a question which – by contrast with some of the other questions we have explored – Paul addresses directly rather than indirectly, in 1 Corinthians 15, and 1 Thess 4.13-18 – both, significantly, written to churches based in Greece.

In both of these letters Paul is especially concerned to press home the importance of belief in the resurrection as a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, and to begin to explore the nature and extent of that resurrection. In 1 Thess he does so because, in his words: “*we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope*”.

But in 1 Corinthians he goes further, he is dogmatic in the technical sense of the word: “*how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith ... if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.*” In other words he is saying, if you don't believe in the resurrection, then none of this holds together.

At least one of the reasons why Paul emphasises the resurrection as a critical article of faith for the young Christian church, is that he is battling against two strong, contemporary belief systems – one within Judaism, and the other within the Gentile, predominantly Greek-influenced world into which Paul sought to spread the Gospel. The first belief is straightforward, and it is simply that there is no afterlife: “when you dead, you dead.” We have identified in previous weeks that this was the centrepiece of the Sadducees' belief system (“*The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits*”, Acts 23.9); but we also know that Epicureanism, one of the prevalent schools of Greek philosophy, also rejected any possibility of an afterlife.

The second belief system concerns the existence of an immortal soul as a critical element of our humanity. Nowadays we might take for granted the idea that our bodies are simply a casing for a soul which determines our identity, our intellect, our behaviours and our values, and which will be the thing that lives on after our bodies die, if indeed anything does. But in the centuries that we are looking at, either side of the life of Jesus, this idea was very much a developing one.

In Week 1 we saw how this idea emerged within Judaism, as a distinct shift away from the original, simple belief that we comprise a body formed from the earth which is animated by the breath of God – and that when we die, this life force, the “*nefesh*”, returns to God while our body returns to dust. The idea that we have a soul which is additional to and independent of those two core elements was

associated with the idea of Sheol as a place where the shades or “refalm” of the dead continue to exist. It is a non-Jewish belief which is probably attributable to the influence of those civilisations among whom the Jews lived for centuries, notably the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and the Hellenistic empire of Alexander the Great and his successors.

We know from the writings of Josephus that, by the first century AD, belief in the existence of an immortal soul had been fully adopted into the thinking of certain Jewish sects, notably the Pharisees and the Essenes. According to Josephus, the Pharisees “say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment” – while the Essenes teach that “souls are immortal, and continue forever; and that they come out of the most subtle air, and are united to their bodies as to prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural enticement; but that when they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward.”

These beliefs have direct parallels in the different schools of Greek philosophy, which had formed and developed their views over 500 years or so, and continued to do so in the great seats of learning of the post-Hellenistic world such as Athens and Alexandria. Paul’s arguments, then, especially to the Jews and the Greeks – and, indeed, the Jewish Greeks – of Corinth and Thessalonica, are geared towards presenting the emergent Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead as cogent, credible and compelling in the face of these competing, conflicting ideologies.

One particular belief that Paul had to work against is the idea – expressed by the Essenes, but also in Platonism and similar Greek schools – that the body is a prison which constrains the soul from achieving its true potential. Only when the soul is liberated from the body can it attain unity with the force that gave it life, and which represents ultimate fulfilment. If, then, resurrection involves a return to an earthly body, how can that be a good thing? Surely it just returns the soul to its prison?

In the final paragraphs of 1 Corinthians 15, from verse 35ff onwards, Paul takes very great care to address the substance of this objection – which takes us into a realm of thinking that we saw last week hinted at in the Gospels, in Luke 20:34ff, where Jesus says this:

“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶ and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.”

This seeks to go beyond the question of whether the resurrection will take place, and starts to explore exactly how it will happen. To Paul, it will be along the same lines as Jesus was resurrected, in corporeal terms. We will definitely have bodies, as Jesus had one – but these will be different: in the same way that a seed is buried, and comes back as a plant or a flower; in the same way that humans are different from animals; in the same way that the sun differs from the moon – so our resurrection bodies will be different from the ones we have now. The key difference will be that our current bodies are physical, weak and perishable; our future bodies will be spiritual, powerful and immortal – v44, σπείρεται σῶμα ψυχικόν, ἐγείρεται σῶμα πνευματικόν, which is perhaps best translated as saying that our bodies will be sown or buried as vehicles for our souls, but will rise as things of the spirit.

It would be nice to be able to say that Paul’s words were decisive in countering the views of the Essenes and the Platonists – but we know from other writings that these issues rumbled on unresolved for decades. Just 40 years later Clement the bishop of Rome writes again to the Corinthians in similar terms to Paul, repeating the same arguments in a new attempt to convince them that the resurrection will in fact occur. There is also a third letter to the Corinthians written in the mid-second century, wrongly attributed to Paul but accepted as canonical in some branches of the church, which makes

the same points all over again. Meanwhile, evidence that disbelief was not confined to Corinth comes in a letter from the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, to the Philippians which says: *“to pervert the Lord’s words ... by asserting that there are no such things as resurrection or judgement, is to be a first-born son of Satan. Let us have no more of this nonsense from the gutter, and these lying doctrines, and turn back to the Word originally delivered to us.”*

Fast-forward another couple of hundred years, and St Augustine can be found rehearsing the same arguments in the work we have previously mentioned, *City of God*. In books XX and XXII Augustine goes into tremendous detail, first describing how he believes the resurrection will take place; then defending its validity against the counter-claims of different Greek and Roman thought-leaders like Plato and Porphyry; and finally contemplating at length the nature of the resurrected body – what will it be like, will there be male/female, how mature/tall will it be, will it be fat/thin, will it have any of the deformities from which we suffer, will its hair and nails grow, what will happen to babies who are aborted or die in infancy, what of those whose bodies are cannibalised, and so on. His conclusion is this: *“It is certainly our duty, if we wish to be Christians, to believe that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a resurrection in the flesh, when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead; it does not follow that our faith in this subject is vain just because we are unable to comprehend perfectly how this is to come about.”* (CoG Book XX.20)

I’m conscious that we’ve followed a rather circuitous and selective route around the landscape of the early church this evening – but deliberately so: the point has been this. As Tom Wright said, there is little in the letters of the New Testament that adds any real detail to what we have previously identified within the books of the Old Testament, and the Gospels. What there is, however, is material which helps us to explore two of the big questions that the Gospels leave us with, which are these:

1. If faith is the thing that allows us to pass directly into eternal life, what are the parameters of that faith? What should we believe, and what should we not believe? Much of Paul’s writing is concerned with answering this question and, to his way of thinking, the resurrection is a key feature of this. And
2. If the criteria which otherwise determine our fate at the final judgement are the deeds that we do in our lifetime, then what do we consider to be good deeds? And what do we consider to be their opposite, the things that will shut us out of paradise? Again, Paul has much to say about this in terms of the deeds and attitudes which, to his mind, serve to disqualify us from the kingdom of God

At the same time, however, while exploring the answers to those questions, the New Testament – and the letters of Paul in particular – provide fertile soil for theologians and writers in and around the early church to develop their own ideas of what happens to us when we die. Even though many of those ideas are contained in writings which are not included in the Bible, which are non-canonical, they have an influence over our belief systems which are much stronger than we probably realise.

We’ve mentioned in passing a number of these works tonight, such as the Didache, the Apocalypses of Peter and Paul, and Augustine’s *City of God* – all 1091 pages of it, but especially Books XIII, and XX to XXII. Each of these is derivative, in the sense that it has its basis in verses and passages of the New Testament, especially the ones from Paul’s letters that we have highlighted tonight. But each of these has also developed ideas and narratives that we would probably be familiar with, or which would accord with our general sense of what happens to us after we die. These include that:

- Good people are examined immediately after their death and, if they are found to have been good, they go into heaven – or a heaven

- The heaven that those people enter is a shiny white place where all God's people are gathered together to dwell with and worship Him for eternity
- Bad people are subject to the same examination and, if they are found to be bad, they go in a different direction to a place that we identify as Hell
- The Hell that those people enter is a place where they are tortured in punishment for the misdeeds they committed during their lifetime

However, none of these ideas are strictly Biblical – or at least, their detail is not fully confirmed by the books of the Bible, however much it may be influenced by them. Remember, all that we have so far been able to say with confidence from the Biblical texts that we have examined is this:

- Death is common to all, but there is strong hope of an afterlife of some kind
- Those who have faith in Jesus are promised eternal life with him in paradise, which is a restoration of the Garden of Eden
- There will be a resurrection of the dead, and a final judgement, at which there will be a separation of those who have done good things, and those who have done bad things
- Those who have done good things will join the faithful in paradise
- Those who have done bad things are destined for a bad place whose characteristics are fire, darkness, a wailing and a gnashing of teeth

Anything over and above those basic statements is interpretation. What we have seen tonight, from examining the views of the early church, is that interpretation can lead us to widely divergent viewpoints: from universalism, which says that all will be saved, almost without exception; to the more exclusive views of Tertullian and Augustine, which were that only the elect and the predetermined would make it into paradise.

We'll return to all of this next week, for the last and what I hope will be the definitive talk in the series, the one where we try to make sense of it all. Among other things I'll be telling you what I believe as a result of this enquiry – which I hope will help you come to a clearer view of what you believe, if you're in any doubt about that. [ENDS]