

# Is there life after death?

by Rex Morgan

**A**merican comedian Woody Allen is quoted as saying: “It’s not that I’m afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens”.

Just like Woody Allen, we may not want to be there when our death happens. Dying is something we try to put off as long as possible. But unfortunately we must all attend our own funeral. We are all terminal, you might say. As some wit has put it: “Death is responsible for 100% of all recorded fatalities worldwide. And it has no cure”.

There is a story about an old lady who went to a monumental mason to order a stone for her husband’s grave. After explaining that all she wanted was a small one with no frills, she told him simply to put the words “To my husband” in a suitable place. When the stone was delivered, she saw to her horror this inscription: “To my husband—in a suitable place”.

But seriously, what happens when we die? Do we go to another “suitable place”? Is death the end of everything—or the beginning of something new and exciting? When your coffin is buried six feet under, or slides into the crematorium, is that the finish, and you’ll never know anything else? Or will there be another life? If we will continue to live in some shape or form, what will it be like?

People have always wondered about questions like this. One of the most well known writers on the subject of death and dying, Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, wrote: “Since the dawn of humankind the human mind has

pondered death, searching for the answer to its mysteries”.

## Some beliefs about death

The pyramids of ancient Egypt are impressive testimonies to belief in the next life. The Egyptians mummified dead bodies because they thought the body had to be preserved and protected so the person’s soul could live forever. They built enormous pyramids to protect the bodies of their kings. Beside the mummies they placed offerings of food and drink and items of value to the king, so he could use those things in the afterlife. Some of the tombs were surrounded by a large number of graves of servants, often women and dwarves, who were sacrificed to serve the kings in their next life.

Buddhists believe that existence is a continuing cycle of death and rebirth. Each person’s position and

well being in life is determined by his or her behaviour in previous lives. For example, good deeds may lead to rebirth as a wise and wealthy person. As long as people remain within the cycle of death and rebirth, they can never be free of pain and suffering. But they can break out of this cycle by eliminating any attachment to worldly things, thereby gaining a kind of perfect peace and happiness called Nirvana.

Hindus postulate that when the body dies, the soul is reborn, or reincarnated, as either an animal or a human being. As with Buddhism, it is considered that our deeds determine how our souls will be reborn in our next incarnation.

Islam teaches that Allah will judge everyone after their death and, according to their deeds on earth they will be sent to heaven or hell. The Muslim heaven is a garden



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with flowing streams, luscious fruits, richly covered couches, and beautiful maidens.

The traditional Maori belief was that on death the soul left via Cape Reinga for Hawaiki, the land of the ancestors. If the rituals of death weren't properly performed, the soul might return as a wandering spirit to trouble those living.

So there have been many ideas and beliefs put forward to explain what happens after death, and these traditions have been accepted by millions of people. I think most of our readers would agree that some of the beliefs mentioned above are patently wrong. For instance, it is clear that the Egyptian dead didn't take the opportunity to avail themselves of the food and drink left

body.

It is axiomatic that for anyone who believes only in a physical world, death is the end and there is nothing else beyond it. Many people see it that way. But there are others who are not satisfied by that concept. In fact, down through history millions of people have believed in an afterlife,

for them. Their personal objects have been found in the tombs untouched (except by tomb robbers!).

Other ideas are harder to refute. For instance the ancient Persians believed the soul crossed over a bridge where for three days the good and evil spirits struggled for it. To the modern New Zealander, this doesn't sound like a plausible scenario, but can it be proved or disproved? Not really, because after physical death any further activity of the "soul" is a matter of the "spirit world", and is not something that can be observed through any of the five senses.

#### **No physical answer possible**

This is the great difficulty with trying to identify what happens after death. All we can see physically is that the heart stops beating, the lungs cease breathing, and the body becomes a lifeless, motionless corpse. No scientific observation or experiment can determine what happens to the person after that. The body is dead, but what about the person who has just died? Does that being continue to exist? If so, it can only be in some spiritual way, invisible to our physical senses, involving the soul which (or who) was in that

and this has been of great comfort to them. Is this just a fanciful illusion, or is there some basis for this belief?

Christians believe that there is a spirit world in addition to the physical creation we see around us. They believe that a God lives in this spiritual realm, and created the physical universe. A reason for believing in the existence of this God was presented in a previous *Inside Life* article, entitled “What happened before the Big Bang?”<sup>1</sup> If there is such a God, and he created human beings, obviously he would know the answer to the age-old mystery of what happens after death. Since scientists don’t have the tools to observe or determine the answer, it is interesting to look at what God says about it. His view on the afterlife is outlined in the Bible.

Christians believe the Bible was inspired by God, and is in fact a handbook he has given to humanity as the source of truth on many aspects of human existence. A previous *Inside Life* article entitled “The Bible: Holy or Holey?” presented a case for the veracity of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

In considering the question of what happens after death, it is only fair to have a look at what the Bible says about the subject. If there is no God, then there is no life after death—end of story. But if there is a God, what does he say about what happens after death? It’s worth a look at, because it is the only viable alternative to the notion that life comes to a complete dead end when we shuffle off this mortal coil.

### **A realistic view of life**

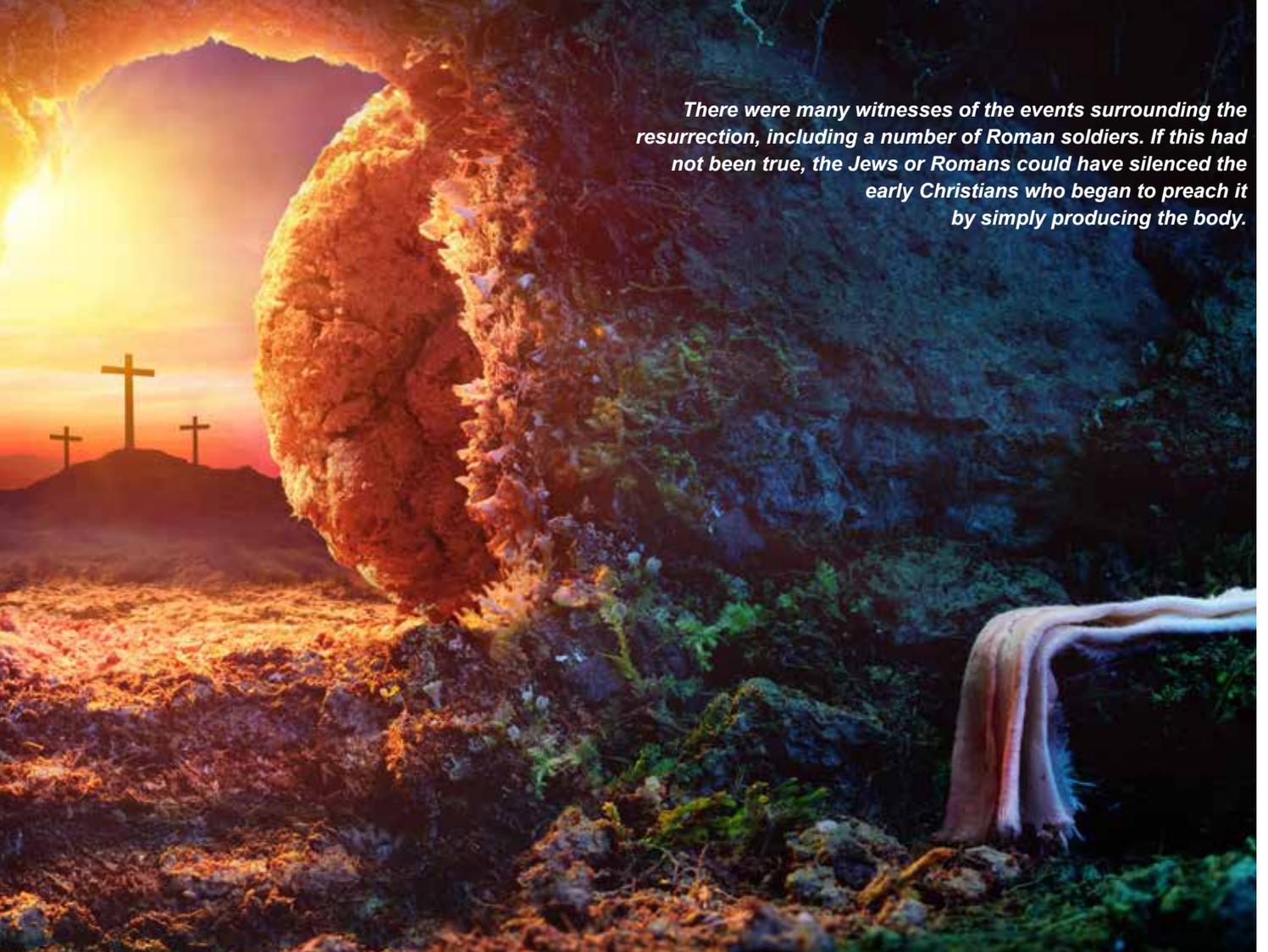
The Bible is very practical and realistic in its acceptance of the temporary nature of physical life. In its opening pages, talking of the creation of Adam and Eve, it says that we are made of the dust, the elements of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

A poetic expression of the fleeting nature of life was penned by the psalmist in these words: “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone”.<sup>4</sup> Another biblical author wrote: “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes”.<sup>5</sup>

We are like the puff of vapour that forms when we exhale on a cold



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morning, a fleeting wisp of wind that disappears almost instantaneously.

The Bible view is that each of us is pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things, when you think of us in comparison to the vastness of the universe, and in the light of the countless aeons of history. A humbling perspective, but hard to argue with. Yet on the other hand, paradoxically the Bible shows God attaches infinite worth and value to every human being. But that is another subject.

“Everyone has to die once”<sup>6</sup> is the candid declaration of the scriptures. The Bible often alludes to the transience of life. But it also goes on to refer to what happens after death, and it is the only book with the authority to do so, if indeed it was inspired by God, as only he could be privy to the answer to a question like this!

Thousands of years ago, the Old Testament writer Job asked the

question: “If we humans die, will we live again?”<sup>7</sup> He proceeded to give the answer that he expected one day to be resurrected. “I know that God lives, and eventually he’ll take his stand on earth. And I’ll see him, see God myself, with my very own eyes. Oh, how I long for that day!”<sup>8</sup>

Many other Bible passages talk about the hope of this resurrection. One of the most well known is Paul’s statement: “In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable...Then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’”.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus Christ is quoted as saying: “I tell you the truth, a time is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come forth...”<sup>10</sup>

But Jesus went beyond just talking of this as a far-off future hope and dream. He showed how it worked in practice by actually resurrecting someone!

### **Resurrections that have already happened**

Four days after the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus confidently approached the cave which was his tomb and called for him to come out. The Bible records that “the dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face”.<sup>11</sup>

Later, Jesus himself, after being crucified and buried for three days was also resurrected.

Most worldviews have to base their belief in the afterlife on untested faith, but the leader of the Christian Church has actually “been there, done that”! Jesus died and later came back to life again.

The resurrection of Jesus isn't simply a fanciful notion. It is an historical event recorded by a number of authors in documents dating from the first century AD, when it occurred.

There were many witnesses of the events surrounding the resurrection, including a number of Roman soldiers. After this amazing occurrence a writer stated that over 500 people had seen the risen Jesus, and that most of them were still alive at that time.<sup>12</sup> If this had not been true, the Jews or Romans could have silenced the early Christians who began to preach it by simply producing the body. The early church members were so convinced of the veracity of the resurrection that they died in their thousands for that belief.

If it was possible for Jesus to be resurrected, it is possible for others to rise again, and in fact that's what the Bible says will happen to everyone who has ever lived: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive".<sup>13</sup>

Even before he had resuscitated Lazarus from the grave, Jesus said to his sister: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies".<sup>14</sup>

What kind of life will people be resurrected to? A clue is found in the most often quoted Bible verse of all: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life".<sup>15</sup>

This promise of eternal life is stated as only being for those who believe in Jesus. But another Bible passage says that "all will be made alive",<sup>13</sup> meaning that every human being who has ever lived will be resurrected. What will happen to those who don't believe in Jesus? If they are resurrected, but not to eternal life, to what sort of life will they rise? And what will the "eternal life" promised to the believers be like? That's another fascinating topic. If you would like further information

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In summary, there are two general viewpoints on the question of what happens after death. For atheists, this natural lifespan is all there is, and there is no hope for anything beyond it. However, for Christians there is the hope of a resurrection and eternal life beyond that. And as we have discussed in this article, there is historical evidence that this belief is true.

Humankind, uniquely among life forms on earth, possesses an innate sense of the infinite. We seem to be hardwired with the need to extend this wonderful consciousness we now experience. Whether you believe the claims of Christianity or not, surely it is worth looking very carefully at them before you have to attend your own funeral?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Inside Life*, issue 25. For a free copy, please write to P.O. Box 304055, Hauraki Corner, Auckland 0750.

<sup>2</sup> *Inside Life*, issue 2. Free copies available at above address.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 103:15.

<sup>5</sup> James 4:14.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 9:27 (The Message version).

<sup>7</sup> Job 14:14 (The Message).

<sup>8</sup> Job 19:25-26 (The Message).

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:52.

<sup>10</sup> John 5:25-28.

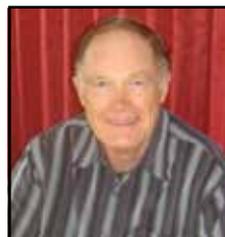
<sup>11</sup> John 11:44.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:6.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22.

<sup>14</sup> John 11:25.

<sup>15</sup> John 3:16.



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