

After Death—Then What?

By James Henderson

It was a dark and gloomy Scottish November night, with a full moon obscured eerily by the clouds that hung motionless in the heavens. In the ruins of the old castle four students walked briskly to meet the midnight deadline. A streetlight shone dimly against a lonely wall, and near the bottom of the wall there was the small oblong-shaped hole that people talked about.

The story was that the place had been haunted since the time of the Reformation, and that on some nights, at twelve midnight precisely, a ghastly handshake would be given to those who reached inside the slot. 'There's no such thing as ghosts', insisted Roberta as she inserted her hand into the void.

I had been waiting. It was freezing, but I had soaked my right hand in a puddle, so it was suitably colder and decidedly clammy. From the other side of the wall I shook Roberta's hand. I heard her scream, and I cackled for effect.

We enjoy pranks and jokes about it, ponder it in rituals, and sing about it with inspirational songs. We can speculate about it and it can ignite our imagination. Movies and TV series dramatise it, books are written about it, and philosophers go on endlessly about it. It's said that more people believe in some form of it than in God.

So, what do you think? Is there something after death? The very idea can fill us with both dread and comfort, with horror or delight. What would it be like? What awareness would we have? What memories? 'Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?' we're asked in the

lyrics of Eric Clapton's 'Tears in Heaven'.

Most religions profess that there is a future of sorts, and that often it is determined by how well we behave now. For the most part, apart from some branches of Christianity and, of course, atheism, the quality of the afterlife is determined by the effectiveness of our efforts in this life.

One of the original writers of the Bible, a man called Paul, taught that the future of the dead could be understood only through the experience of Jesus Christ, who was crucified and rose from the grave. Christ himself gave a cautionary tale based on the then contemporary views of the netherworld, but his listeners did not accept what he had to say. 'They will not be convinced', said Christ, 'even if someone rises from the dead'.¹

Paul's point was that Jesus, the Son of God, did rise from the dead, and, because of that, there is hope for the living and the dead. Just as surely as we all die, he explained, so we shall all come alive again because of Jesus. Paul wrote: 'For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive'.² It's an unconditional statement, not determined by what we do or don't do, or by what we believe or don't believe. It's a gracious act of God.

Christians embrace the idea that when we die, we are safe with God, and that there is a glorious new world to come. The late John Stott, who was a compelling public speaker and a prolific writer, told the story of Joni Eareckson Tada in his book, *The Incomparable Christ*. Joni was paralyzed from the neck down after a diving accident in 1967. The lively, adventurous teenager became a total quadriplegic. It was a devastating blow.



Joni Eareckson Tada, 2013

In the course of time Joni found hope and comfort in the Christian faith through the words of the Bible. She was convinced that after death there would be a wonderful eternity with Christ. She said: 'I have hope for a future now...it's a time, after my death here, when I'll be on my feet dancing'.³ With reference to the resurrection she continued:

Imagine the hope this gives someone who is a manic depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.³

That works for me. When it comes to the afterlife there are two basic options: either there is something or there is nothing. In the certainty of faith I believe there is something, and it's better and greater than we can possibly imagine.

Notes

¹ Luke 16:31 NIVUK

² 1 Corinthians 15:22

³ John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Inter-Varsity Press, UK, 2001) p. 151.