

Eternal Life Not Offered Before Christ

None of the covenants recorded in the Old Testament scriptures offer eternal life, a resurrection, or immortality! We tend to read Christian concepts which are not stated in the covenants back into them.

At the expulsion from Eden, a veiled promise was given that Jesus would conquer death (Gen. 3:15), but no understandable explanation of it is recorded before Christ.

The covenant with Noah contained no promise of immortality.

When we look back to the covenant with Abraham, enlightened by what we see fulfilled in Christ, we can detect a spiritual promise that all families of the earth would be blessed through him. But could Abraham and his descendants find assurance of immortality or a resurrection in that promise? They had a much more materialistic view which gave them assurance that they were God's nation with a claim on Palestine. Unfortunately, that claim is still perpetuated by both Jews and many Christians who look for a restoration of the Jews to their former land with the Messiah reigning over an earthly kingdom there.

Why could no one be saved by keeping the Law of Moses? "Because no one could keep it perfectly," you say? Hit the Delete key immediately. Don't even save that concept in Trash! Don't let anyone know you ever held such an ill-conceived notion!

If a person could have kept the Law perfectly, he would have been saved by his own innocence and merit, not by the Law, and that would have made the atonement unnecessary. The Law of Moses offered no salvation. Law cannot save, neither the code delivered through Moses nor a perceived code delivered through Christ. There is no promise of eternal life, salvation, heaven, immortality, and/or resurrection given through the Law. Law can only bring condemnation by its infractions.

The Covenant of Law was based upon the Ten Commandments. They were undergirded by laws and ordinances mediated through Moses which we call the Law of Moses. This code was given to direct the political and religious life of Israel only. The code was primarily earthly and temporary in application. The Fifth Commandment, the first commandment with a promise attached (Eph. 6:2), offered earthly, not spiritual, reward: "Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Deut. 5:16). No mention of "eternal" or "spiritual" rewards or consequences.

Although there were concepts of avoidance of, or escape from, death and *Sheol* in all ages, there is no exact term for *immortality* used in the Old Testament scriptures. God "took" Enoch (Gen. 5:24). Elijah was "taken up" in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11-12). Samuel was brought back by the medium of Endor (2 Sam. 28:7f). But he was not brought back from heaven, for rebellious Saul and his sons would be killed and be with him the next day (v.19). Moses and Elijah were apparent in the Transfiguration (Matt. 17). So there were prevailing concepts of continued life.

Job expressed belief in being raised from the dead (Job 14), but his belief is not stated as a promise for all mankind. David said he could not bring his dead child back

but would go to be with him (2 Sam. 12:23). He might have only meant that he would go to the grave, or Sheol, with the child, however.

Other references (Job 19:16; Psalms 17:14; 49:15; 73:24; Isa. 26:19; 53:10-12; Dan. 12:12-13; and more) express individual, and mostly vague, belief in resurrection but not necessarily in immortality.

Many years after the fact, when Abraham believed God's promise to give him a son in his old age, it was written, "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Whether God told that to Abraham or not is not revealed. Do we have evidence to conclude that God made some statement like this to Abraham: "Because you believe in me, you are regenerated, you have eternal life, and when you die you will be raised in immortality"? Prophetically, the gospel was contained in the promises to him, but there is no record of that being explained to him (See Gal. 3:8).

It is evident that many individuals held belief in an after-life, but there was no promise of it in any of the covenants, and I find no record of private revelation of such a promise to an individual.

Hebrews 11, in honoring the heroes of faith, indicates that some of them looked beyond earthly rewards. Abraham looked for a city built by God. The Patriarchs desired a heavenly homeland. Moses looked for a reward. "Women received their dead by resurrection." Other heroes "received promises." Those promises are not all identified in the Old Covenant writings, nor were they universal promises of resurrection and immortality. As we look back we are saddened by the finalizing observation that "... all these, though well attested by their faith, **did not receive what was promised**, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39f).

"I Am The Resurrection."

The promise of a resurrection and enduring deathlessness is unique to Jesus. He told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25f). "By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead..." (1 Peter 1:3). Jesus' miracles, teachings, and death would mean little except that he was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead..." (Rom. 1:4). Being the basis of our hope, the resurrection was the recurring theme of apostolic preaching in *Acts*.

Contrary to popular belief, a person is not born immortal, imperishable. Only God has that imperishable nature, for he is the "only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who **alone has immortality** and dwells in unapproachable light..." (1 Tim. 6:16). Man may *seek* immortality (Rom. 2:7). Jesus "...abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10), and that Good News plants hope within us.

Participation in the resurrection, however, does not guarantee immortality! Jesus' complete undoing of the power of death will be accomplished when he has restored life to all who have died. But there is another death for those who do not "seek for immortality," but who reject God. Paul explained, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end,

eternal life. For **the wages of sin is death**, but the **free gift** of God is **eternal life** in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:22f). He did not say “the wages of sin is immortality in endless torture,” as we have commonly interpreted. God does not immortalize evil.

This point introduces another facet which cannot be dealt with in this short treatise. However, in his *The Fire That Consumes*, Edward Fudge treats this subject exhaustively and scholarly. (Available from me for \$18.50 postpaid.) For the moment we will illustrate. A man might rob and kill several victims. As a punishment, he is sentenced to death and is electrocuted. The punishment is everlasting in its effect, but it is not everlasting in its process. He is not tortured ceaselessly for the process ends with his death.

The prospect is different for those who served God in Christ. In former times, those who died *slept* in death, but Paul now explains, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. Etc.” (1 Cor. 15:51f). Contrary to my former concepts, I now accept the possibility that the *last trumpet* call may not be referring of a universal resurrection all at once, but the “trumpet call” for each of us individually at the moment of death.

This concept gives exciting meaning to Paul’s comforting words in 2 Corinthians 4:13 through 5:5. Our earthly habit (clothing, habitation, tent) is temporary and will be destroyed in death, but we shall be left neither naked or without a habitation. As the earthly and temporal is discarded the eternal and heavenly clothing or dwelling is entered. No period of sleep awaiting a universal resurrection. No time of being left unclothed. No time of homelessness. Mortality is swallowed up by life (5:4)! No death! Just a change. “Do you believe this?” Jesus asked Martha. Do you believe this?

You may disagree emphatically with this suggested explanation. That is your privilege. However, you must admit that these concepts do not undermine any essential element of the faith.

Perplexing questions

In concluding this essay, I confess my puzzlement that any promise of resurrection and immortality remained indefinite and veiled through the millennia of Old Covenant history. A post script here will add more perplexing questions. I thought doing this piece would be like splashing through the puddle on the parking lot, but I find myself knee-deep in the murky water of the bar ditch!

Paul tells us that Jesus was the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20-23). So, was Jesus the first to be raised from the dead? Not really. Then what was unique about his experience? Those who were raised previously died again. Right? Wrong! Consider the following.

Solomon tells us that at death “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Ecc. 12:7). So the spirits of those who had died, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were alive with God. They had been **raised**, according to Jesus’ own words: “But that the **dead are raised**, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now **he is not God of the dead, but of the living**; for all live to him.” (Luke 20:27-40; Matt. 22:23; Mark 12:27). They were not depicted as being “**asleep**” or

“unclothed.” If this was true of them, would it not be true of all other of the righteous dead, “the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb. 11:23)?

Another question looms like an iceberg ahead. If the righteous were already raised, who were those remaining in the graves? Jesus assured his listeners. “. . . the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28). So, before Jesus was raised, some of the righteous had already been raised and others were yet in the tomb. Was the resurrection of the patriarchs and their reunion with God conditional, their permanent state being contingent upon Jesus’ destroying death later?

I will offer some possibilities, none of which seem fully satisfying.

(a) Jesus’ experience was unique only in that his death was an atonement and he destroyed the power of death in being raised.

(b) Some, like the patriarchs, were exceptions, “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21).

(c) The planned experience of Jesus preceded the patriarchs, and God’s immutable plan was counted as fulfilled. He was “the Lamb slain from the foundation (beginning) of the world (present order)” (Rev. 13:8; KJV; compare other versions).

(d) God let faith count for reality. “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:56, 58). God chose “even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:28).

Do you choose one or none of the above? The points of this essay are ill-arranged snatches of ideas and texts. If you care to work on it and you develop consistent answers, jot them on a post card and send them to me! ☺ I have faith beyond my ability to understand, but surely God is not displeased with our grappling with what he has revealed in an effort to understand better. []