

Isn't This Life All There Is?

Questions People Ask About The Christian Faith

Around the year 1264, a 17 year old teenager travelled with his father and uncle from his home town of Venice in Italy, to find new markets for their merchandise. They went into what is now Armenia and Uzbekistan, and eventually, all the way along the Silk Road to what is now Beijing in China. They were some of the first westerners to travel that far. The teenagers name was Marco Polo. Young Marco Polo had amazing experiences during his years in the Orient. He met powerful rulers like the Kublai Khan. He saw people and places that had been right outside his frame of reference as a westerner. He ate foods he had never even seen before. It was the trip of a lifetime, which he recorded in a book that became a bestseller of its day.

But there was a problem. Marco Polo didn't have a digital camera. Apart from telling people about what he had seen and done, he had no way of getting across the reality of the world he had experienced. When he told his close friends in Venice what he had seen, they thought he had gone mad. He told them that he had seen black stones that would burn. Some westerners had seen coal, but no one in Venice had ever seen it. They thought he was crazy. He told them he had seen a cloth that refused to catch fire. What he was describing was asbestos, but no one in Venice had ever heard of asbestos. He described a place where he had seen a substance spurting from the ground that actually set lamps alight. What Marco had seen was petroleum. To his friends, this seemed like the stuff of fairy tales, because they didn't know about crude oil. They just laughed at him. While people were fascinated with Marco Polo's book about his travels, for much of his life no one believed his stories. The places and events he described were just too fantastic to be believed. Years later, when Marco Polo lay dying, a Priest at his side urged him to recant all the tall tales he'd told, and acknowledge that he had made it all up. Marco Polo's last words were: "It's all true - every bit of it. In fact, I have not told half of what I saw."

There are several lies that we are told by the world we grow up in. They come from people who don't have a biblical worldview. We hear them so often, and they are repeated so loudly, we get tempted to believe them. Here's the first of them.

Lie #1 – Die And That's It

One of the greatest lies of our time is the lie that this world is all there is. Here's how it goes. Your parents conceive you. Your mother carries you in her womb for nine months. You are born. Your parents spend the next 20 years feeding you, clothing you, training and teaching you, paying for your education and helping you get a job. Then you leave home, get married, raise a family, buy a house, get a huge mortgage which takes you the next 40 years to pay off. Finally you get to retire from working to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet away from responsibility, and then you die! Your body goes into the ground or up a chimney in the form of smoke and that's it. It's all over. Finito! Oblivion. End of story. Isn't that cool? Doesn't that fill your life with a sense of meaning and purpose?

What does the bible say about that? Jesus said ***"I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."*** (John 5:25 29)

As far as Jesus is concerned, death isn't the end. After we die, there is going to be a judgement. Everything that you and I have done on this earth is going to be exposed. And for most of us, that's not going to be a pretty sight. When you and I die, it's not all over. It's just beginning.

Lie #2 – We Get A Second Shot

There are people who believe that if they mess up this life, they will get a second shot at it. There are different variations on this theme.

- **Reincarnation**

If you believe eastern religions like Hinduism, then when you die, your soul will be recycled in a new life form. When celebrities like Shirley McClain wax eloquently about reincarnation, they almost always talk about being recycled as a better person. Hindu teaching says that you might come back as a king, but you might also come back as a beggar or a cow, or even a tree or a fly. Imagine spending your next life dodging people with a can of fly spray in their hand! Actually, in Hindu teaching, reincarnation is bad. Part of the rule of Karma says your soul is trapped in a prison of flesh until you earn enough spiritual points to be released into eternal nothingness. Reincarnation is part of a religious system that has no heaven and offers no forgiveness.

- **Purgatory**

Some religious groups teach that when people die, they get an opportunity to make up for their sins in the afterlife. They go to a place called purgatory, where they stay until they are purified for their mistakes in their past life before being released into heaven. Loved ones can speed up their time in purgatory by giving special gifts to the church, or lighting candles and offering prayers and special masses on behalf of the dead. This teaching on purgatory comes from one of the Apocryphal books called 2 Maccabees, which you can find in a Catholic Bible. The Mormon idea of baptism for the dead is somewhat similar. It teaches that a person who dies in unbelief can be saved if a believing relative is baptised on their behalf. This teaching comes from one obscure verse in the Bible in 1 Corinthians 15:29. But no Christians interpret that verse the way the Mormons do, because the Mormon interpretation runs counter to the rest of the teaching of Jesus. Behind both these teachings is the desire to give people a second chance in the next life.

- **Spirit Guides**

If you believe all the psychic hotlines you find in the magazines and the newspapers, there are people who communicate with those who have died, who tell you that everything is OK after death, and you will meet your loved ones again in very happy circumstances. Now I don't doubt that some people who dabble in this stuff are hearing voices from the other side, but are those voices telling the truth? Wouldn't it make sense for the devil to use demonic spirits to lull people into a false sense of security? What if there really was no second chance after we die, and you had believed these so called "spirit guides"? Wouldn't that be a huge risk?

What does the bible say about this idea that we get a second shot? It very clearly says that we die once, then we face judgement. ***"Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him". (Hebrews 9:27 &28)***

The Dress Rehearsal

There is one emphatic message that runs through the Old and New Testaments. This life is definitely not all there is. It's a dress rehearsal for the main event. In fact, what is coming is far better than what we have here. The early Christian writers of the New Testament certainly believed that. The Apostle Paul said;

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." (Philippians 1:21-23)

As far as Paul was concerned, the life that was coming was so good, he really would rather have died so he could have been with Christ. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church he talked about being "at home with the Lord". He saw the next world as being more real than this one. In another of his letters to the Corinthian church he wrote this;

"However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" - but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians 2: 9&10)

So those first followers of Jesus, people like the Apostle Paul, were convinced that when they died, they were going to experience a life beyond this one that was far better. But how do we know that their belief wasn't any different from a Hindu who believes they will come back as a grasshopper, or a Spirit Guide who genuinely believes they are communicating with the dead? Isn't it all just a matter of opinion? Those first Christians were sincere, just as Hindus are and Mormons are and Spirit Guides are, but perhaps they were sincerely wrong.

Let's go back to the story I began this talk with. Marco Polo had been to another world, and became very frustrated when people didn't believe him about the things he had seen and done. He was trying to describe a world that he knew to be real, to a people who hadn't experienced it. That's how it was for Jesus.

Being Born Into The Real World.

Jesus came from the majesty and glory of heaven, and was born into our world to help us understand how we could be born into his. He talked about another world, which he called by different names. Sometimes he described it as Heaven, or the Kingdom of Heaven. Sometimes he talked about it as the Kingdom of God. But he was talking about a parallel universe where God rules and reigns. To help people understand it, he described it in the form of stories which we call parables. Each story spelled out a little more of the dimensions of the life after this one. But sadly, many people just didn't believe him, just as many don't believe him today.

One of the most memorable conversations Jesus had about the life after this is found in John's Gospel. I want to read it this morning;

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".

(John 14:1-6)

Jesus was very clear that the only way to live in the next world is through faith in him. He offers each of us the opportunity to spend the rest of eternity with him. The whole purpose of him coming to earth, and dying on the Cross for our sin, was that we could have a way to live forever with a holy God. He wants us to have eternal life with him. It's the reason why he came to earth. As far as Jesus is concerned, this life is only a preparation for the next world. It's a world we haven't seen, but Jesus has. And if you believe him, you will see it and live in it forever. All it takes is a simple prayer of faith like this;

"Jesus, I believe that you are the way, the truth and the life, and that I can only have this eternal life with you when I acknowledge that you died on the Cross for me. Forgive my sin, and teach me how to become like you. I want to put you in charge of my life. Make me the sort of person you have always wanted me to be. Thank you that through your death for me, I am forgiven of all my sin and made holy enough to live in heaven with you forever. I want to know you and live a life that pleases you, so that when I die, I will go to that place that you have prepared for me. Thank you Jesus for your gift of a life that can never die".

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