

Followers

Psalm 27:1;4-9
Matthew 4:12-23

What did the Hebrews of Old Testament times believe about life after death? In his seminal work, An Old Testament Theology, Bernhard Anderson wrote, “Just as people today believe a wide variety of things about life after death, so also did the Hebrews. Some believed in it; others did not. Some believed in an eternal judgment at the hands of Yahweh; others did not.” Elsewhere Anderson described the image of the Valley of the Shadow of Death as generally understood in the Hebrew mind. In Hebrew, the phrase seems to describe a chasm so deep the light of the sun cannot reach its floor. Apparently, some Hebrews believed all dead souls ended up there. Others believed it was the place of punishment, the location where those dead souls judged unrighteous by Yahweh spent eternity. Still others did not believe in it at all.

King David, the author of Psalm 27, believed in life after death. He sprinkled supporting evidence for this claim throughout the Psalm. Unfortunately, most of it gets lost in translation. Literally. Mitchell Dahood was born into a Maronite Christian family in Lebanon. By the age of six he could read Latin, Hebrew and Arabic. He converted to Roman Catholicism and entered the priesthood. He became professor of Ugaritic Language and Literature at the pontifical institute in Rome. Ugaritic is a now-extinct language, at least as spoken. But it was an ancestor of both Arabic and Hebrew, the

Semitic languages. All of which makes Father Dahood one of the most-respected translators of the Psalms ever to have lived. His translation of Psalm 27 peels back the curtain on David's belief in eternal life.

Psalm 27:4, according to Dahood: "One thing I have asked a hundred times, this, O Yahweh, do I seek: To dwell in Yahweh's house all the days of this life, Gazing upon the loveliness of Yahweh, awakening each dawn ever more in his heavenly temple." In his commentary on the Psalms, Dahood calls this, "a prayer for eternal bliss with Yahweh in heaven." Psalm 27:9, according to Dahood: "Turn not your face from me, repel not in anger your servant, Be my helper! Do not reject me nor abandon me, O God who can preserve me forever." Dahood comments, "This verse contains five imperatives, four of them expressed negatively. The psalmist *dares* to tell God what *not* to do. Even for so confident a man as David, receiver of the covenant promises of God, this is remarkable. His urgency must reflect how deeply he longs to spend the afterlife in the presence of his God."

Do we often think about life after death? Again, our answers will vary. Some of us may not believe in it at all. Thinking about it in this case does no good. Others may think about it only when someone dear to us dies, or when we suddenly hit one of those moments that confront us with our own mortality. Others believe in life after death completely and serenely. Thinking about it can generate great peace for these blessed folks. Over the course of my career I have witnessed the deaths of a number of people. What they believed about life after death usually had a profound affect on

the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of those in the room left behind.

Some thirty years ago, in a room at the Schneck Memorial Hospital in Seymour, Indiana, a woman in her fifties lay dying. She had battled cancer for months and months. But the doctors ran out of things to try, and with her agreement the family called in hospice. She remained reasonably alert until she came within just a few hours of dying. As she started to slip away her adult daughter stood beside her, holding her hand and bawling. Her husband sat across the room. His face had no expression; he looked dazed, in a stupor. All of a sudden he yelled, "It's not fair!" His wife opened her eyes and smiled. It was one of the most beautiful smiles I have ever seen. She said, "I am not afraid. In fact I cannot wait. I just wish you could come with me." Those were her last words. She died about an hour later. Did her faith in eternal life completely change her daughter and husband's moods? Of course not. But it did make a difference. Her husband stood up and walked over to take her other hand. He stayed with her until she died. Her daughter looked at me and said, "She always knows what to say." And she, too, stayed with her mother until she died, tears still coming, though no longer in rivers.

King David knew more than his share of travail. Yet he could write, "For (Yahweh) will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble..." When we experience travail—the death of a loved one, the loss of a business, the end of a marriage, the struggles of an adolescent child—what we believe about God's power over life and death can make a decisive difference in our experience of this life. The Bible tells us

God can turn darkness into light. That is the actual point of the prophecy from Isaiah Matthew quotes in our second passage for today. Yes, Jesus had moved to Capernaum in Galilee, thus fulfilling the first part of the prophecy. But the more important part follows. People who have sat in darkness have seen a great light. And on people who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. By quoting this vision here, at the start of Jesus' preaching ministry, Matthew is signaling his readers that Jesus *is* that light. Jesus can overcome even death.

The locating of Jesus in Galilee also sends a message to his people that we probably miss. Galilee may have been a remote, rural region—and it was—but it also contained one of the most important crossroads in the Middle East. I suppose that makes Galilee the Terre Haute of Israel! One major road came down the eastern flanks of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains from Damascus south to Jerusalem, and then on to the Gaza plain and eventually, Egypt. Another road followed the Mediterranean coast from modern Turkey, through today's Beirut, Sidon and Tyre, then turned southeast, crossing the first road near Nazareth. This second road then led down the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and continued into the desert, toward important salt mines. Setting up his preaching shop in Galilee gave Jesus exposure to Gentile people traveling to and fro from territories near and far. Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospel writers, placed the greatest emphasis on the universal nature of Jesus' message, on the extension of salvation to all the nations.

Matthew continues on to demonstrate Jesus' charismatic presence. He invites

four men to follow him and they do. I believe I have always read these verses to suggest that this happened on their first face-to-face meeting. Scholar F.W. Beare, however, makes a good case for the idea that these men had met before. He adds, nevertheless, that the four fishermen left what was then and there considered a pretty decent job—fishing—for the total uncertainty of becoming disciples of a roving rabbi. Whatever “It” is, Jesus had it. Historians differ sharply on the politics and policies of Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain at the outbreak of World War II. Virtually no one denies that Churchill had “It”, and that Great Britain needed “It”.

The London Express ran a 2016 story about the charismatic people who stepped into leadership in part of Great Britain reached by the German bombers during the Blitz. One example was a woman named Kay Coupland, who was seventeen when the bombings started. Ninety-three years of age when interviewed, Ms. Coupland remembered how women often organized and ran the fire brigades. The able-bodied men were all in the army, the RAF or the navy. She recounted that she had never suspected she could lead others. But a somewhat older woman, the local fire captain, was killed by shrapnel while standing right next to Kay. So Kay took her helmet off her dead head, placed it on hers, and started issuing orders. All the others, young and old, including a few older men, simply did what she told them to do. The Blitz would continue another two years. Kay Coupland assumed leadership over ever-larger units of fire fighters. Mari Butwell, another woman interviewed for the story, told the reporter, “You just trusted that she knew the right thing to do. And she always had this calmness. This when sometimes the fire hoses themselves would

catch on fire.”

We can say with confidence the four men Jesus asked to follow him in today's passage trusted him. They believed he knew the right things to do. And he gave them calmness. He had—and has—“It”. We can follow him with equal confidence. But in order truly to follow him we must honestly have faith in his power. We must believe he has power even over death, that he rose from the tomb and offers us life. We must believe he has power to teach the truth. We must believe he has power to give us calmness and peace. We Presbyterians belong to the Reformed Tradition, along with the Lutherans, the Reformed Churches and others. One of the great things about the Reformed Tradition is its expectation that its preachers will over the course of time touch on every biblical theme. We need to preach on justice, on sound theology, on mission to the poor, on proper worship of the one God, and etc.

Today we have landed on one biblical theme we no longer, perhaps, emphasize as much as the Bible does: having a saving faith in Jesus. King David trusted in the “God of salvation”. Matthew trusted that Jesus was the long-awaited embodiment of the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah. Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John trusted he would teach and lead them to join in his evangelistic ministry. They would become “fishers of people”. If we think evangelism sounds a little too much like landing fish, we do not understand the point. The point is that Jesus offers salvation. Believing in that not only obtains it, it brings with it calmness. Peace. Believe in and follow Jesus. Doing so helps us all to live—and to die—well.