

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Life and Death

“What Does the Bible Say About...?” Series

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Series Editor

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NC
New City Press
Hyde Park, New York

Published by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd.,
Hyde Park, NY 12538
www.newcitypress.com

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Cover design and layout by Miguel Tejerina

Biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version
©1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the
Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
What does the Bible say about Life and Death

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020931322

ISBN 978-1-56548-405-4 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-56548-406-1 (e-book)
ISBN 978-1-56548-697-3 (series ISBN)

Printed in the United States of America

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Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about LIFE AND DEATH.”

Introduction

The stories of life and death in the Bible invite us to delve more deeply into our own story and those we hear from others—like this one. The call came for a chaplain to visit Maria, a new mom, and Sarah, her infant daughter, in the maternity unit of a large medical center in Southern California. The Pacific Ocean was in view from the top floor of the hospital. Usually, such referrals are to provide a blessing for the newborn and to share in the joy of the mother and the gathered family. This case was different.

Less than a mile away, in the ICU of another hospital, there was a young man, the victim of a drive-by shooting. Barely clinging to life, he had no hope for recovery. He had been declared brain dead, and the ventilator was about to be removed and all aggressive care stopped. His mother was Maria. I was that chaplain, faced with the impossible task of supporting Maria as she rejoiced in the birth of her newborn while overcome with unspeakable waves of grief at the senseless death of her son.

In one bewildering day the mystery of life and death collided in the heart of one mother. All I could do, with the help of God, was to be present with her and her cauldron of emotions. The anger and rage, the profound grief, the comfort of holding onto Sarah ever more closely. I often wondered how she managed to cope once she left the hospital. As Maria's future unfolded, how would she tell the

story? How would her fractured heart find healing? What resources would she draw upon? Would she find anything in her Christian tradition, or the Bible, to show her the way and bring her comfort?

From the opening chapters of Genesis in the Old Testament to the final segment of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, the themes of life and death course through the biblical narrative like two intermingled streams in a river of humanity, indeed of all creation. Sometimes the waters rage as they did for Maria in her joy and her grief. The torrents can seem overwhelming. I think of blameless Job and his unmerited suffering. His wife urged him to curse God and die (Job 2:9). In other passages the currents overflow with joy and gladness as they did for Elizabeth, whose child leapt in her womb, and for the pregnant Mary, whose spirit rejoiced in God her Savior (Luke 1:44-48).

Now to the dawn of my own story. It was a snowy Christmas day on the third floor of a small community hospital. My mother had been in labor for several hours and it was not going well. My father was worried. In later years my parents related, though without going into great detail, that my mother almost didn't make it, and I was at risk of never seeing the light of day. On this day when the new life of a helpless infant born in Bethlehem was being celebrated around the world, my own life in tranquil Batesville, Indiana, was nearly doomed to darkness. Through the grace of God, I made a healthy appearance as dusk settled in, and thanks be to the Creator, my mother lived until she was nearly ninety-one. The mystery of life and death apparent once more.

In these short chapters we'll touch on several complex questions that confront us about being alive, staying alive, and dying. Throughout, whether you see yourself as a believer or non-believer, religious or non-religious, spiritual or secular, or simply are unsure, I invite you to join the conversation. Perhaps there are aspects of your own story that remain unexplored, questions you have tucked away for some later date, or experiences of death and loss that remain in the shadows of your inner being. As you journey through this brief narrative, I invite you to explore your experiences and to engage others in theirs around the issues of life and death.

Chapter One

The Dawn of Life

You are here. I am here. And according to recent estimates there are 7.7 billion others who take up residence on planet earth. From a sheer biological perspective, it is amazing that you and I as unique individuals have been given the breath of life, rather than never having come into existence. That a “me” or a “you” comes into being is nothing less than incredible.

We can push the story back a bit. That our parents even met—mine at a community dance hall in the small hamlet of St. Mary’s, Indiana—is its own mystery. Whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned, whether we were wanted or unwanted, the forces of nature pushed us into the life that is now ours. From a biblical perspective, the activity of the Divine was paramount. The prophet Jeremiah, even though he faced a surfeit of suffering, received this word from the Lord: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:5). The reminder that we have been known by God since before our beginning may offer tremendous comfort.

When things turn out well in life, we tend to rejoice, thinking that God is smiling upon us. On the other hand, if we have been dealt a lousy hand, we may feel warranted

in wrangling with the deity as Jeremiah did later in life, when he cursed the day he was born (Jeremiah 20:14), or as the psalmist complained who felt banished “in the regions dark and deep” (Psalm 88:6). Yet even in those moments of desperation both prophet and psalmist continued to trust in a God who encouraged them and remained their strength (Jeremiah 33:1-26; Psalm 18:1-2).

The question of how it all began is addressed through two remarkably different Creation narratives by two different writers at the beginning of Genesis. According to biblical specialists, their accounts were probably influenced to some extent by other similar creation stories from the Ancient Near East, such as the Gilgamesh Epic, an Akkadian poem. Before taking a closer look at the Genesis narratives, it is helpful to recall that the writers’ intent in these chapters was not to give a literal or scientific report of the dawn of the universe, the origin of species, or in particular the appearance of the first humans. Instead, their purpose was broader and more theological. Their aim was to explain through story and poetry the creative power behind creation. This was none other than the one God, the Lord (YHWH, the four-letter designation for the God of Israel, whose name was not to be pronounced).

The Creation of the Heavens and the Earth

The first Creation account (Genesis 1:1—2:3) is launched with these momentous words: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” (1:1). Out of a