

The Afterlife from a Preterist Perspective

by Ward Fenley

Regardless of whether we like the term "preterist" or not, the fact remains that we who believe in the doctrine of past fulfillment or fulfilled eschatology are preterists. I don't particularly care for the term simply because it sounds crude. Perhaps similar sounding words are pleasant to the ear of those who know other languages; but the word sounds so crude to me that I choose to use the phrase "fulfilled eschatology" as a substitute. It might sound cerebral, but to me it sounds more pleasant. However, for the sake of brevity and space we will use the term "preterist" to describe those who hold to the fulfilled eschatological perspective. That is, we will use the term to describe the view which believes all biblical prophecy was fulfilled by the time the Jewish Temple was destroyed in AD 70.

Most preterists affirm that we are in the kingdom of God now. That is, we believe that through faith in Jesus Christ we enter into the kingdom of God, which is spiritual. We speak of the spiritual nature of the kingdom. We speak of God dwelling with men. We affirm God's presence with us. We even affirm that we are in the new heavens and new earth. Yet many preterists deny that we are in heaven. It is no secret that I affirm our status before God as having immortality, eternal life, and the complete righteousness of God. In fact, I affirm that we *are* the righteousness of God. I believe that we have become God's righteousness through Christ becoming sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). It was the greatest transaction ever completed. This, I believe, is equivalent to heaven. Throughout the Scriptures heaven is equated with the dwelling place of God, which is holiness and righteousness. Throughout Scripture God's people are called God's tabernacle (Revelation 21); God's habitation (Psalm 132); and God's rest (Psalm 132 and Zephaniah 3). Through a careful study of God's dwelling we can find that it was God's desire all along to dwell in us, rest in us, and make us His eternal habitation. But keep in mind that righteousness and holiness were the foundation of His throne. They still are. It's just that we have now become that righteousness and holiness. Heaven was where God dwelled. It still is. It's just that we have become heaven, which is why the Scriptures teach that in the New Covenant "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1-6). The question remains: If we have all of this now, how does this translate into a proper view of "the afterlife"? (Hereafter this term will refer to consciousness after physical expiration.) In other words, how does this translate into a hopeful view of the afterlife?

We must first dispel a dismal doctrine floating around that this is all there is. There are some who teach that we are in the kingdom in the here and now, but when we physically expire it is all over. We simply turn to dust. This essay will, among other things, prove this idea to be dreadfully wrong and unhealthy to Christian living. This will be evident not so much by proving what we will not have after our body dies; rather, it will be evident by proving that what we have now is eternally enduring, because we have immortality.

"He who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus said this Martha after her brother Lazarus had physically died. She was a real woman who had a real conscience and a real life experience. Lazarus was physically dead; therefore we must take this into consideration as we try to make sense of Jesus' subsequent

words:

John 11:23-26 Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. (24) Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. (25) Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: (26) And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

The Jews obviously believed in a resurrection of the dead. Martha did too. But Jesus tells her that He is the resurrection and the life. However, He doesn't stop there. He begins to both qualify and quantify this life. "He that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." At this point we might still infer from His words that He is referring to physical life, but His next words contradict that idea: "Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Let's paraphrase His words to elucidate His view of resurrection: "I am the spiritual resurrection and life. Your brother has died physically, but He will rise with a 'better resurrection' (Hebrews 11:35). He who believes in Me, though he were physically dead like Lazarus yet he shall spiritually live in Me. And he who is presently physically living shall never die spiritually." Some try to convolute this text by inferring that Christ was speaking of two resurrections. But His statement that He is *the* resurrection and the life prohibits that concept. Finally, He is obviously not stating that he who lives and believes in Christ will not *physically* die. If this were His meaning, then we would have to conclude that no one is truly a believer in Him, for all of us still physically die; or we would have to conclude that He was mistaken or was lying, neither of which is an option within the parameters of evangelical Christianity.

From here we turn to this concept of the afterlife. It is suggested by some preterists that the Christian experience of the kingdom of God consists only in what one consciously experiences while physically living and that there is 1) either no conscious afterlife or 2) there is nothing in Scripture which speaks of the afterlife, at least in a qualitative manner. Many would agree that there is a conscious afterlife but that the Bible is silent on that after life. I once held to this idea, but after examining the significance of present consciousness and awareness of redemptive elements and blessings we have in Christ, I have come to understand these various blessings to be those same blessings which continue after physical death, completely uninterrupted. First, let us consider some of the blessings the majority of preterists affirm are present blessings to be enjoyed by those physically alive.

Perhaps the most well-known passage among futurists concerning what is normally perceived as an 'afterlife' passage is found in Revelation 21:

Revelation 21:1-4 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. (2) And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (3) And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. (4) And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

It is not my purpose to elaborate extensively on the nature of this passage since preterists are the intended audience. The vast majority of preterists affirm this passage as fulfilled. They correctly identify the passage as referring to elements under the Old Covenant and New Covenant as the Old Heavens and Earth and the New Heavens and Earth, respectively. The dissolution of the sea is the removal of the wall between Jews and Gentiles (the sea). And of course they believe that God is with His people and the tears and death which were removed represent the sorrows of sin and separation from God. At this point we must agree that these blessings are present realities for the physically living believer in Jesus Christ. But we must ask ourselves the question: If we agree that there is an afterlife, and that the aforementioned blessings are *eternal* blessings, then we must conclude that those same blessings carry on eternally into the afterlife, and thus are descriptors of the afterlife as well as the present life. We agree that they do not represent our physical existence but rather our spiritual existence within the kingdom of God.

Another well-known passage is found in Isaiah 11:

Isaiah 11:6-9 The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. (7) And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (8) And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. (9) They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

Again, preterists affirm that there is presently peace among physically living believers in Jesus Christ, and that this peace metaphorically described by Isaiah represents the peace brought about by the cross of Jesus Christ, which is said to have brought "peace to those who are near and those who are far off" (Ephesians 2:17); and of which Christ said, "My peace I give unto you, not as the world gives, give I unto you" (John 14:27). Likewise, preterists affirm that in the kingdom there is no more hurt or destruction and that through the Gospel, the earth (land) is full of the knowledge of the Lord. Here we must ask, is this peace an eternal blessing in the kingdom of God? If so, then we affirm again that it is a blessing that is not only present now but also continues in the afterlife and is therefore a description of the afterlife.

For the last passage, we turn again to Isaiah 65 and 66, which is a corollary of Revelation 21:

Isaiah 65:17-25 For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. (18) But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. (19) And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. (20) There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed. (21) And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. (22) They shall not build, and

another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. (23) They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they *are* the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them. (24) And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear. (25) The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD.

Isaiah 66:22-24 For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. (23) And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD. (24) And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.

Between the passage in Revelation and the passages in Isaiah, we have the following elements which preterists affirm as present blessings for those who have believed in Jesus Christ:

- A new heavens and earth
- Gladness and rejoicing among the people
- God rejoicing in His people
- No more weeping or crying
- No more children dying in infancy
- No more elderly dying before they grow old
- Prosperity in building and planting
- No more vain labor
- The wolf and the lamb feeding together
- Dust as the serpent's meat
- No more hurting and destruction
- Children playing by vipers' dens and not being hurt
- All flesh coming and worshipping before God

Now, these are what we might call the positive aspects of the present reality for believers. And we would also affirm that these blessings are eternal and thus describe the afterlife for believers as well as our present life in Christ.

Unfortunately there are a great number of preterists who believe we are not actually in heaven. Something to consider: Let's remember from where we came. As futurists we believed that all of those blessings were blessings to be received once we inhabited heaven. But when we came to affirm preterism, we also affirmed that those same blessings were present realities for those in Christ. Now as we contemplate the beauty of those blessings, and contemplate their eternity, wouldn't it seem unwise to contend that these blessings (the new heaven and new earth, gladness, God rejoicing in His people, no more weeping, prosperity, the wolf and the lamb dwelling together, no more hurting, no more crying, no more death, no more sorrow, children playing by vipers' dens, and all flesh worshipping before God) are *not* actually describing heaven, and would actually cease when we physically die?

Most of us would agree that the idea is absurd. Therefore, if we agree that these elements are key descriptions of our eternal life, which we have now and which continues after physical death, then it makes sense that all the above also refer to our experience in the afterlife. And if, as Paul says, "we are seated in heavenly places with Christ" now, then it would also make sense that we will still be seated in heavenly places in the afterlife. And if, as the writer of Hebrews states, "we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, Mt. Zion, the City of the Living God, to an innumerable company of angels, and to the spirits of just men made perfect," it makes sense that those beautiful elements will also continue in the afterlife. We presently have all these things and will continue to have them in the afterlife.

So when we are confronted with the question, "Does the Bible say anything about what happens after we die?," we can answer with an emphatic, "Yes!" We simply need to clarify that it is already happening *before* we die. Obviously those who question this idea will ask questions like, "So this is heaven?" By "this" their minds usually gravitate back to what they see, hear, and feel and not to what the Scripture says. They fail to make a distinction between the physical realm and the spiritual realm. We must remind them that even they will confess that Jesus Christ dwells in their hearts. They would never say that this is a physical dwelling place. In fact they will gladly tell us that our hearts are the spiritual dwelling place of Christ, a fact with which we would agree. So it should not seem a strange thing that all the blessings mentioned above are bound up in the affirmation that Christ dwells in our hearts. Christ does not cease to dwell in our hearts in the afterlife. He merely continues to live out His presence with us both here and hereafter.

Even though it is not the focus of this article, we will briefly address the question: "So what does our *experience* of heaven look like after physical death?" That is a question demanding attention and certainly much study. If we have come to agreement that the blessings described above are present in the believer's life and will continue to be after the physical body dies, then we should consider possibilities of what the experience of these blessings might look like in the afterlife. It is common among evangelicals to assume that our knowledge exponentially increases the moment we physically die. But what scripture supports this? God has created us as unique individuals inseparably connected with the body of Christ. Faulty views assume that we are so collective that individual consciousness ceases. This we deny because the Bible gives no indication of a cessation of individual consciousness upon faith or after physical demise. This is not to diminish the beauty and importance of the collective communion of the saints (the body of Christ). In fact, quite to the contrary: Just as our uniqueness contributes to the body of Christ through love, as we are various members fulfilling extraordinary positions within that body in our present spiritual life (while we physically live), providing great diversity and learning among God's people; it would logically follow that if those positions as members of the eternal body of Christ are equally eternal (as eternal life suggests), then those qualities and provisions of diversity and service to the eternal body will continue after physical life ends.

It is the members of the body of Christ who need mercy, love and relationship; and therefore if we need mercy, love, and relationship within the body of Christ before we exit this physical life, we will also need the same in the afterlife. We likewise continue to learn and bless the body of Christ in our present life and will continue to

learn and bless the body of Christ in the afterlife. We must emphasize the fact that we continue to learn about the eternal attributes of God, the knowledge of which can never be exhausted. Therefore our search for understanding His Fatherhood and character will never cease. There is nothing about physical death which suggests it is a catalyst to understanding the nature of God. There is nothing about physical death which suggests an instantaneous transformation of thought. In fact, everything we know is based upon two factors: sensual experience (through which we learn and develop thought), and divine revelation (which is demonstrated through the faith given by God).

Also, it is often contested by evangelicals that we will not have any recollection of earthly things in the afterlife. This too is an enormous assumption. We have already shown that creation is the eternal representation of God and His kingdom (see: [*Creation and Its Eternal Purpose*](#)). Why would we forget the beauty of the cosmos, by which we remember God and His kingdom? It is also assumed that because our physicality ceases, our ability to perceive physicality ceases. This too is an erroneous conclusion and faulty assumption. God is a spirit, and He certainly sees the cosmological creation. There is no reason to assume that we won't, as we too "have come to the spirits of just men made perfect" and are spiritual beings. Spirituality or spiritual nature does not preclude one from perceiving physical things. Again, to argue that is to argue that God cannot perceive physical things. Now, granted, it is not philosophically necessary that we perceive as God perceives, but why would God declare that such elements of the cosmos as the sun and stars represent Christ and those in His kingdom, and then either cause those things to cease or cause His people's perception of those things to cease?

The afterlife is taught in the Bible by sheer virtue of the blessings of redemption being eternal. If they are present now, then they will be present in the afterlife and therefore they describe the afterlife. Experientially we have no reason to assume that our ability to learn gets better or faster. It may, but it is irrelevant in the grand scheme of eternity. After all, what is better or faster in eternity? Our learning will be an eternally joyous and challenging process through which we develop an ever-increasing view of Jesus Christ and His kingdom.