



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## God Is: An Answer to Our Greatest Fear

Hebrews 2:5-18

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### Introduction

1. I enjoy the occasional sci-fi TV show or movie in part because, by suspending reality, these shows can deal with real life questions in ways that a straight essay on such questions could never do.
2. Like others, *Star Trek* is a favorite. For the last five decades, the franchise's different TV and movie incarnations have explored such questions as the meaning of personhood, searching for God (the fifth movie), the meaning of life and whether we survive the grave.
3. *Star Trek Generations* (1994), the seventh movie and the one that made the transition from the original series cast to that of the *Generations* TV show gave attention to the last two questions.
  - a. The plot involves a space anomaly, a cosmic "ribbon" that sweeps through the universe, destroying everything in its path. In fact, the ribbon is really the passage to the Nexus, a world of paradise where one can have any life he wants (transported to that realm, Captain Picard finds himself with the family he always wanted). Though believed to have died 80 years before, Captain Kirk has in fact been in the Nexus where Picard finds him and convinces him to return with him (back in time!) to keep the villainous madman Soran from destroying a planet in an effort to redirect the Nexus to his location so he can re-enter it.
  - b. Two scenes lead to questions of the meaning of life and death.
    - i. In the first, Kirk is resisting Picard's overtures until he takes his horse for a ride on which they jump over a ravine. When he lands, Kirk senses that something is not quite right and turns back to do it again. This time, sure something is wrong, he stops the horse and turns and stares at the ravine with a mixture of shock and sadness on his face. When Picard rides up, Kirk explains his dilemma: "I must have made this jump fifty times, and every time it scared [me to death]. But not this time. [Pause]. Because it's not real." He realizes then that the whole Nexus existence is not real. "It's kinda like... orbital skydiving. Exciting for a few minutes... but in the end, you haven't really done anything... you haven't made a difference..."
    - ii. Seizing on Kirk's insight, Picard convinces him to help stop Soran. The situation is grim, the odds are against them (Kirk's assessment). "Sounds like fun," Kirk concludes. Together, they defeat Soran, but Kirk is mortally wounded. Although he's dying, in typical movie fashion, Picard tells him to hang on and assures him he will be alright. Kirk knows better, but must first know: "Did we do it? [he knows they defeated Soran]. Did we

make a Difference...?" Picard answers affirmatively and thanks Kirk for his help. "Least I could do ... for a Captain of the Enterprise," he says. At that, he looks at the sky, and a smile crosses his face. "It was fun," he says, and then dies.

4. "If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). *Star Trek Generations* doesn't really answer that question (people in the Nexus have not died, they are just not here). But it does contend that one is better living this life fully and suggests that "making a difference" is the way to find meaning. In search of something close to a happy ending, it takes a positive view of those ideas.
5. Contrast that with the view of death espoused by atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell.  
That man is the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving. That his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves, his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. That no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. *That all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspirations, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.* All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, *only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation, henceforth, be safely built.*<sup>1</sup>
6. Now, let's think through these contrasting positions.
  - a. Both views deal with the inevitability of death, stated well by T. S. Eliot: "Though you may forget the way to the Temple, There is one who remembers the way to your door; Life you may evade, but Death you shall not, You shall not deny the Stranger."<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Whether it's escapism, postponing the question, or just because the alternative is too depressing to consider, people will generally choose the more positive view of *Generations* (even if there's no afterlife, I can live well and make a difference) over Russell's despair.
  - c. But, if Russell is right about the nature of the universe—that the material is all that ever was, is, or will be—then he is also right about the end of life: despair is all that awaits us.
7. The Bible affirms as much—if materialism is true. But it also says there is a different answer, one filled with hope—not in the sense of wish fulfillment, but rather a confident expectation of survival in "a better country" (Hebrews 11:16). In the face of so much uncertainty and despair, we need to be reminded of what the Bible teaches about these things.

### Body

#### I. If This Is All There Is.

- A. Ecclesiastes, the book written by someone with both the desire and means to explore it fully, is the Bible writing that gives us a true picture of a secular life.
  1. The writer does refer to God—as we would expect anyone in his time and place to do—but it is always the more general *Elohim* (40 times), never the covenant name *Yahweh*.
    - a) It's evident that the writer's view of God was that of a being who did not really intervene in life's affairs and who therefore leaves us with nearly every question of consequence unanswered (cf. Ecclesiastes 8:5-7, 17).

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*, 41, as quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism*, 94-95. Emphasis mine, DA.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Zacharias, 92.

2. We are not surprised by this when we recall the perspective the writer tells us he took in his search: "under the sun," a phrase used throughout the writing (29 times) (other phrases like "on earth" also show the point).
  3. His conclusion about this "under the sun" life is that it is all for naught, being "vain," meaningless (NIV), or futile (see Ecclesiastes 1:2-3).
- B. Among the things he explored is the end of life (three texts, 3:16-21, 8:1-9, and 9:1-12, are discussions of the issue of death).
1. He declares agnosticism on the matter of life after death (3:21).
  2. He is not hopeful about being remembered for having lived well (1:11; 9:5).
  3. In one case, he declares that the day of death is better than the day of birth (7:1).
- C. Above all, he expresses despair over a world where what we see is all there is (9:1-12).
1. Death is the one thing that everyone, no matter how smart, righteous or well off, can count on (vv 1-2). "It is the great human equalizer" (Zacharias, 93).
  2. This hardly seems fair; indeed, the writer calls it "an evil" (v 3). In this, he joins many who decry a situation where there is no justice, where the same end comes to both Adolf Hitler and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who perished under Hitler's regime (cf. 3:16-21).
  3. Still, he says, it's better to be alive than dead, for at least the living have awareness and a tomorrow to look forward to (vv 4-6).
  4. His conclusion: live life to the full and enjoy its good things as much as possible; we might as well, for there's nothing waiting on us in Sheol (if such really exists) (vv 7-10).
  5. But even that answer is flawed.
    - a) Capturing the failure of the "under the sun" view, Jessie, the 9-year-old lead in the 1989 film *Prancer* said, "But if there's no God, there's no Heaven. And if there's no Heaven, then what about my mother?"<sup>3</sup> Even children despair over the death's finality, especially with regard to relationships.
    - b) Furthermore, Ecclesiastes points out, we are still left with questions concerning inequities and uncertainties about the life we have (vv 11-12).

## II. God's Answer.

- A. Ecclesiastes' reference to Sheol (9:10, the only reference in the writing) may be more wish than confidence, but it does remind us of the debate in ancient Judaism and other religions/philosophies (e.g., one of the key differences between Pharisees and Sadducees).
- B. Hebrews 2:8-18 is one passage declaring an answer to that age-old question with a corresponding confidence that said answer makes life worthwhile and death less fearful.
1. The writer has devoted 1:1-2:7 to establishing Jesus' credentials for the role of priestly mediator that he will explain more fully from 4:14-10:18.
    - a) He makes a declaration about the majesty of Jesus (1:1-4).
    - b) He said the Old Testament with which his readers were so familiar anticipated these very claims about the expected Christ (1:5-13).
    - c) He calls his readers to pay closer attention in light of who Jesus was and the convincing evidence for the Christian claims (2:1-4).

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Zacharias, 98. *Prancer* is a film about a motherless schoolgirl raised and largely ignored by her bereaved and embittered father. She finds some comfort and fulfillment in caring for an injured reindeer she identifies as Prancer, one of Santa's reindeer who had fallen from the Christmas display in town. (From reviews at amazon.com and imdb.com.)

- d) Then, he turns his attention to show his qualification to mediate based on his ability to identify fully with us (2:5-8a).
2. In his explanation of Jesus' perfect fit for the role he needed to play, the writer shows how he answers our greatest fear, that of death itself.
  - a) He acknowledges the disarray, the uncertainty and ills of what Ecclesiastes called the world "under the sun" (2:8b).
  - b) He says Jesus faced the suffering that is the common lot of humanity, but that it was necessary to pave the way to his ultimate glory and honor (2:9).
  - c) Using a term that will become a major theme in Hebrews, he repeats that the founder of our salvation was made perfect [achieved his goal; τελειόω, *teleioō*] through suffering (2:10).
    - (a) From this we learn that, from God's perspective, there is a goal; our lives are not intended to be aimless.
    - (b) We also have reinforced (see v 9) the reality that the hard knocks of life are necessary to develop the maturity that characterizes life's goal.
    - (c) Beyond that, we learn what the goal is for us: to be brought to glory (cf. Romans 3:23 where "the glory of God" is that from which we fall short when we sin). The idea of "sanctification" in v 11 also points in this direction (see Hebrews 12:10).
  - d) After citing Old Testament texts (vv 12-13, from Psalm 22:22; 18:2; Isaiah 8:16-17) to support his point, the writer begins his application to our situation (2:14-15).
    - (1) Jesus partook of flesh and blood—he was just like us.
    - (2) To what end? To use death to *destroy* the one with the power of death (which assumes the reason for death—sin) and *deliver* everyone enslaved to death because of their fear.
    - (3) Don't miss the writer's overall point: Jesus' earthly life did matter, it did make a difference, but the difference it made is not found in the life itself, however noble it may have been, but in the fact that his life aimed at and was vindicated by his conquest of death and entrance into a new life!
- C. The writer's main point is the right and qualification of Jesus to mediate on our behalf, but what he assumes is the most powerful point in Scripture: Jesus beat death, showing that there is a life to come while at the same time defeating death by defeating the thing that brought it into the world.
  1. Paul shows the significance of this by making the point that Jesus' resurrection shows the way for everyone else (1 Corinthians 15:20-21; cf. Acts 17:31).
  2. Then, he celebrates the victory of Christ's conquest (1 Corinthians 15:55-56).
  3. Peter Kreeft pulls together these great ideas when he writes: "For the darkest door of all has been shoved open and light from beyond it has streamed into our world to light our way, since he has changed the meaning of death. It is not merely that he rose from the dead, but that he changed the meaning of death, and therefore also of all the little deaths, all the sufferings that anticipate death and make up parts of it."<sup>4</sup>
  4. With Paul, we can exclaim, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, 135.

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*Conclusion*

1. “Woody Allen said of death, ‘It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.’ ... When all is said, is it not this aloneness and inevitability that makes the event more dreadful? In death, atheism can offer no comfort whatsoever, and as in the question of man’s origin, leaves him in the state of an unthinking atom—out of flux, nothing but flux” (Zacharias, 94).
2. Now, there is more to the story than we’ve had time to present here. The fact that Christianity proposes a more pleasant outcome means nothing if the claims we make about the resurrection are not true. Merely arguing from the consequences proves nothing; the evidence must be considered.
3. I believe that evidence can stand the test of scrutiny. In light of the choices we’ve examined—the hopeful longing in Captain Kirk’s evaluation of life in terms of the difference it makes, the despair of Bertrand Russell’s (and Ecclesiastes’) “under the sun” view, or the Christian view that there is life yet to come and that our lives here make a difference because of the life that awaits us—if I didn’t believe, I would certainly want to examine the evidence to see if what Christians say is true.
4. For those of us who have considered and accepted that evidence, isn’t it wonderful to have the assurance and comfort that belief brings?

*April 12, 2009*  
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