Can reincarnation and "near death experiences" be Christian?

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How we've changed

Truth be told, as sure as we Christians are about a lot of things, modern knowledge of the earth and sky, of the structure of the universe, has affected how we view heaven. The picture of spiritual beings "up there" that get around with feathery wings seems not only less and less likely, it's less attractive to us. And streets of gold with pearly gates, things that symbolized a vision of comfort and wealth thousands of years ago, don't really carry the same meaning today.

Similarly, viewing hell as a some kind of fiery underworld was more possible back when Christians believed that the earth was flat. Today, the haphazard life we have on this planet can, at times, be more like the hell that tests our "metal." And even lifelong believers are becoming more and more uncomfortable with the "it's God's will" response to disaster. For most of us, the incredible unfairness of life on earth and the random disasters of this natural world aren't anything a loving God should or could be held responsible for.

So what other discoveries are subtly or dramatically changing a Christian's view of heaven, hell, and the afterlife? For one thing, it is getting harder and harder to ignore

the very credible "near death experiences" that are now being described and documented. A second area of significant breakthrough is some neuroscience research that opens the possibility that consciousness, the subjective individuality of who we are inside, can and does continue to exist without a brain or a body! And a third new/old possibility in our emerging understanding of the afterlife is likely the most controversial of all, particularly for Christians. Some credible reincarnation research has for decades been collecting and recording children's memories of previous lives. Some of these accounts are truly compelling, resonating with a ring of truth.

That gets us to you and me. What do we, as Christians, believe? Well, first of all, I believe in the continuing life of each individual and that Jesus Christ is always walking with us—"God with us." Nothing at all out of date about that. I've written seven books supporting and investigating what the Living Savior's presence in our lives does for us. And I'm confident that Christ's same comforting, divine Presence is going to be with us when we wake up and find out that we're not dead.

I've also come to realize, however, that we Christians need to start including more people and greater possibilities in our view of immortality. And the place to expand our understanding of these continuing life possibilities is with the Bible, with some of Jesus' teachings, and with the thoughts of some church Fathers and Christian thinkers.

So let's begin.

2

The *Genesis* of it all

A Christian search for an afterlife needs to start "in the beginning" with Genesis. Using the metaphor of a week of days, this divinely inspired writer introduces us personally to the "beginning," to the Creator of an orderly and concise creation process that continues to startle and amaze. Within the seemingly endless rhythms of earth and sky, God has constructed a huge metaphor, an intricate image of His largeness and beauty and constancy. We are reassured and inspired by nature's grand patterns because God *intended* us to *be* reassured and inspired.

While scientists and humanists are still trying to determine or ignore what came before that "beginning," that magnificent burst of creative energy, I am not. And Christians all around the earth are not. Others might ponder over the subatomic particles merging and the possibility of multiverses. But we don't. From nothing to something. We recognize the divine intention—"He spake, and it was done."

And this first chapter of Genesis also established two essential qualities for human beings. First, we humans "image" or resemble the Creator in some way. As Origen wrote, "For no figment of the body contains the image of God, …

but the one who was made 'in the image of God' is our internal human, invisible and incorporeal and incorrupt and immortal" (54-55). The individuality that images God is our inner spirit—the internal human instead of the external one.

Secondly, human beings were given "dominion." Some see this to mean that we are to be the ruler of this world that God created. But, for me, it just means that we are distinctive, that we include something special. That "something special" is described in the second creation account in Genesis. The inspired writer of this narrative introduces the Hebrew word *ruah,* a word that is used throughout the Old Testament. This very important Hebrew word is translated in four basic ways—as *wind*, as *breath*, as *mind*, as *spirit*.

In a "special creative act of God," in this inbreathing of the divine spirit, each human being is endowed with a "living soul," with an "inner being" that reflects or images God. At it's highest meaning, the Hebrew *ruah* denotes "the entire immaterial consciousness of man" (TWOT 836). Because of God's inspiring *ruah*, human consciousness can recall the past and imagine the future. We can evaluate the goodness and the badness of things. And, most importantly, this "immaterial consciousness" makes it possible for us to meet and to know our Creator, God.

3

Abraham guided by the Spirit

We have the tendency to think that ancient peoples weren't as perceptive about the universe as we moderns are. And yet the Chaldeans, walking onto the human stage many centuries before Jesus' birth, were mathematicians and astronomers. Mapping the paths of the planets and the stars, they governed their lives according to the astrology of the sky.

The Bible tells us that Abraham was from Chaldea. But the beauty and magnitude of the cosmos revealed something greater to him and his descendants than astrological patterns. When Abraham walked out of Ur of the Chaldeans and journeyed to the land of Canaan, Abraham's life was a conversation with a deeper voice of reality, "the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:9).

The Old Testament became more meaningful to me when I approached it in this way—when I realized that it recorded how a people built a relationship with a God they could not see. How difficult that is! Unlike pagan gods that took their form from visible natural forces and animals, God revealed Himself to Abraham as an invisible, but living, Presence or Person, with the capacity not only for power and purpose but for great love.

So did God actually test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son? I don't know the answer to that. But I do understand why Abraham might have felt pressed to sacrifice his son. In the presence of such an unseen, "wholly other," kind of relationship, he would desperately have wanted to prove his obedience and devotion. And so, responding to what was a common form of religious practice at the time, Abraham set out to sacrifice his son. And yet, when all was prepared, at the last moment, the divine *Ruah* inspired Abraham to stop the sacrifice. He heard "the angel of the Lord" saying: "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (NIV Gen. 22:11-12).

We'll never know the depth of his monotheism, but the constancy of Abraham's relationship with God took root in his incredible desire to be obedient. Because of it, he allowed God's spirit, God's "breath," to change him and to lead him. And so, through Abraham, the father of the faithful, God made a covenant with "a people." But maturing into such a spiritual worship, following a God with the invisibility of *ruah*, was not going to be easy or natural for Abraham or his followers. And it isn't easy or natural for us either these many, many centuries later.

4

Visions revealing God's intention

Abraham's grandson Jacob experienced two life-changing visions—insights that changed not only his life but ours as well. It is helpful to realize that both of these visions were preceded by his fear and uncertainty of what was to come. And because of his dishonest acts, he had reason to fear as he fled from his father and brother.

Jacob's first dream was of "a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven" (Gen. 28:12). This visualizes not only a *higher place* of continuing life but a *continuing process* as well. God's "angels," the messengers that Jacob saw, rather than being creatures with wings, were spiritual beings that were "ascending and descending." This introduces an inspiring image, not only movement from earth to heaven but from heaven to earth. The idea that human beings are connected to heaven, to the divine, in a progressive way, something similar to a ladder, was also asserted by Plotinus, a 3rd century religious philosopher. He envisioned "a stairway of worlds superimposed one on another not in space but in time" where the "ascent of the Soul" is described as "an inner process of the individual" (The Philosophy of Plotinus). However we look at it, this "ascend-

ing and descending" that appears in Jacob's first vision is an indication of a continuing interaction between human beings and God, a continuing relationship between who we are now and who we will be later than now.

Jacob's second vision or dream showed him, and us, something about the divine Spirit that powers forgiveness (Gen. 32-33). Once again this experience was preceded by Jacob's fears for personal safety. Although he hoped his brother Esau would accept his peace offerings, he feared his brother's retaliation. Jacob was alone in the desert the night before the meeting. And yet "there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

This is something we all can identify with. Many of us might view this experience as a person wrestling with his or her conscience. But, because of more recent research into consciousness, it can now be more specifically described as Jacob's consciousness, his God inspired individuality, wrestling with nature's instincts—the instinct to run, the instinct for self-protection and survival. It was during this night of struggle that Jacob was blessed with the name of Israel. He interpreted what had happened this way: "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." The significance of this second vision or dream was borne out the next day. In the forgiving face of Esau, Jacob recognized "the face of God." And still today, God forgives, and the Spirit of that intention moves the human heart.

5

Being open to the Lord's whisper

Abraham and his descendants began their religious pilgrimage as a nomadic tribe. Pagan cultures and idol worship were a constant threat—and temptation. In their vulnerability they needed the assurance of a fierce defender, a warrior-like deity. The Israelites also needed the customs and structures of worship that would keep their faith strong and constant. The powerful El Shaddai or God Almighty that emerged in the Old Testament became this Protector.

After the children of Israel left Egypt, however, simply trusting in God's protection was not enough. They needed to grow, to embrace holier ways of living. On Mt. Sinai God inspired Moses with clear patterns or pictures of what basic human righteousness should look like. It was only natural that the judgement and punishment for violating these commands became intertwined with their worship of their fierce Protector. Moses reassured them of this as they faced enemies, saying, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (NIV Deut. 31:6).

Inspired by the Spirit of the Lord, Joshua "was full of

the spirit of wisdom" when he led the Israelites against Jericho (Deut. 34:9). Through the struggling times in the Book of Judges, the Lord's "Spirit" came to Deborah, Jephthah, Samson and Gideon. David said, "The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me, and his word was on my tongue" (NIV 2 Sam. 23:2). And that same Spirit, "the Lord's word," moved so powerfully in Elijah that he was able to multiply a "handful of meal" and "a little oil" into food that lasted a household "many days." With this same invisible, divine "word," Elijah restored the spirit in a child who had died and confronted the prophets of the pagan god Baal (1 Kings 17-19).

Perhaps most inspiring of all, while fleeing for his life, God revealed to Elijah a clearer understanding of who He is. God's Spirit, *Ruah*, wasn't a part of the destructive natural force of wind that tore mountains apart. God wasn't in the earthquakes that broke rocks into pieces. And, even more comforting, His was not a fiery destruction. The invisible God, the Word of the Lord, was then and is now "the still small voice"—a whisper in the ear and in the consciousness of human beings, more powerful than all the forces of nature (19:11–12).

6

Maturing our religious believing

As I see it, the Old Testament record of the Hebrew people is just an amazing beginning. It records how challenging divine inspiration was for a particular people during a particular period of human history. Rudolf Otto concluded that the impulse for religion is a "process," a maturation rooted in "the hidden depths of the spirit itself" (136). And though this religious impulse might at first emerge in primitive and seemingly "unspiritual" ways, the divine Spirit continues to press religious believing "onward and upward to ever higher levels of development" (167).

So what the Israelites perceived God to be did not, and does not, restrict or define all that God is. Basic rudimentary codes for conduct, similar to the Ten Commandments, had also been emerging in various ways in humanity's other great religions. They may be phrased differently, but these commands for goodness in human society would seem to have been planted in human beings from the beginning, inspired by a universal, divine intention for "a living soul," a spirituality of consciousness in humankind. *Ruah,* the "Spirit of the Lord," breathes and speaks in the hearts and minds of all human beings.

And hearing and responding to that Spirit continues to challenge Christian believers today. Because we cannot physically *see* God or *see* His glory or *see* His righteousness, our impulse for believing—our faith and trust—are a work in progress. That's why the struggling times and faltering efforts of the children of Israel ring true to us. Studying their process of growth and maturation helps us because it is an ageless process, one that we all face. From nature gods to warlike vengeance to the redeeming love of a messiah. God's promise, the covenant of relationship, sustained the Israelites and prepared them to receive and nurture His Son.

Jesus Christ often used Old Testament wisdom as a springboard to his new covenant, one born within each of us "by the power of the Spirit" (NIV Gal. 4:29). This second covenant glows from God's heart to human heart. As Paul said, it comes from "the Jerusalem that is above," the source of us all (4:26).

7

One degree of glory to another degree of glory

In first century Jerusalem, many were unwilling to recognize Jesus as Christ, as Messiah. He wasn't the great warrior or military leader some were expecting. He didn't aspire to be an earthly king. And he didn't act all that much like a prophet—even though some did think he might be Elijah returning to them.

But many Jews, the descendants of Abraham who had cultivated and nurtured the very environment for Jesus' birth, weren't ready to believe in his resurrection, his promise of a continuing life for everyone. Paul says that "their minds were hardened…a veil lies over their minds" (NRSV 2 Cor. 3:15). But we Christians today are in no position to judge those resistant Jews. All to often our Christianity slumbers, or lies dormant. We follow doctrinal forms mindlessly, parroting descriptions of heaven and hell that we learned as a child.

Which leads me to ask this question: what does "everlasting life" actually mean to you as a Christian? An answer can be found "in the beginning," in an appreciation of how each of us was created. Our mind or consciousness, our

awareness of ourselves and the world around us, is something God breathed into human beings specifically.

But, as Paul writes, we now "know only in part." We are seeing "in a mirror, dimly," unable to know "fully" the complete likeness of who we are (NRSV 1 Cor. 13:12). But that doesn't mean that there isn't a complete image. At some point our "faces" are going to be "unveiled"—our minds are going to be opened. Seeing "the glory of the Lord" more clearly, we'll be "transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (NRSV 2 Cor. 3:18).

Or, as the CEB translates it, "From one degree of glory to another degree of glory." For me, Paul is saying that the awakening of who we are as God's image happens by degrees. Rather than occurring in a single instant or a single lifetime, our discovery of completeness might occur over several lifetimes. With an "unveiled" mind, we no longer dread an impassable wall at the end of our years—or a permanent, but uncertain, outcome. This frees us in the present. We live now in confidence and hope. We're comforted in our continuing walk with the Lord.

8

Dives and Lazarus revisited

It might come as a surprise to you, as it did to me, that the story about Dives, an example of a rich man, and Lazarus, a beggar, may not actually be one of Jesus' parables. Even the writer of Luke's Gospel doesn't call it a parable—perhaps because it actually names a person, Lazarus. Some scholars have recognized parts of the account in Luke as similar to an Egyptian story. Others find similarities between it and some Jewish myths or legends. Whatever its origin, it's possible, if not likely, that Jesus' listeners would have recognized the plot as something they'd heard before—an adaptation of a common story about the dangers of wealth.

It also surprised me when I learned that Judaism in Jesus' time didn't visualize people going immediately into heaven or hell when they died. For them, *Sheol* was an intermediate place, a general tarrying place, a section of *Hades* where the righteous dead and the unrighteous dead awaited judgment day. Another term distinct from *Sheol* or H*ades* was *Gehenna*, which specifically referred to the place of the wicked. So, instead of being a view of heaven (something Luke doesn't even mention), Jews listening to Jesus would have seen this story as referring to the "place of the dead." The "bosom

of Father Abraham," where Lazarus lay, was also an image that was common in Judaism. Literally, it refers to being situated in a place of honor at a feast—reclining right beside Abraham. Metaphorically, it is visualizing a place of great comfort.

And early Christian fathers and philosophers tended to view the story the same way the Jews did, as describing those awaiting final judgement. It wasn't until later that the Dives and Lazarus story gained popularity as a vivid illustration of heaven and hell. During the Middle Ages, peasants living a life of deprivation and hardship were reassured by a view of heaven where they were guests of honor at a feast—where the poor were rewarded and the rich got what they deserved.

This medieval view of the Dives and Lazarus account also offers some rather fascinating, but contradictory, ingredients for immortality. For example, both men's bodies would have been buried—if this were an actual, and not an allegorical, account. Yet both men retain not only their identity but also their memory. Abraham recognized them, and they recognized him. The connection the two men had during life was being continued—somewhere—after death. And what is perhaps even more intriguing, Abraham was being viewed as a possible intercessor, someone who might be able to offer a reprieve.

9

Second chance opportunities

The idea of human life continuing after death has ancient roots. Many millennia before Christianity and Judaism, cultural and religious traditions followed a pattern of caring for those who had died and praying in some way for their continuing journey. Roman Catholic theology includes purgatory, a place for a final purification after we die. Although they would resist that name for it, Eastern Orthodox theology and many Protestant denominations also embrace the idea of a purification process that precedes our arrival in heaven.

How this purification process takes place is complicated somewhat by the varying denominational views of a last judgment. Some Jews and Christians view this judgement as not occurring until the final resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Others view it as an immediate review or accounting, with those who have died standing at the gates of heaven hoping their names will be written in the "book of life." Any final day of judgment or place of judgement necessarily would include a place to tarry or to wait.

However and whenever it occurs, general acceptance of a need for purification has led to many graphic and fi-

ery forms of purgatorial suffering. We do have to wonder what kind of temporary or permanent suffering could occur in this different state of being. What kind of body is being tortured or purified? But then, popular pictures of the various and scary physical tortures could also have been created figuratively, springing from a medieval rather than from a more modern perspective.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this purifying intermission in a soul's journey is that it allows for some kind of reprieve. Within some Christian denominations and also within Judaism, the situation of the souls of the dead can be changed by the prayers of the living. For the Jews, that reprieve is seen as being something probably offered by Abraham. In Christianity, the prayers and offerings for some kind of reprieve or moderation are usually directed to Christ or to special saints.

A modern perspective on the *how* and *where* of this reprieve is now available. Some recent scientific research is finding evidence that human consciousness is not only separate from the brain but survives it! This discovery could, indeed be the "door that no one can shut" (NIV Rev. 3:8). If there is to be a purification in an intermediate place or some kind of life review, it does seem essential for there to be a conscious, continuing spirit, *ruah.* And that gives rise to another amazing possibility, something also drawn from the book of Revelation. John, speaking as the Lord, says, "The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it" (12). Logically, of course, that leaves me asking, "How many times have we left it before?"

10

The third heaven, an intermediate place

In the Biblical line of heritage, Enoch lived a few generations before Noah and long before Abraham. What he is most remembered for by Christians is found in this statement: "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Gen. 5:24). But Jewish tradition has preserved some writings that are sourced to him. In one of them, *The Second Book of Enoch*, he describes the "Third Heaven."

This would have little interest at all to Christians except Paul also refers to what he called the "third heaven." In his second letter to the Corinthians he wrote, "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell" (NIV 12:1-4). Paul is generally considered to be talking about his own experience, something that likely happened during the years

he spent in Arabia after his dramatic and life-changing encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus.

"The man in Christ," as Paul refers to himself, has not arrived in a final place but is in what Paul refers to as "paradise." Enoch, whose existence is also mentioned briefly in the book of Jude, described "the Third Heaven" as a halfway place, a place "whereon the Lord rests, when he goes up into paradise" (Second Book of Enoch, chapter 8). That actually tends to match what Jesus said to the repentant man who was crucified next to him: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (NIV Luke 23:43).

Augustine described Paul's vision of the "third heaven" as a vision "granted only to him who in some way dies to this life, whether he quits the body entirely or is turned away and carried out of the bodily sense…" This vision, wrote Augustine, is superior to any other kind of vision because it is seen "by the mind after it has been so separated and removed and completely carried out of the senses and purified…" He considers this seeing to be a mystery that occurs "through the love of the Holy Spirit" (The Literal Meaning of Genesis, 55, 56 and 67).

So what do we get out of all of this? First, a "third heaven" supports the idea of an intermediate place, instead of a final place, after we die. These passages also draw a connection between that intermediate place and paradise. And they tell us that when we get there, the Lord will be there and so will other recognizable spiritual beings. Finally, Paul's confusion about whether he was "in or out of the body" is not unlike some of the credible "near death experiences" (NDE's) we read today.

11

Their spirit returned at Jesus' command

Research shows that the ancient Jews of the Bible didn't focus that much on an afterlife. So it is a little surprising that they also didn't think that death was final or a total annihilation for a person. The spirit could continue to exist, they believed. Because of that, a tomb of someone who had died was not permanently closed for three days. Relatives visited during that time in case the spirit of the person returned. This gives some helpful background for the times that Jesus raised people from the dead—or brought their spirit back.

In a first instance, Jesus was contacted by Jairus, "a synagogue leader." Jairus said his daughter was dying. But, as he was speaking, people came and told him, "Your daughter is dead." Jesus responded saying, ""Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." Sometime later, when Jesus told the mourners at the house that the girl wasn't dead but "asleep," they laughed at him. So he only let the parents and Peter, John, and James into the room. He took the girl's hand and said, "My child, get up!" Luke's account then says, "her spirit returned, and at once she stood up" and was offered something to eat (NIV Luke 8:40-56).

In the second instance, Jesus was arriving at a town

called Nain (NIV Luke 7:11-16). As he approached the town gate, "a dead person was being carried out" on a bier. This perhaps reflects the practice of carrying the deceased to a tomb within 24 hours of their death. Having compassion for the woman's tears, Jesus walked over to the bier and said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The young man immediately sat up and began to talk. Obviously the crowd was amazed.

A third instance, the one that challenged conventional thinking the most, was when Jesus called Lazarus to come out of his tomb. Unlike these other two examples, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. No one expected a spirit to return after that long. "But, Lord," said Martha, the ever practical sister who didn't want to open the tomb, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." When Lazarus walked out of the tomb, he was wrapped in the grave clothes required at the time. This "sign" was so dramatic that it scared the Jerusalem Temple priests. It threatened the High Priest so greatly that he was willing to sacrifice "one man" in an attempt to protect Temple worship from the Romans (John 11:1-49).

So why do I relate these three examples? For me, these accounts offer reassurance. They all three show a spirit continuing to exist after dying. And they show that, in some cases, the spirit of a person can even return to a body, particularly one who had recently died with a body capable of being revived. The practice of waiting three days before final burial indicates that a return of the spirit must have been something that had occurred before in ancient times.

12

The dry bones of the house of Israel

Moved by "the Spirit of the Lord," Ezekiel became the prophet who flooded his prophecies with a challenging array of colorful (and often threatening) images. His metaphors and comparisons are so abundant that they sometimes double up on each other! In one place, an Assyrian king with an exaggerated sense of his own greatness was like a "cedar in Lebanon" that would be cut off and broken (31:3). In another place, the Lord brought down "the high tree" and exalted the "low tree" (17:24). The "princes of Israel" are referred to as the "whelps" of a lioness (19:1-3). And the vain prophets of Israel, the ones who "see visions of peace" for Jerusalem, are attempting to build "walls" with "untempered mortar" (13:10-16).

But, in this abundance of imagery, Ezekiel is not really talking about trees and lions and faulty mortar. He is picturing enemies and corruption that threaten the house of Israel. And that leads us to what is probably his most well-known and challenging image—the metaphor of the dry bones (chapter 37).

The inhabitants of ancient Israel generally thought that the human soul, *nefesh*, continued to have a less vital but

shadowy existence after death. As long as the bones remained, they believed that the soul had the potential to continue. Ezekiel knew this, and so he used these dried bones to create a mental picture that would encourage and inspire his listeners. Although this metaphor has often been taken literally, applied to the raising of the dead on the day of judgement, Ezekiel is actually applying the metaphor to a very specific time, to a particular moment in Israel's history.

The prophet foresaw that the remnant of Israelites who would return from Babylon would find a demolished Temple in a decaying Jerusalem. These returning people had been captive in the "graves" of Babylon for more than a generation. They would be dispirited, like "dry bones." When they confronted the decaying walls and scattered stones of the once great city and Temple of Israel, they would be hopeless. So Ezekiel, at his most inspired and encouraging best, visualizes the Lord's promise when he prophecies that the nation of Israel would be reborn, reinvigorated.

The "dry bones" would breathe again, said Ezekiel. The Spirit of the Lord, R*uah*, would revitalize the people who had lived in captivity. They would rebuild the wasted cities of Israel. The Temple gates and walls would be restored to even greater grandeur. In Ezekiel's vision, it was the house of Israel that would "breath" again as one nation, one body (37:11–12).

13

The person we are inside isn't temporary

When Job was lost in his despair and unable to get answers from his old friends, the younger Elihu said to him, "But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding" (NIV Job 32:8). Because of r*uah*, our inner spirit, human beings don't just feel and perceive, we consciously know and appreciate that we are feeling and perceiving. Inspired by this spirit, we can look out at the world as a personal observer, with the ability to understand and interpret what goes on around us. This conscious awareness is what distinguishes us from other living things.

And the translation in Strong's concordance of the Hebrew and Greek words for *spirit* support such a distinction. The word translated as *spirit* in this verse from Job does come from the Hebrew *ruah.* And Strong's defines this Hebrew word for *spirit* as only applied to "a rational being." Similarly, according to Strong's, the Greek word for *spirit* in the New Testament is one that refers to the human spirit, or "rational soul." This distinguishes it from other Greek words that refer to an "animal spirit" and the "vitality of plants."

The significance of this distinction can be found in Genesis. The Creator had already transformed inanimate ele-

ments into the building blocks for a universe of animate life. But He wasn't satisfied with just a natural world of living things. He had a greater purpose. When God breathes His "breath of life" into the heart of each human being, we receive more than life and sentience. We receive a mind that understands, the divine essence of who He is.

This indwelling spirit of consciousness enables us to follow the progress of our own thoughts, to analyze our actions and motives in subjective ways. And this person we are inside is not physically restricted at all—we can climb mountains, dream daydreams, and, yes, talk with God. What an amazing moment it is for each human being, the moment when we are first aware that we are a conscious, individual being, separate from other people and separate from the world.

And that amazement will continue after we die—when we realize that there is nothing temporary at all about this uniquely inspired, ageless individual that God created us to be!

14

Born from above

""How IS IT POSSIBLE for an adult to be born?" Nicodemus asked. "It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" (CEB John 3:4). We today might like to smile a bit condescendingly at Nicodemus' apparent lack of spiritual perception. But even after more than two millennia, the Christian idea of new birth is still not readily clear or easily understood. That's because we Christians, in spite of our doctrinal beliefs, often stubbornly cling to the natural process of things just as much as Nicodemus did.

What Jesus Christ does, what God likely sent him to do, is to lift our gaze, to raise our eyes to see the person God intended us to be, the one created in His image. Being "born anew," says Jesus, isn't something to be "surprised" about but something to gratefully embrace (3:7). As Jesus explains to Nicodemus, "Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6). To be "born of the flesh" is to believe we're defined by the limited, genetic construction of our physical bodies. To be "born of the Spirit" or "born from above" is to embrace the larger, more

vibrant consciousness of life that God has been creating in us from the beginning.

And that thought leads to another inspiring perspective. Both Strong's and Vines, whose translations of the Greek offer born "anew" and born "from above," open the door to another possible translation, born "from the beginning." In the beginning God created humankind in His *image*, according to His *likeness* (Gen. 1:26). And, since the Creator of the universe would not be permanently constrained or contained by a physical form, it makes sense that those created in His image probably aren't going to be either.

If we thoughtfully look inside our heart, we'll realize that this greater individuality of who we are has always been there. We, and all human beings, have always had a unique personhood, something separate from what the world sees. As it says in James, the "good gift" and "perfect gift" of who we are is ours "from above," flowing into us from our Creator, "the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Being born "anew," as Jesus offers, means opening ourselves to the continuing heritage that we've always had. And that is an open-ended and inspiring journey.

15

The source of ought and ought not

From the beginning, something within human consciousness has urged us, or inspired us, to live a certain way. At its earliest, this understanding of our essential humanness probably evidenced itself as little more than a sense of fairness—you don't eat more than your share. You don't demand more from others than you give. Such internally motivated guidelines for behavior weren't always practical or even logical. Sharing too little with too many could starve everyone. That's probably why Lewis called such morality "the Law of Human Nature." He saw it as the one "law" that humans do not "share with animals or vegetables or inorganic things" (Mere Christianity).

And, though they may explain and apply this moral "law" differently, all the world's religions respond to it in some way. Some embrace karma, where good intent and good deeds not only contribute to happiness in this life but in future lives. Others encourage being good and doing good deeds as a way to prove their faithfulness, to insure a heavenly future on the day of judgment. The challenge, of course, is that we all also know that there are people who

aren't particularly religious, who don't believe any of these things, but who are still giving and kind humanitarians.

One explanation of this, the one secularists and naturalists assert, is that moral and ethical behavior is a universal, human quality—one that evolved naturally. Just as animals appear to have the instinct to look out for each other in a herd or a pack or a gaggle, we humans look out for each other. And that "looking out for," these non-believers maintain, has evolved or developed into human goodness.

If this were true, if concern for our survival were able to power our morality, it does seem to me that nastiness, unfairness, and selfishness would have been eliminated millennia ago! And, if moral behavior were actually nature-derived, we would define the actions of animals as being moral or immoral—but we don't. While I do agree that the concept of goodness and badness is indeed universal, it is apparent that it is only present within human hearts. It didn't enter the natural world until we did—until the Spirit of the Lord inspired human consciousness.

16

With us in the growing and becoming

Genesis describes a deliberate creative process by a Creator who is Person, one whose "Word" expresses individuality of intention and goodness. As His image, our life's journey is a way of seeing and understanding what that means. The inspiration of a pure heart, rather that just good deeds and good words, is what draws us into God's intention, His righteousness.

But being good just for the sake of goodness—not for reward or hope of return—is a challenge in this natural world. We easily get "led off course." But we also read in 2 Peter, that we are to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord" (NIV 3:18). Perhaps that's why so many of Jesus' parables focus on growth and development. The yeast that transforms "three measures of meal." The mustard seed, "the smallest of all seeds," that grows into a great tree. And then, of course, we need to appreciate the parable of the sower and the seed (Matt. 13:1-23).

Just as "the sower" in Jesus parable scattered the seed far and wide, we "living souls" appear to be dropped into the earth rather randomly. Some of us are born "by the wayside," a high traffic area where the pride of winning or the

despair of failure trample our good intentions. Others of us are born into "stony places," an arid environment of fear or distrust or poverty that leaves little room in our heart for caring and compassion. And then, too, some of us are born among the "thorns." We are distracted not only by managing our lives but the lives of those around us as well. Even those of us who might fall into the fertile, moist "ground" of good intention don't bear fruit equally. And few of us produce fruit "a hundred fold."

But the Lord's intention, the spirit that inspires us to goodness, will never abandon us. That's because, as George MacDonald wrote, God is with us in "the growing and the becoming." And then he says, "Long before the Lord appeared, ever since man was on the earth, no, surely, from the beginning, was his Spirit at work in it for righteousness" (161).

So maybe human beings are actually climbing "Jacob's ladder" as the old hymn says. And maybe that "ladder" has rested on the earth for eons. When we hunger for righteousness, when we discover within ourselves an intention for goodness, the Spirit of the Lord is with us, right there in our heart. That's because Christ has always been walking with us and strengthening our progress, in whatever place or lifetime we might find ourselves to be.

17

On earth as it is in heaven

What Christians know, or are supposed to know, is that making exterior choices to benefit ourselves or to benefit society (which then often benefits ourselves) isn't the same as having "a pure heart." Most of us can stop ourselves from robbing banks or clubbing someone over the head. But in the daily struggle of life, the purity of heart that gives without judgment or loves without conditions is a steep climb.

St. Paul, for example, described himself as "the worst" of sinners, "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (NIV 1 Tim. 1:13, 15). And many of us would probably add pride or arrogance to his list of faults! Only the Lord could see potential in such a personality profile. But Paul explains his successful discipleship by saying, "the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly" (14).

And we need that abundance poured out on us as well. It is the Spirit of the Lord moving in our hearts that makes actual Christian charity possible. Thinking we can be unselfish and unconditionally kind out of our own strength of character and personality is a desire that's bound to fail. We're going to "fall short" in one fashion or another. And yet, when Peter asked Jesus how often we need to forgive

others for their failings, the Lord answered, "until seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22). It doesn't really make sense, then, that God would ask that depth of forgiveness *from* us and then not offer it *to* us. Which takes me back to the topic that I mentioned in the first chapter.

Maybe it's time to expand our view of what the next step in human experience looks like. Maybe it's time to anticipate what lies ahead of us as a continuing opportunity. Paul writes, "If there's a physical body, there's also a spiritual body…The first human was from the earth made from dust; the second human is from heaven. The nature of the person made of dust is shared by people who are made of dust, and the nature of the heavenly person is shared by heavenly people. We will look like the heavenly person in the same way as we have looked like the person made from dust" (CEB 1 Cor. 15:44, 47-49).

And many near death experiencers, from all walks of life and religious beliefs, have found this to be true. These people find beauty and peace in an intermediate place that is filled with recognizable individuals. And after the experience, they return to this life with an overwhelming sense of God's all encompassing love and forgiveness.

18

Many rooms and possibilities

Interestingly, if we were offered the opportunity to be zapped immediately to heaven, leaving all of this behind, many would hesitate. If the choice is between heaven and hell, well of course we'd choose heaven. But when the choice is between heaven and here, our answer is not so obvious. Part of that hesitancy may be fear of the unknown. But it also could be a disinterest in the rather pointless life in heaven that we've seen in illustrations and paintings.

Jesus' life and resurrection and ascension actually offer a quite different picture. The eternity that our risen Lord shows us is not only a continuing life but a continuing of our current individuality in our relationship with God. He promises, "My Father's house has many rooms: if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" (NIV John 14:2)

In *Miracles*, Lewis wrote that some people, naturalists for example, believe in "a one floor reality" (251). These people are convinced that "this present Nature is all that there is." Another group of people, varying kinds of religious believers, embrace "Nature" as the "ground floor" but then con-

clude that there is "one other floor and one only," an eternal and timeless place of heavenly mystery and bliss.

Lewis then continues on to pose the idea that there might really be many floors, "different Natures, different levels of being, distinct but not always discontinuous" (254). One of these floors could, according to Lewis, explain what happened after Jesus' resurrection. It was a time when "Christ withdrew from one of these [levels] to another." The Son of God was not "confined to any place at all," wrote Lewis, because it is "in Him that all places exist" (254).

How might this change our view of heaven? For one thing, the idea of continuing life doesn't have to be about some earth-like structure in the sky. Instead of a single "mansion" for each of us at some far-off, linear end point, maybe there are many "dwelling places," many opportunities to develop and expand who we are. What we learn now and later than now opens us to new experiences and enlarges the borders of our living. Continuing individuality then becomes a journey, a sojourn that includes everyone and a diversity of possibilities.

19

Descent and re-ascent

One overriding concern for human beings is that dying is inevitable. And another overriding concern is our desire to find purpose in the life we're living now. This thought was expressed several millennia ago when the psalmist asked, "Remember how short my life is! Have you created humans for no good reason? Who lives their life without seeing death? Who is ever rescued from the grip of the grave?" (CEB Ps. 89:47-48).

And yet the psalmist's question does seem to raise the possibility that dying is a part of living our life. That's probably because, as C.S. Lewis concluded in *Miracles*, nature has, from the beginning, established a pattern of "descent and reascent," of death and rebirth (180). Seeds fall into the dark of the soil only to emerge reborn. Animals form as cells in the womb and then eventually die, turning back into the mineral components that the living cells sprang from in order to reform again. Referring to this process of reusing atoms and energy, Lewis wrote that in our natural lives we are all wearing "second hand suits" (246).

That doesn't make the process of dying any less scary. But we do have the promise that Christ gives us. The con-

tinuing life of Jesus Christ after his resurrection evidenced a new and higher potential for all of us—an individuality and personality of soul that doesn't rely on atoms. And the Lord also assures us that who we are now isn't going to disappear into some anonymous spiritual "oneness."

Perhaps best of all, Christ's relationship with His Father has room in it for us. As Jesus promised his disciples, "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" (NIV John 14:3). But following our Lord in this way means willingly leaving behind our limited view of what human life is. Our soul must grow new rooms of understanding and awareness. And many of us, if not all of us, aren't going to get our hearts grown enough in one lifetime.

That's why following our Lord in spiritual life is a continuous spiral of letting go and growing. And, yes, that means it's even possible that the next "room" that our conscious individuality will inhabit will be right here. The psalmist was right, though. We're not going to live this present life without seeing death. But we do have the promise that Christ gives us—not just life after death but a unique and continuing life with new understanding and awareness and purpose.

20

Back to the beginning

I've always found nature's patterns and shapes fascinating. Seashells. Clouds. Frost on windows. A few years ago I enjoyed identifying the many types of leaves I could see from the swing on my back patio, and decades ago I learned the major constellations as I stared in wonder at the night sky. Just recently I was astounded when I read that newer, stronger telescopes show more galaxies in the universe than grains of sand on the earth! We now also know that such recurrent patterns are not happenstance. They instead manifest and give substance to some of our newest, and most intriguing, mathematical principles. These infinitely repeating patterns or fractals are formed by infinitely repetitive steps, and their shapes can contain infinite perimeters. Even what we perceive to be chaos has an underlying pattern or structure.

That's why God's intention for us should not be seen as something separate from the physical world, even as He is so much greater and includes so much more than any of nature's patterns. For the things that we see through microscopes and telescopes, and the things that we see only in the mathematical theories of quantum mechanics, are in some

way, connected to the things that we will never physically or even theoretically see, the things that the natural world can never show us.

Support for this idea can be found in this statement about Jesus written by George Macdonald: "In him, there is perfect submission to lower law. But he would occasionally reveal the Father to the children by the introduction of higher laws operating in the upper regions, not separated from ours by an impassable gulf— rather connected by gently ascending stairs, many of whose gradations he could blend in one descent" (107).

We cannot follow Christ and ignore the reason he did things that seemed to violate natural laws. As Jesus said: "If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him." (John 10: 37-38)

And our Lord's works indicate that there is more going on in our existence, right here, than we may be ready to perceive. For example, one of the more mysterious accounts in the Gospel moves far outside the boundaries of conventional wisdom and modern science. Jesus took "Peter and John and James, and went up into the mountain to pray." Then Luke continues: "And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering. And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias; who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:28–32).

The writers of Matthew (17:2) and Mark (9:2) also recount the incident and say that Jesus was "transfigured." The definition for this Greek word includes the English word *metamorphosis*, which means to change into a different physical

form. To me this could indicate that the transfigured Jesus wasn't spirit, which is the substance of God, but rather just a step or two further on the road from matter to spirit. I find it significant that Jesus brought along Peter and James and John, the three witnesses necessary to prove a truth. And it is also worth noting that the writers of three Gospels chose to include this transfiguration in their narratives. In this meeting with Elijah and Moses, I think Jesus' intention was to give his disciples, and the rest of us, a glimpse, to open the door just a little.

Visualizing such an idea reminds me of another of nature's mathematical patterns, the perfect concentric circles caused by a stone as it plops into a pond. Jesus Christ is the stone that not only ripples our world but also ripples on into something we can only imagine. Still, the natural world does help us imagine it. That is why we shouldn't repudiate or turn away from the world around us. Just as we cannot disconnect the idea of a chair from the chair itself, we cannot disconnect Christ's "larger, stronger, quieter life" (Lewis' words) from the life we have now, the universe we know. The ripples of our eternity begin right here.

That explains why our life and individuality, the part of us that God loves, is greater than what appears to be going on here. No matter how grand and huge our universe is, it will run down and stop, just as our physical bodies run down and stop. But there is something more going on than what we see, and the very patterns and grandeur here in this world are hints of what that could be.

Natural laws are not in one place and God's laws somewhere else. They are all here and they are all connected. You might well question this view; certainly I have questioned it myself. But I find support for it, once again, in some of

George MacDonald's wonderful thoughts. He says: "All I want to show here is a conceivable region in which a miracle might take place without any violence done to the order of things. Our power of belief depends greatly on our power of imagining a region in which such things might be" (106).

And that is what I'm asking you to do—to imagine a region where the lower laws of the natural universe and God's higher laws of spirit are a part of the same process, a part of the same infinite pattern. The freedom and eternity of this "larger" life—how it could continue and where it could continue—give me, and hopefully you as well, immeasurable comfort.

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