

Chapter 1

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 Nothing at all out of date about that.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.