

A response to some questions from *Gather* readers

by the Rev. Dr. Mark Allan Powell

The April 2022 session of “The Kingdom of God,” the Bible study I contributed to *Gather* magazine, apparently generated a lot of questions. I am happy to respond by saying a little more about this topic of the forever life we will share with God and our loved ones after we die.

First, some of us may wonder about how we will enter into this new life that the Bible calls Paradise. Does our body die, and our soul go to heaven? Well, sort of, ...but generally there have been three different ways of understanding this:

- 1) Many Gentiles at the time of Jesus thought that when a person died, their mortal body died but their immortal soul continued to live and have various adventures. Yet if this were the case, then there would be no need for anyone to be “raised from the dead” because their soul (the only thing that counts) would still be alive—and free from its prison of the body. Jews and Christians rejected this idea.
- 2) Most Jews and early Christians believed that when a person died, their body and soul both died. Still, hope would be fulfilled when God raised the person from the dead with a new immortal body (and of course, a new immortal soul). In biblical terms, a soul cannot exist apart from a body because the word “soul” simply means “the person”—in other words, the entity created by God that lives, dies, and then is raised from death to new life.
- 3) Many Christians throughout history (including, probably, Martin Luther) developed a view that was a hybrid of the first two ideas: the idea that people do have immortal souls that can exist apart from their body, but that when a person dies, God takes the soul and keeps it safe until it can be put in a new body when the person is raised from the dead. This has become a common view among many modern Christians.

If one follows either the second or third option above, the question arises as to *when* the person is raised from the dead to be with God. The Bible indicates that this will be at the end of time, but most theologians believe that this only seems to be the case from our human perspective. The person who dies is immediately raised to new life by God in an eternal realm where the concepts of past, present, and future do not apply. We can say the dead will be raised “on the last day” (John 11:24) or “when Jesus returns” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), but in a very real sense, those whom we love are already with Jesus in Paradise (Luke 23:43), because the kingdom of heaven is a reality where things that we regard as future events have already happened.

On a more practical level, people wonder what our new bodies will be like in heaven: Will some people be older than others? Will people be male and female? Will we be different races? Sorry, but we find no answers in the Bible to questions like that. We do get the impression that our “spiritual bodies” (1 Corinthians 15:42-43) will be similar in many ways to physical bodies. For example, there are references to people eating and drinking in heaven. People in heaven sing and dance and bow down. We also read about what we will see, hear, smell, taste, and feel when we are there. So apparently even though our bodies will not be “flesh and blood” (1 Corinthians 15:50), we will have all five senses (and perhaps a few more).

Some were surprised (and disappointed) to learn that Jesus says there will no longer be marriage in heaven (Matthew 22:30). Again, we don't know exactly what this means—certainly, we will be reunited with our spouses, and we will no doubt be closer to them and more perfectly in love with them than ever before. But no marriage? Perhaps this just means that the legal institution of marriage we have here will no longer be relevant in heaven. If people here believe they are married “in the eyes of God” (and in their own eyes), they might continue to experience that in heaven—they just won't be married in the eyes of the government in a place where the government no longer exists. This is a mystery no one has solved.

You can be absolutely certain of one thing: no one will be disappointed by whatever God has for us and our loved ones in that wonderful new life.

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