

QUESTION 1

Why Is It Important to Think about the Afterlife?

I know that many consider it a waste of time to think about the afterlife. After all, this present life has more than enough trouble. This book will not help you to pay off your mortgage, snag that promotion at work, or find the perfect mate. So why bother with it?

I am firmly convinced that thinking about death and what comes after it is the single most practical activity we can do. And yes, it affects *everything else* we do! Popular author Tim Keller put it like this: “The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about the future.”¹ What you truly believe about the life beyond—or do not believe about it—determines your loves, your motivations, your goals, and how you direct all of your energies in this one. It cannot help but do so.

Why should this be so? It all comes down to a matter of “worldview.” Worldview! That sounds like a word that escaped from an undergrad philosophy class. But our worldview drives everything we do, whether we realize it or not. Our beliefs about the afterlife, and all that is connected with those beliefs, form the center from which we may evaluate everything in life. *This life.*

When Worldviews Collide

In his popular song *Imagine*, John Lennon asks us to imagine a universe in which “there’s no heaven” nor any “hell below us.” In Lennon’s ideal world, people would forget about living for some fictitious pie-in-the-sky afterlife but instead focus only on the real world, “living for today.”

So let us accept Lennon’s challenge and see how this cashes out practically. Imagine that all we have is the physical world as we know and see it.

1. Tim Keller, “The New Heaven and New Earth” (podcast of sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, April 12, 2009), <http://podbay.fm/show/352660924/e/1317415673>.

There is no heaven above nor hell beneath. No spiritual realm populated by demons or angels—or even God, for that matter. The entire universe arose out of clumps of stardust banging together eons ago through random, impersonal, unguided processes. These same processes somehow brought forth human beings, evolving us into the highly complex biological machines, so to speak, that we are today. Eventually, though, the universe will wind down and burn itself out, passing away with a bang—or maybe only a whimper. But long before that happens, you and I will live for a time, die, and slip into quiet oblivion without leaving a trace, once the worms have had their fill. Sure, our loved ones may place flowers on our graves—maybe for a generation or two if we are especially beloved—but soon enough no one will remember and it will be as if we never were.

Now, if this describes our ultimate destiny, does such a view have any bearing on our *present* hopes, aspirations, and behavior? And, conversely, might the idea that we are more than corruptible biological machines—that we are eternal creatures, made in the likeness of a personal, loving, and just God—result in a different way of living our lives right now?

Where Afterlife Meets Practical Life

Let us consider just a few of the ways in which our vision of the future affects us now.

Our Hunger for Justice

We know that there is gross evil in this world, some of it so unspeakably horrible that we scarcely can contemplate it. Adolescent girls sold into sexual slavery for the financial gain of despicable human traffickers. Innocent lives cut short by gang members battling over drug turf. Entire populations decimated by genocide to advance selfish political and religious domination. Countries ravaged by despotic warlords and megalomaniacal dictators, who live a life of ease on the backs of their enslaved, starving subjects.

Picture the human trafficker, who has devastated the bodies and souls of innocent young girls. He lives a prosperous life of ease and then dies peacefully in his sleep. Or the oppressive dictator, enjoying fine imported cigars, exotic food, and his smuggled collection of classic cars, indifferent to the unimaginable suffering he has heaped upon his impoverished countrymen living in squalor. Does not everything within us rise up in revulsion and outrage? Is there no payback? Where is justice for the poor and oppressed?

If we imagine that there is no heaven or hell, and that all we have is “living for today,” then we have also imagined a moral universe that remains seriously out of kilter, one in which the scales never balance. Sure, sometimes that warlord or dictator takes a bullet to his head—usually from an even worse warlord or dictator who just picks up where the previous one

left off. No, we cannot deny that there is much unfinished business in this world. And so we have imagined a universe in which that business remains *forever* unfinished, and justice unsatisfied.

As bad as all this sounds, it is actually a good deal worse. A universe that came about through unguided collisions of inanimate matter strips us of any reason for our outrage. Why should we be incensed that the particular clumps of stardust that randomly fashioned the human trafficker also happened to dominate and subjugate the clumps that formed his victims? Because he has violated their “dignity”? What dignity? We humans have no more dignity than a rock or a tree; we are simply a different arrangement of clumps, after all—neither better nor worse. And from where do all these notions of *ought* and *should*, which trouble us so much, even arise in such a coldly impersonal universe? We are outraged, but for no good reason at all!

Yet, outraged we are. We know that such things ought not to be; and we cannot escape the certain feeling that something is deeply, profoundly, and desperately wrong, despite the fact that these feelings make no sense in a purely material and mechanical world.

Let us imagine instead that we are eternal creatures made in the image of an eternal God, endowed with a clear sense of right and wrong—the same sense that he himself has. Let us imagine that this God hates injustice even more than we do, and that he can and will do something about it—perhaps even at great personal cost to himself. Consider a universe in which this God holds his creatures morally accountable, who one day will “render to each one according to his works” (Rom. 2:6). This is a God who will set things right. He will compensate fully those who have suffered unjustly and will punish the guilty with perfect justice.

Imagine *that!*

Natural Evils in the World

Not all of the evils we encounter in this world are “moral evils” of the sort we have just considered. We also experience what we might call “natural evils,” such as earthquakes, floods, and the ravages of old age. How do we make sense of these?

The famous actor and self-proclaimed agnostic Richard Dreyfuss said, “When I die I hope I’ll have a chance to hit God in the face.”² And just what did this God—who may or may not exist, according to Dreyfuss’s agnostic philosophy—do to earn such scorn? “He deserves it,” Dreyfuss tells us, “because of everything that happens to you in the third act of life: it’s humiliating and debasing.”

2. Richard Dreyfuss, “Richard Dreyfuss: ‘When I Die I Want the Chance to Hit God in the Face,’” *The Guardian*, July 24, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jul/24/richard-dreyfuss-reckless-when-i-die-i-want-the-chance-to-hit-god-in-the-face>.

Again, we must inquire: If we are but the result of impersonal, mechanical, physical processes, why ought old age to be other than this? (There is that pesky word “ought” again!) Who is to say that death, disease, dying, and decay are “bad”? They just *are*. One may just as well rage against the wind or tides or any other impersonal force of nature as against the reality that our bodies disintegrate with age. Yet, here again, we know deep down that death and destruction and sickness and decay ought not to be. Something is seriously wrong. We know it and cannot shake this sense. We recoil against our own mortality and see it for the great and terrible evil that it is. And we long for something better: something that this world cannot provide.

Dreyfuss seems to acknowledge all this, whether he realizes it or not. Notice that he directs his rage against a presumably personal God, whom he wants to hold personally accountable with a punch in the face. His rage likewise points to a God who must have the power to do something about it—at least if his complaint is to make any sense at all. Fair enough. At least his anger is intelligible. But it is intelligible only in so far as he has set aside his agnosticism, and speaks from what his heart tells him is true.

Now, what if this personal creator God has revealed to us why natural evils, such as death, befall us in this life? Maybe there is a good reason for it that Dreyfuss has not considered. Perhaps also, this God is working a plan for dealing with death, the ultimate enemy of us all. Would it change anything to know that this same God will someday eliminate all the natural evils in this world by replacing our present universe with a new, glorious, and resplendent one? And that he offers to redeem these frail, weak, and mortal bodies by transforming them into immortal, imperishable, and vibrant ones—brimming with life, subject to none of the degrading effects of time and decay, full of energy and immortal youth?

Our Belief in the Afterlife Motivates Us to Live Sacrificially for Others

While most people “care deeply about justice for the poor, alleviating hunger and disease, and caring for the environment,” Keller points out that the materialist worldview, which denies an afterlife, seriously diminishes our “motivation to make the world a better place.” Indeed, Keller asks, “Why sacrifice for the needs of others if in the end nothing we do will make any difference?”³ But a worldview that regards others as made in the image of a good and loving God, and therefore as beings of eternal value, spurs us to practical action in eliminating the misery of our fellow man and woman. What we do to help others now has no expiration date; it counts for eternity as well.

3. Tim Keller, *A Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 220.

Obviously, there are people who do not believe in an afterlife who make sacrifices for others. That is not the point. The issue is that their worldview undercuts any coherent reason to do so. The atheist and agnostic bear God's image as much as anyone else, and so we are not surprised that they sometimes live like the eternal beings they really are, despite what they may claim to believe. Nevertheless, how much greater motivation is there to do the right thing for the right reason! It is no wonder that Christians, who live today in light of eternity, have done more to alleviate the plight of the downtrodden and suffering than any other religion or philosophy ever have done.⁴

Consider the early Christians, who well understood the connection between time and eternity and lived it out to dramatic effect. What was it about the fledgling Christian movement—reviled, persecuted, outcast, and despised—that triumphed against all odds over mighty pagan Rome, one of the greatest empires in human history? Historians tell us that it was the Christians' selfless love, pouring themselves out in sacrifice to others. At the root of it all was the specifically Christian vision of the afterlife, which propelled these early believers to put their own lives on the line to minister to their countrymen at great personal cost. They did not fear their own deaths, for they knew something better lay in store for them.⁵ To cite but one poignant example, these early followers of Christ risked their own lives to care for their pagan enemies who had contracted infection in a time of plague, when even their own family members cast them into the street to avoid contracting their disease.⁶ The self-sacrifice of the early Christians, more than anything, commended Christianity to a culture that found such a lifestyle astonishing and inexplicable apart from a vibrant, living, and eternal hope.

4. For a book that addresses this theme well, see Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011). See also David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). An interesting book that details the enormously positive effect that the introduction of Christianity has had on India is Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

5. Even some of the most bitter, strident critics of Christianity had to admit as much. For instance, historian Howard Clark Kee cites Lucian as illustrative: "Lucian remarks, 'The activity of these people [Christians] in dealing with any matter that affects their community is something extraordinary: they spare neither trouble nor expense.' It is because 'these misguided creatures' believe that they are forever immortal that they scorn death and manifest the voluntary devotion that is so common among them" (Howard Clark Kee, et al., *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* [New York: Macmillan, 1991], 82). Kee's citation of Lucian comes from his *Death of Peregrinus*, sec. 11–16. See also Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 105–6.

6. Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 114–18.

Our Belief in the Afterlife Gives Us Hope

Since I began writing this book, I have come to appreciate more and more just how much the truth of what God has in store for his children in the next life gives us hope for navigating the trials and disappointments of this one. If I might, I would like to speak to this point very personally and from my heart.

As I write this, it has been less than a week since we have concluded what may be the most contentious, polarizing, and dispiriting presidential election in United States history. Never have I been more discouraged about the prospects for this country. We are in a serious moral eclipse, and though I am hardly a prophet, I predict that we are in for some very dark days ahead. Those who seek their “salvation” in a political party or candidate would do well to heed the ancient admonition that we ought not to “Put [our] trust in princes” (Ps. 146:3). It is hard to have much hope in the current direction of things, both here and around the globe. The world is on fire, and there is little reason to think it will improve.

It is not just the world scene but also life closer to home that often disappoints and takes its toll. Since I began writing this book, I have lost two of my dearest friends in a space of only four months. First, there was Dennis, who died of brain cancer; and then Bob, who succumbed to his injuries from an auto collision three blocks from Talbot School of Theology, where I had taught with him since 1987. Dennis was my classmate at seminary; our kids grew up together, and he and I, with his wife Susan and my wife Diane, did life together for more than thirty years. As for Bob, he was not only my best friend but also a close professional colleague with a brilliant theological mind. Bob was my sounding board for all things theological, including many of the thoughts I had to work through in writing this book. It seems unreal that my intimate advisor, confidant, and friend—more like a father, really—has been ripped out of my life. I cannot call him for advice, encouragement, and help. The pain of this is still raw, and I feel it acutely as I type these words.

Now, it might be easy to conclude that if people would just stop dying and our politicians would shape up, then life would be perfect. But what of the self-inflicted misery of my own heart, welling up as a polluted spring and chargeable to myself alone? What about my miserable pride and arrogance, insecurity and envy, anger and impatience, raging doubts and fears, that surge from within, unbidden? I cannot blame this on the Democrats or the Republicans or bad Supreme Court appointees or anyone else who just lacks the good sense to see things my way. No, I alone am to blame for “the sin that dwells within me” and “which clings so closely” (Rom. 7:17; Heb. 12:1). Nor will I eliminate my misery by just “trying harder.” “For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out” (Rom. 7:18). And I am tired of it: tired of hurting others, weary of failing myself and especially my God. I know that I should do and think and speak and feel only what is right and

pure, every moment of every day. I also know that I can no more do that than I can raise myself from the dead.⁷

Though I grieve over the state of our world and of the pain of personal loss, though I mourn over the depravity that lies within the secret places of my own heart, I do so as one who looks to an ultimate victory—to a day when every tear will be wiped away from my eyes and from the eyes of those I deeply love (Rev. 21:4). Someday the world will be ruled in righteousness by the man whom God has appointed heir of all things, the Lord Jesus Christ, “the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Heb. 1:2; Rev. 22:16). God will banish all wickedness and corruption from his universe, and we shall never again be enslaved. He shall remove all evils, moral and natural, from his world forever, including those lodged so firmly in my own sinful heart. There will be a new heavens and a new earth, in which there shall be no mourning, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things shall have passed away (Rev. 21:4). Knowing this gives us the strength not merely to endure but to thrive, confident in that glorious future that now awaits our unveiling as the sons of God (Rom. 8:19).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. After reading this chapter, how would you reply to the well-known saying, “He is too heavenly minded for his own earthly good”?
2. Reflect on how one’s worldview “cashes out” in such practical ways as our desire for justice, and our motivation to alleviate the pain and suffering of our fellow human beings.
3. Consider Richard Dreyfuss’s statement about wanting to punch God in the face when he dies. Have you ever been angry with God for your own pain in this world? Has anything you have read in this chapter given you a new perspective on that?
4. Have any of the ideas presented in this chapter helped you to deal with some of your own hurts and disappointments?
5. Of everything discussed in this chapter, what aspect of the age to come do you most look forward to experiencing?

7. To paraphrase the great theologian Charles Hodge.

