

## **Quae sint expectanda**

**(or, what we may look forward to)**

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This is a shorthand talk in which, to save time, references will not be given, debatable points will be made as if they were dogmas, authorities will not be quoted, words like "alleged" and "suggested" will not be used, some heresy will be uttered and hackles will probably be raised to be lowered, I hope, by modifications to be made in discussion afterwards.

I propose to do four things:

- 1.** To summarize the New Testament teachings about life after death.
- 2.** To look at data provided by near-death and return-from-clinical-death experiences.
- 3.** To survey spiritualistic communications about after-life conditions.
- 4.** To see if all these can be reconciled.

There appear to be two stages of post-mortem survival; first, the pareschatological state (eschatology is the doctrine of the last things), which occurs between physical death and the crossing of a barrier from which there is no return (those who return from near-death or clinical death never pass this); second, the eschatological condition from which there is no return and about which we can have no experience (unless reincarnation is a fact), only belief.

The New Testament teaches nothing about the pareschatological state, but a fair amount about the eschatological, as follows:

Jesus taught that there is a kingdom of heaven which exists in individuals in this world, whose citizens will be rewarded in the next for their faithfulness here; that everlasting life, everlasting hell-fire, the remorse of outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, final judgement and the possible death of the soul are facts. He stated that he was going into death ahead of his disciples to prepare a place for them in the "many mansions" ("rooms", "resting-places", "inns along the road") to be found in his Father's house. He prophesied his own resurrection and the records agree that his prophecy was fulfilled, though many details of the accounts are irreconcilable with each other.

Everlasting life, hell-fire, judgement, and the resurrection of Christ and of his faithful followers are themes stated or inferred in

all but two or three of the New Testament books other than the Gospels. There are also specific doctrines of the Rapture (the catching-up of believers alive to meet Christ in the air when the Second Coming occurs); of the nature of the believer's resurrection when our natural body will be raised a spiritual body and our mortal body will put on immortality (whatever that may mean — was Paul talking literally or metaphorically? In other words, is any *doctrine* of postmortem existence to be based on his words?); and of a fulfilment of some kind when we who now see as in a glass, darkly, but then face to face, shall know God even as we are known. I doubt whether it is right to found any idea of the after-life on that collection of marvellous metaphors, the Book of Revelation, though I think many Christians get from that book their early ideas of heaven (which a proportion of them never lose) as a shining place full of white-robed, golden-crowned entities bearing palms and either standing on a somewhat slippery glassy sea or occupied in an eternal church-service, while evil-doers with the devil and his angels are doomed to a lake of fire and brimstone from which the smoke of their torment ascends for ever and ever. Like it or not, all this is what the New Testament, if taken literally, teaches about life after death.

Near-death and return-from-clinical-death experiences describe only paretological states. They contain the following elements (not every NDE or RCDE contains all of them but all contain some):

1. Physical pain ceases, and is replaced by peace and joy.
2. The patient "separates" from the physical body becoming, he feels, his "real" self. In this out-of-the-body experience he is usually above his physical body, looking down at the medicos busy about it.
3. He enters a dark, spiralling tunnel and rushes down it accompanied by noise caused by the speed of his travel towards a bright white or yellow light at the tunnel's end. He emerges into this.
4. The light surrounds him with a feeling of indescribable joy and love it should be noted that all people of good conscience appear to share this feeling, whether believer, agnostic or atheist). Men of bad conscience suffer fear and stress and travel into the black void of a hell-like environment with a sense of evil forces, howling, gnashing of teeth and wild animals. There aren't many of these negative experiences reported — perhaps their

subjects are ashamed to reveal them! The literature indicates, however, that they have a sobering and reforming effect.

5. The light is often personal and identified with God, Jesus, a saint, Buddha, Krishna, etc., according to the subject's culture.

6. In the presence of this Being of Light, the subject experiences a review of his life unfolding before his eyes and judges himself. He is conscious while this is happening of love and forgiveness.

7. He is aware of dead relatives and friends about him welcoming him, and, perhaps, of Elysian fields, music, brilliant colours and a conviction of being at one with it all, together with a sense of timelessness.

8. He advances towards a barrier of some kind a wall, a river, a door — and knows that if he passes it, there is no return — pareschatology passes into eschatology. Before he passes this, he knows or is told that his time has not yet come and he must return to earth. He goes back, always with reluctance, and finds himself back in his physical body in the pain and heaviness of sick flesh. But he is after that forever loosed from the fear of death, convinced

that there's something more to come to which he can look forward with pleasurable anticipation.

A digest of the better Spiritualist communications about the after-life produces a picture something like this. We wake up on the other side of life with the same character and beliefs with which we die. The materialist who believes that death is the end may be in a quandary because, if he knows he has died and is yet still alive, he will be unable to adjust to an impossible situation. If he has died unexpectedly without knowing what hit him, he will think that because he feels alive he *is* alive, and will not be able to understand why his friends ignore him and life goes on as if he wasn't there. Such characters will be "earth-bound" until they are educated into the reality of life after death by rescue circles of Spiritualists working on earth or celestial social workers operating in the spirit-world. When ordinary folk die, after initial surprise they adjust to the new situation. Some Spiritualists accept a scenario of concentric spheres, perhaps seven in number, each more spiritual than the one within it, through which the spirit advances as it grows more mature. Ordinarily decent folk pass into the third sphere on death. The two below it are regions of mental fog and gloom for souls sunk in materialism and perhaps vice, from which they will advance in time. Whether one accepts the idea of spheres or not, the general picture is of spiritual progress.

The soul released by death from the body will find itself in a situation where it can create for itself what it desires. Some Hindu doctrines of the after-life are similar, as in them the individual passes from the *mays* or illusion of this life into another realm of *maya* in the next and creates its own heaven or hell. The reason some spirit communicators have spoken of their enjoyment of the finest cigars and whiskies, to the contempt of critics with a more spiritual view of heaven, is that these are precisely what would appeal to *bon viveurs* who really believe that happiness is a cigar called Hamlet. The different "heavens" created by post-mortem entities are well illustrated in direct voice recordings made through Leslie Flint in which first a miner, killed in a pit-accident, awakes to find himself in a sunlit meadow. He walks through it to an ideal cottage which he knows to be *his* cottage, is welcomed enthusiastically by a dog which he knows to be *his* dog and is happy — he has all he wants. But then, secondly, Ellen Terry, the great actress, emphasizes how increasingly difficult it is for her to continue communicating with earth as she advances through realms of indescribable colour and loveliness. *Her* heaven and happiness come from different characteristics and ideas from the miner's; and perhaps the old granny, free from arthritis, with her spirit-cat on her spirit-knee in her spirit rocking-chair before her spirit fire is a conception not to be despised by theologians who talk about being in the nearer presence of God without knowing what they mean. After a time, the miner will tire of his cottage, Ellen Terry of her beautiful landscape and the granny will realise that "you can't get to

heaven in a rocking-chair", and they will all aspire to, and make the effort to achieve, higher things.

Well, there are three extremely sketchy scenarios of what happens when we die. Can they be reconciled? *Ought* they to be reconciled?

Before I suggest answers, there are four concepts I should like you to consider. The first is the magnitude of God the Father, Creator of the universe. He is the Being who made the myriads of galaxies exploding from each other over *an* area measured in billions of light-years and who holds them in his mind (I have to use human terminology) alongside with every heart-beat of every one of the two hundred million living creatures known to science to inhabit every cubic inch of the world's surface. Let your imaginations play with that concept, and then let them play with concept two —ourselves.

We are, compared with the whole Creation of the Being we call God, physically far smaller than one of the two hundred million microbes I have mentioned is compared with the earth. The one quality that we have that makes our physical insignificance unimportant is our mind — the equipment that helps the best of humans to become Leonardos, Shakespeares, Dantes, Beethovens, Mozarts, Newtons, Galileos, Einsteins, and even the most pedestrian of us able to talk about light-years and quantum physics and listen with delight to music and poetry and be stirred by beauty in art and nature and glimpse the enlightenment and ecstasy of the mystic. Yet I cannot believe that to take the very best



of the spiritual microbes that we are at the moment of his death and to introduce him into the presence of the naked glory of God the Creator is a conceivable possibility. It would be like placing one of our two hundred million microbes in the centre of the sun and expecting it to survive. Christianity teaches that our ultimate destiny is to know God as we are known—the journey to that destiny cannot, surely, be completed after sixty or seventy years of earthly life? That would be like placing a one-day-old foetus of an athlete destined to be the best in the history of mankind at the starting-line in the Olympic Games and expecting it to smash the world record. The foetus has the potentiality to do that, but needs to develop in the womb, be born, grow up, be taught technique, trained, work through junior competitions, senior, national and international until the day comes when it is to be the best ever. As the development of the foetus into world-beating athlete takes years, so aeons will be needed for a human spirit to develop to that stage where he can know God even as he is known.

The mention of aeons brings me to my third concept, that of the relationship of time and eternity. Eternity, the element in which eternal life exists, is not just a very, very long time which has no end. It differs from time in that it is a condition in which everything past, present and future *is*, to the Lord God to which the old Jews, by a stroke of genius, gave the title *J AM*. In a radio talk on "What Happens When I Die", given in 1935 (that dates me!), Dom Bernard Clements likened time to a football team walking in single file down a passage. You can say

that the second man in the team comes after the first and before the third, as you can say that 1940 and its events came after 1939 and before 1941 and *their* events. That is time. Now take the same football team and scatter its members higgledy-piggledy in Hyde Park. No longer is any one before or after any other. Their relationship is different. They all *are* in a different environment. *That* is eternity. One of the most difficult adjustments we shall have to make after death, I'm sure, is the adaptation to timelessness and its significance.

The fourth factor to be considered is the nature of the salvation in which we, as Christians, believe. The Protestant doctrine of the Atonement, as I understand it, is that Christ died on the Cross to wipe out the guilt of sin and its power in our lives — Christ was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Those who are justified by faith in him are, therefore, upon death wafted immediately into the very presence of the unclouded God. The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory interposes an interregnum of disciplinary purification which, though without Biblical sanction, seems to me in the light of my athletic foetus metaphor, to be more reasonable and probable.

What happens, then, to the Atonement? May I suggest, with humility for my temerity, that it is limited? God emptied himself to become a man so that we, wanting to know what the Creator of the macrocosm and microcosm is like in terms that we can understand, were presented with a man whose infinite spiritual possibilities — like

ours — could only *begin* to be manifested in his thirty-odd years on earth, and have gone on being revealed by the Holy Spirit ever since. But to be a perfect man — even a perfect spiritual man — is far short of being the ultimate perfection God has given us the potentiality to become. What I suggest the Atonement does for us is to present us completely ready for *the next stage*. It qualifies us to play at Wimbledon or in open golf; to become the champion may still be eternities ahead.

*Quae sint expectanda in morte?* What then, may we look forward to in death? This is my personal view, which I present as surmise, not dogma. I accept the parapsychological scenario of the near-death and return-from-clinical-death experiences as real in the sense of being an adventure we shall all die through — the replacement of pain and distress by painlessness and peace, an out-of-the-body sensation, travel through the tunnel, experience of a Being of Light, a review of our life in which we shall be given the grace to see and judge honestly what we have been and the crossing the barrier into the eschatological state from which there is no return. I must add here that I am aware of the physiological explanations of some of these phenomena and reject them.

I accept the Spiritualist view that we shall carry into the next world the character we have made in this — including our faith in God and Christ and what the latter's atonement has effected on our behalf. I believe that we

may be able to create our own environments for ourselves by thought (I use that word with diffidence — post-mortem thought must be different from pre-mortem) and that in this may be great temptation, against which we may find Christ's atonement for us to be a far more powerful weapon than ever we dreamed of in this life. In this we shall experience what the communion of saints is all about, because we can call upon them as allies. I believe that we shall create our ideal environment (which will have for Christians, of course, a Christian flavour) which we shall in time outgrow and which will become the springboard for something higher and less and less illusory until we find Ultimate Reality in God, whatever that may mean. I do not rule out reincarnation of various kinds as possible stages in this progress. Everything we meet may be totally unexpected (yet come to us possibly and paradoxically with a sense of familiarity — we shall always have known it because it has always been there in eternity). We may find ourselves in an aggregate of group-souls, advancing together. We must be ready to be surprised by joy in all sorts of ways.

I accept the Christian idea of the Kingdom of God being now as well as in the future, for, apart from its belonging to the realm of eternity and therefore timeless, all spiritual truths, it seems to me, are past, present and future — I was converted, I am being converted, I shall be fulfilled in conversion. I accept eternal life and Christ's convenient preparation of a place for us — he is both with us and ahead of us in our life before and after death. I do not accept eternal punishment (I believe Jesus was

Misunderstood in his teaching and that New Testament writers perpetuated the misunderstanding), for eternal punishment would mean the eternal failure of the love of God, for whom to fail is a contradiction in terms. Nor do I accept Paul's idea of the Rapture nor the metaphors of Revelation as containing literal truth.

In short, I am probably a heretic. If I am, I throw myself upon the mercy of God to lead me into truth — post-mortem if not now.