

Personal Implications

What difference does our pre-existence make for us at the personal level?

We are returning, like the prodigal son, to a father we have previously known and loved. We are not going to a new country, where we have never been before. We come back like a traveller from a foreign country to the home and place where we belong.

Reconciliation with God is not making friends with someone we've never met before. It is restoring a lost and broken relationship, and lifting it to a new and far more wonderful level.

We are not purchased by a new owner whom we have never met, but redeemed by our original loving heavenly Father.

Pre-Existence and Universal Reconciliation

in suffering and misery, only to find that far worse awaits them in the eternity that follows.

Thank God the true gospel is infinitely better than this. Our life in this world is a small part of a vastly greater picture. It is neither the beginning nor the end. Our true beginning with God was good. Our eventual state with him will be better far. That state of heavenly blessing can begin for us even now.

Paul wrote: ‘our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all’ (2 Cor 4:17). Jesus himself suffered beyond anything we may imagine, when the inconceivable darkness and burden of the sins of the world broke his hitherto perfect communion with his father. In varying degrees all other members of the human race suffer a breach in their relation with our Father. Finally, all will return to perfect communion with him. Long or short, small or great, the suffering of this life will seem little compared with the glory that will eventually come for all mankind.

Someone looking at one square inch of a great oil painting could easily say that it made no sense. Reveal the whole picture to him, and he would see a brilliant masterpiece. When we look at this life with our limited human sight, we are seeing only a small part of a vastly greater whole. God’s creation is like an enormous and perfect tapestry. For now, we can see only an infinitesimal part of it. He looks at the whole from eternity to eternity and declares, as recorded in the book of Genesis, that it is very good.

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*But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy.
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy.*

Implications

What implications does pre-existence have, and how does it change our attitudes? We will consider first general implications and then personal implications.

General Implications

Traditional teaching has presented this life as the start of our existence. This life might be long or short, happy or miserable, privileged or unprivileged, lived in heathen darkness or with every opportunity for spiritual light. Some people are born into a good family in a free country and live many years in health and happiness and plenty. Others are born into poverty and deprivation or under evil governments, or live their lives with every kind of suffering for no obvious fault of their own.

The man of the world repeatedly tells us it is unfair. How can God be just when existence is so unequal?

In the past we might have replied that this life is not the whole story. Anyone who repents of his sins and believes in Jesus for salvation will go to heaven when he dies, and his sufferings will turn to infinite joy. The unrepentant will go into eternal torment.

Our friend replies that this is even less fair. Not only is this life unjust, but the next is infinitely worse. Many people live out this life

Introduction

Where have we come from, and where are we going? Can we know the answers? One person certainly did. **'I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father,'** he said (John 16:28).

The man of the world believes this life is the only life he has, and he lives and acts according to that belief. If there is an afterlife, he thinks, we do not know much if anything about it, and the best thing to do is to enjoy the life we have on this earth and make the most of it.

Most religions, on the other hand, place a strong emphasis on the afterlife. Most religious people believe that the next life will either be wonderfully happy in heaven or horribly miserable in hell for ever. Our final destination depends on our faith or actions in this life. Many people hold this theory, but few of them are able to live in accordance with what they believe. Most of them watch the majority of their fellow beings, usually including many of their own relations, heading for eternal torment, and feel powerless to do anything about it.

Hindus and Buddhists believe in reincarnation. We progress through many lives on this earth, they believe, hopefully making spiritual progress each time we come, until we finally attain enlightenment and do not need to return. I do not believe this teaching, but I do find it more logical than the idea that we have one short - maybe very short - life on earth after which we will go immediately to eternal bliss or eternal torment (more probably the latter) depending on decisions often made with little on which to base them.

The early church held two significant beliefs which are not commonly held today:

- Pre-existence - the belief that we existed as spirits with God before we entered our earthly bodies.
- Universal reconciliation - the belief that the whole human race will eventually reconciled to God.

These two beliefs change the whole perspective of our earthly life. It becomes a small part of something very much larger. The vast differences in our experiences and opportunities in this world become much smaller when seen against a background of what went before and what comes afterwards.

We will look first at the scriptural evidence for pre-existence. We will then look briefly at the evidence for universal reconciliation, which I have covered extensively in [other writings](#). We will then consider how such views could be correct if so few people now believe them or have seen them in scripture.

Pre-existence Stated in Scripture

The Scriptures contain clear statements of the pre-existence of Jesus; but also two clear statements of the pre-existence of others.

Pre-existence of Jesus

Many scriptures testify to the pre-existence of Jesus. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). ‘He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness’ (Phil 2:7). He himself said, ‘**I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father**’ (John 16:28). He had no doubts about where he came from, and none about where he was going. He came from the Father and was returning to the Father. He also said, ‘**Before Abraham was, I am**’ (John 8:58).

believe in pre-existence as a spirit with God. If you believe in pre-existence, it is a strong argument for believing in universal reconciliation.

Church History

Fourthly, the early church believed in both universal reconciliation and in pre-existence. I’ve read that ‘Until the sixth century A.D., early Christianity taught that we had a pre-earth life. Then the doctrine of a pre-existence was condemned by the council of Constantinople in A.D. 553.’ Like many other truths, these truths were lost until the reformation and more recent times.

An Anecdote and a Poem

One day a very little girl told her parents that she wanted to go and talk to their new baby on her own. The parents had installed an intercom so that they could hear when baby cried. They told her to go ahead and wondered what she was going to say. With the intercom switched on in the baby’s room, they were able to listen to everything the little girl said. She went over to the crib and the parents heard her say, “Since I have been on the earth I have forgotten what Father was like. Could you tell me what He is like?”

This beautiful little story is reminiscent of the following lines from the ode: *Intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood* by the English poet William Wordsworth:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The soul that rises with us, our life’s star
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,*

So we will find some truth stated clearly in scripture for all to understand. Other truth we will find hidden in all kinds of ways, limited only by the imagination of God. Laws, stories, words, numbers and much more, all contain truth that God is able and willing to reveal when and to whom he pleases.

Man's Sin

Secondly, we find that truth is hidden by man's sin and corruption. The doctrine of universal reconciliation is hidden by mistranslation of key Greek words. The church in general knew little of a gospel of grace and mercy, and needed a doctrine of eternal damnation to control its members and frighten them into submission. The ecclesiastical authorities were more than happy with inaccurate translation.

Truth Hidden behind Truth

Thirdly we find that truth is hidden behind other truth. The traditional church view of eternal judgement makes it impossible for anyone to believe in pre-existence. Jesus said that he came from the Father and went back to the Father. Could it make any sense that we also came into this world from the Father, and the majority of us then went on to the devil? What father would send his child to a malaria-ridden jungle in a foreign land with a 10% chance of his returning alive and a 90% chance of his dying a miserable death? Could God send his children to this earth with a 10% chance they would return to him and a 90% chance they would spend all eternity in unspeakable torment?

If you hold the traditional majority teaching that most of the human race is destined for perpetual and indescribable torment, then pre-existence with God becomes an absurd impossibility.

The teachings of universal reconciliation and pre-existence are linked. If you believe in eternal damnation, you cannot possibly

Jesus had no doubts about his own pre-existence, but what did he say of his disciples? Referring to them, he said: **'As you sent me into the world, I sent them into the world'** (John 17:18). In Greek the verb *sent* is in the simple past tense in both parts of this statement, though some English translations change it to *have sent* in the second part.

Ecclesiastes

In Ecclesiastes chapter 12 we find a poetic description of old age and death. It ends with the words: 'Remember your creator in the days of your youth ... before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground from which it came, and the spirit returns to God who gave it' (Ecc 12:6,7). This is a clear and unambiguous statement. The spirit came from God and the spirit returns to God.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah describes his call to God's service as follows: 'The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations"' (Jer 1:4,5). God knew Jeremiah before he entered his mother's womb. This also indicates that Jeremiah (and we) existed as spirits before we entered our human bodies.

Pre-existence Implied in Scripture

Besides these clear statements of pre-existence, we find no less than ten ways in which the Scriptures imply pre-existence.

Dead and Alive

The New Testament describes the unbeliever as being in a state of death. Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). You can't pass from death into life, unless you are in a state of death. Paul wrote, '**God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions**' (Eph 2:5). John uses similar language: '**We know that we have passed from death to life**' (1John 3:14). Jesus, Paul and John all describe unbelievers as being dead. The word *dead*, according to any dictionary, means *no longer alive*. In other words, you have to be alive first before you can be dead. You know whenever you see a dead animal or bird or plant that it was previously alive. The scriptural teaching that the natural man is in a state of death implies that he was previously alive.

Alienation

Similarly, Paul describes people as alienated from God: 'Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you' (Col 1:21). You can only be alienated from people whom you previously knew and with whom you had good relationships. You cannot be alienated from people you never knew in the first place. If we start our lives on earth in a state of alienation from God, then we must have previously existed in relationship with him.

Reconciliation

Paul writes at some length on the subject of reconciliation to God: 'All this is from God, who **reconciled** us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of **reconciliation**: that God was **reconciling** the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And

- "They will be punished with **age-lasting lostness from the presence of the Lord**" (2 Thes 1:9).

This now implies punishment of a limited duration, after which all will be reconciled to God.

See [Universal Reconciliation](#) and [other writings](#) for much more on this subject.

Why have these Truths been Hidden

If the teachings of pre-existence and universal reconciliation are true, why has the traditional church not taught them? Why have they been hidden for so long? Why is truth so often hidden from man's eyes? We will look at four reasons:

God's timing

Firstly, truth is hidden until God chooses to reveal it. In the Old Covenant, truth was hidden in types and shadows - pictures and stories - and later revealed when Jesus came as the mediator of the New Covenant. The truth was there, but hidden until the time came for its revelation.

Most obviously this was true when the apostle Paul re-read the Hebrew scriptures with enlightened eyes, and saw things which he said were '**the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him**' (Rom 16:25,26).

In the New Testament, Jesus spoke in parables so that truth could be revealed to those whom he chose, but not to the multitudes.

Universal Reconciliation

We will now look briefly at the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation, which I have covered extensively in [other writings](#).

Many verses in the Bible state or imply Universal Reconciliation. Here are two:

- For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive (1Co 15:22).
- For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his stake (cross) (Col 1:19,20).

Other scriptures appear to teach eternal torment for unbelievers. For example:

- “Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire” ([Mat 25:41](#)). The plain words of Jesus.
- “They will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” ([2Thes 1:9](#)).

How can these opposing teachings be reconciled?

The simple answer is that the English words *eternal* and *everlasting* and phrases like *for ever* are wrong translations of the Greek word αἰώνιος which literally means *age-lasting* and εἰς αἰῶνα which literally means *to the age*.

The above scriptures can be better translated:

- “Depart from me, you cursed, into **age-lasting** fire” (Mat 25:41).

he has committed to us the message of **reconciliation**. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: **Be reconciled** to God’ (2 Cor 5:18-20). Reconciliation does not mean making friends with someone you’ve never met and don’t know. It means restoring a relationship that previously existed and has been broken. So we cannot be reconciled to God unless we previously knew him and were in relationship with him. King David wrote, ‘**I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me**’ (Ps 51:5) then that previous relationship can only have been in a previous existence.

Redemption

The word *redeem* with its imagery tells us the same story. The meaning of the word *redeem* is to *buy back* what one previously owned. You cannot redeem something that was not previously yours. The meaning comes from the laws of the Old Testament. We find a clear illustration in Leviticus 25:25: ‘**If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold.**’ Not only property, but also people could be redeemed: ‘**he retains the right of redemption after he has sold himself. One of his relatives may redeem him: an uncle or a cousin or any blood-relative in his clan may redeem him. Or if he prospers, he may redeem himself**’ (Lev 25:48,49). Again we see clearly that redemption brings a person back to the free status he previously enjoyed. We see that we belonged to God before birth into our physical bodies and consequent sin separated us from him.

Rebirth

We must now take a fresh look at John chapter 3, the chapter where Jesus speaks about the new birth. Or does he? You may be surprised to know that the phrases new birth and new life occur

nowhere in the Bible. Instead we find the words rebirth and resurrection. In fact, new birth and re-birth are almost opposite in meaning. One has happened before, and the other has not. Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus when he asked, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?’ Jesus was not referring to a repeat physical birth, but to a repeat spiritual birth. When we enter this world, we suffer spiritual death through sin. We must be born again into spiritual life.

Resurrection

We experience spiritual death when we enter this world. Jesus was without sin, and therefore did not experience spiritual death when he took a human body. For him, both physical death and spiritual death took place when he carried our sin and suffered on Calvary. Similarly, he experienced both physical and spiritual resurrection when he rose from the dead. Our spiritual resurrection is the same as our spiritual rebirth. It takes place when we are born again of the spirit. Our bodily resurrection is yet to come.

So we find that the words redemption, reconciliation, rebirth and resurrection all tell us the same story. We are returning to a state we previously experienced and enjoyed.

Chosen before the Foundation of the Earth

Paul wrote, ‘He chose us in Him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him’ (Eph 1:4). Were we chosen before we existed? It’s possible, but it certainly makes better sense if we already existed before the foundation of the world at the time when we were chosen. This scripture also suggests an existence before we came into this world.

Living in Tents

‘Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling’ (2 Cor 5:1). Paul here describes the human body as a tent or temporary dwelling. In our lives, we do not progress from tents to houses. We live in houses and move temporarily into tents and then return to houses. Bible imagery was the same. Abraham was born in a solid house in Ur of the Chaldees, but then went on to dwell in tents in the promised land. God instituted the festival of tabernacles (tents) to remind the people of Israel that they had dwelt in tents during their journey from Egypt to Canaan. Describing the body as a tent naturally implies both pre-existence and post-existence in a permanent dwelling.

Strangers and Foreigners

We find this phrase in 1Pet 2:11: ‘Dear friends, I urge you, as strangers and foreigners in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul’ and Heb 11:13: ‘confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth.’ You can only be a stranger or a foreigner if you have come from another place or country. The Greek word for *foreigner* (παρεπιδημος) means someone who comes from a foreign country. From where did we come?

Coming Naked into the World

‘For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either’ (1Tim 6:7). These words of Paul also imply both pre and post existence. To *take something out* implies going to another place or existence. To *bring something in* implies coming from another place.