



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1995 Series, No. 2

Death – And Life!

June 7, 1995

W. Burney Overton

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’” (Jn. 11:25-26)

This scripture and many others in the Bible easily lead to the conclusion that God has provided life after death, and that the aim of this life is to order our lives in such a way that we can be assured of dwelling in heaven after this life, and not in hell. Heaven is our reward for believing and living as God requires, and hell is our punishment for not doing so.

I wonder if this is the only way to read and interpret those scriptures. To explore my wondering, I raise a question – two questions, actually. One, “Is there life after death?” And two, “Am I dead in this life until I am alive?” In response to my questions, I am aware that they point to two different subjects – in reality, three – and that the title – DEATH – AND LIFE – fits all three. I present them as sub-titles, and will see what I can do with each of them. They are:

FROM LIFE TO DEATH TO LIFE
FROM LIFE TO DEATH TO ?
FROM DEATH TO LIFE

FROM LIFE TO DEATH TO LIFE. People seem to be remarkably preoccupied with issues of death and life – especially as they have to do with the end of this life, and life after this life. In fact, that preoccupation may be to such an extent that it actually interferes with our full experience of living. That is, I become so concerned with the issue of life after death that I neglect life before death.

People in various walks of life give much time and energy to research and speculation on the issue of life after death – meaning, of course, life after physical death. Our religious beliefs tell us that life does not end with the death of our bodies. Although it has never been something that has happened to me, I know, and have read about, people who have had out-of-body, or near-death experiences; usually interpreted to support the belief that there is life beyond the grave. Some people also tell of having communicated with a dead relative or loved one. This, too, is typically seen as giving further support to the belief that life does not end when our bodies die.

“If I go and prepare a place for you,” Jesus said, “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” (Jn. 14:3) “For as all die in Adam,” Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “so all will be made alive in Christ...The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (I Cor. 15: 22 & 26) “The Holy City – New Jerusalem - where the street of the city is pure gold clear as glass, where there is no night, nor sorrow, nor tears.” (paraphrase of Rev. 21:21 & 22:5) Based on an interpretation of these and other scriptures, it appears that, in the order of things, God has created another life after this life.

I remember with considerable vividness, aspects of my teen years. I knew I

wanted people to see me as a good Christian, and I knew I wanted to get to heaven, as well as to avoid hell. Everlasting life was my goal. I just never felt very secure about whether or not I was making the grade. In those days, I felt a rather constant anxiety for fear that I was doing something that I should not be doing, although I didn't know what it might be. I was sure God knew, even if I didn't, and that God would hold me accountable anyway. Hence, I was always very uncertain about my status with regard to obtaining that life promised to me after I died.

Certainly many people derive great comfort from the belief that life does not end with death, and that loved ones are reunited in heaven. That's what my father believed. Therefore, approaching the end of life here on earth was not difficult for him. He knew that heaven was going to be a joyous place, and that he would, indeed, be reunited with his loved ones. He looked forward to that time when he would join them, and they would walk the golden streets hand in hand. I never wanted to take that belief, which comforted him so much, away from him.

Is there life after the death of my body? If so, will I have the same identity that I have now? Will I know people as I now know them? As much as I wonder about it, I am aware that I simply do not know about life after death. Indeed, insofar as I can tell, I have no way to know. I can decide what to believe, but I cannot know. Since I believe with my life that God is in charge, and that God loves unconditionally, I am able to leave the matter of what happens when death comes to my body in God's hands, and feel secure in doing so. Therefore, I will leave this first sub-title, write briefly of the second, and more extensively of the third.

FROM LIFE TO DEATH TO ?

Those who do not choose to believe that there is life beyond this life have two choices about what to believe. One is to decide to believe that death is the termination of life. There isn't anything else. We live. We die. That's it. Neither heaven nor hell exist. We get rewards and punishments while we live – sometimes justly and sometimes now. But there's nothing else. Nothing to which to look forward. We do with our life whatever we do, and then we die.

It is little wonder that those who believe that death is the end also see death as the major enemy of life. Of course, they are not alone. It appears that, rather consistently, those who believe there is life after death also choose to see death as the major enemy – an enemy to be feared and fended off if at all possible. (See I Cor. 22 & 26 – previously quoted)

In an earlier paper, "Under a Sentence of Death," written December 5, 1992, I wrote that "we human beings tend to see death, inevitable though it may be, as the enemy against which we are to fight until our dying breath." Death is the enemy, and I must stave it off as long as possible, using any methods available to me. So we seem to believe, and so Paul seems to believe, based on an interpretation of his message to the Corinthian church.

I wonder, though. Is Paul referring to physical death? Suppose he isn't. Suppose he is referring to the body – being – that has not yet come to life. I'll have more to say about this when I get to the third section of this paper.

A second choice for those who choose to believe that life ends with physical death is to see it that there is a sense in which death really is not the end – the body dies but life does not end.

I ask the question again. Is death the end of life? “Yes,” but there is another sense in which I answer “No.” I use my experience with my garden as imagery to say what I mean.

My garden, for a season, serves its purpose and then ceases to be. Only it doesn't really. Some of its produce goes into our freezer, waiting to be food for hungry people. The plants, after they have born fruit, return to the soil from whence they came.

Did my garden cease to be at the end of the growing season when all the plants were dead? Of course, it did. And, of course, it did not. Although its particular identity ended, its essence did not. Everything that made up the garden continued to exist.

I believe this is true of all of life. The essential elements that come together to make the garden plant – or me – or anything – it appears, never cease to be. They recycle, but not the same plant – or being – even if they happen to be the same order and species the next time around.

It is a stark reality that I cannot have a garden if nothing has gone before it. Before I can have it, it has to have already existed. Given the right combination, the dormant life within the seeds emerges into the plant. Again, given the right combination, the plant grows, bears fruit, and produces yet other seeds that enable the cycle to continue. So, my garden lives and dies, but it does not cease to be. In whatever form it was before it lived as my garden, and it continued to be after it died as my garden.

FROM LIFE TO DEATH TO ? I don't know what comes after death. I just know that death is not the end. I think it is time now for me to try to deal with the third sub-title.

FROM DEATH TO LIFE.

Suppose we take the position that we human beings, created in the image of God, are spiritually dead (separated from God) until we are, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, born again. Suppose we choose to interpret the Scriptures as giving us messages about this life that God has given us here and now, and how we are to live it. Suppose the death that is the enemy is separation from God, and when that enemy is destroyed, we are truly alive as God intended and created us to be. Suppose we move from Death to Life in this life.

Suppose, further, that I don't see body death as an enemy anyway, but as a normal part of life, as is birth. Suppose I focus on living for as long as I live and do not spend time and energy trying to keep body death from happening.

Thinking about this position and this approach when you hear Jesus' words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn. 11:25-26) What he says is almost mind boggling. Jesus shows me the way to overcome my separation from God (my death). He shows me how to live fully.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father is quoted as saying to his elder son, "This your brother was dead (separated) and is alive (back in the relationship)." I suggest that he moved from death to life.

Or look again at what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ... The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (I Cor. 15: 22 & 26) Adam chose to be separated from God, thereby choosing death. Jesus chose not to be separated from God, thereby choosing life. He destroyed the last enemy, death.

Could it be that I am dead until, by the power of God in Jesus, the Christ, I believe, and I become alive – here and now? Could it be that the primary purpose of my life is to live as God's person – here and now – with no concern about rewards and punishments after I come to the end of this life? Could it be that being who God has created me to be is what I do with my life? Could it be that now is when I respond to what God has already given me?

My friend and I were walking in the woods on top of a mountain. There we found, in the crevice of a rock with hardly enough soil to sustain it, a beautiful little blue flower. We had no idea what kind it was. With awe and admiration, we stood and contemplated the little blue flower. It seemed to serve little useful purpose on that high mountain that was mostly rock. However, we decided that the little blue flower didn't know that it was without a purpose, but that it actually had a purpose. It was to respond to God by being what God had created it to be. It had no need to become, or to try to become, anything other than what it was. It had sprung forth from its dormancy, and was gloriously going about the business of being a little blue flower on the top of a rocky mountain. It didn't even need to be noticed, or appreciated, to have a suitable reason to go about its business. It just needed to be what God created it to be. It wasn't concerned about rewards and punishments, not even about whether it would continue to live. God gave it a life to live. And it was doing just that.

If I take a lesson from the little blue flower, I am not afraid that my body will die. Death, in that sense, is not the enemy. Nor do I need to spend time and energy trying to find some kind of evidence that I will keep my human identity beyond the grave. Maybe I will. If that is the case, I will try to live into that life with the same enthusiasm that I live now.

Maybe, in essence, that is just exactly what God intends for all God’s creation. Each of us – each life form – created to be itself. Each life form gifted with all that it needs to enable it to be what it is created to be. Each life form comes from death to life and lives.

Jesus said, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” “Repent” means to turn around; change course; go in another direction. It could mean, “Turn from death to life.” It appears that only human beings have to decide about whether to be what we are created to be. Nothing else in all creation faces that decision.

I must decide. “For as all die in Adam” might read “From the beginning, human beings have chosen to be separated from God – we have chosen death.” Or, to write in terms of myself, I was born a physical being – a child of God. However, I was spiritually dead. I didn’t know that God, insofar as God was concerned, was already in relationship with me. I didn’t know that one gift from God was that I must decide about my relationship with God. I didn’t realize the wisdom behind that gift. I was created to decide for or against God. Until I decided for God, I was spiritually dead. When I decided, I repented. I became alive. I came from death to life.

I do not know what God has planned for me when death comes to my body. I do know what God has for me before death comes to my body. Jesus tells me. Jesus shows me. From beginning to end, the Bible tells me. I know that, one day, I’m going to die. My body will die. Until that day, I’m going to live. Like the little blue flower up on the rocky mountain. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.