

# Life after death

Garry Everett

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**The Christian view of life after death owes everything to the Christian view of God, writes Garry Everett. Our experiences of love are foretastes of God's greater love for us.**

In that wonderful stage production and movie, *The Lion King*, the opening song is entitled, [The Circle of Life](#). Like the verses of our favourite psalm, we should ponder the words of this song also.

The lyrics by Tim Rice touch into the eco-spirituality theme of the inter-connectedness of all things. The music by Sir Elton John conveys the feeling that every ending is a beginning of something new.

These two concepts, inter-connectedness and new beginnings, are also doorways which open to allow us to talk about the rich religious reality of life after death. Most major world religions offer limited commentary on the topic, usually in the expressions of some form of reincarnation or some form of a place called heaven.

Contemporary scientists subscribe to a broad theory that planet earth will one day cease to exist, or at least all living things on the planet will die. This will occur, they explain, because the sun is increasing in temperature and moving closer to earth. Ultimately, the planet will be de-oxygenated, thus removing the vital ingredient of life. This might take a billion years ... or less.

Probably since the earliest forms of intelligent life appeared on earth, humans have speculated about where they came from: why are they here and is there something else after this life?

Christians have scoured the scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, for answers which they find reassuring. In general, Christianity has settled on, and taught, the theology of heaven and hell. However, this is not a universally supported teaching and books such as *Hell, No!* by [Father Richard Rohr](#) offer a plausible alternative.

What is of critical importance to our efforts to think about life after death is, not surprisingly, our beliefs about God. Most of us encountered at some point in our lives the belief in God as judge, who rewards the good and punishes the wrongdoer. In fact, this belief was so dominant, that every family, city, state and country was organised around this core belief. Rules exist to promote the good order of things and if you keep them, it's good news; if you break the rules, you are fined or experience some other form of punishment.

We may even still believe that this is how God behaves too!

Some theologians and spiritual writers began with a different belief about God, which was also sourced in the scriptures. Simply stated, it is of God as unconditional love.

New challenges now emerge.

Firstly, as humans, we have no real experience of unconditional love. We know love of a spouse, a carer for a patient, a parent for a child, the Good Samaritan for the needy. All are marvellous expressions of love, but not of the unconditional kind. We simply can't

comprehend, nor express adequately, what we have neither shared nor experienced: unconditional love.

We may struggle to appreciate Jesus's great parable of the Forgiving Father because deep down we know we would not have acted in the same way as the father. That way is the way of unconditional love. We probably would have placed some conditions on the prodigal son. Despite our best efforts, we cannot love unconditionally because that kind of love is reserved to God alone.

A second problem about unconditional love now emerges. In place of judgments, rewards and punishments how are we to explain God's forgiveness of our failings, small and large? If God is like the Forgiving Father and forgives unconditionally and wraps us up in love, it doesn't seem "fair".

"What about Hitler?" we cry. At this stage we might be grateful that this is God's problem and not ours. Being fair and being seen to be fair are byproducts of our system of reward and punishment, and ultimately of the view of God as judge. Forgiving and loving unconditionally comes from somewhere else.

A third issue of love affecting our views of life after death stems from the words of Jesus in John's Gospel, "perfect love drives out all fear". One aspect of being human is our fear of the unknown. Imagine what it must have been like for the first humans to experience the setting of the sun and the earth being cloaked in darkness.

They had no knowledge of what was happening and no way of knowing if the light would ever return. Fear must have reigned supreme. Many people face death, or think about it, from a stance of fear. Yet Jesus promises no fear because God loves us "perfectly" or unconditionally.

The Christian scriptures offer several references to life after death. Recall the parable of [Dives](#), "my father's house has many rooms", the wailing and gnashing of teeth episode, the resurrection story, and "the eye has not seen, nor the ear heard ..." hope expressed by Paul. Much discussion and reflection will be needed if we are to examine these and other references for insights into the God we believe in, and who shapes our beliefs about life after death.

The Christian view of life after death owes everything to the Christian view of God. This view has not been consistent over the centuries, and we struggle to reconcile new insights with old "certainties".

However, one thing is certain: our human experiences of love are foretastes of God's bigger and better love for us. As the songwriter says in [Nature Boy](#), "*The greatest thing you'll ever learn, is just to love, and be loved in return.*"

As true for God ... as it is for you and me.

*Garry Everett has spent all his professional life, as well as much of retirement, as an educator, and mostly of adults. Garry's enduring interests lie in family, Scripture, theology and Church renewal. At a local level he is involved in social justice and ecumenism. He is also a member of his parish St Vincent de Paul Conference.*

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