


Existence beyond death? Encouraging those who face death



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Modern medical technology has transformed the way people live and the way they die. Today, in some instances the process of dying takes longer, due to more advanced medical treatment and therefore requires more sophisticated care than before. This contributes to the fact that terminally ill people are wrestling with the reality of death. This article endeavours to investigate the phenomenon of death from a biblical perspective and specifically attempts to answer questions such as 'What is death?', 'Is there an intermediate state?', and 'What is "heaven" like?' The article is written in such a way that it equips therapists with biblical information which can clearly be communicated to terminally ill Christian believers to assist them in coping with their trauma and uncertainties; it also intends to remove the sting of death and obtain more clarity on an existence beyond death.

Keywords: terminal illness; uncertainty; encourage; death; intermediate state; consciousness; new earth.

Introduction

Being diagnosed with a terminal illness is certainly traumatic. What does one say to a person who is facing mortality? The following clichés or platitudes should be avoided: 'Everything happens for a good reason', or 'It is probably God's will'. Even statements like 'You are strong' and 'You will get through this or over this' is equally problematic, as well as 'you will be OK'. These are articulated with good intentions, but it may be that the terminally ill person might feel afraid, uncertain or even anxious about what is going to happen next.

Although terminally ill people have multiple needs (emotional, physical, spiritual, social, intellectual, etc.), this article will primarily focus on only one aspect (or need): the need to know more about the spirituality of life beyond death. Many believers confess their belief in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, and eternal life. When facing death, however, some start doubting and anxiety steps in. Then death will become the focal point again.

The *modus operandi* will firstly be to deal with the uncertainties and spiritualities when death comes closer; secondly, to look briefly at what the Bible says about death; thirdly, the question 'Is there such a thing as the intermediate state?' will be discussed; and fourthly, the article will deal with the question 'What does the final state comprise'?

Uncertainty and spirituality at the end of life

Uncertainty

A serious or terminal illness can cause myriads of emotions, intense shock and disbelief with a feeling that a person is stuck in a nightmare. Any uncertainty about what is going to happen next can cause anxiety (cf. Borneman et al. 2014:271; Stephenson 2014:33) and the experience of 'discomfort, pain and suffering' (Coyle 2002:594). According to Stephenson (2014:34), research revealed that spiritual uncertainty at the end of life was an evolving theme from the feedback of terminally ill people interviewed. It is on this aspect of *uncertainty* (cf. Mishel 1988:225), when pondering on what happens at the time of death and beyond death, that this article focuses. Therefore, part of the therapy to comfort terminally ill people should be to inform these Christians about what, according to Scripture and our faith convictions, awaits them when they die and what happens beyond death.

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Spirituality

When terminally ill people try to cope with their situation, this may provide them with opportunities to ask and answer various questions and consequently accelerate spiritual thoughts (cf. Stephenson 2014:37). Such thoughts are constantly in flux and change, subjected to the context, critical beliefs and a renewed search for meaning. These thoughts mostly stem from the reality that death is definite, but its timing uncertain.

Unbelievers who doubt or reject the existence of the God of the Bible, may be distressed due to 'their own mortality and the finality of death' (Davis 2015:1). Christian believers on the other hand, who believe in the existence of God, can be less anxious by the end-of-life sadness as they have become more acquainted with the biblical teaching about the nature of death and existence beyond death. According to research that looked at the palliative care of people, believers who handle the idea of death more easily, develop a greater sense of peace and meaning (cf. Buck, Overcash & McMillan 2009; Tanyi 2002). This could be because such care certainly would have included the communication of 'What happens at death?', and 'What kind of existence lies beyond death?' This information can facilitate the terminally ill person to associate with Paul's mindset. When Paul was in prison and faced death, he referred to his longing to be with Christ (Phlp 1:21, 23; also cf. 2 Cor 5:8).

These words of Paul are not so simplistic as they probably look. Paul could write this due to his perception and certainty about the nature of death and life beyond death. The following section describes a biblical perception of death and what happens beyond death.¹

The nature of death according to the Bible

Physical 'death' as expressed in the Bible

Physical death² is referred to as a process as well as an event. In Acts 9:37 Luke refers to the physical death of Dorcas (Tabitha) who became sick and later died. She suffered a severe illness (ἀσθενέω) and died (ἀποθνήσκω). This may also designate the gradual termination of bodily functions. See 2 Corinthians 4:16, 'Even though our outward man is perishing (διαφθείρω),³ yet the inward *man* is being renewed⁴ day by day' (also cf. Heb 9:27; cf. 2 Sm 14:14). The verb *perishing* is

1. The eschatology of the New Testament is focused on the hope of the righteous rather than the doom of the sinful. Unfortunately, it is not very systematised. Over the last 500 years, the various divisions in Christianity have *each developed their own eschatology* (Lester 2005:13–15). See also footnote 13. This article reflects how this author perceives the eschatological aspects addressed in this specific article.

2. Three other kinds of death referred to in the New Testament are 'spiritual death' (1 Jn 5:16, 19–20), 'dead to sin' (Rm 6:11; cf. Rm 6:4, 6, 13; 8:10) and the 'second death' (Rv 2:11; 20:6, 14–15; 21:8).

3. The passive form of the verb διαφθείρω, is translated by Arndt et al. (2000:239) as 'be destroyed of a person's physical being', or 'to cause the destruction of something, spoil, destroy'. Louw and Nida (1996:769) connect the meaning to a *gradual* moral destruction: 'to cause someone to become perverse or depraved, as a type of moral destruction'.

4. (Is 40:29, 31; Col 3:10) Paul uses two words, ἀποθνήσκω and διαφθείρω (ἀσθενέω) to refer to 'dying'. This implies that there are different ways to refer to death as phenomenon, and it helps to understand what is meant by death.

translated semantically to render 'is gradually decaying' (Today's English Version), 'wearing out', or 'gradually dying' (Contemporary English Version; cf. Omanson & Ellington 1993:86). In 2 Corinthians 4:12 Paul refers to his suffering (persecution) which will lead to his death (θάνατος) due to his obedience of following Jesus. Here persecution unto death is also seen as a gradual form of dying. Even the death of Jesus on the cross had preliminary phases: Gethsemane, trials before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, Jesus' scourging (Jn 19), and then the crucifixion.

Death as an instant event, is evident when Eli, the high priest of Israel during the time of Samuel, heard the news that the Israelites were defeated by the Philistines and that his two sons died in the battle and that the Philistines captured the ark. According to the text, he died instantly (1 Sm 4:12–18).⁵ Another example from the New Testament is the stoning of Stephen (Ac 7).

A biblical explanation of what happens at death

Death is not the end of the road

In Philippians 1:23 Paul writes: 'For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire⁶ to depart and be with Christ, which is far better'.⁷ Paul directly states here that when he dies, in the state of death he would be 'with Christ' (σύν Χριστῷ). The language (preposition, σύν) suggests that he will immediately be in the presence of Christ. This is the highest *telos* of death – to be with Christ and not with any deceased beloved ones. Paul already lived in Christ and looked forward to a closer presence at death (cf. Melick 1991:85). O'Brien (1991:130) strengthens the statement of Melick in his linguistic interpretation. According to him, Paul's statement about his death in Philippians 1:23 is bound in the closest possible way to what follows. He interprets the conjunction, καί, as joining the two infinitives (ἀναλῶσαι and εἶναι) as explicative. For Paul to depart from this life, is to take up residence in the presence of the Lord. For him death cannot break the intimate bond between him and his Lord. In fact, death ushers him into a more intimate fellowship with Christ.

Death cannot kill the soul (ψυχήν)⁸

In Matthew 10:28 Jesus encourages the 12 disciples. He is going to send them out to proclaim the gospel. He warns

5. See 1 Samuel 4:17–18 on the death of Eli who fell off his seat backward by the side of the gate; his neck was broken, and he died. See also the death of Joash (2 Ki 12:19–21), Joseph (Gn 50:22–26), Aaron (Nm 30:22–29), Joshua (Jdg 2:7–10), Gideon (Jdg 8:29–35), Solomon (1Ki 11:41–43), Jeroboam (1 Ki 14:19–20), and Jehu (2 Ki 10:32–36).

6. Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:2, 8 and 2 Timothy 4:6–8.

7. Cf. also Psalm 16:11.

8. Matthews 10:28; 16:23–24 (ψυχήν); John 4:23–24 (πνεῦμά); Acts 2:27, 31; Romans 5:10–11; 6:13; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 6:17; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1–5; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12; James 4:5. See also the following publications in which the existence of the human soul is defended: Bulkeley (2015); Gray (2010); Lee (2014); Meeks (2016); Rollins (1999); Rolston (2005); Turf (2010). Also to be considered in this regard are the evolution theory, contemporary scientific research in neurosciences and neurology, psychology, philosophy (started with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus), and even the science of 'near death experiences' conducted over the past 40 years by various scientists in various countries. Due to space and length constraints, I could not incorporate here all my research on these aspects. Maybe, in this postmodern era, we are deemed to redefine the notion of soul. See Murphy (2006) for her excellent discussion on human identity and character.

them that they will face difficult times, equivalent to his persecution. The worst that can happen to them during times of persecution is the death of the body (σῶμα). Created according to God's image, humans are much more than just their bodies. They are a combination of body and soul (Hagner 1993:285). Therefore, Jesus encourages his disciples when he sends them to proclaim the gospel by telling them: 'And do not fear these persecutors; while *they may kill your body* (σῶμα), *they cannot kill the soul*' (ψυχή, Mt 10:28; also cf. 2 Cor 12:2–4). According to this text it is evident that the body 'is of such a nature that it can be killed by man; the soul, however, is not perishable in that same sense of the word' (Newman & Stine 1992:306; Tepker 1965:18).

Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:8 relates to this: 'We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be, when dying, present with the Lord'. Paul convincingly believed that when he dies, he will be separated from his body and he would still enjoy the presence of Christ.

Death as the separation of body and soul

According to Scripture, it is not the entire person that deteriorates into dust, decomposes and experiences corruption. According to Ecclesiastes 12:7, the spirit separates from the body at the time of death. When a person dies, the 'dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit (רוּחַ) returns to God who gave it'. James (2:26) has an analogous view of death: 'The body away from the spirit is dead'.

Matthew 27:50 refers to 'Jesus, yielded (ἀφίημι) up his *spirit* (πνεῦμα)'. The significance of this statement is that Jesus' *spirit* was not an indication of his body or his entire self. In fact, it refers to his surrendering in the moment of dying. It was the separation of something from his body. It did not simply refer to his last breath. What happened here is that when dying, Jesus committed his *spirit* to the Father (Lk 23:46, cf. Tepker 1965:18). According to Arndt et al. (2000:156) the Greek verb, ἀφίημι, means 'to dismiss or release someone or something from a place or one's presence', 'give up, emit'.⁹

In the pericope, *Elijah revives the widow's son* (1 Ki 17), the author of 1 Kings writes:

Then Elijah stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's *soul* (ψυχή) come unto him again'. And the Lord harkened to the voice of Elijah and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. (v. 21 ff.)

According to this text, death occurs when the soul separates from the body and life revives when the soul re-enters the body. This is a common interpretation of these passages, unless the exegete approaches these statements from the presupposition that man is not a being made up of body and soul (Tepker 1965:18).

9. See also Louw and Nida (1996:152) who define it as 'to cease, of a state – to cease, to stop, to leave'.

Thus, very clearly both Old Testament (חַיָּה/חַיָּה) and New Testament (ψυχή/πνεῦμα) picture death as a separation of the soul or spirit from the body.

Death as termination of physical life

The Synoptic Gospels (Mt 2:16; Mk 3:4; Lk 6:9) clearly depict death as the termination of a person's physical life.¹⁰ Probably the best example from the New Testament is the crucifixion of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels (Mt 27:35–50; Mk 15:23–41; Lk 23:33–46; Jn 19:18–30). See also the death of Stephen (Ac 7:59–60).

Death is described as the decomposition and decay of the body

John 11:39 refers to Lazarus who has been *dead* for 4 days and by 'this time there is a stench' (ἡδὴ ὀζειν).¹¹ Experience taught that 'death brings about decay, disintegration, decomposition, and corruption' (Tepker 1965:17). Ecclesiastes 12:7 verifies this.

Death as putting off the physical body

Paul speaks of death in 2 Corinthians 5:1–5. In these verses Paul regards life on earth as *living in a tent*. He uses two word-pictures to refer to death: (1) to lay aside this tent; (2) to be unclothed. Both pictures refer to the mortal body which a human has in this life. According to Martin (1986:103), Paul understands the moment of a believer's death as the putting aside of the physical body. The occurrence of death is the replacement for the earthly tent, namely οἰκοδομήν ἐκ θεοῦ, 'a house from God', with one that is permanent, not temporary, αἰώνιον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, 'eternal in the heavens' (cf. Job 16:19; Heb 11:16; Philp 2:10; 1 Cor 15:49; Jn 3:12; Martin 1986:103).

The letter of 2 Peter similarly describes death as putting the body off. In 2 Peter 1 the author writes about his departure (death) by stating:

Yes, I think it is right, as long as *I am in this tent*, to stir you up by reminding you,¹² knowing that shortly *I must put off my tent*, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. (v. 14; cf. Tepker 1965:18–19)

For the author of 2 Peter, life is to exist in the body, while death is putting off the body.

Like Jesus overcame death, so do believers

Jesus' *death* on the cross for our *sins* shattered the power of sin and death. 'For if we have been united in the likeness of His death' through faith, 'certainly we also shall be *in the likeness* of His resurrection' (Rm 6:5). According to Mounce (1995:150), a new life in Christ follows when a person dies to sin. John refers to this event on the one hand as rebirth (Jn 3:3, 5), and on the other hand as the acceptance of Jesus through faith (Jn 1:12–3).

10. See also footnote 6.

11. Arndt et al. (2000:692) translates the meaning as 'by this time he's smelling (stinking)'.

These texts from the Bible indicate that the authors of the New Testament teach that death is certainly not the end of everything. It refers to a change in the continuity of existence of the human being (person). If this is true, namely that death is not the end, what then does life beyond death comprise? Biblical textual evidence verifies that an interim state exists before the final state is experienced.

Life beyond death

The intermediate state

A dominant theme in the New Testament

Faith in *life after death* is one of the major themes in the New Testament,¹² although 'in many instances it is still shrouded in mystery' (Verster 2016:19).¹³

The words, 'interim' or 'intermediate state' are not explicitly used in Scripture. In Christianity it conventionally refers to the *condition* in which all mankind find themselves between death and resurrection. It is sometimes also used to refer to the time *period* that elapses between the death of a person and the consummation of history. This *condition* or *period* is then called 'interim / intermediate' because 'it lies between two fixed points; death and resurrection, and because it is temporary, ultimately being eclipsed by the final state of mankind' (Harris 1986:47; see also Waters 2012:285).

Old Testament Israelites believed that persons continue to have a thin and shadowy existence in *she'ol* after death, despite their heavy emphasis on life in this world (see Clark-Soles 2006:10). *She'ol* (the pit), their afterlife, was regarded as a dark place from which there is no return.¹⁴ In the book of Daniel (12:1–4; see also the prophecy in Is 26:19) the idea is made popular that the deceased in *she'ol* would be raised for a last judgement. Between the Old and New Testaments Jewish believers came to realise and affirm the intermediate state and resurrection of the dead. The intertestamental literature describes in more detail what the deceased experience in *she'ol*. According to 1 Enoch (22:1–14), the righteous and wicked await the resurrection in separate divisions of *she'ol*. In the New Testament the picture is a bit clearer. Except for the Sadducees, who with the Greeks, denied the resurrection, Jewish people at the time of Jesus and Paul also held the belief in the resurrection (Cooper 1982:16).

12. See 'Matthew 7:21–23, 10:28, 11:22–24, 16:24–28, 19:28–30, 22:23–33, and especially 25:31–46, Mark 8:34–38, 13:13, 3:26, Luke 10:13–15, 12:33–34, 16:19–29, John 3:10–21, 5:24–29, 6:37–40, 11:23–25, 14:1–4, 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5' (cf. Verster 2016:19).

13. The intention is not to address every aspect of contemporary eschatological interest, such as the millennium, the antichrist, the tribulation, *parousia*, resurrection and judgement, since they are not central to my purpose. The article will only refer briefly to the *parousia*, resurrection and judgement to make a transition from the intermediate state to the final state. Eschatology is probably the most diverse teaching of the loci in systematic theology. The reading and understanding of the Bible amount within the reader's commitments of a specific ecclesiastical lineage. The reader accumulates and is inculcated in a specific tradition that limits, orients and directs the potential meaning of Scripture (Broggi 2015:214).

14. The words *she'ol* (שְׁאוֹל) and heaven are often contrasted (Job 11:8; Ps 139:8; Am 9:2). According to Psalm 9:17, wicked and godless nations will go to *she'ol*. The prophet Isaiah refers to the wicked as existing in *she'ol* after death. Isaiah 14:9–15 describes the King of Babylon descending into *she'ol* where he is met and taunted by other spirits. From these verses the impression is clear that *she'ol* is not a place where the spirits are unconscious. Psalm 86:13 also refers to the soul to go to *she'ol*. Isaiah 57:9 refers to a soul that is lowered to *she'ol*. Confer also Luke 16:19–31, referring to *hades* (ᾍδης).

The intermediate state a conscious form of existence

Paradise equivalent to heaven? When Jesus was crucified, he said to the criminal who died on the cross beside him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me (μετ' ἐμοῦ) in Paradise'¹⁵ (Lk 23:43). In 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 Paul parallelises him knowing a man in Christ who was *caught up to the third heaven* and who was *caught up into paradise*. Then in Acts 7 Luke refers to Stephen who sees 'the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' and when they stoned him calling on *God* and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:55–59).

From these texts it seems possible that we can equate Jesus, Paul and Luke's paradise with heaven. Nothing is said here about locality. From a (post)-modern perspective and worldview it can be interpreted as seeing visionary the Son of Man in the *presence* of God (see the reality of God's presence). Thus, *heaven* or *paradise* refers to the presence of God.

Consciousness in the intermediate state: According to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man¹⁶ (Lk 16:19–31), four observations can be made: (1) it is apparent to Luke that there is life beyond death; (2) there is consciousness; (3) there is recognition; (4) there is even a distinction between people in the afterlife (cf. Verster 2016:19). In 16:26 Luke refers to a χάσμα μέγα (big gulf in Hades) to distinguish between those tormented and those comforted (παρακαλεῖται ... ὀδυνᾶσαι¹⁷). The context shows that neither Lazarus nor the rich man is unconscious and that the dead do not return to this earth. It is also evident that they are not aware of what is happening where they once lived.

Paul's view of the afterlife resonates with the view of Luke. Just as the Stephen's event in Acts, Paul expresses in Philippians 1:22–23 his expectation that after his suffering in prison he would be beheaded by the Romans. Therefore, he expressed the desire to depart and be with (σύν) Christ, which is far better. Paul infers here that his death in Christ is for him by far better than his life in Christ. The Greek verb ἀναλύω means 'to depart' or 'to be loosed' and is the euphemism for 'death' (Arndt et al. 2000:67; Louw & Nida 1996:34). Also, from this text it is evident that Paul expected death to be a condition of consciousness in an intermediate state. He sincerely looked forward more willingly to being present with Christ where there is fullness of joy (cf. Ps 16:11).

15. See also 2 Corinthians 12:3–4; Ephesians 4:8–10; Revelation 2:7.

16. For Van Eck (2017:164), in his discussion of the *realism of the parables of Jesus*, 'a realistic reading of the parables of Jesus should take cognisance of Dodd's (1961:5) definition of the parables as being "drawn from nature or common life, arresting the listener by its vividness or strangeness"'. He is convinced that this 'can be considered a general road map in reading the parables of Jesus as realistic stories'. Ratzinger (1988:124) points out that although this Lucan parable's doctrinal content lies in the moral warning against the dangers of wealth, it also manifests some indications of the afterlife.

17. Luke uses in 16:23 a semantic related noun, βαράννης.

Paul states the *believer's presence with* (πρός) the Lord also clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:1–8. According to Pop (1971:141 ff.), Paul certainly refers to an intermediate state in this pericope. Also see Cranford (1976:100), Dunn (1998:490) and Verster (2016:29) who are convinced that Paul believed in an intermediate state.¹⁸ Paul is convinced that when the earthly tent is dismantled, Christian believers will find themselves in the 'house of God' (metaphor: not locality, rather a condition) until the resurrection (Pop 1971:141 ff.). Here Paul refers to a period (intermediate) when he will have a glorified body ('be clothed [ἐπενδύομαι] with our habitation which is from heaven', 2 Cor 5:2).¹⁹ He yearns (ἐπιποθέω) for that time and desires that it might realise soon. Even though he must face to be without his body, he is content that he will have a glorified body. In this text Paul describes a period when he will be absent from his body. He 'does not regard the state of death as a time when his soul shall be unconscious'²⁰ (Tepker 1965:27). This refers to a new mode of existence which we can't even imagine.

For Paul, death signifies for believers the deepening of their union with Christ. They will enjoy the *heavenly* home (2 Cor 5:1–2) and experience this *heavenly* life (2 Cor 5:2–4). They will experience the presence of Christ since they will be with Christ (2 Cor 5:8). This existence, whatever its nature, will be a conscious union with Christ. 'To die is gain' (Phlp 1:21). After his death he will be in the presence of God, even though the *parousia* has not yet taken place. According to 1 Corinthians 15, bodily resurrection will only realise at the *parousia* (see Verster 2016:29).

The reality of being or dwelling with Christ (μετ' ἐμοῦ, Lk 23:43; πρὸς, 2 Cor 5:8; σύν, Phlp 1:23) involves more than pure incorporation in Christ or union with Christ. Such incorporation and being with Christ after death is as real in the intermediate state as before death. The passages discussed above imply that 'the post-mortem state of the believer is qualitatively superior to his spiritual life on earth' (Harris 1986:48). Thus, the believer's being or dwelling with Christ 'suggests a settled permanent mutual fellowship' (Harris 1986:48).

It seems evident from the passages mentioned above that the intermediate state is one of conscious existence, waiting in suspense for the return of the Lord in order to hear finally from his lips the verdict about each person's life (cf. Tepker 1965:28). We will now examine what the Bible communicates about the final state.

18. See also other New Testament texts, beside Paul, to confirm the existence of an intermediate state: Matthew 10:28; 17:1–3; 22:31–32; Luke 16:22–23; John 11:25; Hebrews 4:10; 12:23; Revelation 6:9–11.

19. Arndt et al. (2000:361) defines it as 'to put a garment on over an existing garment, put on (in addition)'.

20. The strongest argument against soul-sleep are those texts which refer positively that immediately after death, prior to judgement and the resurrection, the deceased believer will be in close communion with God and with Christ. The verb, κοιμάω ('fall asleep'), has been used euphemistically, referring to the act of dying. Nine of its Pauline uses refer to 'fall asleep', rather than, to 'be asleep'. In some texts (Mt 28:13; Lk 22:45; Ac 12:6), the New Testament uses the present tense of the verb. In these texts physical sleep is sensed, (Harris 1986:48). Arndt, et al. (2000:551) defines the verb κοιμάω also as 'fall asleep, die, pass away'.

The new heaven and new earth

Parousia

The Bible teaches that at Jesus' parousia this world will be renewed. This eschatological event will introduce the new epoch. This will inaugurate and complete two massive events, namely the resurrection of the dead and the final judgement (Mt 13:49–50; 16:27; 24:3; 25:14–46; Lk 9:26; 19:15, 26, 27; Jn 5:25–29; Ac 17:31; Rm 2:3–16; 1 Cor 4:5; 15:23; 2 Cor 5:10; Phlp 3:20–21; 1 Th 4:13–17; 2 Th 1:7–10; cf. Berkhof 1976:720–734). These two events will not be discussed in this article due to their irrelevancy to the theme of the article.

The teaching about 'heaven' and the 'new earth'

This subsection will deal with the following points: The locality of 'heaven'; the permanency of life; the basic properties of the 'spiritual body'; the continuity of identity or personality; the reality of God's presence; and finally, the character of 'life' on the transformed and new earth.

The locality of 'heaven': The natural habitat of the resurrected body is habitually thought of as a 'heavenly body' (σώματα ἐπουράνια, 1 Cor 15:40). It is the likely environment of the spiritual body (σῶμα πνευματικόν, 1 Cor 15:44) and it also refers to the experience of God's presence (cf. Harris 1986:50). Revelation 21:3 states that 'He [God] will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God' (cf. also Jn 17:21–23).²¹

Paul writes in Romans 8:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope;²² because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.²¹ For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. (vv. 20–22)

Paul describes that 'just as the entire physical universe shared in the consequences of human sin, so it will share the destiny of Christ's people' (Rm 8:18–25; Phlp 3:20–21; Harris 1986:50).

Peter complements this view (2 Pt 3):

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up (εὐρεθήσεται).^{22,10} Therefore, since all these

21. For Johnson (2003:295) Paul's conceptual 'new creation' is epistemologically and ontologically complementary. Although the phrase 'new creation' does not occur in 1 Corinthians, the conceptuality it assumes, is present. With this terminology Paul infers the new age inaugurated by God. He invaded his creation to reclaim sovereignty over the world enslaved by sin, evil and death. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus constituted the invasive act of God. This fundamental act resets all social conduct and cosmological status. The entire content of 1 Corinthians and how Paul has structured it, implies all this. Many of Paul's specific arguments in this epistle 'rely on the "logic" generated by it' (Johnson 2003:295).

22. The Greek verb, εὐρεθήσεται, in verse 10 is incorrectly translated in many Bible translations as 'burned up'. The actual meaning is 'will be found'. Arndt et al. (2000:411) translates it as 'after seeking, find, discover, come upon'. See Schreiner (2003:386f) for a thorough discussion of this text and for a better translation of the last part of 2 Peter 3:10 which enables this text to resonate with Paul's view in Romans 8.

TABLE 1: The comprehensive scope of salvation.

Texts from Scripture	Saving activity of God	Object of God's saving activity
Acts 3:17–21 (esp. v. 21)	<i>Restoration</i>	All things
Ephesians 1:7–10 (esp. v. 10)	Gathering up, bringing together, <i>uniting</i>	All things in heaven and on earth
Colossians 1:16–20 (esp. v. 20)	<i>Reconciliation</i> (by removing the source of enmity, through the blood of the cross)	All things, whether on earth or in heaven
Romans 8:19–23 (esp. vv. 21, 23)	Liberation, setting free from bondage, <i>redemption</i>	Creating itself; Our bodies
2 Peter 3:10–13 (esp. vv. 10, 13)	Finding, disclosing, lying bare (having purified). <i>Renewal, making new, re-creation</i>	The earth and the works in it; Heaven and earth
Basic characteristics of Salvation	<i>Restorative</i> —Salvation is God repairing what went wrong with creation (not taking us out of the world to 'heaven'). 'Heaven' will be here on (the new) 'earth'!	Comprehensive and holistic – God intends to redeem or restore 'all things' in heaven and on earth, including our bodies (salvation does not apply only to the human 'soul', but entire creation).

Source: Middleton, J.R., 2014, *A new heaven and a new earth: Reclaiming biblical eschatology*, p. 163, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI

things will be dissolved (λυομένων),²³ what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness.¹² Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens²⁴ and a new earth²⁵ (καινοὺς δὲ οὐρανοὺς καὶ γῆν καινὴν) in which righteousness dwells. (v. 10, 11, 13).

Consider also Acts 3:17–21, Ephesians 1:7–10 and Colossians 1:16–20.

Therefore, John could write (Rv 21):

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ...¹ Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (vv. 1–2, 10)

Whether this 'newness' of creation comes about by discontinuation (ἀπέρχομαι, Rv 21:1) or by transformation (καινός, Rv 21:5), the result will be that God may be 'all in all' ('ἢ ὁ θεὸς [τὰ] πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν', 1 Cor 15:28; cf. Harris 1986:50).²⁶

Heaven will therefore be located on this earth; according to the above discussion God is going to renew (not recreate) this earth. Table 1 expresses the renewal of all creation.

From the texts mentioned above, a clear configuration develops. Firstly, redemption is envisioned. God is not creating something completely new, rather God is restoring something. It is rather the fixing or repairing of what went wrong. This point is articulated in perceptions of restoration, reconciliation, renewal and redemption found in these texts. Secondly, this restoration is applied all inclusively and as comprehensively as possible. All things in heaven and on earth will be restored. The phrase 'heaven and earth' is a typically biblical designation of the entire created order (with earth comprehended as the distinctively human realm, Ps 115:16) and 'heaven' as the divine realm (Mt 6:9; Jn 17:1).

23.The Greek verb, λυομένων (present, participle passive) contributes to a better understanding of the verb, εὐρεθήσεται, not to interpret it as 'burned up', rather as 'will be found'. This opens the meaning of 'restoration' rather than 'annihilation'.

24.Also cf. Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22.

25.Romans 8:21, '... because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God'. Revelation 21:1, 'Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away'. See also the excellent publication of Ladd (2002 [1974]), *The presence of the future: The eschatology of biblical realism*. This book is the revised edition of Ladd's (1964) *Jesus and the Kingdom*.

26.Bauckham (2003[1993]:132–143) gives an excellent explanation of the New Jerusalem. According to him 'The description of the New Jerusalem is a remarkable weaving together of many strands of Old Testament tradition into a coherent and richly evocative image of a place in which people live in the immediate presence of God. It can be considered in its three aspects: place, people, presence of God'.

It is then noticeably evident that the final redemptive state envisioned in the above texts clearly denies a thoughtful, immaterial, supramundane 'heaven' as the definitive dwelling place of the redeemed (Middleton 2014:163).

In conclusion it can be stated that the *New Heaven* and the *New Jerusalem* will be here on this transformed *New Earth* (cf. Rv 21:1–2; see also Bauckham 2003[1993]:132–143).

The permanency of life: The following texts emphasise the permanency of life: Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:1, 'For we know that if our earthly house, *this* tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, *eternal* in the heavens'. According to Revelation 22:5, 'They shall reign *for ever and ever*'. The corporate and individual life of believers with God will be *unending*, because Christ is eternal. It will be similarly to the *permanent* durability of the resurrected body and not susceptible to decay or dissolution (1 Cor 15:42, 53–54). Resurrected believers, like the risen Christ (Rm 6:9; 2 Cor 13:4), 'will *never* die again'. They will 'live by the power of God'. Those who will experience a resurrection transformation, will consequently experience *continuous* transformation. This will equip them for the worship of and service to God '*for ever and ever*' (Harris 1986:51). In John 10:27–30 Jesus said, 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me'.²⁷ And 'I give them *eternal* life, and they shall *never* perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand'.²⁸ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one* is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand'. Therefore, the early church prayed, 'Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur' ('Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow Him' – a phrase often used by the early church fathers, quoted by Heltzel 2012:6).

The basic properties of the 'spiritual body': Harris (1986:49) points out that in both Jewish and Pauline thought, embodiment is deemed to be a necessity for the true existence of human beings and to experience a full life either on earth or beyond the grave. Somatic (σώματος) restoration seems to be a prerequisite for true life to continue after the interference of death. Paul states it explicitly in Romans 8:23 that Christian believers desire 'the redemption of the body'²⁷ from its bondage to decay and sin, through its transformation (Rm 8:23).

27.The Greek phrase 'τοῦ σώματος' in this text should not be regarded as a *genitivus discidium* [separation] but rather a *genitivus obiectivus*.

The New Testament authors were not so much interested in the idiosyncrasies of the anatomy and physiology of the spiritual body (an incorruptible body) or even in celestial topography (Harris 1985:48).²⁸ They were more interested in the basic properties of the body in addition to its 'spirituality'. The 'spiritual body' is of divine origin (1 Cor 15:38) with God as its designer (2 Cor 5:1-2). It is free from any form of decay, imperishable; glorious; powerful (1 Cor 15:40-44, 50-55). It will consist of a sexual identity which constitutes an essential element in personality and will be retained in the resurrection. This is due to its deathlessness (Lk 20:36; cf. 20:34-37) and that it will be without sexual passions or procreative powers (Mt 22:30; Mk 12:25; cf. 1 Cor 6:13-14). It will be completely modified to its 'new worldly' environment, (2 Cor 5:1-2), made perfect (Heb 12:23). Paul regarded these features also as characteristics of the resurrected body of Jesus. The risen Christ is now what redeemed believers will be post the *parousia*. He is the first fruits of perfected humanity. See also 1 Corinthians 15:49, '... as we have borne the image of the *man* of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly *Man*'. The body of the believer will have the same form and essence which Jesus now has after his resurrection (see Rm 8:29;²⁹ Harris 1986:49; cf. also Thiselton 2000:1290).

A transformation will be required to inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50). All believers, both the dead and the living, will certainly be transformed at the *parousia* (1 Cor 15:51-52). For both groups the consequence of the transformation will be identical: the possession of a spiritual body comparable to Christ's 'glorious body' (Phlp 3:21; Harris 1986:49).

The continuity of identity or personality: Real continuity will exist between the identity of the physical body and the spiritual body. An identical historically recognisable *ego* will manifest in a second succeeding, but distinctive type of body. When the fleshly earthly body is transformed into a spiritual body or replaced by it (incorruptible body), individual identity is conserved (cf. Harris 1986:50; also cf. Murphy 2006).

The association here is Jesus. The Gospels present the resurrected Jesus as recognisable by his disciples.

28. When Paul uses the pronoun, 'spiritual', in connection with body, it should not be confused with the adjectives 'ethereal' or 'immaterial'. It should not be understood as describing a substance. In reference to the physical body Paul does not describe a body consisting of a physical substance. Neither does his reference to a 'spiritual' body signify a body of a spiritual substance. The fundamental concept involved here 'is that of dominion by the Spirit' (Lincoln 1981:42). Paul has no problem with the fleshly material of 'this age'. For him it was rather a matter of how sin has corrupted it (cf. Johnson 2003:306-307).

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul tries to explain that the epistemology of 'this age' will be transformed into one appropriate for the 'new creation'. This will be equivalent to the transformation of the believer's body of this age into a body appropriate for the 'new creation'. Believers will not be annihilated. What will happen is that the Holy Spirit will transform believers' epistemological categories of 'this age' (ψυχικός) into πνευματικός ones. This will enable believers to perceive by the values of the new creation. These values should be communicated and implemented in the communal life of the church. Similarly, characteristics of the resurrected human body of 'this age' (ψυχικόν), will be transformed by the 'making alive Spirit' into πνευματικόν ones. This event will then enable believers to participate in the new creation at its consummation. Therefore, the body of 'this age' will be characterised to be freed from the devastating effects of sin, free from the proclivity of death or decay.

29. For whom He (God) foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn (πρωτότοκος) among many brethren'.

In chapter 20 the Gospel of John refers twice to Jesus who appears to his disciples in the upper room where they gathered. They recognised him. There were also a few cases where he was not at first sight recognisable: by the Emmaus travellers (Mk 24:13-32); some of his disciples who went fishing and Jesus appeared to them (Jn 21:1-14) and Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:11-18) who went to his grave. They all recognised him later. In John 17:24 *Jesus* prays, 'Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me'. Jesus will be recognisable in the afterlife. *Moses* and *Elijah* were recognisable on the Mountain of glory (Mk 9:1-13;³⁰ cf. also Abraham, the rich man & Lazarus; Lk 16:19-31).

The reality of God's presence: The following texts verify the reality of the presence of God in the midst of God's children: 1 Corinthians 15:28, '... *that God may be all in all*'; 2 Corinthians 6:16, '... "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people"'.

In the conclusive description of the New Jerusalem (Rv 21:1-22:5; cf. Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22-24) attention is focused on both its: (1) superlative beauty and its perfect holiness and (2) on its dwellers among whom *God will dwell due to the perfection and holiness of these people*.

Revelation 7:15, '... *will dwell among them*'; Revelation 21:3, '... *He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God*'.

After his description of the glory of the New Jerusalem (Rv 21:22-26), John refers in Revelation 22:

And there shall be no more curse, but *the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it*, and His servants shall serve Him.³ They shall see His (Jesus) face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. (vv. 3-4)

The character of 'life' in heaven: Most people are of the opinion that life 'in heaven' will vastly differ from life on earth. In fact, God did not fail when He created this beautiful world and humans as physical beings on it. Moreover, after the references to the first 5 days of creation, God called it 'good' (בֹּטֵט, Gn 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21). After the creation of humans on the sixth day, He called it 'very good' (בְּרָאִתְּהֶן, Gn 1:25).³¹ The New Testament in particular, describes a future life that will be in many ways analogous to the life lived on earth. There will be in the corporate context of the 'new heaven and new earth' (God's new world) unmediated inter-personal communion between the individual believer and the Lord (Harris 1986:50). When the children of God live in the light and follow the Shepherd, they will not only have fellowship with the Shepherd, but also with one another.

30. See also Matthews 16:28-17:3; Luke 9:27-36.

31. This researcher is aware of the contemporary interpretation of Genesis 1-11 as mythology.

In Philippians 4 Paul gives us another glimpse of this beatific life:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. (v. 8)

Then in Galatians 5:22, 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²² gentleness, self-control'. The primary objective will be to glorify and worship God (1 Pt 4:11) through such a way of life, as it is also now applicable.

Even in the Gospel of John believers get a glimpse of what life on the restorative earth ('heaven') will be like in future. This becomes evident in John's description of the relationship within the divine (trinity)³² in relation to believers. In his publication on the divine in John, *Divine-fellowship in the Gospel of John: A trinitarian spirituality*, Van der Merwe (2019a:1–9) understands this relationship from the *familia Dei* perspective where 'love', 'life', 'glorification', 'unity' and 'obedience' constitute this divine family life. From this essay it has become evident that John can talk about a person within the divine (Trinity) only in terms of another person in the divine (Trinity)³³ and their fellowship with one another. John understands the relationship between the 'children of God' and the 'divine' also in terms of the *familia Dei* perspective. Experiencing the One is also experiencing the Other. John then uses family metaphors to explain this fellowship in terms of the 'life', 'love', 'unity', 'glorification' and 'obedience' in the *familia Dei* (Van der Merwe 2019a:7). Thus, the present eschatological *familia Dei* on earth is a shadow of the future eschatological *familia Dei*.

Salvation, according to Peter (1 Pt 1:3–12), is essentially restorative (it repairs what sin and evil have marred) and it is holistic in that it impacts all created reality. Peter evidently expects something quite radical and comprehensive at the eschaton, which he claims is in line with the Old Testament prophetic message (1 Pt 1:10). 1 Corinthians 2:

There will be so much more what we can't even imagine! What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love Him. (v. 9)

The New Jerusalem is a sign (Rv 21), a symbol of the composition of all the redeemed from the Old and New Testament ages who have been transformed to the extent that they match God in his life and nature. Revelation 21 rounds it off:

32.The word 'trinity' does not occur in John, although the three divine persons in John (Father, Son, Spirit) are depicted in a divine relationship.

33.Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a developed doctrine of the Trinity. It was initially articulated when early Christians attempted to understand the relationship between Jesus and God as formulated in their 'scriptural documents and prior tradition' (Hurtado 2005:644–648). The New Testament writings possess a 'triadic' understanding of God (Hurtado 2010:99–110) and contains several Trinitarian formulas. Therefore, the reference to the occurrence of the 'trinity concept' in John is due to the close 'divine fellowship' between the Father, Son and Spirit in the Gospel of John.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away. (v. 4)

In the book of Revelation, a high frequency of symbolic and metaphoric references occurs about the future eschatological content and life. Most of these symbols and metaphors have been used to describe 'life on the new earth'. Each has a specific background which controls its primary level of meaning. The whole point of using symbols or metaphors is to enlighten the imagination with multiple layers of meaning. Umberto Eco (1979:8–11) calls these 'open' texts which deliberately have more than one level of application' (also cf. Middleton 2014:157; and Thiselton 2012:318).

Conclusion

Terminal illnesses cause traumatic and anxiety-filled experiences. Uncertainties about the mystery of death and what lies beyond death are catalytic for such experiences. This article proposes one approach to diminish the uncertainties about 'life beyond death' in a terminally ill patient, seen from a biblical theological perspective. Important facts should be communicated to the terminally ill regarding the biblical theological perspectives on death, life beyond death and what is believed to be comprehensible for the patient (and for any accompanying therapist).

Therefore, the article is a modest attempt to deal with specific emotions – the emotions coupled with uncertainties about what happens when you die and beyond death, when facing death. In one of his letters (2 Th) Paul offers therapy for despair in the face of death (the church in Thessalonica faced persecution and tribulations, 2 Th 1:4), namely a holistic eschatological perspective. Paul restrains despair by the comforting reassurance of a distinctively Christian hope. The uncertainties (about death and life beyond death) that strain terminally ill people when facing death should be addressed by means of an eschatological narrative, oriented towards reshaping reality. Their intended effect is to *reincorporate the dead with the living* in a cosmic Christological drama that embraces time, space and persons under the sovereign protection of the One identified in the final benediction of the epistle as 'the God of peace' (1 Th 5:23; Barton 2011:591).

Things to be conscious of: life continues beyond death; believers will find themselves in the presence of Christ where a new and final 'dwelling place' awaits Christian believers – the new earth.

Things to imagine: the connection between life in the kingdom of God while on earth and its exited fulfilment on the newly transformed earth. A futuristic focus is needed.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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