

The Resurrection of Ignorant People

Introduction

There are literally millions of people who have lived and died, without *ever* hearing about Jesus – even once. As a result, those people never had *any* chance to become Christians.

In this presentation, I will refer to people who never heard about Jesus as “ignorant” people – simply because they are ignorant about Jesus.

Have you ever wondered *what* will happen to those people, after Jesus returns to earth?

I certainly *have* wondered about that issue – and so I will try to address that question, in this document.

A Fundamental Christian Belief

One of the most fundamental beliefs in Christianity is the belief that Jesus is the only way to God.

In other words, in order for a human to be “saved” – i.e., to obtain everlasting life – he must accept Jesus as his lord.

There are many verses in Scripture that support this belief, such as Matthew 10:32-33, Mark 16:15-16, John 3:35-36, John 14:6, Acts 4:10-12, Acts 16:30-31, Romans 10:8-10, and 1 John 2:23

The most “famous” of those verses is John 14:6, in which Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. *No one* comes to the Father, *except through me*”.

This belief that Jesus is the only way to God also makes “logical” sense.

Consider this: if there are any *other* ways for people to be saved, then *why* did Jesus have to die?

After all, we know that Jesus did not want to die (see Matthew 26:36-44). So, if there were any *other* ways for people to be saved, then Jesus would have *told* people that – *instead* of dying on the cross.

As a result, we can conclude that the reason why Jesus had to die, is because that was the only way for mankind to be saved.

What about “ignorant” people?

This belief that Jesus is the only way to God raises a question – what about “ignorant” people? Ignorant people never even heard about Jesus – so it does not seem “fair” to condemn them, for not believing in Jesus.

This question is especially applicable to infants (little babies) – because infants cannot even *understand* the gospel. In fact, infants (presumably) cannot even understand the concepts of “good” and “evil”.

So, the overall question is: what will happen to infants who are dead, when Jesus returns to earth?

Why am I concerned about this?

You may be wondering – *why* am I concerned about this issue? After all, God is completely righteous; and as a result, *every* decision that he makes will be the right one – including his decisions about ignorant people.

I do believe that God is righteous – so I, myself, am *not* really “worried” about the fate of ignorant people.

However, people who follow *other* religions – especially religions that have “new age”-type beliefs – *are* quite concerned about this issue. In other words, it is *unbelievers* who are really worried about this issue.

The unbeliever’s argument

Unbelievers often raise this question about ignorant people, in an attempt to “prove” that Jesus can not be the only way to God.

Basically, the argument that unbelievers make is as follows:

1. Some people have *never* heard of Jesus, even once.
2. It is not fair to condemn ignorant people, for not believing in Jesus.
3. Therefore, Jesus can *not* be the only way to God.

On several occasions, Oprah Winfrey has used this very argument, on her talk show. In other words, Oprah has claimed that Jesus can’t be the only way to God, *precisely* because some people have never heard of Jesus.

Of course, there are (literally) *hundreds of thousands* of people who watch Oprah’s show. As a result, I would not be surprised if at least a few of her viewers decided *not* to accept Jesus, *because* Oprah made those claims.

So, in my opinion, the reason why this issue is important is because it has the potential to *prevent* people from accepting Jesus.

What do other Christians believe?

When I first heard about this issue of ignorant people, I did quite a bit of research about the issue, to find out what the various Christian denominations believe about this issue.

Unfortunately, most Christian denominations do not have *any* official position on this issue. In other words, most denominations do not provide any information about this issue *at all*.

This is not very surprising, since there is very little information in Scripture about it. In fact, there is no verse which explicitly states what will happen to dead infants, when Jesus returns.

There are a few denominations that *do* have official beliefs about this subject, though. Those beliefs fall into two broad categories:

- Some denominations believe that all dead infants will be granted everlasting *life*, after Jesus returns.
- Some other denominations believe that all dead infants will be condemned to everlasting *death*, after Jesus returns.

I have a very hard time believing *either* of those doctrines.

The doctrine that all dead infants will be granted everlasting life sounds very merciful, of course. However, that doctrine means that dead infants will “automatically” be saved – without *ever* accepting Jesus as their lord! Of course, Scripture explicitly tells us that accepting Jesus is the only way to be saved.

The doctrine that all dead infants will be condemned to everlasting death is extremely cruel – because it means that all infants who die before Jesus returns will *never* have *any* opportunity to be saved. Of course, Scripture is quite clear that God wants everyone to be saved. In addition, we know that Jesus loves little children! See 1 Timothy 2:3-4, 2 Peter 3:9, Mark 10:13-16, and Luke 18:15-17.

As a result, both of the above doctrines do not appear to be “consistent” with the rest of Scripture. In other words, those doctrines appear to “contradict” what Scripture says.

Is there any other possible interpretation?

As I mentioned, the last two doctrines do *not* appear to be “consistent” with Scripture.

So, the question is, is there any *other* possible interpretation of Scripture – an interpretation that would result in a doctrine that *is* consistent with Scripture?

I believe that there *is* an alternate interpretation of Scripture – an interpretation which will provide an answer to this question about ignorant people, *and* which is consistent with Scripture. So, the rest of this presentation will describe that interpretation.

The Two “Types” of Resurrections

By definition, the word resurrection means “to be brought back to life”. (Literally, to “stand again”, from the Greek *anastasis*.)

However, Scripture contains accounts of two different “types” of resurrections – the resurrection to immortal life, and the resurrection to mortal life.

If a person is resurrected to *immortal* life, then he will *never* die again – because that resurrection raises him with a “glorified” body. If a person is resurrected to *mortal* life, though, then he will still have the potential to die again – because that resurrection raises him with a “natural” body.

An example of a resurrection to *immortal* life is the resurrection of Jesus. God resurrected Jesus to immortal life, by raising Jesus with a “glorified” body. As a result, Jesus will *never* die again.

An example of a resurrection to *mortal* life is the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus resurrected Lazarus to mortal life, by raising his “natural” body from the dead. We know that Lazarus was raised to mortal life, because Lazarus eventually *died again* – after his resurrection. (Lazarus is *not* still walking around today, right? If he were, then the news media would have found him a long time ago...)

So, I will make the following assertion: a resurrection will definitely bring a person back to life – but it will not necessarily grant a person *immortal* life. In other words, a person might be resurrected back to *mortal* life – it all depends on the “type” of resurrection that is used.

The Two “Classes” of Resurrections

Scripture speaks of two different “classes” of people who will be resurrected – the “righteous” and the “unrighteous”:

Acts 24:15 (HCSB – Holman Christian Standard Bible)

15 And I have a hope in God, which these men themselves also accept, that there is going to be a resurrection, both of the righteous and the unrighteous.

Scripture also mentions what will happen to people in those two classes:

John 5:28-29 (HCSB)

28 Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of judgment.

From the verses above, we can see that the righteous are resurrected to “life”, and the unrighteous are resurrected to “judgment”.

However, by *definition*, the term resurrection means “to be brought back to life”. So, *why* is one of the resurrections called the resurrection of life?

In other words, since both classes of people will be resurrected, that means that both classes will be brought back to life. However, the fact that *one* of the resurrections is called the resurrection “of life” *seems* to imply that only that resurrection will bring people back to life.

I believe that the verses above draw a distinction between the *type* of life that the righteous will have, and the *type* of life that the unrighteous will have.

Scripture is very clear that the righteous will be resurrected to immortal life (see Revelation 20:6). So, I believe that the resurrection “of life” means resurrection to immortal life.

The unrighteous will apparently be granted a different “type” of life than the righteous will. Since the righteous will be granted immortal life, that implies that the unrighteous will be granted the *other* type of life – mortal life – during the resurrection of judgment.

So, based upon the above information, I will make the following assertion: the righteous will be resurrected to *immortal* life, and the unrighteous will be resurrected to *mortal* life.

A “Recap” of the information so far

Here is a “recap” of the information we’ve covered so far:

1. There are two “types” of resurrections – the resurrection to *immortal* life, and the resurrection to *mortal* life.
2. There are two “classes” of people who will get resurrected – the *righteous* and the *unrighteous*.
3. The above two points are “linked” as follows: the *righteous* class will be resurrected to *immortal* life, and the *unrighteous* class will be resurrected to *mortal* life.

The “Duration” of the Resurrection of Judgment

As noted previously, the unrighteous class will be resurrected during the resurrection “of judgment”. But what does the term “judgment” really mean in this context? Does it mean “pronouncing a sentence”?

In particular, does the term “judgment” mean that all of the unrighteous will have sentences pronounced on them, immediately after they are resurrected?

The Greek word that is translated as judgment is *krisis*. (The English word “crisis” comes from that Greek word.) There are many possible meanings of *krisis*, but from what I have seen, the primary meaning is “a trial, or contest”. In this case, think of a *trial* of strength, or a *contest* of skill.

For example, consider an archery contest. If you enter an archery contest, then your ability to shoot a bow and arrow will be judged, over a period of time.

In other words, the judges in an archery contest do not “pronounce a sentence” on you, *immediately* after you enter the contest. Instead, they observe how well you perform, *during* the contest, before they issue their judgment.

So, it is *possible* that the resurrection of judgment refers to a period of time – in the future – during which the actions of the unrighteous will be judged.

There is one other verse in Scripture, which describes the resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous – Daniel 12:2. Here is that verse, in two different translations:

Daniel 12:2 (HCSB)

2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to shame and eternal contempt.

Daniel 12:2 (YLT – Young’s Literal Translation)

2 And the multitude of those sleeping in the dust of the ground do awake, some to life age-during, and some to reproaches -- to abhorrence age-during.

That verse tells us that righteous people will be resurrected to “life”. So, that verse appears to agree with the other verses we’ve looked at – in that the righteous will be resurrected to *immortal* life, and the unrighteous will be resurrected to *mortal* life.

There is one other point to note: the HCSB refers to “eternal” life and “eternal” contempt, while the YLT refers to life “age-during” and abhorrence “age-during”. So, why is there this discrepancy?

The Hebrew word in question is *olam*. From what I have seen, *olam* refers to a period of time – but the exact *length* of that time period *varies*, depending on the context.

In some cases, *olam* definitely refers to “eternal”, or “forever” (e.g. Psalm 102:12). However, in other cases, *olam* explicitly refers to a finite period of time – such as in Jonah 2:6. So, what length of time does *olam* refer to in this case?

Well, if *olam* referred to an eternal time period, then that would mean that the unrighteous would be alive – and would be reproached – *forever*. Of course, we have already established that the unrighteous will be resurrected to mortal life – and by definition, mortal life does not last forever.

So, in this case, it appears that *olam* refers to a finite time period. In other words, this verse appears to state that the unrighteous will be resurrected to mortal life – and then they will live, as mortals, for some finite period of time.

Supporting Passages

There are several passages which appear to support this doctrine. First of all, Revelation 21:11-15 appears to support the concept that the unrighteous will live for a finite period of time, after their resurrections. That passage describes the “white throne” judgment, which occurs after the 1000 year reign of Jesus.

Verse 15 tells us that if any person’s name is not found in the book of life, then he will be condemned to everlasting death. That wording implies that some people’s names will be found in the book of life (and will be saved). Note: the only people who will be at that judgment are the “unrighteous” – that is, people who did not accept Jesus during this age.

So, if all of the unrighteous will be judged immediately after they are resurrected, then none of them will be saved – because in that case, none of them will have any *time* to accept Jesus. Since some of the unrighteous evidently will be saved, that implies that those people must be given some time to live, after their resurrections.

The following three passages – taken *together* – appear to talk about what will happen to infants, when Jesus returns: Genesis 22:1-3, Hebrews 11:17-19, and 2 Samuel 12:15-23.

Genesis 22 describes Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. I have always been “puzzled” by one item in that passage – why didn’t Abraham express any sadness, when God told him to sacrifice his beloved son?

Hebrews 11:17-19 appears to give an explanation for Abraham’s behavior. Basically, Abraham firmly believed that if he did sacrifice Isaac, then God would resurrect him. This belief greatly comforted Abraham – and it appears to explain why Abraham was not overcome with grief at that time.

2 Samuel 12:15-23 describes the death of David's infant son. Basically, the infant who died was the child who was born as a result of David's adultery with Bathsheba.

As we can see, when the child became ill, David fasted and wept – and *pleaded* with God for the child – for seven straight days. However, after the child died, David appeared to “return to normal”, almost immediately. This is very confusing – because if anything, I would expect David to become even *more* depressed, after the child died.

David's response to his servants appears to explain his behavior. Basically, the phrase “I will go to him” apparently means that David expected to be “reunited” with his son in the future – because he believed that God would resurrect his son, during the Kingdom of God. In other words, David – just like Abraham – found great comfort in his belief that his son *would be* resurrected. This appears to indicate that God will resurrect infants – i.e., that dead infants will not be condemned to everlasting death.

Summary of this Presentation

My overall belief regarding what will happen with ignorant people is as follows:

First, ignorant people – especially infants – will be resurrected, as *mortals*, during the resurrection of the unrighteous.

Then, those people will be given some *finite* period of time to live, as *mortals*, in the Kingdom. That period of time will be their “judgment period” – or their “probationary period”, if you will.

Basically, those people will have the opportunity to learn about the gospel – and to accept Jesus as their lord – *during* that time period.

If those people *do* accept Jesus during their judgment period, then they will be granted immortal life at the end of that period. If they *do not* accept Jesus, then they will simply die at the end of that period.

This doctrine appears to be much more “consistent” with Scripture, than the other two doctrines that I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation.

Final Thoughts

As I mentioned earlier in this presentation, unbelievers frequently bring up the issue of ignorant people, in an attempt to “prove” that Jesus can *not* be the only way to God.

If I ever happen to be in a conversation, in which an unbeliever makes that type of claim, I will give him the following type of response:

“The people who never heard about Jesus *will have* the opportunity to hear about him – and to *accept* him as their lord – *after* he returns to earth.”

This response would hopefully give the unbeliever a reason to learn more about Jesus – and salvation.