

1 Sermon, July 15, 2012

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 1 Corinthians 15:50-55, Job 17:11-18:7

Title: "Christianity Compared: Perspectives on Eternal Life in Christianity and Judaism"

1. Christianity & Judaism differ in the resurrection of Jesus
2. Christianity & Judaism are more similar than you might think
3. Christianity & Judaism are more similar than you might think
4. Let's focus on the love behind resurrection

1. Christianity & Judaism differ in the resurrection of Jesus

Over the next few weeks, I will be speaking about Christianity, and the differences between it and other world religions in certain aspects. I hope that this comparison with other world religions can teach us more about our own faith.

Today I'm talking about the difference between Christianity and Judaism regarding the afterlife.

There is one thing that *most* distinguishes Christian faith from Jewish faith. That is the resurrection of Jesus.

That the messiah should be crucified and then rise again was a "stumbling block to Jews, and folly to the Gentiles." That's in 1 Corinthians.

It's not that there was no talk about resurrection among Judeans in Jesus' time. No. In fact, they seemed to have regular arguments about whether or not there was a resurrection of the dead.

At the time that Christianity separated from Judaism, Jews went one way, saying that God would not send a savior to be crucified.

But in the first centuries after Christianity and Judaism split, Jews became unified in their belief that there would be a messiah. The messiah would come out of the sky and initiate the perfect world of peace and prosperity. Then *all* the righteous dead will be brought back to life. The wicked dead will not be resurrected.

The Christians, on the other hand, made the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus into the central fact of the faith. Because Jesus died and was raised, we who believe, we who follow him shall be raised as well. The exact manner of this resurrection is unclear: will it be an immediate reunion with God, or will we wait somehow until the day when God ushers in a new Eden?

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Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians that there will be a grand reunion in the heavens, and God will change our mortal bodies into glorious bodies that don't age or decay.

Still, even though this emphasis on a "last day" is in the Bible, ever since Saint Augustine, most Christians have thought of death as a separation of body and soul. The body dies, the soul goes on. It's an easier and more comforting explanation of what happens after death, rather than dying completely, and then being raised by God's power.

2. The afterlife in Judaism

There is no one interpretation of what's after death in Judaism. Not in Jesus' time, not now.

What we call the Old Testament, and Jews call the Scriptures, has very few references to life after death. For the most part, it describes the afterlife in vague terms, many of which may simply be figurative ways of speaking about death as it is observed by [the living](#).

An early common theme is that death means rejoining one's ancestors. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and other patriarchs are "gathered to their people" after death. In contrast, the wicked are "cut off from their people" (Gen. 17:14; Ex. 31:14).

Another recurring biblical image of the afterlife is as a shadowy place called Sheol. It is referred to in the Psalms, Lamentations, Jonah and Job. It is a place of darkness and silence located in low places. The author of Psalm 88 laments his impending death with these words:

I am sated with misfortune; I am at the brink of Sheol.
I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit;
I am a helpless man
abandoned among the dead,
like bodies lying in the grave of whom You are mindful no more,
and who are cut off from Your care.
You have put me at the bottom of the Pit,
in the darkest places, in the depths.
(Psalm 88:4-7)

These early biblical texts seem to indicate that the soul continues to exist in some way after death, but not consciously.
But Daniel 12:2 takes us further:

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"And many of them that **sleep** in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

More developed concepts of the resurrection of the dead and afterlife seem to have entered Judaism under the outside influences of the Greek world *after* the Hebrew scriptures were completed. Maimonides, one of the early great rabbis, included the resurrection of the dead as one of the "13 Articles of Belief."

But Judaism is much more focused on actions than beliefs. Jewish writings focus on the purpose of earthly life, which is to fulfill one's duties to God and one's fellow humans. Succeeding at this brings reward; failing at it brings punishment. Whether **rewards** and punishments continue after death, or whether anything at all happens after death, is not as important.

3. Christianity & Judaism are more similar than you might think

So there are many similarities in the way that Christians and Jews view the afterlife.

Throughout history, Christians and Jews have had a variety of views of heaven and hell. Both Christians and Jews have seen hell as a place of fire and torment, and created some very dramatic art to portray the difference between heaven and hell. On the other hand, some Christians and Jews have said that Hell is inconsistent with God's nature, and therefore must not exist.

Christians believe that we are not saved by our own actions, but by the grace of God. This means we can't earn our way to heaven; it's a free gift.

Jewish tradition teaches that all Israel has a share in the world to come, also unearned, except for apostates and a few other miscreants.

Both Jews and Christians believe in a just and compassionate God, and both have spoken of a Messianic age, when justice and compassion will prevail over sin, evil and death.

Historically, Christians have been more likely than Jews to believe that heaven is a gated community (pearly or otherwise).

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Christians are more likely to think that you have to be Christian in order to be saved than Jews believe that you have to be Jewish to get into heaven. Rabbi Moses Maimonides maintained that the pious of all the nations of the world have a portion in the world-to-come.

Perhaps the biggest difference in thinking about the afterlife is that Christian scholars over the ages have been more likely to talk about the "immortality of the soul."

The rabbis, on the other hand, look at Isaiah 26, where it says:

"Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy."

The rabbis interpreted this to mean that the soul is *not* immortal, in fact, there may be no soul separate from the body. Instead, the resurrection of the dead is something special God will do at a certain point in history.

But this is not the emphasis of Judaism. The emphasis of Judaism is on daily living. Some of my Jewish friends have told me that they're not sure there is anything beyond this life.

It is far from likely for a Christian, on the other hand, to *not* believe in an afterlife and still consider themselves Christian.

4. Let's focus on the love behind resurrection

This is the point in the sermon where I get to ask the question, "So what?" "So what does that mean for me in my daily life?"

Well, first of all it's good to reflect on what we have in common with our Jewish cousins. If we are sisters and brothers in Christ, Jews are cousins.

Second, it's important to remember and be encouraged by our belief in the resurrection. Because of Christ, and his resurrection, we have hope that we, too, will be raised.

Because of Christ's resurrection, not even death can separate us from the love of God. In any circumstance in this life, even in death, there is another chapter; another opportunity.

The point is not necessarily to live in constant expectation of heaven. We need to focus on what God calls us to do in this world. But knowing that there is a next world, we can live with greater confidence and joy.

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Thanks be to God!

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words." 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, NRSV.

"What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 1 Corinthians 15:50-55, NRSV.

"My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart. They make night into day; 'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.' If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness, if I say to the Pit, 'You are my father,' and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,' where then is my hope? Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?" Then Bildad the Shuhite answered: "How long will you hunt for words? Consider, and then we shall speak. Why are we counted as cattle? Why are we stupid in your sight? You who tear yourself in your anger-- shall the earth be forsaken because of you, or the rock be removed out of its place? "Surely the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of their fire does not shine. The light is dark in their tent, and the lamp above them is put out. Their strong steps are shortened, and their own schemes throw them down." Job 17:11-18:7, NRSV.