

## Chapter 16

# REINCARNATION

I used to visit the bedridden woman every Thursday afternoon in a chronic care nursing home. She suffered from a neurological disease which was very advanced. She could still blink, she could swallow, she could talk. But she couldn't turn her head at all. Neither could she change position in bed. And of course she had no bowel or bladder control. One day her husband arrived in the middle of my visit. He was talkative. "What do you think of reincarnation?" he quizzed me. Before I could say anything, he told me he believed in it. "Life is a proving-ground," he said. "Life is a test. If we fail the test in some respect, then we have to suffer for it in a subsequent life. In other words (at this point he seemed to have forgotten about his wife, but I certainly hadn't), if we are suffering now, then we are clearly being disciplined *for failure in a previous life*." I could hardly believe what I was hearing. He seemed oblivious to what his cherished notion of reincarnation implied about his wife. She was suffering so terribly now because she had erred or failed or fallen down 100 years ago? What guarantee was there that she had "learned her lesson"? And if she hadn't learned her lesson from her terrible suffering, would she have to come back a third time in even greater distress and so on until there was noticeable improvement in character? What had this woman done in her previous existence, what could she have done, supposedly, to merit discipline of the sort she was enduring now?

It is evident that I regard the notion of reincarnation as a contradiction of Christian truth.

In the first place, the proponents of reincarnation believe that there is a "me" which is transferable from body to body. I (that is, the "me" which has written this book) am a clergyman at this moment. In a previous existence, they tell me, I may have been an eighteenth-century English shopkeeper. (Whether being a clergyman now is reward or punishment I have no idea.) In my future existence I may be a Chinese military officer. In any case, there is a "me," supposedly, which can be detached from my body and transferred to another body.

The religious version of this notion is that I have a soul which flies off from my body when I die. The ancient Greeks certainly believed in detachable souls and bodies. But the Hebrews did not and never have. The notion of detachable soul and body is utterly unbiblical. According to the Hebrew mind I am not a soul which temporarily occupies a body. Rather, I am an animated body. We human beings are formed from the dust of the earth. We are of the earth earthy. The Hebrew word *Nephesh*, which is sometimes translated "soul," really means "life." The animals are said to have *nephesh* as well, since animals are animated bodies, too. This is not to pretend that humanness can be reduced to bodiliness, or that personality is finally nothing more than a consequence of biochemical interactions, or even that personal identity is an illusion since the composition of everyone's flesh is the same. Yet it is to insist that there is no "me" which is detachable from a body. To be sure, all of us recognize each other as a personality with distinguishing characteristics. Each of us has a personal identity which others recognize through our personality. But we have never met someone, never encountered her personality, apart from her body. If someone were to ask you, "Have you seen Jennifer today?", you would never reply, "Yes, I saw her at 9:30 this morning and I saw her body as well." It is only through our bodies that we meet each other and know each other. Never in our lives have we met a human being who was a soul without a body. When my body dies, I die. There is no part of "me" which manages to escape death — that is, which survives death and is therefore naturally available for reimplanting in another body. If there were, then "I" could not be said to have died; a death which really is death — that is, annihilation — would not have occurred. The Hebrew mind maintains that all of me dies. For this reason, after death I shall live before God only by the grace and mercy of God's resurrect-

there were in forty-eight years, he produced the correct answer without touching pen to paper! In 1953 an eight-year-old Italian girl, Gianello de Marco, conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra in a concert of classical music. Next day the music critic of the *London Times* wrote, "There is an unnerving maturity in her intellectual accomplishments. . . ."

"How can these prodigies be?" people ask, and some people bring forward the answer of reincarnation. Mozart, they tell us, could play the violin at age three because he had already played it at age thirty in a previous existence. Frankly, I don't think such speculation will prove helpful. Why not admit that we human beings, the high point of God's creation, are so wonderfully made that we cannot be programmed or predicted? Why not admit that everywhere in nature there are unanticipated, startling developments? And just as there are prodigies and geniuses, so there are people with psychic powers. There are people with extraordinary mental powers. The human mind is finally immeasurable. There are "layers" of our "grey matter" which are inexplicable. But bringing forward the theory of reincarnation raises more questions than it answers. More profoundly, reincarnation contradicts the gospel's understanding of history and the unrepeatability of each historical moment. Most profoundly, it contradicts what scripture insists it is to be a human being.

In the second place, some people bring forward the notion of reincarnation as a means of redressing the shocking inequities we see in life. Some persons are born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Other children are born into and will know only unrelieved hardship, disease, pain, ignorance, distress. We are reminded repeatedly that it is not fair. It certainly isn't fair. Reincarnation is then brought forward as a means of restoring fairness. Those who are cheated in this life, victimized in this life, will not be cheated or victimized in their next existence.

We must regard seriously and soberly the unfairness seen everywhere in life. Some people are rich beyond counting; others are poor beyond enduring. Some are culturally privileged, others culturally deprived. Some have carriage-trade health care, others don't even have an aspirin. Some are learned, others illiterate.

All of these discrepancies in God's creation can be overcome and should be overcome. The unfairnesses should be redressed. Scripture makes this quite plain. There is only one distinction (and it has nothing to do with unfairness) — there is only one distinction in God's creation which God forbids us to tamper with: the distinction between man and woman. This is the only

distinction which God has built into the creation and insists that we honor. All other distinctions can be overcome and should be. The gaps between privileged and poor, between those with access to CAT scans and those who don't even have clean water to drink, and so on; these gaps should be bridged. When we look out at the unfairnesses in life and shout at God, "Why don't you do something about it?", we forget that this is the very question God puts to us: "Why don't *you* do something about it?"

Be this as it may, there will unfortunately be people, victimized people, who will remain distressed for as long as life lasts. In fact, as creatures who were made to mirror God's glory, all of us are more deformed than we care to admit. What, then, is the future of God's people? Our future is to be raised by the God who has already raised his Son from the dead. Our future is to shine forth as new creatures, reflecting that new nature which God has already sown in us and which is appearing even now. Our future is to share in the kingdom of God, which is simply God's entire creation healed.

It is towards this future that we move in faith.

It is for this future that we work and watch and wait.

It is to this future that we point men and women now while time remains.

ing from the dead, even as that same grace and mercy preserve my identity before God. The idea of a transferable soul, a part of "me" which somehow is not subject to death, is a contradiction of what the Bible means by a human being.

In the second place, we must comment on the reincarnationist notion that life is a testing ground, a proving ground. All of us know that we have to make decisions day by day about what is right and what is good and what is godly. Every day we have to recognize and resist evil. Proponents of reincarnation say it is like sitting an examination at school. If you fail the exam, you have to sit it again. You resit the exam by reappearing in another life.

To be sure, our faithfulness to God and our faithfulness to one another are tested in life. God does try our faithfulness to God and to our neighbors. However, proponents of reincarnation assume that if we keep sitting the exam, eventually we pass. If I failed God's exam as a shopkeeper 200 years ago, I now have a chance to pass the exam as a clergyman. The assumption is that I shall be allowed to keep on sitting the exam until I pass, however long it takes.

The Christian perspective, however, is quite different. According to the truth of the gospel, everyone fails the exam. *Everyone* fails. "All we like sheep have gone astray," says the prophet. "There is none righteous, no, not one," adds the psalmist. Earnestly we acknowledge our sinfulness every Sunday. As often as she worships, the Anglican cries out, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is *no* health in us." Jesus commands us to seek God's forgiveness every day simply because we never get beyond needing it, and never shall. My faithfulness to God and my faithfulness to others (unfaithfulness) will always be of such a nature as to leave me having to say, "There is no health in me." We don't need another chance at the exam. Another chance at the exam would only issue in the same result. We need mercy, we need pardon, we need forgiveness. We need that new mind, new heart, new nature which only God can give.

The woman with the neurological disease I mentioned earlier — according to the reincarnationists she is being disciplined. She is resitting the exam; evidently she failed it before. But what guarantee is there that she will ever pass it? Then might her present suffering be repeated in life after life? The very thought of someone having to suffer like that again, and yet

again, leaves me aghast. None of us needs another chance at the exam! We need mercy, together with that new mind and spirit and nature which God has promised God's own people.

Christian faith differs from reincarnation, in the third place, inasmuch as reincarnation devalues history, including the individual's history. The needy person I meet tomorrow morning — the moment of my meeting this person with her need is not going to reappear in the future. I can't slough her off saying, "She will have another opportunity to have her need met." She won't have this opportunity again. This moment is unique. She is passing this way once. At the same time, I shall never have the same chance to reflect to her the kindness of God. I too am passing this way once. Our meeting each other tomorrow morning is unique, unrepeatable. If I am not open-hearted to this needy person, then I have slapped Jesus Christ in the face; after all, he insists we meet him the guise of the needy, suffering ones. And for this insult to her and to him I shall have to answer in the judgment! God looks upon each historical moment as so valuable, so pregnant with possibility, so much a moment for the inbreaking of God's kingdom, that what I have done with this moment I must answer for in the judgment. To pretend anything else is to devalue history, to pretend that history needn't be taken seriously, since we and others are going to have another chance to make it all good. But we aren't going to have another chance to make anything good! Each "chance" is unique and unrepeatable. What we do with this moment, particularly what we do for suffering people *in* this moment — this is inestimably important; and for this, says our Lord, we must render account at the judgment.

For years I have struggled to understand why the notion of reincarnation has such strong appeal for some people. Reincarnation, I have found, is brought forward to explain highly unusual people who turn up from time to time. Mozart wrote a sonata when he was four years old, a symphony at seven, and an opera, words and music, when he was twelve. When Mozart was three, he began performing as a concern violinist. The explanation of all this, say the reincarnationists, is that Mozart acquired musical knowledge and skill in a previous life.

Another fellow, William Hamilton, began learning Hebrew at age three. By age seven he had greater facility in Hebrew than candidates for professorships. Zerah Colburn, seven years old, was a mathematical "whiz." When asked how many minutes