

This Life Only?

Some time ago I wrote a letter to the Opinion Page of the Boston Globe in order to challenge the mischaracterization of Christian belief by columnist Alex Beam. In that particular article, Beam extolled the advances of medical science to prolong human life and, possibly, to enable a person to live forever. This, he suggests, would do away with the need for Christian Faith.

When I read this opinion piece I was astonished at such a “reduction” made by an, otherwise, intelligent writer. Essentially he was equating scientific/medical techniques to prolong physical human life in the world with Christian Belief in Resurrection in the “glorified body.”

This conception of salvation as, merely, more-of-the-same-life that we are living now misses the whole aspect of Redemption from Sin and Death. The life we are living now is deeply disordered by sin and *“the wages of sin is death,”* (Romans 6:23). To think that true human desire is ordered toward this “more-of-the-same” represents a failure to observe real human experience. Self-transcendence is the distinguishing trait of the human person over-against all other types of created life.

In his most recent article, Beam, seemingly, takes another swipe through his analysis of Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize Speech. Dylan ends his twenty-six-minute presentation by quoting the epic poem of Homer, *The Odyssey*. The following is the excerpt from the article within which is the quote:

“So what does it all mean?” Dylan has the temerity to ask. Good question! He reminds us of Odysseus’s visit to the glorious warrior Achilles in the underworld. Odysseus honors Achilles, who ‘rulest mightily among the dead.’ But Achilles spurns his homage: ‘Speak not soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as a slave of a pauper, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.’ [Beam replies . . .] You crave meaning? There it is — a very bold, very Jewish, very life-affirming rejection of the afterlife, the underworld, and the pie-in-the-sky promise of a putative heaven. It’s life and life only! Live it now.

This is just baffling! The ancient poem has nothing to say about “heaven.” Achilles presides over souls in Hades, the abode of the dead. Though not the same notion as Hell and eternal damnation; Hades is not characterized by the ancients as anything like a paradise. The reason for Achilles response is that Hades is a place of gloom and sorrow where the souls of the dead mope around yearning for the return of the sensations they once enjoyed when alive.

If Achilles were in heaven, as understood by Christians, he would have absolutely no desire for a return to his former life. By definition, Heaven is the satisfaction of all desire, the fulfilment of life, and life given “abundantly,” without any taint or disorder, (see John 10 and Romans 8:18ff, among many others).



“It’s life and life only! Live it now.” Just as he misunderstood or deliberately mischaracterized the Christian Hope for Eternal Life, here too there is a false dichotomy posited between this life and Eternal Life. The implied protest in Mr. Beam’s words are that hope for Eternal Life beyond the grave prevents people from truly living this life and/or properly valuing it. This belief is captured in the old expression, ***“Don’t be so Heavenly minded as to be of no earthly good.”***

True Christian belief does not espouse this diminishment of earthly life. One need only read St. Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians, (*“Those who do not work should not eat!”* 2Thess. 3:10) Indeed, within the economy of Grace, this life is the frontier with Eternal Life: It is the time for us to repent, and to make our proper response to the Savior who came that we might have life ***“and have it abundantly.”***