MYSTERIES
OF THE
AFTERLIFE

RON JONES

HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON
To Mom, who believed her son would one day write a book about Jesus. Rest in the peaceful presence of your Savior.

And to Dad, who always says he’s proud of me.

I pray this answers your questions about the afterlife.
Acknowledgments

The writing of any book is possible but not inevitable. That’s because no author writes alone. It takes a team of people to support the project and turn it into reality. I’m glad to welcome my new friends at Harvest House Publishers to my extended ministry team. I also feel blessed to be included on their list of esteemed authors. Many thanks go out to Bob Hawkins Jr., LaRae Weikert, and Terry Glaspey for meeting with me in New York City and Nashville to discuss my writing aspirations. Of course those meetings would never have taken place without the help of Mick and Julie Tingstrom, who provide the Joneses with constant laughter, inspiration, vision, and friendship for life! God used Julie to change the scope and trajectory of my ministry and fulfill a lifelong dream when she humbly said, “I’d like to introduce you to some of my friends.”

Nick Harrison is also part of the Harvest House team and someone every author needs in his life. He is a kind, capable, gentle, and encouraging editor. Like the quarterback on a football team, an author drives the project down the field and gets it in the literary red zone; someone like Nick puts the book in the end zone by smoothing over the rough places and making the right editorial calls. I’m also grateful for the editorial input my friend Deane Allen gave me on the chapter titled “Eternity for Those Who Can’t Believe,” and for his and Linda’s permission to include their story about baby Jacob.

God also blessed me with a beautiful wife and us with two extraordinary children. Team Jones fills my life with love, laughter, inspiration, and hope that tomorrow will always be a better day. My wife Cathryn deserves sainthood for enduring the ups and downs of life while married to a dreamer, a visionary pastor, and now an author who fastidiously pores over the right words, phrases, and sentences. Neither of us knew quite what we were getting ourselves into when we started this journey more than two decades ago. To my best friend and lover, thanks for still believing that God is faithful and full of grace, and that the best is yet to come! I love you and the way the Fab 4 does family life and ministry together.

Finally, thank you to my church family who first listened to their pastor deliver a series of messages on the afterlife and then provided feedback, to our Something Good Radio listening family who responded to the
broadcast of that series with great interest and enthusiasm, to the Something Good Radio Board of Trustees for your constant prayers, encouragement, and wise counsel, and to my media agent Jack Hibbard and his wife Erin for your authentic friendship in Christ, prayer support, and advice. It’s no mystery why your collective love for and commitment to the Word of God still inspires me every day.

**Ron Jones**

_Virginia Beach, Virginia_
CONTENTS

Introduction ................................................................. 9

2. Can We Really Live Forever? .............................. 19
3. Eternity in Our Hearts ........................................ 23
4. The Last Enemy .................................................. 29
5. Your Appointment with Death ............................ 35
7. Sixty Seconds After We Die ................................. 47
8. Can We Communicate with the Dead? .................. 57
9. Saul and the Witch of Endor ............................... 63
10. Are You a Citizen of Heaven? ............................. 69
11. Is Your Name Written in Heaven? ...................... 77
12. The Father’s Big House ..................................... 85
13. Is Heaven for Real? ........................................... 95
14. Heaven and the New Jerusalem .......................... 101
15. Imagine There’s a Heaven .................................. 109
16. Will the Dead Rise Again? ................................. 121
17. The Seven Resurrections of the Dead .................. 131
18. Can God Resurrect a Cremated Body? ................. 139
19. Was John Lennon Right About Hell? ................. 149
20. What Jesus Said About Hell ............................... 159
21. The Believer’s Day of Reward ............................ 169
22. Angels Watching Over Us .................................. 179
23. Angels in the Realms of Glory and Beyond .......... 189
24. Eternity for Those Who Can’t Believe ................. 197

An Afterword About the Afterlife .............................. 207
Notes .......................................................... 213
About the Author .................................................. 217
Introduction

Do you love a good mystery?

Suspense, enigmatic characters, and puzzling plot lines keep readers turning the page of a good mystery novel.

Real-life mysteries interest us too. Like whatever happened to Jimmy Hoffa? What about the fate of Amelia Earhart? What is Stonehenge all about? Area 51? Do UFOs exist? What's up with the Bermuda Triangle? Is Bigfoot just a myth? What significance does the Shroud of Turin hold?

All these mysteries and more arouse our curiosity precisely because they are mysteries.

For many people, the afterlife is fraught with mystery. I assume because you're reading this book, that's true of you. You, like most of us, possess a curiosity about life after death. Does it exist, and if it does, what can we expect the moment our heart stops beating?

Are heaven and hell real places or old concepts hanging over from a less-enlightened era? Are we reincarnated? Or is the grave the end of it all and there is no such thing as an afterlife? There's no shortage of speculation about the afterlife for the same reason there's no shortage of interest in the subject. Books have been written about it, sermons
preached about it, movies filmed about it. All this, even though the subject of death still makes us uncomfortable and discussing it remains taboo. Want to empty a room? Just start a conversation about death.

The fact remains death is a mystery. We often hear the phrase “God works in mysterious ways.” While that’s true, those words do not appear anywhere in the Bible. They belong with other chapter-and-verse myths like “God helps those who help themselves” and “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” The Bible does say, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God is a revealer of secrets and mysteries. He has revealed the mystery of life, eternity, and Himself through creation, in our conscience, within the words of Scripture, and through His Son Jesus Christ. God’s revelation always trumps human speculation, which is why any conjecture about eternal things based on human reason and personal experience is suspect. However, what God has revealed “belongs to us and to our children forever.” This includes the amazing secrets of the afterlife.

In the Bible, a “mystery” is something that was once concealed but is now revealed. God alone chooses what to reveal and what to conceal until a later time. The word “mystery” appears thirty times in the pages of holy writ, especially in the inspired writings of the apostle Paul, which are found in the New Testament. For example, he mentions:

- The mystery of godliness (1 Timothy 3:16)
- The mystery of Israel’s salvation (Romans 11:25)
- The mystery of Christ’s Second Coming (1 Corinthians 15:51)
- The mystery of the gospel (Ephesians 3:6; 6:19)
- The mystery of Christ (Ephesians 3:4; Colossians 4:3)
- The mystery of the church (Ephesians 5:32)
- The mystery of God’s will (Ephesians 1:9)
- The mystery of marriage (Ephesians 5:31-32)
- The mystery of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:7)
Introduction

Of course, nothing is more mysterious to us than what happens moments after we die. Death eventually touches us all. For this reason we're curious, and for this reason God has chosen to reveal aspects of the afterlife that are vital for us to know.

The book you're holding in your hands, Mysteries of the Afterlife: Exploring Its Amazing Secrets, attempts to answer those questions and give us a glimpse of these vital aspects.

May God bless you and comfort you as you read.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

(1 Corinthians 15:54-55)
A Traveler’s Guide to Your Final Destination

As a pastor for more than twenty years, I’ve conducted my fair share of funerals. In a weird kind of way, it’s one of my more enjoyable pastoral duties. That might sound strange, but because funerals are for the living not the dead, they provide a rare opportunity to get real with people, remind them of their own mortality, and speak pointedly about eternal things. It’s a moment made for the gospel to shine.

One of the most complicated funerals I ever conducted was for a man I never met. His wife and children attended the church I pastored, but I never saw him. One day he died in a freak accident when his private airplane collided with another one in midair. The accident happened above a major freeway in Houston and made the evening news. Of course the man’s wife and kids were devastated. But her devastation quickly turned to anger when she learned he owned an airplane she knew nothing about. That was only the beginning of her discovery.

For years, the husband convinced his wife they were struggling financially. They lived in a modest home and money was always in short supply. She did the best she could to clothe the kids for school and prepare well-balanced meals for them. But when he died, she learned he had been living a double life and shortchanging his own
family. He actually did quite well in a business he kept from his wife’s knowledge. He gave her enough money to run the modest household but used the rest to collect an array of toys, including airplanes, boats, motorcycles, condos, and more. In a twist of irony, everything now all belonged to her.

I was asked to conduct the funeral along with two other pastors in the community. But for the fact that my role was limited to the reading of Scripture during the service, I might have been tempted to tell one of my favorite stories about two brothers. One died and the other made plans to bury his brother in a manner that honored the way he lived. Both brothers attended the same church. So, the surviving brother went to see their pastor and asked him to conduct the funeral. The pastor said yes. The surviving brother had only one request. “What is it?” the pastor asked. “Please, just tell everyone my brother was a saint!” the man replied.

The unusual request placed the pastor in a difficult position. He paused for a moment and then said, “You know I can’t do that. Everyone knows your brother’s terrible reputation. He was an immoral man, a liar, and a cheat. He cheated on his wife and family, cheated people in business, and he even cheated God out of the tithe. You want me to tell everyone he’s a saint? I can’t do that!”

That’s when the surviving brother reached into his pocket and put a piece of paper on the desk. He then slid it across to the pastor. It was a check for $1 million made out to the church’s building fund. The pastor took one look at all the zeroes on the check and said, “Let me see what I can do,” and proceeded to put the check in a safe place.

The next day the pastor deposited the check in the bank as the first order of business and then drove to the church for the funeral. When it came time to speak about the deceased brother, the silver-tongued orator pulled no punches. He reminded everyone of the man’s terrible reputation, calling him out as a liar and a cheat. He even said with a bit of glee, “I rarely saw him in church and today he meets his Maker!” The pastor glanced over at the surviving brother who by now was extremely agitated. That’s when the pastor made good on his promise. He took a deep breath and said to the congregation with a loud voice, “But compared to his twin brother, this man was a saint!”
Okay, so I resisted the urge to tell that story at the funeral of the man who crashed his plane and duped his family. But when given the opportunity, I do always speak with candor about the final destination of the dead. Nothing does more to make us pause and think about what happens after death than a corpse in a casket. It’s the ultimate object lesson for a preacher. One day every one of us will join with the dearly departed. It may happen suddenly like when an airplane crashes or as a result of a long illness. But make no mistake, your death and mine will arrive. And when it does, do you know your final destination?

The book you hold in your hand is a traveler’s guide from here to eternity. Because life is preparation for eternity, the journey is as important as the destination. Along the way, as many questions exist about the afterlife as there are bodies in graves on planet earth. Some of those questions include:

- What happens sixty seconds after we die?
- Are heaven and hell real places?
- Is there a future resurrection and a final judgment?
- What about reincarnation, near-death experiences, and communicating with the dead?
- Is there a place called purgatory?
- Will we see our dead loved ones again in the hereafter?

And my personal favorite:

- Will my dog Fluffy reunite with me in heaven?

Everything we need to know about death and the afterlife is found in the pages of Scripture. Notice I said need to know, not want to know.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (13:12). The New Living Translation says it this way: “Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything
with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.”

Imagine yourself traveling to New York City in November to watch the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade (something I’ve always wanted to do). You make your way to Fifth Avenue, but the crowds are so large that you get stuck behind an eight-foot-tall wooden fence. Your only view of the parade is through a knothole. Suddenly things go white and then black and then white again. You guess that it might be a giant balloon of Snoopy. That’s sort of how we get to see the afterlife in this life. Sometimes God gives us nothing more than “puzzling reflections in a mirror” in the pages of Scripture. That means He chooses to leave some things in this life unanswered, and so must we as we walk by faith with Him toward our final destination.

In the meantime, we’ll do anything to avoid the subject of death, won’t we? Maybe that’s because we fear the unknown. We live as though the inevitable will never happen to us. Or, perhaps we don’t actually believe in the transcendent nature of life itself. Deep down inside we assume death is the end of all existence, and who wants to talk about that?

My thoughts and conclusions about the afterlife in this book aren’t based on best guesses or on some special revelation I claim to have received, nor from a near-death or out-of-body experience.

Sensational stories about the hereafter abound, and they might create enough curiosity to sell many books, but they provide little more than false hope based on subjective experience. Any glimpse I share into the afterlife comes from the only reliable source we have for understanding things beyond the grave. The source I’m talking about is the Book of all books, the holy Bible.

I begin with the assumption that God exists and He has spoken to us through His written Word. He also came to this earth in the person of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Fully God and fully human at the same time, Jesus lived a perfect life and died a real, painful death for us on a cross in order to fulfill His mission “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The most amazing thing about His life and death is that
He didn’t remain in the grave. As He predicted, and as the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied, He rose from the dead to live forever. Jesus defeated the last enemy called death and laid claim to His own words: “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

What this means to every human being on planet earth is profound: death has lost its sting and there’s hope beyond the grave. If that doesn’t make you shout hallelujah (and keep on reading), I don’t know what will.

**AN UNEXPECTED PASSING**

Recently, we experienced a death in our family. The Jones family dog died of an illness the veterinarian believed was cancer. Mandy was a sweet golden retriever we adopted through a Texas rescue agency when the kids were in grade school. Besides two tadpoles named Tad and Pole, and a goldfish my son named Elephant, we’ve never lost a family pet. It was a sad day and a grievous good-bye.

The doctors and nurses at the veterinary clinic across from a major university near where I live couldn’t have been kinder. When I arrived to have Mandy euthanized, they were as sensitive as any pastor sitting with a family in the ICU. I know euthanasia is the humane thing we do for animals, but something about me deciding the day of Mandy’s death didn’t seem right. And it reinforced for me how wrong euthanasia is as a way to end a human life created in the image of God. As I left the clinic that day, the receptionist handed me what she called a “grief packet.” It was stuffed with materials about “saying good-bye to a friend.”

“Accepting the loss of your pet is necessary,” it began. “Denial of your pain only prolongs the hurt.” Okay, I understand how the death of a pet can cause emotional trauma in our lives. After almost ten years, Mandy really was part of our family. But as I read on, I was motivated even more to write this present book. “Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge. When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and
comfortable.” It goes on to talk about the day when we will reunite with our pets and “cross the Rainbow Bridge together and walk into heaven.”

Warm and sentimental? You bet. Comforting? Sure. But is it true? Where did they come up with the idea of the Rainbow Bridge? Another insert in the packet gave me a clue. It encouraged parents to view *The Lion King* movie with their children and teach them about “the circle of life.” I was disappointed because the last place to form our theology about the afterlife is from a Disney movie. The film might be entertaining, but it reveals little about eternity.

So where are Fluffy, Mandy, Tad and Pole, Elephant, or for that matter, Simba? One of my professors in seminary was often asked this question and always answered it graciously. After waxing eloquently about the distinction between animals and humans who alone are created in the image of God, he would say with a slight smile, “However, if having Fluffy with you in heaven is necessary for your eternal happiness, I’m sure she’ll be there!” My professor would always point us to the more important question related to the eternal destination of image-bearers like you and me.

Whenever I conduct a funeral, or when I read the grief materials handed out by well-meaning veterinarians, I’m reminded of how important it is to approach the subject of the afterlife with biblical accuracy and compassion. And that’s what I promise you in the pages that follow. I’ll do my best to write clearly when the Bible speaks clearly and remain silent when it’s silent. When God’s living and lasting Word leaves us looking through a mirror dimly, I won’t attempt to clarify matters with my own speculation or point you to Hollywood for answers. Fair enough?

Whether you realize it or not, your journey toward your final destination began the day you were born. And the beginning of your discovery of what lies beyond the grave starts right now. I’m honored that you would pick up this traveler’s guide and take the time to read it. I’m also praying that God will use it to awaken your understanding of the destiny for which He created you and the route to getting there.
Aubrey de Gray, age fifty-one, wants to live forever. He believes science is close to solving the problem of death through advanced technology and diet. At his research headquarters in Silicon Valley, de Gray told Charlotte Allen of The Weekly Standard, “Someone is alive right now who is going to live to be 1000 years old.”

Author of the 2007 book Ending Aging, de Gray is one of the leading spokespersons in the live-forever movement, espousing the tantalizing idea that death is not an inevitable part of the human condition. He places aging in the same category as heart disease and cancer—something to be cured. Scientists like de Gray are working hard to extend both the length of human life and its quality.

I have good news for the Cambridge-educated de Gray. He will live forever, but not on planet earth and not through advancements in science and technology. The Bible says we all are created in the image of God, and that makes us eternal beings (Genesis 1:26). Life continues after life here on earth. The question from the Bible’s perspective is where will we spend eternity, in the blissful presence of our Creator or not?

According to the Bible, there was a time when human life on earth
spanned hundreds of years. Noah, for example, lived to the ripe age of nine hundred fifty years, of which three hundred fifty came after the massive flood that covered the earth (Genesis 9:29). His grandfather, Methuselah, holds the world record for the longest living human being, which is why the phrase “as old as Methuselah” is common. Genesis 5:27 says, “Thus all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty-nine years, and he died.” Even Lamech, Noah’s father, lived a relatively short life compared to his contemporaries. He died at the perfect age of seven hundred seventy-seven years.

But even a life span of nearly 1000 years is not forever. God created the first humans with the ability to live forever, placing Adam and Eve in a perfect locale called the Garden of Eden. He gave them everything they needed to enjoy life and each other. The Lord God of heaven and earth even took walks with Adam every day. It was truly paradise! But God also established moral boundaries for the first couple. He told them not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or “you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

It’s uncertain whether Adam understood the true nature of death having never seen a life cut short. But when the first human chose to willfully disobey God’s command, Adam and his wife Eve surely died, just as God said. They died spiritually and eventually physically. Like a Trojan virus attacking a laptop computer, sin corrupted the entire human race. Both our minds and our bodies were affected, shrinking our intellectual capacity and shortening our life span to something less than forever. Worse, sin severed our relationship with a holy God. Since then, “the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:22). We were made for paradise, but we live in paradise lost.

The ten preflood patriarchs from Adam to Noah lived an average of nine hundred twelve years, excluding Enoch who did not die but was translated into God’s presence at age three hundred sixty-five. However, during the 1000 years following the flood, human life spans on earth progressively declined. Abraham, for example, lived for one hundred seventy-five years. Moses lived for one hundred twenty years, which was long for his time. Near the end of his journey on earth, the leader
of the Exodus reflected on the brevity of life by saying, “The years of our lives are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10).

Today, life spans remain about the same. Life expectancy in the United States is around seventy-eight years while globally it’s 67.2 years. People in Japan live the longest but only a few years longer than people in the U.S.² Despite advances in medical science and technology, the process of aging that leads to death is still a mystery, even to researchers like de Gray who are in search of immortality.

Much to de Gray’s dismay and ours, death awaits us. As George Bernard Shaw once observed, “The statistics on death are really quite impressive. One out of one people die.” We are not gods, angels, immortals, or superheroes. However, the Bible does speak of a day when we will shed our mortal clothing for immortality. After waxing eloquently about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul writes these thought-provoking words to the Corinthians,

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:53-57 NASB).

Can we really live forever? The Bible says yes, resoundingly! But not on our own. Not through science and technology. If victory ever swallows up death, it will not happen because of something we did or something new we discovered. Words like “death” and “victory” are possible in the same sentence only because of what Jesus accomplished for us on His cross and through His resurrection. He gives us the victory and removes the sting associated with death. That’s the kind of good news that makes me shout, “Thanks be to God!”