

# Book Review: *Embodied Afterlife: The Hope of an Immediate Resurrection*

Falconer, Robert. 2023. *Embodied Afterlife: The Hope of an Immediate Resurrection*. St. Francis Bay: Stockbridge Books. 229 pp. ISBN 978-0-6397-9183-8. Approx. 207.59 ZAR (10.98 USD). Paperback.

## 1. Introduction

While much of Christianity in the West seems to think of the hope we have in Jesus Christ as dying and going to *heaven*, the biblical reality is much more embodied and physical. Rev. Dr. Robert Falconer seeks to correct this error by presenting a view that is more familiar to reality, more hopeful, and more biblical than what is found pop-theology. Born and raised in South Africa, Falconer holds degrees in architecture and theology. He is husband to Catherine and father to two sons, ordained in the Holy Orders of the Anglican Church, and the Head of Student Research at the South African Theological Seminary. Falconer began his professional work in architecture in Scotland and South Africa, has served as a missionary in Kenya with his wife, and continues as a theologian with interests in Neo-Calvinism, African Philosophical-Theology, Architecture and Theology, Soteriology, and the Resurrection.

## 2. Overview of Embodied Afterlife

The Christian faith is not gnostic but looks to find its *telos* in the bodily resurrection and everlasting life in Christ. The three Ecumenical Creeds, as

guides to the faith, speak to the resurrection but merely say it is coming, not how one would experience it. If one speculates on how the resurrection will take place, it can be an *adiaphoron*<sup>1</sup> so long as it avoids heresy. While it seems that many Christians, if not most, believe there is an intermediate state between death in this world and life in the world to come, Falconer (p. 9) posits an intriguing theory: an immediate bodily resurrection after death. This immediate resurrection is not soul sleep. Rather, it is a transformative experience where one does not experience a time of waiting or incompleteness, but Christ raises them from the dead on the Last Day immediately after they experience a temporal death (pp. 153, 156).

Falconer explores this theory of the immediate resurrection in an ordered and understandable eight-chapter journey. First, he investigates the historical truth about Christ's resurrection. The subject of James Turner's *On the Resurrection of the Dead: A New Metaphysics of Afterlife for Christian Thought* (2019) composes the second chapter. Third, Falconer explores select scriptural passages to understand what happens following death. The fourth chapter investigates whether the theory of the immediate resurrection conforms to the biblical understanding of the embodied afterlife. An interesting, if not controversial, fifth chapter examines near-death experiences. The sixth chapter considers theories on the nature and relation of the body and the soul. Following this is the seventh chapter, a study on time. Finally, Falconer finishes by applying the hope of the resurrection to life. Throughout Falconer's book, there is a humility whereby he shows potential pitfalls with his theory and, perhaps more importantly, a palpable sense of his desire to provide comfort and

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<sup>1</sup> *Adiaphoron* is a theological term describing a biblical matter or custom that is not essential to justification as it is neither spoken for or against in the Scriptures.

hope to those whom death affects and hurts in this life. This book is ultimately pastoral, even while engaging in theological speculation.

Falconer guides his book from a familiar *sola Scriptura* background, working to ground his theory in the words of Scripture while trying to understand whether the Scriptures point to an immediate resurrection or an intermediate state (p. 119). Often, theological speculation is not grounded in the text of Scripture; Falconer's work takes the opposite approach. If Scripture is our normative source for doctrine, Falconer works diligently to speak where Scripture speaks and to hesitate to speak where it does not. After all, "the Bible is far more interested in the resurrection and the new creation than it is [concerned] about heaven" (p. 67). Scripture does not supply a detailed description of heaven—what it is, what it looks like, our experiences of it, and where or when it is. There are references to heaven, some allegorical, some apocalyptic, and none particularly clear. The dearth of knowledge about heaven is not a problem for Christians as our hope is not to wander the heavens as ethereal beings but that we will be resurrected and experience eternal life. This leaves room for speculation, though not contradiction (p. 42). However, what is clear is that every time the Scriptures speak of the resurrection and eternal life, they teach that those who will attain it are beings composed of body and soul, the physical and the spiritual.

Falconer's discussion of the resurrection is rooted in the historical resurrection of Christ (p. 17). Appropriately, to make a case for it he presents arguments for the resurrection and handily disputes any argument against the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In the OT, the firstfruits sacrifice (Lev 23:9–14, Deut 26:1–11) was one in which the first yield of the harvest was offered to thank God for the rest of the harvest. If Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection, then his resurrection is a first *gleaning* of the harvest of those who will be raised after him. In this full harvest, God delights in his

people and blesses the whole resurrection. Understood this way, it is the same harvest—the same resurrection. The only difference between Christ's and the believer's resurrection is the distance in time, as we experience it, though we wait with eager anticipation for the advent of the King.

Falconer summarizes James Turner's *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, rightly asserting, "Turner's excellent work is in analytical theology and is inaccessible to most readers" (p. 12). Turner's work is not the source of Falconer's theory but a validation for exploring it. Turner does not treat the subject of the resurrection from a scriptural basis but through an exercise in philosophy and analytical theology, with theorems and qualitative theological proofs supplying the substance of his argument. This is not to say his work has no value; it is just the opposite. It is fascinating but challenging, and Falconer supplies a good companion to Turner's work.

Falconer robustly deals with personhood and its meaning (p. 161). The resurrection reveals what personhood is. Christ cares about the individual believer and promises them life after death (pp. 54, 149–150). The resurrection includes both our souls and bodies, but what of death and the interim? Falconer posits that "it would be unnatural to exist without some sort of physical [body] ... if we are a unified whole" (p. 162). To answer the question, Falconer argues that there is no separation of the soul and body but an immediate resurrection. While this seems to contradict time in this world, to go from death to whenever the resurrection may come while the rest of the world continues through time, God does not experience time in the same way as the world. So, from the eternal perspective, the person is taken from the closing of their eyes in this life immediately to the next: a theory Falconer calls "truncated time," and yet maintaining their whole person (p. 167).

This idea of time is understood through the lens of the soul/body division. Falconer explores four views on the body/soul division in-depth:

dichotomous, trichotomous, holistically dualistic, or physicalistic. The question of the body/soul division affects personhood in three significant ways in the book: 1) If we are dualistic and there is some intermediate state, it would help better explain near-death experiences. 2) If we are indeed a product of physicalism, then there is no true soul that we would have to wonder about, and thus we would seem to experience an immediate resurrection. 3) If we are genuinely holistic, then the soul and the body cannot be separated, and therefore an immediate resurrection is more preferable and likely than an intermediate state (pp. 146–152).

### **3. Strengths**

*Embodied Afterlife* is thoroughly Christ-centered. One cannot walk away from the book knowing less about Christ. Falconer has striven to ensure that Jesus is front and center in every discussion, constantly pointing to the promises of faith in Christ and the purpose of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, which is to give believers the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting (pp. 10, 17, 115, 153, 183, 201, 218). Falconer offers hope and comfort through a pastoral approach as he points the reader to the cross. The ease of its readability is accessible to the layperson, but it also is written to make the theologian think deeply. His theory is based on Scripture and, as such, deserves to be considered, even if it is a somewhat novel approach. Falconer chose to put forward something that works to overcome the commonly held, generally agreed upon, preconceived notion of the intermediate state. That is a difficult task to accomplish, but Falconer pushes back on this idea and makes one consider whether an immediate resurrection could be true. Whether one agrees with the immediate resurrection or not, Falconer's application chapter offers comfort with the knowledge that a resurrection is coming, which makes a difference in this life.

Falconer scripturally addresses his argument for an immediate resurrection best in his discussion on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (esp. 14b), where Paul speaks of God sending those who had fallen asleep with Christ (pp. 111–114). While an intermediate state could address this through the commonly known picture of the warriors returning with their king and the city streaming out to meet him in victory, it is also a difficult passage to understand. Thus, Falconer posits his theory, and, with his treatment, one must admit it could be true. It is no wonder the Thessalonians themselves had difficulty understanding the end times.

### **4. Weaknesses**

While arguing for the immediate resurrection of the believer, Falconer often deals humbly with the Scriptures, but without exploring all the potential meanings of a passage. Admitting bias, I hold to the belief of an intermediate state, and I found that, as Falconer stated his conclusions, I wanted more of his arguments. One senses James Turner's influence throughout Falconer's exploration, to the point where Turner's analytical argument of the immediate resurrection becomes a governing presumption as Falconer presents his argument. So then, having the immediate resurrection presumed from Turner's analysis almost distracts from the conversation and leads one to desire more of the argument. This desire is especially true in the chapter on near-death experiences, where one could envision multiple conclusions regarding the presented data. To that end, despite admitting where it may fall short, the primary theory presented and assumed was that of the immediate resurrection to the detriment of presenting the fullness of other arguments. While investigating each argument that might contradict Falconer's idea would be welcomed, it would likely be out of the scope of his book.

There is another hypothesis upon which Falconer relies to prove his own. Falconer holds that a person is not complete if the body and

soul are separated. Thus, if there were an intermediate state, the soul of a person would feel that this was an imperfect state to be in, thus negating the holiness and perfection that Scripture ascribes to the person of faith, especially following their earthly death (p. 106). Related to this, Falconer wonders why there should be a physical paradise with an embodied resurrection if it is satisfying that a disembodied existence in heaven awaits believers after the resurrection (p. 53). The theory Falconer presents is complicated as Scripture does not explicitly say this separation is an issue nor that waiting for the resurrection is satisfying in the way contemporary Christianity envisions it.

This *incomplete* idea of Falconer's theory could be rebutted in at least two ways. One is by considering the martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6:9. John sees only their souls and, while they cry out for vengeance, there is nothing about missing their bodies or that it serves as an impediment to participating in the divine throne room activity around God. Another point is that incompleteness does not negate personhood or imply grief (p. 153). Could it not be just as likely that one has the anticipation of being reunited, like a husband, alone at home, happily anticipating his wife's momentary return? His thought is not that he is incomplete but that he is excited to see her again. Sympathizing with the idea that Falconer sees this incompleteness as imperfection and knowing the result of sin is death that leads to grief in this life, one must wonder how that separation will appear on the other side if it is true that there is an intermediate state.

## 5. Conclusion

Falconer's *Embodied Afterlife* is an intriguing journey through an unfamiliar concept with familiar components. I offer a strange commendation in praise of it: Falconer presents the idea of an immediate resurrection, contradicting a widely held belief, without delving into

the realm of heresy. He keeps his speculation solely in the realm of an *adiaphoron*, and that is because he is Christ-centered, scriptural, and pastoral—his main goal is to convey hope. He approaches his theory humbly, admitting he could be wrong even while respectfully hoping that others are wrong. Yet he is comforted by his own conviction. For those who want an introduction to the theory of an immediate resurrection without being bogged down in Turner's analytical approach, this book allows them to explore that approach. While Falconer's book will make theological academicians consider the theory, they may find some of the argumentation and assumptions in the book lacking. Despite this, they will find a thoughtful conversation encouraging them to consider how to explain their own beliefs. In this book, Falconer proves that one can posit an idea that stands against a deeply held belief, such as an intermediate state, and still walk away with the reader knowing the comfort of the resurrection and having their grasp of Christ strengthened.

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## Works Cited

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