

A God's-Eye View of Ghosts*

By Reed DePace and Paige Britton

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5b)

It's that time of year again...In Pennsylvania's lush Lancaster County, where Paige lives, the mums are a blaze of glory and the corn is down, revealing previously hidden vistas and sometimes a tumbled crop of jack-o-lanterns-to-be. One family farm in the area boasts an unusual, though popular, crop this season: tellingly titled "Field of Screams," its haunts and grisly horrors (all provided by volunteer recruits) offer the perfect venue for kids of all ages to prolong the fright party.

In Reed's neck of the woods, the heart of the Bible belt, Montgomery, Alabama, the same seasonal celebration of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins, is well under way. Some local churches are offering their annual "haunted house" witnessing attraction, with enough technical proficiency and realistic presentation to make some movie directors jealous. The fascination with the spiritual realm, the occult and its practices is rather common in our culture.

Many of us, well-trained in the school of chills and thrills, find something almost delicious in scaring ourselves silly like this. But if we are honest with ourselves, especially in the wee small hours, the thought that ghosts and ghouls might target *our* bedroom to haunt tonight is something other than entertaining. In these moments we come closest to the experience of our ancestors, who were bound all their lives not only by their fear of death, but also by their fear of *the dead*.

What shall we make of the claims of ghost stories and ghost hunters, of mediums and psychics, of the makers of movies and the guides of ghost tours? Do the disembodied souls of the dead return to the physical realm, to be seen by the living? Can we expect our dear departed to communicate to us from "beyond the grave"? Need we fear that they will?

The answers you get, of course, depend on whom you ask. Here Reed, a Reformed pastor, and Paige, a Reformed writer and teacher, offer a God's-eye view of ghosts.¹ We hope to show that the biblical worldview, or the "big picture" of reality provided by the Bible, not only teaches God's purposes and plans for the living and the dead, but also explains why so many people hold fast to a contrary view and vehemently deny the biblical perspective.

* For the sake of smoother reading, biblical references (that is, the "addresses" of biblical quotes) have been placed in the end notes, along with phrases from the quotation for easy identification. All biblical quotes in this article are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

If you are approaching this topic and article with skepticism towards anything Christian, we invite you to at least listen to the coherent and soberly joyous report about reality offered by the Christian Scriptures. On the other hand, if you are reading this as a Christian believer, we urge you to consider in what ways the culture of the “fright party” has infiltrated your beliefs, so that you may more clearly draw the line between God’s truth and the devil’s lies.

When Worldviews Collide

In the middle of his mission to bring the Christian message to the ends of the known world, the Apostle Paul, himself a surprise witness for the defense, offered this summary of the Christian worldview to a group of curious Athenian philosophers:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him...

“Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”²

Here Paul grounds his message in the goodness of creation, made by a personal, relational, omnipotent and all-knowing Deity. But he also acknowledges the warped worship offered by rebellious minds; and he ends with a startling reference to physical *re*-creation and a stern warning of judgment. What was created right had gone wrong – but it was to be set right once more by the one man among all men who had been *raised from the dead*.

At this Paul’s listeners scoffed, mocking him for the insane suggestion that death could or would reverse itself into physical life. Why, everybody knew this never had happened, nor ever would! Material existence was inferior anyway, in their philosophical scheme of things; how on earth could anybody’s physical resurrection be construed as *good* news? We can almost hear the violent clash as these worldviews collided.

Significantly, it was at the question of death and the afterlife that the Athenians balked. A nerve was touched, a red flag raised: *we have our story, and we're sticking to it*. But who, when it comes right down to it, actually has the story of death straight? Who could, except someone with a God's-eye view?

Think of the many answers that have been given over the course of civilization to the looming question mark of death. Did the treasures and furniture (and sometimes servants) buried with the ancient kings *really* benefit them in the next world, or in the end were these things just lucky breaks for tomb robbers and archaeologists (and rotten luck for the sacrificed servants)? Do the ancestors of the Far East *really* appreciate the aroma of the food served to them at their shrines? Do the murdered dead *really* haunt the site of their demise, restless until avenged?

More specifically, consider the assumptions behind mediumistic or spiritist practices, including the claim of channeling the spirits of the departed so they may communicate with the living. Elaborate schemes of spiritual evolution have been proposed over the centuries, sometimes including the idea of reincarnation and past lives. In these versions of reality, humanity perpetually cycles through physical and non-physical existence, and those in one plane or sphere might just reach out to friends (or enemies) in another. Add to this the understandable human yearning to reconnect with the loved ones we have lost to death, and it is easy to see how such a worldview could gain a foothold in our minds, gaining legitimacy in proportion to our need – or our terror.

Yet not unlike idols of “gold and silver and stone...fashioned by the art and imagination of man,” all merely human conceptions of death and its aftermath *could* only be a combination of wishful thinking, imagination and fear. For who could *really* know the truth about life or death, but God alone?

A God's-Eye View

Like Paul at the Areopagus, the rest of the Bible is unapologetically straightforward about the way things are set up in the universe: God made it, God owns it, God calls the shots.³ He is in charge of everything, even death. Incredibly, the Bible also informs us that the man from heaven, God's Son Jesus the Nazarene, laid down his life only to take it up again.⁴ And those who belong to him, because they have believed God's version of things, are said to have “already passed from death to life,” and will be “raised up on the last day.”⁵ “Whoever believes in Me,” says Jesus to Martha as she mourns for her brother, “though he die, yet shall he live.”⁶ This is a stunning, breathtaking claim: through this man Jesus, death works backward!

But there is another side to the story that is God's story: through this same man Jesus, the world will be *judged*.⁷ Paul's message to the Athenians is not necessarily a

“happily-ever-after.” Idolatry is identified as ignorance, and repentance is called for. Elsewhere Paul writes to Christian friends to explain that although humanity *knew* God,

they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.⁸

This trading of light for dark, and of understanding for foolishness, reflects the rebellion inherent in human hearts since the day the serpent asked, “Did God *really* say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” From just past the beginning, we have been inclined to doubt God’s story and make up our own. What theologians call “original sin” is, in part, this propensity to listen to and invent other versions of reality, placing a mask of life on the face of death:⁹ “There is no such thing as sin, no such thing as judgment! *You will not surely die* – you’ll just enjoy disembodied existence on a higher spiritual plane!”¹⁰

But if God made all things, then God owns them, and God calls the shots. So here is what he has revealed to us in the Bible about death and the dead:

- Death is paid out for rebellion and sin, no exceptions (and everybody *deserves* these wages, no exceptions!).¹¹
- Death is the portal to a courtroom, not an inevitable gateway to adventure (whether of future reincarnation or disembodied freewheeling): “...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,” as one New Testament writer explains.¹²
- Death permanently cuts off contact with the world of the living. In Job’s words, “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him anymore.”¹³
- Death, like life, is under God’s control. As we heard from Paul, the God who “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” also planned their lifespans and locales. “All the days ordained for me were written in your book, before one of them came to be,” writes King David.¹⁴ There is no sense here that God might have overlooked anybody’s details, so that angry or friendly ghosts might somehow slip through the cracks, returning either to harass or to fellowship with the living.

- Death, however, is not a *normal* state of affairs. It is part of the brokenness of the good creation, ushered in by the first man, Adam.¹⁵ It is right to grieve death and be troubled by it, as Jesus showed by example at the tomb of Lazarus.¹⁶
- Death is itself conquered by the death and resurrection of Jesus – but only for those who surrender to him on God’s terms. While they must meet with their own physical deaths, believers in Jesus need not fear the judgment that follows, since they will be found righteous in their Savior. And because Christ has already “tasted death” for them, this final reality is actually a gracious friend who unites them with their Lord.¹⁷
- In the interim between Jesus’ first and second coming, death leads to a *temporary* separation between body and soul (or spirit). Rather than aimless, disembodied floating or “soul sleep,” Paul ascribes to the Christian believer conscious, knowledgeable fellowship with the Lord during the interim before the last day. The corollary to this is conscious, knowledgeable torment for those who die under God’s wrath. In neither case is the temporarily disembodied soul either bereft of heavenly fellowship (in the one case) or free to wander (in the other).¹⁸
- The end of the story is bodily resurrection – for all people! – followed by the final judgment. Bodily existence will then continue, whether in the New Heavens and the New Earth, or in Hell, the place of physical torment.¹⁹
- Death, as the final enemy, will then die; it will have no place in the New Creation.²⁰

Biblical Puzzlers

Readers with some knowledge of the biblical storyline may already have thought up a list of exceptions to the claim made above, that the dead never appear to the living. “What about Saul’s visit to the witch?” you ask; and, “What about the Transfiguration?”

These are relevant examples to bring up, although they say more about who is in charge of the universe than they do about ghostly visitors. A brief look at these passages will confirm that any incidental information on the afterlife that we might try to gain from the text pales in comparison with the *purpose* of the accounts. Both the earthly authors and the Heavenly One are concerned to establish God’s and Christ’s authority in these scenes, not to teach the reader anything about the world of the dead.

In the first instance, the already-disgraced King Saul seeks the forbidden help of a medium to try to contact his late mentor, the prophet Samuel. It's worth a peek at the passage just to register the medium's reaction to her unexpected success:

So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you."

The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" But Saul swore to her by the LORD, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing."

Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul."²¹

Notice that the witch is used to doing *something*. Whether she would typically just deceive her clients or actually managed to have some sort of apparitions appear is not stated. What *is* stated is that when she saw Samuel – a disembodied spirit – she recognized him for who and what he was. Her shock shows that she was not used to calling up from the dead actual disembodied human spirits. Clearly, someone else is in control of this situation! Saul gets what he asked for – in the form of God's rejection, underlined and boldfaced, via the Lord's servant Samuel; but we cannot generalize from this scene to a rule about the success of mediums or the visits of ghosts. God merely used unusual means to accomplish his purpose at this moment in salvation history.

Similarly, the significance of the Transfiguration is in the uniqueness of the event, not its precedence for ghostly appearances. Here three disciples witness a conversation between Jesus, Elijah, and Moses, in a vision of glory atop a mountain.²² We would be as mistaken as Peter (who started talking about tents) if we focused on the conundrum of how these men of the past could appear as visible and recognizable figures before the final resurrection. Suffice it to say that God intended for the disciples to receive, boldfaced and underlined, the message that "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." The focus is on Jesus' identity and superiority, not on God's arrangements for his translated and departed saints.²³ Again, God merely used unusual means to accomplish his purpose at this moment in salvation history.

Neither of these passages actually supports the popular notion that ghosts, disembodied souls of the dead, actually do return to earth where they can be seen by the living. Both passages are given as exceptions to the ordinary rules of earthly existence, *with the exceptions being explicitly under God's control to proclaim the gospel*. Neither, therefore,

can be taken as the normal course of events. They offer no justification for the popular notion of the souls of the dead appearing to the eyes of the living.

A God's-Eye View of Ghost Sightings

So what about people who insist they have seen a ghost? What about people who say they have unmistakably seen departed loved ones, murder victims, former U.S. Presidents, etc.? How does their experience square with what the Bible teaches about the souls of the dead not returning to earth?

Well, in some situations we can determine that they really didn't see anything at all. What they have reported may be due to the influence of a substance (e.g., alcohol, hallucinogenic drugs, etc.). In some cases, a person may have some physiological illness that results in them "seeing things," in other words, hallucinating. Such folks' brains register that they have seen something, but this is due to a defect in their mental functions, not due to the real presence of any ghosts.

In some cases, it may simply be that a person has a very active imagination. This, coupled with sufficient desire and sensory stimulus, may result in them imagining that they've seen something. How many friends do you know who, after watching a scary movie, swear they saw something in the dark hallway as they crept in fear towards their bedroom? And couldn't longing for a loved one who has died bring a remembered face to mind, as real as life?

These explanations notwithstanding, we do not want to discount the possibility that a reliable witness actually did see some sort of immaterial apparition, and that such an appearance might have taken on the form of a departed loved one, a classical ghost-sighting. How do these kinds of sightings fit with the Bible's teaching?

For an answer, take a look at 2 Cor. 11:14-15. In the immediate context Paul is warning the Corinthian believers about their continued problem of listening to men who claim to be apostles, but who taught a false gospel. He makes a comparison between Satan and these false apostles. His point is simple: *if Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light, so can his servants.*

This is a very interesting "Halloween" costume for Satan to don. In this costume, Satan disguises himself as one who serves the Lord of Light, even Jesus Christ. Now, while this passage is specifically talking about certain men who disguised themselves as apostles, Paul's point also applies to Satan's lesser servants, the demons who serve him.²⁴ If their lord uses such disguises to trick men into believing his lies, we can expect that his servant-demons may do likewise. Of course, there is no guarantee that this is actually what has

happened when a person witnesses something unusual and “ghostly.” Rather, it provides a biblical framework for determining what a person *may* have seen.

So if someone insists they saw their favorite dead aunt sitting on the edge of the bed down the hall, what should we say? First we should run through all the possible natural explanations, since they may simply be fooling themselves.

Yet if none of these ordinary explanations suffice to prove that they really did not see anything, then *the Bible allows us only one other explanation* – the person saw a demon disguised as their loved one. It serves Satan’s deceptive purposes to show them such a lie, and in this way lead them from a reliance on Christ and his gospel into the darkness of the occult.²⁵ It is not for nothing that God forbids his people to have anything to do with such things!²⁶

When Worldviews Combine

Given our stubborn insistence that we can tell the story better than God, plus the devil’s fiendish desire to lead us down the garden path to exactly the wrong tree, it’s no wonder that even Christians are so easily influenced by the world’s view of “ghoulies and ghosties...and things that go bump in the night.” We *expect* weird things to happen in the “Twilight Zone,” though we also remember that Casper is a *friendly* ghost. We let a movie scare us silly, then wish we weren’t in the house alone. And we might think nothing odd of an announcement in the church bulletin advertising a local ghost tour, or the youth group’s trip to the Field of Screams.²⁷

The shakier we are on the gospel of Christ and the Word of God, the more easily will our thinking be shaped by the worldview of the “fright party.” We will forget that God is in charge of every detail of life and death; that the story of sin and a Savior means that souls are judged, rather than free to wander after death; and that a celebration of Satan’s dark kingdom is completely out of keeping for the Children of Light.²⁸ We will also lose sight of Christ’s authority over the devil and his servants, so that we find ourselves increasingly slipping into bondage to the fear of death and of (what we suppose to be) *the dead*.

The disciples, though they were part of the community of Israel who should have known better, sometimes let slip their superstitious upbringing. Once, when they were crossing a rough sea towards dawn, they became terrified at the sight of a *ghost* walking on the water! And again, when an old friend they knew to be certainly dead suddenly showed up in their locked dining room, it was the assumption that they were seeing a *ghost* that made their jaws drop and their eyes pop!²⁹

Jesus kept setting their thinking straight, as he sets ours straight now. “It is I,” he said; “don’t be afraid!” He who tasted death for his people, and who destroyed the one who

held the power of the fear of death, has delivered us into the Kingdom of the Living. So why should we go on mixing God's view of reality with the devil's and the world's, as if we could "look for the living among the dead"? Let's get straight the *true* story of death, and instead look to the One through whom we have already passed through death, and into the light of life.³⁰

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Soli Deo Gloria

¹ In this use, "Reformed" refers to the fact that we both affirm a particular theological "family" of thought, having become convinced that this expression of the Christian faith most accurately reflects what is taught in the Bible. Summaries of Reformed thought can be found in documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism.

² *Paul in Athens*: You can read about this encounter in **Acts 17:16-34**. The verses quoted here are **17:24-27, 29-31**.

³ *God made it...God calls the shots*: A good place to begin investigating these claims is **Genesis 1-3**.

⁴ *Jesus laid down his life, only to take it up again*: Jesus discusses this idea in **John 10**.

⁵ *Already passed from death to life*: See **John 5:24**...*Raised up on the last day*: A frequent theme in Jesus' speeches in the book of John (see, e.g., **John 5:19-24; 6:41-58**).

⁶ Read about the raising of Lazarus in **John 11**.

⁷ *Jesus the Judge of the world*: See, e.g., **Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:22-29; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Acts 10:34-43**.

⁸ *"...their foolish hearts were darkened"*: Read more of Paul's thoughts on this in **Romans 1:18-32**. The verses quoted here are **1:21-23**.

⁹ *Placing a mask of life on the face of death*: A nod to Rich Mullins, "Damascus Road," from *Brother's Keeper*, 1995.

¹⁰ *"Did God really say..."* and *"You will not surely die"* were Satan's words in the drama of **Genesis 3**.

¹¹ *Death as wages that everyone deserves*: See **Genesis 2:16-17, Gen. 3, Romans 6:23** and all of **Romans 3**.

¹² *"It is appointed for a man to die once"*: **Hebrews 9:27**

¹³ *"...he returns no more to his house..."*: **Job 7:9-10**...*Interaction cut off*: In a parable involving figures in the afterlife (**Luke 16:22-31**; see note 18 below), Jesus suggests that someone returning from the world of the dead to warn the living about what awaits them is useless if people haven't paid attention to God's Word in the first place: *"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead"* (**Luke 16:31**). God's way to people's hearts through his Word, preached and written, not through messengers from the dead. (Note, though, that the suggested "return" in this passage is not characterized as ghostly, but as an actual resurrection, predicting Jesus' own resurrection and the continued stubbornness of the Jewish leaders towards the gospel.)

¹⁴ *"All the days ordained for me"*: See **Psalms 139**.

¹⁵ *Death ushered in by Adam*: See Paul's discussion in **Romans 5:12-21**.

¹⁶ *Jesus grieves at the tomb of Lazarus*: Read this story in **John 11**.

¹⁷ *Death conquered*: See **Romans 6:8-11; Acts 2:22-24; 2 Timothy 1:8-12**...*Surrender on God's terms*: See, for starters, the book of John, esp. **John 1:12-13; 3:16**...*No fear of judgment*: See **John 5:22-24; Galatians 2:20; Romans 8:1-4**...*Christ "tasted death" for us*: **Hebrews 2:9**...*Believers united with the Lord at death*: See **Luke 23:39-43; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14; 2 Cor. 5:1-10**. (The word "Christ" is not Jesus' last name, although it is often used in place of or with his name. It is a title designating him the true Savior who was prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. "Christ" is the Greek rendering of the idea of "anointed one," which in Hebrew is "Messiah.")

¹⁸ *Conscious, knowledgeable presence with the Lord at death:* See **Luke 23:39-43; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14; 2 Cor. 5:1-10**. *Corollary:* A story told by Jesus in **Luke 16:22-31**, though a stylized “afterlife” tale (i.e., its details are not necessarily to be taken literally; its purpose is to make a point), also indicates that God fixes one’s appropriate placement after death, and that there is conscious, knowledgeable experience either way. The Catholic idea of Purgatory is found nowhere in the Bible, and contradicts the message of Christ’s finished work on our behalf.

¹⁹ *For Jesus the Judge of the world:* See, e.g., **Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:22-29; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Acts 10:34-43...For the final judgment scene, and the New Heavens and New Earth: See **Revelation 20:11-22:21**.**

²⁰ *Death will die:* See **1 Corinthians 15:26; Revelation 21:1-4**.

²¹ *Saul and the Witch of Endor:* **1 Samuel 28:8-12**.

²² *The Transfiguration:* Read this story in **Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; and Luke 9:28-36**.

²³ *“Translated”:* in this use, “caught up bodily to the heavenly realms.” Elijah did not physically die, but was *translated* to God’s realm (see **2 Kings 2**)...*“Saints”:* in biblical usage, “Christian believers.” Believers are *holy* (the root word behind the Greek word for “saints”) because they are *set apart* by God, as in the OT priests and temple furniture were also set apart for holy service. In contrast to the Catholic view of saints, the biblical view includes believers who are not always very “saintly”! Being “set apart” is the *beginning* of life in Christ; being made increasingly like Jesus in our character is the ongoing *process*, only to be completed when we are finally with him.

²⁴ See **Ephesians 2:2; 6:12**.

²⁵ *Satan as a liar:* Jesus has a lot to say about this in **John 8:39-47**.

²⁶ *God forbids the practice of the dark arts, sorcery, and necromancy (literally the conjuring of the spirits of the dead) in both the Old and New Testaments.* See, e.g., **Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Isaiah 8:19; Acts 19:18-19; Revelation 21:8**.

²⁷ No kidding – true stories from Paige’s neighborhood, though not her PCA church!!

²⁸ *Darkness vs. Light:* See especially the book of **John** for this theme...*Children of Light:* The same contrast between light and dark is used by Paul in **Ephesians 5:1-14**.

²⁹ *Jesus walks on water:* Read this story in **Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52...Jesus appears in the locked room: Read this story in **Luke 24:36-43**.**

³⁰ *Already passed through death:* **John 5:24; Romans 6:1-14; Ephesians 2:1-10...The light of life: **John 8:12**.**