

# 4 ISSUE 3: WE ARE REINCARNATED BEINGS

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## AKBAR'S STORY

*I am an “outcaste” or “untouchable.” As an “outcaste” I rank below the Sudras, who are the slaves and servants—the lowest status level in the Hindu four-caste system. Untouchables or outcastes, such as myself are called “Pariahs.” We belong to no caste at all. I am so despised that if my shadow falls upon the food of a caste man while he is eating, the food is considered defiled and is thrown away. My miserable existence as an outcaste is the result of my karma in a previous life. I have reaped what I have sown. The only way I can improve my status is to be reborn in a higher caste by living righteously and obeying caste rules in this life. I do not remember my past life, but I must have been a cruel, undisciplined person to have deserved being born an untouchable in this life. It will take me many reincarnations to achieve liberation from this wheel of existence.*

### TOPICS

*New Age Ideas of Reincarnation*

*Your Worldview on Human Nature*

*Biblical Teaching about Human Nature*

## DESCRIBING YOUR WORLDVIEW . . .

### WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS CONCERNING HUMAN NATURE?

In conjunction with Lesson 4, consider the following questions which will help you to identify and describe your beliefs concerning human nature, another of the five components of a well-rounded worldview. Use your notebook to write your impressions in answer to each of these questions, and explain your answers.

1. Are humans merely physical beings and the product of evolutionary process, or are they complex created beings possessing body, soul, and spirit?
2. What is the human nature like?
3. Are humans determined, or free?
4. Is this life all there is?
5. Do humans survive after death?
6. Will human beings spend eternity in heaven? In hell?

## NEW AGE IDEAS OF REINCARNATION

You may find it strange that we have introduced this lesson with the story of Akbar, an *outcaste* from India who was born before the caste system was outlawed in India. But his story provides us with the background from which we will look at the modern-day belief in reincarnation frequently associated with the New Age worldview.

Surprisingly, while belief in reincarnation and its related belief, the law of *karma* or *deed*, has been foundational in the Hindu belief system, the hereditary caste system was later originated by Hindu priests in an effort to prevent the intermingling of races. The Hindu belief in reincarnation and the law of karma were used by priests to justify the rank of each person in the system.<sup>16</sup> The law of karma, often described as “what you sow, you will reap,” justified the idea that a person was born into a certain caste, high or low, as the result of the previous life he or she had lived. The only way to rise to a higher caste in the next life—and eventually to be liberated from the “wheel of life” and be reunited with

Brahman—was to live righteously and obey caste rules. The following quotation further explains this belief:

According to Hinduism, the ultimate goal of man's soul is union with Brahman, which is bliss beyond change or pain. But the soul cannot achieve this goal in one lifetime. The religion . . . claims that the soul is not born and does not die. It passes from body to body until it becomes pure enough to be reunited with Brahman. . . . When the soul achieves union with Brahman, karma no longer operates. The soul is then liberated from the cycles of birth and death.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to understand this background in order to grasp the significance of reincarnation and karma in the New Age worldview and the extent to which Eastern mysticism has penetrated Western thought. Just as in Hindu thought the individual soul (Atman) progresses in the wheel of existence through many reincarnations until it achieves union with Brahman, so in the New Age worldview one's soul may progress through many reincarnations until one achieves the "higher consciousness" of self or the realization of self-perfection. At that time, the individual soul becomes part of the impersonal One or God. (We will look at the New Age view of God in Lesson 6.)

If your view of human nature includes the New Age belief in reincarnation, you probably accept the following ideas:

1. *Our souls have many lives.* According to this idea, the soul is eternal and is ever striving to achieve perfection or oneness with the One (the impersonal divine Source known as God). Living out many lives is necessary for the development of the soul, because perfection cannot be achieved in a single lifetime.

2. *Each reincarnation is the result of karma.* This is sometimes called the "law of cause and effect," that is, "whatever you sow, you will reap." A well-known, modern-day astrologer named Zolar gives us this updated explanation of *karma* by author William Judge:

*Karma* is the name adopted by theosophists of the nineteenth century for one of the most important laws of nature. Ceaseless in its operation, it bears alike upon planets, systems of planets, races, nations, families, and individuals. It is the twin doctrine to reincarnation. So inextricably interlaced are these two laws that it is impossible to properly consider one apart from the

other. No spot or being in the universe is exempt from the operation of Karma, but all are under its sway, punished for error by it yet beneficently led on, through discipline, rest and reward, to the distant heights of perfection. It is a law so comprehensive in its sweep, embracing at once our physical and our moral being, that it is only by paraphrase and copious explanation one can convey its meaning in English. For that reason the Sanskrit term *Karma* was adopted to designate it.<sup>18</sup>

Zolar adds, “According to the teachings of theosophy it is not our ‘deeds’ but rather the ‘thoughts’ that precede them that make, or break, our karma and determine the circumstance of this and our next incarnation.”<sup>19</sup>

*Theosophy* is the teaching of a movement that originated in the United States in 1875 which follows chiefly Buddhist and Brahmanic theories of pantheistic evolution and reincarnation. According to the theosophist’s explanation of *karma*, it is a divine law that, in essence, judges the morality of human behavior and determines whether, in one’s next life, one will be rewarded for one’s past behavior and be reborn to a better life than the preceding one, or be punished and reincarnated into a more difficult level of life the next time around. Since we choose how we will live in this life, *we are responsible for our own level of reincarnation.*

3. *Reincarnation explains the problem of evil.* This is a very important aspect of reincarnation for those who accept it as true. With respect to good and evil, it is typical for some New Agers to say, “There’s no such thing as good and evil, there is only ignorance.” Those who accept the teaching of reincarnation, however, might say, “Karma is the answer to good and evil. An evil person has a bad karma and will be punished in his or her next reincarnation, while a good person will be rewarded.” Some carry this idea further and suggest that if, for example, a child dies from a blow to the head, perhaps that child (that is, the soul) in its previous life caused the violent, untimely death of other people. Nash observes:

Once one abandons a worldview in which one’s existence involves a relationship with a personal God, theories of reincarnation and karma offer “explanations” for many of life’s negativities and inequalities. We are where we are now because of things that happened to us in the earlier, impersonal wheel of existence.<sup>20</sup>

4. *Reincarnation explains many of the world's mysteries.* Most of the information New Agers have about reincarnation and karma seems to be given through channelers. The “entities” who speak through the channelers are disembodied “souls,” and some of them are said to have lived as humans far in the ancient past. They often reveal “mysteries” of the universe. For example, they may reveal what they claim is information about other planets or extraterrestrials that could not otherwise be known. They also tell inquiring people, through their channelers, about the past lives these people have led, and this gives the people insight into their personal karma.

5. *The Bible teaches reincarnation.* In his *Book of Reincarnation*, Zolar devotes two chapters to “hints at reincarnation” in the Old and New Testaments. The passages cited in the Old Testament are Genesis 28, Ecclesiastes 1:4,9–11, Jeremiah 1:4,5, and Proverbs 8:22–31. To show that Jesus taught reincarnation, he cites Matthew 16:13–16; 17:10–13; John 8:56–58; 9:1,2; and Revelation 3:12.

Bible scholars who study these passages in their historical and literary context using proven exegetical methods easily disprove the claims that these passages hint at reincarnation. For example, John 8:56–58 is clearly understood by Christians as a declaration by Jesus that He is the eternal Son of God, “very God of very God.” However, for those who claim that Jesus was simply a man who led the way in showing other people how to realize their full spiritual potential and achieve “Christ-consciousness,” this passage is interpreted as a statement by Jesus that He lived before Abraham and was reincarnated.

6. *“Deja-vu” and “child prodigy” are proofs of reincarnation.* Those who believe in reincarnation also support their belief by giving as an example the *deja-vu* experience of many people. This is an overwhelming impression, when you are going through a given experience, that you have had that experience before, even though you feel certain you have not had actual prior experience of it in this lifetime. Another example is that of the child prodigy who can play *Beethoven* or other classical music perfectly at the age of five. How could this be, unless the child mastered it in a previous existence?

## YOUR WORLDVIEW ON HUMAN NATURE

You can see from our discussion thus far that a belief in reincarnation has a profound impact on how one views human nature. For example, such a view diminishes the individual life to be merely the means for the eternal soul to progress until it loses its own personal identity and becomes one with the impersonal One. Humans are simply physical beings who house an eternal soul and whose physical life and status are the result of karmic consequences. One's human existence takes the form determined by one's karma, and all of life is shaped by one's understanding of the need to practice discipline and work at achieving a higher level of consciousness in order to improve one's karma for the next life. The level of each life is determined by one's previous karma. One's physical life ends with death, but the soul survives and continues in repeated cycles of physical life and death until it reaches perfection. There is no heaven or hell, only a final state of perfection or oneness with the One.

Some questions arise from all of this: If the human's highest goal is perfection and unity with the impersonal One, who judges one's moral behavior and who determines the status of one's reincarnation? How could an *impersonal* Higher Source care about moral behavior and imperfections anyway? An impersonal Source would lack the characteristics of personality, which include the ability to reason, to feel, and to make choices. Also, if truth is relative and sin does not exist, what is there to judge?

We do need to emphasize that not all people who have, in general, a New Age worldview believe in reincarnation. Some flatly reject the idea, while others are ambivalent concerning it. For example, in *A Course in Miracles* (which we described in Lesson 3), in the section "Manual for Teachers," the question is raised, *Is reincarnation so?* The following ideas are included in the two-page response to this question:

In the ultimate sense, reincarnation is impossible. There is no past or future, and the idea of birth into a body has no meaning either once or many times. Reincarnation cannot, then, be true in any real sense. Our only question should be, "Is the concept helpful?" . . . . For our purposes, it would not be helpful to take any definite stand on reincarnation. A teacher of God should be as helpful to those who believe in it as to those who do not. . . .

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this course aims at a complete reversal of thought. When this is finally accomplished, issues such as the validity of reincarnation become meaningless. . . . Does this mean that the teacher of God should not believe in reincarnation himself, or discuss it with others who do? The answer is, certainly not!<sup>21</sup>

As you can see, this response contains the kinds of statements which fail to pass the test of non-contradiction we discussed in Lesson 1. On one hand, it claims belief in reincarnation is meaningless; on the other hand, it asserts that it may be useful to believe in it. The stated goal of *A Course in Miracles* is a complete reversal of thought, that is to say, if one follows the prescribed meditations and mental exercises in the course, one can achieve perfection of the self or save oneself. All else is said to be meaningless.

Let us look now at what the Bible teaches about human nature.

## **BIBLICAL TEACHING ABOUT HUMAN NATURE**

While we do not have adequate space in this course to give a comprehensive treatise on biblical teaching concerning the human nature, we will summarize some basic teaching for the purpose of contrasting it with the New Age views we have discussed. According to the Bible:

1. *Humans are a special creation of God, made in His likeness or image. This likeness is of a moral and spiritual nature, but humans are not divine.*

The biblical account of creation reveals that humans are unique in all of God's creation because we, alone, are created in the image of God, and God himself breathed into our first parents the breath of life (Genesis 1:26,27; 2:7,18–23; see also Psalm 139:13–16). This is not stated of any other creature. We recognize that humans are different from all other created beings in a number of ways. For example, we have the power of speech and the ability to think, understand, and communicate our ideas through speech. Humans have the ability to recognize and enjoy beauty, anticipate future needs, plan ahead, and make choices. We are able to distinguish between right and wrong; and throughout history, in every culture, humans have manifested a deep need to worship a superior being or God. We are not divine; we are created beings of our Almighty God who alone is divine.

2. *Human nature consists of a physical aspect (a material body) and a non-material aspect (a soul or spirit).*

Humans are complex creatures, created with a visible, physical body that will eventually decay and die and an immaterial soul or spirit that will never die. Biblical references to the soul and the spirit make it unclear whether these are two elements of the non-material aspect of the human nature or simply one element (see Genesis 2:7; Psalm 42:6; 1 Corinthians 5:3; Hebrews 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:23). Some Bible scholars identify the *soul* as that which gives us breath and makes us living creatures, and the *spirit* as our mind or that which is the basis of rational life, related to reason or understanding.<sup>22</sup> The word *soul* is also used in the Bible to refer to the whole person, as in Ezekiel 18:4 (see also verses 5,9,20):

Every living soul belongs to me [the Sovereign Lord], the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.

This passage implies that the soul of each person is unique and an integral part of that person's being, in sharp contrast to the reincarnation view that the soul has many lives.

3. *Being made in God's image means that, like God, humans have intellect, emotions, and will.*

The Bible reveals that God is a personal Being: He communicates (Psalm 25:14); He has feelings or emotions (Isaiah 1:14); He thinks (Isaiah 55:8); and He makes decisions (Genesis 2:18). Humans, too, are personal beings who have the ability to reason, to feel, and to make choices. We can communicate with God because He has given us this capacity. He has also given us a conscience (Romans 2:15). Our conscience judges our actions and attitudes on the basis of 1) our knowledge of God and of His revealed will, 2) the moral awareness He has given us, 3) what we have been taught about right and wrong, and 4) the social standards we have accepted.<sup>23</sup> However, our conscience is not perfect and it can be defiled (1 Corinthians 8:7), corrupted (Titus 1:15), and seared (1 Timothy 4:2).

4. *Humans are capable of sin. Sin explains the problem of evil.*

Humans are not determined—that is, their choices are not determined for them—but have the possibility of making both good and bad choices. *We are therefore accountable to God for the choices we make.* God



created us to fellowship with Him, but sin entered the world through the choices made by Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). Because of their sin, we live in a damaged world ruled by Satan's evil influence, and we are prone to sin. Ronald Nash observes, "What a paradox human beings are! The only bearers of the image of God on this planet are also capable of the most heinous acts."<sup>24</sup> As we shall see in Lesson 8, it is only by God's grace that we can overcome our sinful nature and live to please God.

5. *This life is not all there is. Every human being faces a final destiny.*  
The Bible teaches our existence does not end with physical death:

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:27,28)

This passage indicates that, contrary to the concept of reincarnation, all humans can expect to have a one-time experience of physical death followed by judgment. Their judgment will be based not on *karma* but on the decision each of us has made concerning Jesus Christ. If we accept Him as our Lord and Savior, our final destiny will be the resurrection of our physical body—which will be reunited with our soul—and an eternal life of peace and joy as a unique, redeemed member of the body of Christ in the kingdom of God. This will take place when Christ comes to *rapture* (take away) His Church. The Bible also affirms that each believer will, at the Rapture, experience the glorification or perfection of body and soul. (See the following Scripture passages which help us to understand the concept of *glorification*: Philippians 3:20,21; 2 Corinthians 5:1–5; 1 Corinthians 15:35–52.) In contrast, those who reject God's plan of salvation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ will be judged and will experience what the Bible refers to as the "second death" (Revelation 21:8). This is described by theologian Millard J. Erickson as "an endless period of punishment and of separation from the presence of God, the finalization of the lost state of the individual who is spiritually dead at the time of physical death."<sup>25</sup>

In conclusion, while the Bible does not give extensive details about what is called the *intermediate state* of the soul—the period between the time of physical death and the resurrection of the body—we do know that the soul does not die. Erickson discusses these implications of the biblical doctrines of death and the intermediate state:

1. Death is to be expected by all, believer and unbeliever. Unless we are alive when the Lord returns, it will happen to us as well. It is important that we take this fact seriously and live accordingly.
2. Although death is an enemy (God did not originally intend for man to die), it has now been overcome and made captive to God. It therefore need not be feared, for its curse has been removed by the death and resurrection of Christ. It can be faced with peace, for we know that it now serves the Lord's purpose of taking to himself those who have faith in Him.
3. There is between death and resurrection an intermediate state in which believers and unbelievers experience, respectively, the presence and absence of God. While these experiences are less intense than the final states, they are of the same qualitative nature.
4. In both this life and the life to come, the basis of the believer's relationship with God is grace, not works. There need be no fear, then, that our imperfections will require some type of postdeath purging before we can enter into the full presence of God.<sup>26</sup>

Let me emphasize what Erickson has said: The decisions we make in this life will have eternal consequences. We will not have a second chance to make the right choices. The Bible is clear: after death, judgment. I urge you to consider seriously the biblical teaching about human nature. Your life for all eternity will be affected by how you respond to this teaching.

We now turn our thoughts to another important issue for those who have a New Age worldview: their conviction that Christianity is oppressive. We will look at this issue in Lesson 5.