

Better than the Bard

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...

These famous words helped make the playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon one of the world's most renowned dramatists. Often referred to as the 'Bard of Avon', William Shakespeare is viewed by many as the greatest writer in the English language. He lived from 1564–1616 and the recent 400th anniversary of his death has prompted much performance and appreciation of his plays and poetry.

Literary Genius

Shakespeare's popularity is well-founded. There are few writers who can come close to his linguistic skill and ability to create the perfect phrase. Indeed, many expressions common today have their origins in his writing, and yet seem very modern.

If something were to '*vanish into thin air*' or refuse to '*budge an inch*', to be '*cold comfort*' or '*too much of a good thing*', then the description comes from Shakespeare. The same applies if we find ourselves '*tongue-tied*', playing '*fast and loose*' or '*standing on ceremony*'. If something is a '*foregone conclusion*', if '*the game is up*' and '*the truth will out*', then we owe these sayings to the Bard as well. There are many, many more.

Not only this, but his ability to capture human emotions and relationships is remarkable. Consider the power of love and death in *Romeo and Juliet*; honour and betrayal in *Julius Caesar*; ambition and sheer terror in *Macbeth*; and greed in *The Merchant*

of Venice. His words are still used today to reflect current themes such as immigration, royalty, the abuse of power and even the popular opinions about lawyers!



Human Limits

However, even Shakespeare is limited because he was human like the rest of us. It is interesting to see that he admits this within his writings.

His work has no moral or absolute authority; it is simply the product of a sophisticated human mind. He even plays down the importance of his works, for example in the apologetic end to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The close of *The Tempest* stresses how his characters' endeavours are in the hands of others.

Shakespeare's work is limited to this life. Although he writes much about dying and death, he cannot tell us about what lies beyond the grave. Hamlet describes death as '*the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveller returns*'. In other words, it is something nobody can tell us about unless they have come back from the dead.

The Word of God

So then for the most vital questions we need to turn to the greatest book of all – the Bible. It has divine authority with

God as its writer. It can tell us about life, death, and life after death. And it can give us a real, tangible hope for the future.

The Bible makes direct claim to be the fully inspired words of God. Throughout its pages, we read *'thus says the Lord'*, that *'the word of the Lord came to'* specific people, and about *'the word of the Lord through'* His messengers. The Apostle Peter makes a very clear statement:

Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

There is ample evidence in the scriptures that this claim is true. It contains accurate prophecies, consistently fulfilled in every detail, which could not have been written by even the most advanced man or woman. Scientifically accurate descriptions of the earth, the water cycle and how to manage diseases are found in the Bible, centuries before scientists made the same discoveries.

A man-made book by over 40 writers, written over more than 1500 years in different countries, would be a patchwork of totally unrelated pieces; yet the Bible is one coherent whole from start to finish, because its author is God. So we can trust the Bible's authority and turn to it for 'life and death' questions.



Matters of Life and Death

When we turn to the Bible on these subjects, we find clear and consistent teaching. The Lord God created life, and when He takes it away, we die, so He is perfectly placed to tell us about these things. His Son, the Lord Jesus, did rise from the dead and come back to teach his followers. All of this is recorded in our Bibles.

When we die, we simply cease to exist. The Bible describes death like a sleep from which we never wake.

The dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6).

The good news is that God offers us the hope to be awakened from the 'sleep' of death, just as Jesus was, and to live for ever in the Kingdom of God on the earth. Jesus said this:

This is the will of Him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).

It is a privilege to spend time with our Bibles, to understand these matters of life and death and to have God-given confidence when, as the Bard said, we *'suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'*.

This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life (Psalm 119:50).

Editor