

“So You’re Dead, Now What?”

When I was a senior in High School I got a job at a funeral home—Sweeney-Phillips. The owners were family friends and me another couple of guys worked there as the night shift. I got paid \$100 a month and my job was to get there about 5p.m. and stay until about 7 a.m. every third night and every third weekend. The job included a little bit of everything. I’d vacuum, dust, wash cars, run errands, drive cars, help with visitations and funerals. And when a call came in the night, I’d meet the funeral director and help transport the body so that it could be prepared. It was kind of a strange job for a senior in High School, but the money wasn’t bad and I kind of felt like a grownup for the first time.

But I got to tell you, it was kind of scary. Especially whenever you have to stay the night in the funeral home and there’s a body, or several bodies, there in the building with you. It’s not something you’re used to at age 17.

Working there that year definitely gave me a perspective on death. It made me think about it being around so much death. I mean, there I was, 17, full of life, thoughts, feelings, ideas, hopes, dreams, and there was that body lying in a casket. There was a moment when that person changed. Made a transition from what we call life, to what we call death. They were once 17 like me, and one day I would be like them. It made me confront my own death. It made me think about the afterlife. I’ve come to believe that what we believe about the afterlife affects how we live this life.

As a culture we seem to be fascinated with the afterlife. There are TV shows like *Medium*, and *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Whisperer*. Shows about people communicating with the dead. Shows like *Past Life* about reincarnation. And there’s always constant stream of movies that focus on what happens when we die or communicating with the dead. Even the hit movie *Avatar* has a powerful scene where one of the characters gets a glimpse of the afterlife.

I think that it’s only natural to wonder what happens after we die. Throughout recorded history human beings have believed that this life is not all there is to life. That when our consciousness here ends, something else begins. So over the next three weeks, let’s take look. Let’s see what the Bible teaches about this, what we learn from our own experiences, and how this applies to our daily lives, and why it matters so much.

Starting today we’ll focus on one major question about the afterlife each week. And today’s question is, “What happens to us after we die?” In the next three weeks we’ll look at hell, judgment, and heaven. How do we as 21st century people understand these in light of the Bible, in light of science and in light of our own experiences?

Last week was a fascinating week because I sent out an email asking for questions and stories and I got a ton of replies from you. Over the next three Sundays I’ll do my best to answer the questions you have but it will be hard to hit them all. But one of the biggest questions you had was about whether or not you’ll know loved ones in the afterlife. Another big question was after you die do you go immediately to heaven (or hell) or wait until Jesus returns. And many of you talked about the death of people you love and as Christians wondered, very honestly, if belief in an afterlife was just wishful thinking to make you feel better in the face of tragedy. And one of you wrote that even though you believe in heaven and are a follower of Jesus, you’re still deeply afraid of dying, of leaving behind family and friends, of the unknown.

One of you wrote this, “So I’m dead. Whatever mask I wore in life is now gone. In death now, for the first time, I am revealed? Am I finally known? Will I be ashamed of how I hid in life? Or will I finally be done with shame?”

Another of you wrote, “The thought that our short time on earth determines whether we spend eternity in bliss or in agony has never felt right to me. I don’t pursue my faith because I am afraid of an eternity of torment. I pursue my faith because it makes no sense to me that our existence is nothing but random chance.”

These are some great questions and comments and over the next few weeks I think we’ll be able to address most of them. To get at a few of these today let’s focus on the question **what happens to you after you die?** In a Barna Group study done in 2003, it was found that about 10% of the U.S. population believes that when you die, that’s it. You don’t really have a soul, just a brain and when the brain stops functioning you simply cease to exist. About 30% of the U.S. population believes in reincarnation, that when you die your soul

leaves your body and comes back to earth in another body. In fact, a growing number of Christians have begun to believe this.

About 60% of the population believes in something that looks like the traditional Christian understanding of resurrection. That after we die our souls live on in an afterlife of some sort. Our memories are preserved, we are ourselves and we have a chance to be with those we love who have gone before us.

I think it would be helpful to look at the difference between reincarnation and resurrection. **Let's take a look a quick look at reincarnation.** 40 years ago very few people in the American population would have said they believed in it—probably just those who were Hindu and Buddhist. The idea of reincarnation comes out of those Eastern religions.

In the U.S. the idea of reincarnation started gaining popularity mostly because of media exposure. Movies, TV shows, actors and actresses who believe in reincarnation and get a lot of press about that. And a lot of people have found it intriguing. “Once I'm done with this life I can come back and try it all over again and maybe I can get it right next time, learn a few more things that I can take with me to the next life.” Many people think that reincarnation is a kind of do-over, a mulligan, and that can sound kind of appealing. But what's interesting is that Hindus and Buddhists don't find the idea of reincarnation to be a positive one. The goal of Hinduism and Buddhism is to escape reincarnation.

The traditional belief in reincarnation is that you go from life to life to life carrying good karma or bad karma along with you depending on the good things or bad things you did. If you carry bad karma into the next life it may make you be born in poverty, or have cancer, or something very difficult in life to hopefully help you get it right and make forward progress for the next life.

In the belief in reincarnation when you die you do it again and again, and again, and again. And each time your memory is wiped clean and you're not reunited with the people you love. You have no knowledge of them. According to some you repeat this cycle millions of times until finally the hope is that you are released from this seemingly endless cycle of death and rebirth. That release is called *moksha*, which means liberation. And this liberation from the cycle of reincarnation takes you to Nirvana which has been described as a drop of water reunited with the ocean. It's a return to the cosmic consciousness where your own consciousness is absorbed.

The Christian view of resurrection says that human beings only die once. And after that comes the judgment, and then after that we have the opportunity to spend eternity with God. And when we die we carry ourselves with us—we keep our identity. Our souls go with us into the next life and we are given a new resurrection body. We get the opportunity to be with Christ and see all those we've known and loved who died as Christians before us.

A big part of the reason that Christianity holds this view is that Jesus told us that this is how it works. Jesus said, **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25, NIV).** Jesus also said, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1-3, NIV).** This is the idea.

So as I look at these, and if I had a choice—God doesn't give us a choice—but if I had a choice between going back and repeating it over and over again, going back through pimples and puberty, and all the very difficult things of life, witness the deaths of loved ones over and over. Between that and joining God in paradise where the pain will be gone and I can be with my loved ones and experience things available only on that side of eternity. I choose going to be with Christ. And that's what Christianity offers. That is the idea behind what happens to us when we die in Christ.

Now, this raises a few questions. **What happens RIGHT after we die?** Some Christians believe we go to sleep after we die and then when Jesus returns to earth we wake up and join him in heaven. Other Christians believe we go immediately into the presence of God. Some Christians believe one way and some the other. Why is that? Well, it's because the New Testament talks about both. 1 Thessalonians 4 talks about

how those who die before Jesus' return will stay in their graves in a kind of soul sleep and wake up and rise up when Jesus comes back.

But there are other passages that seem to teach us that after we die we go immediately to stand before God, and that's what I've come to believe because I think it fits better with the larger picture of scripture. And logically it makes sense. Because what would be the purpose of you sleeping for a year or 10 or 1000 years until the Lord returns? Why would God do that to us?

Let's look at a few scriptures that support this. In Revelation chapter 5 we're given a picture of heaven--the throne room of God. It's filled with people praising God. They're very much awake.

In Luke chapter 16 Jesus tells a parable, a story, about the afterlife. Now we can't base our doctrine on this, but it tells us what was on Jesus' mind. It's about two men who die at the same time. One goes to heaven and the other goes to hell. There's a big chasm in between them and they speak to each other across that chasm. We can't base our doctrine on this but Jesus gives no indication that these two men would sleep until his second coming, then have this encounter across the chasm.

Then one of the most important passages on this question is when Jesus is hanging on the cross between two criminals. One criminal is cursing Jesus, but the other one believes in him, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:42-43, NIV).**

Jesus doesn't say, “Today you'll go to sleep and when I return at some point in the future, you'll be with me.” He says, “Today.” This tells me that that man was going to be with Jesus that very day. So looking at the larger witness of scripture I don't think we fall asleep when we die and wait for the second coming of Jesus, I think we enter the presence of God immediately.

I want us to ask this final question, **“What difference does believing in the resurrection make in my daily life?”** Listen, your belief in the afterlife and the resurrection positively affects your life here and now, it enhances your life here and now and makes you a better human being. It makes you more bold and courageous than if you did not have this belief. It also gives you greater peace.

Look at this passage from 2 Corinthians. We looked at it briefly last week. **“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18, NIV).**

This passage gives us a glimpse of Christian hope and the difference that resurrection makes for us. Paul's been talking about the troubles and hardships we face sometimes in life. And he knew hardships and even torture. He was flogged and beaten within an inch of his life, he was imprisoned over and over. He was persecuted by Jews, by Pagans, and even by some of his fellow Christians. Eventually he would be beheaded for his faith. But despite all that he said, “We do not lose heart.” He says it twice in chapter 4. It means we don't despair, we don't give up. Why? He goes on to say that even though our outer nature begins to waste away--that's our physical bodies—our inner nature is renewed day by day. You know that our bodies waste away, they decline. Particularly those of you 40 and over know this! Actually our bodies begin to decline after age 20. “Our outer nature is wasting away but our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” That means that when we have faith and put our trust in God, God's Spirit renews us even though our outer body is declining or decaying. How you view the afterlife, directly affects how you view this life.

But then look what Paul says in verse 17, “For our light and momentary troubles...” he calls all the hardships that he's been through light momentary troubles! You see, when you believe in the resurrection of your body and soul, you look at everything differently. You look at difficulties as light and momentary. Those difficulties and hardships are all just tiny compared to all eternity. It gives you a certain perspective on time when you see your life in the light of eternity.

Paul goes on to say that our light and momentary troubles, “are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” This lets me know that God never let's suffering go to waste. I don't believe that God sends suffering into our lives. God has told us, “If you encounter suffering, I'm going to make some good come

out of it that will affect your eternity.” So in the light of the afterlife, we look at suffering differently because it shapes us for an eternal life that far outweighs all the suffering.

Paul talks about what can and cannot be seen in this life. He’s pointing out that all the stuff of this life, it really is just fleeting. It’s here today and gone tomorrow. We can get so carried away with stuff. Just look at all the Christmas presents you got a few months ago. Can you remember any of them? Can you think of many, or any, you got the Christmas before? The toys break, the clothes wear out, the electronics become obsolete, the books get read and passed along, the rest ends up in the youth rummage sale in the spring! Our stuff, our houses, our retirement funds, it’s all fleeting and doesn’t really matter in the end. It’s important now and we’re grateful for it, we enjoy it, but you know what? It’s just not eternal. You really can’t take it with you. So we hold things lightly in life, we give them away generously, so that we can reach for that which is forever in heaven. Our belief in the afterlife affects how we live this life.

Some non-Christians look at death and are afraid of it. “Let’s put it off as long as possible. Maybe I’ll cryogenically freeze my body, or maybe just my head if I can’t afford to do the whole thing, so I can be awakened at some later, better, time to live more days on this earth.” I say, “You’ve got to be kidding me!” As wonderful as life is here at its best, if they unfreeze you, you’re still going die! You’re still going to get sick. You’re still going to face the death of others. You’re still going to have to pay taxes! So many people try to postpone death, but you know what? Christians see death differently! We see death as the final victory, not the final defeat! Death is the moment we receive everything we’ve been longing for on this side of eternity.

Do I want to die soon? No! I want to stick around with my family as long as possible! I want to stick around with you! But you know what? I’m not afraid of dying. I’m anxious because I’ve not been there yet, but I know at my death, I enter into a fullness of life that I can’t really begin to get my brain around. Our perspective on death is very different when we’re followers of Jesus Christ because of the resurrection of the body.

I’ll end with this story. One man from another Methodist church wrote about an experience he had. At 3:30 one morning as he slept soundly next to his wife, he was awakened. He wrote, “I suddenly felt something brush against my cheek. It was so firm, so real, that I sat up in bed...I looked at my wife but she was sound asleep. I thought maybe the kids had tried to wake me up and looked down the hallway and I listened but there was no noise...I wondered what had touched my cheek and I thought, ‘Well I must have just been dreaming’ and went back to sleep. At 8:30 in the morning my brother called from Connecticut, he lived near my parents, and he said, ‘I’m sorry to tell you this, but early this morning Dad died in his sleep.’ At that moment I recognized the feeling that I had in the middle of the night. The feeling I had was that same feeling I had when I was just a boy and my dad used to kiss me with his stubbly chin. And I remember in the middle of the night that faint scent of his cologne. I’ve never had an experience like that before or since, but that night I knew that there was a resurrection and that there’s something beyond this life and I’ve never doubted it since.”

You may not put a whole lot of weight to that story, but it’s very consistent with the Christian faith. That after we die we’re resurrected. That it could be that God in his mercy allowed that father to kiss his son one last time here on earth before welcoming him to his eternal home.

We as Christians believe that death has been swallowed up in victory by the resurrection of Jesus from the grave and we are people of life and afterlife and that changes how we live this life. And for today that is the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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