

What Happens When You Die?

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(1 Corinthians 15:52–55 NRSV) in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. {53} For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. {54} When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." {55} "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

For the past two weeks I have been exploring that most uncomfortable topic – death.

Since death is a reality for all of us, one question remains to be explored → What happens when you die.

The simple answer is WHO KNOWS → and I probably should just shut-up and sit down.

But I can find you all kinds of people who will tell you exactly what will happen.

<< STEEL MAGNOLIAS CLIP>>

One of my favorite is from a mega church pastor who about 20 years ago preached a sermon on what takes place in the first 5 minutes after you die. I am impressed that he knows just what's going to happen --- because I don't know!

The Bible has a number of places where it talks about what death and life after death is going to be like. But every one of them is the author's attempt to explain what is un-explainable --- by using words and concepts that were contemporary to their culture.

Let me share with you just some examples:

(Psalms 48:14 KJV) For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.

(John 14:1–2 NRSV) "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. {2} In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

(1 John 3:2 NRSV) Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

(1 Corinthians 15:19–20, 22, 25–26, 53–55 NRSV) If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. {20} But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. {22} for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. {25} For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. {26} The last enemy to be destroyed is death. {53} For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. {54} When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." {55} "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

(2 Corinthians 4:16– 5:1 NRSV) So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. {17} For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, {18} because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. {2 Corinthians 5:1} For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

(1 Thessalonians 4:13–14 NRSV) we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. {14} For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

(Revelation 21:4 NRSV) he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

None of those give us a very clear idea of what is going to happen when we die or where we are going to go.

As I shared last week, in the Hebrew Bible the understanding prior to the revolution in thought that came with Alexander the Great and his policy of Hellenization was SHEOL.

Sheol was just the place where you went when you died.
There was no resurrection → it was not heaven, nor was it hell.

The Greeks brought with them to Judaism the idea of an eternal soul and the ideas of reward and punishment for a life lived, even though the book of Job repudiated that idea.

All of these ideas were incorporated into the New Testament author's visions of what happens, but as you can see, there was not a consistent idea about what exactly happens when you die.

The early church needed to flesh out what these concepts were all about, so we developed the ideas of heaven and hell and along with them the concepts of limbo and purgatory → which are not biblical at all.

In Roman Catholic theology, Limbo is an idea about the afterlife condition of those who die in original sin but have not yet been condemned to Hell.

It was developed to explain what happens to persons who lived a good life, but were not baptized Christians → since only baptized Christians could make it into heaven.

In 1992 and again in 2007 the Roman Catholic Church issued documents dealing with the issue of what happens to unborn infants, and the conclusion was that: "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments".

Thus in some ways, Limbo as a theological concept has been repudiated, yet it still lingers in the thought of many within the Roman Catholic church and many Protestant Churches.

The other extra-biblical concept that many of us are familiar with is the idea of PURGATORY.

The word purgatory has at its root → purge → thus the concept behind purgatory was a place where the dead could go and have their souls purified, or purged from sin, to prepare them for entrance into heaven.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, some souls are not sufficiently free from sin and its consequences to enter the state of heaven immediately, nor are they so sinful as to be destined for hell either. Such souls, ultimately destined to be united with God in heaven, must first endure purgatory. In purgatory, souls "achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven."

The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, first published in 2005, is a summary in dialog form of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It deals with purgatory in the following exchange

210. What is purgatory?

Purgatory is the state of those who die in God's friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter into the happiness of heaven.

211. How can we help the souls being purified in purgatory?

Because of the communion of saints, the faithful who are still pilgrims on earth are able to help the souls in purgatory by offering prayers in suffrage for them, especially the Eucharistic sacrifice. They also help them by almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance.

This became one of the battle lines of the protestant revolution, as Luther and others opposed the idea of selling "indulgences." An indulgence helped get one out of purgatory quicker and thus into heaven sooner.

In case you are curious, in the United Methodist Church's Articles of Religion; Article 15 is about Purgatory and this is what is written:

The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardon, worshiping and adoration, as well of images as of relics, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but repugnant to the Word of God.

So we are back where we began → WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

<<SHADOWLANDS CLIP>>

I experienced death as a child, but like many children, I was shielded from it. My grandfather – my dad’s dad died when I was 8 years old. I have only a few memories of him, embellished, no doubt by family stories.

My dad’s mother died when I was almost 13, and I do not remember her funeral, although I do remember visiting her many times in Tennessee when I was growing up.

My mother’s parents died around the same time. The last, when I was just starting college. I remember going to their funerals, but I don’t recall being distressed about it.

All of my grandparents seemed OLD – so their deaths were not all that unexpected.

Not only were they fairly old, (both of my parents are the babies of their families) but they lived so very differently than we did.

In the spring of 1985, my youngest brother took off for Spring Break with his college friends to go skiing in Utah. While he was there, he called my parents to let them know that he wasn’t feeling good.

Upon returning from his trip he went to the doctor and the doctor told him that he had some type of soft mass in his stomach.

A few weeks later they did exploratory surgery that had to be aborted because they discovered that there was cancer everywhere.

I was finishing up my last semester at The Divinity School at Duke University and served two little churches in Stanley County NC about 100 miles from Durham.

For the next few months I would rush home whenever I found the opportunity to steal a visit with Stewart.

The last weekend of September I was able to come home for a quick visit, and I remember telling my dad on the way back to the airport – “Dad, you need to tell Stewart that it is OK if he dies – cause you know he is dying.” It wasn’t until

that visit that I realized that he was going to die – 23 year olds shouldn't suddenly get sick and die!

That was the hardest thing I think I have ever said to my dad – a 25 year old shouldn't have to do that.

On November 9th, 1985 I was at the Parsonage at Richfield, NC. It was a Saturday night and I had a dozen or so kids spending the night, because we were having a lock-in. Just as we were getting ready to go on a hayride, I got a phone call.

The reason why I will never forget that phone call is that it was a collect call from my dad. Let me tell you right now, if you get a collect call from your dad, it probably isn't good news.

He told me that the doctor said if I was going to come home, I had better come home now.

I was just as anal then as I am now, and I said to my dad I would leave right after church was over the next morning.

I called Nancy and her mom brought her out to Richfield so that she could make the trip to Downers Grove with me.

During worship, I told, this my first congregation, that I was leaving in a couple of hours, and I didn't think I would return.

I don't think I have ever felt such love from a group of people → I am not sure I have ever told them how they made this period in my life easier.

Nancy and I drove (with Nahum my dog) as far as we could that day, and got to Frankfort Kentucky where I had to stop for the night. When we called, my dad said, don't hurry – Stewart has gone into a coma, and we don't expect him to live much longer.

I was emotionally and physically wiped out and we crashed, hoping to get up early in the morning so that we could arrive early in the afternoon.

My mother kept a journal, and these are the words she wrote:

since about 5:30, Stewart is comatose, struggling for every breath, waiting for his brother to arrive. Having driven all day from Durham, Steven and Nancy have spent a few hours sleeping in a motel somewhere along the way, when Steven is awakened by a sense of urgency that he must leave now if he is to make it home before Stewart dies. About 10:30 A.M. they arrive. Nahum, their Beagle hound, is with them. Usually, when they arrive for a visit, Nahum will rush into the house barking. Because he sensing that something awesome is taking place, Nahum is very silent. Steven talks to his brother for a few minutes, then Stewart gives a big sigh and dies. We gather around his body and sing "Amazing Grace" and then Scott says that when they were little we used to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and that we should sing it now.

Stewart's death forever changed me – and it changed the way that I understood death – and life!

I found that I had no choice but to wrestle with God – thus I began a lifelong adventure trying to understand the divine in my life.

You see, I found that my childhood understandings of God just didn't work anymore.

Ideas like

- God was sitting up on some throne somewhere up there
- That God would choose to heal one person – and let another die
- That God would choose to hear one prayer – and ignore another

So I began wrestling over the things that I was told that I was supposed to believe and slowly began to experience a God who made sense to me.

So, what do I believe about death?

I believe that when you die – you go to God

What does that mean?

I don't know – I leave that up to you

But until I find out first hand – I also know that God is with me every day!

Jesus was not so concerned about what is going to happen in the next world as he was what was going to happen here.

I love what John quotes Jesus as saying:
(John 10:10 NRSV) “ I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

It is in embracing the reality of death that we can truly find life.