

INTRODUCTION

This is the second message in the series, "Heaven: An insider's guide." Last week I invited you to email me your questions about heaven and I've received several dozen good questions. I was surprised to learn the most popular question asked is, "Will there be pets in heaven?" There will be animals in heaven. We know because in Revelation 19 Jesus is returning from heaven riding a white horse. But I'm not sure if we'll retain ownership of animals in heaven; they belong to God, not us. Maybe all the animals will be like pets to us.

The second most popular question has been, "What will we be doing in heaven?" I'll address that next week in the message entitled, "Heaven's Activity Guide."

In this message I'm going to answer the question, "What happens when a person dies?"

There are many theories about what happens after a person dies, but they usually fall into four categories. First, there is materialism, or atheism, that basically teaches when the body dies that is the end of existence—there is nothing beyond, like the epitaph on a tombstone in England that reads, "Here lies an atheist. All dressed up with no place to go."

The second theory is reincarnation. Some of the Eastern religions teach that the soul survives after death, but it is reincarnated into another body. If the soul is enlightened, it is reincarnated into a higher life form, if not, it regresses into a lower animal form. Mark Twain once said, "I don't believe in reincarnation—and I didn't believe in it in my former life, either."

The third theory about what happens after death is the Platonic theory of immortality. Plato suggested that the body is totally separate from the soul, and the body is bad and the soul is good. Death is the liberation of the soul from the body. After death the soul lives on without a body for eternity. Sadly, many Christians unknowingly embrace this Platonic belief.

The fourth theory, which is taught in the Bible, is called Resurrection. At death, the soul and spirit leave the body, but at a future date, the body will be raised and changed and reunited with the soul and spirit. That's the broad belief, and in this message we'll dig into the details.

One of the best passages dealing with what happens when we die is found in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9:

"Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

"Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and

would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it."

Even people who call themselves Christians often have strange ideas about what heaven is like. We get a lot of our misconceptions from Hollywood. I love the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life" starring Jimmy Stewart. But the opening scene gives us a faulty understanding of heaven. Frank Capra opens the movie with several people praying for George Bailey, who is in trouble because some money is missing from the Savings and Loan. Then the scene shifts to outer space where God is talking to an angel named Joseph. They summon an angel second-class, named Clarence, to go to earth and help George. Clarence is a man who died in the 1800s but he hasn't yet "earned his wings." In spite of the fact that he's not the brightest bulb in the socket, Clarence, played by Henry Travers, succeeds in getting George to consider that his life is worth living. At the end of movie as George Bailey is standing by the Christmas tree, a bell on the tree rings. Zuzu says, "Teacher says, 'Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings.'" And Jimmy Stewart smiles and says, "That's right. Atta' boy, Clarence!"

That makes for a great movie, but it distorts what the Bible says happens to a person when they die. When a person dies, they don't become an angel. In fact, Jesus said in Luke 16 that when Lazarus died, the angels carried him into Abraham's bosom, which is another way to describe paradise. Let's notice three things about what happens when a person dies.

I. THIS LIFE IS LIKE SLEEPING IN A TENT

How many of you have ever spent at least one night sleeping in a tent? Tents were popular during the time Paul wrote this letter. In fact, we learn in Acts 18:3 that Paul worked as a tentmaker. But unless you're really into camping, chances are you haven't spent much time in a tent. The main thing to understand is that a tent is a temporary dwelling compared to a building, which is relatively permanent.

Your body is like a tent, and who you really are lives in the body. You and I are created in the image of God. That doesn't mean we look like God. But just as God is a tri-unity, Father, Son, and Spirit, we are tri-unity as well. We are body, soul, and spirit.

To put it another way, you have a visible, outward presence as well as an invisible, inward presence. The Bible says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." (2 Corinthians 4:16) The outward person is your body, and the inward person is your soul and spirit.

So the real you (invisible) lives within a body like a camper lives in a tent. When you look at me, you can only see the "outer me" but there is also an "inner me." That inner person is often called the ego, or the personality, or the soul of a person. President Woodrow Wilson's favorite limerick was: "I know how ugly I are; I know my face ain't no star; But I don't mind it; cause I'm behind it; It's the others who get the jar."

A. Your body wears out and eventually dies

Paul wrote about this tent being destroyed; that's a reference to death. It may be destroyed slowly by old age or by some disease. Or it could be destroyed suddenly, like an automobile accident, or a soldier being shot. But we all have one thing in common; this tent isn't permanent, one day we'll move out of it.

Everyone has to deal with the thought of death. A pastor was trying to press this idea to his congregation. He said, "One day, every member of this church is going to die!" There was a young boy on the front row who laughed at that statement. The pastor repeated it. "I said, one day, every member of this church is going to die!" Again the boy laughed out loud. The irritated pastor said, "Son, what's so funny about that?" The boy said, "I'm not a member of this church!"

I've read there's a tombstone in Georgia with an epitaph that says: "Remember young man, as you pass by; As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, you soon shall be. So prepare, young man, to follow me." Someone added a note to the tombstone that said, "To follow you is not my intent. Until I know which way you went!"

B. Your spirit endures forever

It's also true of your soul, but I believe your spirit is the innermost part of your personhood. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body." That's true, but the real essence of who we are is in our spirit. If you have trouble distinguishing between soul and spirit, that's normal. According to Hebrews 4:12, only the Word of God can separate the soul and spirit.

Before you come to know Christ, your spirit was dead. When you become a Christian, your spirit becomes alive through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. We spend a lot of time, money, and attention on our bodies. But Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" (Mark 8:36)

Here's the great truth. While your tent is getting more and more feeble, it's possible that your spirit is getting more and more renewed. I've lived for six decades in this tent, and every day there seems to be a few more aches and pains, but I'm more excited about living for Jesus than ever before.

I've come to better understand one of the first choruses I ever learned. "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before. Everyday with Jesus I love him more and more. Jesus saves and keeps me, and He's the one I'm living for. Everyday with Jesus is sweeter than the day before."

II. DEATH IS LEAVING THIS TENT TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF JESUS (PARADISE)

The best description of the death of a Christian in the Bible is 2 Corinthians 5:8, which says, "Away from the body and at home with the Lord." Most of us are familiar with the King James translation which reads, "Absent from the body, present with the Lord." At the point of death,

our body quits functioning, but our soul and spirit immediately go to be with Jesus.

The word for "death" in the Hebrew language literally means, "to breathe out." It's like our English word "expire." The Bible says in John 19:30 when Jesus died on the cross He said, "'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

A Christian shouldn't fear death. One of my favorite descriptions of the godly woman from Proverbs 31 is that "she can laugh at the days to come." (Proverbs 31:25) And while death is no laughing matter, Christians can inject a little humor into the somber atmosphere of death.

An inscription on a tombstone is called an epitaph, and through the years I've enjoyed collecting humorous epitaphs. Here are some of my favorites.

On a tombstone in Ribbesford, England: "Here lies Anna Wallace; The children of Israel wanted bread; And the Lord sent them manna; Old clerk Wallace wanted a wife; And the Devil sent him Anna."

On a tombstone in Ruidoso, New Mexico: "Here lies Johnny Yeast; Pardon me for not rising."

On a tombstone in Richmond, Virginia: "She always said her feet were killing her; But nobody believed her."

On a tombstone in Portland, Maine: "Here lies my wife; I bid her good-bye. She rests in peace; And now so do I."

But my all-time favorite is from a tombstone in Nantucket, Massachusetts because it really describes what happens to a Christian at death: "Under the sod; And under the trees; Lies the body; Of Jonathan Pease. But Pease isn't here; This is just the pod; Peas shelled out; And went to God."

In 2 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul wrote about a man in Christ who ascended to paradise, the third heaven. This man heard inexpressible things he was not permitted to tell. Most scholars believe this man in Christ was Paul himself. Can you imagine what it would be like to catch a glimpse of heaven? It would make things on earth seem rather mundane.

When Paul was writing to the church in Philippi he said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." (Philippians 1:21; 23-24)

Death is a departure of our soul and spirit to be with Jesus. Paul used a triple superlative to describe it. "Better by far" doesn't capture the thought, it should be translated, "Much much much more better." That's not good grammar, but it's good theology.

Death for a Christian is departing to be with Jesus. Later when Paul wrote to Timothy he said, "The time of my departure is at hand." "Departure" was a word used to describe a soldier who broke camp and folded up his tent to move on to another assignment. It was also a word used to

describe a prisoner set free from his chains. For a Christian, death is not an ominous, scary prospect. It is something we can face with as much confidence as we have when we leave one room and walk into another.

Dwight L. Moody was the Billy Graham of the 19th century. He led crusades in North America and England in which thousands of people accepted Christ. Moody Church and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago are named after him. Here's how he described death: "Someday you will read in the papers, 'D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead.' Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have gone up higher, that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body. I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever."

III. WHEN JESUS RETURNS, ALL BELIEVERS WILL RECEIVE AN ETERNAL BODY LIKE HIS

Obviously, the answer to "what happens when a person dies" depends on whether or not that person knows Jesus. This series is on heaven, but the Bible also teaches that those who die without a personal relationship with God spend eternity separated from Him.

In Luke 16 Jesus pulled back the veil from the afterlife and revealed what happened when two people died. There was a rich man, whose name isn't given, and there was a beggar named Lazarus. Lazarus died and Jesus said that the angels carried him to Abraham's bosom. That's another word for paradise. Because for any good Jew, joining Abraham would be a heavenly experience. The rich man died and woke up in Hades. He was suffering, and to make matters worse, he could look into paradise and see Lazarus and Abraham. The rich man cried out, "Father Abraham. Have Lazarus dip his finger in water and come and touch my tongue for I am tormented in this flame." The rich man was still giving orders to Lazarus. Notice the rich man had a sense of a body. He could see and recognize Lazarus and he understood Lazarus had a finger and he had a tongue. He had the physical sense of suffering.

Abraham said, "No way. There is a great gulf chasm between us that, so that those who are here can't go to where you are (why would they want to?) and so that those who are where you are can't come here (they would ALL want to). The rich man's next request was this, "Then please send Lazarus to my house to warn my five brothers NOT to come to this place!"

The rich man wasn't yet in hell, he was in Hades, which is hellish in nature. Revelation 20 says that at the end of time, death and Hades will deliver up the dead in them and anyone whose name was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death. Hades is like the county jail before a prisoner is sentenced to the state penitentiary. Lazarus wasn't yet in the final heaven, he was in paradise, the current heaven. Paradise is like the waiting room for our final heaven—but it is heavenly in nature. Some call paradise pre-heaven, or the intermediate state, but I prefer to call it paradise.

This is a point of confusion for many Christians; so let me try to explain by using my dad as an

example. My dad died on May 29, 1981 at 7:15 p.m. He was 58 years old. He died of cancer while he was a patient at the Mobile Infirmary. At 7:15 and one nanosecond, his soul and spirit departed from his sick body, a tattered tent. He woke up in paradise in the presence of Jesus with a sense of a body that was whole and well. Like Lazarus and the rich man he had a sense of a finger and a tongue, and was aware of his surroundings.

We took his corpse, and buried it in Panama City, Florida. That's where his corpse has been for the past 32 years. It's probably not in very good shape right now, but that's okay. There are older bodies of Christians in worse condition than his. Some Christians were lost at sea, or burned, or eaten by wild animals. But those believers are with Jesus in paradise now, with a sense of having a healthy body.

My dad is joyful and content in paradise, but he knows the body he has now in paradise isn't his permanent heavenly body. He knows one day Jesus is going to return in the clouds to rapture the Church. When He comes, He will bring my dad and other saints with Him. That's when they'll get their resurrection bodies.

The Bible says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him...For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17)

What will our resurrection body be like? It will be like the body of Jesus because the Bible says, "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

Then the resurrected saints and those who are alive at the return of Jesus will join Jesus in paradise. According to my understanding of Daniel and Revelation, we'll be there for seven years and then when Jesus returns at the final battle of Jerusalem, we'll come with Him. After the short battle, which Jesus will win with the sword that comes from His mouth. In other words, He only has to speak victory, and it will happen. Then Jesus will rule and reign on earth for 1,000 years, and we'll be here with Him for that time. At the end of the thousand years, God will create a new heaven and a new earth. It will be like the greatest total makeover ever. And that's when the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven to earth and that's when we will experience the permanent heaven.

You may be thinking, "Wow, isn't it tough on your dad and others in heaven as they are waiting for their resurrection bodies?" Not at all. I don't even think they have a sense of waiting for a long time. When a believer dies and enters paradise, time and space are meaningless. With God, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day. There are no clocks in paradise.

Did you notice the generation of Christians who are alive when Jesus returns actually won't die? We will go straight to paradise without going through a cemetery. I've always said I'm not looking for the undertaker; I'm looking for the uppertaker!

Once you understand this, 1 Corinthians 15 begins to make more sense. The Bible says, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep (the dead), but we (the living) will all be changed. In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (the rapture). For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we (the living) will be changed. For the perishable (the dead) must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal (the living) with immortality."

CONCLUSION

What will we be like for eternity? Mentally, you'll have a renewed mind, the mind of Christ. Have you ever struggled to remember something? Or searched for the right word, and stuttered trying to find it? Have you ever made a mistake and beat yourself up by saying, "How can I be so dumb?" In heaven we will be mentally perfect. Paul wrote, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

We all have questions now with no answers. Why is there cancer? Why do good people die young? Why are there tornados and earthquakes? We'll never have the answers in this life, but when we meet Jesus we won't even have to ask Him. We'll KNOW even as we are known.

Emotionally, you'll have a joyful heart. There are times in this life we are ecstatically happy, and other times when we sink into the depths of despair. Our emotions can be a rollercoaster alternating between highs and lows. There are times when we are angry and other times when we worry ourselves sick. But in heaven, there will be none of those negatives emotions. There will be constant, pure joy. The Bible says, "You will fill me with joy in your presence." (Psalm 16:11)

Physically, you'll have a body that will last for eternity. These bodies that hurt, wear out, and ache will be transformed into a body like Jesus had after His resurrection. When Jesus appeared in the upper room on the first Easter, the disciples were frightened. They thought it was a spirit, a ghost. Jesus said, "Why are you troubled?...Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." Then he said, "Do you have anything to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. (Luke 24:38-43)

There will be no more pain, no more suffering, no more death. The Bible never says how old we will be for eternity, but you will always be the perfect age for vitality and health. J. Oswald Sanders wrote: "We will have bodies fit for the full life of God to indwell and express itself forever. We will be able to eat but will not need to. We will be able to move rapidly through space and matter. We will be ageless and not know pain, tears, sorrow, sickness, or death. We will have bodies of splendor." (*Heaven: Better by Far*, p. 79)

Where will you be five nanoseconds after you die? Some people might answer, "I don't care." But you will care five seconds after you die. Others answer, "I don't know." How sad not to have assurance of eternal life. But if you have placed your faith in Jesus you can say with assurance, "I'll be away from this body and at home with the Lord—forever!"

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes