

INTRODUCTION

Before George Carlin or Woody Allen ever said, it comedian Sean Morey spoke these words on the Johnny Carson show in the 1980s. "I think that the life cycle is backwards. You should die first; get it out of the way. Then you live in an old age home. You are kicked out when you're too young. You get a gold watch and you go to work. Then you work forty years until you are young enough to enjoy your retirement. You go to college; you party until you're ready for high school. Then you become a kid; you play all day with no responsibilities. You become a little boy or a little girl. Then you spend your last nine months floating. And you finish off as a gleam in someone's eye."

It might be nice to think about living life backwards, but the truth is we're all growing older. Because we are slaves to *chronos*, or chronological time, we are moving closer to the moment when we will meet the Lord, either in physical death or in the rapture, when Jesus returns. We are exactly one day closer to our deaths, or the rapture than we were this time yesterday.

Paul visited the city of Thessalonica to establish a church. By the way, a few weeks ago, we had a couple from Greece visit Green Acres and they told me they were from the city of Thessalonica. They reported that there are many believers there to this day.

Paul got run out of town by a mob after only two weeks, but he stayed in touch with the new Christians there through his letters and through Timothy. Paul preached that Jesus was going to return soon. When some of the believers started dying, their loved ones were confused and heartbroken. They thought they had missed the big event. They wondered if they would ever see their loved ones again. That's still a question family members are asking. "Will I see my Loved Ones again?" Paul's answer to believers was a resounding "Yes!"

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 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. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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. Therefore encourage each other with these words."

Let me give you some statistics on death in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 2.5 million Americans die every year. That means during the hour we're together, about 300 Americans will die from disease, by accident, or violence. Of course, the CDC doesn't factor in the one million babies aborted every year in the U.S, and when you add those numbers, about 425 Americans will die every hour.

The three states that lead in the number of abortions are: New York, Florida, and Texas. Abortion is the leading cause of death in America. About 600,000 Americans will die from heart

disease this year, and about 550,000 will die from cancer. But a million beating hearts will be stopped by abortion. How can this be in a country where our Declaration of Independence says that one of the inalienable rights God has given us is life?

So, I encourage you to join Representative Matt Schaefer and other pro-life proponents at the Stand4Life Rally tomorrow evening, July 8, at 7:00 p.m. on the south steps of the Capitol Building in Austin. The pro-abortion crowd was yelling, "Hail, Satan" this past week while pro-lifers were singing "Amazing Grace." We need to show up in large numbers, but we also need to show the grace and love of God to those who disagree.

Speaking of statistics, here's one. Did you know that 78.9% of all statistics are made up on the spot? But there's one statistic about death that isn't made up: 1 out of 1 people die. If the Lord tarries, all of us have an appointment with death. This is one appointment you won't miss or you won't be late for!

When I was in college, I had forty or fifty scripture memory cards to help me hide God's Word in my heart. One I've never forgotten is Hebrews 9:27, which says, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment."

Let's notice three encouraging truths that will help you prepare for your final appointment.

I. WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU DIE DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU DO BEFORE YOU DIE

A few years ago, a letter went out from the Greenville County, South Carolina, Department of Social Services. The letter was addressed to over fifty former residents who had recently died. The letter said: "To whom it may concern: Your food stamps will be stopped effective immediately, because we have received notice that you passed away. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances."

That's funny, but the truth is that after you die, you can't change your circumstances. What you do as you prepare for your final appointment will determine where you will spend eternity after you die. There are only two options.

A. If you know the Lord, you'll be with Him at death

In the Luke 16, Jesus pulled back the curtain from the afterlife and showed us the two possible destinies. He told a story about Lazarus and a rich man. This wasn't a parable, because parables were theoretical stories in which Jesus never used proper names. This was a true account of two real people who died.

Lazarus was a beggar who was outside the door of a rich man who had plenty to eat. Lazarus begged for the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. He was so miserable that the dogs licked the sores on his body. Here's how Jesus described Lazarus' death. "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side." (Luke 16:22)

There are a couple of beautiful things to note here. God sends angels to escort the souls and spirits of the redeemed into paradise. This is just another evidence of God's love for His children. Even death cannot separate us from His love.

The second thing to notice is that Lazarus arrived in the presence of Abraham, who was in the presence of God. There is no indication Lazarus was even buried. It was the custom to just toss the bodies of beggars into the fires that burned in the valley of Gehenna near Jerusalem. The disposition of the body at death isn't as important as the disposition of the soul before death. Lazarus didn't earn heaven because he was a poor beggar. He was a man who trusted his soul to God. He was saved by faith.

B. If you reject the Lord, you go to a place of eternal regret

The rich man wasn't named, but he died also, and his funeral was probably a large formal affair. But again, it wasn't the disposition of the body that mattered. It's what the rich man did or didn't do about trusting God.

Jesus said, "The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'" (Luke 16:23-24)

Hades is similar to hell. It's like the holding cell before the final sentence to eternity in the prison of hell after the Great White Throne Judgment that happens at the end of time. Many translations use them interchangeably. Notice what the rich man was experiencing. First, he had awareness of paradise. He could see Lazarus and Abraham. The fact that he recognized Lazarus is just another proof that we will recognize our loved ones in heaven. Imagine the agony of those in Hades being able to see those who have arrived in paradise. Second, the rich man expressed a physical sensation. He had a tongue, and he knew Lazarus had a finger that he asked him to dip in water and cool his tongue. When a believer goes into the presence of Jesus, they have a sense of having a physical body even before Jesus resurrects their bodies.

The rich man also experienced memory and regret. Here's what happened next according to the Message paraphrase: "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.' The rich man said, 'Then let me ask you, Father: Send him to the house of my father where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them so they won't end up here in this place of torment.'" (Luke 16:25-28 MSG)

Did you know that people who died having rejected Christ regret that for every moment of eternity? And if we could lower a microphone into Hades today you'd hear millions of souls begging us to go warn their family members to give their lives to Jesus.

Hell is an unpopular subject. The majority of Americans don't believe in hell. If our U.S. Supreme Court could rule on hell, I'm certain it would be a 5-4 decision outlawing hell as cruel and unusual punishment.

You don't hear much preaching about hell anymore. There was even a pastor of a mega-church in Michigan who wrote a book saying that God's love is so inclusive that no person would experience hell.

The respected English theologian J. C. Ryle once wrote: "The watchman who keeps silent when he sees a fire is guilty of gross neglect. The doctor who tells us we are getting well when we are dying is a false friend. And the pastor who keeps back hell from his people in his sermons is neither a faithful nor a charitable man."

But I must speak about hell because the Bible speaks about hell. It breaks my heart to think that there will be people who die without accepting God's free gift of eternal life.

I used to think it was easy to go to hell. In fact, in college I used to hand out tracts that I thought were funny. On the outside it said "How to go to hell." On the inside there were no words—it was blank by design. Meaning, if you want to go to hell you do nothing. It's easy to go to hell, just never repent of your sins.

I've since changed my mind. I don't think it's easy to go to hell, especially in East Texas. God has given you so many warnings and ways for you to be saved.

Imagine someone is driving down the interstate and they see a flashing sign that says: Danger! Bridge out: 1 mile. Detour ahead. Half a mile later it says: Danger! Bridge out: 1/2 mile. Detour ahead... Danger! Bridge out: 1500 feet. Merge left. There are flashing signs and cones and barriers across the bridge being repaired. What if someone is driving and hits the accelerator and drives right through the barriers and into the gully? Would anyone say, "How can our highway department be so cruel to send somebody to their death?" Of course you wouldn't say that. God has put up so many warnings for every one of us about hell.

One of the warnings is this message today. If you're not a Christian, this is a warning to you: There is a hell to be avoided and you're going to have to crash through God's love and prayers of other people and the conviction of the Holy Spirit to go to hell.

II. IF YOU DIE IN CHRIST, YOU'LL INSTANTLY JOIN YOUR LOVED ONES WHO ARE WITH JESUS

In John 8:24 Jesus said to the unbelieving Pharisees, "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins." There are only two ways to die. You will either die in Christ; you will die in your sins. If you die in Christ, you will immediately join Him and your loved ones who have died in Christ.

The Bible says, "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." (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

If you die in the Lord, the moment you die on planet earth, the angels will escort your soul and spirit to be with the Lord. Your loved ones who died in Christ are already there, and you'll see them and you'll know them.

My dad died two years before my mother. When my mother died, we were glad she would be reunited with him in heaven. Do you have someone in heaven who might be waiting on you? Don't disappoint them. Be sure you know Jesus.

One of the reasons I like country music is that the songs often tell a story. One of my favorites is a song that Brad Paisley recorded in 2008. It's called "Waitin' on a Woman." It's a great music video because Andy Griffith plays the old man in the song. The lyrics are: "Sittin' on a bench at West Town Mall; He sat down in his overalls and asked me; 'You waitin' on a woman?' I nodded yes and said, 'How 'bout you?' He said, 'Son, since 1952, I've been waitin' on a woman.'" Then he goes on and talks about how he's been waiting on his wife all those years. He continued, "And I don't guess we've been anywhere; She hasn't made us late, I swear; Sometimes she does it just 'cause she can do it. Boy, it's just a fact of life, it'll be the same with your young wife; Might as well go on and get used to it; She'll take her time 'cause you don't mind; Waitin' on a woman." The final verse is about going to heaven. The old man continues, "I've read somewhere statistics show; The man's always the first to go; And that makes sense 'cause I know she won't be ready; So when it finally comes my time; And I get to the other side; I'll find myself a bench, if they've got any; I hope she takes her time, 'cause I don't mind waitin' on a woman; Honey, take your time, 'cause I don't mind waitin' on a woman."

Those are great song lyrics by Brad Paisley, but if I had to choose the WORST theological lyrics ever recorded it would be "Last Kiss" by Wayne Cochran recorded in 1961. Pearl Jam covered it in 1999. It's a song about being out on a date, and having a wreck. The chorus says, "Where oh where can my baby be? The Lord took her away from me. She's gone to heaven, so I've got to be good, so I can see my baby when I leave this world."

You don't get to heaven by being good. You only go to heaven by trusting Jesus. Of course, Wayne Cochran knows that now because he's a pastor in Miami, Florida. He's still singing soul music, but now it's soul-saving music.

III. IF YOU'RE ALIVE WHEN JESUS RETURNS, YOU'LL BE REUNITED WITH YOUR LOVED ONES WHO HAVE DIED IN CHRIST

Have you noticed whenever I say everyone is going to die, I always preface it with the phrase, "If the Lord tarries?" There will be a generation of believers who will not have to go through a cemetery to see Jesus. When Jesus returns, He'll bring with Him the souls/spirits of our loved ones who have died in Christ. In a nanosecond, He will raise their bodies from the grave and their souls/spirits will occupy their eternal resurrection body.

Those of us who are alive will be caught up to be with the Lord. We'll be changed instantly to be like Jesus. In other words, the believers still alive when Jesus comes back will never have a funeral. It's wise to make preparations for your burial; but I'm not looking for the undertaker, I'm looking for The Uppertaker!

Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Philippians 3:20-21)

The reason we don't really feel at home in this world is because once we give our lives to Christ, we are citizens of another country. And from that moment on, we become homesick for heaven.

Every October, hundreds of thousands of Monarch butterflies descend on the eucalyptus trees on the Monterey peninsula. They come to California to escape the colder temperatures in the Rockies. They will stay there, lay eggs, and die. Their offspring will then fly north in the summer. The next fall, the fourth generations of those butterflies return to the exact area where their great-great-grandparents roosted. Some etymologists claim they return to the same tree of their ancestors. They don't have maps or GPS, and they only have a speck of a brain, so how do these butterflies return to the same trees of their great-great-grandparents? Some claim it is simply biological instinct. I believe it's just another evidence of God's fingerprints in His Creation. In the same way, I believe God has placed in each one of us an instinctive desire to be drawn to our Creator. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes that God has placed eternity in our hearts. This longing for heaven can only be fulfilled in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Are you prepared to die? Not everyone is. For those who don't have a relationship with Jesus, death is a scary prospect. Bertrand Russell was an English philosopher and atheist. Here's how he described the prospect of death: "The life of Man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach and where none can tarry long. One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death."

Compare that to Hannah Moore who was an English poet and playwright: "There is one single fact which we may oppose to all the wit and argument of atheism, namely, that no man ever repented of being a Christian on his death-bed."

There's a lot of wisdom in that statement. There have been many people who called out for God in their last moments. But there has never been a single recorded instance of a Christian denying their faith at the time of death.

There's an old hymn that asked the question, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" It was written in 1907 by Ada Habershon. The lyrics say: "There are loved ones in the glory; Whose dear forms you often miss. When you close your earthly story, Will you join them in their bliss? Will the circle be unbroken; By and by, Lord, by and by? There's a better home awaiting; In the sky,

Lord in the sky. One by one their seats were emptied; One by one they went away; Now the family is parted; Will it be complete one day? Will the circle be unbroken; By and by, Lord, by and by? There's a better home awaiting; In the sky, Lord, in the sky."

My grandmother on my mother's side was called Me-maw. She made the best banana pudding in the world, with real vanilla wafers on the sides of the bowl soaking up the delicious pudding. It had a meringue topping that was four inches high.

She was a tiny woman, who was about ¼ Native American, and she loved the Lord. She attended church every Sunday without fail, even when she had company. My mother's dad was a big man, about 6' 6" and weighing over 250 pounds. We called him Paw-paw. He was a rough, tough, man who worked for many years on the railroad. Most of us grandkids were scared of him because he had a temper, and he drank a bit.

Paw-paw never attended church. But he drove Me-maw to church and picked her up after services. He was one of those men who thought religion was for the women and children, but real men didn't need it. The few times I brought the subject up, he'd say something like. "The Man upstairs and I are okay."

In the early 1980s I was teaching an evangelism course using Cecil Thompson's concentric circles of concern. It's a simple tool to reflect on who in your circle of relationships need the Lord. I was the center circle, and I knew the Lord. My immediate family was the next circle, and I knew my wife knew the Lord, and was praying that my two daughters would trust Jesus when they were old enough to understand. Both my parents were saved. My brother and sister knew the Lord. But when I got to the circle about grandparents, the Holy Spirit put Paw-paw on my heart. At that moment he was in a care facility in Panama City Florida suffering from congestive heart failure. We didn't really have hospices back then, but this was an end-of-life facility. I called Me-maw and told her I was driving from North Alabama to see Paw-paw.

When I got to his room, this giant of a man had lost so much weight I hardly recognized him. When I saw him, I suspected he would never leave that bed.

What do you say to a relative who is dying, and you don't know if they're going to heaven? That's exactly what I told him. I said, "Paw-paw I love you. Most of our family members are believers and we know that when we die we're going to heaven. Don't you believe Me-maw is going to heaven?" He nodded.

"Paw-paw I just can't stand the thought of being in heaven, and you not being there with the rest of us. It's not the Man Upstairs who will save you. It takes more than just believing in God. Would you allow me to tell you how to go to heaven when you die?" He nodded again.

I shared the plan of salvation with him. I told him he had to admit he was a sinner and would never be good enough to earn heaven. I told him the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. I told him he could open his heart and receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior. I quoted Revelation 3:20 and said, "Jesus is standing at the door of your heart and He's knocking on your heart's door. Will you ask Him to come into your heart and save you?"

"If you want me to lead you in a prayer of faith I want you to reach out and take my hand."

I waited for a few seconds. Then he took his big, calloused hand and grabbed mine. And I led him in a simple prayer. When he finished the prayer, I was crying; Me-maw was crying, and there were tears streaming down the rough old face of Paw-paw.

That's the last time I saw Paw-paw alive. I preached his funeral a few weeks later. I believe I'll see him in heaven. Because he lived a good life? No. Because Jesus isn't a liar; and His Word says, "As many as received him, to them gave he the power to become Sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." (John 1:12 KJV)

Is there someone in your family who wants you to join them in heaven? Is there someone in your family with whom you need to share Jesus?

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes