

# “What Happens When We Die?”

July 6, 2008

They say there are two things that are certain in life: death and taxes. There may be some ways to avoid taxes, but there is no known way to avoid dying. Sooner or later, it will happen to all of us – our bodies will stop functioning and the life we have known will come to an end.

The question we are trying to answer this morning is this: what happens when we die? Sure, the Bible talks about being resurrected at some point in the future when Jesus returns to earth and that all who have trusted in Him will be raised to life to live with Him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18). But what happens in between the time we breath our last breathe and the time of our resurrection? Do we just lay there “dead” or do we have some sort of “heavenly” experience while we wait?

Here is what the Bible teaches:

1. At death, we go to one of two destinations

Luke 16:19-24

How can we know which one we will get?

John 3:16-20

Romans 6:23

2. Believers go immediately to the presence of Jesus

Luke 16:22-23

Luke 23:43

2 Corinthians 5:8

Philippians 1:21-23

3. Believers will dwell with God forever

Psalm 23:6

John 3:16

John 14:1-3

I have enjoyed the various questions that have been submitted this past month. You have given me some really good questions you want addressed. I have another question this week – and this is one that really makes you think. Here’s the question: “What does God have in store for us after death?” I’ve shortened the question in the outline to this: “what happens when we die?”

We don’t hear so much about it now, but for a while it was really popular to talk about the Near Death Experiences people have had. You know what I’m talking about, someone flat-lines in a hospital, and while the doctors and nurses are trying to revive them, the person kind of floats away from their body, watching the whole scene of what’s going on, and floats towards a loving being of light – only to be told they need to go back.

I did a little reading about these experiences this past week. It’s all pretty interesting stuff. There was one guy who did extensive research on near death experience, but didn’t limit his research on just the near death experiences that occur now, but went back in history to stories of near death experiences from years and years ago. These days when people talk of NEAR death experiences, they generally talk about experiencing love and warmth and light. But years ago when people used to have near death experiences, the experiences were anything but warm and fuzzy. Many years ago when people had near death experience, they were generally terrible experiences: torture and threatening and like they were headed for hell – not like they were headed for heaven.

Why the difference? Well, these days people generally don’t believe in hell or a place of eternal punishment. People generally believe everyone is going to heaven, unless they have been really, really bad. But years ago, this wasn’t the case. Years ago, people tended to believe in hell and there was a genuine sense of fear of dying and having to stand in judgment before God. Sermons today tend to emphasize God’s love and compassion and mercy. Sermons back then tended to talk about sinners in the hands of an angry God.

The researcher concluded that the near death experiences were culturally conditioned. They were some sort of subconscious experience based on a person’s belief system and cultural expectations. In other words, they weren’t really traveling down a tunnel towards a bright light, they were just doing it in their subconscious mind. And the people long ago weren’t really being tortured and dangled over hell, they were just experiencing it in their minds.

Why do I bother telling you all of this? Well, I tell you this simply to say that we really can’t answer the question of “what happens when we die” by looking at the accounts given by people who have had some sort of near death experience. Those experiences, no matter how real they seemed to that individual, may or may not have been real. We don’t know, and they don’t know either.

If we can’t know from people’s near death experience what happens after death, how can we know at all?

I have a theory. My theory is based on a firm belief that I possess. I believe that God has revealed His truth to us through the pages of Scripture – through the words of the Bible. I

believe that the things said in the Bible are accurate, true, and that we can depend on it. Based on this belief, here is my theory: My theory is that the best way we can learn what happens after we die is to take a look at what the Bible says on the topic. So, given that basic belief and the subsequent theory, I figure we might as well try to answer this question by turning to the pages of scripture.

This morning I really wish we could go sit on chairs in the fellowship hall or Foundation and sit in a great big circle. I would really like to just do this as an informal Bible Study rather than as a speech. So, I'm going to do my best to simply walk with you through the Bible and look at what the Bible says will happen when we die.

Our first stop this morning will be at a parable Jesus told in Luke chapter 16. Now, you have to be careful when you try to find answers in parables. The stories Jesus told may have been hypothetical – just stories he made up to teach a point; or they may actually be true stories of things that really happened. We don't know. And when Jesus told the parables, He generally had some specific point in mind. When we stray too far away from His specific point, we run the risk of getting way off track.

Given those general warnings, I want to take a look at a parable Jesus told that deals with a couple of people who died. In this parable, He describes in some detail what happens to them immediately after they die. Turn with me to Luke chapter 16:

*Luke 16:19-21 (NLT)*

*“Jesus said, ‘There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed and who lived each day in luxury. [20] At his door lay a diseased beggar named Lazarus. [21] As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man's table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores.’”*

*Luke 16:22-23 (NLT)*

*“Finally, the beggar died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and his soul went to the place of the dead. There, in torment, he saw Lazarus in the far distance with Abraham.”*

*Luke 16:24 (NLT)*

*“The rich man shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in these flames.’”*

One of the main points I see in this parable about what happens after we die is consistent with what we find in many other places in the Bible. So I think we are on safe ground when we make this conclusion. First of all, we need to understand that our existence does not end when our bodies die. God has given each of us a soul. And as I understand the Bible, our souls continue living even after our bodies die. It doesn't matter whether you are a good person or a bad person, when your body dies, that is not the end of your existence.

As we see from this parable, and from many other passages in the Bible, when a person dies, their souls pass on to one of two places. In this parable, as in other places in the Bible, one possible destination is a place of extreme torment and discomfort. That place is known by a variety of terms, but we generally know it by the name of “hell.” So, at the moment of death, some souls go to hell.

But some souls do not go to hell. Some souls go to a place of comfort, peace and blessing. It is the place where God’s people go. Again, this place is called a lot of different things, but we generally call this place “heaven.”

Although there might be some technical differences between hades and hell, and paradise and heaven, but for the sake of simplicity, I’m just going to use the terms “heaven” and “hell” as generic descriptions of the two different places people go at the moment of death.

O.K., at the moment of death, we go to one of two places: heaven or hell.

Here’s a good question: how do we know which one we will get?

This question takes us right back to the basics of what the Bible is all about. So, let’s take a little detour this morning and look at it for a few minutes. Let’s go to one of the best known verses in the New Testament: John 3:16.

*John 3:16 (NLT)*

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."*

*John 3:17 (NLT)*

*"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it."*

*John 3:18 (NLT)*

*"There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him. But those who do not trust him have already been judged for not believing in the only Son of God."*

*John 3:19 (NLT)*

*"Their judgment is based on this fact: The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil."*

*John 3:20 (NLT)*

*"They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished."*

*John 3:21 (NLT)*

*"But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants."*

O.K., these verses talk about two different destinations too: One destination of eternal life; one destination of judgment and punishment. But it gives us an answer about how we can know which way we will go. The answer depends on us and the choices we make here on earth.

John 3:16: if we “believe” on Jesus – if we commit ourselves in faith to Him and make Him the Lord of our lives, God promises to grant us forgiveness and the gift of eternal life and blessings.

John 3:18-20: if we refuse to place our trust in Jesus and commit our lives to Him in faith, we are rejecting the offer of forgiveness and are, instead, choosing to accept eternal punishment because of our stubborn rejection.

It is really pretty simple and straight forward. We decide are own fate. We decide whether we want to go to heaven or hell by choosing to either submit our lives to Jesus or not.

*Romans 6:23 (NLT)*

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

O.K., so at the moment of death, we go to one of two directions: a place of torment or a place of blessing.

Now the parable in Luke 16 isn’t very clear in many respects. It simply says that the righteous Lazarus went to be with Abraham. If we chase down some other verses, we find that not only will we go to be with Abraham; not only will we go to be with other believers; at the moment of our death here on earth, we go immediately into the presence of Jesus!

Let’s look at Luke chapter 23. There is a very famous passage where two people who are about to die are having a discussion. One is a person who is known to be a bad apple. His life has been wasted pursuing bad choices. But right at the end, he has a change of heart and makes a profession of faith in Jesus.

The other character is Jesus himself. Both Jesus and the criminal who is being crucified beside him are about to die. After the thief makes his expression of faith in Jesus, this is what Jesus said to him:

*Luke 23:43 (NLT)*

*“And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

They were about to die. Jesus had some words of comfort to give him. The moment they died, they weren’t going to just pass into non-existence. The moment they died, they weren’t just going to come to an end. The moment they died, they were to make a transition – a glorious transition. They were going to make a transition to a place Jesus

called “paradise.” The repentant thief was going to be with Jesus in “paradise” when he crossed the boundary we call death – and was going to pass into what God calls eternal life.

So, when we die, it isn’t the end. We don’t end up in a “half-way” place of purgatory. For those who have surrendered their lives to Jesus in repentance and faith, they can have a bold expectation of an immediate transition from life here on earth to life with Jesus on the other side.

Now, we don’t really know what it will be like when we get there. But from the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus we get the idea it is a pleasant place for the children of God. Lazarus was carried there by the angels and he seemed to be in comfort.

Jesus describes the place as “paradise.” The word He used is used elsewhere in the Bible to refer to heaven – a place of eternal bliss. The term literally means “garden,” as in the garden of Eden. In the book of Revelation 2:7, it talks about going to Paradise where the tree of life is.

I love that imagery. When God’s children die here on earth, it’s as if they go straight to the Garden of Eden – that wonderful garden of beauty and bliss that God had originally designed for us.

The Bible doesn’t really tell us much about what to expect when we get to heaven. We don’t know what we will be doing and experiencing. I guess God doesn’t think we need to know all of the details. But I am content in simply knowing that when I die here on earth, I’ll be with Jesus in a place of peace, a place of comfort, a place like the paradise of the Garden of Eden!

There are other verses which talk about an immediate transition from this life to the eternal life. I’ll let you study them out on your own. I have a couple of them listed in the outline where Paul talks about leaving this earth and going immediately to be with the Lord.

*2 Cor. 5:8 (NLT)*

*“Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord.”*

*Philip. 1:21 (NLT)*

*“For to me, living is for Christ, and dying is even better.”*

*Philip. 1:22-23 (NLT)*

*“Yet if I live, that means fruitful service for Christ. I really don't know which is better. [23] I'm torn between two desires: Sometimes I want to live, and sometimes I long to go and be with Christ. That would be far better for me,”*

But I want to skip on down to another thought – one that is a continuation of what we have been talking about. When we who have committed our lives in faith to Jesus pass from our

time here on earth, we have a glorious future waiting for us. We will dwell with God forever – eternity! Look at one of the most famous passages of scripture in the O.T.:

*Psalm 23:6 (NLT)*

*“Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.”*

I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. When my time here on earth is over; when I have breathed my last, experienced my last heart beat, had my last brain wave activity, when some doctor pulls the sheet over me and shuts the eyes of this earthly body – that’s when the real party just begins! That’s when God’s angels will carry me to His presence to enjoy the blessings of an eternity with him.

I know many of you have had to say good bye to loved ones in recent times.

Others of you will do so in the months and years to come.

Some of you may well cross that path yourself.

It is only natural that we mourn the loss of our loved ones. Their passing leaves a huge hole in our hearts – and emptiness in our lives that we have trouble filling.

But let me give you some words of encouragement. Let me pass on to you some of the words Jesus gave to His disciples in John chapter 14 as he was getting ready to die himself. He realized his passing would hit his disciples hard – that they would miss him greatly. They might even fear for their own lives because they didn’t know what to expect.

In the face of death, whether ours or someone we love deeply, we can take hope. Listen to the hope that Jesus gives:

*John 14:1 (NLT)*

*“Don't be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me.”*

*John 14:2-3 (NLT)*

*“There are many rooms in my Father's home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so, I would tell you plainly. [3] When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.”*

Here is what Jesus said. Don’t let the death of God’s children trouble you. And if you are a child of God, don’t worry about it yourself. There is no reason to cling so tenaciously to life here on earth. We live in a shadow land – the real life waits for us when we have finished our time here on earth and pass into the eternity of joy and peace and comfort and blessings God has waiting for us in the Garden of Eden known as Paradise or Heaven.

Jesus came to earth to make it possible for us to receive forgiveness of our sins. We need only to commit our lives to Him in faith. And when we do, we can then be assured that we will have a wonderful time with Him in eternity.

There is no comparison between what awaits the children of God and what awaits those who have been rebellious and stubborn by refusing to submit their lives to Him. Those who have spent their lives rejecting Him will, in the end, be rejected by Him. He will allow them to experience what they have asked for: an existence without Him – an eternity of darkness, no love, no compassion, no mercy, no peace, no comfort. It is a decision they have made, and God allows them to make that choice.

But God has a completely different destination for those of us who chose to turn our lives over to Him in faith and obedience. If we choose His path during this life, we are rewarded with His continued light, love, compassion, mercy, peace, comfort and blessings throughout all eternity.

You are given the choice. You can choose a life and an eternity without God. Or you can choose a life and an eternity with Him.

Which will you choose?

If you have been resisting God; if you have been resisting the decision to submit your life to Him and to follow Him in life, it is not too late. You can change your mind. The thief on the cross made a mess of his life, but turned to God in the end and Jesus accepted him in love and mercy. No matter what kind of mess you have made of your life up to now, you can still turn to Him in repentance and accept His love and mercy.

Turn to God. Don't miss out on all that God wants to give you in this life and in the life of eternity which awaits you when your life here on earth comes to a close.