

DEATH, THEN WHAT? QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING

Everyday we are reminded of the reality of death by the obituary columns that fill our newspapers. Cemeteries with their tombstones and peaceful settings dot the countryside. The evening news is filled with reports concerning death. The Bible clearly states that “it is appointed unto men once to die” (Heb. 9:27). Death is the destiny of all people. Paul Helm wrote in his book *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell* that “death is inevitable not merely in the sense that it will happen to each one of us, but also because it is *bound* to happen.”¹ Death is inescapable. This common occurrence is shared by all human beings.

The book of Ecclesiastes speaks to the realities of life: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die” (Eccles. 3:1-2). In the New Testament, Jesus spoke of a man who had planned for his present life, but he had neglected to prepare himself for death: “And he spoke a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease. Eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:16-20). Everyone needs to be educated about what lies beyond the grave. We make wise investments and

¹Paul Helm, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 36.

prepare for hosts of things in life. Just think of what goes into planning for just a week of vacation. How long will eternity be? Have we planned for it? Death is final, but it is not the end.

A legitimate question is “Why do we die?” Death is a result of the disobedience of Adam: “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:15-17). God forewarned Adam of the consequences of disregarding His command; it was a penalty of death. Adam disobeyed God’s command, therefore bringing death upon all of mankind. Romans 5:12 teaches us that “wherefore, as by one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” Death came about because of the sin of Adam. The reason there is death is that there is sin: “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:15). Death is certain and it is coming for you and me; it stalks us.

The ever presence of death makes us think about the preciousness and the brevity of life. James 4:14 visualizes this truth for us because it says that our life “is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away.” Life is short. Our life is compared to a vapor, similar to the ones we see on a black-top road in the summertime; it appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Life is fast, it is quick, and before we know it, it is over. The Bible teaches us to number our days and to redeem the time. According to Ps. 90:10, we have done exceptionally well if we make it to eighty years of

age. The Bible says that we know not “what shall be on the morrow” (James 4:14). The good news is that we are still breathing and our hearts are still pumping. Every day, every breath, is a gift from God that should not be taken for granted.

There are many misconceptions concerning death. One misconception is that death brings the end of one’s existence. This life is all there is, but that is not true. Job asked a question about life: “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). Jesus answered this question by saying, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Jesus told the dying thief on the cross: “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). There is life after death! A person’s soul never dies, but will live for eternity (forever). At no time does a person cease to exist. When we die, we pass from this life to the next. Death is a departure, as Paul clearly stated, “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand” (2 Tim. 4:6).

Another misconception concerning death is the location of one’s soul after death. Jesus succinctly defines what lies ahead of us when we die with these words: “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Matt. 25:46). Many believe that the spirits of those who die float around like ghosts. Others say the deceased sleep (soul sleep) in the ground; this is often called eternal rest (or rest in peace–R.I.P.). Still others believe they will come back as something else; this is called reincarnation. All of these beliefs are false according to the Word of God.

Luke 16:22-24 tells us the story of what happened when two men died: “And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom; the rich man also died, and was buried; And in Hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” The Bible teaches that there are two places of eternal destination: heaven and all of its glory or hell and all of its torment. Erwin Lutzer wrote, “One minute after you slip behind the parted curtain, you will either be enjoying a personal welcome from Christ or catching your first glimpse of gloom as you have never known it. Either way, your future will be irrevocably fixed and eternally unchangeable.”² Death is the coldness and stillness of the human body, but our spirits are chauffeured through the gates of either heaven or hell. John 3:18 indictates what will determine where we will find ourselves after death: “He that believeth on Jesus Christ is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.” (John 3:36). Based upon these verses, our soul enters into either eternal life with God or eternal life without God.

A third misconception is that death is something to fear. Most people fear death because of the unknown. This is not true for the Christian: “Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent

²Erwin W. Lutzer, *One Minute after You Die: A Preview of Your Final Destination* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 9.

from the body, and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6-8). The Bible teaches that for the Christian, to be physically dead is to be alive in the presence of God. This state of being is preferred! Death is gain and the afterlife is far better than the life we now live: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better” (Phil. 1:21-23). Many would acknowledge the elevated status of Psalm 23 is due to the reassuring statements regarding the passageway from life to death. In this famous Psalm we read these words: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou [Christ] art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). There is no need for the Christian to fear death.

The most tragic misconception about death is the belief that everyone goes to Heaven. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by Me” (John 14:6). What does that tell us? There is only one road to Heaven. There is only one highway to God and it is through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the exclusive way. Any other way will not lead to God the Father. Only those who have entrusted their life to Christ will go to Heaven. These misconceptions can all be replaced by the truth of God’s Word.

When death comes, what happens to the soul? There are only two places a soul can be after death—heaven or hell. Jesus spoke of only two eternal states—heaven and hell. Heaven is a real place; so is hell. Heaven is the home of the believer (all those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ). Those who have died in Christ have been released from this sin-cursed world. They will be forever free from sin, sickness, weakness,

suffering, and sorrow. Heaven is a spacious home because “the Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Perish refers to being separated from God for eternity in Hell. Repentance speaks to the concept of turning away from our sin and trusting in Jesus Christ. God offers to all people this free gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23). Heaven is spacious and there is plenty of room. It will be no one’s fault but their own if they do not end up in Heaven. Heaven is the home of reunions where we will be reunited with the saved that have already passed on. We will be reunited with God: “So shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). Heaven is the home of eternity and this rest endures forever: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6).

Let us not be deceived, hell is just as real as heaven. Hell is the destiny of the unsaved, those who have not trusted in Christ and repented of their sin; they will not see Heaven. Hell is the home of bondage, darkness, and chains. It is not a place of reunions, for there is no joyous fellowship but only “outer darkness.” The Bible says, “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12). Hell is also a spacious place: “For wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat” (Matt. 7:13). Hell is for those who reject Christ. Jesus proclaimed, “Depart from me, ye cursed into everlasting fire” (Matt. 25:41). There is no middle ground. According to the Bible, there are only two eternal destinations – heaven or hell. The only way into heaven is through salvation in Jesus Christ. The Bible states that today is the day of salvation: “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). The Bible has great urgency in calling all men to receive Jesus Christ as Savior.

Why is Jesus the only way to heaven? No man has ever conquered death save one, Jesus Christ. This is what separates Him from all other men. Jesus tasted death for every man and has won the ultimate victory through His physical resurrection. Physical death may come, but it can not hold us: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he [Jesus Christ] also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15).

1 Cor. 15:54-56 teaches us that death and the grave have no victory over the believer. Heaven is possible through the Gospel of Jesus Christ: “Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim.1:8-10). The gospel is simply defined in 1 Cor. 15:1-4 as the death of Christ, His burial, and His resurrection from the dead: “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and in which ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.”

How do we prepare for life beyond death? Knowing Christ makes all the difference. Jesus promised eternal life to those who believe in Him: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). As a believer in Jesus Christ, not even death can separate us from Him: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Rom. 14:7-8 tells us that “for none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.”

The destination of an individual's soul is determined by his personal decision regarding salvation in Christ Jesus. The redemptive work of Jesus Christ makes heaven a reality and there is salvation in no other name: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus Christ came to give eternal and everlasting life to all men: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13).

What happens to our physical body when we die? Our bodies are like the shells we find along the seashore. The animal that once inhabited that shell has departed and the shell remains and is without life. Our physical bodies house our eternal spirit, and when the spirit is gone, the body is dead. The body looks like it is sleeping, but it is actually decaying and will rot and stink in a matter of time: “Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days” (John 11:39). Our physical bodies are a temporary dwelling

place for our soul (2 Cor. 5:1-3). The body will eventually return to dust awaiting its future resurrection. The Bible teaches us of two separate resurrections: one unto life with God, and the other unto condemnation and separation from God (John 5:28-29).

Jesus promised that He will return: “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1-3). The Bible teaches us that when Christ returns, He will bring with Him the souls of the deceased believers. Jesus will then resurrect their former bodies and reunite them with their soul: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep [asleep refers to the dead], that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them [the souls of the dead in Christ] also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them who are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore, comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:13-18). This future event is also spoken of in 1 Cor. 15:51-57:

“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be

brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Our physical bodies will be resurrected in perfection and we will live forever this way.

Each individual must ask himself these questions: What is my life? It is even a vapor. If I die, shall I live again? Yes! Now the most important question: If I die, where will I spend eternity? Will I trust Jesus Christ and the Word of God, or will I pass on and be punished? Jesus said, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).

Erwin Lutzer, in his book *One Minute after You Die: A Preview of Your Final Destination*, shared the following: “D. L. Moody at death caught a glimpse of heaven. Awakening from sleep he said, ‘Earth recedes, Heaven opens before me. If this is death, it is sweet! There is no valley here. God is calling me and I must go!’ Just before John Bunyan died, he said, ‘Weep not for me, but for yourselves. I go to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will through the mediation of His blessed Son receive me though a sinner; there we shall meet to sing the new song and remain everlastingly happy, world without end.’”³

As you consider the question, “What happens after I die,” are you prepared for life after death? Have you personally accepted Christ as your Savior? If not, are you willing to turn unto the Savior today? Will you receive Jesus Christ and eternal life? Would you like to know that you have a home in Heaven reserved for you? Jesus Christ died on the cross and shed His blood for your sins. He was buried and rose again, victor over sin and death. A free gift of salvation has been provided for you. You can simply cry out to God and say, “God, be merciful to me a sinner, I put my trust in Jesus Christ alone.

³Ibid., 141.

Please save my soul. Thank you, Jesus, for dying for me and my sins. In Jesus' name, Amen." Now you can know for certain what will happen to you when death comes. Your eternal destination will be life eternal in Heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ! Hallelujah!