

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

"What Happens to Us When We Die?"

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It happened one morning on the way to church. I was driving the car, and A.J. and Alex were sitting quietly in the back seat. It had been a quiet trip so far, which in hindsight should have been a clue that A.J. was thinking some very deep thoughts. When we were about halfway to church, he asked me something.

"Daddy," he said, "am I going to die?"

Now I had always assumed that I would have to answer that question one day, but I thought I had at least a few more years to get ready for it, and I didn't think that it would just come out of the blue like that as we drove to church. I've always believed that honesty is the best policy when speaking to children (because they can usually tell when you aren't being honest anyway), so I answered, "Yes, A.J. Dying is something that happens to everybody someday. But hopefully that won't happen for a long, long time." I expected him to get upset about that, and I was prepared for it, but instead he asked another question.

"Daddy," he said, "When I die am I going to heaven?"

Unfortunately A.J. is old enough to be aware of the fact that we've

had members of our family die, and he's asked questions about them and we've talked to him about heaven during those times. But as is the case so often with children, sometimes your best answers as a parent only lead to more questions. I told him that yes, when we die we can be assured that God loves us so much that we will go to be with God forever, and we'll also be together with the people we've loved who have died as well. I thought that was a pretty good answer, but suddenly A.J. burst into tears. Obviously something I had said worried him, so I asked gently what he was concerned about. His answer was one I'll always remember. "But if I go to heaven," he said through his tears and sobs, "I'm going to miss Mommy."

Of course, I overlooked the obvious omission of a certain parent from his thinking and simply replied, "I would miss Mommy a lot, too."

One of the reasons that questions about death can be so unsettling is that we train ourselves not to think about it. I think most of us acknowledge the reality of death, but ultimately we take comfort in that voice that says, "Don't worry. It's probably won't happen for a long, long time." We choose not to think about it or

dwell on it, and instead assume that we'll deal with it when we get there. If we're looking to scripture as a guide for how to discuss death, however, we will approach the reality of death honestly and faithfully. We will not shy away from the truth that death is one of the few things that happens to us all. We will also acknowledge that God has much to say about death, and in fact what God says about death teaches us a great deal about life. St. Benedict was once quoted as saying, "Keep death always before thine eyes, and life will be much the sweeter."

So what does the Bible say about death and what comes after? What happens to us when we die? We may assume that death is something utterly unpleasant, and that which follows death is some intolerable state of separation from all you knew in life. I think about Bob Wilcox shuffling around the stage in the Kerr Building, rattling his chains at Ebenezer Scrooge and crying out, "Agoonyyy and painnnn, aggonnyyy and painnnnn!!" I can't do it like Bob does it, but you get the point.

We could also assume that death is just the end, and any possibility of there being *something* after this life isn't worth talking about. The notion of resurrection has always encountered a fair

amount of opposition, particularly in the days of Jesus. The Sadducees, who butted heads with Jesus on more than one occasion, were absolutely against any notion of life after death whatsoever. There are records of grave markers during the days of the Apostle Paul that contained sayings such as: *I was not. I became. I am not. I care not.* It's quite a bleak picture of life and what comes after, but you don't have to search very far to find someone who has latched onto that idea.

The Bible, however, gives us a different picture, though it isn't at all specific. Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once famously said, "I refuse to conjecture on the furniture of heaven, or the temperature of hell." That is to say, the Bible gives very few specific details about life after death, and when we talk about what happens to us when we die, we must be careful not to say more than God himself has said on the subject. As hard as it may be, we must learn to accept that there is more mystery than certainty in the Bible when it comes to answering this question. Perhaps the longest and most specific conversation about the topic occurs in John's Gospel, where Jesus reassures his frightened disciples that in his Father's house are many dwelling places (John 14:1-7). "I am

going there to prepare a place for you and I will come again and take you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also." This language that Jesus uses, describing the afterlife as "many dwelling places," at least indicates that we would do poorly to think about "heaven" as one specific place and instead think of it as a state of being with God. By inference, of course, hell would be the state of being far away from God, a condition quite possible to attain right here on earth. But that's another sermon.

Later in John's Gospel, the risen Christ appears to his disciples. He comes to them when they are locked in an upper room, filled with fear and uncertainty about the future. They are in a room and the door is locked, yet Jesus enters and says to them, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19-28). The point of that story is that Jesus was there for them, even as they faced an uncertain future. And if he was there for them, risen and offering peace, then he will be there for us, and we will know him face-to-face. What we have in the New Testament are not so much literal details as imaginative imagery. We have not descriptions but promises, promises of a risen life in Christ and with Christ. What we will look like, what those we have loved and lost will look like, we cannot say or know.

So, while sparse on the details, the Bible does give us a fundamental claim that lies at the center of the Christian faith: the belief in resurrection. Christian faith is at its heart a resurrection faith. It is based on the profound conviction that when God raised Christ from the dead, death was finally, ultimately, and completely defeated. We heard this in our Old Testament reading, which reads:

He will destroy on this mountain

the shroud that is cast over all peoples,

the sheet that is spread over all nations;

he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,

*and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all
the earth,*

for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

*Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might
save us.*

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

We also hear it in our New Testament reading, in which the Apostle Paul describes life-after-death using the imagery of a seed. The body is but a bare seed, he says, and "what is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." Then in one of the most eloquent passages of the entire Bible, Paul writes:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 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... Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'

You can imagine the specifics of what that's like if you wish, but the overwhelming message of scripture doesn't give us specific details. What it gives us is simple a mystery, and a promise... but what a mystery! And what a promise!

The late Christian theologian Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Our Greatest Gift*, lays out two choices that are before us. The first is to live as if this life is all that we have and death is far away and we need not talk about it. The second is to claim what he calls "our divine childhood." As 1 John puts it so clearly, "See what love the Father has for us that we should be called children of God, and so we are. We are God's children." And if you are a child of God, if you know that promise, then you can be assured that God will not abandon you to the cold silence of death at the end of your earthly life. Instead, you will come to behold all of God's glory and all of God's love. And you will come to see it face-to-face in a way that we cannot now imagine.

I want to close with a conversation that Nouwen creates between a set of twins not yet born, still living in their mother's womb. They are brother and sister, pondering the uncertainty that awaits them. The sister says, "You know, brother, I believe there is going to be life after birth." The brother says, "Why, that's the most ridiculous idea I have ever heard." But the girl insists, saying, "There must be something else—a place with light and freedom to move," but she couldn't convince her brother. Then she said

hesitantly, "You are not going to believe what I am going to say now either. But I will tell you what else I believe. I believe there is a mother."

"Well, you have never seen a mother, and neither have I," the brother announces. "This place is all that we have." The sister says, "But don't you feel a presence there? Don't you feel the squeezes and intimations of something else now and again? I think those are there to get us ready for another place. A place far more beautiful than this. A place where we will see our mother face to face."

That's the promise, the reality that awaits us. And you need not look very far to see it. There are lots of places you might look, but I usually prefer the words of 1 John 3:2, which reads,

*"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."*

So may it be! Thanks be to God! Amen.