

### **FAQs: 3. What Happens When I Die?**

**2 Corinthians 4:16-5:9**

**January 21, 2018**

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How are we doing with our 40 Day Prayer Challenge? I think the real challenge is to not let our distractions be the reason not to pray but our reason to pray. Can I just say I was among those praying in the final minute of a certain football game last Sunday? As much as I'd like to think God a favorite football team whose colors are purple and gold, I don't think God plays favorites – but that didn't keep me from praying and then losing hope. With about a minute left in the game, I could not bear to watch anymore so I took the dog outside. I returned with just 10 seconds left in the game – and my prayer was answered! How did the Vikings do it? Folks, it was me! If you are reading Mark Batterson's book, *Draw the Circle*, in yesterday's reading he offers this bit of wisdom about prayer: "Many people pray like they are playing the lottery. Prayer is more like an investment account. If we are going to experience a miracle one day, we need to pray every day." So, keep praying... Today is day 14 in our 40 day prayer challenge.

And keep hoping. Everybody has questions and doubts, and with this series, I want us to be the kind of church that leans into this. Today's question is a big one: What happens to you when you die? It's not just an idle question. Some of you think about this every year on the anniversary of the death of a parent or a spouse or a child. What might have been if he or she were here, and what is life for them now? We wonder. And frankly, we'd like to know before we get there. I've had this conversation many times with people in our Messiah family who were facing death. What will happen to me?

A Barna survey asked Americans to describe their views about life after death. 10% said this is it. When we die, that's the end. We cease to exist. Another 10% when asked said they don't know. They would like to think there is something more, but they don't know. 20%, that's one in five, think people are reincarnated – that when we die our soul re-inhabits another person and life continues. And 60% believe in the resurrection – that after death we go to heaven. This morning, I'm not going to spend time examining why someone might think there is nothing after death, and instead let's consider the other 90% who at least hold out hope that there is something more.

I find it interesting that 20% would embrace reincarnation, including many Christians. It is a fascinating idea that we see in movies – this idea that we don't really die but remain in this world. And when you think about, it sounds intriguing that you could have a chance to try life all over again. The idea of reincarnation comes out of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. But those religions don't see reincarnation as something positive. The goal is to escape the cycle of reincarnation. Think about it. Why would anyone want to come back again with no memory of what happened the last time? Reincarnation is based on the idea that in life we accumulate good karma and bad karma and the sum total of your karma determines whether you move up or move down the ladder of life forms and a person is trapped, reincarnated over and over again – perhaps millions of times until you can reach Nirvana where Hinduism says we are absorbed into a higher consciousness and Buddhism says we are extinguished – like a pebble in a pond with ripple after ripple until finally – nothing. That's not hope. What purpose could God have in reincarnation?

The Christian view of resurrection is very different than that: We die one time and after that there is a judgment and we carry our soul with us forever. At every funeral that I conduct, I begin with these words of Jesus; "I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25) In John's gospel,

Jesus says, **My Father's house has plenty of room... and I am going there to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.** Which one carries a message of hope? Life with Christ or life over and over again until you are extinguished?

So, how exactly does this resurrection work? What happens when we die? And when we turn to the Bible we find two different descriptions. We read that in death we go to sleep until the Second Coming of Christ when those who have died are awakened and join Jesus. But we also read that with death we immediately go to heaven to be with God. Which is it? The New Testament is not entirely clear. And that may be because the apostles and first Christians thought that Jesus would return in their lifetime – even before they died, and so it wasn't important for them to clarify whether one goes to sleep first because even if that's what happens they wouldn't sleep for long. Let's turn to 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul was writing to the Christians in Thessalonika because they misunderstood what he said when he was with them. They thought all believers would live until Christ returned – so when some died and Christ had not returned they asked, "Will those who died miss out on that great day of Christ's return?"

**Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest, 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 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.**

So if the dead are not raised until the Second Coming, what happens between the time we die and that happens? Some say we enter a kind of "soul sleep". But others question why God would do that.

Other passages seem to say that we go immediately to the Lord. In Genesis 5:23, Enoch does not experience death but is taken up with God. Why would God do that if only to put Enoch to sleep? In the story of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), God sends a chariot of fire to take Elijah to heaven. Why do that if only to sleep? In Matthew 17, Jesus goes up a mountain to pray and while praying meets with Moses and Elijah who are awake and not asleep. In Revelation 5, we are given a picture of heaven with a huge multitude of believers and they are awake, not asleep. Then Luke 23 provides the scene when Jesus was on the cross with two thieves on either side of him. One thief hurled insults at Jesus while the other said, "**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" And Jesus replied, "**Today, you will be with me in paradise.**" It's because of these passages that I think we immediately go to the Lord. Some try to merge both of these views to say when we die our souls go to the Lord and then at the Second Coming, we receive our resurrection body. But still, I wonder why God would want us to be disembodied spirits. What do you think? The scriptures are not absolutely clear. For the New Testament writers, they thought Christ's return was imminent and when that happens all would be together anyway.

One more question is what is meant by "resurrection of the body"? Many of us grew up reciting the words from the Apostle's Creed: I believe in the resurrection of the body. Some think that means this earthly body is somehow reconstituted and that's the body we will have in heaven. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, the present body is perishable. Whether we like it or not we are doomed to die, but there is a body that is to come that will be full of life, a life that nothing can

harm or destroy. The perishable body is made of earthly material, belongs on the present earth and will eventually return to it. Years ago, in a trip to Rome, we walked down into the catacombs which was the burial place of the early Christians. The tunnels were lined with crypts 4-5 stories high. Most of the ones we passed were open and nothing was inside. We were told that through the centuries, the crypts were broken into and anything of value was stolen and when the bodies were exposed to the air they quickly decayed and turned to dust. At every committal, I say the words: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, blessed are they who die in the Lord." That's the earthly body. The new body is spiritual and is waiting in heaven in God's realm and it is a body that will never wear out. This resurrection body will be similar to the perishable one – the essence of who we are remains but it will also be quite different. What exactly it will be like is part of the mystery. The only template we have is the resurrection of Jesus. When we read the resurrection appearances of Jesus, he was not immediately recognizable but with the sound of his voice they knew it was Jesus. We are told that the wounds in his hands and side were visible but not as wounds, but rather as marks of his obedience to God.

All of this brings us to the scripture read to us this morning from 2 Corinthians. What does all of this mean for those of us who are living? Chapter 4, verse 16 - **Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.** Remember Paul knew what it was to suffer. He was hated, attacked, beaten, thrown in prison, and eventually was beheaded. But he says he does not lose heart – not because this life is easy but the worst of this world is only temporary. What we cannot see – the spiritual – the life that is to come is greater than anything we can imagine. It is glory! Fix your eyes on glory! Earlier in the chapter, he says the glory of this world is like clay pots. In the first century clay pots were like the plastic containers we buy at the grocery store. They were disposable. Even your worst imaginable suffering is like that. It is disposable. Your present body is like a tent. I enjoy camping in a tent, but what makes the tent a lot of fun is that I don't have to live there. I would not want the tent to be my home forever. God has our future bodies already in store for us.

So in the meantime, Paul says: **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... So we make our goal to please him.** I remember when our daughter, Bethany, first moved to Los Angeles, she was seeking a career in Costume Design – and though today her primary focus is on painting and murals, I remember visiting her about a year after she moved. She had landed a job with a small theater company designing costumes for a production of Elephant Man. I was there to see it. Probably the most expensive play I've ever attended. There was the plane ticket, hotel room, meals, a ticket – not to mention the thousands of dollars spent on tuition so she could get the degree to design costumes. This was expensive! But that's not what I was thinking about as I sat through the play. I hardly even listened, because I was focused on what the actors were wearing. And when it was over, she asked, "Dad, did you read the program?" In the program, she had thanked her family and friends "but most importantly wants to thank her Dad." She may have been designing costumes – finally doing what she had hoped for years that she would do. But I realized what she really wanted was to make me proud. To be honest, that still matters to me – I want to make my mother proud.

Your future home is secure. Be confident. And in everything you do today and tomorrow and whatever time you have in this body – make God proud – make it your goal to please him. And you will not be disappointed.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of January 21, 2018**

**Weekly Prayer:** Eternal God, you have given us life and the promise of life everlasting. What lies beyond this life is a mystery to us. We trust that you love us with an undying love. Thank you for defeating even the ultimate enemy, death. Grant us, once more, the confidence and faith in eternal peace, joy and love that streams from you. In Christ's name, Amen.

### **Monday, January 22 - Day 16: Lord, Surprise Me**

#### **Scripture: John 3:1-8**

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

**Observation:** The Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family, that is being a child of Abraham. Now Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth isn't enough. You need to be born all over again – a kind of baptism by the spirit. The point is that God's kingdom is now thrown open to anyone and everyone. The spirit is on the move.

**Application:** In God's omniscience and omnipotence, God has determined there are some things God will only do in response to prayer. The Bible puts it bluntly: "You do not have because you do not ask God." If you don't ask, God can't answer. Do you have prayers that have gone unanswered because they went unasked? What does this lead you to ask today?

**Prayer:** God, thank you for your generosity in providing so much, even beyond what I've asked. Help me to set aside time in this day to share what's on my heart so that I will know and you will hear what I am seeking. Amen.

### **Tuesday, January 23 - Day 17: Do Not Delay**

#### **Scripture: Daniel 9:4-6, 17-19**

As I prayed to the LORD my God, I made this confession: Please, my Lord—you are the great and awesome God, the one who keeps the covenant, and truly faithful to all who love him and keep his commands: We have sinned and done wrong. We have brought guilt on ourselves and rebelled, ignoring your commands and your laws. We haven't listened to your servants, the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our leaders, our parents, and to all the land's people.

"But now, our God, listen to your servant's prayer and pleas for help. Shine your face on your ruined sanctuary, for your own sake, my Lord. Open your ears, my God, and listen! Open your eyes and look at our devastation. Look at the city called by your name! We pray our prayers for help to you, not because of any righteous acts of ours but because of your great compassion.

My Lord, listen! My Lord, forgive! My Lord, pay attention and act! Don't delay! My God, do all this for your own sake, because your city and your people are called by your name.

**Observation:** The book of Daniel describes a period when the people of Israel were taken captive and living in Babylon. The first half of the book is a collection of stories about a young Jewish man named Daniel, struggling to maintain his Jewish identity and religious faithfulness in the context and pressures of a world-dominating pagan culture. In the second half of the book, Daniel offers a vision of Israel's future. Today's verses come at the end of a prayer where Daniel prays for redemption.

**Application:** When you are praying the promises of God, you can pray with holy confidence. You don't have to second-guess yourself because God gives God's word! You may want an answer ASAP (as soon as possible), when prayers are meant to be ALAT (as long as it takes). Is there a prayer that you are ready to pray ALAT?

**Prayer:** Lord God, I trust in your goodness and unfailing presence. I know that you hear me when I pray. There are matters on my heart that are worth waiting for. Grant me the patience and perseverance to keep praying. Amen.

### **Wednesday, January 24 - Day 18: Keep Circling**

#### **Scripture: Joshua 6:1-5**

Now Jericho was closed up tightly because of the Israelites. No one went out or came in. The LORD said to Joshua, "Look. I have given Jericho and its king into your power, along with its mighty warriors. Circle the city with all the soldiers, going around the city one time. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry seven trumpets made from rams' horns in front of the chest. On the seventh day, circle the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. "Have them blow a long blast on the ram's horn. As soon as you hear that trumpet blast, have all the people shout out a loud war cry. Then the city wall will collapse, and the people will rise up, attacking straight ahead."

**Observation:** The Lord commands the people to march around the city and to repeat that march for six days. If the Israelites had stopped circling Jericho, they would have forfeited their first victory in the Promised Land. But there was much more at stake than that. They would have forfeited the Promised Land altogether. But they didn't stop. They kept circling.

**Application:** They kept circling. If you keep circling, the walls will come down. If you follow through, the breakthrough is inevitable. What are you ready to circle and keep circling ALAT?

**Prayer:** Hear me, God, when I call. Let me not be discouraged even when there is no answer. Let me hear your silence as an invitation to keep asking, to keep circling, to keep expecting – as long as it takes. Amen.

### **Thursday, January 25 - Day 19: Memorial Offerings**

#### **Scripture: Acts 10:1-4**

There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Company. He and his whole household were pious, Gentile God-worshippers. He gave generously to those in need among the Jewish people and prayed to God constantly. One day at nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, he clearly saw an angel from God in a vision. The angel came to him and said,

"Cornelius!" Startled, he stared at the angel and replied, "What is it, Lord?" The angel said, "Your prayers and your compassionate acts are like a memorial offering to God."

**Observation:** Today, we return to a story that we have read previously in these 40 days of prayer. However, today, we focus on the answer that Cornelius received to his prayer. *"Your prayers and your compassionate acts are like a memorial offering to God."*

**Application:** Verse 4 declares that your prayers are memorial offerings. God may not answer your prayers how you want or when you want, but God will answer. God always answers! Each prayer is like a memorial that jogs the memory of the Almighty. If your prayers are that precious to God, shouldn't they be significant to us? How would you treat your prayers knowing that God hears them as a *memorial*?

**Prayer:** Like a parent who keeps the artwork of their child, I am grateful that you, God, remember me and hold the prayers of my heart – both spoken and unspoken. I give praise that you are a God to whom I can come at all hours and moments of life and you will welcome me with gladness. Amen.

**Friday, January 26 - Day 20: Go. Set. Ready.**

**Scripture: Hebrews 11:8-10**

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived in the land he had been promised as a stranger. He lived in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were coheirs of the same promise. He was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

**Observation:** In chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews is encouraging believers to persevere in faith. He points to great persons from the past who did just that and found blessing. Without knowing where he was going, Abraham took the first step and God honored his faith.

**Application:** There are moments in life when you may need to quit a job, make a move, or end a relationship. And you need to take that step without knowing what the next step will be. Be obedient to the grace and strength that God has given you. Take that first step in faith. Faith is not faith until it is acted upon.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, I want to stay close to you, knowing that you will not let me fall so far that I cannot get up. Help me to be attentive to your voice and your presence so that I never stray too far to hear and to receive what you have for me. Amen.

**Saturday, January 27 - Day 21: Set Your Foot**

**Scripture: Joshua 1:1-3**

After Moses the LORD's servant died, the LORD spoke to Joshua, Nun's son. He had been Moses' helper. "My servant Moses is dead. Now get ready to cross over the Jordan with this entire people to the land that I am going to give to the Israelites. I am giving you every place where you set foot, exactly as I promised Moses.

**Observation:** With the death of Moses, Joshua is chosen to lead the people into the Promised Land. God renews a promise made to Moses. That promise is now given to Joshua. God promises success but only if Israel obeys the law of God that Moses has given them.

**Application:** God transferred God's promise from Moses to Joshua. Would God also transfer that promise to you? Not a promise that would give you possession of the land that is today the nation of Israel, but possession of what God wants or wills for those who believe. What would that look like for you? Sometimes being plugged into God's power supply is an answer in itself!

**Prayer:** Eternal God, you have given me life. I trust your love for me. Grant me, once more, the confidence and faith in eternal peace, joy and love that streams from you. Amen.