

What Happens When a Person Dies?

Luke 16.19-31

Steve Mayo

“Some day you will read in the papers that D L Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I shall have gone up higher, that is all; gone out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal, a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint, a body like unto His own glorious body. I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1855. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever.”

These words from D L Moody have stuck with me ever since I read them for the first time while preparing an English paper in year 9. Isn't this a wonderful perspective?

Death is a topic we are reluctant to talk about. Even so, we think about it quite a bit. We joke about it. We dread it. We wonder about it.

What happens when a person dies?

This is our question for tonight.

[Pray]

1. What is Death?

It seems bizarre that we even have to ask this question. We've all seen death – little kids stomp on cockroaches, don't they.

I remember when Sean learned about death. As a young boy, he caught a small lizard and started playing with it. He had a styrofoam cup in hand and used it to trap and release the lizard. The lizard would run, and the cup would come down and catch it.

One time the cup came down on the poor lizard's neck. Guess what . . . the lizard didn't move any more. Sean wanted me to fix it, but it couldn't be fixed. The lizard was dead.

It should be easy to define death – but it is not. Like everything else, people have differing opinions.

Doctors think of death in clinical terms. People can be 'kept alive' by machines that continue bodily functions. But when brain waves cease, the person is dead.

Grunge fans think of death in terms of attraction. They love the colour black, engage in self-mutilation, and sing about the glories of death.

Some people think of death in terms of quality of life. Once a threshold of enjoyment is past – for example, when life becomes limited by disease or handicap – these people feel they are as good as dead. Euthanasia is the answer.

Who has the final, authoritative definition of death?

The only person who is the master of it: God. Fortunately for us, God put His teaching on the subject in writing. The Bible holds all the answers.

Biblical Truth: There are two types of death.

Physical death

Many people equate the cessation of breathing with the moment of death. Medical doctors pinpoint the absence of brain waves. The Bible, however, defines death in terms of separation.

Physical death is the separation of the spirit/soul from the body.

Eccl 12:7

7 Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.
(NKJ)

James 2:26

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.
(NKJ)

While we're thinking about physical death, we should take up a related question:

Is death natural?

The answer is, "no." Death is a penalty -- "For the wages of sin is death . . ." (Romans 6.23). In the Bible, it is labelled 'a curse' (Genesis 3.17-19), 'an enemy' (1 Cor 15.26) and 'an evil' (Deut 30.15).

God did not intend for death to be the experience of mankind. Thus, we see God at the tomb of Lazarus, and, just as you and I have done at funerals, the Bible records, "Jesus wept." (John 11.35)

This is not, however, the end of the story. God is able to work all things together for good – and He has done just that with death.

For the believer, death is a release from sin and suffering, and an entrance into the presence of the Lord. Thus Paul writes, "to die is gain."

Isa 25:8

8 He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken.

(NKJ)

1 Cor 15:53-57

53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

55 "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(NKJ)

Spiritual death

The Bible speaks of two kinds of death. Jesus warned that a greater fear must be attached to the threat of spiritual death.

Matt 10:28

28 "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

(NKJ)

This is also called the second death.

Rev 21:8

8 "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

(NKJ)

Spiritual death, like physical death is defined in terms of separation. Whereas physical death is the separation of the soul from the body, spiritual death is the eternal separation of the sinner from the Saviour.

2. What Happens When a Person Dies?

The answer to this question depends in large part on your anthropology and your soteriology.

Anthropology is the doctrine of man. What is the nature of man? Are we trichotomous, dichotomous, or an organic unity?

If we think man is an organic unity, then the definition of death we gave in the previous point is wrong. How can you have the separation of body and spirit if the two are inseparable?

There are religions who believe the soul/spirit dies along with the body. Their teachings can be summarised under two headings:

Popular Theories:

Soul-sleep

This is a doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists who believe that the soul, as well as the body, reposes in a state of unconsciousness until the last resurrection.

The basis for this doctrine is the frequent use in Scripture of the word 'sleep' when a person had died. For example, Jesus said to his disciples, "Lazarus is asleep", when, in fact, He knew Lazarus was dead.

This is a shaky basis for a doctrine. In John 11, Jesus used both words, 'sleep' and 'dead' making the two synonymous (compare vv. 11 and 14).

In addition to this, we've already noted that the Bible defines death as the separation of body and spirit. The spirit goes some place at death. For the believer, that place is heaven.

Furthermore, the Bible clearly describes dead people as being conscious. Both Jesus and Paul anticipated conscious awareness following their deaths (Luke 23.43; 2 Cor 5.8).

Luke 23:43

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (NKJ)

2 Cor 5:8

8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

(NKJ)

The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) is an example of this. It would be good for us to do a quick exposition of Luke 16.19-31.

[Turn to Luke 16.19-31]

Note the following:

- Angels attend the righteous in death. (v. 22)
- The rich man was in conscious torment. (v. 23)
- The rich man recognised Lazarus. (v. 23)
- Lazarus was in conscious comfort in Abraham's bosom. (v. 23)
- The rich man had remembrance of earth. (v. 27)

Annihilationism

This teaching relates primarily to the unsaved. Some religions, most notably Jehovah's Witnesses (who have roots in Adventism), believe there is no conscious existence for unbelievers after death.

But the Bible is clear: the unsaved will exist forever:

Matt 25:46

46 "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (NKJ)

Rev 14:11

11 "And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name." (NKJ)

In summary, some people would answer the question, "What happens after death?" by saying, "nothing, really. You cease to exist."

I should point out that Adventists and JW's are not alone in this belief. They are joined by secularists, humanists and atheists (though for very different reasons).

- *I am going to the great perhaps.*—Rabelais, French physician and humanist

Contrary to this, most people, in America at least, do believe in a conscious afterlife. A recent survey found that 9 out of every 10 Americans think there's more than a cessation of existence at death. They believe in a life to come – whether heaven, hell, reincarnation or something else.

The Bible clearly teaches that there is indeed a 'hereafter'.

The Intermediate State

Heaven

The same survey I quoted earlier also indicated that 76% of Americans believe there is a heaven. That's good, because the Bible says there is a heaven.

What is it like?

Presence of Christ: "to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." 2 Cor 5.8

Immediate entrance: "Today you will be with me . . ."

Paradise: ". . . in Paradise." (Luke 23.43)

Desirable: "For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better." (Phil 1:23) (NKJ)

Who gets in?

Believers (Acts 16.31)

What will we be like?

Body?

Speculation: I think we will have an intermediate body. Why? Because Moses and Elijah were recognised as bodily figures on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17.1-6)

Also, Paul expressed this hope in 2 Cor 5.1-2.

2 Cor 5:1-2

1 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

2 For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven,

I think this is reasonable – even though our actual bodies will lie in the grave or as ashes – because angels are recorded to have a bodily appearance on certain occasions in the Bible. Yet we know that angels are incorporeal. If they can take on a

body, having never had one, I reckon we can, too.

If my speculation is correct, I can assure you that this body will be merely temporary. There is no question that the Bible promises a new body at the return of Christ.

Remembrance of people/things on earth?

This verse is taken out of context, but I think the principle applies:

Isa 65:17

17 "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. (NKJ)

I believe that we will be so consumed with the presence and glory of God, that there will be no room in our mind for regrets or worries. I also think that heaven will be a timeless environment so that our reunion with loved ones will seem momentary.

Awareness of earth?

I cannot give an authoritative answer to this, but there is an indication in Scripture that there is some awareness.

For example, Moses and Elijah conversed when they came to earth in the Transfiguration. What did they talk about? The approaching death of Christ! They had some awareness of what was going on.

Luke 9:30-31

30 Two men, Moses and Elijah,
31 appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. (NIV)

Also, the martyrs in Revelation seem to be aware as they plead for justice (Rev 6.10)

On a positive note, Luke records that there is great rejoicing in the presence (not 'by') of the angels when one sinner repents (Luke 15.1ff).

I'm sure I haven't answered every question on heaven, but we will move on:

Purgatory

What is it?

This is primarily a Roman Catholic teaching, so we need to understand it in keeping with their dogma.

Immediately upon death, the individual's eternal status is determined. The soul becomes aware of God's judgement upon it. This is not so much a sentence as a perception:

The soul is then “moved of its own accord to hasten either to Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory, according to its deserts.”

Hebrews 9.27 is the basis for this conclusion:

Heb 9:27

27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement, (NKJ)

Those who have died in a state of wickedness go directly to hell. Those who are in a perfect state of grace and penitence, who are completely purified, go directly to heaven.

Those who, although in a state of grace, are not yet spiritually perfect go to purgatory.

Thomas Aquinas, in his writing in *Summa theologica* (Appendix, question 1, article 2), defines purgatory as a place of punishment, a place of suffering, a place of cleansing. He even goes so far as to say it is connected with hell.

(Joseph Pohle, another Catholic theologian, connects purgatory with heaven, however. Even so, it is still a place of punishment, not probation).

Why punishment? Because in this life, we can be cleansed by performing works of satisfaction, but after death that is no longer possible. Penal sufferings are required for the removal of venial sins.

Souls in purgatory can be assisted in their progress toward heaven by the faithful still on earth – the mass, prayers, and good works

Does it exist?

The short answer is 'no'. There is no such place as

purgatory.

How can I be so sure?

1. You will find no mention of purgatory in the Bible.

Where does the idea of purgatory come from, then?

a. Tradition.

b. Pride – The idea that I contribute to my salvation is attractive, even if it involves pain.

c. The Apocrypha.

“He (Judas Maccabaeus) also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.”

-- 2 Maccabees 12.43-45

2. The concept of purgatory – that I must pay the penalty for my sins to gain entrance into heaven – is contrary to the core teaching of the Bible.

Hebrews 9.27-28

27 And as it is appointed for men to die once,
but after this the judgement,
28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins
of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will
appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.
(NKJ)

Hebrews 1.3

3 who being the brightness of His glory and
the express image of His person, and upholding all
things by the word of His power, when **He had by
Himself purged our sins**, sat down at the right
hand of the Majesty on high, (emphasis added;
NKJ)

Friend, don't fear purgatory. Praise God! Jesus paid it

all.

If you are a Christian, Paul's hope is yours, too. Absent from the body, present with the Lord.

Hell

Two words used in the New Testament are translated 'hell' in the old King James. This is unfortunate, because the words do not mean the same thing – although they are inseparably related.

Newer translations make a distinction between these words.

Gehenna – from *ge hinnom*, or valley of *hinnom*, which was a real place separating Judah from Benjamin. During the divided monarchy, this place was the location of a pagan altar where people sacrificed their children.

God predicted judgement – specifically that the valley of Hinnom would become a cemetery known as the Valley of Slaughter (Jer. 7:31–32; 19:1–6; 32:35).

This prophecy began to be fulfilled when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Later, the Valley of Hinnom became the city dump for Jerusalem. Fires continually smouldered there, as the site was used as a burning ground for refuse and the dead bodies of criminals and animals.

In time, the valley became so noxious that its name became a synonym for hell. The Hebrew phrase *ge* (“valley of”) *hinnom* eventually became the Greek *Gehenna* (Matt. 5:22; Mark 9:43, 45, 47). At one time, Jewish tradition even held that the entrance to hell began at that valley.

What is it like?

Gehenna is described as a place of fire and unceasing torment.

Mark 9:43-44

43 "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--

44 "where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

(NKJ)

Hades – means 'all receiving'. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, "Sheol". It is the waiting place of the unregenerate dead. Gehenna is the final destination.

Hades is also a place of torment. The rich man was in agony, you remember, and he was in hades.

Who goes there?

Every person who has not put their trust in Christ

The Eternal State

The Millennium

Revelation 20.6

The Lake of Fire

Revelation 20.11-15

The New Heaven, Earth and Jerusalem

Revelation 21.4-7

Addendum of Illustrations:

Pastor Daniel Jackson, 1852

It becomes my painful duty to record the death of Mary Jackson, my beloved consort in life. She expired on Tuesday, the 27th of January, at half-past ten in the evening. Her disease was consumption, which refused to relinquish its hold until the vital powers of life sunk beneath its final grasp. It is not in the power of my pen to depict the agonies of that memorable deathbed scene. I will therefore hasten to present the reader a more inviting phase of this matter.

The triumphant state of her mind softened every agony, hushed every murmur, and completely disarmed the king of terrors. For awhile, she had a sharp conflict with the power of attachment which bound her to family and friends, but by the grace of God she obtained a glorious victory and longed to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.

I will here notice some of her dying words uttered during the last week of her life. Speaking of the happy state into which she was about to enter, she exclaimed, "O glorious day, O blessed hope, my heart leaps forward at the thought." When distressed for breath, she would say, "Blessed Jesus, receive my spirit." When I spake to her about her thirst, she said, "When I have been thirsty I have thought of that river whose streams make glad the city of God."

I am left as a lonely pilgrim with no one to count my sighs nor wipe away the falling tear. But hush, my soul, what means this repining? Couldst thou look beyond the spheres of material worlds, and see the glories of thy departed one, thou wouldst say, "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

Email from Pastor Mike Kwok, Fellowship Baptist Church, Blacktown upon the occasion of his wife's death in 2003.

Dear friends and family,

It is with great sadness and yet great joy that I write to tell you of Lynda's homecoming. We had known for the past few days that it was coming close. She was getting restless and was unable to speak or sit up in bed. Today she started more shallow breathing and I stayed by her bedside as it grew less and less and finally ended. It was so peaceful and yet so much grief for me to bear. Only the grace of God sustained me in the moments after her passing. Thinking of her in the arms of her Saviour at last, free from pain, free from cancer, free from worries and more alive than I am - that was a great comfort. By His mercy, I had just read to her from 1 Peter 1 - "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith - the salvation of your souls." (vv.3-9)

I sang her a hymn and she passed away in my arms - what a bitter sweet moment to see her pain disappear. It could not have been orchestrated by God any better. Praise Him. Below is a letter that Lynda wrote some time ago and we never got around to sending it. It is addressed to you - those who have prayed us through this trial. It is by your prayers that I praise God tonight. Bless you all.

Mike Kwok

Letter from Lynda Kwok upon learning that she had terminal cancer:

Dear family, friends, former 5th grade students, brothers and sisters in Christ,

Thank you for the abundant love you have poured out upon me over the past year, but especially over the past 7 months. I am overwhelmed by the e-mails and cards. I wish so very much that I could sit down face to face with each of you individually and bare my heart to you. Those of you I have never met - my heart is so moved that you have reached out in love and prayer to me and my family. The world cannot comprehend the love of God that is shed abroad

in our hearts (Romans 5:5). When the community nurses come out to the house for ritual visits they are mostly concerned that I have some sort of support network. It is such a testimony to the ladies to share that God is my refuge and strength and very present help in time of trouble (Ps. 46:1). I also tell them about all the church family and friends both here and abroad. It amazes them. "Blest' be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love." Others of you have touched my life in very unique ways - I could never tell you enough how grateful I am that the Lord brought you in my life. And still others have been a part of my life for all or most of the journey. Oh, what a sweetness to know that truest of friends are not high maintenance people - we may go miles before our paths cross again but when we speak the next time there's no awkwardness or apologies - we just pick up where we left off. You know me so well and still love me so much. I have been so blessed! Surely I can say that my feet have been on the "high places" (Habakkuk 3:19).

To my dearest students - where has the time gone? I told you guys in 5th grade how fast it would go! And I said that I remembered 5th grade (and still do) as if it were a moment ago.

Please share what I'm about to say with any of your classmates. It was my desire and calling to teach all my life. Standing before you was such a great privilege and responsibility. Oh the wonderful memories! If there is anything good that you gleaned from being in my class it is totally God. I have never forgotten any of you. There is a packet for each year (7 total) that I taught 5th grade at BJES. Each packet contains the class photo, individual photos, notes, pictures, and memories that you gave me. I thank you! And never forget . . . once in my class, always in my heart. Seek to know and serve God - keeping your eyes on Him alone as you follow Him day by day.

When I was diagnosed 2 ½ months ago with a stage four inoperable tumour, it became clear that I would have to make the hardest decision of my life. What would I put first of all the people I love and that love me. It was so clear - my family here. With limited time and strength when God intervenes means making necessary changes and preparations. It has been so hard - you know that - but it has been an amazing journey - so sweet - you might not know that.

Another decision was not hard at all - where should my time and energies go? Some said spend as much time with family as possible. Mike and I were talking and decided that if we knew that Jesus would return in 3 months - how would we spend our time? We immediately agreed - tell as many people about the Lord as we could - be a witness. Mike said, "Why would it be different when someone doesn't have long to live?"

I would love to return all the e-mails and cards; however, my time and energy is limited. I feel compelled to direct attention toward unsaved contacts - doctors, nurses, friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers. The Lord knows all the names - many of them I can only remember from time and place. Praise God for the opportunities to share Christ. Believe me - people don't like to talk about religion or death. But you should see their undivided attention when this dying religious lady starts to share the gospel. There's the couple travelling from England in downtown Sydney, the friends/family recovering from a night of partying after a wedding, the ladies at McDonalds, Paul and Lauren's swimming instructors from last year, their Little Athletics coaches, my mid-wife for Sean, and on and on the list goes. If God calls me home to heaven, we have a list of unsaved contacts to come to the funeral -

Praise the Lord! And there will be an evangelistic message - "God's Final Call."

Don't worry - I'm not throwing in the towel. I have hope of healing and hope of heaven. It's a win/win situation for the Christian, and the Bible teaches that "to depart" is far better. In the middle of those two realities, I wait, "looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of my faith." "As for the Lord, His way is perfect." The Bible speaks of an appointment with death. Your name could well be called next. Let me strongly encourage you to seek your own heart - are you ready to meet God? Are you truly saved? Are you serving and loving Him with all your heart? You are all in my thoughts, prayers, and praises as I lift up you up to God.

Thank you for allowing God to use you in our lives at this time.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Lynda Kwok

- This epitaph adorns the grave of Ellen Shannon, twenty-six, of Girard, Pennsylvania:

*Who was fatally burned
March 21, 1870
by the explosion of a lamp
filled with "R. E. Danforth's
Non-Explosive
Burning Fluid"*

- Epitaph of a dentist named John Brown:

*Stranger! Approach this spot with gravity!
John Brown is filling his last cavity.*

- Inscribed on the tomb of Mel Blanc, creator of the cartoon characters Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig:

That's All, Folks!

- The epitaph of Benjamin Franklin:

*The Body of
B. Franklin, Printer
Like the Cover of an old Book
Its Contents torn out
And Stript of its Lettering & Gilding
Lies here. Food for Worms
For, it will as he believed
appear once more
In a new and more elegant Edition
corrected and improved
By the Author*