

What Happens When We Die? • 1 Corinthians 15:51

An old hotel in the city of Istanbul has a century old elevator run by a uniformed operator. Arriving at a certain floor you walk down dimly lit hallways to a very special locked room. An old man who works for the hotel has a key and, for a price, will open the door to let you look around. It is like stepping into the past. A small sign tells you that in this room Agatha Christie wrote one of the most famous fiction books of the English language, *Murder on the Orient Express*. It is a murder mystery.

Our English word “mystery” comes directly from the ancient Greek word *mysterion*. It appears 27 times in the Greek New Testament. Originally it meant something a little different from the way we use the word today. *Mysterion* referred to something that was hidden and unknown but has been revealed—kind of an “open secret”. More specifically, a biblical mystery is something once hidden that God has revealed. If God had not told us we never could have figured it out for ourselves.

In some ways it is surprising that St. Paul would use the word *mysterion* 27 times in his writings because it could have been easily misunderstood. In the first century probably the number one religious competition for Christianity were the Greek “mystery religions”. They were the ancient equivalents to secret societies in more recent centuries. These religions claimed to have special spiritual information about the gods, about spirituality and especially about salvation and eternal destiny. People usually joined the religion without knowing much. Then they were told some secrets and they promised never to tell anyone on the outside. After that they could progress through many levels to learn higher and higher secrets or mysteries. There were often rituals along the way. Some rituals were sexually immoral while others were just gross like taking a bath in bull’s blood or other pagan practices. The mystery religions

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claimed to take a person higher and higher to more and more secrets and eventually to eternal life.

Christianity also revealed mysteries, but the difference was the openness. The New Testament gave the revelations of God to anyone who would read or listen. Once the secrets were told you were invited to come and believe in the God who revealed the mystery, thereby gaining eternal life.

Today we are going to study the mystery about what happens when we die. We all wonder what it will be like and when it will happen. And we all should plan ahead.

One man planned ahead by telling his wife to bury all his money in the casket with him when he died. He wanted to take his cash with him. At the funeral, just before the casket was closed, his dutiful wife placed a box in with his body. The casket was closed and sealed and she walked away. Her friend said, “I hope you were not foolish enough to put all that money in there with him.” “But, I promised!” the wife said. Her friend said, “You actually put all that money in the casket?” The wife said, “Yes. I wrote a check.”

The mystery we will look at today from the New Testament deals with what really happens when we die. Technically, that is not exactly what the mystery really is. The real mystery according to I Corinthians 15:51-52 is the mystery of what happens when we do not die:

Listen, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Okay, so the mystery is what happens if we don’t die. But, this mystery is tied to what happens when we do die, so let’s package them together.

First of all, we need to understand what it means when the Bible talks about

resurrection. Resurrection is not the same as resuscitation. Resuscitation is what paramedics do with CPR. The patient is dead in the sense of not

breathing, not thinking and heart not beating. When air in the lungs, electric shock to the heart or a pound on the chest starts up the patient again you have resuscitation.

Resurrection is different. Resurrection deals with a person who is dead dead—cellular death; body decay; dead for days or years or longer. Resuscitation brings a person back to where she was before. Resurrection takes a person forward to where he has never gone before. Modern medicine has gotten good at resuscitation, but only God can do a resurrection.

Talk about a mystery! This raises all kinds of questions. How does that work? What happens when God resurrects someone? How are the dead raised? That is exactly what someone in Corinth once asked St. Paul. He wrote his answer in I Corinthians 15:35-37:

But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just the seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.

Apparently Paul did not have a lot of patience with the question. Maybe it had been asked of him before. He thought it a little foolish and reasoned that we should be able to figure it out for ourselves. He explains that the resurrection of our bodies is much like what happens with seeds and plants. If we plant a seed in the ground, it dies as a seed and the life inside the seed comes back as a whole new plant. Does a grain of wheat look like a full-grown shock of wheat? Not really. Are they related? Absolutely. Is it the same life only in a different form? Yes, that is exactly what it is.

St. Paul's point is that the bodies we now have will die and then God will bring us back to life in resurrection bodies that are directly connected to who and what we are now—only a whole lot different. It is new life; new body; same person. He writes in I Corinthians 15:42-44:

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised 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 natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

This new resurrection body is a very-much-improved model over what we currently have. Our present bodies are perishable; our resurrection bodies are imperishable. We all know what perishable means at the grocery store. Bananas have a short shelf life. They become bruised, turn ugly colors, taste rotten and get thrown away. We are like that. We get sick; we get terrible diseases; we struggle with depression; we suffer from cuts, amputations and disabilities; we die.

Our resurrection bodies are imperishable. No sickness. No cuts. No broken bones. No pain. No death. Our resurrection bodies are indestructible. Big improvement.

Our present bodies have dishonorable sin, lots of weakness and physical limitations. Our resurrection bodies will be glorious, powerful and spiritual. No more sin. Supernatural strength. Spiritual bodies. What might this practically look like? We are not told, so we need to guess.

All we know is that we will be a lot like Jesus after his resurrection. Jesus' voice was familiar to those who knew him before. Jesus was recognizable. Jesus could move instantly from one place to another without normal modes of transportation. We will be like that. We will be a whole lot better and a whole lot smarter. We will be truly godly people.

According to I Corinthians 15:49, "*And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.*" This is a really important point! This line from the Bible contrasts Adam and Jesus. Adam was from earth. He was weak, sinful and died. Jesus was from heaven. He is sinless, powerful and alive. Right now we are more like Adam. Our resurrection bodies will be more like Jesus.

All of this says that we are going to be a lot better off with our future resurrection bodies than with our present original bodies. This is like trading in an old tent for a new mansion, a beat-up Taurus for a brand new Lexus or a maxed-out credit card for a billion dollar checking account. This is substantial improvement! St. Paul described it this way in Philippians 1:21-24:

For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart

and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Here is the question: If the next body is better than this body, why do we prefer life to death? The answer is that God created us for life. He built into us a strong desire to live this life—and to continue this life into eternal life. This creates a tension because we do not want to die even though we know the future is “better by far” than this life will ever be.

The key point to understanding what the Bible teaches about life after death is that we are not now fit for heaven. This body will not work there. We need new bodies. The current model is out-of-date, broken down and unacceptable. In heaven we need to be like Jesus and that means a new resurrection body like Jesus.

All of this teaching from the New Testament is interesting and important but it is not yet the mystery. The mystery is that some people will go from this body to their resurrection body without going through the gate of death. Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:50-54:

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Now we are really into the mystery. This is a secret of God that he is telling to every Christian or anyone else who reads the Bible. It is an open secret. We never could have figured this out by ourselves. It is amazing, astonishing, breathtaking and very supernatural. God has planned a day when resurrections will take place. This will co-

incide with the promised return of Jesus to earth. People who are alive at that time will go instantly from old bodies to new bodies, from these bodies to resurrection bodies, from earth to heaven. It will be instantaneous.

Here is what we know. Jesus is planning to return to earth. The sequence of events was Jesus’ life, Jesus’ death, Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus’ ascension to heaven in front of witnesses and then, according to Acts 1:10-11:

(Those witnesses) were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Not everyone will die. I Corinthians 15:51 tells us, “We will not all sleep, (that is, we will not all die) *but we will all be changed. . . .*” It will be fast—in a flash—in the twinkling of an eye. I am not exactly sure how fast an eye twinkles, but I as-

sume it is faster than a blink. Try blinking your eye and imagine switching from your present body to your resurrection body that fast. Sure beats dying!

Death is done. Jesus won! “*Death has been swallowed up in victory.*”

This is the mystery of God. And he told us! But it still raises questions. One of the most pressing questions has to do with the expression in I Corinthians 15:52 where it says, “*For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*” That sounds like a lot of people who previously died will have to wait until the return of Jesus to get their resurrection bodies. That includes my grandparents, my older brother and your relatives and friends who have died.

That is exactly right. We all get “changed” in the same eye-twinkle. Except, don’t we all think that at the moment they died they were suddenly and instantly walking around the streets of heaven with new bodies? Actually, the Bible never

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teaches that. So, we have a mystery within a mystery. What is life like for those who have died and are awaiting resurrection? We really do not know, but we do know they are consciously with God. St. Paul said it is “better by far” than life on earth. He also said that to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord, a conscious presence. So how could that all work? Do we get a temporary resurrection body?

For several years I had a cracked tooth. The dentist told me that eventually it would break. Rather than have a broken tooth at a bad time and place I agreed to have it replaced with a crown (sort of a porcelain “resurrection” tooth!). The dentist ground away the old tooth but told me I would have to wait a couple of weeks (which turned out to be a couple of months) for my new crown. In the meantime he provided a temporary crown. It worked. It looked pretty good. But it was temporary until I got my new tooth. Perhaps it is the same between death and resurrection. God gives us a temporary resurrection body to get us through until the resurrection.

We have focused on the resurrection of Christians because that is what the Bible does. But, I need to tell you that the Bible also teaches that there will be a resurrection of unbelievers. Christians are resurrected to eternal life; unbelievers are resurrected to eternal death. It is as bad for them as heaven and Christian resurrection is good for us. That is why it is so important to believe in Jesus as Savior from sin in this life. Accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord now is what determines whether we are raised to live or to die.

For those who believe in Jesus Christ, it is a lot like a popular song that has cemented its way into our American culture. The song is *Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree*. It is about a man who has served time in prison and is being

released. Unsure whether the woman he loves would accept him or reject him, he wrote her a letter asking if she could forgive him and if she would welcome him home. If the answer was yes he requested that she tie a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree at the entrance to town. If there no ribbon was there when the bus rolled into town he would know there was no forgiveness, that she did not want him and he would stay on the bus. On the long bus ride he wondered what he would see. However, as the bus drives into town all the passengers erupt into cheers. Not one but one hundred yellow ribbons are tied to the tree. She not only forgave him and wanted him, she enthusiastically forgave him and wanted him home.

That is what it will be like for Christians. We do not have to wait and see. The mystery is revealed. Whether we die soon or live until Jesus returns, he will welcome us into his heaven with a million yellow ribbons. God not only forgives us Christians for whatever we have done but he loves us and welcomes us with supernatural love, enthusiasm and resurrection. It is like a million yellow ribbons on that old oak tree!

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