

What Will We Be Like in Heaven? • Luke 20:27-40

There is a bedtime prayer you may have learned as a child:

Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

What does it mean for the Lord to take a soul? What does it feel like? Where does it go? What does it look like? The Old Testament sufferer Job said in Job 14:14, “*If a man dies, will he live again?*” Whether young or old, suffering or sound, we all end up with the same questions: What happens to us when we die? Is there life on the other side of the grave? What’s it like?

One day an attorney sat in his client’s office to discuss the drafting of his will. The client kept saying, “If I die, I want my children to have the family business.” “If I die, I would like my wife to be well provided for.” “If I die, I want a big chunk of my estate to go to charity.” Finally, the attorney interrupted him and said, “Mr. Conrad, it’s not a matter of ‘if’ you are going to die; it’s a matter of ‘when’, because you are going to die. We are all going to die.”

Questions about death came to Jesus a couple of days before he himself died. It was a group of Sadducees who confronted him. Sadducees were the aristocracy of first century Jewish community in Jerusalem. They claimed to be descendants of the ancient high priest Zadok.

Let me give you a quick lesson about Sadducees and Pharisees. Both are mentioned often in the biography of Jesus. Both groups were major players in first century Jerusalem. Pharisees were legalistic in their lifestyle. They believed in the Old Testament plus thousands of additional rules and regulations. They believed God plans and knows our future. They believed in the resurrection from the dead, in angels and demons and in the coming of the Messiah. They were the fundamentalists of their day. By contrast, Sadducees were

quite secular and usually wealthy. They, too, believed in the Old Testament and gave particular authority to the first five books of the Old Testament, but no extra rules. They believed in unlimited human free will—that we determine our own future. They did not believe in resurrection from the dead, in angels or in demons. They did not expect Messiah to come. They were the religious liberals of their time.

Many of Jesus’ most famous conversations were with Pharisees, but his conversation about life-after-death was with some Sadducees. They came with a trick question intended to show Jesus and everyone else how silly it is to believe that there can be life after death. Let’s look at the conversation from Luke 20:27-40:

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and

leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then,

at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

Some of the teachers of the law re-

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sponded, “Well said, teacher!” And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

They were talking about what happens to us forever and ever and those Sadducees had some bad assumptions. Bad assumption #1 was that we are all dead forever—like mosquitoes and flies and seaweed—we live for a short time and when we’re dead, that’s it. No more feelings. No more thoughts. No more relationships. No more anything. We’re done. The Sadducees assumed that “*there is no resurrection.*”

Our assumptions often shape our thinking on everything in life. If we assume that there is no God, if we assume that the Bible is not God’s truth, if we assume that there is no life after death—we will find “facts” to support our assumptions.

I recall a conversation from several years ago between an atheist and a Christian. The Christian assumed that the Bible is true, that Jesus is the means of eternal life and that he would go to heaven when he died. The atheist assumed that the Bible is not true, Jesus is not the means to eternal life and when you are dead—you are dead. Near the end of the conversation the atheist asked the Christian, “What if I’m right and you’re wrong?” The Christian replied, “Then I will have lived a good life with great joy and I will die and stay dead.” Then the Christian asked the atheist, “What if I’m right and you are wrong?” The atheist replied, “Then I will have made the worst possible mistake of all of eternity.”

The Sadducees assumed that when we die we’re dead forever. However, in arguing their point with Jesus they made a second bad assumption. They assumed that ‘forever’ is more of today. Please understand that they didn’t believe in life after death, but when they allowed for it for argument’s sake they assumed that life after death would be a straight-line continuation of life as we now know it.

Not only was that a bad assumption then, it is still a common bad assumption today. I hear it often. Golfers assume they will play the fairways of heaven with a scratch handicap. Musicians assume they will play in a combo or orchestra or will be vocalists in the choir of heaven. Others talk about dancing, reading, water-skiing or mountain climbing. They never seem to consider the possibility that forever may be radically different from ev-

erything we now currently experience.

Based on their bad assumption that forever is more of today the Sadducees used marriage and Jewish law to make their point. They cited an obscure Old Testament law in Deuteronomy 25:5 that required a man to marry his brother’s widow if his brother died childless. Then the first child born to the second marriage would be legally counted as belonging to the dead brother. It is called Levirate Marriage (“levir” is Latin for “husband’s brother”). “What if . . . ?” the Sadducees asked. What if she marries a third and a fourth and a fifth and a sixth and a seventh brother and she never becomes pregnant—and then she, too, dies?

No one ever claimed that such a thing happened. This was totally hypothetical. If it did happen I hope brother 5, 6 or 7 would request a sanity hearing or a murder investigation before a wedding ceremony! (Actually, this was an Old Testament rule that was rarely followed and probably never followed in Jesus’ time.)

The Sadducees were really just trying to make a point. “*Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?*” They were saying that it’s absurd for there to be a resurrection because she couldn’t and shouldn’t be married to all seven brothers at the same time. But their premise was flawed. Their fatal error was that they assumed the future will be like the past, that heaven will be just like earth and that eternity will be just like time. It was and is a common mistake. It was and is a bad assumption.

Jesus replied, “*The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.*”

Jesus taught that in heaven our relationships will be different from those we have here on earth. Because people won’t die in heaven there will be no need for children to be born. Since children are a primary purpose of marriage, marriage will no longer be needed as a basic human relationship. There will be new and different relationships provided by God that we cannot now comprehend but which will fulfill and satisfy us in wonderful ways.

Some people read this as very good news. They feel they have already been married to this person too long and heaven wouldn’t be heaven if they

have to be married forever. Other couples want to extend the contract from “until death us do part” to “forever and ever, Amen.”

Charleen and I have had this discussion many times. We have known each other all our lives and have been married to each other most of our lives. It is hard to imagine life without each other. We love each other very much and we thoroughly enjoy being married. We’ve talked about setting a meeting place in heaven so we will be sure to find each other. If we aren’t married there we would at least like to hang out together.

But, we are all doing what the Sadducees did. We are assuming that the future is an extension of the present. Not so, says Jesus. It is going to be really different. It is going to be better. We are not going to be disappointed. We are going to like it better than anything we can imagine. So don’t worry. Trust God. The God who created the best of this world has something far better coming up forever.

Jesus’ second teaching about forever is that admission is limited.

Jesus taught in Luke 20:35 that “*those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead*” are the ones who will be admitted into heaven.

Heaven forever is not for everyone. There are very specific admission requirements and those who do not meet the requirements will not be admitted to heaven. This teaching is not very popular among lots of people. The common assumption is that everyone goes to heaven when they die. It is assumed because that’s what people want. But it should not be assumed—because that is not what God says. God says the only way to get into heaven is to be considered worthy of admission. Since we are all sinners and not worthy there is only one hope—to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and get in on his worthiness. We will never make it on our own. The only way into heaven is under the auspices of Jesus. That’s why it is so important to become a Christian before you die.

Jesus’ third teaching about forever is that there

will be no more death. Jesus said in Luke 20:36 about those who are Christians that “*they can no longer die.*” Because sin and death are linked and because there is no sin in heaven, death becomes an impossibility. Of course, heaven would be an awful place if we were miserable and could not die. But heaven is wonderful and happy and forever—and we cannot die, so there will be nothing to worry about!

Actually, this is getting back to where God first started with the Garden of Eden. He designed this perfect place and put his creatures in it with the expectation that joy and fulfillment would be theirs forever and ever. But human sin created a long, dreadful interruption. So, Jesus came to set everything straight, and those who believe in him and follow him end up with the best of everything—forever! It is truly eternal life.

Jesus’ fourth teaching about forever is that we will be like the angels. For some people that is not the best of news. They imagine that we will be playing boring music while sitting

on clouds and wearing long white robes. Hardly!

Angels are magnificent, powerful, good and godly. They are the highest and happiest of God’s creatures. In many ways they are better, smarter, stronger and more creative than any of us humans. And they have no sin. But they are not human. They do not have our human souls and wills. They are not created to be like God the way we were created.

Imagine that you could be 100% you but also have the best of all that angels have and are. Imagine being you only better, brighter, more beautiful and more fulfilled—the best of everything that God intends. Jesus says that we will forever be like the angels.

His fifth and his final teaching to the Sadducees is that God gives life. Jesus quoted from the Old Testament story when God talked to Moses by a burning bush in the Desert of Sinai—a story the Sadducees had no doubt about in their belief system. Moses addressed God as “*the God of*

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Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” The words were carefully chosen. By that time in history Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all died; yet, God is still their God. Those who are dead forever don’t need a god. Only those who are living need and have God.

The point Jesus was making is that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob continued to live after their deaths. Jesus was insisting that God is the God of the living. God gives life and even those who have died physically still exist and live spiritually. God will not let death be the final victor. He is the God of the living—and those who believe in him can and will live forever.

There is so much more to say, so many more Bible teachings, so many more glimpses of what heaven and forever will be like. Jesus’ teachings are powerful and important but they don’t answer all of our questions. It seems to me that they are at best glimpses of what it is like on the other side of death.

Remember when your friends took a fabulous vacation to Hawaii or to the Grand Canyon or to the Florida Keys or the Oregon Coast? They bought a picture postcard with room on the back for a name, address and a short note. Perhaps they wrote something like this: “Having a great time. This place is fantastic. Wish you were here!” It wasn’t enough for you to really experience or understand the magnificence of Hawaii, the Grand Canyon, Key West or Oregon, but it was enough to tell you that it is very different from Minnesota.

The Bible is like a postcard from heaven. It’s a glimpse, a snapshot, but you have to experience it for yourself to really understand how great it is. And, Jesus says, “Wish you were here!”

I hope you will be there. The good news is that if you really want to be there you can be. Make guaranteed reservations by believing in Jesus Christ as your only Savior and Lord. Accept him as your ticket. Trust him as your Savior and acknowledge him as your Lord. Someday you will experience wonderful new relationships, you will have the forever life of God, you will never die and you will be just like the angels.

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