

After Death Experience — 2 Corinthians 5:1–10

Each of us will one day face death. Maybe that's one reason that the topic After Death Experiences is among the top subjects chosen in a survey of Sermons People Want to Hear.

Thousands of people die every day. Just turn on the television, listen to the radio, read the newspaper. Except for maybe the very youngest among us, every one of us knows someone who has died, so every one of our lives has been touched by death.

For some, death comes quickly with the shot of a gun or a car crash. For others death may follow a long, painful illness. For some, it is when young. For some, it is when old. But the truth is that every single one of us has thought about this. We wonder when we're going to die. We wondered how we're going to die. What will it be like? Maybe we've also wondered about what's next. What happens a minute or two after we die? What will that be like? Will we experience heaven or hell? Will it be eternal bliss or maybe nothing at all?

What happens when we die has to be one of the more important subjects of life because if we get this one right then all the rest of life can fall into place behind it. But if we get this one wrong, then we have made a tragic eternal mistake. What happens when we die is at the center core of Christianity, for the Bible and Christians have long taught that Christians die differently, that we die with an assurance and a hope that is not available to others. But let's talk first of all about death itself, that great transition.

II Corinthians 12:9 presents one of the most wonderful promises of the entire Bible when it quotes Jesus as saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Grace is a synonym for the word gift. So what we have here is the assurance that no matter what we ever face in life, God will provide gift resources for us to deal with it. It could be the best of times; it could be the worst of times. It could be the things that we have dreamed of; it could be the things that we have dreaded most of all. No matter what it is that we face in life, God is there for his children and God provides. He gives to us the customized gifts that we need in order to deal with life. Interestingly, the darker the circumstance, the brighter the grace of God shows. He says that in our weakness his grace is most apparent; it is sufficient. And there's no time when we are weaker than when we are dying.

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The moment before death is a great equalizer. It doesn't matter how old we are or how young we are or how healthy we have been. It doesn't make any difference if we are rich or poor, if we are people of fame and influence or if we are people that no one has ever heard of. When the physician looks us in the eye and says, "I'm sorry, but there's just nothing more that we can do," it doesn't matter how much money is in the bank or who can be called. Then we face our moment of greatest weakness.

Millions of Christians over thousands of years have experienced dying grace. That is the special loving, caring, powerful, helpful strength that God gives to a believer when going through this great transition of death. Dying grace is different for every Christian. God customizes it for every one of us. So you can't look at somebody else and see God's dying grace in that person's situation and then anticipate that that is the way it will be for you because it will not be.

Nor do we need that grace now. We may be troubled and anxious as we anticipate death but grace does not come until it is actually needed. Our faith is not in what will happen; our faith is in God. We're convinced that God will be there for us and will give to us whatever we need for that moment of death. It is wonderful grace.

Death is the separation of the body and the soul. Since God created both our bodies and our souls, he knows better than anyone else what that is like and what we will need. Without God's dying grace, death ought to be feared. It ought to be dreaded. But with God's dying grace, we are assured that he will carry us through the great transition.

There are many, many examples. One of the most interesting is the biography of Stephen in the New Testament book of Acts chapters 6 and 7. Stephen is there described as a man full of God's grace and power. He powerfully and significantly communicated the gospel of Jesus. The result was that a mob formed that was determined to kill him, and the

form of death they chose was by stoning.

When you start thinking about different ways of dying, stoning has to be among the absolute worst. A person is trapped in a circle of people who won't let

him get away. There's deep antagonism and animosity, even hatred. They pick up the largest stones they can hurl and throw them at the victim resulting in lacerations, bruises and broken bones. The person tries to fight off the rocks, but it's impossible because they are coming from every direction. But it doesn't make any difference because before long the person falls to the ground and, if the blows of the rocks don't kill, the crushing of the pile of rocks soon will.

We're told that when Stephen was dying God gave him special grace. In his case, the grace was a picture of heaven where he saw Jesus Christ standing next to God the Father welcoming him to heaven. So when Stephen died, the focus of his attention was not on the horrors that were surrounding him on earth but on the anticipation of what was next going to be his in heaven. God gave him dying grace, but not the same as he'll give to you or to me or to others. It was customized specially for Stephen.

Much closer, but very different, was my own recent encounter with dying grace. Not too long ago, Charleen and I were packed to go on a three-week trip to India. The trip had been scheduled two years in advance, but shortly before the Sunday that we were scheduled to leave we received a telephone call that her mother was hospitalized in New Jersey, apparently with pneumonia.

Charleen had just been there a few days before and had a wonderful time with her mother. They had gone sightseeing; they had eaten in restaurants; they had played games; they had reminisced. But now she was sick and we didn't know if we should take the trip. So we prayed for God's wisdom.

On that Sunday morning, at the last minute, the decision was made to go to Newark instead of to New Delhi. We unpacked the suitcases and repacked them for a different destination. When we arrived in New Jersey we went directly from the airport to the hospital. Her mother seemed fine. She was coherent. She was interactive. She was engaged in the treatment that she was receiving. That was Sunday night. By Tuesday she was diagnosed with leukemia and in less than 72 hours she died.

During those final days, her family gathered from near and far and engaged in an around-the-clock vigil, praying with her, talking with her, holding her hand, providing family support during what turned out to be the final hours of her life. During the last hours of her life, her children and grandchildren sang Christian hymns for five consecutive hours. The last hymn that was sung was the hymn Blessed Assurance. When the last words of the last verse were finished, the line went flat and she died.

What do you call all of that? The week had been

set aside two years in advance. The decision to alter the trip was made without adequate information. The family gathered from around the country and united in the singing of hymns and the praying of prayers at the end of a long and godly life. What do you call that? Do you call it "good luck; it ended pretty well"? Do you call it "wonderful circumstances; isn't that great?" No, I think you call that dying grace. God gave special grace for that special time.

She died at 3:15 on Friday morning. So what did she experience at 3:16 on Friday morning? The Bible teaches that the best comes next, that life after death for the Christian is even better – in fact is always better – than life before.

Perhaps you remember the conversation that Jesus had with the man on the next cross during the crucifixion. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." When this man died, one minute he was in the agony of crucifixion and the next minute he was in paradise with God in the presence of Jesus Christ. That is absolutely astonishing, and certainly far better than anything he could ever have experienced in all of his life up to that date. After is better than before!

But if that's true, then why don't we all just want to die? Why do we hold on to life so tenaciously? Why do we treasure every breath? Some of the answers to those questions are in II Corinthians chapter 5. I would encourage you to read this chapter for yourself. There you will discover that God designed us to live in these bodies that he gave us. God created us to be this way. That's why we want to live. That's why we hold on to life. And that's good. That's right. It's the way God intended for us to be.

But at the same time, we look forward to heaven because this life is hard and because heaven is better. God has designed us and wired us that way, too. So we hold on to life, but we anticipate the next life. We're caught in a tension, a tension that God designed for us to have.

In the meantime, God gives to us the Holy Spirit, who is God himself, who then resides inside us and gives us the power for living. But more than that, God gives to us a deposit, a down payment, a preview of what heaven will be like in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our job is not to choose how and when we're going to die; our job is to live now the way we anticipate that we are to live then and that is by pleasing God.

So we leave to God the decision of when this great transition will take place. We're convinced that God wants us to live but also that God has something better for us and that our goal in the meantime is to please him. II Corinthians 5 says, "So we make it our goal to

please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.”

Here’s what to expect. God will give to us grace for dying. When we die God will instantly welcome us into his heaven, a paradise better than anything we have ever experienced on earth. When we get to heaven, we will love it. We will be right at home; we will not need to adapt. We don’t have to worry about a thing. It will be an instant fit because that’s the way God designed everything to be.

If this were a classroom, hands would pop up all over because there are a lot of questions that still need to be answered. Like, when we get to heaven will we recognize people we knew on earth? Every indication from the Bible is that we will. Not only will we recognize people that we knew on earth, we will recognize characters from the Bible and others that we didn’t know on earth. But be careful here because what makes heaven heaven is not our friends and family that we will be reunited with, nor is it the beauty of heaven or the absence of sin or pain or death. What makes heaven heaven is God! He’s the big attraction. He is what heaven is all about.

When we get to heaven will we know what’s going on back on earth? Will there be HNN or something like that so we can keep up on everything that’s happening here? There are some hints in the Bible that we may have some partial information, but probably not much. There are no promises about information from earth. We should not think that heaven is mostly about earth because it’s not. Earth may be most about heaven and looking forward but heaven is the destination, it’s not about looking back.

Will there be sickness or pain or death in heaven? Absolutely not! Will we understand then and there what we don’t understand now? Indeed, we will. In I Corinthians 13:12 we read, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” In other words, in heaven things that don’t make sense to us now, that seem contradictory or inappropriate, will hang together. Then we will have an understanding that we don’t have now.

What about coming back to earth? Do we die and come back as somebody or something else? Do we get recycled and then die and live and die and live all over again? This is called reincarnation and on that the Bible is quite clear. In Hebrews 9:27 we’re told, “. . . we are destined to die once.” We have one life and then we have eternity.

Ah, but where will we live and what are we going

to eat and drink in heaven? Do we eat and drink in heaven? And if so, what’s on the menu? Will we have pets? What language will we speak in heaven? I need to study up so that I’ll be quick to understand everything that’s being said. The answer to this and ten thousand other questions is this: “We don’t know; there’s no way for us to know.” God has chosen not to tell us either because he doesn’t want us to know or because we wouldn’t understand. What we need to do is trust him. True, it’s fun to guess about some of these things. But we need to be cautious that we don’t put words into God’s mouth that God never intended to be there.

We need to focus upon what we do know. And what we do know is that when we die we’ll go to heaven, but also that our situation will be temporary. Temporary, you say? Isn’t that sort of a new twist? Not at all! We need to understand what happens after death in terms of sooner and later, in terms of before and after the resurrection.

You may want to read for yourself I Corinthians chapter 15 because that is the single greatest concentration of information about life after death in the entire

Bible. There and elsewhere we are taught that we all have two parts: physical and spiritual or material and immaterial. We have a body and a soul that began when we were conceived and were there when we were born and have stuck together through all of our lives. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. Death is so traumatic because it’s a tearing apart of what has never been apart before and what God intended to always be together. It’s because of sin that we have death and it’s because of sin that our body and soul are separated. Death is so tough because it’s the pulling apart of body and soul.

But the good news is that God promises that he’ll put us back together again. God will someday reassemble our dead bodies and reconnect those bodies with our souls. That’s called the resurrection. It’s much like the resurrection of Jesus. He died on Good Friday; his body was laid in the grave; his soul ascended to heaven; and on Sunday morning his soul came back to earth being reunited with his body. He was alive again! And the same thing is going to happen to us. That’s what we may expect.

But wait a minute. How is God going to do this? Jesus was dead for only a few days. Some people have been dead for thousands of years and there are no bodies to resurrect. Some people died in explosions; their bodies were blown apart and the pieces are all separated. Some people’s bodies were cremated; there are just ashes left. How can God make a body out of that?

Then the really curious people start going in all kinds of directions. They say, “What if somebody

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drowns at sea and a fish eats the body and somebody catches the fish and eats the fish? Now how is God going to put that person back together again?"

The answer to all these questions has to do with the power of God. God is able to do what seems impossible to us, what may not even fully make sense to us. He is the God of the impossible. Somehow he will figure it out and do it. When he does, our reconnected or resurrection bodies will be similar to what we have now only different. They will be like Jesus' body after his resurrection. People recognized his voice; they recognized his face; they examined his hands, his feet, his side. They ate with him. It was exactly the same Jesus. Only different! Different because he could enter a room where they were assembled behind a locked door without unlocking or opening the door. He could ascend to heaven without going through death. The same, but different!

The analogy that's used in I Corinthians 15 is of a seed, perhaps of wheat. The seed is put into the ground and grows up and becomes something that looks a whole lot different. At first it may seem that there's not much of a connection, but there's a direct connection. You can even check out the genetics of the plant and discover that the seed and the plant are connected to each other. But while they are similar, they are also dissimilar. And so it will be with our resurrection bodies. There will be clear connections—the same genetics—but definitely different.

These resurrections are future. There are actually two of them. One is for Christians; the other is for those who are not. One is to eternal life and the other is to eternal death. Until these resurrections take place and our souls are reunited with our bodies, we're in a temporary holding pattern. Which raises the question that if death separates our bodies and souls and we don't get our bodies back for a long time, what happens to those who are dead and waiting? And what will be my experience?

Again we don't fully know the answer. We do know that we will be in paradise. We do know that we will consciously be there. We do know that we will be in the presence of God. We do know that Jesus Christ will welcome us. We do know that everything will be great, but we don't know exactly how it works. Perhaps we will have some kind of a temporary body, but the truth is that we just don't know.

What we are taught in I Corinthians 15 is that our resurrection is clearly connected to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that our resurrection bodies will be both similar and dissimilar to the bodies that we now have. Similar and dissimilar, but always spiritual and supernatural and wonderful! I Corinthians 15:42-44 says:

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.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

There is so much more that could be said, so many more questions to ask, so many more answers in the Bible. But the bottom line is that death is a glorious victory for Christians and a disastrous defeat for unbelievers.

In the media there are stories of people who have near-death experiences. They are portrayed as seeing a bright, white light that is warm and attractive and Jesus is there welcoming people into heaven. What is underpublicized, but equally documented, are those who have near-death experiences with darkness rather than light and with visions of hell rather than heaven.

The powerful message of Jesus is that he wants us to believe in him and thereby to die well and have eternal life. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." So believe in Jesus. Have your sins forgiven. Become a Christian. Get eternal life that starts right now and be assured that God will give you dying grace for when your great transition comes so that when you die the best will be next. Then life after death will be better than anything you have ever previously experienced and you will someday have a resurrection body that will be much like the body of Jesus and will last forever.

Our Father, thank you for the truths that you tell us. Help us to trust you for the questions that remain unanswered. But most of all, thank you for Jesus Christ through whom we have the assurance of eternal life and in whom we have the promise of our own resurrection. Hear us as we declare our belief in faith. In Jesus your Son and our Savior we pray. Amen.

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