

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

34 What Happens When We Die?

The Christian Approach to Death

Old Testament Scripture: *Genesis 2:16-17, 5:24, 15:15, 25:8, 35:29, 49:33; Numbers 23:10; II Samuel 12:20-23; II Kings 2:11; Job 14:14, 19:25 - 27; Psalm 16:11, 17:15, 23:6; Ecclesiastes 12:7; Daniel 12:2 - 3; Hosea 13:14*

New Testament Scripture: *Matthew 22:33, 10:28, 17:1 - 4; Luke 16:19 - 31; John 3:14 - 16, 5:24-29, 11:25 - 26, 14:2 - 3; Romans 5:12, 6:23, 8:17 - 23; I Corinthians 15:51-57, 15:26; II Corinthians 4:17 - 18, 5:1-4, 5:6 - 8; Philippians 1:23; Hebrews 2:14 - 15; II Timothy 1:10; I John 5:11 - 12; Revelation 1:18, 14:13*

We are living in a day when people are saying new things about an old subject, the subject of death. In the medical and legal professions death has suddenly become rather complex. Whereas we once thought that to be dead was to be dead, now the condition of death is understood by certain preterminal stages which lead to what is known as clinical death. It is at this point that the blood pressure drops to zero and the heart ceases to beat. However, we are told that the body is able to remain alive anywhere from four to eight minutes if conditions are favorable. Finally, biological death happens and the body is on the way to fulfilling what is said at most funerals, "Dust to Dust."

What does all of this mean to us and how are we going to accommodate the fact of death to our lives which are ordinarily so busy we don't have time to plan for tomorrow much less what might happen to us five or fifty years from now? What we really ought to do is to take the time to understand what the Bible has to say about the subject of death. We ought to let the Bible's teaching sink in even though medical genius now is able to prolong life and even raise the dead before our very eyes. We would expect the Christian faith to talk about death. A religion that does not speak to this matter could hardly be expected to say much about life. Surely one of the assurances that we need in life is that death holds no surprises for us. For that reason men have long speculated about the possibility of immortality and what exactly does happen when we die. We will not take the time to examine the various secular notions which range all the way from annihilation to thousands of successive incarnations. It is our conviction that all we can know about death in terms of immortality is recorded in the Bible. To

walk away from the Scriptures in this matter is to walk away from true knowledge and hope. There is a world of difference between man-made religion and what comes to us in Scripture. From Solomon to George Bernard Shaw the estimate comes that life is a breath and that a living dog is better than a dead lion, but not by much. The highest thoughts of men only breed confusion and despair, but when we come to God's Word we find something that is wonderfully different and refreshing. Let us turn our attention to the Bible and certain information which will help us to understand what does happen to us when we die.

I. WHAT IS MAN?

Long ago the Psalmist asked, *"What is man that thou art mindful of him?"* (Psalm 8:4) When we come to the subject of death it is important that this question be answered according to Scripture. We should understand that man came into being by a creative act of God. We read in Genesis 1:27, *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."* It was a very special breed of person that came from the hand of the creator. Man was not after the order of the herbs or other warm-blooded animals, but after God's image. The word *"image"* and the word *"likeness"* (Genesis 1:26) do not mean bodily form or physical likeness inasmuch as we know from other Scripture that God is a spirit. John 4:24 tells us that *"God is spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth."* A spirit is incorporeal (not made with matter) and as Jesus said in Luke 24:39, *"Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."* Rather, these words imply that man was made in God's spiritual likeness. He was first a personal being. As a being possessed of personality, man was rational with the powers of perception, self-determination, fixative thought, and self-consciousness. Further, man was a moral being with the facility to know right and wrong. Possessing this capacity man was different from the beast of the field. God created man good and upright. He was the very crown of creation, highest on the scale of created beings. This is the way the Bible describes man's origin, *"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."* (Genesis 2:7) Man is thus material but not exclusively. The record tells us that man became a living *"soul."* The view here is that of a material and immaterial being. The word *"life"* in this verse is plural in form so that the creative act of God was to inhabit the dust body with the breath of lives.

Competent scholars are divided on the matter of whether man is composed of two parts (body & soul) which is called dichotomy, or three parts (body, soul and spirit) known as trichotomy. Those who hold to a dichotomy feel that man is not a three story building, but a two story building with two windows on the second story, one looking up and the other looking down. The soul looks downward and is the seat of our affections, reason and will. The spirit links man with God, is above the body-soul part of man's being, and is capable of being quickened by the Holy Spirit. Others feel that man is essentially a threefold being according to such verses as I Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12. Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse has resolved this matter in his own mind by talking about a ruined building. "We remember photographs of the bombing of London. There stand the ruins of what was once a three-storied house. The third floor has fallen into the second floor and the debris of those two floors can be seen mixed together. This is a picture of what happened when Adam sinned. Before the fall man was a three-natured man. As soon as sin entered, his spirit fell into his soul and he has lived in that confusion ever since."

It may be academic whether man is two or three natured. The point is that he is possessed of a little diamond within himself that is neither visible nor mortal. It is not material and does not disintegrate as material things do. It is a spiritual substance, and by that nature will live on when the house in which it resides goes to pieces. Corruption is a disintegration of parts. The soul has no parts; it is for that reason incorruptible. The pathologist who said sarcastically to me bending over the mortal remains of an elderly man, "All right Christensen, where is the soul? Is it here in the foot, or up here under the arm?" I didn't know what he was talking about. Such warped thinking has long made light of what is sacred.

II. WHY DO WE DIE?

The answer to this question lies in the way the word death is used in the Bible. The meaning of a word is not determined from its derivation, not by the way it is used secularly or by pagan writers, not according to the lexicons or standard dictionary, but according to its use in Scripture. It is the way the word is used by the Holy Spirit that determines its meaning for the Christian. What then does death mean to the Holy Spirit, as He has revealed this understanding to us in Scripture?

1. Death Is the Penalty for Man's Outrage Against God:

God said, *"In the day that you exercise your will in violation of mine, in that day you shall surely die."* (Genesis 2:17) In Romans 6:23 we are informed that *"the wages of sin is death."* Paul refers to death as an enemy in I Corinthians 15:6. It is the great enemy of our souls. It brings sorrow and separation. I have used the word penalty to describe the reason why death has become our lot. Penalty in the sense may-be defined as the reaction of divine holiness against sin. This penalty is not confined to moral consequences alone. Moral consequences have to do with the effect of sin on our soul and spirit. Physical death is the positive penalty that God has attached to the one who has broken His law. We do not understand this penalty to issue annihilation as do some. All men are immortal whether they have Christ in their life or not. As we have already said, man's immortality is fundamental to his nature. He is a soulish creature, not brutish only.

2. The Essence of Death Is Separation:

In the case of the Eden story as recorded in the third chapter of Genesis, man was separated from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-23), from the Garden of Eden, and from the personal and visible presence of God. Adam and Eve hid themselves because their sin had made them morally unfit for face to face communion with God. There is a threefold death described in the Bible which arises out of the separation I have just mentioned.

A. Physical Death:

This is the separation of the soul from the body. At the time of death man's body begins a process of decomposition until the some thirty different chemical elements return to the earth. It is at this time that the soul takes leave of the body. Genesis 2:17 states, literally, *"dying thou shalt die."* Death is a process. In the original pair it began at once upon disobedience and continued until it eventually overcame them. Their expulsion from the tree of life meant the impossibility of continued physical existence. If they had obeyed God we assume they would have been confirmed in righteousness and physical well-being.

B. Spiritual Death:

This is the separation of the spirit from God. Man's spirit, with which he communed with God was stricken, it became unresponsive and without

desire for God. This is a state of alienation and is the condition of the person who is without Christ in his life. It means that while a person may be possessed of vitality in all other areas of life, there is deadness spiritually. He cannot relate to God. There is a blind spot in his thinking process, he does not receive the things of the Spirit of God and they are foolishness to him. (I Corinthians 1:18-24)

C. Eternal Death:

The Bible teaches that eternal death is the result of spiritual death. It means separation from God who is the source of life and joy. Eternal destiny, according to the Bible, is but an endless manifestation of the condition of a person's soul at the time of physical death. Either a person is found to be within God's grace at that moment or he is not. You will be in eternity what you are in your moment of death. Our conjectures as to what might or might not be do not alter the fact that man's soul lives on, like it or not.

III. HOW CAN WE KNOW IMMORTALITY IS NOT JUST WISHFUL THINKING?

Immortality may be defined as the eternal, conscious, continuous existence of the soul after the death of the body. There is first the desire to live on. Man is both body and soul spirit. As body-man he dies. As soul-spirit man he desires to live on. This desire is implanted in the very nature of man; it is not a momentary craving. It was Aristotle who declared, "Nature does nothing in vain." The eye demands light, our frame demands air, and there is light and air. All men experience the urge to go on to some thing better than this life has offered them. They do not have to persuade themselves that they will live on; rather, they must try to persuade themselves that they will not. We cannot prove the immortality of the soul as we can prove that cement is heavy by trying to lift it. But there are different orders of being with different orders of proof. Who would deny the reality of love or sincerity because it can't be weighed on a scale? Again, we have the conscience which has played a meaningful role in the moral history of man, and cannot be denied. Things will be tallied someday and we have an inner voice which tells us that this will be so. From the standpoint of Scripture, yes, there have been those who have come back and told us. Christ raised at least three people from the dead, recalling their souls to their bodies. Many feel that the Apostle Paul was actually stoned to death at Lystra. (Acts 14:6 - 22) Few people ever walked away from a stoning. Paul writes about it in II Corinthians 12:1 - 10.

At first he speaks about himself in the third person and then changes to the first. The desire that we have for immortality does not count for nothing. If we have desires, aims, aspirations, all of which demand an object, then that object must exist. Can we imagine a reasonable God fashioning that delicate organ of hearing, the ear, adapted to every kind of vibration, yet not endow objects with the power of causing sound? The whole reason for this instrument is to hear, yet it would never do so because its complimentary object would be lacking. Every natural tendency implies an object. If nothing in this life completely satisfies the soul, God is telling us something. We will never come to the stage in this life where our desires are quite satisfied.

IV. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES CHRIST MAKE?

Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, death has been changed for the believer. As far as their physical bodies are concerned, there is no difference between the death of the believer and unbeliever. We have already spoken of physical death as the separation of the body and soul. This is also known as the first death. We often use the word “expire.” It means the exit of the soul. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us that Christ took a body upon Himself so that through death He might destroy death and destroy him that had the power of death that is the devil, and set free those people who were all their life time subject to bondage because of the fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-15) There are wonderful words in I Corinthians 15:20 where it tells that Christ is the fruit of a glorious coming harvest. Death to the believer, instead of being a door to oblivion, becomes a gateway to everlasting life. In the New Testament there are certain words that convey to us what happens when we die. The word “sleep” is used. This has reference to the body. Christians called their cemeteries “*Cubicula*” or sleeping places. (John 11:11-14; Matthew 27:52; Acts 7:60; 13:36; I Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 8, 51; I Thessalonians 4:13-15; II Peter 3:4. The body alone is in view here because only the body associates with the word resurrection. Death is like a departure, or a loosing. (II Timothy 4:6; Philippians 1:23) Another word is the word “*exodus*.” It means a “going out.” (II Peter 1:13-15) The Christian accepts death as part of the sovereignty of God. (Psalm 31:15) His attitude reflects his faith in Christ. “*O glorious confidence, to be absent in the body, is to be present with the Lord.*” When believers die we lay their bodies to rest in a simple and dignified way, knowing their souls have gone to the immediate presence of the Lord Jesus. They see the Lord in spirit at death; they will see Him in body at the resurrection

Editors Note:

The following check list concerning death was prepared by Pastor Christensen for another Bible Study on this subject that was not originally included in the series "Questions We Want Answered." The editor includes it here because of its practicality and helpfulness in addressing a situation that affects us all.

THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO DEATH

The following guidelines have been prepared by Alan B. Christensen, Pastor of Hope Church, Wilton, Ct., with the realization that the time of death is uncertain, and the emotional stress of the occurrence often renders us unable to think clearly. Thus, it seems reasonable to prepare well in advance. Let us consider preparations to be taken before death, at the time of death and following death.

I. Preparations to Be Made Before Death:

1. The most important is spiritual. Be certain that you are prepared to meet God through personal faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. (Amos 4:12; John 5:24; John 1:12)
2. It is an increased burden to die intestate. Make out a will.
3. Life insurance is very practical. Those who benefit will be grateful.
4. Make your choice of a mortician.
5. Consider the kind of funeral service you want. Instructions may be filed with your will.
6. Plan for the place of burial. Many have found it advisable to purchase a family plot.
7. Leave instructions concerning the disposal of your body. Questions having to do with disposal or preservation, the performing of autopsies, or the giving of organs, can be settled more reasonably ahead of time.

II. Preparations to Be Made at the Time of Death:

1. Immediately call upon the Lord for strength and understanding.
2. Call your pastor. Inform him of the death and allow him to come and pray with you. He will be willing to help in any way you ask.

3. Call your family physician or the medical examiner.
4. Call the mortician and provide a biography for him.
5. Set the time and place of the funeral service, along with the visiting hours. It would seem that the most likely place for the memorial service of the redeemed is in the House of God. This is the last in the parade of lifetime events and it is a triumphant one. It does not dignify the business of burying with sorrow.
6. Many have felt it wise to have the casket open during visiting hours at the funeral home (when possible) but closed for the church service. Here the emphasis is upon our hope in Christ.
7. Notify out of town loved ones and friends.
8. It has been observed by many that we should not be ashamed to cry. It is healthy to cry during a time of great loss.
9. Keep your Christian values in mind regarding the choice of a casket, clothes, etc. Here is an opportunity to demonstrate our faith. Be sure to discuss finances with the mortician before he is authorized to proceed.

III. Preparations to Be Made After Death:

1. This is the time to lean heavily upon the Lord and to draw your strength and comfort from Him. He has promised His comfort-and constant presence with you. Spend time in the Word and prayer.
2. Resume your regular activities as soon as possible.
3. Keep close to God's people. Seek to serve the Lord as opportunities present themselves. Help others and you will help yourself.
4. We are told that adjustment is impossible (almost) for the first couple of weeks. After four or five weeks progress should be made.
5. If you are having a difficult time be sure to call upon your pastor or some other trusted Christian friend. The Lord has provided them for you in your time of need.

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