

“What Happens When I Die?”
Sermon Series on *Tough Questions*
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(1 Thess. 4:13-18)

Introduction.

A few months ago Google made an announcement which said, “Not many of us like thinking about death – especially our own. But making plans for what happens after you’re gone is really important for the people you leave behind.” The announcement went on to say that Google was launching a new feature that makes it easy to tell Google what you want done with your digital assets when you die. It’s called the “Inactive Account Manager.” The announcement concluded by saying Google hoped this new feature will enable people to plan for their digital afterlife in a way that both protects their privacy and security and makes it easier for loved ones when we’re gone.

Well, that may answer the question “What happens when I die?” as far as your Google accounts are concerned, but it doesn’t answer the deeper spiritual question about the eternal nature of the soul and what really happens to us when we die. What happens when the person we love takes their last breath in Hospice? Or dies suddenly in a car accident? Or collapses on the golf course from a massive heart attack? Or passes away peacefully as they sleep at night? Have you ever wondered what happens when you die?

Last weekend Jamie Smith spoke at our Forum on Faith and Culture, and in one of his talks he made reference to the biography by Walter Isaacson on Steve Jobs. In his biography Isaacson relates what Jobs shared with him on the topic of death and the afterlife shortly before Jobs died of liver cancer in 2011. Here’s what the tech giant said:

“Sometimes I believe in God, sometimes I don’t. I think it’s 50/50 maybe. But ever since I’ve had cancer, I’ve been thinking about him more, and I find myself believing a bit more. Maybe it’s because I want to believe in an afterlife, that when you die, it doesn’t just all disappear...that the wisdom you’ve accumulated, somehow it lives on.” He paused for a very long time and then said: “Yeah, but sometimes I think it’s just like an On/Off switch. Click, and you’re gone.” Then he added, “Maybe that’s why I never liked putting On/Off switches on Apple devices.”¹

Steve Jobs wasn’t immune to death, and you and I aren’t immune either. Will our lives end like an “On/Off” switch, or is there something more to life when we die? The apostle Paul gives an answer to this tough question in the passage we’ve read together this morning. Let’s take a closer look at what he says.

I. The Reality of Death.

Billy Graham once said, “The death rate the whole world over is still 100%. None of us is going to get out of here alive.” And in his book *Nearing Home* Graham writes, “No one can outrun death. It will catch up to all of us eventually.” The reality of death and what lies beyond it is always there. Sometimes this reality is quiet, sometimes it crashes in on you, and other times it is just lurking beyond the grasp of our conscious thought. Nevertheless death awaits each one of us eventually.

Death was never part of God's original plan, and it came as a result of the disobedience of our first parents in the Garden of Eden. You'll recall that in Genesis 2 God told Adam, "*You must not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die*" (2:17). Adam and Eve thought they had a better idea, and they chose to go against the warning of God. As a result death entered the world, and you and I have been living with the reality of it ever since. But death isn't the way God intended things to be in the beginning. It is an intruder, an unwelcome guest which forces its way in on us. It destroys our bodies, it robs us of our dignity, and it leaves an empty shell. And the Bible says that death is an enemy of every single person.

Many people in our world today want to ignore death and pretend it won't happen, or they try to soften the reality of it and put it way off into the future. But no matter how hard to you try to ignore the reality of death, it has a way of imposing itself on all of us eventually.

Last Wednesday ESPN aired a special feature on a 10-year-old boy named Logan Shoenhardt who died of brain cancer the day before. Logan was a huge New England Patriots fan, and his favorite player was Tom Brady. The story was about Logan getting to meet his hero before a Patriots game back in December and fulfilling a lifelong dream before Logan passed away. It is a very moving story.

The segment began with these profound words: "Before the leaves fall and the color fades, there is a beauty here (in New England). It doesn't last forever. It's days are numbered. All our days are. We all have a number inside us, counting down, unequal and unknown. It's how we reach our number that matters."

Death is going to be a reality for all of us. That's true whether you're a 10-year-old boy with cancer, or 110-years-old and your body just eventually wears out. "We all have a number inside us, counting down, unequal and unknown. It's how we reach our number that matters."

I always thought Lorie would live into her 80s, if not her 90s. Her grandmother lived to be 96, and her mother was 87 when she died. Lorie was so conscientious about fitness and nutrition, I figured she would outlive me and be amazing in her old age. But I was wrong, and she died when she was just 64. Sometimes I still have a hard time getting my head around it all. Often it feels like she's away on a mission trip traveling overseas like she often did in her work with the poor, and I keep waiting for her to come home. But then I look across at the empty space next to me in my bed, and the reality of her death settles back in.

In the 16th century, the great reformer Martin Luther once said, "Even in the best of health, we should have death always before our eyes so that we will not expect to remain on this earth forever, but will have one foot in the air, so to speak."²

It's good to be aware that one day we will die, and the reality of death will become a reality for all of us.

II. The Eternal Nature of the Soul.

In the passage we have read this morning the apostle Paul acknowledges the reality of death, but he also makes it clear that there is a distinction between the body and the soul when a person dies. So when we ask, "What happens when I die?" we're actually asking two questions. The first question is, "What happens to my body?" And the second is, "What happens to my soul?" The Bible teaches that at death the souls of believers don't cease to exist even though their bodies no longer function. Instead, our souls continue to live on for eternity, and we enter into the presence of God.

In his sermon last Sunday Jamie Smith ended his message by quoting from Revelation 7, which is a powerful description of believers in heaven. When Jamie read the passage, my eyes welled up with tears at the thought of all the wonderful things described in that passage which have been prepared for everyone who follows Christ and has gone before us. They are in the presence of God now, and they are with the Lord in heaven. It is such a beautiful picture.

While our bodies are confined to the material order of this world, our souls have a nature that is other-worldly and they transcend this earthly existence. When we die, our bodies return to the earth. “*From dust you come, and to dust you shall return.*” That’s what the Bible says. But our souls live on in eternity, and what makes you *you* will live forever.

As a pastor I’ve had the privilege of being at the bedside of several people when they passed away, including Lorie back in November. And whenever I’ve been witness to these holy moments, I’m always amazed by what happens. One moment they are alive, and the person is still there. Then they die, and all that is left is an empty shell. You begin to realize it was just a tent they once lived in, but now they’re gone. The spirit of the person has departed, and they have left this world.

Chapter 32 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says, “The bodies of human beings, after death, return to dust, and see corruption. But their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.”³

Anne Lamott once wrote an essay in which she said that death is like finally getting to take off the too-small shoes we’ve been wearing our entire lives. It’s like getting to rub those sore arches and wiggle those baby toes after all these years of feeling cramped and constrained. It’s like Chinese women who are foot-bound, tiptoeing to minimize the pain. What a relief it is for the soul to be unbound and completely free in heaven!

Someone told me recently that when her grandmother died, she gave strict instructions that when they buried her they weren’t to have her wear pantyhose. She didn’t want to have anyone put pantyhose on her when they put her in the casket, because it wouldn’t be heaven if she had to wear pantyhose!

Freedom awaits us when we leave this world of sin and death.

III. The Hope and Promise of the Resurrection.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul says that when we die, while our souls don’t sleep, our bodies do. The soul doesn’t sleep – it goes to be with the Lord in heaven, but the body sleeps. Sleep is a common metaphor for death in the Bible, and we read about it being described like this on many occasions (Ps. 13:3; 90:5; Jn. 11; and 1 Cor. 15).

Did you know that our English word “cemetery” comes for the Greek word for “sleep”? From a Christian point of view, a cemetery is a place of sleep for the bodies of the dead. But the sleep is temporary. According to Scripture the death of our bodies is only for a time. Sleep is followed by waking up, and death will be followed by the resurrection.

Author Jim Nite says⁴ that in the New Testament the resurrection of Jesus Christ is both a *proof* and a *promise*. It’s the proof that the Father accepts Jesus’ death for our sins, but it’s also a promise that we will be resurrected one day ourselves. Jesus’ resurrection was the first of its kind, but won’t be the last.

To understand what happens when we die, we have to go to the second coming. The Bible says that Jesus Christ is going to return to this planet, but He’s not going to come alone, and we

see a reference to this here in our passage. In verse 14 we're told that those who have died in Christ will accompany Jesus on His return to earth, and the dead will be the first full participants in the future kingdom of God.

At Jesus' return there will be a universal authoritative announcement which will involve a loud command, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet call of God. Jesus will return physically, visibly, and dramatically, and He will come with all those who have died in the Lord. And when this happens their bodies will be raised, and their souls and their bodies will be reunited. But their bodies will be new and different, just as Christ's body was after His resurrection. The God who created the universe out of nothing has the ability to reassemble the molecules of our bodies in their new resurrected state.

And all this will happen in the blink of an eye. Elsewhere in the NT Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, "*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, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will all be changed*" (15:51-52).

You and I live in a world that is afraid of death. We hide it away in hospitals, nursing homes and funeral homes. But Christians have nothing to be afraid of when it comes to death. The life we enjoy today is only an introduction to the life we will experience following death, and the Bible says it will be glorious and incredible.

C.S. Lewis once described our current experience in this world as only the cover and the title page of the book. Death takes us to the first chapter of the *Great Story*, and every chapter in that new book will be better than the one before. Since we live in a world that is badly damaged by sin, the world to come is the greater reality. With death our souls enter heaven, and with the return of Christ our bodies will be resurrected. Then the Bible says God will create the new heavens and the new earth, and, as New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has written, "everything will be put to rights."

Because of this wonderful promise from God Himself, Paul says that you and I don't have to grieve as people who have no hope. Instead, we have every reason to look with faith and optimism to the future and beyond. Because of our faith in Jesus Christ we can look past death and all the pain and disappointment we experience when someone we love dies to the amazing and wonderful things Jesus is going to do one day when He returns again at His second coming. Until that happens, Paul says we should encourage one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:18).

Conclusion.

In the third book of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, one of Frodo's hobbit companions, Pippin, and the great wizard, Gandalf, have a conversation about what is to come in the afterlife as an epic battle appears to be lost. With the enemy approaching and the possibility of dying very real, Pippin says, "I didn't think it would end this way."

"End?" Gandalf replied. "No, the journey does not end here. Death is just another path, one that we must all take. The grey rain curtain of this world rolls back and all turns to silver glass...and then you see it."

"What, Gandalf? See what?" Pippin asked.

Gandalf replied, "White shores...and beyond...A far green country under a swift sunrise."

Pippin remarked, "Well, that isn't so bad." To which Gandalf smiled and said, "No, no it isn't at all."

Early in my sermon I quoted Billy Graham and what he said about the reality of death. I want to close this morning with another story from his life. In 1996 Billy and Ruth were invited

to Washington, D.C., where they were honored with the Congressional Medal of Freedom. At the ceremony held in the Rotunda of the Capital, Dr. Graham, who was visibly suffering from Parkinson's disease, feebly stood at the podium, and he addressed the impressive gathering of political leaders.

In his remarks as he made his acceptance speech for the prestigious award, he said to those gathered, "As I look around this Rotunda today, I see the statues of many famous people who have shaped this country. I have studied the lives of many of them and what they have accomplished. And I have discovered that there is one thing all these people have in common – they are all now dead. And the fact of the matter is that one day all of us in this room are going to die too. And the question is, will you be ready to meet God when your time comes?"

Billy went on to share the gospel in a winsome and wonderful way to the most powerful leaders of this country. He did this because he knew that the question of "What happens when I die?" is a question we all need to ask and be able to answer with confidence. Where are you with Christ today? And how does God want you to prepare your heart for the day of your death when you, too, will leave this earth?

Thanks be to God for the hope we can have in Christ. It is a hope that can outlive even death!

¹ The quote is slightly altered from what appears in Isaacson's biography *Jobs*, on page 571. It includes material from a *60 Minutes* documentary on Jobs and an interview with Isaacson about this incident.

² Quoted by Philip Yancey in *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, p. 5.

³ *The Westminster Standards*, 32.

⁴ Jim Nite, "What Happens When We Die?" This is taken from an article he wrote for *Christianity Today*. Date unknown.