

XLVI. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

*What Does the Bible Say?*

“What Happens When I Die? (Part 1)”

II Corinthians 5:8

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I’m going to start this study by reading a foundation passage from II Corinthians 5:6–10 which says [6] *So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight. [8] Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*

Now I want to look at Hebrews 9 which picks up on this same theme. Hebrews 9:23–28 says [23] *Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites (speaking of the baptisms of blood, water and oil), but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. [24] For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. [25] Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, [26] for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. [27] And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, [28] so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*

I’ve been praying through almost six months now on this series of sermons on what happens when we die. It is something we think about for multiple reasons. My first prayer as a child was ‘God is good, God is great, let us thank Him for this food and the rest of ya’ll wait.’ The one my dad and mom taught me that we would pray before I went to bed was, ‘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.’ This matter of understand death is something you come to grips with hopefully early in life. I will confess to you that this is very foundational in death itself. What is death? Why is there death? How should we view death? What does the Bible teach about death? In the next study we’ll build on the foundation of what happens when we die to an unbeliever and a believer. Then where do we go and what is our state? What is the ultimate state and what can I expect?

I’m not preoccupied with this matter of death by any means, but one more than one occasion I have had people say how much they appreciate how I do a funeral service. I’ve often wondered why because that is the one place I’d prefer not to be at yet for some reason the Lord has allowed me to minister both to believers and unbelievers at times of funerals. I think one of the reasons for that is, when I was a kid I was only exposed to two funerals until I was 21 years of age. Both of those funerals were some of the horrendous experiences you can absolutely imagine. People were in utter despair, chaos, no comfort and those who had lost the loved ones grieved with no hope. It was a grief that had come apart, it was uninformed, it was bewilderment and absolute despair. At one of those funerals I sat and held my aunt’s hand for six hours with no opportunity to say a word. It was amazing that God used a death and funeral to convert me.

Some of you know I went to East Carolina University for my freshman and sophomore years only to find out that I would no longer be attending there to play baseball due to my poor grades. I had worked in a lot of things those two years but unfortunately class was not one of them. So I did almost an insurmountable feat that stands in the annals of history, I flunked out of East Carolina where if you can unfog a mirror you can graduate. After that I headed off to the Marine Corp and coming home that summer I had a little time on my hands my mother decided if I wasn't going to become a Christian she would get a woman in my life to stop this runaway train, because I was descending rapidly in a life of dissipation, sin, ungodliness and immorality. I had a few talks with my mother about the inappropriateness of what she was doing.

One time I went to pick up my mother and there was this young woman hanging around who I saw something different in but wondered why my mom didn't try to set me up with her and she said 'you're a little out of your league on this one.' I'm competitive so I went after her and I found out why she was so different. I was not only attracted to her but she was different because she was a Christian. There was some depth to her. I want to date her and she only dated Christians so I didn't mind lying at the time to tell her I was one. So I knew we would go to church and I didn't want to go to mine because she would know I wasn't a Christian and I didn't want to go to a hers which was a Baptist so I found this little Presbyterian church. I didn't know there were different kinds of Presbyterians and this church believed everything.

On Christmas day I received a phone call that one of the elder's wife had just had a cerebral hemorrhage at the dinner table and the four little daughters wanted 'Mr. Harry and Ms Cindy' to come stay with them. The wife died and this was the ceiling work of God's grace in my life. I had heard the Gospel all my life but something was different after this funeral had taken place. I went to Mr. Elliot and said "I'm not sure what to say but if there is anything I can do for you let me know." He said "Harry I think there is something you need to hear. If I could bring my wife back now I wouldn't do it. I appreciate your encouragement. Keep praying for me." I had only been to two funerals and I didn't have a category for that response. I kind of thought that they had been having trouble and maybe he was glad the marriage was over or something like that.

I went in the other room and talked with a guy who had kind of been shadowing me that had played ball with my dad. He said to me "Harry you are seeing the flag of Christ." I told him what Mr. Elliot said to me about not bringing his wife back and he gave me three reasons why. He said "One, do you know what she has right now? Why would I be that selfish to bring her back to me with all she has right now? I am going to rejoice and ask God to help me rejoice for her. Secondly, the Bible says that all things aren't good but that all things work together for good so God has a plan in this. Death is not beyond Him and death is something He'll use just like anything else for His glory and my good. I don't know what it is but I know that. Thirdly, it won't be that long until I'll be there too."

After hearing that, I went into a foyer and got on my knees because I had had the emptiness of everything the world had offered and it was nothing but empty. My favorite song that year was a Peggy Lee song titled 'Is that all there is?' I remembered when he said the flag of the Gospel is what you are seeing being raised over sin and death and I wanted it raised in my life. After praying and giving my life to Christ, I then prayed 'So Lord, if there is anything you want me to do just let me know and I'll go do it.' I had no idea where that was going to lead me for the rest of my life but I'll never forget that moment. I don't think it has ever left me since.

Death, we have to finally deal with and we can't run from it. There are several reasons why I want to preach on this. One, is we sanitize society from death. We sanitize it with our

language. We usually create as many ways as possible so that they don't have to encounter it while they are going through it. We usually warehouse death and we don't deal with it. We keep the whole issue away from our children when in reality they ought to be aware of it, know about and how to deal with it. We don't have much clarity on death or we don't trust what the Bible says about it or we don't know what the Bible says about it or there is a combination of both. That's why people who have died and come back to life write a book about it.

Was there anybody in the Bible that died and Jesus raised them up? Lazarus. Did he write a book? I would say he didn't write a book for two reasons. One, the book has been written. It is God's Word. Two, I think Lazarus was a little ticked off – look where I was and now I'm back here. He would have to do this again and so why is he going to write about it? I don't think he writes one because we have one. This Book tells us the truth about death, about the victory of Christ over death and where death leads. Hebrews 9:27 says [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* I believe this is an appropriate journey for us to deal with this subject and not out of morbidity but out of glorious triumph that Jesus won the victory over sin, death, hell and the grave. I will not in this series speculate beyond what the Bible says but I do believe the Bible says what we need to know. I believe in the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture and I don't need the speculation of others. All I need is what God's Word tells me about life, death and eternity.

Another reason for this series is because of the way the Bible treats this. It's really intriguing. When the Bible deals with death it uses on the one hand very stark and startling terms and on the other hand very careful and comforting terms. The Bible will refer to death as an enemy and then it will use the term for death as he 'fell asleep' in Jesus. The clue is when death is referred starkly as the enemy He is speaking of death in its universal reign of sin over all who do not know Him. When He speaks of the believer who dies in the victory of Christ He uses a euphemism in place of the startling term for death (Thanatos, meaning separation) and gives the word asleep for it. We are asleep in Christ.

Why is it that believers who are headed for eternity who want to be with the Lord, struggle while they are dying? One time I went to minister to a lady who had just lost her mother. I said "Nancy, here is where your mother is..." and I went through some things with her and then she said "Preacher, I've just decided that I'm not going to die." I quoted to her the passage in Hebrews 9:27 and then said 'so you are going to die.' She said "no, I'm not for to die you have to quit breathing and I'm not going to quit." Yet she was fully aware of all the glories her mother had. Why is it we struggle to keep living even though we want to be with the Lord and know what we are going to? The reason is we weren't made to die. Death is an enemy. It's not a friend and I know we don't think that way. That's why I want to cover this.

People come to me all the time saying "Will you pray that I have a natural death?" There is no such thing as a natural death. Death is not a part of nature. Death is not a part of God's creation. There is no death in Genesis 1 and 2. Death doesn't come until Genesis 3. Death is the curse of covenant unfaithfulness of Adam. It's not a natural order. It is an enemy to be defeated. Praise God it has been defeated. That is why we can talk about the death of a believer being asleep in Jesus because it has been defeated. It is not and should not be seen as something natural. It is an incursion in this world because of sin.

One more reason I am doing this series is because the stakes are high. Everybody faces death. Death's domain is universal. I only know of two people that did not die. One man who didn't die is the man who fathered the man (Methuselah) who lived the longest in the world. His name was Enoch. In Genesis 5 we're told that Enoch walked with God and he was no more for

the Lord took him to be with Him. All the ones listed before him say he lived this long and died but it doesn't say Enoch died. The only other one I know of that didn't die was Elijah. You will find in II Kings 2 as he is preparing Elisha to follow him he goes to the river Jordan, the water splits, Elijah walks through and the next thing you know is the Lord takes him into glory. I always think of this when I take people to Israel and we're around the River Jordan. Unless Jesus comes back first we all will face a moment of a last breath, now what?

Why is that death there and then what happens? I have already read two texts that tell you what happens ultimately. Ultimately as it says in Hebrews 9:27 says [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* There are things that happen before that judgment and there are things that happen after that judgment. The Bible tells us what they are and what will be the experience of those things in what we call the intermediate state between our death and the judgment. What can I expect, not with speculation but with the clarity of what God has given to us? I will confess that He has not given an extraordinary amount of information but He has given us some information.

So in this study I want us to understand what death is and why it's here, already having said why I want to deal with this matter. The reality is its universal domain. Death is not natural so no one will have a natural death. It's funny how people will ask me 'Pastor if I die will you do my funeral?' And it's not if you die but when you die because unless Jesus comes back first you will die. So let's start by looking at what death is.

The Greek word for death is Thanatos and it means separation but this is an interesting word that means separation. It's not the kind of separation one might think of when you think of something being separated with perforation. It is a separation of what was designed to be inseparable. There are three kinds of death in the Bible. Here is the reason death is here. Romans 6:23 says [23] *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* The reason is just the first part of this verse before the word 'but.' Our sin earns death. Notice, death is not a part of a world and life view that declares it natural. Biblically death is seen as an intruder, under the sovereign hand of God as a wage for sin.

Where do we first see death in the Bible? Let's look at Genesis 3 which is where sin enters the picture and here we see what sin does – it brings death. After Adam and Eve knew they sinned Genesis 3:7–13 says [7] *Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

[8] *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.* [9] *But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* [10] *And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* [11] *He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"* [12] *The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."* [13] *Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

So for the purpose of this study, what do we have here? There is God, having made man in His image. Satan is coming to promote disobedience by attacking the veracity of God's Word and that hasn't changed to this day. I just read a quote from a "celebrity mega preacher" telling everyone in his congregation that the song you learned as a kid was the beginning of our troubles in Christianity and it's the reason we can't reach young people today. The song he was referring to is "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." This preacher went on to

say that the Reformation was wrong, Evangelicals are wrong for we do not build our faith in Christ on the authority of God's Word and that's why we're losing people because there are all kinds of things in God's Word you just can't defend and obviously are errors. Then he goes on to say in which you can hear the irrationality of this; 'you build your faith in Christ and the resurrection.'

There is an obvious question here. How do you know Jesus is raised? The Bible tells me so. You can't pick and choose what is truth from the Bible. There is a reason the Bible is the whole truth. You can't know the God of the Word without the Word. It is that simple. That is why Satan in the Garden attacked the Word when he said to Adam and Eve, "Has God said...?" Satan says God is not trustworthy and He's a liar for Satan says God said that to you so that you wouldn't know that you could be like Him. God already said all that needed to be said to Satan in His Word. Satan is telling them to disobey God and not trust His Word and if they do they can be like God, yet they are like God for they were made in His image. They know so because He told them so. Yet she takes and eats, he takes and eats as he abandons his responsibilities and we all sinned in them and with them when they sinned.

What was the result of sin? God comes walking and they no longer want to walk with Him. Why? It is because of fear, shame and guilt. I was afraid. I was naked (and ashamed). I tried to hide myself (because of guilt). I was stripped naked in my conscience as well as in my body and I had to hide. It didn't work. They hid behind fig leaves and still felt naked. They hid behind trees and that didn't work. They hid themselves with excuses, blaming the other or even God but none of it worked. See how separation is taking place because of sin.

That separation is codified with three kinds of death in the Bible. Death one is physical death. James 2:26a says [26a] *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead.* Here death is the soul being separated from the body. Earlier I said not to think of separation as a perforation for it is the rending apart of what was supposed to be permanently united. Physical death is the Thanatos, the radical separation of the body from the soul. Most of us because of the influence of Greek philosophy and our educational system we think of a person like a car where the body is the car and the soul is like the person driving the car. Death is open the door and let the person out. No, it is not your body and your soul is a passenger in that body. When God made man He made him from the dust of the ground. He is physical but he is just a corpse until God breathes into him, into that corpse, into it and he became a living soul. It is the body and soul which are two threads woven together as one cloth and they weren't made to be separated. That is why you keep wanting to breathe, you weren't made to die.

I love our evangelism programs like EE and Bridge to Life because they say when they go out to share the Gospel they create 'fishing pools' which is what they call them. I have two favorite 'fishing pools' and one is a golf course. I love to fish for Jesus on the golf course. I don't even have to ask them on that gold course 'if you died tonight do you know where you'd go' because as soon as he misses a three foot putt I know where he's headed for all eternity. The other 'fishing pool' of mine is when I get on an airplane. All you have to do is pray for a little turbulence when someone you don't know sits next to you so that you just open up the bins a little to get the conversation going. Then you just turn to the person next to you and say 'do you think there's a heaven?' I once had an atheistic Oxford scientist sitting next to me who told me later she didn't believe in heaven but when we were experiencing some turbulence in the air and I asked her she said 'oh yeah, I believe in heaven.' I said 'how do you think you get there?' and now we're off and running on our interesting conversation of the Gospel.

Why do people always answer me ‘yes’? Ecclesiastes 3:11 says [11] *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.* He not only made your body and soul to be united but He made your body and soul for eternity. That is why you’re not only born again spiritual but one day He is going to raise your body and prepare it for eternity. He will remove that sin curse from the body. The mortal will put on immortality and you’ll have that eternal body because that’s the plan. So physical death is not natural for death is an enemy. It is the radical separation of what was not supposed to be separated. That is why it just doesn’t naturally happen. There is a death struggle that is there. We will get to the fact that it is a victorious death and can be a peaceful death and a comfortable death but it is never a natural death because there is nothing natural about it.

The second kind of death that death brings is spiritual death. Let’s look at Ephesians 2. Here He is talking to believers. What was the first state you are in when you were born into this world? Ephesians 2:1–7 says [1] *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins* [2] *in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—*[3] *among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (How come I’m not there now?)* [4] *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,* [5] *even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—*[6] *and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,* [7] *so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

This gives us a glimpse of where we are headed in this series and that is that you are headed to be a showcase of God’s glory, the glory of His grace in all eternity, but how do you get on that road? We were born sinners. We are not sin sick but we are sin dead. That’s why we know what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus. John 3:3 says [3] *Jesus answered him (Nicodemus), “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Jesus did not say ‘may not’ but He said one ‘cannot.’ So why can’t we see the Kingdom of God? It is because we’re dead in our sins. We are not drowning in the ocean of sin for we are at the bottom of the ocean of sin with a ten million pound rock on top of us. Someone has to intervene because we’re dead. We are spiritually dead, separated from God by record and nature and we walk in that rebellion against Him.

The third kind of death is eternal. The Bible calls this the second death. The first death is the physical death. Those who are spiritually dead and die physically will face eternal death. [41] *Then He will say to those on his left (those spiritually dead), ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ (Matthew 25:41).* [23] *And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’ (Matthew 7:23).* That is eternal death. Now I want to conclude with this.

Let’s look at Revelation 20:11–15 which says [11] *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.* [12] *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.* [13] *And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.* [14] *Then Death and Hades were*

*thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. [15] And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.* This is the second death, the eternal death that awaits all who are not written in the book of Life.

There is coming a day where there will be no sin, death, consequences of sin or attendance of death for it will be removed. This is called a new heavens and a new earth. How so you get there? You get there by being in the book of Life. If you're not in the book of Life then you're in the books. Again, Hebrews 9:27 says [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* I'm looking forward to talking with you about the glories of the intermediate state and then the final state of the new heavens and the new earth. I'm not looking forward to, but I will spend some time on the intermediate state of torment and the ultimate state of torment, Gehenna, the lake of fire.

I want you to know that there are only two destinations but here's the key. If you are born twice you will only die once, but if you're only born once then you'll die twice. If you're only born once you'll not only face a physical death but then you'll face a second death that is forever, unending, in the place of the lake of fire. If you're born twice then your name is in the book of Life, written by the blood of Jesus and though you face a physical death, it is totally different. You are leaving the created home, your body, and you're going to your everlasting home with Jesus. He will raise that body so it's prepared for that new heavens and that new earth. For those who are born twice, not only the birth of generation, but the birth of regeneration will take place because you have been born again. So then your death is going home, from a home you're ready to leave, this body in this world, to a home that He is preparing for you – the mansion of a new heavens and a new earth to be with Him.

So death is a reality but there is a victory. When I went to Miami, Florida I inherited a church where the average age was 69 and the lady that had figured that out had been 59 for ten years. There were no children but mine and in one good flu season I was out of a church. No one in this church bought green tomatoes or green bananas and everyone ate dessert first at the dinners. I knew I was going to be doing funerals so when I got there I went and talked with the man at the funeral home because I figured we would become pretty good friends over the next couple of years. I told this man how I would do funerals and how we'd celebrate and I wanted this man to support me. We had a great conversation.

I then said to him, "I would say in Miami there aren't many people who go to church." He said "Very few do." I said, "So when they die they come here, right?" He said "Yeah, they end up with me. They all have an appointment with me and they are dying to keep it, they'll be here." I said "In that case, if the family ever asks for a preacher, would you call me?" It wasn't because I'd go there to try and preach people into heaven that didn't know Jesus. It was because carefully and pointedly I would minister to the family where I could minister in truth and love but my biggest ministry was to warn the family that there is day coming for them and they could come to Christ. I had the great privilege over the next year to see four different families that didn't have a preacher that when I came to do the funeral and with the reality of death they heard the message of Life. That's why we're here. We do not have to warehouse death. We understand why it's here and we have a Savior who has won the victory. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to spend time on this issue and to work our way through it. As we build on it in the coming weeks by learning more about what it means to be absent from the body and present with the

Lord, and what it means to be in the intermediate state, the ultimate state, the judgment and all of those things, and what eternity will be like, please keep us faithful to Your Word. Keep me faithful to Your Word and give Your people great joy in what You have done and great sobriety on what needs to be proclaimed to the men and women of this world, to whom its appointed once to die and then the judgment, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.