

Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?"

I Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11

Text: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him." I Thessalonians 5:9,10

This morning I want to talk about death. Many of us do not like to talk or think about such a grim subject. It has always been interesting to me how people physically act out their reluctance to come in close contact with death at a funeral. People consistently sit at the back of the church or the funeral chapel, as far away from the casket and the family as possible. They are acting out their reluctance and are unconsciously separating themselves physically from the reality of death and the grief of the mourners. Yet, death is an inevitable part of life. We cannot escape it. For that reason, this morning I want to focus our attention on the Christian view of death and to think together about what happens when we die.

Let me say in the beginning that what Christians believe about death is based on what the Bible says. Recently there have been a number of books published dealing with the so-called "near death" experiences of people. These books relate what has happened to certain people who were "dead" or who were thought to be dead. As a matter of fact, there is a new movie currently showing in St. Louis called "Beyond and Back" which takes the experiences of people who were believed to have died and then were resuscitated. Now, there is a certain danger associated with giving too much credence to such experiences. The Christian faith has never been based on human experiences alone. Its first foundation has always been the Word of God, the Bible. Human experiences may be deceptive. For example, in these so-called "near death" experiences, it is commonly reported that the person encountered a "Being of Light" and some even gave it the name of God or Jesus. Yet, in II Corinthians 11:14 St. Paul tells us that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. If Satan were trying to confuse us, wouldn't it be natural for him to disguise himself in just that way? If Satan counterfeited himself as the Being of Light, wouldn't it be clever of him to use that disguise to rid us of our fear of death and judgment? That way we wouldn't feel any need to live good, moral lives, or to relate ourselves to God.

That brings us to another point about these "near death" experiences. There is no element of judgment in them. If we believe the Bible, how do we account for the apparent moral indifferences these people experienced about their lives? And what about the death of Jesus for our sins? If there is no judgment, but only a warm welcome from the Being of Light at the end of the tunnel these people have experienced, then the death of Jesus on the cross was superfluous and unnecessary.

Now, my point in making these comments is to simply raise a warning flag for us about these books and the movie dealing with near death experiences. Perhaps another day I will deal with this subject more fully, but this morning I simply want to make the point that we base what we believe on the Bible, on the Word of God, and not on a variety of human experiences, no matter how similar they may be. If I were Satan and wanted to fool people about the fear of death and the judgment of sin, I would disguise myself as a Being of Light and play the hero at the end of the tunnel. But the Bible calls death an enemy. True, it is now a defeated enemy, but the Bible never looks on death as basically good.

So, I just want to caution you about these books and about the movie currently being shown. We Christians base our faith on Jesus and on what God has chosen to reveal to us about death in the scripture.

The first thing I want to say this morning, then, is that there are two kinds of death that the Bible talks about. They are: spiritual death and physical death. The Bible tells us that because of sin; because of separation from God due to wickedness, all of us are cut off from God. We are alienated from him. And that is called spiritual death, or eternal death. As a consequence of that spiritual death, that separation from God, we are also subject to physical death, which has to do with our physical bodies. Because of sin, we are not only subject to spiritual or eternal death, our bodies also grow old, or they malfunction; they become subject to disease and deterioration and we die physically.

But the Bible goes on to tell us that Jesus came to die for our sins. It tells us that he paid the punishment for our spiritual death and as a consequence, if we accept his death as done for us, we are forgiven. We are made at one with God again. We receive the gift of eternal life. See how it works. Most of us are familiar with St. John 3:16 where we are told, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." But a few verses later we read these words, "He who believes in him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." So, if you don't believe in Jesus; if you don't accept his death on the cross as done for you, you are spiritually dead, you are condemned already.

Now, I want to make that clear this morning. All of us are spiritually dead; we are separated from God and we are eternally dead in the sense that we are cut off from God. You become spiritually alive; you become related to God eternally, when you believe in Jesus. That is an experience so amazing that we speak of it in dramatic terms. We call it becoming a new man, we call it being born again. Now, if you have not accepted Jesus and been born again; if you have not believed in Jesus and what he did on the cross for you, you are spiritually dead, eternally dead. And if that is your position this morning let me say to you that recently I preached a sermon entitled: "Born Again." I urge you to get that sermon and read it.

But suppose you have been born again, what does that mean? Well, first it means that you are given the gift of eternal life. Your relationship with God is restored. As John 3:16 says, you have eternal life. But it does not mean that you escape the other death we talked about, physical death. As St. Paul writes in Romans 8:10, "But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive..." However, Jesus has also done something about that physical death, because the Bible tells us that physical death, our last enemy, has been defeated. Yes, the grave has lost its victory and death has lost its sting! As St. Paul put it, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also..." (Romans 8:11) And that is what Easter with the resurrection of the body of Jesus is all about. The Bible tells us that it is evidence of God's promise to us that even our mortal bodies will be raised from the dead. I'll come back to this in a moment.

So, there are two kinds of death--there is spiritual death and there is physical death. When we believe in Jesus and receive him as saviour, we are given eternal life. It is something that begins right now. Don't make the mistake of thinking that maybe after you die, God will judge you graciously and make the good in your life outweigh the bad and then you will have eternal life. No, either you have it now or you will not have it then. Eternal life begins now. It begins when we accept Jesus. As Jesus said, "he who does not believe is condemned already." So God has done something about our spiritual death and you can have eternal life this morning. But God has also done something about our physical death, for in raising Jesus from the dead he has given us evidence that we, too, shall be raised.

So, for the Christian, for one who has believed in Jesus and received eternal life, what happens when we die? Well, the Bible does not answer all of the questions we

would like to ask. There are a lot of details for which the Bible gives no answer. Yet, there are two things that the Bible tells us that we can count on. The first is this: when we die our souls our spirits, go immediately to God. The Bible teaches that our bodies return to the dust from which they came, but our spirits return to God. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, "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..." Have you lost a loved one who believed in Jesus? Then the Bible tells us that that loved one went immediately--at once--into the very presence of God. And if you believe in Jesus as your Saviour, when you die that is exactly what will happen to you. You see, the Bible teaches us that nothing--not even death--can separate us from the love of God. (See Romans 8:31-39) That's what our Scripture text for this morning told us. It said, "For God has not ~~not~~ destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep (that is, whether we are alive or dead) we might live with him." Or as Paul puts it in Romans 8:38,39, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So the first thing the Bible teaches us for sure is that when we die our spirits go immediately to be with God. Isn't that what Jesus said to the repentant thief on the cross? He said, "Today you shall be with me in paradise." (St. Luke 23:43) The second thing we know is this: our redemption is not complete. You see, the Bible teaches us that the body is important. The Greeks thought man was a soul stuck temporarily in a body and the body was not important. But that isn't what the Bible teaches. The Bible says that man is a whole personality--a complete person--and that includes his body. The whole man is in need of redemption and Jesus died for the whole person including his body. Therefore, when Jesus comes again, there will be a resurrection of the body. Now, that body will not be the same earthly body for Paul tells us in the 15th chapter of I Corinthians that it will be a glorified body. Yet, it will still be a body and it will be identifiable with our present bodies. It will be perfected--all of the defects, the brokenness of it,--will all be perfected, but it will still be identifiable with this present body. Wasn't that true with Jesus? His body was somehow identifiable with his earthly body, because his disciples did recognize him. Yet, it was also different, it was a glorified body. Well, that's what the Bible tells us about our bodies. They will be resurrected and they will be glorified. As St. Paul puts it, "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is 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 physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." (I Corinthians 15:42-44)

Yes, there are two kinds of death. There is spiritual death which means separation from God. And Jesus came and died for us so that if we will believe in him, we will escape that spiritual death and have eternal life. There is also physical death when the body perishes. When that happens our souls go immediately to be with God, but when the end times come and Jesus returns, our bodies will be raised in glorified form and united to our souls forever.

So, the Bible doesn't answer all the questions we might ask, but it tells us all we need to know. Most of us know of Woody Allen. He is a movie star and a fine director and he is a funny comedian who makes us laugh. But Woody Allen confesses that he has a morbid preoccupation with death. He is an atheist and does not believe in human survival after death. A reporter who interviewed him once sought to comfort Allen and said to him, "Aren't you happy that you will achieve immortality through your achievements?" Woody replied in deep gloom, "Who cares about achieving immortality through achievements? I'm interested in achieving immortality through not dying."

It's too bad Woody doesn't believe in Jesus for he would have the immortality he yearns for. As the Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." What will happen when you die? If you have Jesus as your Saviour, you will have eternal life.

... Have you ever seen a man who has believed in Jesus? Then the Bible tells us that those who have believed in Jesus... the very presence of God... And if you believe in Jesus as your Saviour... the Bible teaches us that nothing-not even death-can separate us from the love of God... that's what our Scripture text for this morning told us... It said, "For God has not... designated us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ... who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep (that is, whether we are alive or dead) we might live with him." Or as Paul puts it in Romans 8:38,39 "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

... the Bible teaches us that when we die our spirits go immediately to be with God... that's what Jesus said to the repentant thief on the cross? He said, "Today you shall be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) The second thing we know is that our redemption is not complete... because we know that the body is important... The Greek thought was that a soul stands separately in a body and the body was not important... But that's what the Bible teaches... The Bible says that we as a whole person... a whole person-not just his body... The whole man is in need of redemption and Jesus died for the whole person including his body... Therefore, when Jesus comes again, there will be a resurrection of the body... that body will not be the same earthly body for Paul tells us in the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians that it will be a glorified body... it will still be a body and it will be identifiable with our present bodies... but be perfected--all of the details, the program of it--will all be perfected... it will still be identifiable with this present body... When Paul came with Jesus his body was somehow identifiable with his earthly body... because his disciples did recognize him... Yet, it was also different... it was a glorified body... What the Bible tells us about our bodies... they will be resurrected and they will be glorified... As St. Paul says, "When he shall be manifested, who is promised to us... it is seen in weakness... it is raised in glory... it is raised a spiritual body... it is raised in power... it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

... There are two kinds of death... There is spiritual death which means separation from God... And Jesus came and died for us so that all we will believe in him... we will escape that spiritual death and have eternal life... There is also physical death when the body perishes... When our bodies go to heaven it is to be with God... but when the end times come and Jesus returns, our bodies will be raised in glorified form and will live out some forever.

... the Bible doesn't answer all the questions we might ask, but it tells us all we need to know... Most of us know of Woody Allen... He is a body man and a body director and he is a funny comedian who makes us laugh... But Woody Allen confesses that he has a world preoccupation with death... He is an atheist and does not believe in human survival after death... A reporter who interviewed him once sought to comfort Allen and said to him, "Aren't you happy that you will survive immortality?" Woody replied in deep gloom, "Who cares about immortality? I'm interested in achieving immortality through my acting achievements." (The Immortal: A Conversation with Woody Allen)