

Afterlife — Answers To Your Questions

September 10, 2017

This is the Sunday you were waiting for. It is the sermon you built!

If you are new, we are in the tail end of a series called Afterlife: What Does The Bible Say About Life After Death? During this series, we circulated a card of commonly asked questions on life after death. Each week, you voted for three. Today, I get to answer your most popular questions.

There is one change from our original plan. Since so many people are interested in learning answers to these questions, I am lengthening this from one to two weeks.

I will start with the most popular questions and work my way down from there for the next two weeks.

By the way, a number of you had great write-in questions. If a write-in question connects with one of the questions I am answering, I will touch on it as we look into the topic.

This is going to be fun. Let's jump right in.

1. Can loved ones see us in heaven?

This is the most commonly asked question. It gathered 133 votes. I think there are three reasons the question is popular. First, the obvious reason is we miss our loved ones. We want to stay connected. Second, popular culture has a number of books that describe near-death experiences where people talk about out-of-body events where they can see their living loved ones. This leaves many people wondering if our loves ones can see us after death. Third, there appears

to be biblical support for loved ones looking down from heaven and watching our lives. That support comes from Hebrews 12:1.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us... Hebrews 12:1 (ESV)

The writer of Hebrews talks about a great cloud of witnesses. Who are these witnesses? More important, are they our dead relatives?

In context, the writer of Hebrews just finished talking about great heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11.

As much as we wish Hebrews 12:1 told us our loved ones are witnessing us from heaven, that isn't what it teaches. Hebrews 12 gives us practical lessons on how we should live based on the way the heroes of the faith lived in Hebrews 11. Notice Hebrews 12 begins with the word *therefore*. That means everything Hebrews 12 says is the way we should respond to what we just learned in Hebrews 11 about the lives of heroes of the faith.

The heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, such as Abraham, Gideon, Moses, and David, are not witnesses in the sense they are watching us. *They are witnesses to us of the value of living by faith in God.* For example, Abraham lived by faith when he set out for the Promised Land not knowing where he was going. Faithfully obeying God's Word appears to be foolishness but from our perspective looking down the corridors of time, we can see God's plans to give Abraham's descendants the Promised Land. We are thankful Abraham lived by faith. Rahab, the prostitute in the city of Jericho, by faith hid the Israelite spies and placed her faith in the God of the Israelites. As a result, she was saved in the

destruction of Jericho, not killed. She became part of God's people. She even became part of the bloodline of Christ. Do you see the value of living by faith?

The writer of Hebrews said, "Since we have so many people that went before us showing the results of living by faith in God's Word rather than what feels right at the moment, let us learn from their example and do likewise."

That is why Hebrews 12:1 says therefore let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that entangles and run with perseverance *the race marked out for us!*

There is no evidence in the Bible that our loved ones are watching us from heaven. Hebrews 12:1, which talks about the great cloud of witnesses, is not talking about our deceased loved ones watching us but learning the importance of living by faith in God's Word from the heroes the faith that went before us.

Before we completely cross off thinking about our loves ones in heaven, one book I read on heaven had the story of a father talking to his son after the funeral of the little boy's grandfather. The young boy and his grandfather were close. The young boy asked if grandfather could see him from heaven, to which the father said, "Probably not." Then the young boy paused and thought for a moment. He made an insightful comment. He said, "Dad, tonight when we pray to Jesus, could we ask Jesus to give Grandpa a message? I want Grandpa to know I miss him." The father thought for a moment and said, "There is nothing wrong with that." We can ask Jesus to give our loved ones a message.

We must remember we are not living our lives for the applause of our loves ones in heaven. Hebrews 12:2 says we should fix our eyes on Jesus, the

author and perfecter of our faith. Our loved ones can't see us from heaven but Jesus sees us from heaven. Jesus is watching how we live. Jesus cheers us on.

2. Does it matter if I am cremated or buried?

This question came in second place with 116 votes. Up front, let me give you the short answer. No! It doesn't matter if someone is cremated or buried. Technically, cremation only accelerates the process of decay that turns a body into dust.

As we already learned, the state of a body's decomposition doesn't matter when it comes to the resurrection. God the Father resurrected Jesus' body after it was dead three days. He can also resurrect a body that has been dead for 3,000 years. The more ruined the body, the more glorious the resurrection of the body. I know the resurrection of a 3,000 year-old body is hard for some of you to grasp. To encourage your faith I want you to realize that if God made the entire universe in six days, he won't even break a sweat when it comes to resurrecting dead bodies.

While it technically doesn't matter, I counsel people toward burial rather than cremation. Why do I have this preference? For a number of reasons.

First, I think it shows more respect to the body. Remember our bodies are precious. God made them. Our bodies will be raised from the dead. The picture of laying the body of a loved one to rest in the ground until the return of Christ is preferable to the horrific thought of taking your loved one and incinerating him or her to ashes in the flame. The idea of burning a body symbolically pictures the lake of fire, while the idea of burying the body symbolically reminds us of someone asleep in the dust of the earth awaiting the resurrection.

Second, there is a rich history for Christians preferring burial to cremation. In ancient Rome, cremation was the standard way to dispose of the dead. The early church, on account of the resurrection, placed a high value on the body. The early church adopted the Jewish custom of burying a body as preferable to burning the body. Burial was a reminder that the self-same buried body would one day rise from the dead. While Plato taught matter was bad and the spirit was good so the elimination of the body was preferable, Christians echoed Jesus saying matter is good and the spirit is good. Both were made by God. As Christians, we don't eliminate the body but we look forward to the glorious resurrection of the body. That is why we bury a body.

Since land was in high demand, Christians began the practice of not just burying bodies horizontally in graveyards but added vertical burial chambers. They dug tunnels below the surface and created burial chambers in the walls. These became known as the catacombs in Rome. This was an effort to save space and respect the body by burying it to wait for the resurrection, not burn it to simulate the fires of hell.

Third, burial of the dead has Scriptural precedence. Burying the dead instead of burning them is also found in Scripture. Abraham had a burial chamber for his family in the Promised Land. Joseph was mummified and wanted his bones brought to the Promised Land for burial.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed... 1 Corinthians 15:51 (ESV)

The reference to sleep in these passages is a reference to burial of the body.

I know some of the tender-hearted among us have feelings of guilt because you made the decision to have your loved one cremated. Please understand this is not a matter of sin. It is a matter of symbolism. Some cremate their loved ones because they can't afford burial. Cremation is cheaper.

Burial is a way of stating your hope of the resurrection. It is a way to treat a body with respect and remind others that your body is not eliminated but that one day your body will return from the grave.

This is one of the reasons older churches have graveyards. The Christians of the church were buried behind the church waiting for the resurrection of their bodies at their church. If a body is burned to ashes, all physical traces of that life and its looking forward to the resurrection are removed.

Fourth, burial gives a better chance of leaving a lasting legacy. Some of you have seen photos I shared of the old Trucksess family graveyard behind a church in Pennsylvania. It goes back seven generations. I think it is so neat that I can see the gravestones and the burial plots of my dead relatives. I love that I can read a sentence or two written on their gravestone about the importance of Jesus in their lives. Seeing the place they are buried and reading the tombstone with a message of their hope in Jesus written on it is very inspiring for me. It encourages me to run the race of my life for Jesus just like they ran the race of their lives for Jesus. One day, when Christ returns, their body will come out of the

grave. If I am dead, my body will come out of the grave. We will meet and I will thank them for the witness to Jesus they left on their tombstones.

If they were cremated, all traces of them would have been forgotten. There would be no place for me to go, no place for me to read about the hope they placed in Jesus and the resurrection. Cremation is less likely to leave an impact for Jesus on the next generation when compared to burial and a tombstone.

Please understand, this is not a matter of right or wrong. It is a matter of symbolism, respecting the body, and declaring our hope in the resurrection.

3. Will Christians who commit suicide be in heaven?

This question came in third place with 105 votes.

Suicide is a terrible tragedy. A friend recently told me suicide is now trendy among young adults. One of the reasons suicide is popular is in part because of a television series called, Thirteen Reasons Why. In the series, a high school girl commits suicide and leaves behind cassette tapes where she records 13 reasons why she took her life. My friend has a relative that is a pastor. The pastor recently attended the funeral of a teenager that took his life after watching this television series that promotes suicide. What should we think about suicide?

First, you need to know that suicide is wrong. It is a lie of the devil. The devil came to steal, kill and destroy. The devil celebrates when you take your life.

Second, suicide is murder. It is the taking of a life, your own life. Many times when I talk to suicidal people, I ask them if they would ever consider killing someone. Of course, they say, "No." I remind them not to take their own life because it is murder.

Third, suicide leaves a horrifying wound on your parents and siblings. Those who consider taking their own life cannot even begin to fathom the depth of pain they are considering inflicting on their family and friends.

Fourth, it shows disbelief in the power of God. If you believe God resurrected Jesus from the dead, you need to believe God can resurrect your life from situations that feel hopeless. Even if you see no future, God sees a way. God will make a way. The Bible is full of stories of people that found themselves in hopeless situations but God came to their rescue. Think of Daniel in the lion's den. Think of David in his battle with Goliath.

The problem with being a young Christian is you don't have depth of experience because you can't have depth of experience. Talk to older Christians. They will tell you story after story about how they found themselves in hopeless situations but God came to their rescue. Younger Christians need to hear those stories or you can become overwhelmed by circumstances.

Fifth, suicide is the ultimate act of selfishness. It is thinking life is about your happiness. Life is not happiness. None of us are entitled to lives of happiness. Life is about God and his glory. What matters is not that life is tough and we are unhappy. What matters is how we bring glory to God in the tough situations he puts us in.

All of this being stated, does suicide automatically exclude a Christian from heaven? No.

The only way someone who commits suicide will be in heaven is the same way any of us will be in heaven, it is by saving faith in Jesus, not by our works.

There are times when a true Christian, in a moment of utter depression or through psychiatric illness or through the misuse of psychiatric drugs may become suicidal and take his or her life. While suicide is a grave sin, if your faith is in Christ, it is a forgiven sin.

Suicide is still murder. We already learned that every Christian will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to either gain or lose eternal rewards. Anyone that commits suicide, even though they are saved by Christ, stand to lose a great deal of eternal reward as they stand before Christ and need to give an answer for self murder. Remember we are saved by Christ, but we are rewarded by our works.

The thing we must remember is the devil is a liar. Suicide is not the answer. It is a terrible tragedy that leaves behind huge scars and countless tear-filled nights for those you love. Suicide also shows a lack of trust in God to bring good out of tragedy, which is something God's Word tells us is his specialty.

4. Is there an age of accountability below which someone automatically goes to heaven?

This question came in fourth place with 75 votes. Related to this question is a question some of you wrote in which is, "Will severely mentally challenged people be in heaven because they cannot understand the love of Christ?" These are great questions.

To answer this question, we need to begin with babies. Are cute babies sinful? Some people believe all babies go to heaven because they are innocent. Unfortunately, that isn't what the Bible teaches. The Bible tells us there two kinds of sin. There is inherited sin, from which we get our sinful nature, plus there is

chosen sin. While a baby is too young to intentionally choose sin, they are still of the line of Adam, which means they have inherited sin. They have a sinful nature. A sinful nature is painfully obvious as soon as a child learned their first word, which has two letters. No!

King David affirmed the sinfulness of everyone from the moment of conception forward.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Psalm 51:5 (ESV)

This doesn't mean David was an illegitimate child. David was simply saying he was sinful from the moment of conception forward.

So while infants are not capable of hearing and responding to the gospel, they are sinful from the moment of conception before they actively choose sin. They are in the line of Adam, which means they have inherited the guilt of sin, plus they have a sinful nature, which will show itself as soon as they are old enough to express it.

While the Bible is clear all babies are sinful and guilty before God from the moment they are conceived, there are times when the Bible shows us God was already at work in the life of a baby calling him or her to himself even before the baby was born.

King David wrote this.

Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. Psalm 22:9–10 (ESV)

It appears God gave David some type of saving faith before he was old enough to consciously possess saving faith.

We read something similar about John the Baptist.

...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. Luke 1:15 (ESV)

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. If John the Baptist and David had some kind of saving faith before birth, even though they were born in sin, it makes it highly unlikely that every infant which dies before being old enough to hear and comprehend the gospel will be damned because of his or her sinful nature.

Another passage that provides a window into this question is examining the way King David reacted to the death of his two sons. The first son we will look at is Absalom. Look at the grief in David's heart.

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" 2 Samuel 18:33 (ESV)

Absalom died as an adult son. He knew that according to the Ten Commandments he was to honor his father, instead he engineered a coup against his father. Absalom even tried to have his father murdered. Absalom murdered his brother. He slept with his father's wives. David was heartbroken for the eternal future of this son.

Look how David reacted to the death of his infant son that died on account of David's sin.

He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." 2 Samuel 12:22–23 (ESV)

David was confident his infant son would be with God for eternity. He was confident he would see his infant son in heaven. Let me emphasize the Bible hints that those who die in infancy and those who never come to the mental ability to trust in Christ will be with Christ in heaven, not because they are innocent of sin but because God appears to apply the work of Jesus to cover their sin before they come to the age of accountability. This is not explicitly stated in Scripture. It is implicitly stated.

This is because of God's wisdom. Could you imagine what abortion doctors would do if there was a chapter and verse that explicitly told us all babies killed in infancy automatically went to heaven? That information would be used to encourage the death of children!

As adults, the only way we can hear the gospel and respond to the gospel is a supernatural work of God in our hearts where he bring us to the point of repentance and soften us to Jesus. In the same way, it appears that God supernaturally applies the work of Jesus to the sin of babies who die before they can hear and respond to the gospel.

We will acknowledge there is a degree of mystery to this. God doesn't tell us all we want to know. In my studies, I ran across this quote by Charles Spurgeon. I think it says it well.

It is not that God chooses someone to salvation because they are going to die in infancy. Rather, He has ordained that only those who have been chosen for salvation will be allowed to die in infancy. God's justice in condemnation will be most clearly seen by allowing those who will not be saved to demonstrate their inherent sinfulness through willful, knowing transgression.

Spurgeon believed those not chosen by God for salvation would be allowed to grow into adulthood to demonstrate their rejection of God. Those

dying in infancy were elect by God for salvation and had the grace of Christ applied to their lives before they were born without their asking for it.

This brings us back to our question on the age of accountability. When is it? Jewish tradition says it is 13, but the age of accountability is different for everyone. I think it is safe to go with this statement from James to show us when the age of accountability arrives.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. James 4:17 (ESV)

When you know you are choosing sin, you are old enough to know you need a savior.

5. Should I trust near-death experiences?

Coming in fifth place with 62 votes is a question on near-death experiences. Should we trust them? My simple answer is...no! There are many near-death and actual-death experiences written about in culture. Everybody wants to know what lies beyond the grave. Probably the most popular book is Heaven Is For Real book by Todd Burpo. It is the story of a young boy dying, going to heaven, and eventually being resuscitated. The boy in the book tells us how everyone in heaven has wings.

The first thing to realize is claims of near-death or actual-death experiences become replacements for biblical truth in the minds of many young believers. The truth is we should evaluate near-death experiences based on biblical truth, not the other way around.

The other thing to realize is we should be suspect of these near-death experiences even if they talk about Jesus.

And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 2 Corinthians 11:14 (ESV)

Satan loves to pretend to be the good guy when he is actually the bad guy. He does this to deceive people away from the truth. For instance, in the book Embraced by the Light by Betty Eadie — which was a New York Times bestseller — she talks about her fascinating visit beyond the grave. She even dedicates her book to Jesus. The problem is, when you look into the book, you realize the Jesus she talks about is not the Jesus of the Bible. She describes the Jesus she met as a being that would do nothing to offend her. She claims Jesus told her she has no reason to regret past deeds because humans are not sinful. She claims Jesus told her humans are actually spirit beings that assisted God in creating the universe.

My friends, that is not the gospel message. Paul said:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:8–9 (ESV)

Betty Eadie says nothing about the problems of sin and Jesus needing to die for our sin. Who are you going to trust? Betty Eadie or your Bible?

This is one of the reasons I am very skeptical about near-death experiences. I am not saying they can't happen. I am just super skeptical of them. I have yet to hear or read about a near-death experience that I did not think was wacky.

In addition, we should realize that we only hear about positive near-death experiences. Many near-death experiences are not positive. Dr. Maurice Rawlings in his book To Hell And Back tells of many people resuscitated to life in

an emergency room. They came to life scared to death about what they saw at death's door. Dr. Rawlings claims his near-death accounts are more accurate because they were recorded immediately after reviving a near-death victim not weeks or months after the fact.

The Bible has a few near-death experiences we should notice. For example, Lazarus didn't have a near-death experience. He had an actual-death experience. We don't hear him writing about what lies beyond death's door. Apparently he missed a great book deal and should have made a lot of money.

In addition, in 2 Corinthians 12 Paul talked about being caught up to Paradise and hearing inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to tell. Since that happened 14 years before he wrote this letter to the church in Corinth, it likely happened when he was stoned and left for dead in the city of Lystra. If Paul had a near-death or actual-death experience, we do not know. What we do know is Paul was not permitted to talk about it.

Whatever we do with near-death or actual-death claims, we must be careful to scrutinize them. Satan wants us to be more caught up in the claims of popular afterlife books than we pay attention the truth of God's Word. Remember, Satan masquerades as an angel of light. In addition, remember this:

...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment... Hebrews 9:27 (ESV)

When you are dead, you are dead. You don't come back.

As for Todd Burpo and the book Heaven Is For Real, I don't know what to say other than there are now claims on the Internet that the young boy in the book, who is now a young man, admits he made up at least portions of his story.

6. How can I desire heaven if I know I won't be married to my spouse?

This is the last question for the week. The question gathered 34 votes.

I understand this question. I have often thought about it. I love Cindy, my wife. I can't imagine the thought of not being married to my best friend. To think we will not be married in heaven is hard to swallow.

The first thing to make clear is to realize the Bible clearly tells us we will not be married in heaven.

And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage..." Luke 20:34–35 (ESV)

While there won't be earthly marriage in heaven, there will be marriage in heaven. We won't be married to one another. We will be married to Christ. The Bible describes us as the bride of Christ. The Bible tells us all the wonder and joy we experience in earthly marriage today was given to us by God as a small sampling of the much greater joy that will be ours in heaven when we are married to Jesus tomorrow. Can you imagine greater intimacy, greater joy and greater satisfaction than being married to your spouse? I can't. Yet the Bible tells us our relationship with Christ will be even more satisfying than our relationship with our spouse.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:31–32 (ESV)

All I can say is our relationship with Christ must be incredibly thrilling if it is better than marriage.

Of course, this doesn't mean we won't know our spouses in heaven. We will still have our shared memories. I am sure we will still be best friends. The

institution of marriage, which is not created by the state but by God, will not exist. I know it is hard to imagine being married to Christ will be preferable to being married to our spouse, but that is what the Bible tells us.

To help you grasp this let's look at a verse we touched on two weeks ago. It is Psalm 16:11. It says in God's presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. Jesus is the fountainhead and source of all joy. While a great marriage is the greatest pleasure this world can offer, being married to Christ is the greatest pleasure eternity can offer. It is being married to the one from which all joy and pleasure flows.

Conclusion

That ends the first week. Next week we will answer more of your questions. Most of those questions are about the end times. They are questions like, what is the meaning of the number 666? Who is the anti christ? What is the mark of the beast?

I look forward to seeing you next week as we finish up the series.



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