

Life and Lordship

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About a year ago, a nearby church was charged with fraud for claiming that the pastor had raised a man from the dead. In a widely circulated, and widely mocked video, a man with his mouth open, laying in a coffin, suddenly sits up with the pastor prays some words over him. Of course, once the media got involved, and people started investigating, suddenly the church turned around and said that the pastor had never claimed he was raising the man from the dead, and that he wasn't even sure the man was dead. Eventually the charges were dropped, and the world sneered again at phoney Christianity.

The idea of getting someone who died back from the dead is an exciting prospect. A person who truly dies and comes back, can tell us what is on the other side. And that information makes all the difference to how we live on this side.

For that reason, it's not surprising to see books that claim a death experience and a return to this life sell by the millions. In 2010 a book called *Heaven is For Real* was published, supposedly giving the story of a boy named Alex Malarkey (appropriately named, in my opinion) who suffered a spinal cord detachment in a car accident when he was six. He was in a coma, and two months later came out and detailed his account of meeting Jesus and Satan. His account was published in 2010 and sold over a million copies. That was until, in 2015, he admitted that he had made the whole thing up and Tyndale Publishers quickly withdrew the book. Two years ago, he was suing the publishers for money that the book made, which had gone to his father, and not to him.

But that doesn't stop people from publishing these. A short search of Amazon revealed these titles: *Clinically Dead - I've seen Heaven and Hell*; *I Saw God: The True Story of a Young Boy's Miraculous Return from Death*; *Nine Days in Heaven: A True Story*; *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story*; *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* and my personal favourite *Signs From Pets In The Afterlife: Identifying Messages From Pets In Heaven*. As hokey and ridiculous as these may seem, most of them were actually number 1 bestsellers on Amazon or even New York Times bestsellers. People crave knowledge of the afterlife, they want to know what they are in for.

The problem with death is that it is a one-way ticket. No one has a round trip and gets to tell you what's on the other side. Hebrews 9:27 tells us it is appointed to men to die once and after that the judgement. That makes death the one destination that every human being will go to, but no one can return and tell us what is there.

That affects not only the moments after you die, but all the moments before then. The fact that we must all die affects how we live before that moment. If time and life was something we had in unlimited quantities, it would completely change how we live and what we live for. The very fact that our lives are finite, and are running out every day changes what we do, and why we do it.

Death casts its shadow over all of life. That's the point that Solomon was making in Ecclesiastes. The book was probably written for the Gentiles who visited Israel and Solomon's court, because the book never uses Israel's covenant name for God, Yahweh. Solomon seems to be confronting the nations with the way they live, and asking, what sense does it make to live for this or that, if you die, and that's it? For example, what's the point of pleasure if it eventually loses its savour as you

age and then disappears when you die? What profit did you gain from being momentarily pleased with food or music, or luxury or sex? He asks the same of money. What the point of accumulating riches, if death effectively zeroes out everything you have earned? He asks the same of learning and knowledge and wisdom. What's the point of accumulating all this knowledge if when you die, it is gone, people forget your learning, and it won't make any difference after death?

In fact, Hebrews 2 tells us the power that Satan has held over man has been through the fear of death. The knowledge that we have one life, and it is soon passed, drives people to their pursuits. But this is where knowledge of what happens on the other side is so crucial. If you don't know, then you must guess, you must gamble. And whatever you guess becomes the background reason for why you live the way you do.

I say background, because not everyone is thinking about the reality of death all the time. On the contrary, most try to forget, to not think about it. But it doesn't change how people live. They either believe there is nothing after death, or they believe they are going to face some kind of judgement, favourable or unfavourable, or they think they will come back as someone else.

Every form of false philosophy, false religion, false moral system comes out of this as man tries to get more before he dies, or forget that he is going to die, or gather up some kind of insurance for when he dies. Drugs, sinful entertainment, escapism, greed, vanity, sexual sin, wars, deception, exploitation, false religion, self-imposed morality, it is all driven by what people are banking on happening after they die. And that's why having a person who came back from the dead would be so valuable.

Not that a truly risen from the dead person would really change sinful behaviour. When the rich man in Hell asked Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers, Abraham answered, "But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'" (Lk. 16:30-31)

The Bible teaches one reliable source of someone who came back from the dead: Jesus Christ. Yes, there are four other people who were raised from the dead in Scripture. Matthew also records that some resurrections took place at the time of Christ's. But all these people either died again, as in the case of Lazarus, or Jairus's daughter, or the widow's son, or we assume those raised up after Christ's resurrection entered into glory shortly thereafter. The only resurrected person whose teachings we have is Jesus Christ. His is also by far the most attested and proved resurrection in history.

What we have from Jesus is what He taught about the next life, and then someone who died and came back. This is unique. Thousands of teachers have taught about the next world, but none of them have been able to test and prove their theories. In Jesus, we have one who told us what would happen after we die, then He died, but then He rose. What that means is if you are a Christian, you can live your life now on the basis of what He said would happen after death.

So here is a survey of everything Jesus said about the afterlife, what it is, what happens, where you go, what it is like.

I. What Jesus Said Happens After Death

At the end of the age, humans will be sorted into the righteous and unrighteous, and the unrighteous will be cast into the furnace of fire, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth, the righteous will shine like the sun. (Mt 13:4-43). The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and people will

be raised to the resurrection of life or the resurrection of condemnation (Jo 5:25-29)

He said many people go the easy way to destruction, and few people find the narrow way to heaven. (7:13-14). He said lots of religious people who called Jesus *Lord* will not enter Heaven. (7:21-23). Heaven will be filled with many non-Israelites, and some Jews will be in Hell (8:11-12). Heaven will be missed by many who refused the invitation, but no one will be there without an invitation (22:1-14)

Hell, Jesus taught, is a real place. He called it a place of everlasting punishment (Mt 25:46). Hell is unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43-50). Hell is a place of conscious torment, of thirst and pain which is inescapable. (Luke 16:19-31)

God is able to kill body and soul in Hell (Mt 9:28). Jesus said that He will deny those who denied Him in front of the angels Luke 11:10. Idle words will be judged on the day of judgement 12:36

Heaven will be given by grace not by merit or labour Mt 20:1-16. Those who receive the Son will have eternal life, those who reject are condemned already Jo 3:16-18. He taught that there is a kind of wealth in Heaven which does not decay and cannot be stolen. (Mt 6:19-21). Heaven will bring rewards to those who were good stewards of their gifts and punishment for those who hid them or were lazy. Matt 25:14-30. Heaven will reward those who loved the needy for Christ's sake, and punish those who neglected them. Matt 25:31-36. Simple deeds done for other believers will have eternal, permanent reward Matt 10:42. Rejection and persecution for Christ's sake brings great reward Luke 6:23. The apostles will sit on twelve thrones judging Israel, and those who forsook benefits in this life for Christ's sake will receive a hundredfold there Matt 19:28-29

Heaven does not include seeking marriage or getting married (Mark 12:25), instead it is one large household. There are many rooms or place in the Father's household, and it will be place prepared and suited for us (Jo 14:1-3).

Those who belong to Jesus will never perish and no one will snatch them from Him or the Father 10:27-28. In Heaven, believers will get to behold Christ's glory.

Now, based upon those descriptions, we can tell that there really are two destinations after death, one appears horrific, the other sounds delightful. And the great emphasis in Jesus' teaching is that whatever you get after death is permanent. The punishment is permanent, the separation from God is permanent.

On the other hand, the rewards are permanent and can't be lost. The riches are permanent and can't decay or be stolen. The fellowship with the Father and the Son is permanent. And small deeds, cups of cold water for Christ's sake, blessing the needy for Christ's sake, bring about an eternal, permanent, unending reward.

Now that's what Jesus said is on the other side. But very importantly, Jesus gave us an interpretation, a commentary on what that means, on what we should do in light of that. Again, here is a survey from the gospels on what Jesus said we should live for, what life really is about, based upon these truths of what happens after death.

II. What Jesus Said We Should Live For

He said we should have a real relationship with God that could worship privately that would bring reward from Him (Mt 6:1-8). He said we should pursue the kind of wealth or treasure in Heaven that cannot be lost (6:19-21). He said we should pursue the kingdom of God above all things, and

trust that lesser things will be added to us (6:33)

He taught that if you try to find your life and have your own way and love your family more than Him, you will lose it all (Matt 10:35-39).

We should come to Him, take His yoke upon us and we will find true rest (Matt 11:27-30).

If we gain the whole world, and lose our souls, we have lost, and not gained (Matt 10:26). Your salvation is worth more than anything this world could give you (Matt 10:26).

We should become humble, like little children, if we want to see Heaven (18:1-5) He said we should love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, that this was the greatest commandment of all (22:36-38).

We should make disciples of all nations till He comes.

We must deny ourselves. We must accept our own lives as forfeit, like people going to their own execution. We should lose our lives for His sake and follow Him (Mk 8:34-37)

To be first of all, we should serve others (Mk 10:44). We should be willing to cut off and amputate anything that would cause us to sin and go to hell (Mk 9:43-50)

Fear God rather than man (Lk 12:5). Be rich toward God (Lk 12:21). Be willing to forsake material goods (Lk 14:33). We should spend our money in ways where only God can repay us.

We must be born again (John 3:3). We must drink of Jesus the living water (Jo 4:14) We must not labour for perishable food, but believe on the living Bread, Jesus. We must enter by Jesus, the true door (John 10). We must believe in Him, the resurrection and the life (John 11). If we love our lives we will lose them. We must abide in Jesus and keep His commandments (John 15)

In summary, Jesus said that life is about knowing and loving God through faith in Him. To do that, we cannot still pursue our own worldly lives. We must make a choice between selfish living and living for Him. The two will come into radical conflict and only one can survive at a time. We must either invest in ourselves right now, or invest in Heaven by making disciples, serving other believers, forsaking what hinders us from doing that.

Now here you have the only representative from the dead telling you what happens on that side. He is telling you how not to waste your life. He is telling you how not to misspend your precious years. He is telling you what will be an awful misuse of your time. He is telling you that ultimate reality is Heaven and Hell. The world as it is now is really the intermediate world. The way to live in this life is to prioritise the kingdom of God, fight against your inclinations to try to turn this life and this world into a Heaven. Hate sin, be willing to deny and forsake and give up things if they get in the way of loving God with all your heart. Prioritise eternal rewards, pursue God's reputation.

You either believe Jesus, or you believe your own instincts, or believe the world, or believe what people around you are doing. But if you are going to take the words of Jesus seriously, then you can't do both. You can't take out an insurance policy that protects you in the event that Jesus's words turn out to be true, and in the mean time, act as if they aren't. That's not Christianity. In Christianity, if you have truly embraced Jesus as Saviour, then you have embraced Him as Lord, and you live as if what He said about this life and the next is true.

That brings us to the text in Romans.

III. What Jesus Did So We Could Live and Die Correctly

7 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Rom. 14:7-9)

Paul tells us in verse 9 that Jesus died and rose for this reason: to be Lord of the dead and the living. In verses 7 and 8, he tells you what it looks like to be under Jesus' lordship, to have Jesus as Lord. Our life and death is no longer for ourselves or to ourselves. We belong to the Lord, so our life and death is now entirely oriented to the Lord. He purchased us at the Cross.

It is the same idea that we see in 2 Corinthians 5:14 and following.

14 For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; 15 and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

At the cross, Jesus did more than one thing. He paid the penalty for our sins, bearing God's wrath, and dying as our substitute. But He also took our old natures, that worldly self, and included it in His death. It's as if when Jesus was in the ocean of God's wrath, as He went down, He took our sinful natures with Him.

This is what Paul means in Galatians 2:20, when he says, "I have been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me". It's what he means in Romans 6 when he says that if we have been immersed into Christ by the Spirit at salvation, then we have been immersed into His death and resurrection.

It is not just Jesus who died and comes back. In one sense, this is what happens to every believer. This is what baptism pictures: we drown that old life, with its selfishness and worldliness and fleshliness. We emerge to a life unto God, seeking first His kingdom, losing our life to gain His, loving Him first. In other words, the life that Jesus told us we should live, the kind of life that makes sense in light of what happens after death, Jesus made that life possible by His death and resurrection.

Jesus doesn't just preach this radical other-worldliness, this radical God-centredness, and then leave us to attempt it on our own strength. No, Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our Faith makes it all possible. He dies in our place, and dies our death. He is raised, and gives us new life, makes us new creations. Now we can by faith live in union with that death and resurrection, and live that kind of kingdom-seeking, self-denying, disciple-making, cross-carrying, sin-killing, Christ-following, God-loving life.

It is not that you will always feel like you are dead to sin. It is not that you will feel alive to Christ. Because of our habits, because of still being in this body of death, you will often feel the opposite. But in the end it all comes down to faith.

I must by faith either believe that Jesus rose from the dead, or not. I must then by faith believe what He said about life after death. I must by faith believe what He said about how to live now. I must then by faith believe it is true of me that I've died to the old life, and live to the new. And then acting from that position, from that faith in grace, I then obey. I kill the sin, and take up my cross, and invest in Heaven, and forsake this world, and disciple others.

Now if you're a believer, then you may not be getting that right all the time, but you will sense fundamentally that it is the correct life. You will sense that when you try to live for this world, for this time, that you are living against your own nature. You will be miserable. You will know that you cannot truly be dead to this world and still live according to its priorities. You cannot be dead to sin and live therein. You cannot be dead to self but always and only live for yourself.

If that is how you live, with very little conflict within, then I would urge you to examine yourself for true salvation, an true conversion. Don't take a past experience as sufficient. Don't take your present friendliness towards Christianity as sufficient. Ask, what do I think life is? What do I think ultimate reality is? If I knew for certain that I had just one year to live, what would I cram into that year? Your answers to those questions reveal whether you have ever really died to this world.

John Wesley was once asked that question. What would you do if you knew it was your last day on earth? Wesley replied he would do nothing different from what he had planned. His devotions, his family responsibilities, his ministry and tasks for that day. Wesley had already consecrated his life to God where he was living that kind of life, a life dead to self and alive to God.

Jonathan Edwards made one of his resolutions the following: "Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life."

Your life is like some gold coins. You get to bet them, or more accurately, you get to invest them in the way that you think is most worthwhile. That's what you treasure. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also. You can take advice from all kinds of people as to what the best use of the coins of your life is. But there's only one Person who has lived and died and come back, and told you what awaits there. You can disbelieve Him, but everyone else is less reliable, has fewer credentials, has died and never come back.

So, on this Resurrection Sunday, are you trusting in the only one who died and rose again, to bring you true life, and set you free from a living death? Come and die with Jesus: accept His death as your death, and His life as your life. Only one life, soon past, only what's done for Christ, will last.