

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Philippians 1:20-26 at Victory of the Lamb on July 13, 2014.

Series: Good Questions – Honest Answers

Today's Focus: Is There Life After Death?

“To Be With Jesus...Better By Far”

Last Sunday I tried to help you answer you the question, Why Should I Trust the Bible? And I started out by telling you about a conversation I had with a guy who was sitting in his driveway drinking an MGD. Remember that? Well today I'm going to start out by telling you a story about another driveway conversation I had a couple years ago as I was going door to door inviting people to come to church.

This guy was about 30 years old just like me so we got to talking right off the bat. We had a nice, frank conversation. But I could tell right away that he was pretty shaken up. It turns out his uncle had died the week before in a motorcycle accident. I asked how he was dealing with it and he said, “Not well.” He explained that he was pissed at the universe. He described how it made his own life feel meaningless. He said it was making him think a lot about death. Eventually I asked him what he thought would happen to him when he died.

And this is what he said: “When my brain turns off...well that's it, man. Game over. The End.” What he meant, pretty emphatically, is that there is no life after death. And when I asked him how that belief helped him deal with the fact that one day he too would die like his uncle, he just said, “It means you gotta just try and make the most of your time because you live, you ride, and then you die. That's it.” He went on to say the meaning of life is you just have to try and have fun and have as many experiences as you can because you never know when your end is coming up.” It was clear that his thoughts about what happens when you die had a big impact on what he thought about how you should try and live.

So what about you? How would you answer the question, Is there life after death? Do you agree with what that guy I talked to who was said that when your brain turns off that's just it? Game over? The end? This is important because what you believe about dying has a big impact on how you feel about living. And at the very least it's important because, well, we are all going to die. Over the last two months I've been at three family funerals. A generation now has passed on. My generation has now moved up one closer. So this isn't just a philosophical question for me. It's getting more and more practical all the time. Death is life's most sobering event. Is there life after death?

You might find it interesting to note that the vast majority of people around the world believe in some kind of life after death. In fact according to a recent poll, even here in America nearly ¾ of our country still believes in life after death. Maybe it's something you've pondered too after watching a movie like Heaven Is For Real. Any of you see that movie? It's the story of a 4 year boy named Colton who had a near death experience and he comes out of it knowing things about family members who have died that he had no way of knowing before. You've probably noticed that there's been a lot of interest in these so-called near death experiences lately. I think that interest demonstrates something the Bible says. It's a verse from Ecclesiastes that says *He [God] has also set eternity in the hearts of men* (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

In other words in the heart of every person deep down there is the sense that there is more than meets the eye, something more than just this physical world. The inner feeling that there must be something beyond the grave, a feeling of eternity. We have a sense that we have a soul and that this soul will somehow live on after death. We don't just long for that to be true. We sense it to be true because God made us human beings this way. He set eternity in our hearts! Our hearts are restless to know answers to big questions like Is There Life After Death? And yet the Bible verse continues to say, "*yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end*" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We can't figure out eternity on our own. Our human brains are too small to take it all in...and even to say anything at all for sure about there being life after death we need something more than just natural knowledge. We need revealed knowledge. We need God to tell us. That much I think we can learn just from my conversation with that young man in his driveway who said he was quite sure that when your brain turns off that's it.

That's why today I'm going to introduce you to someone who speaks with the knowledge that God revealed to him. His name is Paul. He is one of the authors God used to write the Bible. And before we listen to what he has to say today I think there are some helpful things to know about the situation he was in when he was writing. You see Paul at this time was facing his own death. He wasn't sick. But he's under arrest waiting for his trial before Caesar in Rome. So he's writing to his Christian friends in Philippi and he's sharing with them that he's not sure about what's going to happen. God hasn't revealed that to him just like none of us knows how and when we're going to die either. Paul knows that in his situation he could be executed or he could be freed. He could die or he could live longer and maybe even see his friends again.

Here's what he says...and we're going to see how his answer to the question, Is there life after death?, had a big impact on how he viewed the purpose and meaning of life here and now. ²⁰*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* ²¹*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* ²²*If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!* ²³*I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;* ²⁴*but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* ²⁵*Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶*so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.*

So you get what he's saying? "There are two possibilities right now for how my situation could turn out and the bottom line is I'm content with either one. Live or die. Because to live is Christ and to die is gain." Well what do you mean, Paul...*to die is gain*? "What I mean is that to depart through death doesn't mean life is over, end of story. No, to depart through death means that I will be with Christ and that's better by far. To die and depart is actually the beginning of real life being with Jesus in heaven."

So you get how Paul answers the question, Is there life after death? He's saying that because of Jesus, the answer is absolutely yes...and it's better by far compared to this life. **It's better by far to be with Jesus Christ.**

If you're like me you've been at funerals where you've heard people talk about their loved one that they've lost. They've lost a spouse. They've lost a parent. They've lost a child. They've lost a friend. And I'm not saying that's wrong to talk like that. Please don't misunderstand me. It's altogether appropriate. It's healthy to express those feelings. We have all *lost* people whom we dearly love. In these last two months I lost both my Grandpa and my Grandpa. I loved them dearly. But make no mistake. Even as they faced death, as believers in Jesus they didn't stand to lose anything, not even their life. You see death was not a loss for them. It was pure gain. Because **to be with Jesus is better by far.**

When my wife Sarah's mom died last August, she didn't really lose her battle with brain cancer. I know we talk like that. So and so lost their battle with cancer or whatever...but Paul's perspective changes ours. When Mom died, from God's perspective she didn't lose, she won! because her Savior and ours, Jesus Christ, has taken away the sting of death and transformed dying itself into the doorway to eternal life. She is now with her Lord and Savior. And **to be with the Lord Jesus is better by far.**

Now why would anyone say such crazy things? Because here's what Paul knew... You see, Paul was once not a Christian. He in fact persecuted Christians. He didn't like them and he wanted them dead. He stood there and gave his approval at the stoning of Stephen—the first Christian martyr. But then Paul met Jesus...*alive*. Jesus said, "Saul, why do you persecute me." And that was the moment Paul's life changed forever which led to his baptism, his missionary journeys, the very reason he was in jail when he wrote these words to the Philippians. After meeting the resurrected Jesus, Paul spent the rest of his life living not for himself but for others telling them, "Jesus is alive. He died for our sins on the cross. He died to take our punishment in our place. But more than that he rose from the dead! His victory has sealed death's doom forever. Now repent and believe the good news! Whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Your citizenship is now in heaven. Death which is the greatest evil has become the greatest gain because Jesus has undone the curse of sin!"

Yet Paul didn't know which of the two options was going to happen in his life and when and we don't either. *Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!*²³ *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* So if Paul had a choice he says, "I'd love to go heaven." Certainly for Paul that would be better by far than going through his present sufferings and imprisonment. But what he says also answers another question that many people have when we die. Some people wonder, "When we die, do we sort of just sleep in the cemetery, soul unconscious, until Judgment Day and then wake up?"

But listen again to what Paul says...and this is consistent with the rest of the Bible. *I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* No, Paul isn't thinking that when he dies he'll have to hang around awhile and wait until Judgment Day. He's not looking forward to soul sleep. He's looking forward to being with Jesus right now, right at the very moment of his death—that his immortal soul would leave the shell of his earthly, mortal body and immediately be with his Savior. And this is what makes death something we don't have to fear, but something we could actually look forward to.

This week I read about a bank in New York that had some flowers sent to a competitor bank who had recently moved into a new building in their town. But there was a mix-up at the flower shop, and the

card sent with the flowers read, “With our deepest sympathy.” Of course the florist was greatly embarrassed when she realized that the card intended for the bank was attached to a floral arrangement sent to a funeral home. Because that card with those flowers now at the funeral home read, “Congratulations on your new location!” Now, if the person who had died was someone who trusted in the work of Jesus Christ their Savior, then that’s not really such a bad thing at all. “Congratulations on your new location!” It’s a promotion to the heavenly mansions prepared for us by the Lord Jesus.

The Bible gives us some fantastic pictures of what heaven will be like. Our sermon text today really doesn’t get into that. But let me sum it up by using one of my favorite pictures that Jesus himself used to describe heaven. Imagine a wedding feast, a great celebration, with the best food and the best drinks and all those you love most and best and it never comes to an end and nothing can steal away from you your endless joy because Jesus himself is there. That’s what heaven will be like.

Of course before we get there, we are still here on this earth, aren’t we? And here we still have to deal with trouble and woe, sickness and loss. But I would submit this to you today that it is only when you and I are certain about heaven that we can really live on this earth. Or to put it another way: If we know what we happen when we die, then we are truly able to start living now. Because think about it. What do people often live for? Wealth? Pleasure? Power? I’m reminded of Alexander the Great who had conquered the known world and then sat down in his tent weeping. Why? He said because “there are no more worlds to conquer.”

So what do you live for? Paul says that if he had a choice, he wanted to go home to heaven. No surprise there. In fact if there’s not at least a part of you that’s excited to go to heaven to be with Jesus whenever it’s God’s timing, there’s something wrong. That’s the sinful nature that we all have talking. That’s why what we all deserve is to be, not with Jesus, but without him one day because we don’t love him by nature. We don’t love God by nature...not as much as we love our spouse, or our family, or our friends, or our dog, our stuff. This is why we need to flee to the mercy of God daily for his full and free forgiveness. This is why we come to the Lord’s table where Jesus wants to give us a foretaste of that wedding feast. This is why Paul reminds us later in Philippians that our real citizenship is in heaven thanks to Jesus who overcame sin and death for us all.

But there was something else on his mind even as he talks about how being with Jesus is better by far. ²⁴ *[B]ut it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* ²⁵ *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ *so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.*

Sounds like Paul is thinking of others before himself, doesn’t it? Because he knows that heaven is his home, every relationship here matters more now, not less. He doesn’t look at people as if they are tools to be used merely for his own fun or his own convenience or his own benefit for as long as he’s around. No, he sees everyone as a soul who is dearly loved by God. A soul for whom God’s Son, Jesus, died. Paul knows that as long as he has life and breath, God is giving him opportunities to be Jesus to others—to

show love and to care, to give encouragement, and to speak the message of the gospel to lead people to know Jesus also that they too might be with him one day in heaven.

As many of you know, a couple weeks ago my Grandma died. Two weeks after her my Grandpa died. My Mom shared with me that Grandpa's reaction to Grandma's death was simply this, "Praise God!" Why? Because he knew that to be with Jesus is better by far. And then he asked about the house, about the car, about all these details. It was like he was thinking, "What can I still do? Is there anything that I'm needed for? Anyone else to take care of?" And my mom and my uncle said, "Here's what we're going to do about this. And here's what we're going to do about that." And my Grandpa says, "Sounds like you have everything under control." Then in less than a week, he passed on to glory. He knew that **to be with Jesus is better by far** and this gave him great peace even in the face of death.

After he died my Grandpa's pastor shared how my Grandpa faced death. And I'm so glad for this because I don't know about you but I wonder what that will be like. So the Pastor asked him, "Bernie, are you are afraid of death?" And my Grandpa would say, "Na!" And the Pastor asked him, "Bernie, are you worried about anything?" And he said, "Na!" And the Pastor asked him, "Bernie, do you need anything?" And I'll be you can guess what he said... "Na!" My Grandpa had a gentle but powerful way of scoffing at death. Why? Because he knew that he had all that he needed in Jesus who is the Resurrection and the Life. This is what gave him courage. This was his grounds for hope. He knew that to live is Christ and to die is gain. **To be with Jesus is better by far.** Amen.

My Next Steps

Connect: There are all sorts of books (and books that were turned into movies like "Heaven Is For Real"!) that talk about near death experiences or people who actually died for a short time and were brought back to life. Their stories intrigue us because who wouldn't like to know for certain what's going to happen after we die?

Aha: Although there are a lot of questions left unanswered about what heaven will be like, the most important answer is this: those who are in Christ will be with the Lord forever.

Treasure: ¹³ *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope* (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Challenge: How we view life after death or just the knowledge that there is a life after death has an impact on how we choose to live today. How has God's Word altered your view of life after death? Think about and come up with some ways that this new perspective will impact your day to day life, especially as you interact with others.