

The Morse Church

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What Happens When We Die?

By Bryan J. Dahms

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August of 1997 was a strange and exciting time for Paula and me. We had just accepted a new job with Alpha North America, one that required we relocate to New York City. Not knowing the area, we wanted to take some time to pick out a house. Thankfully we received a gracious offer from an Episcopal minister named Janet Kraft, who it turns out is the sister of Matthew Broderick and therefore the sister-in-law to Sarah Jessica Parker. We could live in her Scarborough, NY home for 6 weeks while she joined her family for sailing in New England. We moved in on a Saturday and I started work on the following Monday. To get to 60th and Park Avenue, Manhattan, where my new office would be located, I needed to take a train to Grand Central Station. If you are familiar with the area, then you know that the train ride from the suburb of Scarborough to Manhattan is, frankly, spectacular. It follows the Hudson River for 10 miles, then crosses into Manhattan near Yankee Stadium. Since the Hudson River is actually a geologic, tectonic fault line, the valley is rimmed by huge cliffs and large hills. The view is stunning, particularly in late summer and early fall.

(See a map at: <http://www.mta.info/mnr/html/mnrmap.htm>)

So as I boarded the train that day, I sat in a seat across from two women. I enjoyed the view for about 10 minutes, then began to take in the scene on the train. The first thing I noticed was that talking was apparently illegal. Nobody spoke, though the train was packed. Then I realized EVERYBODY was reading. So I began to take in what they were reading. My eyes fell on the two novels in the hands of women sitting backwards across from me. The title of one was “A Far Off Place” by Lauren Vanderpost. The other lady was reading “A Long Way Away” by Kitty Murry. I just began to chuckle. Apparently, the commuter life in New York was something to be escaped from.

I have great news for those two ladies and for everyone else. All of us are booked for a journey, a trip. Well, I guess that may not be good news, as some people fear travel or generally dislike it. George Carlin once made an interesting observation—much of the language we for travel is not too positive: we have a final destination, the end of the line, we go to the terminal.

Alas, this is not a trip we get to cancel. Our reservations are secure. And as sure as we pay taxes each year, this particular trip is an eventuality for all of us. We can't buy our way out, we can't exercise our way out, we can't eat our way out, we can't trade our way out. Each person, of course, is going to die. So it makes sense that we, on occasion, have an open and honest discussion about death and dying.

Most of us, if we were totally honest, probably have some fear or apprehension of death. That, of course, does not make a lot of sense, intellectually speaking. After all, most demographic studies indicate that about 82% of the world's population are religious adherents and about 10% would call themselves Atheist. Thus all but 8% of the world's population thinks they have figured out death and life issues. Intellectually, only that 8% who call themselves agnostics are the ones who should be worried about death as they admit they don't know what happens when they die.

Of course, fearing death also does not make much sense, practically speaking, as death is as much a part of life as are birth, breathing, eating, sleeping, and relieving oneself.

So I base this sermon on this premise: that we fear death because we don't talk about it much, don't study it much, and therefore don't really know much about it. Thus I thought this morning we could have a basic, open discussion about this topic: What happens when we die? As I am a Christian pastor who was trained not only in seminary but also at a typical university that espouses a "western" mindset, I am relying on essentially three sources to address this question—knowledge, experience, and The Bible. It would also make sense to address this question from a physical, emotional, and Spiritual side.

What is life and what is death?

From a physical standpoint, a human being is considered alive as long as their heart is beating, even if the beating takes place only via an external stimulus. From an emotional standpoint, a human being is alive as long as there is measurable electrical activity in the upper areas of the brain—the cerebral cortex. In the western world, most people believe that life has stopped when the brain activity has stopped, though we generally require a written statement from the deceased—called a living will—to end the heartbeat of a physically alive person who is emotionally dead. For the purposes of this talk, I will not distinguish between physical—stoppage of a beating heart—and emotional—end of brain activity, death. When I say "dead," I mean "heart stopped beating" but am including the end of brain activity.

From a biblical standpoint, life is more complex than just a body and a mind. 82% of the world's population—those people who adhere to a religion, join Christians in understanding that a human being is actually comprised of a body, a mind, and a spirit. Therefore, when I am speaking of "life," I am referring to a body, a mind, and a spirit.

One way to view "spirit," is to perhaps understand that your spirit is the part of you that is "you." Maybe we can get a better understanding of "spirit" by reflecting on identical twins who live in a healthy, married home. They have the same DNA and many of the same experiences, but there is just something very different about each one. That difference that we perceive from identical people is the different spirit in each—it is their spirit that makes them different people.

So now that we understand that a human is made up a heartbeat, thoughts, and "personhood," lets talk about what happens to each when we die.

The first thing that happens when die is that we somehow lose consciousness. Sometimes this happens by falling asleep, sometimes by passing out, or other times as the result of an event, such as an accident. Since "consciousness" refers to active brain activity—intentional thinking—the first thing to go is our mind. Sometimes this happens almost simultaneously as physical death (the ending of our heartbeat)—such as what likely was experienced by the people on the planes who hit the world trade centers. More often, we lose consciousness before we lose our heartbeat. That is to say, most of us will not be aware the moment we experience physical death as our brain "dies" first.

At the moment of physical death, our bodies begin to decay very quickly. That is because our bodies are organic—made up mostly of carbon—and therefore susceptible to the millions of bacteria in our bodies that attempt to live off of them. Within 5 minutes of death, unless death happened by falling into a frozen body of water, the body usually cannot be revived. The one exception is a newborn baby's body. It is not uncommon for newborn babies to go 10 or 15 minutes without a heartbeat and be just fine later. Our son, Calvin, for instance, was born unconscious and without a heartbeat but is just fine.

So as far as physical and mental death goes, it is often painless and quiet. But what about the spirit?

Thankfully, the Christian Bible has a great deal to say about death and about what happens after death. Often, the information is very specific.

First of all, regarding physical and mental death, the Bible usually refers to this event as sleep. In fact, if you look on the handout sheet, I have placed a small number of the verses from the Bible that refer to death. As you can see, sleep is the common way to refer to death in the bible.

The Bible on Physical and Mental Death

Deuteronomy 31:16 “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘You will go to sleep with your ancestors...’”

2 Samuel 7:12 “And when your days are over, you shall sleep with your forefathers.”

Job 7:21 “For now I will go sleep with my ancestors. In the morning, you will seek me but I will be gone.”

Psalms 13:3 “Consider and hear me, my God. Lighten my eyes before I sleep the sleep of death.”

John 11:11 and 13 “Lazarus is not dead, but asleep...Jesus was speaking of death but they thought he was speaking of sleep.”

Acts 13:26 “For King David, after he had served his own generations by the will of God, fell asleep and was buried with his ancestors.”

But what is really amazing is that the bible also refers to a period of waking up after the sleep of death—and we wake up in a new place. This event is called the resurrection of the dead, and it happens to everybody.

The Bible on the Resurrection of the Dead.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-15 “¹³But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. ¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

Philippians 3:10 “¹⁰that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

John 5:28 “²⁸Don’t be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God’s Son, ²⁹and they will rise again.”

I Corinthians 15:51 “⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, ⁵²but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised...”

So death is not an event, but a process. First we lose consciousness, then our heart stops beating (and for some these happen almost at the same time), then we go to sleep, then we are awoken. But what happens next?

At the beginning of our discussion, we reviewed the makeup of a human being—that is to say, we discussed that a human being is comprised of a body, a mind, and a spirit. According to the Bible, our spirit comes to us as a gift from God and he actually breathes life into us. At physical and mental death, our body and mind is gone forever. But the part of us that makes us “us” lives on—our Spirit continues. This is the part that God really cares about and is the part that is eternal. It is also a gift from God. All of us have a spirit, and for all of us, our spirit came from God, and for all of us, that spirit will live on.

The Bible on the Human Spirit—the Breath of God.

Genesis 2:7 ⁷And the LORD God formed a man’s body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And the man became a living person.

Isaiah 42:5 ⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.

Ezekiel 37:9 ⁹Then he said to me, “Speak to the winds and say: ‘this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so that they may live again.’”

What happens at the resurrection of the dead?

Because there is so much folklore about death and dying, much of coming from sources other than the bible, I think it might be help to clearly state what does not happen at the resurrection of the dead. And though space does not allow for a full explanation, here is a brief summary of biblical teaching:

1. We are not ghosts and we do not return to earth.
2. We are not simply spirits, rather our spirit inhabits a new body that is probably very different from our current body. This new body has all of the sensory abilities of our current body, and perhaps a great deal more. For instance, this new body can see, hear, taste, smell, and feel pain. (I Corinthians 15:44 ⁴⁴They are natural human bodies now, but when they are raised, they will be spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, so also there are spiritual bodies.)
3. The afterlife is a physical place as well as a spiritual place—in other words, there are at least 4 dimensions in the afterlife, not just the three we currently perceive).
4. We don’t become angels or demons. Angels and demons are a different type of created thing than people. We will see angels and demons. (*Note: there are a wealth of verses that discuss angels and their differences to humans—more than space will allow*).

5. We are not married, will not reproduce, and thus we probably do not have gender. However, we will be able to recognize others that we know.

So at the resurrection of the dead, our spirits inhabit a new body and we are in a new place. What happens next? Essentially, we participate in a trial. And here is the bad news. We are the defendant. But it gets worse, Satan is the accuser and prosecutor. Here is perhaps the best news: Jesus is the judge. The question at the trial? Were you perfect during your life on earth? In bible-speak, imperfections are called “sins” and perfections are called “sinless.” Obviously, these trials are pretty short. To wit:

Hebrews 9:27 “It is our destiny that we die only once and after that to face a trial of judgment.”

John 5:28 “Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God’s Son,²⁹ and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to judgment. “

Romans 2:5 “For there is going to come a day of judgment when God, the just judge of all the world,⁶ will judge all people according to what they have done.”

Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.”

Romans 6:23 “And the wages of sin is death,”

Matthew 25:31 ³¹“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

So we already know the outcome of the trials—we are guilty of being imperfect. Since God is perfect, we cannot be with God or else we will make his kingdom, Heaven, imperfect. Thus, we must pay the price of our wrong choices on earth, our sins, by being separated from God.

Except....

John 3:16 ¹⁶“For God so loved the people of the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷God did not send his Son into the world to condemn them, but to save them.”

John 11:25 ²⁵Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. ^o Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. ²⁶They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.

John 5:24 ²⁴“I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”

Romans 6:23 “...the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What happens after the Judgment?

We live with new bodies in a new house in a perfect, loving world without pain or suffering, only joy and peace forever!

John 14 “Don’t be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me. ²There are many rooms in my Father’s home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so, I would tell you plainly. ³When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. ⁴And you know where I am going and how to get there.”

⁵“No, we don’t know, Lord,” Thomas said. “We haven’t any idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. ⁷If you had known who I am, then you would have known who my Father is. From now on you know him and have seen him!”

The book of Revelation gives several wonderful descriptions of this new, physical place—The New Earth and the New Jerusalem. If you want to get a good idea of what it looks like, as well as what the scene will be like at the great trial we all will face, then I suggest first reading Revelations Chapter 1, verse 12 and the following. That will give you a really clear image of Jesus on the throne and the scene in heaven. Continue reading throughout Revelations to get a more clear picture of what the future holds.

Revelation 21: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband.

³I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. ⁴He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.”

¹⁰So he took me in spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. ¹¹It was filled with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious gem, crystal clear like jasper. ¹²Its walls were broad and high, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels. And the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on the gates. ¹³There were three gates on each side—east, north, south, and west. ¹⁴The wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

In conclusion, this is what happens when we die:

1. We lose consciousness and our heart stops beating.
2. We wake up in a new place with a new body.
3. We go on trial.
4. We are found guilty and sentenced to death, which is defined by eternal separation from God.
5. Those who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior “shall not perish but have eternal life.”

6. The forgiven and redeemed enjoy eternity with a new body in a new house in a perfect, loving world without pain or suffering, only joy and peace forever in full communion with God!

Need more information or proof? Below is the 15th Chapter of the book of 2 Corinthians. In closing I leave it as a gift for you. Read it frequently and enjoy. For God has done a marvelous thing and we have a great hope and great future ahead of us.

The Resurrection of the Dead

¹²But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead? ¹³For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁴And if Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless. ¹⁵And we apostles would all be lying about God, for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave, but that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. ¹⁶If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins. ¹⁸In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! ¹⁹And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world.

²⁰But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again.

²¹So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, Adam, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man, Christ. ²²Everyone dies because all of us are related to Adam, the first man. But all who are related to Christ, the other man, will be given new life. ²³But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised first; then when Christ comes back, all his people will be raised.

²⁴After that the end will come, when he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having put down all enemies of every kind. ²⁵For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet. ²⁶And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For the Scriptures say, “God has given him authority over all things.” (Of course, when it says “authority over all things,” it does not include God himself, who gave Christ his authority.) ²⁸Then, when he has conquered all things, the Son will present himself to God, so that God, who gave his Son authority over all things, will be utterly supreme over everything everywhere.

²⁹If the dead will not be raised, then what point is there in people being baptized for those who are dead? Why do it unless the dead will someday rise again?

³⁰And why should we ourselves be continually risking our lives, facing death hour by hour? ³¹For I swear, dear brothers and sisters, I face death daily. This is as certain as my pride in what the Lord Jesus Christ has done in you. ³²And what value was there in fighting wild beasts—those men of Ephesus—³³if there will be no resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection,

“Let’s feast and get drunk, for tomorrow we die!”

³³Don’t be fooled by those who say such things, for “bad company corrupts good character.” ³⁴Come to your senses and stop sinning. For to your shame I say that some of you don’t even know God.

The Resurrection Body

³⁵But someone may ask, “How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?” ³⁶What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn’t grow into a plant unless it dies first. ³⁷And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a dry little seed of wheat or whatever it is you are planting. ³⁸Then God gives it a new body—just the kind he wants it to have. A different kind of plant grows from each kind of seed. ³⁹And just as there are different kinds of seeds and plants, so also there are different kinds of flesh—whether of humans, animals, birds, or fish.

⁴⁰There are bodies in the heavens, and there are bodies on earth. The glory of the heavenly bodies is different from the beauty of the earthly bodies. ⁴¹The sun has one kind of glory, while the moon and stars each have another kind. And even the stars differ from each other in their beauty and brightness.

⁴²It is the same way for the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies, which die and decay, will be different when they are resurrected, for they will never die. ⁴³Our bodies now disappoint us, but when they are raised, they will be full of glory. They are weak now, but when they are raised, they will be full of power. ⁴⁴They are natural human bodies now, but when they are raised, they will be spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, so also there are spiritual bodies.

⁴⁵The Scriptures tell us, “The first man, Adam, became a living person.”^o But the last Adam—that is, Christ—is a life-giving Spirit. ⁴⁶What came first was the natural body, then the spiritual body comes later. ⁴⁷Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven. ⁴⁸Every human being has an earthly body just like Adam’s, but our heavenly bodies will be just like Christ’s. ⁴⁹Just as we are now like Adam, the man of the earth, so we will someday be like Christ, the man from heaven.

⁵⁰What I am saying, dear brothers and sisters, is that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. These perishable bodies of ours are not able to live forever.

⁵¹But let me tell you a wonderful secret God has revealed to us. Not all of us will die, but we will all be transformed. ⁵²It will happen in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, the Christians who have died^o will be raised with transformed bodies. And then we who are living will be transformed so that we will never die. ⁵³For our perishable earthly bodies must be transformed into heavenly bodies that will never die.

⁵⁴When this happens—when our perishable earthly bodies have been transformed into heavenly bodies that will never die—then at last the Scriptures will come true:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”^o

⁵⁵ O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”^o

⁵⁶For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. ⁵⁷How we thank God, who gives us victory over sin and death through Jesus Christ our Lord!

⁵⁸So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and steady, always enthusiastic about the Lord’s work, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.