

QUESTION #16: “HOW NEAR IS DEATH?”

(Ecclesiastes 9:12)

9.8.19

INTRODUCTION

This is both a really interesting topic and an uncomfortable one. While “near death” sounds kind of cool, sort of like lifting the lid on a box to see what’s inside, the idea of death itself is not always filled with the same kind of anticipation. But since that is today’s topic, let’s dive right in.

TEXT

[N]o one knows when their hour will come — Solomon, Ecclesiastes 9:12a. [KARL MALDEN AS THE PASTOR IN “POLYANNA”]. That was a little over the top and for the benefit of the movie, but he was right; the Hebrew verb “to know” simply tells us nobody on planet earth can know or learn or perceive or discern when death is actually coming. Death doesn’t advertise itself; it’s not something you can jot down in your planner or put on a calendar. And notice there are no conditions mentioned in this verse. Death is an irreversible outcome for life — for all of us.

DEFINITIONS

Death: the permanent cessation (ending) of all biological functions that sustain a living, physical organism.

Near-Death Experience (NDE): a personal experience associated with death or impending death. These experiences began to be collected and explored as early as the 1890s, when mountain climbers who survived traumatic falls began to recount their experiences, and these kinds of experiences have continued to this day, to the point that there is serious scientific study of the phenomena. These studies have taken notice of many similar occurrences, although these experiences are not all realized in all NDE events:

- 1) When positive: may encompass a variety of sensations including:
 - a) For many people, they have no words to communicate what they experienced; human language seems insufficient to the moment.
 - b) Many people do recall hearing medical professionals pronounce them dead.
 - c) People often experience some sort of noise; sometimes the noise is wonderful music but, most often, the noise is something harsh or disturbing, like an ongoing buzzing or ringing.
 - d) People say that they experience detachment from the body, often talking about observing themselves being worked on by medical professionals who are attempting to resuscitate them. Often this includes feelings of levitation, as people see themselves looking down on their bodies from above as they are being cared for.
 - e) A total sense of extreme pleasure, serenity, peace and quiet, to the point that they wanted to stay “dead” and not return to their life.
 - f) There is often the sense of traveling through a dark tunnel or passageway, simultaneous to hearing the noises described above.
 - g) People often talk about the presence of a light, more brilliant than anything they have seen in their lives. Despite the brightness, it does not hurt their eyes. The light seems to be a being, who communicates warmth and love. Often no words are heard or exchanged; the communication seems to be through thoughts alone.

- h) Many people notice a new view of death, seeing it as a natural transition from this life to the next but, as a result of their experience, fearing no judgment or punishment in the next life.
 - i) Many people are able to recount specific events (for example, in the hospital operating room or maybe outside in the waiting room) that would have been impossible for them to know unless they had been consciously seeing these things.
- 2) When negative, such experiences may include sensations of:
- a) Anguish, even terror, and
 - b) Distress.

Neuroscience research suggests that an NDE is a subjective phenomenon resulting from “disturbed bodily multisensory integration” that occurs during life-threatening events that is seen in the person in much the same way as dreams are “seen” when sleeping. Some theories that have been suggested as to why this experience happens:

- 1) Loss of oxygen to the brain (hypoxia)
- 2) Deeply embedded memories of childbirth
- 3) Trauma or injury to the brain
- 4) Severe psychological stress that may release chemicals in the brain that could induce certain experiences
- 5) Hallucinations caused by various medications.

Death (as defined by the Bible): The immediate transition from earthly life to eternal life.

Spiritual death: Eternal separation from God (hell).

BIBLICAL REALITIES:

How did death even come to be a part of the human experience? It wasn't the original intention, you know. But the Bible tells us it happened anyway: ***The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” — Genesis 2:15-17.*** But eat they did and, as a result of Adam and Eve disobeying God by eating from the fruit of which he told them not to eat, ***sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned — Paul, Romans 5:12.***

- 1) MUWTH (moth) — a verb meaning to die; in this case, death is seen as the execution of the offender (Adam) in capitol offense cases.
- 2) THANATOS (than^at-os) — death, the extinction of life, naturally or by violence; generally, and of natural death, but also implying death as the natural result of sin and disobedience, therefore ensuring not only death but also exclusion from the presence and favor of God.

What sin means is that life on earth became like a coupon — a limited time offer. The Bible makes that abundantly clear: ***[All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be — David, Psalm 139:13-16.***

[Christ] has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many — Hebrews 9:26b-28a.

THOSE IN THE BIBLE WHO NEVER DIED:

When Enoch (meaning “dedicate; dedication”) had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived a total of 365 years. Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away — Genesis 5:21-24.

As [Elijah (meaning “my God is Jehovah”) and Elisha] were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more — II Kings 2:11-12a.

THOSE PEOPLE WHO WERE DEAD AND RESURRECTED TO LIFE:

- 1) The widow of Zarephath’s son who became ill and died (Elijah: I Kings 17:17-24).
 - a) *No breath left in him:* NeSHAMAH (nesh-aw-maw[^]) — breath, wind, spirit. The breath of humans is recognized as the source and center of life, and as the source of life that vitalizes humanity. It is also understood that such breath originates with God, and He can withhold it, thereby withholding life from humanity. Therefore, people’s breath is a symbol of their weakness and frailty. This word is also used to represent life and anything that is alive.
 - b) *“Let this child’s soul come into him again.” And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived:* (1) NEPHESH (neh[^]-fesh) — breath, the inner being with its thoughts and emotions (soul). The term can cover the animating force of a person or his or her dead body. (2) CHAYAH (kha-yaw[^]) — to be alive, to live, to keep alive. Among its meanings are that it suggests reviving or healing.
- 2) The Shunammite’s son who complained to his father about the pain in his head (Elisha: II Kings 4:18-37). *[H]e sat on [his mother’s] knees till noon, and then died:* MUWTH (moth) — to die, to kill, to put to death, to execute; most often used to reference that someone is dead or has died.
- 3) An anonymous Israelite man who was thrown into Elisha’s tomb in haste due to a Moabite raiding party coming into the area (Elisha’s bones: II Kings 13:20-21). *When the [Israelite] man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet.* See CHAYAH above.
- 4) Widow of Nain’s son on his way to burial (Jesus Christ: Luke 7:11-17).
 - a) *[T]here was a dead man carried out:* THNESKO (thnay[^]-sko) — be dead; die. To die naturally.
 - b) *“Young man, I say unto thee, Arise”:* EGEIRO (eg-i[^]-ro) — to rise, literally, to rouse from sleep, from sitting or lying, from disease, from death. Used in connection with Christ’s miraculous raising of the dead.
 - c) *And he that was dead sat up:* NEKROS (nek-ros[^]) — A dead person, dead body, corpse; as yet unburied.
- 5) The daughter of Jairus (Jesus Christ: Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:22-43, Luke 8:49-56). *With the noisy crowd and people playing pipes,* it seems to indicate that the girl had been dead for awhile, long enough for a funeral to begin.
 - a) *My daughter is even now dead:* TELEUTAO (tel-yoo-tah[^]-o) — be dead, decease, die; earthly life implied, meaning to end one’s life, die.

- b) “[T]he maid is not dead”: APOTHNESKO (ap-oth-nace[^]-ko) — be dead, death, die; the prefix “apo” is an intensive, which means that someone’s state of death is absolutely a matter of fact. It is a stronger word than “thnesko” though generally considered synonymous.
- c) “[T]he maid is not dead, but sleepeth”: KATHEUDO (kath-yoo[^]-do) — (be a-) sleep. The idea is the transitory, temporary state of death.
- 6) Multiple (anonymous) dead when John the Baptist’s disciples came from him, wondering if Jesus was in fact the promised Messiah or if they should be looking for someone else. Jesus simply told them to watch him in action and then report back (Jesus Christ: Matthew 11:2-6, Luke 7:18-23) — see NEKROS above.
- 7) Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, already “dead four days” (Jesus Christ: John 11:1-44)
 - a) “This sickness is not unto death”: THANATOS (than[^]-at-os) — death, the extinction of life, naturally or by violence; generally, and of natural death.
 - b) “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth”: KOIMAO (koy-mah[^]-o) — sleep, be dead.
 - c) “Lazarus is dead”: see APOTHNESKO above.
 - d) “He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live”: see APOTHNESKO above.
 - e) “[W]hosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die”: see APOTHNESKO above.
- 8) Saints in Jerusalem, believers already dead and buried (God: Matthew 27:50-54): *And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept* arose: see KOIMAO above.
- 9) Tabitha (Greek, “Dorcas”) (Peter: Acts 9:36-42). *[S]he was sick, and died*: see APOTHNESKO above.
- 10) Eutychus (Paul: Acts 20:7-12)
 - a) *[H]e sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead*: see NEKROS above.
 - b) “[H]is life is in him”: PSUCHE (psoo-khay[^]) — the soul, the animating element in men and animals.

APPLICATION

Resurrection vs. resuscitation: The latter is restoration to earthly life, and those so restored do die eventually. Resurrection comes at history’s end, restoring those who have died to transformed bodies in which they will spend eternity. In that context, in contrast to all of the above-listed episodes of returning to life, only Christ was truly resurrected in that he resurrected in his glorified, heavenly body. All other such episodes involved people returning to flesh-and-blood human lives that continued to be subject to death and, eventually, did die and remained physically dead.

But what about near-death experiences? What should the Christian make of those? Below are some ideas of the truth behind these experiences:

- 1) Many Christian researchers have noticed a distinct similarity between the experiences related in near-death experiences and those experienced in the realm of the occult with out-of-body experiences (OBE), to the point that near-death experiences may be merely another version of occult experiences. As John Ankerberg and John Weldon made note of in their book, *The Facts On Life After Death*, “both the NDE and OBE have many

similarities, including . . . spiritistic contacts, world view changes, and development of psychic powers.”

- 2) Many people who have had NDEs have suggested that the being of light that they encountered was none other than Jesus Christ. However, there is a huge problem between what the Bible declares about Christ and what the people having these experiences report:
 - a) Sin is not a problem. In fact, the being they assume to be Jesus most often responds with humor to human sins and failings.
 - b) There is no hell to worry about.
 - c) All people are welcomed to heaven, regardless of whether or not they have surrendered their lives to Christ and repented of their sins.
 - d) All religious beliefs are valid.

Do you see the problem? If, as the Bible says, ***Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever — Hebrews 13:8***, then the being assumed as being Christ is presenting some huge contradictions to the words and works of the Son of God. The fact is that Jesus claims the same attributes as his Father claims, specifically:

- 1) ***“He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind” — Samuel, I Samuel 15:29.***
- 2) ***“I the Lord do not change” — God speaking, Malachi 3:6a.***

As surely as Jesus does not change, neither do his words or his message or his intentions.

So what’s going on? In a lot of cases, Satan is what’s going on. Remember how Jesus described Satan: ***“[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” — Jesus Christ, John 8:44b.*** Remember how the apostle Paul described Satan and his angels: ***Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness — II Corinthians 11:14-15a.*** Because these are “near” death experiences, it could very well be that, at a particularly vulnerable, suggestive moment in their lives, Satan is planting a false idea of what lies ahead, and what God’s expectations are for every individual. Nothing makes Satan happier than keeping somebody from the truth of God. And all of this is a great reminder that, as Christian apologist Norman Geisler said, “All out-of-body or near-death experiences should be measured against the standard of God’s infallible Word. We should never use our experiences to interpret the Bible; instead, we should use the Bible to interpret our experiences. . . . [O]ne needs an objective source of truth to judge these experiences. For a Christian, it is the Word of God. Thus, a person’s *vision* or *experience* should never contradict or add to what the Word of God has already revealed.” As Jesus himself said so simply: ***“Scripture cannot be set aside” — Jesus Christ, John 10:35b.***

Now, that all being said, there is also evidence to support that many people, contrary to the idea that all NDEs are pleasant experiences, have gruesome, terrifying near-death experiences that, in some cases, have had a major impact on bringing people into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In his book, *One Heartbeat Away: Your Journey Into Eternity*, Mark Cahill recounts the research of a cardiologist named Dr. Maurice Rawlings, who recounts observing near-death experiences in his book, *Beyond Death’s Door*. He said that nearly half of the 300 patients he interviewed “reported seeing a lake of fire, devil-like figures, and other sights reflecting the reality of hell.” His conclusion? “There is life after death, and if I don’t know where I’m going, it’s not safe to die.”

Cahill himself told this story: “A respiratory nurse who works in an emergency room told me about a patient who had gone “code red” — he flat-lined. She and some other medical personnel rushed over with the defibrillator to try to bring him back to life. They applied the paddles and revived him. She said that he started screaming and shouting, “The heat, the heat!” Then his heart stopped again. They brought him back a second time. He shouted, “The flames, the flames!” They lost him again. Four times the man flat-lined and was brought back, each time shouting about the heat or the flames. After the last time, he died and they couldn’t bring him back. She said all the doctors and nurses just stood there for a few minutes and stared at the body. They all knew that man went to hell. He was screaming it to them before he even got out of here.” Cahill’s conclusion? “[D]on’t believe that sweetness-and-light near-death stories are the only kind people report.”

And God has graciously used some of these experiences to bring people into his kingdom. As one young man recounted to Cahill, “he had been injured and wound up on an emergency-room operating table. He said his heart had stopped beating and, as his soul rose up out of his body, immediately the sense of an evil presence began to come over him and he could hear an evil hissing laughter. He told me he was so glad to get back into his body and be alive! He now knows how real evil is.”

But the fact is that not everybody will have a near-death experience. However, unless God intervenes, everybody will have a death experience. So, the greater question is: Are you ready for death? Do you know where you will be spending eternity? It is a huge question because of what Solomon wrote nearly 3,000 years ago: *[N]o one knows when their hour will come — Solomon, Ecclesiastes 9:12a*. As interesting as near-death experiences are to look at and study, it doesn’t detract from that bigger, more important, eternally-impacting question: Are you ready to die?

As sure as Solomon’s words are true, some words from the apostle John in his first letter are also true: *[T]his is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life — I John 5:11-13*.

For us as a church, there are three important ramifications; let’s call them “the 3 U’s”:

- 1) Urgency for ourselves, that we know the answer to that question.
- 2) Urgency for our friends and loved ones regarding their answer to that question.
- 3) Urgency for the people God has placed around us regarding their answer to that question.

Why do you think Paul would say to the Philippian church: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain — Paul, Philippians 1:21*? He understood why he was here, what his life’s purpose was: That his life was Christ. We’re no different — that is why we are here; that is why we were not taken home to heaven at the moment of our conversion. We are here to communicate both the reality of eternity — that this life is NOT all there is — and that people everywhere can KNOW the destination of that eternity that lies ahead for all of us.

Therefore that means some other critical things as we move forward; I call them “the 4 P’s”:

- 1) **Perception**: The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church: *[C]onduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ — Paul, Philippians 1:27a*. The reality of eternity makes having our relationships be the best they can be even more important. How people

perceive us can have a huge impact on what kind of conversations we can have with someone. That's why it's so important that we are here as ambassadors — to reflect in our words, actions and attitudes the wishes of our King. To be credible to talk about Jesus, we need to act like Jesus, so that people understand Christ's reality, not just because he is real to us, but also because He is a reality in us.

- 2) **Preparation:** It is therefore so important that we remember Peter's words: ***Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have — I Peter 3:15b.*** When was the last time you shared Scripture or your testimony with somebody? Are you out of practice? Practice giving your testimony with other believers; practice the Scriptures you think are important for you to share, that resonate in your life. Peter said to always be prepared. Practicing is a great way to be prepared. That's not something to be feared. Sharing Christ is an honor! [EXPAND]
- 3) **Prayer:** Pray for opportunities; pray that God bring people and circumstances your way in which you are given opportunity to share your testimony, your witness of Jesus Christ in your life.
- 4) **Priority:** Life on earth is referred in the Bible as a mist, a shadow, a vapor — here one moment, gone the next. Eternity is where our life is essentially going to be spent — which means that eternity has already begun. I have said this before, so forgive me for repeating it, but eternity is not a question of duration. It is ONLY a question of destination. Somebody please tell me what consideration could be more important for anybody than where they are going to spend their eternal life. That's where Jesus comes in. That's where Scripture comes in. That's where testimony and witness come in. That's where WE come in.

But (and here is the extra, necessary ingredient in all this), while it is true that we are commanded, as Christ said in Mark, to ***“[g]o into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” — Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15,*** while it is true that we are called to preach ***“repentance for the forgiveness of sins” — Jesus Christ, Luke 24:47,*** while it is true that we are told, in the authority found in Jesus Christ, to ***go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything [Jesus has] commanded you” — Matthew 28:19-20a,*** we are also to take that message, to reflect that message, to share that message, with JOY!!! The apostle Paul, who knew a thing or two about enduring trials in the name of Christ, said it this way to the church at Rome (and I love how the English Standard Version, the ESV, says it): ***Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 5:1-2 (ESV).*** And what is our basis for our joy? Why can we rejoice in our justification by faith? Paul explains that later in the same letter: ***[T]here is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death — Paul, Romans 8:1-2.*** WOW! Do you understand what that means? It means that I am seen by God as though I have never sinned, because his Son who never sinned allowed me the amazing grace of substituting his perfect life for my train-wrecked life.

How can that NOT fill us with an endless supply of joy? How can that NOT make us want to share the source and the reality of that joy? I'll tell you how: by making this life a bigger deal than eternity, by making our life in this world a bigger focus than our life in Christ, by making

this life more important than the life to come. Folks, this life is a speed bump. And a speed bump doesn't last long. We need to commit our time, our strengths, our resources, to the life that is promised to last, not to the one that is going to eventually, as Jesus said, *"pass away"* — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 24:35a*.

Think of it this way: How often don't we share photos of family members (kids, grandkids), or maybe something we saw on vacation. We have no problem sharing those things because part of the joy of those moments or those people is found in actually sharing about them with others. I love talking about my granddaughters — not because I have to, but because of the joy I have found in knowing them, and how that joy is enhanced in sharing about them with others. How can we treat the greatest joy of all — having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ — be treated with less enthusiasm than our earthly joys?

And the fact is, a great barometer of our love for the Savior, as well as how meaningful our salvation is, is found in how quickly and how often we share our faith with those around us. It begs the question: Has coming to faith in Jesus Christ been the greatest experience of your life? Is being seen as "clean" before your Lord the greatest joy of your life? Nineteenth century British preach Charles Spurgeon said it this way in words that still ring true today: "It is impossible to know the value of salvation without desiring to see others brought in."

CONCLUSION

And one final consideration as we close: Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes are still true, and still incredibly relevant. None of us know when we will be done with our lives on earth. If God has marked out my days to end tomorrow, guess what? To borrow from our Bible study, right now, today, I am living in my "end times." How do I know when my opportunity to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ will be my LAST opportunity to share that good news? I don't. We don't. We need to be faithful to every moment God gives us. While we remain here by his design, that's the gig, and the only one that matters: Be faithful to the moment, because every moment we have is God's gift to us, for the glory of Him and His kingdom.

Praise His name! Because of Jesus Christ, ONLY because of Jesus Christ, anyone and everyone can know where their eternal destination will be. That's what makes all the outreach ministries of our church so important. That's what makes all our youth ministries so important. That's what makes our Bible studies so important. That's what makes our prayer times so important. That's what makes Sunday morning praise and worship so important. It is ALL about reaching others with Jesus.

And one simple thing we can ALL do for outreach: Invite people to our services. Invite people to our Bible studies. Why? One reason: JESUS is spoken here. The One who left heaven to come alongside us is spoken here. The One who lived and taught and healed is spoken here. The One who took ALL our sins upon himself is spoken here. The One who was slaughtered for us is spoken here. The One who rose from the dead to show the power we can know over death is spoken here. The One who is coming back that we can eternally be with him is spoken here. The One who tells us we can know our eternal destination is spoken here. All this is true because JESUS is spoken here.

Solomon said it so very plainly: *[N]o one knows when their hour will come* — *Solomon, Ecclesiastes 9:12a*. The joy of the life in Christ? Because of Jesus, you don't need to know when your hour will come. You only need to know Jesus. In that context, are you ready when your hour comes? If you know Jesus, you're ready. Do you know him? Let's pray!