

IV. Eternity in Biblical Perspective

If I Should Die Before I Wake...

“Death—What’s Next?”

John 11

Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

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We will be looking at a couple of texts of Scripture. We’ll start with two that are said to be referred to more than any other texts in the Bible in the context of favorite texts of Scripture. One is Psalm 23. What a glorious passage of Scripture and as a pastor I’ve seen it in many occasions giving so much encouragement. It’s the one that points us to Jesus our Great Shepherd and one that defines for us His majestic life and ministry. So let’s start by looking at Psalm 23.

So what happens when you die? In Charlotte, I had the privilege to pastor this couple. I remember when their 12-year-old contracted a brain tumor and we pastored and worked with them all the way through it. Then the Lord called this young boy home at age 12. I remember being in the hospital with him. I remember his father and mother hugging him and then telling him ‘it’s okay’ because he was struggling so much. Then I saw Nathaniel go right into the presence of the Lord with a look on his face that showed the anticipation. Then I remember his mother turning to me saying ‘Pastor, where and what’s happening for him right now? Please tell.’

Some year ago in this congregation there was a young woman who had been given a diagnosis of terminal cancer and she was a great warrior for Jesus. Her parents were members here, she and her husband and children also. I would make visits with her from time to time. She had sent word that she thought she was close to death and wanted to talk again. I went over and she said ‘The time is coming and I have some ideas but what will happen when I die? What will happen next? I know all the answers and the quotes but can you just give me some insight as to what is going to happen?’

I also have people I visit who know they are getting ready to die who tell me what’s going to happen when they die so I have that side of things as well as a pastor. This is part of discipleship – how the grace of God gives us direction, under gird us and lead us as the Heidelberg catechism says ‘as our only comfort in life and death.’ How do we deal with death? What do we expect and what should we expect? What has God said about it and what has He promised? So that is how we started this series.

I purposely took the title from a childhood prayer that goes like this;

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

Where? What will it be like? What’s going to happen? This is not the time for pastoral flights of fancy or platitudes or sentimental efforts to comfort as well meaning as they may be. We want to know what God says about this and what He has revealed about this. We have already been through three studies on this. One is that I want to lay out for you that death is not a part of creation. My illustration on this is when a man who was close to death asked me if I would pray that he would have a natural death and I said ‘No, I won’t because I can’t. In the Christian world and life thing there is no such thing as a natural death. Death is not a part of “nature,” God’s created act.” The Bible identifies death as an intruder, an enemy that must be

conquered by our Savior. Death is one of the enemies that He came to defeat. There are so many songs that we sing about His victory over death and His triumph.

What are the ramifications of death? It is an enemy. It's not natural. It is not found in Genesis 1 and 2. It is only found in Genesis 3 and beyond. It is not a part of God's creation act for that's a Darwinian atheistic evolutionary view. We understand that God created everything good and God created the heavens and the earth. Death with its curse has now fallen after sin – the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

Secondly, death that sin brings is three-fold. There are three deaths that the Bible teaches. The word for death is *thanatos* which means a radical separation. Don't think of a perforated pamphlet being torn apart for it means something is being rendered apart. What is being separated? Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body and it wasn't designed to be separated. Don't think like a Greek or like Plato which by the way has undergirded almost all of our educational system. The Biblical world and life view does not present your body as a vehicle carrying your soul where death is kind of opening the door to let it out. That is a pagan world and life view. The Biblical view is that God made Adam and breathed into his body a living soul and Adam became a living soul. Up until then he is a corpse. Then He breathes in that soul—spirit, heart, mind—there are a number of terms used to describe that soul and this make us in the image of God. Our bodies come in the image of our parents but our soul is that stamp of *imago deo* – made in the image of God.

Another way to look at the separation of death is two threads being woven as one being torn apart. They weren't made to be torn apart. They were made to be interdependent upon each other – the physical and the spiritual. What you do physically affects you spiritually and what you do spiritually affects you physically. It wasn't designed to be separated so the unnatural separation is the body from the soul. James 2:26 says [26] *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

The second death is spiritual death. When Adam sinned we sinned and the curse of sin is death and that means the separation of the sinner from God Himself. We are separated from God because of our sin. That's why it says in Ephesians 2:1, [1] *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.* When Adam was separated from God we are all separated, then we are born and then we sin but we don't sin and then get a sin nature. We have a sin nature because we sinned in Adam when Adam sinned, thus we are born sinners which is why we sin. This is why actual sin comes from that original sin. Thus we are separated from God.

The third death is eternal death. This separation is the place of hell which is an unfathomable, unending torment of the judgment of God for all eternity. The two phrases in the Bible that cause me the most concern when I read the Bible is the phrase 'God gave them over' as He removes His common grace as well as His redeeming grace which is found in Romans 1. And the one that is more horrific in my ears than that phrase is the phrase 'depart from Me.' That phrase is just overwhelming to me. This is departing from the felt presence of God under the judgment of God for all eternity in a place called Gehenna or the lake of fire (hell).

Praise God in Christ we have victory over that death. Christ has won the victory over Satan, sin, death, hell and the grave. So in Christ, even though we die, yet we live, physically. In Christ we are born again. Ephesians 2:4–10 says [4] *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— [6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ*

Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. We have been born again to a living Hope (I Peter 1:3) with a spiritual life in Christ. Instead of the eternal death of hell we receive the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ because of His victory.

We now begin to take a look at what happens as believers, who have been rescued from spiritual death (regeneration – born again), have been assured of our salvation because Christ endured it on the cross and satisfied the wrath of God, on this issue of physical death if Jesus has not come back yet and we die. What happens next is called the intermediate state and then after we finish going over the intermediate state we'll look at our final state which will be in coming studies. Then we'll look at an unbeliever's intermediate state and their final state, which means we'll get to the doctrine of the new heavens and the new earth – the final state – and the doctrine of hell – the final state of the unbeliever. We will look at what the Bible says about all of that.

So now we'll look at the intermediate state, meaning it's not the final state. We will be looking at some key passages to help us understand this state and again we'll start now with Psalm 23. Psalm 23:1–6 says *[1] The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. [2] He makes me lie down in green pastures. [3] He leads me beside still waters. [3] He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. [4] Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. [6] Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Here is Jesus our great Shepherd and unless Jesus comes back you will go to the valley of the shadow of death. One might think 'will everyone go there?' Almost, for there are a couple of exceptions – Enoch and Elijah for they were taken up into the presence of the Lord not experiencing death. What about those Jesus raised from the dead, like Lazarus? They had to die again. The basic concept here about death is what we see in Hebrews 9:27 which says *[27] ...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* When you die, this Jesus who has shepherded you into life through regeneration, justification and adoption will now shepherd you into glorification – as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

One of the ways He is trying to communicate to you that you will fear no evil in death is that in your last breath you are encountering the shadow of death. Here is just one of the many ways the Bible communicates to Christians that they will die unless Jesus comes back first but a Christian's death is different because of the victory of Jesus. At times in the Bible there are euphemisms used when referring to a Christian's death. Jesus used one when Lazarus died by saying 'he fell asleep.' He doesn't do this because of an exotic notion of soul sleep. He is trying to communicate with this euphemism that the death of believer doesn't have evil attached to it for the death of a believer is the transformation and translation of the believer into the presence of the Lord – just like when you come out of a tiredness of sleep into a new morning.

In Psalm 23 He is using something else. Here He calls the death of a believer a valley but He says it's a shadow. I love the way Donald Grey Barnhouse explains this. Barnhouse, whose first wife died, was driving his kids from the funeral. One of the kids said, "Daddy, I don't understand, where did Mommy go? I don't understand what it means that she died." Barnhouse was trying to figure out how to explain death to his kids when, just then, a truck passed by and cast a shadow over the car. He looked back at the kids and said, "Kids, would you have rather

been hit by the truck or hit by the shadow?” Well, of course, they would have rather been hit by the shadow because the shadow doesn’t hurt. It just darkens things for a moment. Then in his own wisdom, Barnhouse said these words, “Kids, when you die without Christ, you are hit by the truck. When you die with Christ, you are only hit by the shadow. The shadow is all you get.” Apart from Christ death hits full force with all of its evil. In Christ you go through the shadow of death but He is not through.

At the last breath of the believer there is no evil for it is translation and according to Psalm 23 you don’t go through it by yourself for He is with you. I remember being at Richard’s BBQ on a Wednesday morning and Curtis Tanner had come over to tell me that my father had just died. One thing that stuck me as I went home to help take care of things and do the service, was that I really wished I could have been there with me dad at that moment. One thing that was greatly comforting was that I couldn’t be there but the Lord was. The Lord will be with those people at that moment for we don’t go through this valley alone. He is walking with you through it and His staff and rod are comforting you.

When you walk through it, where are you headed? Psalm 23:5 says [5] *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* That anointing of the Spirit seals us into Christ. The Spirit of God has been poured out of you. You have table fellowship with the Lord here and into eternity at that glorious marriage supper of the Lamb. What happens after all the days of my life? Psalm 23:6 says [6] *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and **I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*** Now we’re ready for the text from John 14. We are going to dwell in that house prepared for us by the Lord for all eternity.

John 14:1–7 says [1] *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. [2] In My Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also. [4] And you know the way to where I am going.” [5] Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going. How can we know the way?” [6] Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. [7] If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him.”* Why? It is because Jesus is the exact representation of the Father and has represented the exact manifestation in their presence.

Jesus has to go for when He redeems us here He has to finish the work of redemption on us. He has done the work of redemption for us but now when He goes away He will do the work on us by the Holy Spirit to bring us to be with Him, therefore He is preparing a place for us in His Father’s house. What makes it glorious in heaven is that we will be with Him forever. He is coming back but if you die before He comes back He will bring you to be with Him. He will be with you through every moment, will bring you to Himself and you will dwell with Him forever. I will answer more of the questions I know people have – like is my dog going to heaven? What makes heaven, heaven? What makes heaven, heaven is not your dog and with all due respect, not even your loved ones for you will be with Him and He will be with you in the house of the Lord forever. Because of that glorious truth then we’re ready for the next glorious truth we find in II Corinthians 5.

II Corinthians 5:1-5 says [1] *For we know that if the tent (our body) that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. [2] For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, [3] if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. [4] For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being*

burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. [5] He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

This tent, our body, is constantly enduring the physical consequences of the curse of sin – sickness, pandemic, COVID-19, etc. All of this is here because of the curse of sin, even death itself. This mortal body will become a new tent which is a new body and it will be transformed and translated into that which is eternal. How do I know I'm going to get this new dwelling place that He is preparing for me? It is because He has sent the Spirit to me who is the Down Payment, the Guarantee. Philippians 1:6 says *[6] And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* The Spirit is the fulfillment of this body that is shaped for all eternity.

He goes on to say in II Corinthians 5:6–10, *[6] So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight. [8] Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him. [10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* What will I want to do in my new body in the new heavens and the new earth? I want to please Him. What do I want to do in this body until I get there? I want to please Him.

Everybody will appear at the judgment and if your name is in the book of Life that judgment will be for stewardship of your life in Jesus Christ. If your name is not written in the book of Life that judgment will be declaring the consequences of sin and condemnation for all eternity. Until we get there we are to make it our aim to please Him. Now we can see why Paul would say he longed to be with the Lord but knowing that while he was here it was to please Him. Now let's look at Philippians 1.

Philippians 1:18b–26 says *[18b] Yes, and I will rejoice, [19] for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, [20] as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored 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 live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. [25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, [26] so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

Paul knew he could be served a death warrant at any time due to the fact he was in prison and his desire was to go be with the Lord but he also had a desire to minister to those he was writing to. Paul was pretty convinced that the Lord was going to leave him on earth for those people and that was fine with him because he loved them. He wanted them to know though if he were to die he wouldn't lose because to die is gain – he would win.

There was a period of about eight years in my life where I felt like I was going to put the medical community into orbit with surgery after surgery after surgery. Several of those surgeries were relatively serious where I talked with my wife and kids telling them that if the Lord calls me home it was okay – I'll miss you but I'll wait for you, but I win, I don't lose. So if I go under and then go up that's gain. It is far better. Now if He leaves me here then that means He has something for me to do and that will be good. After I left the hospital on one of those occasions

a person came up to me and said ‘You seem to be doing well. When you woke up out of anesthesia were you disappointed?’ I appreciated the insightful question and certainly to a sense but I said ‘No I’m not, because God is sovereign and if I’m here it’s for a reason. So what I need to do is embrace that reason and that opportunity.’ This isn’t a demotion, it’s my call that God has more for me to do.

In the sovereign hand of God, even though we know dying is better because we’re with Him, He made us to live and that’s why we don’t go out and grab a knife and stick it in our heart. That is why even in our last breaths we’re trying to take them. God made us to live for Him – if it’s here on earth we live for Christ, if it’s there it’s gain.

As I close this study I will pick up the second part to it in the next study and I want to leave you with some Scriptures to read before the next study to prepare you for it. I would like for you to read Luke 16, Hebrews 12:18–24, Matthew 22 and Revelation 7:9–17 which tells you what happens in the intermediate state. You are probably thinking that the final state will be better and you are right but the intermediate state is not bad for it’s gain, it’s far better, especially than here.

I’ve heard people say after a loved one has died who suffered say things like ‘Praise God they are no longer suffering and that they are skipping on the streets of gold with the angels.’ No, they are not, not yet for their body is in the grave. So where are they? They are in Abraham’s Bosom, paradise, heaven. Hades, the place of the dead, Sheol – has two dynamics. One is torment – intermediate judgment called the abyss. Second is blessing and comfort known as Abraham’s Bosom. Do you remember what Jesus said to the thief on the cross? “Today you will be with Me in paradise.” Paul tells us in II Corinthians 12 that paradise is heaven. Abraham is in heaven and we know that from Hebrews 11. Abraham’s Bosom is another way to say heaven.

I grew up in the Christian Missionary Alliance Church and our pastor lived in a parsonage. I got saved in a Reformed Presbyterian Evangelical Senate Church and the pastor’s residence was called a manse. I remembered saying to my wife who grew up in a Southern Baptist Church ‘what is a manse?’ She said ‘I don’t know but I think it’s the preacher’s home.’ I said ‘Oh you mean the parsonage.’ I had to go to seminary to get this thing straight and I found out it’s the same place – preacher’s house, manse, parsonage.

The intermediate state is heaven, paradise, Abraham’s Bosom, gain, better – what will we be doing? Will we know each other? How will we be able to live when we get to that intermediate state? What will it be like? I plan to answer these questions in our next study and that’s why we’ll be looking at Revelation 7 where we’ll find out seven things about this place that is far better. In the study after that we’ll find out about the ultimate place – the new heavens and the new earth, where we get a new body for the new heavens and the new earth. So is the intermediate state bodyless? Yes, because your body is in the grave and it will stay there until the resurrection. I tell everyone at a funeral that the reason we’re here is that God is not through yet – absent from the body, present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8) – but He will raise this body for a new heavens and a new earth. It is glorious what it will be like in that intermediate state as we’ll see from Revelation 7. It is better than this, yet there is more to come.

My question is not ‘are you going to die’ because if Jesus doesn’t come back first you will die so I know the answer to that question. My question is, ‘are you ready’ because the next step is going to be a judgment seat. Will you be ready at that time? I can’t wait to get to our next study but in this one I want to know if you’re going to be there with the Lord. If you are going to be with Him in that glorious place with all those who have gone before you in Him then

that means you have to be in Jesus today. You have to know Him and put your trust in Him. If you don't please come talk to me because I will be glad to introduce you to Him. I'll be glad to talk and pray with you but I want you to be in Christ for that's what makes the intermediate state and the final state the most glorious – we'll be with Him for all eternity, a new body, a new heavens, a new earth. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we have been able to be together in Your Word. Thank You Father, for the privilege to build our understanding from the Word of God about our comfort, joy and salvation in life and in death. I pray that everyone reading this will understand that when they die their body goes to the ground and the soul of a believer, You do take to be with You. If I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take and it will be gain and better than here. I pray Father that everyone reading this has come to You so they will be there with You. I pray that their heart and soul will be filled to overflowing with the presence of Jesus by His Spirit with His Word now even as we anticipate of being with Him then. Jesus come quickly, catch us up to the new heavens and the new earth but if this is not Your appointed time, please in this day help us to live with no fear in life or death for Christ is our life. To live is Christ, to die is gain, I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.