

## WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH?

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for  
SIU Students  
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Several older people have expressed surprise in learning that the question which topped all others in my poll of students was "What Happens After Death?" Apparently some assumed that students are so intent on raising ned on the campus and indulging themselves in fun and frolic that they haven't time to be bothered with such geriatric problems as death. Obviously this assumption is wrong and a moment's thought makes the reasons plain. Though the now generation loves life as much as any generation, the view it gets of the world leads rather easily to the impression that they have been born into a morgue. Almost from the time a child starts sitting up in his crib he is given the sight, smell and sound of death. As human corpses are seen littering the highways of our nations, the streets of our cities, the wastelands of television, the battlefields of Vietnam, and the humble homes of Biafra, could anyone blame young people for wondering what happens after death? Indeed, this generation has made an early discovery about life that is often postponed for longer periods by more arrogant generations, namely the discovery that human life is conditional, tentative and mortal. Possibly they know better than any other generation that has come upon the face of the earth that they are going to die.

So what happens after death? I think I could pack the SIU Arena if I could advertise that I have just returned from a week's visit to the Eternal World and that I am prepared to document my flight by the presentation of my findings in the splendid stereo of a tape recorder and the living color of motion pictures and still photos. But I haven't got any such recordings or pictures and I haven't made any such flight. The absolute truth of the matter is that I do not know what happens after death. Though obviously I am on the way, I haven't been there yet, so I can't honestly tell it like it is. I am simply not in possession of any first-hand empirical evidence.

Whereupon this sermon might be hailed as one of the shortest on record and we could all be dismissed. But since you are all here, and since the question has been asked, I am going to share with you

what I think and what I believe - about life after death. That is positively all that I can do. In doing some research recently in a library, I came upon these words, written by an unknown author:

Man's ingress into this world is naked and bare;  
His progress through the world is trouble and care;  
His egress out of the world is nobody knows where;  
If we do well here we shall do well there;  
I can tell you no more if I preach for a year.

(A Second Treasury of the Familiar,  
ed. by Ralph Woods, MacMillan Co.,  
1950, p. 271)

Still the question rises with anguished insistence from our human hearts: What happens to us when we die? There is no doubt that we want an answer, but I think we want also to place some conditions on the way we are answered. Many of you have seen that remarkable little volume entitled Children's Letters to God. One child writes:

Dear God,

What is it like when you die. Nobody will tell me. I just want to know, I don't want to do it.

Your friend,  
Mike

Mike is just like me: I sure want to know what it's like to go to the moon. But I don't want to do it! Like the ancient Job we are all anxious about our mortality. With Job we see that

Man wastes away like a rotten thing,  
like a garment that is moth-eaten.  
Man that is born of a woman  
is of a few days, and full of trouble.  
He comes forth like a flower, and withers;  
he flees like a shadow, and withers.  
(Job 13:28-14:1,2)

And with Job we ask:

If a man die, shall he live again?  
(Job 14:14)

A recent Gallup Poll shows that while 98% of the American people believe in God, only 74% believe in life after death. In Sweden only 38% of the people believe in life after death, and in France only 35% so believe. What do you believe? Let us think about this together and as we do I will share with you my beliefs and then hope you will do the same with me.

-I-

Let us begin by considering some of the very human ways in which we respond to the fact of death.

First, there are those who exploit death. Several years ago Jessica Mitford shook the funeral profession to its foundation by publishing her sensational book The American Way of Death. At the same time another book was published by Ruth Mulvey Harmer called The High Cost of Dying. Both of these were sensational and overdrawn but they did dramatize the fact that there are those in our society who exploit the human emotions about death. The funeral profession consists largely of highly dedicated and dignified people. It is basically a profession of integrity and value, but there are those who without conscience capitalize on this universal experience. No profession escapes from its exploiters. There have been plenty of frauds who have worn the cloth of the ministry. So the fact of death is no exception. I remember seeing a sign attached to a cigarette machine in a theater in San Francisco. It read: "We think that smoking cigarettes is injurious to your health. However, if you insist on smoking we would like to make a profit from it. Price: 50¢ a pack." So if you understand human nature, don't be surprised to see that death is exploited.

It is obvious, of course, that many people seize upon death as a means of escaping from the agonies of this world. Twenty-five thousand Americans killed themselves in 1966 and nine times that many made unsuccessful attempts at suicide. For many death is the only way out of intense suffering, be it physical, social, moral, intellectual, or spiritual.

Still others brandish belief in a certain kind of life after death as a means of punishing those who do not belong to their own social grouping or those who do not agree with them. Hence some have been assigned to hell because they didn't have the right color of skin. One man told me recently that he could not imagine there being any Negroes in heaven. I asked him what he would do if he were fortunate enough to reach that reward only to find black people also present. Without batting an eye he declared that he would rather go to hell. I refrain from speculating about the location of his everlasting habitation! A woman called me this week to ask if I had held a memorial service for Martin Luther King, Jr., in recognition of his 40th birthday. She told me that she was glad that Martin Luther King was dead, though she was sorry that his death had to come at the hands of a murderer. Nonetheless, she expressed in her heart the wish for his death. This is obviously her way of willing that he be punished eternally for what he believed and did on this earth. After hearing her expound most vehemently on the sins of this man it was plain that his death brought her satisfaction. Furthermore, it has given some people called Christian satisfaction in believing - they claim to know - that those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will be punished in hell and denied translation to heaven. It was basically this view that succeeded in effecting the slaughter of some six million Jews during World War II.

Let me simply comment on this view by saying that one of the most precious friends I have on this earth is a Jewish rabbi. At this precise moment he lies near death in a hospital in Columbus, Ohio. In contemplation of his moral purity, his prophetic vision and the beauty of his soul, I WANT TO RAISE HELL AGAINST THE ASSERTION THAT OUR FATHER GOD WOULD RECEIVE ME AND REJECT HIM IN ETERNITY!

You see, what I have been trying to say is that when it comes to musing over what happens after death some people have entertained the shabbiest, the most vulgar, the most vile, yea, the most sinful thoughts that can corrupt a human spirit. They seem to believe that death is something hideous and loathsome. On one thing I would bet my life: we ought to reject these views of death with quickness and indignation. They are unworthy of entertainment in the sanctuaries of our hearts if we would hold to Christ as the honored Guest.

I do not need here to remind you that I am not telling you just what happens after death. I do not really know, but I have some further intimations or intuitions, if you please, of two characteristics that might very well be in you as you approach the day of your own death.

-II-

First, I think you might very well decide that as you think about your life after death you should relate it somehow to how you treat, in this life, all of the other creatures of this earth who are also mortal. In other words, I suggest that you not separate your morality from you mortality.

Actually, your relationships with other human beings need not depend entirely upon your belief in life after death. Bishop John A.T. Robinson, of Honest to God fame tells of an evangelical undergraduate in an earlier generation who declared that a belief in a future life was all that kept him moral. Otherwise he would feel free to rape, steal, murder and be a drunkard. Robinson comments: "This strikes the contemporary humanist, whether Christian or not, as not only incredible but immoral. If this is all that keeps a man responsible, then he is less than responsible." (In the End God, p. 24, 25) Surely a man does not have to believe in life after death just to act morally! He ought to treat other human beings with respect and concern even though he thinks he will be annihilated when he dies. On the other hand, a deeper dimension will be given to his moral life if he believes that life is so precious and infinitely important that it does not end on this side of the grave. That faith ought to make him more compassionate, more just, more loving. If you were to have that Reverence for Life that motivated Albert Schweitzer, and if you believed that life is sacred just because God continues it after death, wouldn't you be inclined to show reverence for life in all of the relationships you have with all of God's children?

My thought is this: if sometime you are conscious of your continuing existence in a world beyond the life of this, wouldn't you be embarrassed, indeed humiliated, to discover that the human souls

whom you had rejected and despised here on earth - the poor, the colored, the foreigners, the non-Christians, the moral derelicts - were all received in eternity on the same terms and with the same respect with which you are received? Wouldn't it be embarrassing if in Eternity you had to submit to the ordeal of a kind of "This is Your Life" program in which all of your earthly relationships and your manner of dealing with your fellow men were reenacted so that all of the company of heaven could see! Aren't you really going to be ashamed to die nursing some of the hatred, prejudice, ill-will, revenge, that you have in your heart?

-III-

The other characteristic that you are going to need is that of sheer faith.

Now when it comes down to the day of your earthly death no other device or stance will do. In that moment you will have to throw yourself entirely and absolutely on the mercy of God. That is, you will have to trust that God does exist and that he is full of mercy. Your situation will be something like that which occurs when they come to your hospital room on the day scheduled for surgery. Through many days, and certainly all through the night, you have wondered what this moment was going to be like, and you have wondered if you would survive. Now they come to make you ready. They lift you from your bed and place you on a cart. They strap you down. Then the long journey down a hospital corridor begins. The lights on the ceiling flash by, and they are all you see. In what seems an endless ride you at last come to a room where you will experience your existential moment. It is bright and sterile and all sorts of contraptions loom up to startle and frighten you. From the cart they lift you onto an awesome table. Sensing that your destiny now is absolutely in the hands of others, that there is not a single thing in this moment that you can do to save yourself, you may, while consciousness remains frame in your mind the words of that little prayer of your childhood:

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.

Then someone takes your arm and your skin is skillfully pierced by a needle. In that last moment of consciousness, just as the world swims in whiteness and you sink into utter oblivion, you may wonder about your being: will it continue beyond this one moment, or are you sinking into nothingness or non-being? In despair you may conclude that that is the end. Or, by the courage of grace, you may say, in utter faith, as I hope to say with St. Paul: "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us (me) from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

(Romans 8:38,39)