

BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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“WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE?”

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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 7:9-17

What happens when I die? Certainly this question has been plaguing human kind since the Fall. Living in broken relationship with our Creator, we fear the inevitable—physical death—but then, what will happen after the grave?

I was talking with some colleagues about this topic earlier this week, when I realized that I used to be much more enamored with this question as a young person, and as a teen. I used to think about it a lot, wonder about this a lot, and have a certain fear of this, maybe even terror.

Perhaps I don't think much about this much anymore because I am more wrapped up in my daily living...my daughter, her therapies and medical needs, paying the bills, doing my job...or maybe I don't think about this so often because I am no longer fearful of death.

I don't know exactly what to expect, but I do know that I have a living relationship with a loving God whom I know I love and trust. I don't fear death, nor do I fear what comes after the grave, therefore, I don't spend much time thinking about nor worrying about death. We'll see if that will change as I grow older. I kind of doubt it.

In the text I read today, Paul is writing to a young Church in Thessalonica. The people have seen many of their fellow saints pass away, and they are wondering what has happened to them. So Paul writes them: “Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus.”

The NIV says “...Those who fall asleep...” What a beautiful picture...when we die, we fall asleep in Christ, and we will return with Him when He comes in final victory to judge the living and the dead.

Remember what Jesus said to the criminal on the cross who believed in Him? “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” I believe that our loved ones who believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and have died and gone on ahead of us are with Jesus Christ right this very moment, with Christ who sits at the right hand of God the Father.

The Bible tells us that when we become new creations in Christ, God seats us with Christ in the heavenly realms. Therefore, death for a Christian is just a continuation of this life, but much better—for we will see God face to face.

And then, when Christ comes again in final victory, those of us who have already passed away will meet, in the air, those who remain, and we will experience the resurrection of the dead, where we will be given our new eternal bodies.

A sick man turned to his doctor, as he was preparing to leave the examination room and said, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side." Very quietly, the doctor said, "I don't know." "You don't know? You, a Christian man, do not know what is on the other side?" As the doctor was holding the handle of the door; on the other side came a sound of scratching and whining. When he opened the door, a dog sprang into the room and leaped onto him with an eager show of gladness. Turning to the patient, the doctor said, "Did you notice my dog? He's never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear. I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing. I know my Master is there, and that is enough." (borrowed from Rev. Chuck Root)

Is that enough for you this morning? Is that enough for me?

The Bible is a story of a relationship...a relationship lost, and a relationship found. We are the ones who break the relationship, God is the One who finds us. We spend our lives being pursued by a loving God, who, spends much time looking for us. When we are found, God rejoices and so do the angels but much more work is yet to be done.

We must learn what it means to live life as those who have been found by God and loved by God. We must learn that it is safe and good and right and lovely to love God back. And that in loving God back, we find more in life than we could ever have imagined. We must learn by error, by maturation, through faith, hope and love that we can trust in God at all times and in all situations, and that what God said is really true: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

When we know this, and I mean really know this...not just because it is written down, but when we have absorbed this and experienced this we can truly begin to face this life and ultimately death, unafraid!

Do you know this? Have you experienced this? Have you absorbed the fact that God loves you more than you can imagine, and that He will never leave you, never forsake you?

If you have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, have you absorbed the fact that you have been forgiven? Are you ready to spring into whatever may come ahead without fear because you know your Master is there and that is enough?

The apostle Paul knew much about God. He didn't know everything, but he knew a lot about Christ's love and forgiveness. He wrote to the church at Thessalonica and also in Romans *: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I believe that this morning, perhaps more than anything else in all creation, how about you?

Hear these words from Revelation 7.

We are given a vision of the hope we share with all Christians of what happens after death. It's not a precise, 'just the facts' answer to our questions, but it is a vision and this vision conveys a powerful message.

As John on the Island of Patmos gets a peek beyond the creation we live in, he sees things our senses cannot tell us. As John describes his vision, he sees a great multitude standing before the throne in front of the Lamb of God. These are the Christians who have died and been resurrected. This multitude is international, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual. The barriers that divide people on this earth have been torn down. We will worship side-by-side and hand-in-hand with all believers of every age.

Fear, distrust, and suspicion will have melted away, so that we can all embrace one another as brothers and sisters. This will be an experience of true community and baggage-free fellowship. The victorious, heartfelt worship of the multitudes indicates a closeness to God that goes beyond even our deepest experiences of God's presence in this life.

Later in the Book of Revelation, John assures us of this closeness even more clearly: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Yes, this is the culmination of all things...when we are restored to that right relationship we had before the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Some argue that this is even better, because God showed His love to us in this way, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us to make this possible.

I don't know about you, but when I worship now, I am often distracted, or my responses are sometimes mechanical. I'm not always into it. John assures us that after we are raised from the dead, our worship will always be spontaneous and genuine. We will be fully engaged in our praise and devotion to God.

The last verses from Revelation 7 hold the most tender promises of all. These verses promise us healing of both body and soul. In the resurrection, our physical bodies will no longer be a burden. John expresses this by saying that we will no longer hunger and thirst. Right now, our bodies are part of God's good creation, but because of sin, our bodies are weak and needy. Our resurrected bodies will not be weak and needy.

This redemption of the physical world will extend even to the realm of nature. The promise that the sun will not strike the multitude of the resurrected speaks of reconciliation between humanity and nature. Nature is one of God's greatest gifts, but in our present Fallen state, nature can also be destructive and dangerous.

According to Genesis 1, the sun was part of God's good creation. The sun is good and life-giving, but it is also harsh and causes us to wither. Who of us has not at one time or another been oppressed by the sun's heat? It saps our strength, can make us ill, and can even kill us.

In heaven, this problem will be eradicated. People and nature will live in harmony. We will experience God's creation as the gift it was meant to be.

And just as our material selves will be redeemed, so will our raging emotions: pain and grief. Life is full of heartaches. Grief can be a devastating experience. Some of us still feel the sting of the death of a loved one decades later...the pain may be hardly diminished by the passing of time. Sometimes anger and grief threaten to overwhelm us. Trying to keep our emotions under control can take enormous energy.

John promises that God will reach out His divine hand and wipe the tears from our eyes. What peace that gives us to know that in life after death, our loved ones have already been healed of their emotional hurts.

Eternity with God is an experience of true fellowship, of the joyous presence of God, of the healing of body and soul, and of reconciliation with the rest of God's creation. Grief takes time. As those who have been claimed by God, we affirm a victory beyond grief. We place our loved ones and ourselves in God's hands, and wrap the promises of the God of the Bible around ourselves.

For those of us who have been found by God in Jesus Christ, we need not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him...For the Lord himself will come down with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

There is no reason to fear death. Not if we have absorbed this!

Jesus says in John 5: "Anyone who hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." Have you passed from death to life? Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ?

After we die, those of us who have accepted Christ's free gift of salvation will be part of the company of heaven. We will be the ones who stand around the throne of God singing "Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory."

I can't wait! Wherever God is, that's where I want to be. But God has promised me that even today he is with us. Until that "Great Getting'-up Mornin'" happens, we've got work to do. I want to tell the world about eternity and this awesome God I serve. I don't want anyone left behind!