

Answers to 5 Questions about the Afterlife

By Randy Frazee

Right after I finished a five-week series on the Afterlife at Oak Hills Church, where I serve in partnership with author Max Lucado, our IT leader came to me and said, “this is the most online watches we have had in our history.” Considering all the series Lucado and I have done, this blew me away. I could visibly see the strong increase in weekend attendance, but I completely underestimated the viral power and pure interest in this topic.

Lesson learned: People desperately want to know what happens to them after they die.

Below are what I believe are the five most important questions people want answers to straight from the Bible. Most folks have figured out we ministers often say things at funerals that the family wants to hear. While it is merciful, it can be misleading. When I approached this series, I did so out of a season of deep struggle in my life. Out of nowhere, over a period of just a few months, my mother, at the age of 62, died of pancreatic cancer. This really sent me involuntarily into a tailspin of doubt about heaven. When I approached the congregation about this series I told them where I was coming from personally. I told them I originally prepared these thoughts with no sermon to write and no denominational axe to grind. This was a personal journey to discover what the Bible really says about life after death. I saw them shaking their heads as if to say, “We want to know too.” So, I dove in -

Is Jesus Enough?

When we were driving my mother to the Cleveland Clinic hospital in my parent’s Ford Econoline travel van, my mother asked me this honest question, “Is it enough?” I knew exactly what she was asking. She wanted to know if her prayer of confession of Jesus as her Savior was enough for God to receive her at her death. I was nowhere close to admitting that my mom was going to die, but I said without a second’s pause, “Why yes mom, Jesus is enough?” Within thirty minutes at the hospital we moved my mom to palliative care. Now, instead of helping my mother get better, we were charged with the painful assignment of helping her die.

Once this new reality sunk in, the question my mom asked so innocently, started to bug me. There have always been those passages of scripture that seem to challenge the notion that salvation is simply a gift which we receive by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. So, I tore into my Bible right in the hospital chapel to discover with honest eyes if there is some requirement that I missed so I could get it to my mom before it was too late.

Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler was at the top of my list. When the man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus replied, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven. Then come follow me.” (Mark 10:21) This not only contradicted what other writers in the New Testament shared but Jesus himself. (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:16)

After looking at the dialogue more closely, I realize that Jesus was trying to get the arrogant young man who declared he had kept the law perfectly, that he did not. Had he admitted that he was incapable of keeping the law perfectly, Jesus would have given the message of John 3:16. You can't be found until you know you are lost. I remember rushing back into my mother's room. She was highly sedated but the nurse assured me she could hear me. I whispered in her ear, "Mom, Jesus is really enough. I will be right behind you."

What happens if I die without Christ?

With the same vigor, I approached this question. What I discovered from scripture is that a person's spirit who dies without ever receiving Christ in this life, goes to a place called "Hades" or "Hell." (Luke 16:22-23) This is not the final destination for this person. It is a holding place while awaiting final judgment. We might say it is like being on death row. Not a good place to be.

What happens if I die with Christ?

Truthfully, the Bible doesn't give us tons of information on this question. The Old Testament is virtually silent on the topic and the New Testament contains on a few explicit verses. What we do know is that when a believer in Jesus dies, they go to be with God, which is a really good thing. (Philippians 1:21-23) We know at this point there are no Pearly Gates, Streets of Gold or Golf Courses. We also know that this is not our final destination. We are waiting for the return of Christ to earth to usher in the kingdom of God and to receive our full inheritance as children of God. (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)

What happens if I don't know Christ when he returns?

This is one of the hardest things to read about in the Bible. Here is the truth without mincing any words. When Christ returns, the spirits of those in Hades will receive bodies and stand before God at the judgment. If their names are not written in the Book of Life they will be cast into the Lake of Fire along with Satan, demons, death and sin. This is their final destination. (Revelation 20:11-15). We learn in the Bible, God doesn't send anyone to hell; he merely honors their choice. How sad.

What happens if I do know Christ when he returns?

This is where the Bible is just overflowing with scripture and descriptions of our eternal destiny (Revelation 21-22) When Christ returns our spirits will receive imperishable bodies, just like Jesus did at his resurrection. Our eternal home will not be floating on clouds in heaven but walking with two feet on a new earth. And get this, God will no longer be "up there" but "down here" with us just like he was in the beginning with Adam and Eve in the garden. I look so forward to this day. If you are planning to be there, I would love to introduce you to my mom.

Through this experience, I have learned a few things. First, my doubts and struggles about the afterlife became a powerful connection in helping the people with their own struggles and doubts. Second, people really do want to know what the Bible says about this topic. Don't sugar coat it like they can't handle the truth. Most people have an incomplete picture of what God has in store for us in the next life, particularly for those who believe. The stuff we aren't told about is the most compelling of all. Preach it! Finally, Christians have a deep longing to see their family and friends believe in Christ. We created a prayer wall on an oversized window in our worship center. During the service people would go over to the window and write the names of folks in their lives that needed to trust Christ. Hundreds of hundreds of names and prayers were written on the wall as tears fell to the ground. The cool thing is that some of the names were erased off the wall before the series was even done.

You can find out more in my new book from Thomas Nelson, "What Happens after you Die: A Biblical Guide to Paradise, Hell, and Life After Death." My prayer is that it will encourage you in your personal journey and give you some fuel for your own series on the Afterlife.