

What's It Like After We Die?

1 Corinthians 15: 38-54

Death keeps coming after us. It comes to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to victims of floods, violent storms, and accidents. It comes to those who live long lives and to those whose lives are interrupted. It comes to our parents, our children, our friends, and eventually to us. So, how might God be experienced once we leave our earthly bodies and what about love and relationships in the afterlife? In other words, what's it like after we die, especially in terms of experiencing God and relating to other people?

The first question that comes to me is *how*. How does one know the answers to what it's like after we die? How do we know in what way, or even if, we'll experience God and other people after death? Trying to answer such a fundamental question of existence, we really ought to seek all possible sources and resources of understanding. What does the Bible say? What do insightful writers say? What has been my own experience around death and, finally, what do I really think, feel, and believe?

It may sound odd, but death is really part of life. From the very first time the earliest human beings realized with certainty that they would die someday, we have been fascinated by and obsessed with death. Fear of dying has turned people throughout history to their need for God?

The biblical library is filled with people of faith who looked to God to protect them from death and suffering. More than that, since death was inevitable eventually, they looked to God to guard them in death – to justify their lives and choices to remain faithful. This was particularly important to those early Christians under persecution – those to whom much of Paul's ministry was directed. Would God vindicate them? Would God save them from death, as in the story of Daniel and the Lion's Den, or after death, as with Jesus and the Christian martyrs? It was all about their choosing the right path.

The many references in the Bible with regard to life after death have to do with the continuation of connectedness with God and with each other. One of my favorites is Psalm 139: 8-10 (NRSV).

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

In life and in death, we are within God's providence.

In the same letter of 1 Corinthians, there is a familiar passage that speaks to the nature of our continuing perception of God.

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! (1 Corinthians 13: 12, *The Message*)

In the fifteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul addresses issues of the nature of resurrection in terms of Jewish theological understanding – the idea of a final resurrection and the nature of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection only made sense in terms of the Jewish understanding of a general resurrection at the end of time – a bodily resurrection like in the story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones.

At the same time, Jesus’ resurrection marked a whole new thing, a spiritual reality with spiritual bodies. It was not physical, not a triumphant return of the messiah to set up a kingdom like Rome, only Jewish. This resurrection marked a completely different way of being. This whole passage is intended to reassure those early Christians facing persecution and death. It was intended to tell them that their dying was not in vain – that God would vindicate them and justify their faith.

There would be no need to fear death and the great powers of the world, Rome in particular. “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” All that seems overpowering, overwhelming, and intimidating in the world, the greatest of all these – the power of death – would be as though they had no power at all compared to God.

So, what do I think it’s like after we die? How might we experience God and continued relationships with loved ones? I must confess that I am no more of an expert on this subject than any of you. I offer no magic solutions or easy answers -- only what seems right from my experience, my journey, and what others on the journey have said that seems true to me.

Why do I believe there is life after death? All around us, there is the mystery of new life from death. New flowers grow from dried-up bulbs planted in the ground. Autumn to winter’s death – then the new birth of spring! This deep mystery is all around us. It is our common experience of life. How can we not believe in life after death? It is our constant common experience! So, when I have listened to all the resources I have available and when I have thought as clearly as I can about the experience of God after we die and about relationships with those we love, I believe there are three things we can count on.

First, our experience after death likely will be very familiar to us especially to those who have paid some attention to faith and spirituality in this life. Anecdotal evidence of near death experiences contained so many similar images. Many people experience what they expect including the experience of loved ones around them. My father passed away almost two years ago. Near the end, he clearly was aware of the presence with him of his brother Jack, my uncle, who died in World War II and of my mother who died in an automobile accident twenty-five years ago. There were also other loved ones surrounding him, communing with him, and ready to welcome him. Were these hallucinations? Perhaps they were, yet my sense is that this experience represents a deep truth that his “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), whose love for him spanned even the great chasm of death, were with him as he crossed over. I believe they were.

The truth reflected in Mitch Albom's bestseller *5 People You Meet in Heaven* is that, after death, we remain strongly connected to the significant people from your life. What is *core truth* to us here, especially deep relationships -- what is core remains with us even through death.

Second, our experience after death will also be completely new -- something absolutely different from any other experience. Paul describes this experience as spiritual rather than physical, eternal rather than temporal. He wrote, "We shall be changed." It will be something different, something we have not experienced before as far as I know. I cannot even describe or understand the nature of this difference. It is just mystery -- beyond the veil -- as different from our present experience as God is different from us.

Third, everything we know about life after death focuses attention on this life. How we live this life affects our experience after death. Our experience of God in this life is strongly connected to our experience of God after this life. The Bible talks about the after-life always from the perspective of justice, mercy, and compassion in our living. Thinking about life after death affects how we live life before death.

So, if it is true that *after death* is most familiar and also most mysterious -- if it is true that the biblical images of *after-death* point us back to this life -- if it is true that our experience of God then mirrors, though more brightly than a summer sunrise, our clearest experience of God now -- if it is true that our experience after death is like going home, as home is in our heart of hearts with loved ones gathered all around us -- if it is also true that our experience of God then, so new, stretches the extremes of what we only imagine now at our most creatively playful and our most rashly hopeful -- and if it is true that we will be deeply in love with all souls and share communion with all life in a way we cannot even imagine -- then it does matter, it matters so very much, how we live now. It matters because *now* prepares our capacity to experience God *then*, our thirst to drink in the wonder of the new.

I don't know for sure what it's like when we die. In some ways, it will probably be a different experience for each of us. Yet, there is holiness at the core of life, beyond understanding. There is a wonder in the mystery of life that continually calls us home. What is eternal in life is indeed immortal. We are, we are each and all, held in the loving presence of God in the eternal present of God. We are one and we are in the One in a deep mystery that we know now in part, whose fullness and clarity will grow in us -- eternally more intimate, forever surprising, and completely at home.

That's why we gather as church -- to remind us and help us to live while we have life. We gather to emphasize relationships now and practice openness to God's presence now. We encourage each other to dream and to realize dreams -- to walk the journey of life boldly, to follow Jesus honestly as our example and our guide. That's why we bring our questions and our wisdom to practice the life of community. We find heaven in our hearts where we meet the Spirit of truth.