

SERIES: Life After Death

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Message Title: 60 Seconds After You Die Pt. 1

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There's been a book written by Donald Piper entitled *90 minutes in Heaven*. Now, I don't know, Don Piper seems like a very sincere guy. Clearly, he's gone through a very traumatic event, but the question is, did he actually spend 90 minutes in Heaven? You know, what do we do with these near-death experiences? A couple of years ago, there was another book written, I don't remember the exact number, but something like 17 minutes in hell. Well, you're free to have your opinion. I have my opinion. There's definitely a mystery to all of that. I would say certainly that Jesus said that even if somebody goes to the other side and comes back and tells their story, people won't listen. So it's hard to imagine that Jesus changed his mind and he's now employing that strategy. But you can make of that what you will.

I think we would all agree that those kind of near-death experiences are not a good basis by which we formulate our beliefs about life after death. We have to have something more objective, something more reliable than that. That's what we want to try to accomplish. Just by way of review, we talked about the historical evidence for literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. We acknowledged that people in our culture are free to disbelieve a literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, but they must understand that the leap of faith they make to deny the resurrection of Jesus is actually a much greater leap of faith than what we believers make, because of the historical evidence. We talked about the fact that one day we who have trusted Jesus as Savior, will experience, a literal, physical, bodily *resurrection from the dead*. The fact that Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead is the basis upon which we believe that there is yet then a future *resurrection from the dead* for us.

Time Magazine did a poll and found that two thirds of people that believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus also believe that we will not have a literal body in Heaven, but that's just bad theology. There is no question we will not be disembodied spirits that float around the universe. The resurrection of Jesus, the fact that it was a literal physical, bodily resurrection, that's the point. He is the *first fruit*. He is the pledge. He is the prototype of what we will be for eternity. There's no question about that from First Corinthians Chapter 15.

When we start talking about what happens 60 seconds after we die, it gets a little bit more difficult to define. There is the eventual resurrection of the dead that comes with the return of Jesus when the New Heaven comes down to a remade Earth and there is Heaven on this Earth, as all creation is redeemed back and we will live out on a redeemed Earth with a literal physical body. That is what NT Wright's calls life after, life after death. In other words, there is that which comes after the resurrection of the dead. That is the New Heaven, the New Earth, and we'll talk about that. What we're talking about today is this intermediate period. If you died today, if your loved ones have died in Jesus, there is this intermediate period that is before the resurrection of the dead, but is this period now, it would define you 60 seconds, frankly, one second after you die today. So that's what we're talking about.

Now in the process of trying to make some sense of this, I'm going to make a number of references that the Bible says this, and the Bible says that, but to try to identify all those passages and look them all up would get really confusing. So what I'm going to do is I will make passing references to things that are said in other places of the Bible and I will not give specific references for many of them, but when we come back and print the transcripts, we will insert those references in so that you can read the transcript and know this is where the Bible actually says that. So just so you're aware of that.

Probably the best place to start is to go back and have some degree of understanding of the Old Testament, the old covenant understanding of life after death. It's really wrapped around a Hebrew word: Sheol. Sheol is a word that is used 65 times in the Old Testament. It captures the idea of the grave but certainly goes beyond the grave to a state of consciousness after the grave. The Hebrew language actually has a very specific word for the grave if that's all you're talking about. Sheol pushes it beyond that to, it includes the grave, but it also includes a conscious state beyond that. Sheol can refer to a place of paradise and Sheol can refer to a place of torment. You have to look at the context to understand which is being referred to in a particular passage. That led the rabbis to believe that Sheol included two compartments. There is a conscious state after death and there's two different compartments. One is a place of torment. One is a place called Paradise or Abraham's bosom. It appears in the New Testament that Jesus then picks up on that concept and talks about it in Luke chapter 16.

So if you have a Bible turn with us to Luke chapter sixteen. One of the challenges we always have is trying to figure out what are the New Testament Greek words that most closely align with Old Testament Hebrew words. In other words, what would be the Greek word that would be the closest equivalent to the Hebrew word Sheol? Our best resource for that as a document called the Septuagint. The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. In all 65 times when the word Sheol is translated into the Greek language, it uses the word Hades. So we would be quite confident that the Greek word Hades is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol, and that's the word that's used in this particular text.

Now, there's a fair amount of discussion as to whether or not this is a parable or whether it's actually a true story talking about true people and it's really hard to land on one side or the other. There's pretty good arguments for it being a parable, although we would say if it is a parable, it's a very unique parable. There are characteristics about it that would set it apart, but still pretty strong argument. There's also a pretty good argument that it's actually a story taken on the basis of real people and real events. What we can say with a great deal of confidence is even when Jesus was telling a parable, he did not dispense misinformation. The parables were still relative to the facts as they really are. The intent of this particular passage is to teach about life after death. As a matter of fact, Jesus' motive is in teaching us about life after death, it should change the way we live today.

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So on that basis, we pick it up in verse 19.

"Now, there was a rich man and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his

*gate, covered with sores and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table besides even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. And the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes being in torment and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue for I am in agony in this flame. But Abraham said, child, remember that during your life, you received your good things and likewise Lazarus, bad things. But now he is being comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you, there is a great chasm fixed so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able and that none may cross over from there to us. And he said, then I beg you father, that you send him to my father's house for I have five brothers in order that he may warn them so that they will not come to this place of torment. But Abraham said, they have Moses and the prophets let them hear them. But he said, no father Abraham. But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. But he said to him, if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.” (*NASB, Luke 16:19-31)*

Now there are several things that we can learn about life after death from this passage. First of all, we need to identify that this is referring to this intermediate state. There's no question that what happens here is immediate. This is not a reference to the future resurrection. This is a reference to what happens immediately and there's clearly a sense of urgency and awareness of that.

The first thing beyond that that we would notice is that there is a sense of consciousness. There is an awareness. Clearly both, the rich man and Lazarus, they are aware of who they are. They're aware of who they were on Earth, they're aware of one another, they recognize one another. There is clearly a memory of life on Earth. So, this idea that suddenly we just kind of become these disembodied spirits that float around the Universe is completely false. There is a sense in which we know who we are, we know where we're at and there is a sense of recognition within one another for one another.

There is a belief that's put forth by some, that's called soul sleep. It's based on the idea that you have to have the soul and the body together. So, when you die because your body goes in the ground, your soul cannot live without your body, so it goes to sleep, and it remains in a state of sleep until the eventual resurrection of the dead. That's taken from two different sources. One is from a misunderstanding of a passage in Ecclesiastes, chapter nine verse five. The other is a misunderstanding of the concept of sleep when people die. Both the Old and New Testament referred to when somebody dies, they have *fallen asleep*. Always a reference to someone who has believed in Jesus as Savior. The idea is not of the spirit, the idea is of the body, and it's simply a promise that one day that body will be resurrected. Therefore, rather than that body being just dead and gone, there's a metaphor that it actually will wake up one day and be reunited with the immaterial part and live out on the New Heaven and the New Earth. So, when the body says sleep in reference to death, it's not the soul, it's the body.

But if you go back to the Ecclesiastes chapter nine verse five passage, the first question you always want to ask is, what's the context? In other words, what's being taught there? And when you read through the context, you figure out quickly that the writer of Ecclesiastes, Solomon, is not talking about life after death. He's talking about the emptiness and vanity of life. As a matter

of fact, that's the theme through the whole book. Vanity of vanities. Life on this Earth is worthless. It's empty. It's full of despair if that's all there is. So it gets into chapter nine and he's talking about if all you've ever lived for is the stuff of this world, when you die, you've got nothing. And there's great despair in that.

As a matter of fact, the verse that immediately precedes verse five, verse four actually says, it's better to be a live dog than a dead lion. In the ancient world, that dog was not like little Fifi that's our pet. A dog was considered a wild, scroungy animal. Probably the closest equivalent today would be, it's better to be a live rat than a dead lion. If this world is all there is, better at least to be alive than to be dead because when you're dead, you've got nothing. That's the context into which those comments are made. It saying when you're dead, you're dead. To try to read into that, that it's saying that there's some sort of a sleep state really goes against the context of the passage.

We also have to weigh that against so many other passages that seem to be very clear. The whole concept of Sheol in the Old Testament is about a conscious state after death. You have some of these strange passages. For example, you have Elijah and Enoch in the Old Testament who actually didn't even die. They just entered into the presence of God, clearly not to fall asleep but to enjoy the presence of God.

You have a weird passage in first Samuel where Saul isn't doing so well and through a medium, he called Samuel back and much to the medium's shock, Samuel actually comes back and he's very aware of what's been happening. He's aware of the problems with Saul and clearly, he's not been in a state of sleep, but he's very aware of the situation.

In the New Testament you have Moses and Elijah that carry on a conversation with Jesus, when Jesus was transfigured on the mount, clearly awake and conscious and aware. You have this wonderful passage in Acts chapter seven, where Steven, right before he dies, looks into the Heavens and the Heavens part and there is Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father and clearly what's implied as he's welcoming Steven home, not to go into a state of sleep, but to enjoy being in the presence of Jesus.

You have Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians, he said, you know I'd rather be absent from the body and present with the Lord. In that particular passage, he's clearly talking about life after death and he's talking about how wonderful it's going to be. He says the same thing in Philippians when he writes to the church in Philippi and he says, you know, I'm really torn because I really do want to depart to be with Jesus. Clearly he's implying I want to be with Him in a relational sense, not go to sleep, but I also want to stay in this Earth and accomplish the mission. See we have many, many, many texts that clearly give us the idea that the moment we die we are conscious on the other side.

Arnie: So Bryan, I so much love this about your teaching, but it, it's kind of mind blowing. You're teaching on that we're in this intermediate state, seems to suggest that the moment we die, we are somehow in the presence of God. Is that right? I mean, will we still have a body at that point?

Bryan: Yes. So immediately in the presence of God? Yes. Will, we have a body? I'm not sure; that intermediate state, if we die today before the New Heaven, the New Earth before the return

of Christ, is the most undefined. So, you have Samuel and Elijah and Moses coming back from the dead and different passages and they have bodies. The angels take on bodies for different assignments. So is there an in between body, an intermediate body? My guess is yes, but that's really an unknown.

Cara: How do you account for these near death experiences then that these people have or claim to have?

Bryan: Yeah, so it's hard to know. I don't like to put God in a box. God can do whatever He wants. So, did people actually have some sort of an experience? I don't know. You have books written about people being in Heaven, books written about people being in Hell. One of the things I look for is what's the fruit of that? Do they love Jesus more? Are they more dialed in to the mission? If so, that's a good thing; encourage that. I don't know that we can say yes or no, but I wouldn't take my theology from those experiences. I wouldn't read one of those books and decide that's what Heaven's like or that's what Hell is like. You know, we need to get that from the Scriptures. What else God does beyond that, I don't ever want to put Him in a box. I don't really know.

Cara: Do you think those are helpful for unbelievers, those types of stories?

Bryan: Oh, you know, that's a great question. I think they are if it stirs people's thinking, if it raises questions and starts dialogue. Some of those books get really popular in the culture. If it starts a conversation that moves to the Gospel, there's benefit in that.

Arnie: So what will we be doing in this intermediate Heaven while we're waiting for the return of Christ and the New Heaven and Earth?

Bryan: Well, as you know, there's lots of conversation about that. The things I would say biblically is I think we're cheering. Hebrews 12 clearly seems to be the imagery of once we've passed the baton, that we're seated with the great heroes of the faith from chapter 11 and we're cheering on the next runners. You know, it's not an individual raise, it's a relay. So they're teammates, so I think that's part of it. And theologians argue to what degree do we actually see the race? And we could argue that back and forth.

Bryan: I personally think we're praying. Revelation six, the martyrs are talking to God about people on Earth, which is essentially prayer. So, there's some level of interceding on behalf of those, still engaged in the battle. And I'm highly confident that we'll be engaged in what's most on the heart of Jesus. This idea that when we die, we go off on a cloud and don't care about what's happening on Earth makes no sense to me. If we're in the presence of Jesus and Jesus is the head of the church and he's dialed into what's happening until his Kingdom comes in and its fullness, then wouldn't that be what's most on our heart? And in some ways, I think we're fully engaged, maybe more engaged than we ever were here on Earth, until the victory's won, Jesus returns and the New Heaven and the New Earth is ushered in.

Cara: So it won't be boring, because that's the one thing you hear non-believers say, is it sounds boring.

Bryan: Yeah. What I say to people, and I think this applies to any age, including children, is think about those things in this life that give you most pleasure. You know, things that are good and right, and that's a glimpse of the world to come. And that's different for everybody. But those

are just little moments that you experience a taste of what's to come. But it certainly will not be boring.

Arnie: So is it a sin to ask God to take you home?

Bryan: I think there needs to probably be a context with that. I know a lot of elderly people – they're ready to go. And what's wrong with that? [Okay.] They reach a point where they're not going to get better. It's pain, it's suffering, it's loneliness. And they just want to be with Jesus. It's a little different than a 16-year-old that just wants to check out. [Yeah.] You know, it's not my decision to make. I want to run my race all the way to the finish line and then I'm ready to meet Jesus.