

# Heaven Can Wait

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## Heaven Can Wait

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:1-2).*

A kindergarten Sunday school teacher, hoping to make a point, asked his young students a series of questions about heaven. "If I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children in my neighborhood and loved my wife, would that get me into heaven?"

"No," the children answered.

"If I cleaned the church every day, dusted the pews, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?"

Again they answered, "No, that won't do it!"

"Okay, what if I sold my house and my car, and I had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?"

Once more, they all answered, "No way!"

"Well," he continued, thinking, "These kindergarten kids are a lot more theologically sophisticated than I gave them credit for." "Then how can I get into heaven?" he asked.

From the back of the room, a boy shouted out, "YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!"

Kids tell it like it is, don't they? Their lack of any inhibition allows them to shout out the obvious. You gotta be dead. It's our unavoidable fate. We have to die to go to heaven, and nobody that I've met is too excited about making the trip. Everyone seems to have at least some level of anxiety and a question or two about dying and heaven.

Our fears about dying are like thieves in the night. They rob us of so much that we could gain from the experience. The anxiety we feel keeps us from anticipating the joys of the life to come. It takes away from our being able to help people at a time when they need us most, and it makes our own death a dark and ominous event that's always out there looming over our shoulders, ready to strike at anytime.

Serving as a chaplain and now as a pastor here at Westminster, I've honestly lost track of the number of children and adults I've been with as they died. I know that in being with someone when they die I am seeing amazing grace up close, peering into the depths of God's love for us. I learn something each time. Each experience is similar and yet unique.

I've learned that death is not a waste of life but an important part of living. It's more an act of fulfillment than it is an ending. I've found that it's in the powerless act of dying that we grow into our

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identity as beloved children of God. Death is a journey home and into the presence of God. But I think the most important thing I'm learning about dying is to trust God. God loves us and provides for all that we need in life and in death.

The fear of death can be paralyzing. I have a vivid picture of that fear in my mind from my very first day as a chaplain at Children's Hospital. I had just completed the hospital's all day training program and I was talking with the senior chaplain, Richard Freeman, when his beeper went off and he was called up to an ICU unit where a baby boy was dying. He looked at me and asked me if I was ready, and I said, "Okay, let's go."

As we came to the room the hospital had set aside for the family's privacy, we were met with a sight I'll never forget. I looked into the room, which was empty of all furniture except for two chairs at one end where the young mother and father sat holding their infant son. I remember thinking that the mother didn't look much older than my own daughters. But the oddest thing was that the walls of the room were literally lined with people of all different ages, who seemed to be pressed against them by some centrifugal force. There was so much pain in their faces, some were sobbing, and the few who were speaking were whispering with their faces tilted close together. I later learned that one of the frozen figures on the wall was actually the family's pastor.

Richard went into the room ahead of me, and it was quite a sight to see his giant six-foot frame bend down to kneel in front of the couple. I followed behind him, and as I crossed over the doorstep, I felt the unmistakable, tangible presence of God. It was undeniable. It had density, and up until that time, it was the most powerful experience of holiness I had ever felt. I've felt that holiness many times since then.

God is present when we die. I came in and just stood there in the center of the room facing the family, thinking to myself, "What in heaven's name are you all doing?" The boy's grandmother was the first to come over to me, and I opened my arms to hold her. Then one by one the rest of the family peeled themselves off the wall and we hugged and cried together in one big mass of hurting humanity there in the center of that room.

We need to be there for each other, especially in our dying, but our fears prevent us from doing that. They keep us frozen against a wall for fear of saying the wrong thing, speaking too loudly, or showing our weakness in a flood of uncontrollable tears.

So many people are uncomfortable talking about dying. We don't even say the word. Instead we say somebody passed away or we *lost* a loved one.

Even when we know that someone is near death, the subject is the elephant in the room. We all know it's there, but no one has the courage to bring up. And so many times the patient wants to talk about it. People desperately need to talk about what's happening to them, but they have no one who is ready or able to listen. There's no one who will hear their questions and assure them that God is near, that they will be okay.

To stand by a person who is dying is to participate in an immense struggle of faith. It's a struggle no person should face alone. People whose life here is ending need to hear that all we profess we really believe, that all we say each Sunday in church is true. They want to know they can trust those words. They need to hear them again from someone who truly believes them.

"If it were not so," Jesus said, "would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come and take you to myself so that where I am you may be

also.” That’s a powerful message, a powerful promise from our Lord and Savior.

Talking about dying and making plans for it together ahead of time would benefit everyone, but most of us don’t do it. We count on our own deaths being a long way down the road. We make better plans for what will happen to our china and our antique cars when we die than we do for ourselves.

We’re afraid of encountering death. We don’t want to be around it. We don’t want to see it or touch it or hear it. You’d think by our behavior that death is contagious. As a society, we’ve moved death out of our homes, where people used to die in familiar settings surrounded by family and friends in their own beds. Lots of people now die in hospitals and nursing homes instead. Our children are shielded from death. The dying are kept from passing on priceless lessons about a journey that all of us will take one day. Thankfully, hospice care is gaining ground and making progress in reversing that trend.

Dying people need to be around the people they love. We all want someone to hold our hand, someone to touch us and speak gently to us, someone to pray with us as we leave this world and travel into the next. But so often people are afraid to touch the dying and afraid of saying the wrong things, so they stand back against a wall, frozen in their insecurities, and they say nothing.

If we could learn to look at death in a different way, if we could overcome some of our fears, we would die better and we would become better at helping others die.

I know I can’t possibly cover all the fears people have on this subject, so I’ve picked out some of the ones I’ve heard the most, with hopes that this will be just a start of conversations to come.

It’s probably safe to say that everyone has at least thought about the way they will die. Some of us will die suddenly, but for most of us, it will be a slower decline from either a stroke or another illness, or maybe just our bodies finally wearing out. One by one, we’ll have to give up the things that we used to be able to do ourselves. Each of us has a choice to make as we lose our independence. We can be bitter and resentful and make everyone else around us completely miserable, or we can become living examples of the pure grace of God.

As we let go of our pride and allow others to care for us, we also open ourselves up more to God and become more dependent on him. Our dependence on others gives us the chance to live the end of our lives with humility, with faith, with dignity and grace.

We come into this life completely dependent on others to care for us and most of us will leave this life the same way, in a kind of second childhood. Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children again you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” Our lives come to fulfillment in our dependence on other people, and more importantly, in our total dependence on God.

The unknown is a scary concept for us. We feel much better about things the second time around, don’t we? Our confidence grows because we know we made it through okay the first time and we can trust that whatever got us through once before will kick in and get us through again. And while it’s true that we’ve never died before, we’ve made a journey that’s similar in many ways to dying when we were born.

We had to leave a place where living conditions were cramped, but we’d come to feel pretty comfortable and safe in our mother’s womb. It’s always frightening to leave behind the familiar for the unknown, even if we know the next place is better. Being born into this world had to have been an experience that challenged us in every way, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It had to have been hard. Yet despite the challenge, none of us even remembers it now, and all of us made it

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through okay.

God has put things into place to bring us safely from this world into the next too. Many times I've been with people who begin seeing and having conversations with people who have died, starting up to a few weeks before their own death. A sister, father, or a dear friend will show up to help them go home. Jesus said when the time comes he will come and bring us to himself. We can trust that we won't be alone in our journey, and that when we die we will go immediately into the presence of God.

We will be okay. But what about the people we leave behind? People have told me this is what they worry about the most before they die. Who will take care of my family?

The fact is that for the most part, life will go on exactly as it has been when we are gone. The day we die, the morning paper will still be printed, rush hour will still be rushed, and moms will still be wondering what they're going to fix for dinner that night. Life will go on.

And our loved ones will rest securely in the hands of God, right where they have always been. God will continue to care for them and provide all that they need, just as he has always done. God's plans for their lives and all of his creation will continue to move forward long after we are dead.

Our Old Testament story today is such a beautiful testimony to that. Moses had been the one in charge throughout the entire journey of the Israelites from Egypt into the wilderness. Every need they had was provided for by God through Moses up until this point. Moses was a single parent to the infant nation of Israel. But Moses made God angry on the trip by claiming glory for himself instead of giving the credit to God in making water come from a rock. God told Moses that because of this, he would never get to see the Promised Land. So after this journey that covered decades, just before they got to their final destination, Moses died and Joshua was left with this huge responsibility. Can you imagine that? Who would want to fill those shoes?

Just like us, Moses must have been worried about how his people would get along when he was gone. He must have been up nights pacing the floor, worrying about how Joshua was going to carry on with out him. But God reassures Joshua by telling him that even though Moses is dead, the plan is still on and that God will continue to provide and protect them. God tells Joshua not to be afraid of anything, that no one will be able to stand before him all the days of his life, that everything he promised to Moses is still going to happen. The people of Israel will inherit the land God promised to give their fathers. God tells Joshua, "Be strong and courageous. As I was with Moses, so will I be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. The Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

God will not abandon the people we love when we are gone. They will be okay, and God will never abandon us either. When we're suffering, when it looks like we might not get the miracle we pray for, it's hard to believe that. It's hard to trust that God is still with us. More than any other time we pray in our lives, this prayer for healing is the one we want to be answered our way and no other. And when it isn't, we think God didn't hear us, that he's left us to suffer on our own. We don't want to die before we're ready to go.

Of course, we all want to live long lives. We have dreams of seeing our kids graduate, walking our daughters down the aisle, spoiling our grandchildren. But did God promise all that? Really? None of us is born with a guarantee of how long we'll live. No one knows exactly how long we have and which of life's milestones we'll make it to. The attendance at class reunions always goes down instead of up.

God doesn't promise longevity, but what he does promise is that he will always be with us, that he will never abandon us. And he says that throughout the Bible, in just about as many ways as anyone could possibly say it. From Genesis to Revelation God tells us, "Do not be afraid. I am with you until the end of the age."

God also promises that there is something beyond all of this. The suffering, pain, and injustice of this world don't have the final say. There's a place of perfection, a place Jesus tells us that he went to prepare for us. A place where there is no more sorrow or pain, suffering or death. Heaven is a place of glory, Paul says, far beyond anything we could ever imagine.

And precisely because it *is* beyond our imagination, lots of people have anxieties and questions about heaven as well.

A lot of people tell me they're afraid they aren't good enough, that they haven't done enough to get into heaven. That's a simple fear to address. You're absolutely right: we aren't good enough, we haven't done enough. Thank heavens for Jesus!

Next, I've been asked about the people we love and the relationships we cherish here on earth: will those continue in heaven? I mentioned earlier the experiences I've seen of loved ones returning to help people through their death. That's proof to me that we will be reunited with our families.

But also, *relationships* are the whole point of life. First, God is relational by his very nature, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And if the two most important commandments in this life are to love God and to love one another, it seems to me that God is telling us these relationships are the things that will last forever.

Pet lovers, old and young, seem to be afraid they won't see their pets again because animals don't have souls. God had Noah go to the trouble of bringing every species on the ark two by two. If animals were that important to the world back then, they must have a part to play in heaven too.

We want all of the things we love here to be a part of heaven, and because the Bible doesn't give a whole lot of details about what to expect, we worry.

There were two men who had been best friends for years. They both had lived to their early 90's in good health until one of them became deathly ill. His friend came to visit him on his deathbed, and they spent time reminiscing about their long friendship and the good old days, all the years they had spent together playing and enjoying the game of baseball.

The dying man's friend asks, "Listen, when you die do me a favor. I want to know if there is baseball in heaven." The dying man says, "We've been friends forever. If it's possible, I will do this for you." Then shortly after the visit, he dies. A couple of days later the surviving friend is sleeping when he suddenly hears his dear friend's voice from beyond. "I have some good news and some bad news," the voice says. "The good news is, there *is* baseball in heaven." "That's great!" he says. "What's the bad news?" "You're pitching next Wednesday."

On the Wednesday we find ourselves pitching in heaven, I think heaven will be so wonderful, so amazing, that we'll be angry we didn't get there sooner.

Look around you now and imagine all that is good in this life, perfected. Everything God created, without the tarnish and decay of sin. Maybe that means the rain that makes a rainbow never floods a town, or bees make honey but no longer have stingers. I'm not quite sure. God hasn't told us much. We can only imagine. But I do know that we can trust him. He's the one who made everything we

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love in this world. Then he made us with the abilities to enjoy and experience it all. Could there be a better architect designing heaven than God?

Finally, what is it that we leave behind? When we're in heaven, what have we left in this world for the generations to come?

When Jesus knew he was dying, he said a strange thing to his disciples. "It is good if I go away, because if I do, I will send you the Spirit and it will be a spirit of truth." When we are gone it isn't really the things we've done that we're remembered for; it's who we are; it's the spirit we've lived in that goes on.

If the Spirit of Christ guides our lives; if the Spirit whose fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is the spirit we chose to live by, then that Spirit won't die, but will continue on from generation to generation. And the legacy we leave behind will be one of love. Our lives will be a testimony that love can conquer suffering, love can conquer adversity, and most importantly, love can conquer death.