

LIFE After Death

Today we celebrate Life After Death Sunday. This First Pres tradition, which has run for more than four decades, follows Easter and reminds us that because of Christ's resurrection, death is not the end. Jesus conquered the grave, and His victory over death extends to us when we place our faith in Him. It is also a time when we pause to reflect, honor and remember those members who've gone home to be with the Lord since last Easter.

GOOD NEWS THAT TOPS BAD NEWS • Job 14:7-12; 19:25-27 • John Goodale • April 23, 2017

The story is told of two church elders, Bob and Earl, who shared a love for baseball. They enjoyed attending games together, talked about baseball year round, and even nurtured a hope that there might be baseball in heaven. Bob eventually died, but one night appeared to Earl in a dream. After exchanging greetings, Earl begged Bob to tell him if there was baseball in heaven.

Bob responded, "Earl, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that there is indeed baseball in heaven, and it's even better than we experienced on earth—for everything is better in the presence of the Lord." Bob then continued, "But Earl, the bad news is that you're the starting pitcher tomorrow night!"

Today, I have good news and bad news. Let's get the bad news out of the way first, so we can dwell longer on the good news. The bad news: this life will come to an end for every one of us. Now, that's a hard way to begin a sermon! We don't like to think about our mortality, and we'd certainly rather not talk about it. But unless we stare this fact square in the face, we can't fully appreciate what Christ has done for us.

Job acknowledges the reality of death in chapter 14. If you're not familiar with this Old Testament book, Job suffered tremendous loss, then sought to make sense of what had happened. Earlier in the book, he'd wished for death that might have spared him this pain; now Job is contemplating its finality. He notes that even when a tree is cut down, its stump dead in the soil, life could emerge again: **"At the scent of water, it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant."** (14:9) Job goes on to observe that we lack that hope: **"we breathe our last and are no more."** (14:10) He compares us with a lake or stream that dries up during a drought; when death takes us, we're gone from this world.

Year ago, there was a movie called, *Forrest Gump*, starring Tom Hanks. At one point, Hanks reflected, "Life is like box of chocolates." I'd like to suggest that life is really like a bag of

chocolates! At the outset, it can seem like candy in a large bag is limitless; we enjoy it, with little thought of it running out. Only when we near the bottom, with just a few left, do we perhaps become more aware that there's a finite number in the bag. And those remaining may become a bit more precious to us because of that. Similarly, we tend to go through life with the mindset that we have a limitless number of days before us. We know that's not true, but this allows us to enjoy our current experiences, without having to think of an end to them.

Job reminds us of bad news that none of us can avoid: our days on earth are numbered. And unlike a bag of chocolates, many of us won't know when we're down to our last few. There will come a moment when we take our last breath. All that we've enjoyed will come to an end. And our loved ones will be left with tears and sadness. That is bad news—but fortunately, as followers of Christ, we also have wonderfully good news that tops it! Once again, Job points us toward it, in a remarkable expression of faith.

Much of this book consists of a back and forth dialogue between Job and his friends. In a follow up speech to chapter 14, Job dares to look beyond death with his words in 19:25-27. Job is so far before Christ's resurrection, it doesn't seem likely that he's professing a hope he'll live again. But he does envision a moment, beyond death, when God would intercede on his behalf. You see, Job's "friends" were insistent that his suffering was caused by sin in Job's life, and was God's punishment for it. Job didn't believe that was the case, and this was affirmed by God later in this book. Here Job expresses hope that even on the other side of death, God would vindicate Job and restore honor to his name.

The word used here for redeemer is "go-el"; it was descriptive of a relative who intervened when a family member was in trouble. For example, if an Israelite had to sell himself into slavery to pay his debts, a family member redeeming him from slavery would be his "go-el." Interestingly, this word was also one of

Israel's references for God in the Old Testament. It was rooted in their deliverance from Egypt, and a concept used multiple times by the prophet Isaiah.

Job had a strong hope that God would intervene on his behalf, even beyond death. We have an even greater hope today, on this side of Christ's resurrection. For Jesus is our "go-el," or redeemer. He's intervened to conquer death and save us from its finality. Because of what He's done, there will come a day when our sadness caused by death will be dwarfed by the joy of new life.

This Sunday is an important reminder of good news for all who have a personal relationship with God, and who claim Christ's saving work on the cross for our sins. Death will not have the last word. This is not the last we've seen of our loved ones who've gone home to be with Jesus. They're experiencing life more fully than they ever could on earth--and we will one day, as well. Yes, there's much in this world that's good and enjoyable, so it's natural to want to hold onto it as long as we can. But can we believe that the life awaiting us beyond death is even better than we're currently experiencing?

Two weeks ago, my wife Deborah and I were planning to take our first train trip, from Denver to Glenwood Springs, then back again the next day. Unfortunately, the day before our trip, Deborah became very ill, and it was obvious she couldn't go. The train and accommodations were already paid for, so we decided it was better for one of us to go than for both of us to miss out on the experience. So, I went. I saw much beauty, and there were enjoyable moments—but I was very aware that I wasn't sharing them with my wife. Again and again, I found myself thinking over those two days, "It wasn't supposed to be this way."

God has placed much beauty in this world, and given us many experiences to enjoy and delight in. So it becomes easy for us to forget: life here on earth also wasn't supposed to be this way. God's original designs for His creation have been marred in so many ways by the sin and fallenness

of this world. We experience loss, pain, conflict, cancer, uncertainty, regrets and eventually death. If we perceive this life is the best we'll experience, we're settling for far less than we need to.

Christian author, Bob Benson, died of cancer at the age of 55. Before he did, he wrote the following: "I used to think, loving life so greatly, that to die would be like leaving the party before the end. But now I know that the party is really happening somewhere else." The bad news is that this life won't last forever; the good news is that it can't compare to what God still has in store for us.

In recent weeks, we've been blessed by artwork that helped us better understand the parable of the prodigal. However, not even the most brilliant artist can capture the beauty and glory of life after death that awaits. The Apostle John tried to do this in the book of Revelation—but it's hard to grasp, because even words couldn't capture what he saw. With this in mind, let me humbly attempt two brief thoughts of what we can look forward to one day.

First, relationships will be richer than we've ever experienced. They have to be! Think how often our love for others is hindered here on earth by busyness or distractions. They'll be gone—as will insecurities, misunderstandings, conflict, and the self-focused nature of sin. We'll give and receive love in its purest, deepest form. Second, our joy will be greater than we've ever experienced. Again, every factor in this world that stifles joy will be absent; even better, we'll be with the author of joy. The psalmist wrote, **"You will fill me with joy in your presence."** (Ps. 16:11) That will be our experience. The joy we experience in this life will be exponentially multiplied when we're with our Lord.

Deborah and I recently moved, and now live next to Ute Valley Park. One of my greatest joys each week is walking its trails. When I begin on the west side of the park, I have to walk up a steep road to reach the park. In the morning, it's still shaded from the sun, but there's plenty of daylight to see the detail around me. And there's

beauty to enjoy on the way up. Once I reach the top, though, and am in the warmth of the sun, I can see so much more clearly in the sunlight. And I can see beauty of the park that extends so much further.

I think of this as an image of our transition from this life to the next. There will be a day when each of us who love God and are loved by Him will make this journey. We'll pass from this world, where we've assumed we've seen as clearly and experienced as deeply as we possibly can, into a more beautiful and glorious reality than we can yet imagine.

Until that day comes, let me encourage us to do three things. First, if you haven't asked God to be your redeemer, to save you from the devastating consequences of sin and death, don't leave today without talking with someone. It may feel tempting to put this off—but as we've noted, none of us knows how many days remain. Second, treasure each day as precious, remembering that we do have a finite number of them. Each day is a new gift from God—so let's value and use them well. Finally, cultivate a yearning for the glorious life God still has for us, for the best that's yet to come. As we do so, may the words of Job become our own: **"After my skin has been destroyed . . . I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes. . . . How my heart yearns within me!"** (19:26-27)

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STUDY GUIDE

"Good News That Tops Bad News" Job 14:7-12; 19:25-27

Start It

- If you were to fill in the blank, "Life after death will be _____", what are some of the words you'd use? What would you say prompts those words, or has formed your perspective of what life after death will be like? Is this something you get excited about, or do you tend to feel neutral at best about it? Why do you think this is?

Study It

- Read Job 14:7-12. What do Job's descriptions tell you about the nature of death? How does understanding this impact how we might view the days we have until that moment?
- Read Job 19:25. The word for redeemer here is "go-el", which is descriptive of a relative who would intervene when a family member was in trouble—and was also one of the ways Israel referred to God. In what ways has God been a "go-el" for you during your lifetime—and how is He today?
- Read Job 19:26-27. Job is expressing a yearning for what God would do on his behalf, even on the other side of death. To what degree would you say your anticipation of life after death is somewhat like a consolation prize thrown in with death, vs. something you're truly yearning for?
- Think of loved ones whom you've lost to death. How does God's promise of life after death bring you comfort, with regards to them?
- How hesitant or open are you to thinking about the fact that your own days here on earth are numbered? How can our church's annual life after death focus the week after Easter enhance your awareness of this?

Pray It

Lord Jesus, thank you for conquering death, so that it no longer has the last word. Help me not shrink from the thought of death, but allow it to heighten my appreciation of what You've done for me and saved me from. Enable me to treasure as a precious gift each day that You give me here on earth—and fill my heart with greater yearning for the moment when I'll be fully in Your presence! In Your powerful and precious Name, Amen.

Live It

Seek to better understand God's promises of life after death, perhaps by reading (or re-reading) the New Testament book of Revelation.