

After Life Sermon Series

What Happens When We Die? – I Cor. 15:35-44

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Twenty-one grams. That's how much your soul weighs, about the same as a double-A battery. That was the finding of Dr. Duncan McDougall, who in 1907 conducted an experiment to determine the weight of the human soul leaving the body when it dies. Dr. McDougall placed six terminally ill patients on a sensitive, specially constructed bed scale. At the moment of their death, Dr. McDougall measured the change in weight right before and after their last breath. The difference? Twenty-one grams.

Only one of the six patients actually exhibited this change; the other five were inconclusive. And Dr. McDougall's experiment has been widely discredited down through the years as pseudo-science. Incidentally, Dr. McDougall did the same experiment for 15 dogs, all of which showed no change, which led him to conclude that dogs don't have a soul. And that right there is why I discredit Dr. McDougall. Someone get that man a puppy!

While the experiment was invalid, the concept of the soul weighing 21 grams has persisted in popular culture, including being used as the name of a 2003 film about grief and loss starring Sean Penn and Naomi Watts. Even though there's no scientific way to prove what happens when we die, that doesn't stop us persistent humans from wondering, speculating, making movies and TV shows about the subject. Everything from the movie "What Dreams May Come" to the TV show "The Good Place" has explored theories of what happens after we take our last breath.

In this sermon series, we've taken up the fool's errand of exploring what happens after we die. We talked about Heaven and recognized that our earthly conceptions of pearly gates and angels sitting on clouds are no match for the images of Heaven given to us in the Bible. We concluded that, ultimately, going to Heaven feels like going home. Then, we took the elevator all the way down to the basement and talked about Hell, a PG-13 sermon in which I said that word 39 times. Scouts, I'm glad you weren't here for that one. We concluded that there are a lot of ways to conceptualize the Bad Place, but rather than it being an actual place, it's more like a way of existing for people who willingly choose to be separated from God.

For today's question, I'm working off the assumption that, if we have professed our belief in Christ, we are going to Heaven. Today, I'm going to answer the question, "What happens when we die?" I have a short answer and a long answer, and because I'm a preacher, you're going to get both. The short answer: I don't know. The long answer: I don't know, but I'm going to use a lot of words to say that. Ultimately, we have to own our uncertainty and exhibit the humility required in tackling such a question. No one knows. I've never received an email from Heaven.org or gotten a text message from a deceased person that had a selfie with an angel. As hard as it can be for us humans to acknowledge there are things we can't know – even with the help of science – this is one place where knowing stops and faith takes over. If we are trying to answer this question through the lens of faith, well, there are some things we can know.

We're not the only ones asking these kinds of questions. The folks at First Christian Church in Corinth were also trying to make sense of what happens after we die. They were being told by some false teachers that the concept of a bodily resurrection was ridiculous. There was a way of believing back then called Gnosticism. Gnostics believed that the flesh was bad and the spirit was good, so when you die, you escape your fleshly existence and become a pure, eternal,

disembodied spirit. They believed in the immortality of the soul but not the resurrection of the body.

Sounds good, right? But there's one problem for these early Christians. Jesus. You see, Jesus was resurrected, but he wasn't just a spirit. He was a body, a body you could touch and hug and eat breakfast with. Easter wasn't just about an immortal soul going to Heaven, it was also about a dead body being brought back to life. So, the idea that there was no bodily resurrection flew in the face of what people had experienced with the resurrected Jesus.

Paul's justification to the Corinthians for a bodily resurrection is brilliant. He says that anything that dies is raised to new life by the grace and power of God. "If there is a natural body, then there is a spiritual body." I like the way the Bible translation The Message handles these verses. Part of it says, "You plant a 'dead' seed; soon there is a flourishing plant. There is no visual likeness between seed and plant. You could never guess what a tomato would look like by looking at a tomato seed. What we plant in the soil and what grows out of it don't look anything alike. The dead body that we bury in the ground and the resurrection body that comes from it will be dramatically different."

Newsflash: our earthly bodies have expiration dates. Despite modern research to extend our lives, we're all gonna die. Realize that even the people raised from the dead by Jesus still eventually died. No one goes to the Kroger and sees Lazarus walking around the produce section. "He looks good for his age!" No, he died, just as everyone dies. Our earthly bodies are not meant to live forever.

But our spiritual bodies...now that's a different story. Paul promises us that when we are resurrected, we will receive a spiritual body that is meant to last forever. He writes, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable;⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

If what Paul says is true, do you know what that means? It means when we go home, we will be made perfect. Our imperfect earthly bodies will be transformed so they are like Christ's glorious body. Do you know what that means? Adios, Alka Seltzer. Take a hike, Tylenol. So long, Zoloft. Later, Lipitor. We can even bid good riddance to Rogaine! Often, when I preach at funerals, I encourage people to imagine the dead person at their happiest, healthiest, most joyful, most alive. When we stand before God, that's what we'll be like, the perfect version of our earthly selves.

So, one of the things that I believe happens when we die is healing. Alzheimer's won't have the last word. Cancer won't have the last word. Heart disease and birth defects and brain tumors won't have the last word. God will have the last word. As Revelation promises, "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." What the Bible promises is that we need not fear death, because it is not the end of our lives, only the end of everything that has made life hard to live.

But will we still be ourselves? Probably one of the most frequently asked questions I get on this topic is, "Will I recognize my loved ones?" You could draw the conclusion from Paul's words that our spiritual bodies will be different enough from our earthly bodies to render us unrecognizable. I mean, who looks at a tomato seed and sees a tomato? And if we're standing in God's presence, will it matter to us if we know the other people around us?

I don't know if it will matter then, but it matters now. I'm counting on the fact that when I get to Heaven, I'll see Dad and Nana and PawPaw and Grandma Frankie and Poppy and Meemaw Bonnie. And that they'll see me. And I truly believe that will happen. Why? Jesus. You

see, when Jesus was resurrected, he was also recognized. Not right away, mind you. Mary thought he was the gardener...until he spoke her name. I'm expecting that when I get to Heaven and Jesus says, "Welcome, Kory," my loved ones will go "Kory! It's you! You're here!" And my dogs, who absolutely have souls and will most definitely be there, will say, "Arf! Arf!" which means, "We had our doubts, but we're glad you made it!"

When I went to my 20th high school reunion in Virginia one or two or 18 years ago, we were given nametags to wear that featured our senior picture, and I was amazed at how different most people looked, including me. I didn't know if anyone would remember me. But person after person I talked with said, "Kory! You're the guy who loved UK basketball!" While they may not have recognized me physically, they recognized my soul. That's how I think we'll recognize each other in Heaven.

The other reason I believe we will know each other in Heaven is that God created us to be in relationship with each other, and I don't believe that ends when we die. The bonds we make with each other are soul-level bonds and the end of our earthly bodies doesn't mean the end of our earthly connections. I'm looking forward to being with you in Heaven.

We can't fully and definitely answer today's question, even though so many people have tried, from zombie movies to books about near-death experiences. But I think one of the best attempts comes through the spiritual language of music. In 1999, the band MercyMe released a song that became a huge crossover hit and capturing both the ecstasy and mystery of what awaits us on the other side. They sing: "I can only imagine what it will be like when I walk by your side. I can only imagine what my eyes will see when your face is before me. I can only imagine. Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance before you, Jesus, or in awe of you be still? Will I stand in your presence, or to my knees will I fall? Will I sing Hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all? I can only imagine."

What happens when we die? I don't know. But I know what the Bible says. A resurrected, perfect body. A reunion with loved ones. Standing face-to-face with my Creator. Do I know that for sure? No. But I have faith in my God and God's promises to me. What happens when we die? I don't know, but I can only imagine.