

IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE. . .

The Thing I've Always Wanted

Small Group Questions

Introduction: Share one thing you've always wanted to accomplish or accumulate in this life that hasn't yet been experienced.

- 1. Read Ecclesiastes 3:11. How does the world demonstrate the innate awareness of eternity? How does the world attempt to avoid this reality?**
- 2. Do you believe that the church today puts the right amount of focus on heaven? Why or why not?**
- 3. Of the three things mentioned that creates a longing for heaven which one do you most identify with?**
- 4. What are your thoughts, questions, concerns about the near death experiences that have been published in our world today?**
- 5. What do you believe to be Paul's motivation to break his silence after fourteen years about his experience recorded in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 Read the context of this passage (vs. 1-10). What can we learn about the reason behind Paul's story and why he told it when he did?**
- 6. Heaven offers joy, strength, focus and victory. Which of these mean most to you? Why?**

Eccles. 3:11 (NLT)

He has planted eternity in the human heart.

There are over ten thousand religions in the world and almost all of them believe in some sort of afterlife. There's something in man that longs for immortality. We just know there's something more out there, beyond what we know now, beyond what we're living at the moment. It's something innate within the nature of man. As the structure of a fish implies water and the structure of a bird implies air, the structure of a man implies immortality. God has planted that thought, that longing into the heart of a man. It's intuitive and instinctive.

Hebrews 11:16 (NIV)

They were longing for a better country--a heavenly one.

This verse is found in the context of Abraham's story. God called Abraham out of his homeland to go to a place that God would show him. And even while Abraham inhabited the land of God's promise, Hebrews tells us he was looking for a better country. It just echoes what Paul said in 2 Corinthians, that as long as we are alive on earth, we're not really home.

We Long for Heaven Because Life on Earth is . . .

There is a better country out there and God has set it in the heart of every human being to long for that home. So, what's driving that hunger for more?

1. Unjust

How many times in your life have you said, 'that's that not fair?' We learned very early in life that there is a code of ethics by which the world ought to operate but doesn't. The bad guys get off scot free and the good guys get hammered. We believe that a man should reap what he sows. But too many times, the wicked succeed and the righteous suffer. That's just the way this world operates. So, we have a longing for justice.

2. Unfinished

You've just been given a terminal diagnosis and the reality of not being able to do the things you've always wanted to do creates all kinds of regret and disappointment. How many of you have a bucket list? There's always more list than life. That's just the way it is. And it creates a good deal of regret. Not saying the things you wanted to say but now there's no opportunity to say it. Reconciling a relationship, sharing the gospel, making adequate preparations for those left behind. Unfinished business, unfinished goals and dreams leave people frustrated with life.

3. Unsatisfying

There are many pleasures in our lifetime but they are temporary and deceptive. A couple of years ago Tom Brady, from the New England Patriots was interviewed on 60 minutes and said this: Why do I have three super bowl rings and still think there is something greater out there for me? He is speaking the language of every human being. There is nothing we accomplish or accumulate that ultimately satisfies.

And it leaves us wanting more. I don't know that we can completely grasp this because we've never experienced it on earth, but here's the deal: heaven will not be longing. Heaven will be fulfillment. There is nothing in heaven to create a dissatisfied, disappointed, unhappy experience. There's not a single thing on earth that's a true 10. And there's not a singly thing in heaven that falls short of a true 10. Everything's a 10 in heaven. That's hard to understand because this is the only home we know. But here's the point I'm making: every time you want something better, whenever you long for something more, for life to go right, for life to be right, for life to give you what you ultimately want, friends you're longing for heaven. You long for heaven far more frequently than you realize. And you can't turn that off, you can only tune it out. There's a whole host of earthly residents that have, for whatever reason, religious or philosophical, they've reasoned it doesn't exist and can't exist and so they've just tuned it out. They've rationalized away their longing. They have no reason to believe there's anything more than what they have and that's sad. I want us to take a look at one of the experiences Paul shares in his second letter to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

²I know a man^(A) in Christ who fourteen years ago was^(B) caught up to^(C) the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know,^(D) God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into^(E) paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know,^(E) God knows— ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

1. Paul is referring to himself in third person. The context supports it. Most Biblical scholars believe Paul is talking about himself. His humility kept him from boasting about this experience.
2. It took him fourteen years to talk about it. This was the first time he's told this story and it's fourteen years old.
3. He can't even tell the whole story because 1) he doesn't really understand it himself, and 2) he says, what I did experience I am either unable to express or not permitted to express.
4. Let's go back to the fourteen year issue. Some scholars put this event during the time that Paul was off in the desert, right after his conversion. It's understood that God revealed many things to Paul during his exile period. Some place this event right before Paul was commissioned in Acts 13 to be a missionary to Asia minor, right before he started his missionary journeys. And then, some people place this event happening in Lystra during his first missionary journey.

This happened in Lystra.

Acts 14:19-20 (NIV)

They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. [20] But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

Sometimes you think a person is dead and they're not really dead. My friend's brother was pronounced dead three times and the medics got it wrong all three times. Was Paul not really dead? Was he dead and then came back to life? Thirteen million Americans claim to have had, at one time, an experience that allowed them to have an in-between life and death experience. Did Paul have one of those experiences? What does the Bible say about such experiences? Interestingly enough, it doesn't say much. The Biblical definition of death is the body without the spirit. (James 2; Ecclesiastes 12; Psalm 146) The daughter of Jarius died. She came back to life when her spirit returned to her, that's the wording in Luke 6. Today we think of people dying when they stop breathing and their heart stops beating. But think about it – we have technology today that can keep your heart beating for you, we have machines that breathe for you. So, can you be clinically dead but not biologically dead? And which death is the real death? That's a little rabbit trail for you to think about and since I'm not smart to answer it we'll move on. Here's what's interesting about the Biblical material concerning this issue. In the Old Testament, Elijah raised the son of the widow of Zarephath. (1 Kings 17) Elisha raised the son of the Shunammite (2 Kings 4) In 2 Kings 13 there's a really odd story of man coming back to life after being dropped on the bones of Elisha. In the New Testament Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, the son of a woman at Nain and one of his best friends, Lazarus. In the book of Acts Peter raised Dorcas from the dead and Paul raised Eutychus, the kid who fell asleep during church in Acts 20. Read everyone of those stories – not one, not a single account in the Bible of someone dying and coming back do you read about their experience while dead. Lazarus was dead for four days, not a word about the in-between. You've heard the phrase "dead men tell no lies." Evidently formerly dead men don't talk too much either. So what are we to make of all these people today telling all kinds of out of this world stories? In Acts 7 we read about Stephen, he's being stoned to death and he has a vision of Christ sitting at the right hand of God. Hebrews 2:14 tells us that Satan has the power over death and so what happens in the in between may have Satanic influence. Christians are protected from the power of Satan but, of course, we're not exempt from death. So, while it might not be wise to simply disregard anyone's experience. It would be extremely wise to weigh those stories in light of Scripture. There's a lot of stories out there, I mentioned, "90 Minutes in Heaven" last week. I can't deny anyone's experience. But what I can do is evaluate those stories with truth. Don't take anyone's story as authoritative about anything beyond what we know to be true from the Bible. If they're story doesn't line up with scripture, then go with the Bible. This is what I believe to be the most important take away from Paul's experience. He's like all the rest, he had the experience. But he kept it to himself for 14 years. And even after he broke his silence he didn't really tell us anything. So, why did God allow Paul this experience anyway? I'm not sure except, think about this. Keep this experience in mind and you read some of the things Paul wrote. When he said, to live is Christ but to die is gain, I'm torn between the

two. How much of his experience influenced that statement? Think about all the suffering Paul had to endure this side of heaven. Do you think God allowed him a glimpse of eternity to galvanize him for all he had to go through to preach the message of eternity? When he told us in Romans 8 that our suffering isn't worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed; was he talking out of his intellect or his first hand experience of that glory? He wrote in Romans 5: and this hope does not disappoint, "I know, I've seen it, I've been there, you will not be disappointed."

Hope of Heaven Offers. . .

Maybe that's what God wants us to get from a story Paul could never tell. Paul preached a message of hope.

1. Joy

Revelation tells us heaven is going to be void of sorrow, mourning, crying and pain.

Isaiah 65:17-19 (NKJV)

¹⁷ " **For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.**

¹⁸ **But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;**

For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing,

And her people a joy.

¹⁹ **I will rejoice in Jerusalem,**

And joy in My people;

The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her,

Nor the voice of crying.

As I said earlier, heaven will be characterized by fulfillment, not by hunger; no frustration, no disappointment, no regret. Eternal satisfaction. Heaven is synonymous with happiness.

2. Strength

Heaven is our consolation in grief, our encouragement in trouble, our satisfaction in disappointment and our purpose in suffering.

Hebrews 6:19 (NIV)

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Someone once said; the worst thing that can happen to a man may be the best thing that can happen to a man, if he does not let the worst get the best of him. That's why we walk out of a funeral crying but not distraught. We grieve, but not without hope.

3. Focus

Like Israel making their way to the promise land, Christ followers keep their eyes on the prize.

Philip. 3:14 (NASB)

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus told us to store up treasure in heaven. Make earthly investments that will generate returns forever. C.S. Lewis said that those who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. Heaven puts things in priority. So, where's your focus?

4. **Victory**

John's record of the end times and the culmination of a reunion in heaven starts with a message of triumph.

Revelation

2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.^(B)
To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of^(C) the tree of life, which is in^(D) the paradise of God.'

2:11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.^(B)
The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

2:26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works^(B) until the end,^(C) to him I will give authority over the nations,

3:5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never^(B) blot his name out of^(C) the book of life.^(D)

3:12 The one who conquers, I will make him^(B) a pillar in the temple of my God.

3:21 The one who conquers,^(B) I will grant him to sit with me on my throne,

Romans 8:37 (ESV)

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

It happened to me twice during the NCAA tournament. I recorded the games to watch later. But people had texted the results to me before I could watch it for myself.

Fortunately I didn't answer my phone so I did get to experience the thrill of victory.

But it would have save me a considerable amount of angst if I'd known the outcome ahead of time. Here's the luxury of the Christian life: we've read the end of the story.

We know who wins. Through all the struggles, difficulties and trials, regardless of how bad things get and how perilous things appear to be: we know how the story ends. So,

let me say this as we dive into this series. An understanding of heaven, a Biblical

understanding of heaven is not just a spiritual luxury, something nice to know, friends, it is a spiritual necessity. This world is not your home. What this world has to offer will

never fulfill the deepest longings of your soul. Your best ambitions, your greatest accomplishments and your wildest adventures on this earth pale to what lies ahead.

What this life does to you, what this world will drag you through will never compare to the eternal glory that will one day be revealed in you.

When you begin to learn what God has planned and prepared for you, when you will realize how much He loves you and wants to be with you forever will generate a desire and create an overwhelming hunger to reach that place and experience that reality.

C.S. Lewis, in the last volume of his classic Chronicles of Narnia describes the difference between the old Narnia (earth) and the new Narnia (heaven). He writes: The newer one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there, you will know what I mean. It was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-foot on the ground and neighed and then cried: "I have come home at last. This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Come further up, come further in."

One Question to Ask: Am I Hungry for Home?

Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you."

Earlier in my ministry I always gave LRCA (our Christian camp) a week of my life. I did this for about 15 years. I'd show up Sunday afternoon, unpack my clothes, lay out my sleeping bag on the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch plywood bed, plug in my fan and start counting. I'd wake up the next morning after a full night of 16 10 year old boys who wouldn't go to sleep, couldn't find their underwear and wouldn't stop spraying mosquito repellent in each other's eyes. And I'd count. I made it through one night, four more to go. Tuesday morning, two down, three to go. And on I'd count.

Next Week: Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

Text Your Questions to 219-379-7147

You can get through just about anything if you know there's an end to it. And granted, there's a lot of good to this life, that's why some of us don't think too much about the next life. But whenever you experience frustration, disappointment or despair; keep the realization alive in your spirit that one of these days it will all be over and it will all be better. It will not only change your tomorrow it will change your today.