

“Questions for God: What Happens When We Die?”  
Luke 20:27-38

The question about life after death has haunted humanity for a long time and there have been many attempts at answering this mystery as we truly do not know and cannot prove anything about life after death. I am aware that this is a tough subject for us to tackle. I know that because whenever the topic of death comes up (outside of times of grief or loss), our culture either jokes about it or denies it. There are so many Pearly Gates jokes out there. Here is one of them (screen).



On a more serious note, PBS premiered a show called “Into the Night: Portraits of Life and Death” about dealing with our own death. Here is an overview of it:

<https://youtu.be/BTUgwyifKDI>

Death is a scary topic for many because of its mystery. And for a long time, we have portrayed death as the grim reaper who comes with a sickle to harvest our souls. Yet, death is a part of life that cannot be avoided for us or for our loved ones. Sooner or later we experience death. Not only that, but we do our loved ones a great disservice when we avoid talking about death. In his book, *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande who is a surgeon reflects on life and death in the United States through his many years as a doctor. He discovered through experience and study that dying people often want to talk about their death, but often times, their family members avoid the subject.

A big part of the problem is not truly knowing what happens to us after we die. And faith just gives us the assurance that there is life after death but does not truly tell us what that life will look or be like. Even when faced with a question about describing life after death, Jesus did not give a clear answer, instead he gave his questioners an affirmation of faith.

The Sadducees who came asking Jesus the question about life after death were part of the Jewish faith. They were the dominant religious group in Jesus’ day, making up Israel’s priesthood. All of the high priests in the first century were Sadducees. They

were the ones who were in cahoots with the Roman Empire. So their power was not only religious. It was also political. The Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees and Jesus, were very strict in their reading of the Law of Moses or Torah. In fact, they believed that the Law of Moses/Torah, which was made up of what we know now as the first five books of the Bible, was the only legitimate scripture. They believed if something was not clearly stated in the Torah/the first five books, then it was not worth believing. Therefore, since the first five books of the Bible didn't have any specific teachings about the resurrection or life after death, the Sadducees believed it was not a valid doctrine for their faith. As a result, they did not believe in eternal life. Jesus and the Pharisees on the other hand, believed in and taught about eternal life. They also believed that the first five books of our Bible were not the only valid scriptures to take into account. They saw that books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel were also authoritative. They came up with new teachings that related to their context and the changes in their culture. The Sadducees were threatened by the popularity of Jesus and of the Pharisees. They saw him as a threat to their authority and their teachings.

Against this backdrop we can see how their question about the woman who is married seven times to seven brothers could be a trap for Jesus. Let's listen to the story (read Luke 20:27-38) The practice of marrying your brother's widow was something that was instructed to the people of Israel in the Torah (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This was known as levirate marriage where if one brother dies before having children, the next brother in line marries the widow in order to have children and keep his brother's name alive. So, the question about the resurrection was a trap for Jesus because the official teachings of the temple were against the belief in the resurrection! The Sadducees' question about marriage in eternal life was a challenge to Jesus on two fronts. First, if he denied the validity of levirate marriage in eternal life, then he might as well deny its validity in this life. Second, if he said it was valid in eternal life, then he would have denied their traditional teachings about the resurrection. Jesus responded by affirming eternal life and the resurrection, but he did not fall into the trap of explaining what eternal life looked like or how marriage would be understood in it. He told them that in the kingdom of God, in eternal life the laws of society as they knew them were not valid. The laws that governed human life on earth which oppressed women were not valid in eternal life. He also went on to challenge them to expand their interpretation of the Bible by redefining their understanding of life after death based on the understanding that their ancestors in faith, such as Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, were alive in God's presence.

Because of their narrow mindedness and their literal interpretation of the scriptures, the Sadducees could not imagine anything beyond what they knew. They could not imagine life after death! They could not imagine life without marriage as they knew it. Now, we can dismiss their worldview and their experience as evil, but in their minds they were trying to be faithful and not all of them had evil intentions! But their narrow mindedness led them down an exclusive path that shut the door to any new revelation from God. They closed the door to their minds and their hearts to imagine any new possibilities of the Spirit. Their spiritual and social imagination had shrunk to the point of rigidity that it shut out any mystery about faith.

So, the invitation for us today is to be open to the mystery of life and death and to trust that the goodness of life and love we know now is not the end, but is part of the process of moving deeper into the mystery of God. This does not mean that we do not grieve the death of our loved ones. Instead, it means that we are able to live life trusting in the mysteries that are beyond our comprehension. I leave you with three thoughts:

1. **Trust in God's goodness** (screen) in this life and in the life to come. The God who created you and gave you form is the one who will receive you after you are physically not here. Since God is the energy of life itself, we know that there is nothing outside of God's realm. Life and death are all in God's realm.
2. **Talk about death** to your loved ones, especially if you or they are dying. Have your wishes be made known to your loved ones about your end of life care and choices. Don't be embarrassed to share your fears. Learn together about what makes for a good life till the end. In many places in the world, there is a movement that was started in 2004 to help people talk about death. It is called "Death Cafes." The idea behind it is simple and yet powerful. People would gather to talk about death and their understanding of it. People would gather to eat cake or pastries, drink tea and to talk about death. This is not a grief support group or to help people who are actively dying. It is just a sacred space to talk about one of life's mysteries.
3. **Keep death as part of your daily life.** This mindfulness of our own mortality could help us live life more fully. This is not about worrying every day about dying. It is about being grateful for being alive and appreciating each moment we have. In his book *Living in the Light of Death*, Larry Rosenberg wrote, "If we understood the reality of death, we would treat each other differently. Carlos Castaneda was once asked how we could make our lives more spiritual, and he said: Just remember that everyone you encounter today, everyone you see, will someday have to die. He's right. That knowledge changes our whole relationship to people."

Lectio Divina on Romans 14:8. I will read the text three times allowing silence after each reading. I will invite the first time to let one word or phrase shimmer for you or catch your attention. The second time, pay attention to the feeling associated with your word or phrase. The third time, listen to a message that you might receive from God. "8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

(First service) Now, please turn to your neighbor and share with them your word or phrase as you feel comfortable to do so.

We will close with this poem from John O'Donohue:

**Entering Death (John O'Donohue)**

I pray that you will have the blessing  
Of being consoled and sure about your death.

May you know in your soul  
There is no need to be afraid.

When your time comes, may you have  
Every blessing and strength you need.

May there be a beautiful welcome for you  
In the home you are going to.  
You are not going somewhere strange,  
Merely back to the home you have never left.

May you live with compassion  
And transfigure everything  
Negative within and about you.

When you come to die,  
May it be after a long life.

May you be tranquil  
Among those who care for you.

May your going be sheltered  
And your welcome assured.

May your soul smile  
In the embrace  
Of your Anam Cara (soul friend). Amen.