

QUESTIONS AT THE CROSSROADS OF FAITH:
WILL I REALLY LIVE FOREVER?

John 11:18-27, 39-45

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Would anybody here like to live forever?

At the crossroads of faith we come today to discuss the question of immortality. Yes, Virginia, there is a heaven. Yes, Jim, you can live forever. I believe that with all of my heart. Yet to explain the unexplainable and to describe the indescribable and to peek through the shadows of earth and catch a glimpse of eternity is often more than our grieving minds can grasp and our questioning intellects can assimilate. We, like Mary and Martha, may be more inclined to argue about God's timing than to embrace Christ's resurrection. Nevertheless, let those who have ears hear, those who have eyes see, and those who have open hearts, believe. You will rise again.

While immortality is ultimately an act of faith, there are good reasons to hold on to this belief in life after death. So come now for just a few moments and let us reason together about life that is everlasting and eternal.

You see, immortality just makes sense. Modern materialism would have us believe that human beings are combinations of genes and cells which live to reproduce and finally die. What philosophers call "mind" and "soul" can be reduced to physical brain power, reasons Keith Augustus in a paper entitled, "*The Case Against Immortality.*"

John Hospers says, "The body seems to be involved in every activity we describe even though we are forever trying to imagine existing without a body." To separate body and soul, from a materialist point of view, is nothing more than wishful thinking, at best. Let me confess to you, I am not a scientist. Every time I encounter this line of reasoning I think of an old, old sermon Harry Emerson Fosdick preached back in the 1940's. He said, "From a chemical point of view, the average man contains about enough fat to make seven bars of soap, enough iron to make a medium size nail, enough lime to cover a 20 x 40 foot lawn, enough phosphorous to make about 2200 match tips, enough magnesium for a good dose, and enough potassium to explode a toy cannon, along with a little sulphur. At current rates, (1940's) these elements could be obtained for about 98 cents."

Is that all there is to human life? That I am dust and to dust I shall return may not make a lot of difference to many people, but what about the lives that really mattered? What about Lincoln, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Beethoven and Bach? Shall we go down the list of those who have marched across the stage of life? Well, reasoned Fosdick, if you can believe that, you can

believe anything. Immortality makes sense.

Immortality is the next step. Isn't it interesting, while it is extremely difficult to affirm immortality, everything within us is trying to stretch us to it? Is not that a God-given gift to all of us? We are never satisfied with where we are. We want the next step. We want to stretch beyond. We want to see something more. Something inside us makes us want to push the envelope, dream impossible dreams, beat unbeatable foes. And rightly so.

I was thumbing through a book put out by **Life** magazine of the last thousand years in pictures. I ran across a map drawn by a Spanish priest in 1220 A.D. Jerusalem was at the center of the world then. The Mediterranean dominated the central axis. It is all surrounded by an ocean. What a small world we had in 1220 A.D. Today there are 92,000 people on Pan Am's waiting list for a trip to the moon whenever it becomes a tourist attraction. Our world is forever expanding and there is something in the heart of human beings that wants to push it further, to evolve into it, to reach out in unknown places.

Thanks to modern medicine, today there are about a 100,000 centenarians, people who have lived 100 years or more. The prediction is that by 2050 there will be 2.2 million people who are at least 100 years of age on this earth. Is not our tinkering with the cloning of human beings, as controversial as it is, a human attempt "for the perishable to take on the imperishable and the mortal to be clothed in immortality"? Is not this reaching of our soul into the unknown a God-hunger for immortality?

Immortality. Nature sings of it. All nature sings and round us rings a resurrection. Maybe it is Nashville, Tennessee, maybe I have better eyes than I used to have, maybe it is just that way. Didn't Spring just happen overnight this week? I was driving in our subdivision one evening and the trees were bare. The very next morning I left home and the Bradford pears were full of blooms. Suddenly, I was surrounded by God's great coming out party. Every spring I embrace it. This miraculous rebirth of the earth grows sweeter to me every year, just to see it and to know it and to feel it and to live into it.

*In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree,
In cocoons a hidden promise, butterflies will soon be free.
In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

All of creation speaks of resurrection! Even now it unfolds before us.

William Cullen Bryant reasoned, if the Father designs to touch with divine power the cold and pulseless heart of a buried acorn and make it burst forth from the prison wall, will he leave neglected the soul of a person who is made in the image of the Creator? If he gives to the rose bush whose withered blossoms float upon the breeze the sweet assurance of another springtime, will he withhold the words of hope from people when the frosts of winter have come? Immortality. It is in

nature itself.

Those of us who go by the name Christian recognize, embrace, and empower the notion that immortality is a gift of God to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus said to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” Do you believe it? And Martha, right out of Sabbath school says, “Yes, I know, I remember, I believe in the resurrection of life at the last day.” Jesus turns to her and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live. And whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Can you believe this, Martha?” Well, can you believe it?

You see, for Christians, immortality is not an argument, it is an announcement; it is not a debate, it is a declaration; it is not a fantasy, it is faith. If Christ is not raised, then we have no faith to live, but if Christ is raised from the dead then we are, of all people, most hopeful, most prophetic and most believing. My friends, if I didn’t believe that today I could not do my job every week.

At every funeral I open with these words of Jesus, “I am the resurrection and the life and they who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live.” I have buried too many babies, walked in front of too many caskets containing teenagers, held too many young mothers’ hands who were losing their children to death, walked the last road with young fathers, and I have buried close personal friends and family. I want to tell you my faith is built on the sure and certain hope that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life and without it we have no faith to proclaim. Immortality. It makes a lot of sense.

Of course, eternal life is not just something in the future. It is radically present now. The whole message of John’s gospel was to present to us a notion of eternal life, not just over there, but now. And the way you think and believe about what is “over there,” dramatically impacts how you live now. Think about it for just a moment.

Immortality gives present life dignity and purpose. It all started at the post office, complained *Ziggy*, in a Tom Wilson cartoon. Now everybody calls me “occupant.” A jingle in the Wall Street Journal goes:

My Social Security number is easy
My banking number I can spout
Phone numbers and zips are always ready
But my age, I have to figure out.

We are forever being put in somebody’s pigeon hole. We are named, numbered and put away somewhere. But then I read the gospel that tells me that I am created in the image of God, and no less than the moon and the stars. I have a purpose for being here. Though I do not often act like it, the psalmist said I’m just a little bit lower than the angels. You’ve got dignity, value, purpose, worth. Don’t let anybody take it away from you.

Let me live and walk the pathways of duty and work to the close of the day. Let there be no doubt about it. I know there are joys that are waiting when I have gone the last mile of the way. Let me die with dignity, too. I have got some place to go, and if you have some place to go, you can turn loose of life here. Belief in immortality transforms the way I live my daily life.

Belief in immortality gives reason to character. Why be good if it makes no difference? Do your kids ever ask that question of you? I ask it occasionally of myself. The preacher in Ecclesiastes asked it long ago, way before Peggy Lee put it in a song, "Is that all there is?" You see, if that is all there is, then being good does not make a lot of sense. Just keep on dancing, bring out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is. If that's all there is, then materialism makes sense. Take the cash and let the credit go. If that's all there is, then why live for others. Take your chance and grab all you can. Run for it for what few days you have on earth, if that's all there is.

But what if that's not all there is? Did you hear about the pastor, an executive and a Boy Scout who were in a private plane when the plane developed engine trouble? The pilot said, "Sorry to tell you guys but this things going down. I'm sorry to tell you further that we only have three parachutes for four people. I need to tell you I've got a family at home and they need me so I'm taking one parachute and I'm out of here." With that he took a parachute and jumped. The executive looked at the other two and said, "There are people in this world who think I am the smartest man on earth. The world would suffer a great loss if I were to lose my life in this crash." So with that statement he grabbed for a parachute and jumped as well. The pastor looked at the Boy Scout and said, "Son, you have your life ahead of you and I've lived my life. Let me just ride this thing out. Why don't you take the parachute that's left and I'll just see what happens." The Boy Scout said, "Relax, Reverend, the smartest man in all the world just grabbed a Boy Scout back pack thinking it was a parachute and jumped out of the plane."

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." That only makes sense in the light of eternity. So many of our Christian values only make sense if there is immortality written into the universe.

Immortality. It transforms the nature of service. It gives meaning to service. C. S. Lewis, the great Christian philosopher, painted pictures of heaven and hell this way. In Lewis' image of heaven and hell, people in both places had long spoons and elbows that would not bend. They were all sitting at a table that contained a feast for all. In heaven, people were full, happy, rejoicing. In hell, people were starving, angry, and shouting at one another at the table. What was the difference? In heaven, people had learned to take those stiff arms and long spoons and feed one another across the table. In hell, they were still trying to do it

themselves!

You see, my friends, temporal deeds take on eternal dimensions when you do it for others. The last time I checked, the final exam has only one question on it. Did you do it for the least of these? I want to tell you, the least of these are not very beautiful people, most of the time. The least of these are not very thankful people, most of the time. The least of these are not very deserving people, most of the time. It is only when you transform the least of these into service for Jesus Christ himself, who will one day ask me, how did you do with the least of these that I discover the great need for the simplest giving and sharing. If the least of these becomes the physical presence of Jesus among us, then every client becomes a guest, every patient becomes a child of God, every member must be viewed in the light of eternity. It transforms the way I see the world.

Immortality keeps hope alive. David Clayton Thomas, with Blood, Sweat and Tears, sang years ago, “*I know there ain’t no heaven but I pray there ain’t no hell.*” In that kind of world of unbelief, you and I are called to keep hope alive. When the doctor looks into the eyes of a caring family and says, “I’ve done all I can do,” it is up to the community of faith to keep hope alive. When life seems like a merry-go-round, picking you up and spinning you around and around and up and down and depositing you at the same place you started, when you are caught on that kind of circle of life, somebody needs to step in and keep hope alive.

According to extensive aeronautical research it is impossible for the bumblebee to fly. It is just built all wrong, with proportions in inappropriate places. According to aeronautical research and design the bumblebee ought to get used to walking. The problem is nobody told the bumblebee that. So it just keeps on spreading its wings and going from flower to flower, fulfilling its purpose on earth against impossible odds. You and I are called to be the people who keep hope alive. Dante said, “Life without hope is hell.” I believe in life after death. Do you?

*We can only see a little of the ocean
A few miles distance from rocky shore.
But oh! Out there beyond the horizon
There’s more, there’s more.*

*We only see a little of God’s loving
A few rich treasures from his mighty store
But oh! Out there, beyond the horizon.
There’s more, there’s more.*

