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THE REALITY OF DEATH

Let me give you a fact that shouldn't surprise you. Unless Jesus Christ returns in our lifetime, we are all going to die.

You may be saying, "I know that, Tony. What's your point?" My point is many people are trying to deny or dodge that simple fact, even though their eternal destiny is at stake. Our culture tries to camouflage death or dress it up. People use soothing terms like "pass away" and "laid to rest" to talk about it. But the reality is that you and I are marching toward a date with death.

On the following pages, I want to bring us face-to-face with that reality, and to answer the question of what awaits us beyond the grave by examining what the Bible says. Everyone has an opinion, from the atheist who says there's nothing beyond death to the universalist who says God is waiting with open arms to receive everyone.

But anyone other than Jesus Christ who gives you an opinion about death, heaven, and hell is giving you an uninformed opinion. So don't let anybody who hasn't been there tell you about eternity, because you can't afford to get this one wrong. Let's set the stage for our discussion of eternity with several important facts about the reality of death.

DEATH IS AN APPOINTMENT

The first thing we need to know about death is that it is not a random event. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Every person who has ever lived will die by appointment. People may be late for a lot of things, but this is one appointment everyone will be on time for, because it has been set by God.

The story is told of a man who came face-to-face with death one day. The man was standing on a street corner in his city when a stranger walked by. The stranger looked at the man in surprise, but said nothing and kept on walking.

When the man learned that the stranger was Death, he became afraid and went to a wise friend for advice. "Death just walked by and looked surprised to see me. What should I do?"

The wise friend said, "If I were you, I'd flee to another city far away."

So the man got ready and that night fled to a faraway city. But as he was walking on the streets of that city the next day, he was horrified to run into Death. "I thought I left you behind in my home city yesterday," the terrified man said to Death.

Death replied, "That's why I was so surprised to see you there yesterday. I have an appointment to meet you here today."

All of us have a God-ordained appointment with death we will most definitely keep when the time comes. It can't be avoided or missed. Once you accept that reality, it can help you better prepare for it. Rather than living in denial or running from something you may fear, choose to learn about eternity. In this way, you can better utilize your time on earth by focusing on the things that matter most—in light of your eternal destination.

DEATH IS A CONJUNCTION

The common idea of death as the end of human existence is not what the Bible means when it talks about death. In the Bible, death involves separation, but never cessation.

Most people think we are in the land of the living on our way to the land of the dying. But actually, we are in the land of the dying on our way to the land of the living. That's why I say death is a conjunction, not a period. It is the bridge between this life and the life to come.

We'll see that later in a familiar passage from the Bible, Jesus' teaching in Luke 16. In this story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus said, "The poor man died and," then "the rich man also died *and* " (v. 22, emphasis added). Luke 16 could have been a very short chapter if Jesus had simply said, "These men died, period." Instead, he said "and."

Without "and" that would have been the end of the story. But the Bible knows nothing of a concept of death that means the person ceases to exist. Death is the separation of our temporary, material body from the eternal, immaterial part of our being, the spirit or soul. James 2:26 says, "The body without the spirit is dead," but the opposite is not true. Our souls were created to live forever.

The Bible says our bodies are dead without their immaterial part because the soul is what gives life to, or animates, the body. At his creation, Adam was just a shell made out of dust until God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and [Adam] became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Adam had no personhood or life until he received his soul. You are who you are because of your soul, not your body. Your ultimate value is not in your body, but in your soul, because it is the part of you that will live forever. When you die life is not over because the only part of you that died is your body. Some people say that at death, the soul sleeps until it is resurrected. But that view does not have any support in Scripture.

**YOUR ULTIMATE VALUE IS IN YOUR
SOUL, BECAUSE IT IS THE PART OF
YOU THAT WILL LIVE FOREVER.**

Paul's preference was "to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). He told the Philippians, "I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better" (1:23). It doesn't sound like he expected to go into a deep sleep in an unconscious state until the resurrection.

The Bible is clear. At the moment of death our souls pass immediately into conscious existence in eternity, either in heaven or in hell. A lot of people think there's some kind of second chance after death, but God's Word says nothing about an intermediate state of purgatory after death in which we have a second chance to get our act together, have our sins dealt with over a period of time, and finally make it to heaven.

Others want to believe that at death, every person encounters a wonderful, warm light and a welcoming, forgiving Being, ready to escort the deceased person to paradise. But that's not what the Word says either.

Since death means immediate passage into the next life, the fact is when they bring your body to the church for your funeral, you won't be there. A funeral, a burial, and a gravestone may give the look of finality to a person's life, but that's only the way it appears from the standpoint of earth.

Our society puts a period after death, but from God's standpoint death is only a pause so brief it's not even worth trying to measure. Paul says that at the resurrection our bodies shall be changed "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:52).

That's how fast you and I will be in eternity when we die. Death is a conjunction, followed by a destination.

DEATH IS FOLLOWED BY A DESTINATION

In Luke 16:19–31, Jesus gave a picture of what happens when we die, peeling back a corner of eternity. In doing so, He offered us a glimpse into heaven and hell.

We'll deal with this foundational passage later on; all I want to point out here is that both Lazarus and the rich man ended up somewhere when they died. The difference was in their destinations—the difference between eternal joy in heaven for Lazarus and eternal suffering in hell for the rich man.

A dying man once gathered his four children around him. To each of the first three he simply said, "Good

night." But then he turned to his fourth child and said, "Good-bye, Son."

The young man said, "Dad, you told the others good night. Why did you tell me good-bye?"

The dying man answered, "Because they are Christians, and I'll see them in the morning in heaven. But you have not come to Christ, and unless you do I'll never see you again."

TAKING THE STING OUT OF DEATH

What will happen when you die? That depends on what you have done with Jesus. If you know Him as Savior, your deliverer from sin's sting, you don't have to wake up in the middle of the night wondering what will happen to you when you die. Death won't sting you at all, because "the sting of death is sin" (1 Corinthians 15:56).

One day a little boy was riding in the car with his father when a bee flew in through the window and started buzzing around. The boy began to scream, "The bee is going to sting me!" But his father reached out and grabbed the bee. He held it in his hand for a few seconds, then released it.

The bee began to buzz around and the boy started to cry again. But his father said, "Son, you don't have to be afraid. All the bee can do now is make noise." Then Dad held out his hand, and there in the palm of his hand was the bee's stinger.

On the cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ took the stinger of sin, which is death. So all death can do now is make noise for those whose trust is in Jesus Christ.

**WE CAN'T AFFORD
TO GAMBLE ON ETERNITY.**

Forever is too long to miss Christ. Eternity is a long time to suffer torment and the pain of regret. For Christians, this life is the only hell they will ever know. But for non-Christians, this life is the only heaven they will ever know.

Life is not a game. We can't afford to gamble on eternity. As we look at what Scripture says about eternity, make sure you remove any doubt about where you will spend it.