

Introduction

Tomorrow is Memorial Day and we keep it by honoring the dead. But there's something we need to remember as we do that. Many of the dead we're honoring aren't actually dead. They were alive on arrival instead.

Never Die

Jesus teaches us just that in John 11. In verse 14, He announced to His disciples about a friend of theirs, "**Lazarus is dead.**" Put your name in front of the words "**is dead**" and ponder it. It bothers most people to do that and here's why. It's because they fear death more than anything.

A young man named Robert, for instance, wrote this: "**My whole life, as long as I can remember, I've been afraid of dying. The fear seems to hit be in waves, but it's always there, constantly reminding me of my mortality.**" Robert isn't the exception. He's the rule. Almost all people are scared to death of dying and dread it.

But Jesus didn't. It's an observable fact about Him in the gospels. He had a cavalier attitude about dying. He didn't dread it. He disregarded it instead as a factor in human life. He had no anxiety at all about it. We see that same disregard in the New Testament writers. They were perfectly at peace in the face of dying.

And you and I, as disciples of Jesus, will be too – if we understand and believe what He taught in our text. Lazarus lived in Bethany with his sisters Mary and Martha. Four days after he died, Jesus arrived in Bethany and had a conversation with Martha that's recorded in verses 20-27. In that conversation, Martha expressed her belief in the final resurrection, verse 24. Jesus replied in verse 25 that He is the One who gives resurrection and life, anytime He wants. He then went on to reveal the implication of that to her, also in verse 25. Whoever believes in Him "**will live even if he dies.**" He said it differently in verse 26 but the meaning is the same. Whoever believes in Him "**will never die.**"

That is a startling statement. We may have to pay taxes but we

don't have to die and won't – if we **“believe in”** in Jesus.

Now, suppose that we truly understand and believe that. What would follow psychologically is clear. We wouldn't dread our earthly bodies ceasing to function and decaying. We'd disregard it. We'd be utterly at ease in the face of it, because we ourselves will never die.

Obviously, I can't cause you to believe that. But I can assist you to understand it. We understand it by deduction. We ask and answer the question, **“If it's true that we will never die, what must logically also be true?”** Let me share part of the answer. That we will never die implies three stages of experience that all disciples of Jesus will go through. Let's understand those stages because it transforms life when we do.

#1 – Preparation

The first stage is preparation. In this stage, the immortal part of us, our souls, prepare themselves for the new arrangement ahead.

That preparation has to do with the casting off of our earthly bodies. Our earthly bodies give us the ability to act upon the material world around us and to be acted upon by it. We **“die”** as we say it when they completely lose that ability.

But as almost all of us over the age of 30 know, the loss of that ability begins to occur long before death. We call that loss aging. I came across a little poem titled “An Ode to Old Age.” After rehearsing a host of bodily declines, its last stanza sums it up like this: **“Well, you get the idea, what more can I say? I'm off to read the obituary, like I do every day. If my name's not there, I'll once again start; perfecting the art of falling apart.”** That's how we describe aging isn't it? We're **“falling apart.”**

But the fact that we'll never die implies that in falling apart, we aren't losing but gaining. It's like a caterpillar shedding its cocoon. We're shedding what's holding us back from a new and indescribably better arrangement that lies ahead – what I'm calling **“arrival.”** We

can't enter into that arrangement in our earthly bodies. Their limitations don't allow it. So, we go through the process of aging to cast off what's holding us back. That makes aging not our enemy but our friend.

Understanding and believing that profoundly alter how we view and experience aging. It's done that for me. When I see a new age spot, wrinkle, or mysterious appearance, I interpret it in terms of the caterpillar and cocoon. I'm shedding my cocoon, this earthly body. And when it's completely shed, I'll be born into a brand new and indescribably better life. Most people see aging as leading to an ending and mourn it. I see it as leading to a grand new beginning and celebrate it.

I can honestly say I don't have any fear or dread of aging because of what I understand and believe to be true. It's my soul preparing for a new arrangement ahead, which makes it a process of gaining not losing.

Passage

All disciples of Jesus go through a second stage of experience. It's what Dallas Willard calls "**passage.**" In this stage, our earthly bodies have shut down because of injury, illness, or what we call "**old age.**" They've ceased to function and the immortal part of us, our souls, transition from life on earth to the "**next life**" as we say it.

I've personally observed this passage of many people over the years. I was with a gravely ill wife and mother and her family when she took her last breath. A few moments later, her son asked me, "**What just happened; what did she just experience?**"

That's a vital question. In my opinion, in fact, it's the one that concerns people most. What's going to happen to me the moment I take my last breath? Very few people have a way of thinking about that, which is why it bothers them so much. The unimaginable is naturally frightening to us. We fear the unknown in other words. So, let's have way of thinking straight about the moment our bodies die.

There is a defining reality in that regard. We won't be cast out into isolation. That is, I believe, the one thing that people fear the most

about passage. They necessarily leave this world and life and everyone in it behind, which means, they think, that they'll be suddenly alone in a strange new world and life. But they won't. God loves His disciples and would never do that to them – cast them out into isolation.

On the contrary! We sing an old spiritual that says: **"I looked over Jordan and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home? A band of angels coming after me, comin' for to carry me home."** That picture of what occurs in passage is derived from Biblical narratives and teachings and is consistent with the nature of God and the human soul. It is, in other words, exactly what we should expect to occur.

But it isn't just angels in our passage. Hebrews 12:1 mentions **"a cloud of witnesses"** that surrounds us. That cloud refers to all the disciples of Jesus who have passed from this earth before us. Well, there are those in it who even now are watching for us, anticipating our arrival to be with them. I wonder who they are for you. For me, they include my mother, my father-in-law and mother-in-law, my brother, John Easterday, and hopefully Francis of Assisi, since I'm so anxious to meet him. When I take my last breath on earth, angels will usher me into the awaiting presence of Jesus and them. And in the first few hours after my passage, they'll be present with me, introducing me to the remarkable new world and life in which I'm living. It will be the same for you.

Arrival

That brings us to the third stage of experience – arrival. We enter into the new arrangement that Jesus has made ready for us, alive. We'll be alive on arrival, which means three things.

First, we'll retain our personal sense of identity, our personal sense of who we are. I'll know, for instance, that I'm Bobby Murphy, and remember the relevant parts of my life journey that got me to arrival.

Second, we'll retain our knowledge of and relationships to the persons who are there. I'll know, for instance, that Ruby Murphy was my mother and remember the wonderful job she did in raising me.

Third, we'll be in possession of ourselves as never before. Unrestrained by the limitations our earthly bodies impose upon us now, we'll have phenomenal new powers of consciousness and activity. And we'll use those powers to act upon and interact with Yahweh (God), angels, the cloud of witnesses, and the breath-taking eternal environment and world around us.

As a result of all of that, we will have a life that is richer and deeper (more love, peace, and joy producing) than we can imagine. We will move from one astonishing experience to another in a full life with God that never ends.

That's the new arrangement to which we arrive. I don't have time to explain the details but I do have time to quote John Hick who describes it generally this way: "**(Jesus) used symbols to point to eternal life as limitlessly enhanced life, as a state of being more intensely alive in an existence which is both perfect fulfillment and yet also endless activity and newness. For beyond death we will not be less alive but more alive than we are now.**" He's right. After passage, we won't disappear into an eternal fog bank or dead storage, or exist in a state of isolation or suspended animation, as many seem to think. We will be alive on arrival instead – as never before.

Grow

We now understand, partially at least, the reality Jesus taught in our text. We will never die if we believe in Him. So let's act consistently with that reality. Let's believe in Him. To believe in Him means to apprentice ourselves to Him. We make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to become like Him and to do all that He says.

That's what it means to believe in Jesus and I want to identify one particular aspect of doing so. It's growing. A man who was dying of cancer once told me, "**You and I are in the same boat. We're both dying.**" All of us have heard that before. People say that we're all dying. But that isn't so. I don't know about you, but I'm not dying; I'm

growing. Growing means becoming increasingly eternal – becoming one who is more and more at home in the arrangement to come.

Remember what the central message of Jesus was, **“the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** **“At hand”** means right here, right now. He was telling us that we can access the presence and powers of the age to come, eternity, in our everyday lives. And if we do so, that presence and those powers change us in the very core of our being. They form our inner dimensions so that we, by nature, become more and more suited to the eternal environment and life that awaits us.

I’ve explained in depth how we access the kingdom of heaven at hand. It’s by practicing activities that engage it like solitude, silence, fasting, prayer, worship, study, lectio divina, Bible meditation, practicing the presence of God, and purposeful obedience, to name a few.

Conclusion

Let me ask you a question I’ve already asked myself. Are you doing those things? Are you devoted to growing? If not, you should be.

In his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law wrote about a successful 35 year-old businessman named Penitens who was dying. Penitens told friends of his that he, with his life after death looming, was far more concerned about it than his life before death. He then went on to say this: **“What a strange thing it is that a little health or the business of a shop should keep us so unaware of these great things that are coming upon us so fast! If I now had a thousand worlds I would give them all for *one year more* of such devotion and good works as I never before so much as intended.”**

That’s a profound insight from a dying man. He’d give all the greatest treasures for just one year to prepare for life after death. Well, you and I likely have that – one year, or many. So let’s do it. In the years we have left on earth, let’s devote ourselves to growing, to increasingly becoming an eternal kind of person. We’ll be alive on arrival if we do!