

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin by quoting a familiar axiom, "**I don't have to do anything but die and pay taxes.**" All of us have heard or even said that many times. But isn't actually true. There is one of those things we don't have to do and John 11:17-26 reveals which it is.

## **No Exit Sign**

This text is part of a larger narrative, 11:1-46. Jesus was a close friend of two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus became ill, whereupon Mary and Martha sent for Jesus to come and heal him. But He tarried and Lazarus died. Four days later, Martha went out to meet Jesus as he was coming to Bethany their hometown. Part of the text I read, verses 21-27, records what He and she say. In verses 21, Martha points out to Jesus that He could have healed Lazarus if He had gotten there before he died. But in verse 22, she asserts her belief that even now God will do what He asks. Jesus responds in verse 23 that Lazarus will rise from the dead. Martha concurs in verse 24, affirming her belief in the final resurrection. That in turn compels Jesus to declare in verse 25 that He is the One who gives resurrection and life, anytime He wants. He goes on to reveal the implication of that, also in verse 25. Whoever believes in Him "**will live even if he dies.**" He says it differently in verse 26 but the meaning is the same. Everyone who believes in Him "**will never die.**"

Let that sink in. It is, I believe, the most startling statement in the Bible. It goes against everything that our sensory experience tells us but it's true. Everyone who believes in Jesus will never die.

Years ago, G. Gordon Liddy was on *The David Letterman Show*. Letterman asked him, "**What happens when we die?**" Liddy answered, "**We're food for the worms.**" "**That's all,**" Letterman queried. "**That's all,**" Liddy replied. Liddy thought we die and cease to exist.

But that isn't so if we believe in Jesus. According to Him in verses

25 and 26, our existence never ceases. There is never even a split second of time when we aren't conscious and active. Do you realize that? Our consciousness and activity carry on forever even after we die. Yes, our earthly bodies cease to function and begin to decay, but we ourselves continue to know, experience, act, and relate.

## One Life

The best way to explain it is in terms of what I call "the continuum of life." Notice from the Power Point that there are three events on the continuum: our birth, our death, and the Second Coming of Jesus. Those events together constitute three phases of life.

The first phase is between the time we're born and the time we die. This is the dash between the date of our birth and the date of our death. It's the one life that God has given us to live on earth. We're in it now.

The second phase is between the time we die and the time Jesus comes again. In this phase, God secures our existence without bodies and brains just as He does that of angels. The life we now have as the persons we now are continues in the spiritual realm Paul calls "the heavenly places." But the difference is that we're in possession of ourselves as never before. We aren't restrained by the limitations our bodies impose on us now. We're able to know, experience, act, and relate in phenomenal new ways, moving from one breathtaking experience to another until Jesus comes again.

The third phase is when Jesus comes again "ad infinitum." "Ad infinitum" means "that never ends." The Holy Spirit gives us resurrection bodies like the one Jesus had. Each of us then lives a fully joyful and satisfying heavenly life that lasts forever. Our *Life after Life* study explains the incredible details of this astonishing life we'll live.

You can see that we have just one life. It does change drastically two times, at death and at the Second coming of Jesus, but it's never interrupted. It isn't three lives but one life with three different phases. It's one life that begins the moment we're born and never ends.

That's one of the most transforming truths that we'll ever learn, if we believe it. It impacts us in two ways in the first phase of life that we're living now.

### The Encouragement

First, it encourages us. It does so at least if we discover its logical implications to us now. Let's take a look at two of those.

One is that we have a future. I once visited a 99 year-old woman who had lived her entire life for Jesus. Her mind was sharp and clear and I'll never forget what she told me: **"People feel sorry for me because they think my life is over. What they don't realize is that it's about to begin."** How right she was. She had a future and knew it.

Going back to "the continuum of life," my grandson Zechariah, who is 12 days old, is here, almost 100% distance from death. You teenagers are here, about 80% distance from death. I'm here, about 25% distance from death. And the 99 year old is here, less than 1% distance from death. But notice this critical point. If we believe in Jesus, all of us have the same amount of time left to live, which is forever. You teenagers can look forward to what you'll be doing 10, 20, 30, even 40 years from now. But so can the 99 year-old. She can even look forward to what she'll be doing 100, 1000, or even 1,000,000 years from now.

That isn't just nice talk. It's the truth. It doesn't matter if we're 19 years old or 99. If we believe in Jesus, our life lies before us. The best is yet to be. All of us have a future no matter how old we are.

"The continuum of life" has a second implication that encourages us. Aging is a process of gaining not losing.

Don't get me wrong. We all know that aging is a process of losing physically. I read an article, for instance, that listed and explained the body functions most affected by aging. I'll read one those: **"The proportion of fat to muscle, which may increase by as much as 30%. Typically, the total padding of body fat directly under the skin thins out and accumulates around the stomach. The ability to**

**excrete fats is impaired, and therefore the storage of fats increases, including cholesterol and fat-soluble nutrients.”** That’s just one of the many things all of us have to look forward to – all the fat in our bodies eventually accumulating around our stomachs. That kind of thing is why almost everyone sees aging as a process of losing.

But that isn’t the whole reality is it? As I explained two weeks ago, we need to address the negative but accentuate the positive. Studies show that while physical and cognitive abilities decline with age, emotional experience improves. They show that older adults are better at regulating their emotions than younger adults. They experience “negative affect,” meaning destructive emotions, less frequently.

But “the continuum of life” implies that there are more than just emotional benefits. There are spiritual benefits as well – two, in fact.

First, aging discards what is holding us back. We were made for something better than life on earth. Our ultimate and best destiny is our eternal and full life with God in its two phases after death. But that life can’t be experienced in our earthly bodies. Their limitations don’t allow it. So, we shed them like a butterfly does its cocoon. That’s a perfect simile for aging. A believer’s body aging is like a butterfly shedding its cocoon - then entering into a brand new and far better life.

A second spiritual benefit of aging is that it prepares the soul. It doesn’t just discard the body. It prepares the soul as well. Getting closer and closer to our eternal and full life with God changes us. As our physical substance fades out, our spiritual substance becomes richer and deeper. The things of earth grow dimmer and dimmer and the things of God and His kingdom brighter and brighter. We find ourselves becoming more and more glorious, more and more like a person who is at home in eternity. I know that’s true of me. My person and life are much more eternal now than they were when I was 29, 39, or even 49. I’d be much more at home in heaven if I died now than if I had died then.

That then is the first way that the continuum of life, if we believe it, impacts us in the first phase of life we’re living now. It encourages us.

## Challenges Us

The second way is that it challenges us. I'm going to share with you now a priceless insight. I learned it in William Law's marvelous book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, which he wrote 300 years ago.

Law tells about a 35 year-old named Penitens who was a busy, notable, and prosperous tradesman. He was just coming into his own when he became seriously ill. Shortly before his death, friends visited him and expressed their remorse that he was going to die.

Penitens then addressed an issue in that regard. What was it specifically that made them so remorseful. Why was his pending death so tragic to them? It was because of all the enjoyments of life, as a successful and wealthy young man, that he was going to miss. I heard several people express that same sentiment when the young actor, Heath Ledger, died.

But their view would change, Penitens says, if they were the one who were dying. Those who are dying see it a whole lot differently than those who are living. The living are concerned about what the dying will not experience before death. But the dying are concerned about what they will experience after death. Penitens said it this way to his friends: **"Feasts, business, pleasures, and enjoyments seem great things to us while we think of nothing else, but as soon as we add death them they all sink into an equal littleness. What happens after death makes all that goes before trivial."** That is the profound insight of a dying man. What they'll experience after death is far more important to the dying than what they didn't experience before it.

Now, what they, and we, will experience after death is determined by this - how devoted we are or are not to Jesus. Penitens pointed that out to his friends and challenged them, therefore, to be devoted to Jesus. That really is the ultimate "So what?" of the continuum of life. How devoted we are or are not to Jesus in the first phase of our lives determines the depth and quality of our lives in the second and third phases.

So, be devoted to Jesus. That's the only thing we can do that will make us what Penitens called **"easy at the hour of death."** As he himself said it: **"If I now had a thousand worlds I would give them all for one more year that I might present unto God one year of such devotion as I never before so much as intended."** Don't have the regret when we're dying that Penitens had. Be devoted to Jesus now.

He Himself taught that in verses 25 and 26. He said those who will not die are those who **"believe in Me."** Belief, in the Bible, means much more than mere mental assent. It is commitment as well – to two things. First, we commit ourselves to experiencing and doing everything as a service to Jesus. That means that we intend to experience and do it in a way that pleases and honors Him. Second, we commit ourselves to experiencing and doing everything in conformity to His will. That means that we intend to experience and do it as He would if He were us. The first has to do with motive and the second with methodology.

Take something as routine as dinner. First, I eat it as a service to Jesus. My purpose in eating it isn't just to satisfy my hunger but to please and honor Him as well. Second, I eat it in conformity to His will. I eat it as He would if He were me. I savor and enjoy every bite, getting as much pleasure from it as I can. I also think about what a blessing it is and have an attitude of gratitude as I eat it.

That then is the challenge. We should devote ourselves to Jesus. We should experience and do everything in our lives as a service to Him and in conformity to His will. Doing that in the first phase of our lives prepares us for the second and third phases.

## **Conclusion**

You can now see why the old axiom, **"I don't have to do anything but die and pay taxes,"** isn't true. Yes, you do have to do the one thing – pay taxes. But according to John 11:25-26 and the continuum of life, you don't have to do the other. Devote yourself to Jesus. You'll never die if we do.