

The One Question I Would Ask God

What Happens When I Die?

And Will I be Reunited with Those I Have Loved?

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I approach this question – by the way the ‘I’ is Andrew and not God! - and questions like this with some fear and trepidation. In part I do so because so many people have so much emotionally invested in after-death issues. For instance many are invested in the possibility of being reunited with those that they have loved in life. Fear and trepidation is also the case because our texts actually aren’t all that clear around what happens after we die. I actually believe that the most honest answer I could give to this question, and other questions about the afterlife, is, ‘I’m not sure’.

But let’s dig a little deeper than that.

As noted there are differing views to be found in our text, and all have made their way into the tradition. One popular conception is that when we die we go straight to somewhere and that somewhere is heaven. (Let me state that I categorically reject the notion of a physical hell where bad people go after death to be eternally tormented at God’s behest.) This argument is supported by Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross that ‘today you will be with me in paradise’. Our understanding of what Jesus means by paradise is what determines what Jesus was referring to here. It is important to remember that these words came at the end of a conversation in which the thief affirms Jesus as a good and innocent man, and asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus may simply have been stating that today this thief would indeed join Jesus in his kingdom, his paradise that is the place, on earth, as in heaven where God’s will is done. Notwithstanding the question of what Jesus meant by ‘paradise’ our tradition is rich in language and images of individuals ascending into heaven upon death.

And yet the bulk of the afterlife narratives in Christian scripture speak of a future resurrection when ‘the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised’. St Paul weaves a long and intricate argument to this effect, the core of which is that Christ’s resurrection prefigures our own future resurrection. Indeed Jesus reinforces this point when on the night before he died he told his friends that he was going to prepare a place for them so that ‘where I am you will be also’. By this definition, then, there will be no resurrection, no looking for our loved ones until some distant point in the future. This is captured in words that Anglicans know well: May she/he rest in peace and rise in glory. First we rest and then we rise.

And so the question of when the dead arrive in heaven is an open one but the question of how to find loved ones remains. Again the tradition is rife with language that suggests that heaven will constitute one big family reunion. In our Anglican church a prayer in the funeral liturgy states that after our life on earth we will 'be reunited with our brothers and our sisters'. It would be logical to infer from that that heaven is the venue for a homecoming and so the only challenge left would be how to 'find my loved ones'. On this the tradition seems to be silent. And so even if all of the above holds true we are left only with the hope that heaven will afford a way for this reunion to take place.

Nonetheless our scriptures also suggest that the matter of identification is not a cut and dried one. If Jesus' resurrection foreshadows our own it is important to remember that in his post-resurrection appearances he was often not recognized. The inference is that a post-resurrection body is very different than a pre-resurrection body. The book of Revelation also talks of a great crowd of witnesses without number gathered around the throne where only the lamb, Jesus Christ, is recognisable.

So the question of how we find our loved ones in heaven, like all questions about an afterlife, is left unanswered, at least from a scriptural standpoint, or at least answered in a way that may not prove ultimately satisfying.

But I am compelled by some words that St Paul wrote to the church in Rome. In so many words he wrote, 'whether we live or we die we belong to God'. There is nothing precise or specific about those words, and they drive us deep into the mystery that often accompanies our journey of faith. And yet these words are also comforting. They remind us that even in the absence of clear answers to our questions about what happens after death, we have the promise that we will be in God's hands and God's care. That although death may be a sad even shocking event for those around us, for us it will be a seamless transition from one way of belonging to God to another way of belonging to God. Comforting also because God is also the God of the living who remain and they too can count on the comfort and care of God even as they grieve.

How can we find our loved ones in heaven? What happens after we die? I'm not sure. But I do know that all of us, dead and alive, belong to a loving, caring God. And perhaps that is enough.

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