Sermon Series: What Does It Mean to Be Saved?
Sermon Title: What Happens When We Die?

Text: **1 Corinthians 15:20-26 -- But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death**.

Introduction: Two men were golfing together near a cemetery. While the one man was preparing to putt, a funeral procession turned into the cemetery led by a hearse. **Without a moment's hesitation, the fellow on the green immediately dropped his putter, removed his cap and bowed his head**. For at least two minutes he stood in this position until the last car had passed. Then he returned his attention to golf. Later when the two men returned to the clubhouse his partner said, "***I have to tell you I was deeply moved back there by the respect you demonstrated for the deceased***." "***It's nothing really***," his friend replied. "***In fact, it's the least I could do. After all, I was married to her for thirty-four years***."

This morning, I want to spend some time talking to you about a subject that evokes some kind of response in all of us…death. Obviously, this topic weighs heavily on the minds of many. There are those who view it as the worst possible thing that could happen to a person. They would agree with the Russian proverbs— "***A wooden bed is better than a golden coffin***." Others seem to approach death a little differently. **Author Joseph Bayly** writes, **"Death is the great adventure beside which moon landings and space trips pale in significance**." What is your view of death? As we would assume, the Bible has a lot to say about our exit from this world. This morning, I invite you to join me as we consider what it teaches about it.

But before we go there, let me review our previous messages in the series, **"What Does It Mean to Be Saved**?" We began by talking about **GOD'S COMMON GRACE** because that is the first way most of us get to experience Him. He pours out His goodness on us even though we deserve death the moment we sin (**Matthew 5:45**). Then we talked about the doctrine of **ELECTION**. The Bible tells us that we were chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world not based on anything we've done, good or bad but according to His own will (**Ephesians 1:4**). This was followed by a message on God's **EFFECTIVE CALL**, which functions as a kind of summons or subpoena that cannot be ignored (**1 Corinthians 1:9**). From there we talked about an act of God that we call **REGENERATION** (being born again) – the act of being made spiritually alive which actually occurs prior to our conversion (**Ephesians 2:4-5 -- But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved**). As I just mentioned, **CONVERSION** is the next step in our salvation experience. This involves repenting of sin and believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Though God's call and the act of regeneration guarantee a positive response to the Gospel, it does not eliminate the need for it (**Mark 1:15**). The blessed **ATONEMENT** was the next topic in our series. The word "**atone**" means to **cover**. Through the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross, He covered our sin by taking upon Himself the wrath of God intended for us (**Hebrews 2:17**). **JUSTIFICATION** is what follows in our salvation experience. God exchanges our sin for Christ's righteousness when we believe in the Lord, and we are now declared to be "just" in His sight (**Romans 5:1**). At the same time, we are **ADOPTED** into the family of God so that we become His children (**John 1:12**) and **SANCTIFIED** – set apart from sin unto God. This begins at the point of conversion and continues throughout our lives as the Holy Spirit works to make us like Jesus until we are united with Him (**Romans 8:29**). And finally, last week we talked about **ETERNAL SECURITY** – the belief that those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives (**John 6:39**

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day).

Now, let's take a look at what the Bible says about what happens when we die. We'll be asking the question, "Why do we have to die?"

Why do we have to die? Death is not a punishment for Christians. The Bible tells us in **Romans 8:1 -- there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. The entire penalty for our sins has been paid. We should therefore never think of death as God's way of taking out His anger on us. So why then must Christians die? Let me provide two reasons.

- **Death results from living in a fallen world**. **It has become one of the conditions of human existence because we live in a world where the effects of sin have not been completely removed**. We live with physical and emotional pain, suffering, disease and even the knowledge of our imminent death. The Apostle Paul says that **the last enemy to be destroyed is death** (**1 Corinthians 15:26**) and this will happen when Christ returns (**1 Corinthians 15:51-55 -- Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"**). **WE CAN'T WAIT UNTIL THAT HAPPENS, BUT UNTIL IT DOES, ALL OF US WILL GROW OLD AND DIE**.
- **Death completes our union with Christ**. In dying, we imitate Christ, who also died. **The result is that we experience a closer relationship with Him as we share first in His sufferings/death and then in His glory** (**Romans 8:16-17 -- The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him**). **As those who have shared in His sufferings, we are then destined to receive all that He receives** (**i**.e., JOY—**Matthew 25:21; Hebrews 12:2**; **and** AUTHORITY TO RULE — **Revelation 3:21; 2 Timothy 2:12 -- if we endure, we will also reign with him**). This inheritance awaits us when our union with Christ is complete.

What happens to us when we die? **Until the Lord returns, death is the inevitable conclusion of life. One hundred out of one hundred people die**. This fact is troubling for many. **Tom Howard likens facing death, to A HEN BEFORE A COBRA, incapable of doing anything at all in the presence of the very thing that seems to call for the most drastic and decisive action. He says, "There is in fact, nothing we can do. Say what we will, dance how we will, we will soon enough be a heap of ruined feathers and bones, indistinguishable from the rest of the ruins that lie about**." As if the event of death were not enough for us to concern ourselves with, many agonize over what will come next after we die. Well, the good news is that the Bible tells us what we can expect.

- **Believers are immediately in the Lord's presence**. The Apostle Paul says that ***to* be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord** (**2 Corinthians 5:8**). In reflecting on whether it would be better to remain for the sake of the church or to die and go to heaven, Paul later said, "**I desire to depart and be with Christ** (**Philippians 1:23**)." In **Luke 23:43** Jesus told the thief on the cross next to Him, "**Today, you will be with me in Paradise**." It seems rather clear from these verses and others (**See also Hebrews 12:23**) that **at the moment of death, the soul of a believer is immediately in the presence of the Lord**. ***This teaching means that there is NO SUCH THING AS PURGATORY*** (i.e., the place where the souls of believers go to be further purified from sin before being admitted to heaven.) This teaching comes from the writings of **the Apocrypha** in **2 Maccabees 12:42-45** and **implies that something must be added to the redemptive work of Christ, which contradicts the teaching of Scripture** (**Hebrews 10:10 --And by that (God's) will we have**

been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all). NOTHING CAN BE ADDED TO THE WORK OF CHRIST TO BRING ABOUT OUR REDEMPTION AND SUBSEQUENT INHERITANCE IN HEAVEN!

- **Unbelievers go immediately to eternal punishment**. **There are no second chances for those who reject Christ in this life. The book of Hebrews says,** "**It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment** (**Hebrews 9:27**)." **The Old Testament speaks of SHEOL and the New Testament of HADES as the temporary destiny of the doomed** (**Matthew 11:23 – NKJV -- And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you**). **It is the intermediate place where they go to await the final judgment, WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE AT THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT** (**Revelation 20:13-15 – And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire**). **Our Lord spoke of it as a place of agony** (**Luke 16:22-24 -- The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame**). **This is the reality that most of us would like not to consider. Hell is A PLACE OF ETERNAL AGONY** (**Matthew 25:41-- Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels**). **Survey**: According to a recent Gallop Poll, the number of Americans that believe in hell is up from 54% in 1965 to 62% today. The problem isn't that postmodern people don't believe it hell; it is that they don't think they will go there. In 1965, 17% thought they were headed there; today, only 2% see it as their destiny.

How should we think about death?

- **When we consider our own death as believers, we should face it with joy and not fear** (**Philippians 1:22-23 -- If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better**). The writer of Hebrews tells us that Christ died to free those who have been held in slavery by fear of death (**Hebrews 2:14-15 -- Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery**). We no longer have to fear death because it is but a transition for us into heaven.
- **When we consider the death of another believer, we should feel sorrow mingled with hope** (**1 Thessalonians 4:13 -- But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope; 5:9-10 -- For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him**). The grief we experience in our separation should be mingled with worship because saints who die can rest from their labors (**See Revelation 14:13**).
- **When we consider the death of an unbeliever, we should grieve and reflect**. Paul said that he suffered "***great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart***" knowing that his countrymen were dying without Christ (**Romans 9:2-3 -- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh**). We should never cheer the death of the wicked because God Himself does not (**Ezekiel 18:23 -- Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live**?). At those times, when we're consoling others over the loss of unbelieving loved ones, we should seek to minister to their need and gently point them to the Savior.

As you reflect on death…

- …**give thanks to Christ**. He conquered sin and death through His sacrifice and made us alive in Him (**See Ephesians 2:4-5**).
- …**share the gospel with others**. Knowing that it is appointed for men to die and after this comes judgment should motivate us to share the Gospel with the unbelieving world.
- …**make the best use of your time**. This world will not last. It is passing away. Your time here is limited as well. Jesus told His followers to prepare for eternity by laying up for themselves treasures in heaven that will last forever (**Matthew 6:20**). Paul elaborated on this theme by saying, "**Command (believers) to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life"** (**1 Timothy 6:18-19**).

Conclusion: **Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a 32-year-old Lutheran minister and internationally known theologian, a teacher at the University of Berlin and a leader of the German resistance against Hitler**. In early 1939, he received notice that he had been conscripted into the armed forces. This meant that he would have to pledge his allegiance to the Führer, something he likened to one of the apostles offering a sacrifice to the Roman Emperor. To no one's surprise, Bonhoeffer refused to heed the order. To save his life, church authorities arranged for him to leave the country, and three months later, he landed in New York. Everyone rejoiced that this brilliant young Bible scholar had been saved. He was permitted to stay in "***the Prophet's Chamber***," a suite of rooms at **Union Theological Seminary** where he could continue studying and teaching. **It took only a short time, however, before Bonhoeffer began experiencing a profound sense of homesickness**. On **June 18th,** he happened to hear a sermon by **Dr. John Hess McComb** on the believer's likeness to Christ, and that decided it for the 32-year-old. ***Just as Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing the result that awaited him, so Bonhoeffer could no longer escape the conclusion that his vocation compelled him to share in his countryman's fate as they suffered the Nazi's evil***. No amount of arguing could convince him otherwise. Soon he returned to Germany and became a double agent, ostensibly spying for the Third Reich while really working for its downfall. **After two attempts to kill Hitler by the German resistance, he and many others were rounded up and sent to prison in the spring of 1943**. There, just like Joseph in the Bible, he became known for his wise and loving counsel, even by the German guards. He constantly shared the contents of his family's weekly care packages with those around him. Said one of his fellow inmates of Bonhoeffer, "***He always seemed to inspire an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every small event of life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive…He was, without exception, the finest and most lovable man I've ever met***." Unfortunately, after a third nearly successful attempt on the life of Hitler, he and several others were taken from prison to a concentration camp where they were interrogated while being denied contact with anyone outside the prison. **Then on April 5, 1945, just three weeks before the Allies liberated Berlin, he was executed**. Why did he choose this course for his life when he could have enjoyed the comforts of a small seminary in New York, far away from the war? Here's what he said to a friend, "***Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security***." **The kind of courage that Dietrich Bonhoeffer displayed in his choice to suffer and die at the hands of the Nazis grew out of the confidence that all Christians share: death is a conquered foe, and our choices in this life now must be guided by what is best for the kingdom of God**.