

**12@12**  
**Taking the Long, Long View**  
**February 2, 2017**

Today is going to be different. I do try to bring you a different look at different topics each month. But today will be decidedly different. Today we are going to take the long, long view.

Last month, I shared with you about success and some ways to find it. I shared a handful of suggestions, but one that seemed to really resonate with people is when I said that success requires looking up and looking down. If you weren't here last month, I shared that when we go for a run or a bicycle ride, we look up and we look down. We look up to see what's happening on the road ahead and make decisions about our course, and we look down in order to make sure that we don't get tripped up by what's right in front of us. Look up for too long or look down for too long and you are likely to get yourself in trouble. This is true when we go for a jog; it's true in much of life as well.

When I consider most of my talks at 12@12 I consider them "looking down" types of talks, at least on the larger scale of things. I share about how to find success in *this* life, how to incorporate generosity or gratitude in your life, or how to keep your edge and out of the slump. Oh sure, I often do add something that provides, shall we say, a slight heavenly perspective, but still what I talk about has to do with navigating the terrain that is in front of us.

Today, however, I want to take the long, long view. I want to broach what I think might be the most important question of all. And that question is: Is there eternal life after death? Let me explain why I think this is the most important question of all, especially since some of you might have expected me to say that more important questions are: Is there a God or who is Jesus?

I suppose I would say that my question is at least as important as those questions, because without life after death I'm not so sure those other questions would matter. For example, let's suppose there is a God, but that that God only created the world for temporary creatures. We are here today, gone tomorrow, for nothing more than his amusement. If this were the case, it might be important that we acknowledge God to

help us get along in this life, but in the end it wouldn't really matter much since the grave would be as far as any of us would get. Or let's suppose that Jesus came to die for our sins, but all that did was provide us forgiveness in this life. As in the other scenario, that forgiveness might make us feel a little better for the few years we are on Earth, but again in the end it wouldn't really mean anything. Do you see, then, that whether there is life after death really is an all important question for us?

A few years ago, *Time Magazine* ran an article entitled "How the Universe Will End." When you hear that title, you might be surprised that *Time* would weigh in on apocalyptic forecasts. But this article was not about a pending nuclear holocaust or an alien invasion, it was about the ultimate usable energy loss of the universe. There is angst from time to time about the waning supply of fossil fuels, but the loss of that supply is nothing like the loss of energy this universe will experience one day if it keeps on going. Eventually the stars will burn out and the universe will reach what me might call a state of thermal equilibrium that will be devastating to life. At that point, nothing will survive on any planet, let alone Earth.

Now, I want you to let that sink in. From time to time we do look up from our daily lives and take a longer view. Perhaps we attend a funeral of someone we figure died way too young. We are reminded of how fragile life is, and we vow to live a little bit different in light of our limited days. Maybe as a result we become involved in something that provides clean water to those who need it. Maybe we volunteer in a local school to help at-risk kids. Maybe we donate money to a long-standing civic institution. These are all good things and as some say, "Make the world a better place."

But remember today, I want to take the long, long view. And the long, long view is that if there is nothing beyond this life, the effect of our life will ultimately end in the same place. We will be in the grave and the universe will be a lifeless place that will have long consumed anything good we did. Another way to say that is: take route A or B, or X, Y, or Z in this life and in the long run the results will be just the same. That might seem rather depressing, but if there is no life after death I don't know how the long, long view can be described any differently.

But let's suppose there is life after death, that in some way the life we live right now is but a portal into another life. And let's suppose that what we do or think or believe in this life affects one's place in that afterlife. That would change everything, wouldn't it? Then going route A or B, or X, Y, or Z could have very different results. We would, you might say, have significant incentive to choose one route in life over another. It would guide the steps to take when we are looking down on the path of life.

This last week I moderated a discussion among people of all different faiths. A Jewish man posed the question, "How can we know if there is life after death?" Before we had gathered, he told me he really wanted to talk about this question because he said it's a really big question. And I couldn't agree with him more. It is a really big question. But how do we answer it? How can we know if there is life after death or not?

I have to tell you that I am rather pragmatic when it comes to a question like this. Some might say you just have to faith that life after death exists. I don't think faith is unimportant, but I don't think that faith makes something exist. If there is a life after death, it will not be our faith that makes it happen. It either is or isn't.

In my pragmatic approach, it seems to me that the only way we can garner any kind of confidence in the matter is to get the inside scoop from a trusted source who has been there before. Indeed, you gain confidence about things in this manner all the time. Your good friends travel to Costa Rica. They stay in a fine little resort with all kinds of super amenities. You have never been there, but nonetheless you confidently book a trip there yourself after hearing about their stay. In fact, because you have so come to trust their judgment from your years of friendship, it never even crosses your mind that they could be making this up and leading you astray. I tend to think our conclusion regarding the afterlife ought to come about in the same way. We need to talk to trusted people have been to the other side. But where do we find that?

Some look to what has become known as NDEs, or near death experiences. Perhaps you have read of some. A person seems to die. His heart has stopped to beat and there is no brain activity. Eyes are shut and there is no sign that any of his senses are working. And yet some time later, he awakens. And he (or she) awakens and tell stories of what

is beyond. Those who have had these experiences sometimes speak of seeing a bright light, of experiencing a certain calmness, or even of talking to people who have already died. Some of the most intriguing information from these NDE's is that people speak of earthly things they could not have known unless somehow they left their body during their "dead" period. Blind people who have had NDEs speak in visual detail about their surroundings. People lying in a hospital, who for all intents and purposes are dead, talk about what happened in their home (what people were wearing and eating) while they were in the hospital. Deaf people die, then come back and report on conversations they heard when they were dead. And accounts like this are not just found in supermarket tabloids, they are found in respected medical reports. Somehow in some way those who died and came back to life were for a time outside their bodies. There really is no other way to explain at least some of these NDEs.

But I am not sure that these stories do it for me in terms of knowing whether there is life after death. They certainly give me reason to believe that we are more than just materials beings, but what if the "soul" life experienced outside the body is short-lived, what if it only exists as long as the body is able to rebound. But if I don't rely on NDEs, where else do I turn to find out about any life after this one? This is where, for me, Jesus comes in. I know, I know, I am supposed to say that. I am in Christian ministry, so Jesus is supposed to be where I turn. But I think there is more to it than that.

I speak with people of all different kinds of religious backgrounds. One of the most interesting things is that nearly everyone respects Jesus regardless of whether they are Muslim or Buddhist or Mormon. They all think that Jesus was a good guy and worthy of following. When I read the most thorough biographies we have of Jesus written by his followers, I see that he was a good guy too. He was always looking out for the small guy. He was always telling it like it is, whether it was the popular thing to say or not. If Jesus would have told me of a little shack on the other side of the Sea of Galilee where I could pick up a fish sandwich for lunch, I would have believed him.

But it seems to me Jesus gives us reason to believe him about a lot more than just a fish sandwich. I like the occasion when some men brought a crippled man to Jesus. They actually lowered him through a roof

because they couldn't get in the crowded front door. Everyone knew what they wanted. They wanted their friend to be healed. Jesus does something curious though. He says, "Your sins are forgiven." Your sins are forgiven? What is that all about? I mean I'm sure the guy would like his sins forgiven, but let's get down to business Jesus: this guy came to walk not to be forgiven. Besides isn't forgiveness of sins something that only God can do? So what does Jesus do. He says this: "So that you know that the Son of Man (the personal name he used for God and applied to himself) has the authority to forgive sins, pick up your mat and walk." And lo and behold the man gets up and walks. Jesus, in essence, said I know you can't measure whether I've forgiven sins or not, since that it is part of the unseen world, but so that you know what I am talking about, I'll do something in the seen world. I'll make this man walk.

Now, it would be one thing if this was the only time something like this happened with Jesus. But according to the biographical accounts, it happened all the time. Jesus was always doing things that confirmed that there was another world than the one we live in and that he knows all about it.

Just before Jesus died, he spoke to his closest followers. He told them he was about to die at the hands of his enemies, and understandably they were quite concerned. It's at that point that he says,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1-4)

Isn't that interesting? Jesus says he knows something about the afterlife. He says he knows all about it. He says he plans for his followers to be with him there. Now, if Joe Schmuck on the side of the road told me this, I would laugh and move on. But this is Jesus speaking. This is someone who did all kinds of things to show that he is trustworthy on these otherworldly matters. I spoke earlier of friends suggesting a resort in Costa Rica. I don't think it would be unreasonable to believe them and book a ticket. Similarly, it does not seem unreasonable to believe Jesus when he speaks of a life after this one. He proved, at least to me,

that he is worthy of my trust. How can we know there is life after death? For me, the answer is because Jesus told us so.

I began this talk by saying I was going to take the long, long view today. And it seems to me that if there is a life after this one that goes onto eternity, the long, long view is something we should keep in mind as we look down to navigate the terrain of this life. If there is nothing beyond this life, do as you please. Your end will be the same regardless of what path you choose. But if there is a life after this one, even as Jesus says there is, then perhaps any old road won't do. Maybe in whom you trust and how you live makes a difference. Maybe it will help you decide what steps to take when you are looking down from day to day.

© 2017 John Hopper