

We are Family...Forever!

Isaiah 65:17–25 ¹⁷ “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. ²⁰ “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. ²³ They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

In Christ Jesus our Brother, dear fellow redeemed,

It was early morning when the phone rang. A member of my mom’s hospice team was calling to tell me that she had just passed away. I knew the call was coming, but still I was caught a bit off guard by some of the thoughts, which in that moment, began to pass through my mind. I thought about how long mom had battled the disease of cancer – just over 21 years. I thought about the times she had been so sick that I was sure she was going to die, either from the cancer itself or just as likely, its intended cure. But she didn’t. Mom had always hung in there until this time, dying this past January, just five days short of her 84th birthday. And then there was one more thought. With dad having passed away 12 years earlier, it suddenly occurred to me that I was now an orphan – not the happiest thought, but not at all surprising.

It’s the very nature of death to leave us feeling scared, sad, and alone. For this reason, among so many others, no one likes to talk or even think about death. It’s the elephant in the room for everyone, except our God. He talks about death quite a bit throughout the pages of Scripture, including the verses before us from Isaiah 65. Let’s hear what God has to say about death and life under the theme: We are Family...Forever.

That, in and of itself, is an amazing statement when you remember how death came to life so long ago. How can we forget? The world was brand new. Our family was small, consisting of just one couple – our first parents Adam and Eve. God made the perfect people, placed them in a perfect home, on a perfect planet in a perfect universe. He promised them everything would remain perfect as long as they listened to him. He warned them that any disobedience on their part would bring death to them, to their descendants, and to creation itself.

You know what happened. The man and woman listened, not to the voice of their loving Father, but to the empty promises of the liar, Satan. They sinned, and as their Father warned, they ruined everything. Rather than receiving God’s continued blessings, they brought upon themselves and us, sin’s curse. What was meant to be a joyful, fulfilling, unending life was now filled with agony and frustration. God said to the woman: “**...with pain you will give birth to children.**” (Genesis 3:16). To the man, God said: “**Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.**” (Genesis 3:17-19). Just like that, joy gave way to sorrow as life gave way to death.

And so it is to this day. Sin's curse never skips a generation. Each of us has been born in the likeness of those first two sinners. We've inherited their guilt and have done nothing but add to it with a lifetime of our own sin and shame. What does all this get us? The man named Job, in the throws of deep depression, answers this way: "**Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure.**" (Job 14:1). Sin gets us misery here and here after. This is true...if sin gets the last word. But it doesn't! God does.

Listen: "**Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.**" (Isaiah 65:17). Interesting! Is God declaring a "do-over"? We couldn't blame him if he chose to write us all off as an eternally "lost cause" and start over from scratch. Right? He could let us all die off; let us all suffer eternal destruction and pretend none of this ever happened. But that's not what he's talking about here. It's not a do-over. It's a restoration!

Don't forget, when God was handing out curses in the garden he said to the devil in serpent's form: "**I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.**" (Genesis 3:15). Rather than treat our parents and us as our sins deserve, our holy God devised a plan that would satisfy his justice and, at the same time, save his children from their sin. This could only be done through the efforts of a Perfect Substitute, One who would be willing to gift his holiness to all us sinners and then give up that same holy life to cancel our sin-debt by suffering sin's curse in our place. This is what happened when Jesus, who is both God's Son and the woman's offspring, lived, died, and then rose from the grave for you and all people. He restored our holy status. He made us right again with God. Jesus promises that everyone who believes this "**...has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.**" (John 5:24).

That sounds great, doesn't it? But if we've crossed over to life, why do believers still die? Here's what we need to know. Sin kills two times over. It kills spiritually, separating sinners from holy God and sin brings physical death, the separation of the soul from the body. Here's the worst of it: When a spiritually dead person dies physically, that person then experiences eternal death in hell, forever separated from God. Jesus suffered our eternal death in place of us. When God works faith in us to believe this about Jesus, a resurrection takes place. God raises us from spiritual death to spiritual life. Because God did this for you and me in our baptism, physical death, the separation of body and soul, can no longer harm us. In fact, by rising from the dead himself, Jesus has now made physical death the way that every believer's soul enters the glories of heaven to await the resurrection of the body when Jesus returns.

It's so critical for us to see all this as God sees it. Too often we think and speak of death like the world around us. We might say that we've lost a loved one to cancer. Or that a Christian friend lost his life in a car accident. That kind of talk isn't helpful. We don't lose those who die in Christ. Death can't sever our family ties. In Jesus we are family forever! In the same way, our Christian friend hasn't lost anything in death. Look at what the Scripture says, "**The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.**" (Isaiah 65:17). Ok, the Christian who dies does lose something. She loses all memories of sin and the pain it caused in this life. Such things will never come to mind. She will never have to deal with sin again because there is no sin in the paradise God has made for his people. This explains why "**...the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.**" (Isaiah 65:19) Those who live in God's heaven revel in the victory Christ has gotten them over sin and death. God has purged them of their sin. They are holy like Jesus. This is why we call them "saints triumphant." Sin can't hurt them ever again – not in heaven.

"**Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.**" (Isaiah 65:20). Wait a minute. I thought we just

said that in heaven God's people don't sin and they don't die. What is this talk of "dying at a hundred"? It's God's way of explaining to mere mortals like us the wonders of eternity. What's it like to live eternally? I don't know. Do you? God says, imagine living a really long time, so long that somebody who is a hundred is considered a mere child. Or how about this, God says, **"...as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands."** (Isaiah 65:22). Oh, you mean we'll keep going like one of those 3000 year old sequoia trees out west.

In the world to come, God restores his people to their original, perfect, eternal condition. No wonder he tells them: **"...be glad and rejoice forever..."** (Isaiah 65:18). But do you know the greatest reason for rejoicing? It's right here – God says, **"I will rejoice...and take delight in my people;"** (Isaiah 65:19). Our loved ones who die are not just a "number" to God, another soul to cram into some empty corner of heaven. They are precious and important to our God. He celebrates them, not for a day or two, but for eternity, even as he will rejoice in and celebrate us when it's our turn to come home. You and I, and our loved ones in Christ, we are the family of God forever – forever joyful! And...forever blessed!

Blessed in what way? In other words, what is it like for those who have gone to be with Jesus? Is heaven one long worship service? I suppose in a sense it is. But that's not to say that we'll spend our eternity gathered in a circle singing hymns. God's people worship him in all they do. God explains: **"They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat... 23 They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them."** (Isaiah 65:21-23). More picture language to help us try to imagine the unimaginable. What is heaven like for our loved ones? What will it be like for us? There will be no frustrations, no disappointments, no rat race, no accidents, and no tragedies. Will there be work to do? I don't know, but if there is, it will bring us a sense of perfect fulfillment and complete satisfaction as we and our family of saints enjoy blessing upon blessing from our God who then as now anticipates and supplies our every need, promising: **"Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear."** (Isaiah 65:24)

I don't know about you, but these words of Scripture sure help me to look beyond our present reality. They let me dream of what heaven is for our fellow believers who are there, and what it will be for you and me—the home of tranquility where **"The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD."** (Isaiah 65:25). God paints a beautiful picture of heavenly peace. There will be no backbiting, no disagreements, no road rage or violence of any kind. Those who were once enemies because of their sin, will now form a family forever at peace. As for that remaining enemy, Satan, the serpent from Eden, he will eat dust in the dungeons of hell for time without end. He will never hurt us again!

What wonderful encouragement God thinks to give us! He could leave us wondering about all these things, but he doesn't. Instead he shows that when our loved ones in Christ pass away, we are not left as orphans here. For our loved ones live, right now, in a home of indescribable joy, blessings, and peace. Neither they nor we have lost anything at all, because not even death can change the fact that We are Family...Forever in Christ Jesus who has made it so. Amen.