

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 25, 2017
Based on Luke 23:39-43; I Thessalonians 4:13-17; John 6:54; I Cor. 15:35-44,51-52***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a summer sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In the news over the past couple of weeks we have witnessed a number of tragic and unexpected deaths, some close to home, others around the world. Such tragedies remind us of the fragility and the shortness of life. We like to think that the afterlife, if there is one, is distant from us, but the events of each day remind us that the question of our eternal destiny is immediately relevant and pressing.

So what happens when you die? One very common answer to that question in our day is that nothing happens when you die—you are just dead. It’s over. People who hold this view generally do not believe in God or at least do not believe that God cares enough about you to want to keep you around. Jesus said—to the Sadducees who denied the afterlife, in one of his plainest statements in the gospels—that this view is wrong. [*Jesus said (to the Sadducees who denied the afterlife), “You are quite wrong.” Mark 12:27*] The clear message of Jesus is that God loves each of us deeply, and God’s intent is to create for you and me an eternal destiny. This is what God does through Jesus Christ, as Jesus opens the way for us into heaven.

So the Bible affirms that there is an afterlife. But among those who believe in an afterlife, there is a lot of fuzzy thinking—and some popular notions that are just not supported in the Scripture. Last week we discussed one of the very popular ideas in our time—that you have an immortal soul. In this view, the human being is a dualistic entity—you have a body, and you have a soul. The body will die, but when it does, the soul will naturally continue on and will float off into some spirit realm—maybe into a haunted house, or into a cycle of reincarnation, or perhaps into some kind of heaven. Interestingly enough, as we saw last week, the Biblical view of the human being has much more in common with modern science than it does with the popular imagination. In the Bible, as in science, there is no body/soul duality but a unified understanding of the human self—we may have mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects, but they are all thoroughly intertwined. Thus there is nothing naturally or automatically immortal about us. If we are to have eternal life, it must be because God raises us out of death into everlasting life. This is precisely the promise of the New Testament, and it is exactly what we see in Jesus.

When Jesus dies on the cross, his followers do not say, “Well, his body died, but it’s O.K., because his soul has gone on to be with God.” His followers were devastated, feeling that all was lost; and Jesus was buried. Then, on the third day, the disciples became witnesses to something completely new in the human story—resurrection.

In the resurrection, Jesus was raised out of death into life. It was not a floating off of

his soul into some disembodied spirit realm; it was actually a bodily resurrection. The tomb was empty. The risen Jesus physically appeared to his disciples, they could touch him, he even ate fish and broke bread. Nevertheless, there was also something quite different about his bodily form. He would appear and then vanish from their presence, and he ultimately ascended into heaven.

The resurrection of Jesus provides the shape for what the New Testament will subsequently proclaim about what happens when you die. We heard a passage about this from I Corinthians 15, where Paul talks about God raising us into a “spiritual body.” As he said, “It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.” (I Cor. 15:44) The basic New Testament idea is that in eternity, we will not simply be disembodied minds floating around in space, but we will have a bodily form. It will not be exactly the same body that we have now, thank heaven; but rather, as we see in the resurrected Jesus, it will be something best described as a spiritual body—a form that has some continuity with our earthly appearance but which is thoroughly transformed.

To help us to get the picture, Paul uses the image of sowing a seed. As he said, “You do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen . . .” (I Cor. 15:37-38) When a seed is sown, it is buried in the ground, as we will one day be buried. The plant that subsequently comes forth has continuity with the seed, but it is quite different and there is much more to it. So the promise of resurrection is that God will raise us out of death into a new and far more glorious form.

Thus the New Testament proclaims not the immortality of the soul but the resurrection of the body, and this affirms four key Biblical truths about the afterlife. First, as we have noted, everlasting life is not in our nature; it must be given to us by God. As Paul said, “This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” (I Cor. 15:53) This is precisely what God does for us through the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the idea of a spiritual body says that in eternity we retain our identity as distinct persons. When people over the ages have entertained notions about the immortality of the soul, they have often concluded that that soul, being purely spirit, may very well lose its particular identity. In Hinduism, for example, if you get reincarnated as a cow—which is not considered so bad, especially if people are not trying to eat you—you are not going to remember all the things you just did in this life. Your soul continues but your personality does not. In Buddhism, likewise, the individual soul is considered to be like a drop of spray from the ocean; nirvana is go back into the ocean, where the drop vanishes and simply merges with the whole. In contrast, the Christian proclamation says that God places infinite value on you as a person, and eternal life means that you continue as you.

This also means that in eternity, people do not blend into each other and into God, but

they continue in relationship and fellowship with one another. This is one of the most important aspects of eternal life, which is often emphasized by Jesus, and to which we will return in this sermon series—that God’s eternity means a community of persons sharing in love with one another and with God.

Finally, the idea of the resurrection of the body says, as we have noted, that in eternity we will have a bodily form. Our present earthly body is like the husk of the seed that Paul was talking about; it will decay and will not further be needed, but what comes forth in resurrection is that “spiritual body” which will enable us to continue to feel, to act, to experience, and to enjoy God’s blessings forever.

All this is why one of the most prominent Christian symbols of resurrection is the butterfly. The transformation of caterpillar into butterfly, via the tomb-like cocoon, is a very good image of the New Testament idea that as our earthly body passes away at death, we are “changed,” as Paul says, into a new and far more wonderful form.

So if we must be resurrected into eternal life, the further question arises as to when exactly that resurrection happens. Here we find some confusing and apparently conflicting statements in the Scriptures. On the one hand, there are statements which seem to indicate that at death, the faithful enter immediately into eternal fellowship with God. In the gospel passage we heard this morning, Jesus said to the man next to him on the cross, “Today you will be with in paradise.” (Luke 23:43) Today! Of course, Jesus said that on Friday, and was not resurrected until Sunday, so there seems to be something a bit murky about that word “today.” We will come back to that in a moment.

On the other hand, there are statements in the New Testament which seem to indicate that there will be a final resurrection at the end of time, at the Second Coming of Christ, when the “trumpet will sound” and the dead will then rise. As Paul said in I Corinthians, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.” (I Cor. 15:51-52) Or again he said in I Thessalonians, “Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep [that is, those who have died]. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise . . .” (I Thessalonians 4:14,16) Likewise when Jesus was speaking in the passage we heard from John about people receiving eternal life, he said, “I will raise them up on the last day.” (John 6:54)

So which way is it? Do the faithful enter immediately into God’s presence at death, or are they “asleep” in some sense until a final general resurrection on “the last day” at the end of time? People have gone through all sorts of theological gyrations to try to bring these apparently conflicting concepts together. Some have suggested that at death the faithful enter into a purely spiritual fellowship with God, and then at the end of time, they share in a

final resurrection of the body and receive that “spiritual body” of which Paul spoke. So there’s a kind of two-stage process. Others, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, have tried to simplify the matter and teach that at death you are just dead in the ground until the final resurrection, when you are raised into new bodily life. But since no one really wants to wait around very long, they also teach that that final resurrection is coming real soon. Others outline a yet more complex process, such as the Catholic church, which has to work purgatory into the picture. We’ll come back to that in the future in this series.

The confusion arises because people are trying to think about the afterlife from the standpoint of our position within time, which is somewhat like trying to consider the shape of the earth while standing in your back yard. You are just not getting the full picture. We need a different perspective. In fact, all the Biblical statements about the afterlife fit perfectly together if we look at them from the standpoint of eternity.

In this life, we are of course within time. We are like the characters in a book; our life here on earth is unfolding on a particular page, and there are many events in the past, and many events on future pages that are yet to unfold. From our standpoint, there is a giant gap between our life and the life of Jesus, which was on a much earlier page, and between our life and the final judgment and resurrection, at the end of the book.

Meanwhile, God is the author of the book, and is thus outside the book. God is in eternity, which is outside of time. To God, all the pages of the book are present at once. This is why God knows the future—not because God is very good at predicting things, but because God sees the future. From our position within time, there is a big distance between Jesus’ death on the cross and the moment of our death and the moment that the Bible describes with the image of the last trumpet. But when we die, we leave the book, and we enter into eternity. From the standpoint of eternity, those moments—the moment of our death, the moment when Jesus gives his life for our sins to save us, and the moment of the last judgment and final resurrection—are all simultaneous. The day of our death and the “last day” when the trumpet sounds and we are resurrected are the same eternal day.

So do we enter immediately into God’s presence at death? Yes. And when does resurrection happen? In the same eternal moment, which is the same moment when Jesus gives his life on the cross to save you. Those points in time that seem separated for us are not separated in eternity; they are part of the same eternal now. This is why Jesus could say on Friday that the man on the cross would enter paradise with him that day even though resurrection would not happen until Sunday, because Friday and Sunday, while separated in time, are simultaneous in eternity. This also explains how Jesus could say to the Sadducees, in a passage we heard earlier in this series, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not dead but living, and were already living in heaven in the days of Moses. [*Jesus said, “God said to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is God not of the dead but of*

the living.” Mark 12:26-27] If eternal life becomes possible through Jesus, how could Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be sharing in eternal life more than a millennium before Jesus? It is because the resurrection of Jesus is an eternally saving moment which applies to the whole book of time—the resurrection applies to those of us who are after Jesus in time, and it applies equally to those who were before Jesus in time. So just as we are saved through Jesus and enter at death into eternity, so Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were saved through Jesus Christ and entered, upon their death, into the life of eternity. Of course, we are saved not only because of what Jesus does; we are saved as we put our faith in Christ, and accept and receive the salvation that Christ brings. So how could Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be saved when they did not know anything about Jesus? It is because they had faith in God and what God would do, and thus they were saved by virtue of what God would ultimately do through Jesus Christ, even though they did not yet understand anything about Jesus. This has broad implications, to which we will return in this sermon series.

If all this is somewhat mind-boggling, it is because we are time-bound creatures struggling to grasp eternity. The important thing to realize is that the Biblical message all comes together around a clear and coherent truth—that God through Christ brings us into everlasting life. We will pursue further aspects of that truth as this sermon series continues, and we take hold of the promise that by the grace of Jesus Christ “we shall be with the Lord forever.” (I Thess. 4:17)