

Luke 16:19-31
What Happens When You Die: New Testament
October 9th, 2016

A story is told about “a father who was at the beach with his children when his 4 year old son ran up to him, grabbed his hand, and led him to the shore. There a seagull lay dead in the sand.

Pointing to the seagull the little boy asked, “Daddy, what happened to him?”

The dad got a bit serious and said, “He died and went to heaven.”

The boy thought a moment and then said, “What? Did God throw him back?””

Indeed, what happens when we die? We began exploring this very important thought last week with the Old Testament’s understanding of Sheol, the place of the dead.

This week and for the next several weeks we will explore the N T understanding beginning with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Now this parable wasn’t originally spoken to tell us specifically what happens when we die. Jesus intent here wasn’t to describe heaven and hell.

His purpose was to warn against greed and indifference to human suffering and through that we get a glimpse of what Jesus believed and taught about Heaven and Hell. Basically, our attitude toward God and neighbor determines where we will spend eternity. Heaven and hell begin in this world.

As we read and think about this keep in mind that in this parable **we are the “5 brothers”**. We are not the rich man. We certainly are not Abraham, and I pretty much know none of us here are sore covered beggars named Lazarus, which means “God Helps”. We are the 5 brothers who need to listen to Moses and the Prophets and the One who has been raised from the dead.

We are the 5 brothers who need to repent, to turn towards God in trust and turn toward neighbor in love to be saved, to wind up in “Abraham’s bosom.” **Abraham’s Bosom** was figurative for what we call heaven. The Jews taught it was **“the place of highest bliss.”**

I like the fact that they thought of heaven in terms of relationship, they imagined heaven to be a place where a figure would comfort them in his arms as a father comforts a sleepy child.



Here is a picture of my son-in-law Austin, my daughter Amy and of course “Sweet Pea” in the bosom, the chest of her father. This is the comfort and peace that the ancient Hebrews assumed they would experience in the good part of Sheol.

As Deuteronomy 33:27 says, **“The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”**

Now Interpreters of the NT are pretty evenly split as to what Jesus is describing here. Some say it is the OT understanding of Sheol where the spirits of both the righteous and the wicked go upon death that has two sections: a smoking and non-smoking as the old joke goes.

Or it is the more traditional Christian understanding of two completely separate places: heaven and hell. What is obvious from what Jesus says is that there are 2 places and our designation in one or the other by God is irreversible. As Jesus has Abraham say, **“a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”**

The story also shows us that beyond death we still experience consciousness, memory and relationships. The Rich man is spoken of as having pain, thirst and even compassion on his 5 brothers. The Rich Man suddenly developed an interest in missions and sending Lazarus

on a mission to them. We are aware on the other side of death and in many instances I believe even more aware for our memories will be enhanced, we will remember the good, and the bad will fade away in the presence of the glory of God.

Again, “the rich man was lost because he did not listen to the Law and the Prophets, and not because he was rich. It is the abuse of riches and the neglect of the needy neighbor that is here condemned so unconditionally.” Abraham in his day was rich.

Part of the idea behind this was in Jesus’ day everyone ate with their hands and you can imagine how messy this was. The filthy rich, like this man, would use chunks of bread to wipe his hands on to clean them up, and then would toss the bread to the dogs, the very dogs that licked Lazarus’ sores. This is the picture of willful indifference, a sin of omission.

Lazarus’ name construes his attitude towards God: **“God helps”**. In the midst of his pain, sickness, and starvation he did not turn against God in bitterness and complaint. He knew his redeemer lived.

Love and good works follow us from this world to the next like our Revelation scripture reveals. For Lazarus his work was his belief and trust in God in the midst of absolute misery. The rich man did not even have one act of essentially throwing paper towels to a beggar to eat.

So what does this tell us? In heaven we will know loved ones, friends, and acquaintances. My belief and hope is that I will remember everybody’s name. You see the Rich Man having never met Abraham knew who he was. Though he never acknowledged Lazarus ever; he knew his name.

In the book “One Minute after You Die” the writer relates the following story. Page 80

“Judson B Palmer relates the story of the Rev. A.D. Sandborn. Rev. Sandborn called on a young Christian woman who was seriously distance.

*She whispered, "Now just as soon as they open the gate I will go in."
Then she sank upon her pillow in disappointment.*

She said, "They have let Mamie go in ahead of me, but soon I will go in."

Moments later she spoke again, "They let Grampa in ahead of me, but next time I will go in for sure."

No one spoke to her and she said nothing more to anyone, and seemed to see nothing except the sights of the beautiful city. Rev. Sandborn left the house.

Later in the day the pastor learned that the young woman had died that morning. He was so impressed with what she had said that he asked the family about the identity of Mamie and Grampa. Mamie was a little girl who had lived near them at one time, but later moved to New York State. As for Grampa, he was a friend of the family and had moved somewhere in the Southwest.

Rev. Sandborn then wrote to the addresses given him to inquire about these two individuals. Much to his astonishment he discovered that both Mamie and Grampa had died the morning of September 16, the very hour that the young woman herself had passed into glory."

Again we will know loved ones, friends, and acquaintances when we get to Heaven.

And in death, often times, we are escorted to heaven by angels. Lazarus was. I have never seen angels personally, but then again I have never died, or had a near death experience, but I have listened to stories. And some of you have written me stories that I want to collect for a devotional for the Lenten season. Write them down get them to me.

In death angels will accompany us, but more importantly Christ will meet us. Stephen the first Christian martyr said at his martyrdom from Acts 7:55-56, "**Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and**

saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

So is death our final enemy or with Paul can we say, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

In the NT there are several words used to describe death and the passage of souls. The first I want to mention is a “Departure.”

“On the Mount of Transfiguration Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus and “were speaking of his DEPARTURE which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” Luke 9:31 That word departure in Greek is “exodus”, from which we get our word exit.” It reminds us of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt and that God was with them. Jesus is not only waiting for us on the other side he walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. And note He and the disciples knew right away it was Moses and Elijah.

Death is also spoke of as a “Collapsing Tent”. Paul spoke of it this way and this is a scripture I have used at almost every funeral and memorial service I have ever done. “For we know that if the earthly tent, we live in is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” 2 Cor. 5:1

And I always couple that with John 14:1-2, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

The idea being that what God has given us here in this world is only temporary. We have an eternal dwelling place waiting for us, not only in terms of our homes, but also our bodies. When we die our spirits go home to heaven to the presence of Christ. Then when we are raised from the dead our spirits will be given new bodies that we will live on in forever in a New Heaven and a New Earth, the address being the city of the New Jerusalem. (More on these topics in the weeks to come.)

Death is also known as the **“Ultimate Healing”**. When I heard that phrase used the first time it made me mad. I could only think of life as good and sacred and could not even conceive of the meaning of the phrase, **“When my life becomes a burden”** from the hymn Stand by Me.

But now I realize that upon death our spirits go to heaven and we await the general resurrection of the dead. We await the New Heaven and the New Earth where the Tree of Life will be whose leaves are for the healing of the nations as Rev. 22:2 says. We will receive new perfect healthy bodies to live in forever more.

Some believe that the reason Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden was so they couldn't eat of the tree of life and be immortalized in this sinful condition. When we die we are cleansed of our sin through Jesus sacrifice and when we receive our new bodies in the New Heaven and Earth we will then eat of the fruit of the tree of life.

Death is also referred to as **“Sleep”**. It is a rest from work here on earth. Jesus referred to his friend Lazarus being asleep in the tomb. John 11:11 says, **“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.”** Paul writes, **“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.”** You often see this as a quote in nurseries at Churches. That's cute but the meaning is much deeper.

Now I know some think that when we die we simply sleep until the day of resurrection and the last judgment. This belief is called, “Soul Sleep.” But when you think about it Jesus said to the thief on the cross, **“TODAY you will be with me in Paradise.”** In Hebrews 9:27 it says, **“You die once and then there is the judgment.”** And remember, St. Stephen, he saw Jesus as he was dying. No, I believe we are conscious in the presence of Jesus and all our loved ones who have crossed over the moment we die.

Sleep is also the powerful metaphor behind the image of Bosom of Abraham. The image of a child, asleep, rocked in the arms of his or her parents. It is an image of rest, renewal and refreshment.



Finally, remember in this parable we are the 5 brothers. To receive the gift of eternal life we need to put our trust in God as revealed in Jesus Christ and love our neighbor as ourselves. We need to repent which means to turn to God in trust and towards our neighbor in love.

What happens after we die is much dependent on what we do here on earth even here right now. Much of what it is like; is a mystery, but it is not a mystery how to get there. We simply must trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior and God. So let's do that right now. Would you pray with me?

Lord we don't know completely what it's going to be like when we die, but we know that you are there. We trust that you will take us there for you are the way the truth and the life.

In Jesus' name, amen!