

Veterans Recognition Sunday

November 11, 2001

"A PEEK AT THE LAST PAGE..."

"But I would not want you to be ignorant concerning those who are asleep, that you sorrow no, even as others who have no hope." I Thessalonians 4:13

One of the most frequently requested sermon topics of all time is the one I bring to you today. It comes in many variants, but each and all revolve around the question: "What happens when we die?" Back when I was in my first year of Ministry I asked my wife's grandfather Curtis up in Armagh Pennsylvania, what sermon he would most like to hear. He responded without a moment's hesitation: "What's coming next? What will the future be like for me and mine?" He was nearing 90 at the time. I have often heard it since.

So it did not surprise me when I circulated a sermon request form in the bulletin for a couple of weeks early this summer, that the only duplicate request (in fact there were three) was for a sermon on the subject of "What happens when we die?"

The question through the years comes in different disguises. Sometimes people want to know how I know that heaven is there. Sometimes they ask whether we go straight to heaven, or do we "wait in the ground until Jesus comes back," as St. Paul says in I Thessalonians 4. Sometimes the widow asks "Do you think Charlie will be there waiting for me?" Many mourners want to know if those who are gone know what is going on, on earth. "Can they see us?"...Ultimately, they want to know: "Can they communicate with those who are left behind?" Then, they want to know why those who are gone do not initiate heavenly communication more often than they do. Many yearn for some small measure of closure, one little peek.

A few years ago, after his young son was killed in an accident, Eric Clapton recorded a song, "Tears in Heaven", asking the same question. The song became widely popular back then. I still hear it every once in a while, especially since September 11, 2001. It began "Will you be the same, If I saw you in heaven? ...Would you hold my hand if I saw you in heaven?" etc. He was searching. Most touching to be sure, from a father who really wanted to know.

At times the focus of the question becomes more theoretical. " Do people know it when they are dead?" Often someone asks: " Do you believe in purgatory, Reverend?" Is there an " in-between" place, where some people go, those who were a bit devilish, but not evil. Like someone said of Huck Finn, " He had none of the virtues except the essential ones, and all of the vices except the unforgivable ones."

In the case of little children who die at birth, or as infants, there seems to be a need to have somewhere special for them to go. In traditional Christian theology that place is called Limbo/Infantum. It is an intermediate or transitional place where infants are safe and are not left alone. I prefer to believe that God in his mercy accepts infants and children directly to himself. I see no need for them to be assigned to a limbo because they have not been baptized, or because they have not earned salvation. But it is a time-honored tradition.

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I told you once before that my mother asked me a question one afternoon back in 1985, 33,000 feet up in the sky, flying together on USAir from Pittsburgh to Florida, after my brother and father had passed away. It was her first flight ever. She looked out the window and asked me, "Well, where is it Richard?" I said, "Where is what?" She said, "Heaven, isn't it supposed to be up here somewhere?"

I said I didn't know. I explained that heaven was a concept, a place where we would be with the Lord. I said I learned in seminary that it was not a spatial reference, not a floating empire on a raft of clouds. I volunteered that it was not necessarily 'up' and Hades 'down'. Slightly exacerbated, she asked "Then, where is it?" To satisfy her I ended the discussion by saying it was likely farther up, farther than an airplane could go.

As an aside (perhaps to defend myself) I always am suspicious of the person, minister or Theologian, who pretends to know the exact details of heaven and how to get there. From time to time I hear radio or television preachers harping on with uncompromising finality about what happens when we die. Some conservative evangelicals and Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, etc., have it all spelled out and down pat. They use their chosen verses from selected portions of the Bible.

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I can tell you what the Bible says: Old and New Testament. I can tell you what other faiths tend to believe. I can surely tell you what I believe. But when you cross the line into metaphysical things and matters of heaven and everlasting life, I always advise humility. "My ways are not your ways," saith the Lord, "Neither are my thoughts your thoughts."

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When you come to the Bible it is not as easy as it sounds, even for the experienced theologian. It might surprise you when I say that there is not a definitive consistent word in all the Scriptures about what happens when we die. There seem to be several different ideas, with equal credence, and differing emphases. At times the Bible says that the dead will remain asleep until judgment day arrives, and Jesus Christ returns at the Second Coming. At other times, it seems that we will go directly to heaven when we die. Sometimes you get the feeling that the Bible teaches that our souls go on to God as our bodies enter the ground. But Saint Paul teaches a resurrection of the body.

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There is no way to pull all these ideas together into one single belief. Being a Pastor in the reformed tradition, I am mindful of what John Calvin wrote in his study of "*The Last Things*": "It is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our souls intermediate state....It is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than Christ permits us to know. Scripture goes no further than to say that Christ is present with the deceased. They will receive blessed rest...but "all things will be held in suspense until Christ the Redeemer appears." Amen.

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In the early years and centuries of the Old Testament the concept of living on after death was not a primary concern. They worried more about their community. (It could be that God is nudging us in that direction now.) Still, there appears to be a universal idea that death did not mean the end of life. In the early Old Testament, those who died went to Sheol. When Jacob was distraught because he believed his son Joseph was dead; he said, “ I shall go down to Sheol, to my son, mourning.” (Genesis 37:35) Following Korah’ s rebellion in the book of Numbers, it says, as Moses had predicted, “ ...They and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them...” (Numbers 16:33)

The best-known example of all is the time when Saul went to a medium and asked her to “ divine” up the spirit of Samuel who was deceased. She did. When the vision came, “ Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed his face to the ground and did obeisance.” (I Samuel 28:14)

We could go on. Sheol is mentioned sixty-four times in the Old Testament. It appears to be a place where souls are gathered together under ground. It is not Hell but neither is it heaven. It is mainly a place for the dead to go and remain, waiting for literally God only knows what.

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Beyond Sheol, there is another reflection from the early Hebrew Scriptures. It was critical to remember those who were gone. Immortality was not an important concern. When Jacob died it reads simply, “He breathed his last.” The Patriarch’s major concern was not that he get to heaven, but to make sure that each of his twelve sons and the tribes of Israel for which they were named, would not forget him or his fathers or their faith. So long as someone remembered you and carried on your name and faith, you were not gone from the earth.

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Later, in the Old Testament, things began to change, partly because of what happened when God’s people went into exile. By then, with Jerusalem destroyed and the survivors of God’s people carted off to Babylon, they could no longer be gathered to their fathers; that is, it was too far to the land where their fathers were buried, and there was no one to take them anyway, and if there were, they were not permitted to leave.

At that time a concept began to arise of a personal immortality. Daniel wrote that those “who sleep in the desert” will awake. Best known of all is the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel, where the dry bones came to life. The dead were not dead. Ezekiel peeked over the top of the highest mountain in the world and came back to tell us that they live on forever more. The bones are connected. King David said on the death of his son, "He shall not come back to me; but I shall go to him." They were/are beginning to understand. Human life is precious. Our lives will outlast their mortal sphere. A little later Job said that “without his flesh he would see God.”

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When we come to the New Testament, unfortunately it is not all that much clearer. There is very little teaching from Jesus about the afterlife. In the Gospels, His references to eternity are normally part of a larger teaching. Jesus believed in the everlasting life, which was also common in the tradition of the Pharisees. He seems to have believed that God's people will be rewarded by what they have done on earth. He stated that He was "The Way, The Truth and The Life". But most of the time, He seems to have been far more concerned about what we do on earth to bring on the Kingdom of God, than how we can rest forever in the clouds. The Kingdom continues on in the afterlife, but it begins in the here and now.

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It was not until Saint Paul began to write his letters about twenty-five years later, that the issue took on a new character. Paul had to reassure the living about the ones who had already died. What would happen to them? In I Thessalonians chapter four, he explained that Christ would greet them first when He returned. In I Corinthians 15 He raised the discussion to a higher level. "What is sown is physical", he writes, "what is raised is spiritual." He does not tell us what that means exactly, but anyone can assume just by looking that the physical body does not survive its own death. Jesus survived death, or rather was brought back as the Son of God. That he is the message of Easter. But our mortal bodies do not survive their demise. Primarily, the "Spiritual Body" requires that the resurrected form be recognizable as the person who lived on earth. Tell Eric Clapton that his son will know who he is. I cannot believe in reincarnation mainly because it would mean that the person I know as you in this life would disappear and come back as someone else and someone else again.

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What happens when we die? ...There is a nearly unanimous opinion that we will each appear before the judgment seat of Almighty God, to give an accounting of what we did in our years on earth. Hebrews 9:27 says, " And just once it is appointed for men to die once, " and after that comes judgment" Romans 14:10 adds, " For we shall all stand before the " judgment seat of God; ...each of us shall give account of himself (herself) to God."

That can be a fearful thought: the memory of things you never should have said or done keeps cropping up. If you fear what God, the Righteous Judge, might say or do to you, then let me take it up a station higher. Hebrews 9:28 continues, "So Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly awaiting him." The important concern here is not what we do not know, but that we know Christ is our advocate. He is on our side. He will be there to guide and comfort and save us on Judgment Day.

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Some insist that you must say this word or that word, always their words, lifted from selected passages in the New Testament in order to be admitted to Heaven. But the Bible is not so final or narrow as some assume. I think what is required is that we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to whom the creator God has entrusted the keys to eternal life and the only keys. The New Testament is clear that salvation comes only through Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. I believe that completely. If you believe that Jesus Christ is God, they are one and the same.

But, that does not mean that our Lord is limited to do it as some Christians interpret he should. The gift of Eternal Life is on his terms. On the cross, Jesus said to one of the criminals hanging beside him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43). The convicted thief had just rebuked the other criminal being crucified, "We are guilty", he said, "but this "man was innocent." (23:41) He made no confession of faith. He did not surrender his life to Jesus. He just made an observation that the King of the Jews had done no wrong. Apparently that was enough to please the Lord.

In Matthew chapter seven we read, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he (she) who does the will of my father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evil doers.'" (Matthew 7:2-23) The well known scene in Matthew 25, where the sheep are separated from the goats also applies here. There could be many surprises when Judgment Day comes. Some who talked the best game of belief might hear the words of rebuke. Others, who were not part of the insiders' confessional crowd, might hear kind and reassuring words from the Lord. He can open the gates of everlasting life to anyone and everyone he chooses.

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Dr. Fred Speakman, an old friend of mine now gone, once said that he liked to think of Judgment Day as a courtroom trial in heaven. You (or I) will be the defendant. All those who wish to testify against us will be the witnesses for the prosecution. Everyone you have hurt or harmed or neglected, or even those who thought you did, can come forward. God himself will be the Judge. The

prosecuting attorney has the long list of faults and foibles, failures and sins. Oh dear, it will be a long day at trial, listening and waiting and wondering as the misdeeds of the days and decades of our lives are paraded before the court. No doubt a touch of fear. But the most fearful thing of all is that no one seems to be there to speak for the defense. “ I tried hard. I did my best. Who will speak for me?”

Then in this dream of Judgment, someone will arise from the back of the courtroom. In a calm, deep, reassuring voice, you will hear the words called out, “ The defendant is a friend of mine. I will speak for him (her). I will vouch for them.”

That voice will be the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ. He knows our mortal frame; he became one of us; he was tempted in all ways such as we. He knows what it is to be a human being, frail and fragile as we are. And, while he never failed, he understands why we do.

It still might not seem fair, but the weight of evidence has shifted. It might seem unfair: It turns out that the defense attorney is the Son of the Judge, and the Judge did not recuse himself. They sit beside each other in their home in the heavenly realm. They are on the best of terms: Father, Son... You belong to Christ; He belongs to the Father. Everything is going to work out right.

Finally, the judge will say, “ Thank you my Son. Open up the gates for the ones you choose, for now and evermore!" Amen.

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(This sermon is patterned on the last chapter of Dr. Cromie' s newest book, a revised and enlarged “ *When You Lose Someone You Love*”)