

WHAT HAPPENS TO ONE'S SOUL WHEN THEY DIE?

TRINITY BIBLE CHURCH

Luke 16:19-31

April 8, 2012

In thinking of the events of this weekend some 2000 years ago, it struck me that the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord and Savior totally changed the way both life and death were viewed, both then and certainly now. It seems that in the Old Testament times, very little was understood about eternity and what the future held for those whose life was over. There were some, however, who did grasp the meaning of life and death — those who had faith in and looked forward to the coming glory of God. Many of these are spoken of in Hebrews, chapter 11, which is often called “the triumphs of faith” or something similar. They knew for sure that their afterlife held something of far greater value than their life on earth. They didn’t know exactly what it was, but they still looked forward to it. Others simply had no understanding, as do many, today. They seem to live a meaningless life, without purpose or knowledge of their destination.

With the advent of what we celebrate, it became perfectly clear that life does not end with physical death, as many then and now believe. The soul lives on after we pass from this earth. It was true then, is true today and will remain true forever. It has not only changed the reality of death, but also changed our attitude about death.

While I have never officiated at a funeral, as a chaplain at Del Webb hospital, I have ministered to both believing and non-believing families of those who have passed. Some were for those who had reached the end of their days after a long life and for some, their death came un-expectedly.

It is very clear that there is a decided difference in the attitude of those in attendance based on whether the deceased person was or was not a believer in Jesus Christ. For those in Christ know that the believer’s soul is with Jesus and are celebrating while the others are mourning.

Regardless of whether the person was a believer or not, what remained was a shell, a lifeless form, devoid of all life forces that once defined who that person was. They were physically dead!

Keep in mind that at any moment, anyone of us could find ourselves facing immanent death. For some of us, this may be our day or last year on earth in this physical body. This is this reality that we must all face: every one of us must experience an event called death.

But what actually happens at the time of physical death? What about our soul — what happens to it? Where does it go? I have been asked this question, over and over again, particularly when ministering to these families.

While we cannot fully control disease, accident, or being a victim of a moral crime, we can have complete assurance of what will happen at that very moment of death and thereafter.

The very words of Jesus, as recorded in Luke’s gospel, are, I believe, the definitive revelation of the realities of what happens to souls at the moment of death and thereafter.

While not all bible commentators agree with the conclusions that I will suggest to you tonight, it is important to understand that there is no universal agreement on each point among the bible commentators, themselves.

But I ask you to consider some of the reasoning's I will be sharing regarding these things.

I know that many books have been written regarding near-death experiences and there are also books written by those who believe they received a visitation from angels who have told them what it will be like. And some have written accounts of dead relatives who have passed on the secrets of the life beyond. And there are accounts of people who say they have been caught up to heaven during their surgery or their accident and were shown wonderful things, and then they have come back.

Please understand that I'm not implying that those folks didn't experience the things of which they write. What I do want to point out, though, is that the revelation of God's word is usually discounted in most of those accounts.

The apostle Paul records that it is possible for rebellious angels, spirit beings, to masquerade as a messenger from God. It is possible for them to appear as dead relatives; as they are referred to in scripture as "familiar spirits". Paul writes in 2 cor. 11:14-15a: "and no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

We must ask, "Why is it that people are so willing to reject the scriptural account of something as important as death to take up these other books and experiences?"

I believe the underlying reason is that they don't want to be accountable to the truth of scripture. It seems more in vogue to hold to an ever-increasing view, even among young theologians, that ultimately God lets everyone into heaven.

But I pray that you will agree that as bible believing Christians, we must focus on what Jesus has to say about these things and not the thoughts of those who do not accept the truth of God's word.

So this evening we are going to explore what the scriptures teach, and more specifically what Jesus taught, about the conscious experiences of the afterlife, both for the believer and the unbeliever.

Please open your bibles to Luke 16:19-31; and follow as I read Jesus' words.

"Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom.

And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' and he said, 'then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'they have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' but he said, 'no, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' but he said to him, 'if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'"

It is vital to understand that Jesus would never use a myth or a fairy tale to communicate essential truth, especially regarding his upcoming resurrection.

Some call this text a parable, but I would submit to you that it is not a parable.

In most cases when Jesus spoke metaphorically, he, in fact, specifically prefaced his teaching by saying that this is a parable. But here he did not! In addition, this is the only "parable-like" text in which Jesus actually names a character—he says: "a certain poor man named Lazarus"! To give a name to the poor man speaks to the reality of an event that he knew of directly.

This should not be thought as unusual, as the bible teaches that Jesus was God incarnate and that he spoke what he heard the father say, and did what he saw the father do. And remember that "in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

Verses 19 & 20 tell us of two men were on the opposite ends of life's spectrum — the rich man lived in luxury, wore the most expensive clothing, and most likely, had many servants. Verse 28 says that he came from a large family, having 5 brothers. And from verse 30, we learn that his family lived without regard to moral integrity before God, nor compassion for the poor. The rich man confessed their need for repentance!

Riches have the tendency to do just that — to make us live for the now, with no accountability for how we treat others and no dependence upon God for life.

In contrast to the rich man, Lazarus' life situation was one of abject poverty — he had no one to care for him — verses 20 & 21 reveal that he was fraught with disease and starvation. And the fact of the stray dogs licking his sores describes a man who had not experienced the compassion of anyone from the town. But in spite of all his maladies, like Job, he held to his faith in God and to the hope of the messiah.

In his humanness, he had every reason to cast off hope in God, but he held to his faith in the midst of his suffering and calamities.

We are reminded in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, of how the glory of heaven outweighs our sufferings. Paul writes: "therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Even though this is addressed to believers after the resurrection of Christ, the principles are still true for those who held to the hope of the messiah before Christ's death

As bad as things can get for the believer, as much suffering and destitution that a person may experience in this life, the eternal weight of glory which awaits us is far more exceedingly glorious. As torturous as the enemy of the gospel may make our life here on earth, our everlasting reward far outweighs the suffering of our earthly experience.

The things that are seen are temporary, fleeting, and even deceptive. The spiritual things that are not seen are eternal and I pray that this is the hope of every one of us here today!

Turning back to our scripture, versus 22-31 describes what immediately happens after death.

For the poor man, Lazarus, there is no mention of a burial, or even of a memorial service to honor his deeds among men.

In those days, to have no formal burial was among the highest of dishonors among the Jewish people. To look at his life from a natural, earthly viewpoint would cause you to shake your head and say that his life was of little value in man's eyes.

But oh how differently God sees things!

Verse 22 tells us that "at the moment of death he is carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom." Notice that he is carried — not left on his own to find his own way. And notice that he is carried by the angels. Jesus says that there were at least two angels that escorted him to Abraham's bosom. As we will see later, Abraham's bosom is the place of comfort for those who have died in faith toward God, awaiting the coming of the messiah.

You see, the lord sees what inside of us, not what's outside. He looks at our heart and the condition of our souls so very differently than the way men may see it!

The rich man, on the other hand, ended his life with probably the finest burial money could buy. I would assume he had the customary professional mourners at his funeral, there to help those who were sad at his departure get in touch with their grief. The procession to his burial spot must have been stuff that made the evening news. He had all the accolades in this life that money could buy.

But we see from the text, just how differently God views a soul!

The rich man's wealth was temporal; none of it changed his eternal destiny. He ended up in a place of torment, according to verse 23.

To fully understand the difference and importance of where Lazarus went, as opposed to where the rich man ended up, I need to explain what is called, "the compartment of the dead".

In ancient, old testament times, the view of the afterlife was a very general one, especially at the beginning of the Old Testament. Death was seen as the place to which all souls entered, both wicked and righteous.

There was also the general belief in a day of reckoning at the end of time. However, toward the end of the Old Testament period, the revelation of that “world of the dead” became much more specific.

The Hebrew word for the “world of the dead” is sheol, which also translates to the “grave”, the “pit” and the “abode of the dead”. The Greek word is hades.

This is not a description of Gahanna, the place of eternal burning, created by God as a place of everlasting punishment for the devil and his angels — the place we call “hell”.

Hades (sheol) and Gahanna (hell) are different places. You might say that hades is a temporary jail, where the souls goes awaiting sentencing, while Gahanna is the eternal prison, where the final judgment is carried out.

Jesus revealed in our text that there were two compartments in sheol/hades. Verse 23 says: "and in hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment". The fact that he “lifted up his eyes”, shows that the rich man was in the lower compartment, a place of suffering.

And when he “lifted up his eyes”, to the upper compartment, he saw Lazarus in “Abraham’s bosom”, which surely was a place of comfort.

It is critical to understand that upon death, prior to Christ’s resurrection, all souls were transported to and held in one of these two compartments — the lower compartment for the unrighteous and the upper one for those whose faith was in God and looked forward to the promise of glory.

In the Catholic tradition, this place is called “purgatory”, which means “to cleanse or purify”. Interestingly, the word “purgatory” was coined in 1254 AD in a letter from Pope Innocent IV to his apostolic delegate to Greece. Some historians believe that that this concept developed from the need of the Catholic Church to raise funds to build their incredible churches. Thus they began selling indulgences, which meant that one could purchase their loved one’s passage from the lower chamber to the chamber of comfort and hope.

But verse 26 reveals that a “great chasm” existed between these two compartments and it was “fixed”. In other words, there was no passing from one to the other — one could not work out their sins in the lower compartment and earn their way to Abraham’s bosom.

It is obvious that the truth of God’s word denies this Catholic teaching. In fact, Martin Luther recognized this contradiction and included indulgences as a major theme in his “95 Theses” which rocked the world in 1517.

Being in the upper compartment, verse 25 claims that Lazarus, was “being comforted”, while the rich man, in the lower one, was in “agony”.

Looking at verses 26-31, we see a dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, which reveals that those in the lower compartment are fully aware of where they are. The text implies that:

...there was seeing — verse 23 — he saw Abraham far away.

...there was feeling — verse 24 — he was in agony in the flame.

...there was the ability to communicate — verse 24 — he cried out to Abraham.

...there was no chance for repentance — verse 26 — the chasm was fixed.

...there was recognition of former people — verse 28 — he remembered his 5 brothers and:
...there was the remembrance of the former life — he asked Abraham to warn his brothers.

But what about life after the resurrection of Christ? Good question!

Immediately after Jesus died on the cross, he entered the “abode of the dead”, sheol/hades, (and not hell, as some say), to proclaim the fulfillment to those who died in faith, and the condemnation of those who died in unbelief. Peter records in his 1st epistle, chapter 3 and verses 18-19: “for Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that he might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also he went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison.”

The Greek word translated ‘preached’ is kerusso, which means to herald the message.

Jesus was not holding an evangelistic crusade in hades, nor was he fighting with the devil to gain the mastery as some say! When Jesus proclaimed on the cross, “it is finished!”, “tetelesti”, the work was accomplished right then. When Jesus ascended to heaven he led of multitude of captives with him.

Paul writes in Ephesians 4:8-10: “therefore it says, “When he ascended on high, he led captive a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (now this expression, “he ascended,” what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is himself also he who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)”

All those who had believed — those in the upper compartment, Abraham’s bosom — received the fulfillment of their faith, and were led into the presence of the lord at his ascension.

This means that the upper compartment of the dead, Abraham’s bosom, is now empty.

All those who died or will die, from that point on and have placed their trust upon Jesus Christ, went or will go immediately into heaven to be with the Jesus.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8: “therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight — we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the lord.”

But what about non-believers who died or will die after the resurrection of Jesus? Their souls, just like the rich man’s, are in torment, held captive in the lower compartment of hades. And their souls will remain there until the day of final judgment at the great white throne.

Revelation 20:12-15 makes known the fate of the unbeliever.

Scripture says: “and I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

It is perfectly clear that on the day of judgment, the souls of the unrighteous will be sent to the place we call "hell — Gahanna", eternally separated from the presence and love of God, while those whose names are written in the "book of life" will escape judgment, as their souls are already with the lord.

Let me finish with this question: are you certain where your soul will go when you pass from this earth? Will it await judgment in the lower compartment of hades or immediately upon death, be resurrected to the place of perfection, we call "heaven"?

If these things that I speak of are true, and you are a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, you need not fear death. But if you have not surrendered your life to Christ, I pray that this message has scared you — because you, according to the bible, are, indeed, in a very precarious position.

Let's pray!

TRINITY BIBLE CHURCH
WHAT HAPPENS TO ONE'S SOUL WHEN THEY DIE?
LUKE 16:19-31
Rev. Roy Herman
April 8, 2012

INTRODUCTION: The death rate for human beings is one-for-one! We will all die! The question is “what will happen to our soul, when we pass from this earth?” The answer depends upon whether or not we are a born-again believer who has placed his faith in Christ Jesus.

BIBLICAL ANSWER: Jesus clearly addresses this question, as reported by Luke in Chapter 16:19-31. Jesus describes the fate of a rich man, who is unnamed and a poor man named Lazarus. He, Jesus, tells us that the soul of the rich man was sent to a place of agony, awaiting final judgment, while that of Lazarus, was carried to a place of comfort in the bosom of Abraham, v. 22, waiting for our Savior to take him to heaven.

TWO COMPARTMENTS OF SHEOL/HADES, THE WORLD OF THE DEAD:

1. Sheol/Hades, which means “World of the Dead”, the grave, is a holding or temporary place for the soul. It should not be confused with “Gehenna”, which describes the place we call “hell”, which is eternal damnation.
2. The Upper Compartment, which is called “Abraham’s Bosom”, was a place of comfort, where the souls of those who had faith in God and looked forward to the promise of glory.
3. The Lower Compartment is a place of agony and torment, where the soul await final judgment and will eventually be cast into the “Lake of Fire”, which we call “hell”.
4. A “Fixed” chasm exists between the two compartments, which cannot be crossed (v. 26).

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS: After Christ died on the cross and said, “It is finished” — Tetelesti (John 19:30), He proclaimed to those in Sheol, the fulfillment to those who died in faith, and the condemnation of those who died in unbelief (1PE 3:18-19). Prior to the ascension of Jesus, all souls were committed to either the upper compartment or the lower one, dependent upon their faith in God and the promise of Glory. But after Jesus’ ascension, things changed:

1. Those unbelieving souls in the lower compartment remained there and the souls of those who died after the ascension, including today, went or will go there awaiting judgment.
2. Immediately upon the ascension, the souls of the believers were released from captivity and carried to heaven, as are those who died after the ascension (2CO 5:6-8).
3. The upper compartment of the dead (Sheol/Hades) now has an empty section since Christ’s ascension into heaven. All those who died or will die, from that point on and have placed their trust upon Jesus Christ, the son of God, went or will go immediately into heaven to be with the Jesus.

DAY OF JUDGMENT: Revelation 20:12-15 describes precisely what will happen to both unbelievers and believers on the Day of Judgment, at the Great White Throne:

1. The souls of the unsaved (unbelievers) will be “thrown into the lake of fire”, the place known as “hell” or Gehenna, eternally separated from the presence and love of God. This is called the “second death” vv. 14-15.
2. Those that have placed their faith and belief in Jesus will not be judged because their names were written in the “Book of Life” and either ascended to heaven upon Christ’s ascension, or went home to the Lord, immediately upon passing.

CONCLUSION: Are you certain where your soul will go when you pass from this earth? Will it await judgment in the lower compartment of Hades or immediately upon death, be resurrected to the place of perfection, we call “heaven”? Think about it!