

What Happens when we die?

(My son, who himself has since become a pastor of a Christian Fellowship, invited me to preach at the fellowship where at that time he was an elder. He gave me the instruction, “None of your Anglican sermons here Dad; we expect half an hour as a minimum”.)

It is always difficult when you are a visiting preacher to know what to speak about. Maybe you will pick the very subject which the minister has just spent 3 months covering from every possible aspect. Or perhaps you choose a subject on which the church has a particular theological standpoint and from the first word you utter, the whole congregation will brand you a heretic. The danger then is to go for safety and say nothing that might challenge anyone to have to think more deeply about what they really believe and so the sermon is of no use to anyone. So let me tell you what I am going to speak about; it is this, “What happens to us when we die?” Well that is a conversation stopper isn’t it? I mean it is just the thing to brighten up your Sunday lunch.

I wonder how often you have heard a sermon on that subject. Personally I cannot remember ever hearing one. I have heard plenty about the fact of life after death, but nothing about dying. I have preached on it myself, but only rarely. How strange we are: the only thing in life of which we can be absolutely certain is that it will come to an end, and yet we do so little to prepare for it.

It may well be that much of what I say will be totally new to you and I have to admit that a lot of it is my own understanding - it isn't easy to find material on this subject. I would also mention that, contrary to what Daniel, my son, seems to believe, in spite of my great age I haven't actually died yet and so what I say is somewhat speculative and not based on personal experience. So I suggest that you listen to what I have to say, test it against

Scripture and then make up your own mind on what you believe. Feel free to reject my views but, if you do, work out why you reject them. It really must be more than, "Well, I don't want to believe that." Even if you reject what I say, if you are clear why you reject it you will have learned something and will be more confident of what you do believe. Let me warn you, I will try to make it as clear and simple as I can, but it is a vast subject and it will stretch you and make demands on your concentration.

In the Old Testament there is little understanding of life after death. You may recall the phrase, that so and so lived or reigned for this number of years and then "he slept with his fathers". The place of the departed is called 'Sheol', a place of shadows where the soul is in a state of limbo. At one time it seems that the Jews believed that Sheol existed as a place or power independent of God; but later they saw it as being within his dominion, but those who were there were unaware of, or cut off from, his covenant. However, you will remember the words of the psalmist in that great psalm 139:-

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths (the word is Sheol), you are there. [Ps. 139:7-8]

I am sure the psalmist is right; how can there be anywhere where God is not?

At the time Jesus walked the earth the Pharisees believed that there was life after death and the Sadducees did not - it was this that made them so 'sad you see'! You will remember that when Paul was on trial accused by the Jews before the Roman court, in the course of his defence he very cleverly claimed that he was on trial because of his belief in the resurrection, which immediately got the Pharisees and the Sadducees arguing against each other

about whether there was a resurrection and it stopped the trial; at least on that occasion.

We need to remember that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead. This is the great victory of Easter which we shall be thinking about next Sunday. Even though the Pharisees believed that there would be a resurrection, no one had actually done it, experienced it. So where were the dead until then? Scripture says that they were held in 'Hades', which is the New Testament word basically equivalent to the Old Testament 'Sheol', by or at the instigation of Satan. Because all have sinned, Satan was able to say to God, in effect, "By your own decree, no sinner is able to enter heaven; everyone has sinned and so they all belong to me."

Jesus seemed to develop this understanding of Hades and Sheol, (although he was only building on something the Jews were themselves coming to believe) that it was divided into two, one part for the righteous and one part for the unrighteous. Do you remember the story of the Rich man and the poor beggar named Lazarus who sat at his gate? Jesus explains:-

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell (and the word is Hades), where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' [Luke 16:22-26]

Now we must be careful because this was only a story Jesus told to illustrate a point; the characters, Lazarus and the rich man, were not necessarily real people who had lived. But he could not be referring to the final state of heaven because he had not yet died and risen and, as we have seen, he was the first to rise from the dead. So there is the strong hint that within Sheol or Hades there was a place of some sort of torment or deprivation and a separate place for the righteous, who were still held captive because of sin, but it was not unpleasant and this was the Paradise to which Jesus referred when he told the thief on the adjoining cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise”. Actually, there is another difficulty here also. Hades is simply the place of the departed, it is not normally thought of as the place of torment, that is a different word, Gehenna, where the fires are continually burning, and the implication is that the wicked are sent there only after the final judgment.

The problem is that in English both Hades and Gehenna are translated by the same word, ‘hell’. There is another difficulty also. As human beings confined at present to this life, we have to think in terms of time; and God, together those who dwell with him, are outside time, which must make a great difference to our present comprehension. But obviously Jesus was seeking to convey some truth meaningful to us living out our lives here on earth, and certainly in this parable of Lazarus and the rich man he does seem to speak of a division within Hades.

But to return to the general point that everyone who had died was held captive to Satan in some way because everyone who died was a sinner. Do you remember that great vision that John describes in the Book of Revelation of the risen Christ who says to him:

I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Rev. 1:17/18)

Isn't that wonderful? We have that great picture of Jesus towering above John saying, "Look, I have the keys of the prison of death." In the words of the Te Deum, 'Jesus has opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers'. Let me remind you of something else. It comes in St. Matthew's description of the death of Jesus:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the Holy city and appeared to many people. (Matt.27:51/3)

Notice the care with which the Bible describes this. The moment Jesus died, the curtain which hid the Most Holy place where the glory of God dwelt and where only the High Priest could enter, and that only once a year on the Day of Atonement, that curtain was torn in two - a wonderful visual aid (without a word being spoken) showing that the way into the presence of God, which had been shut to all mankind because they were sinners, had been opened for all. At the same moment the tombs broke open - another visual aid; death had been defeated - BUT the dead did not appear until Jesus had risen because Scripture is consistent; Jesus is the *first* fruits of the resurrection of the dead. And notice that it was the *holy* people who were seen. I do not want to read more into Scripture than the Holy Spirit put into it, but it seems to me that there is a clear implication that it was not a general resurrection of all the dead, but only those who, under the Old Covenant, genuinely sought the Kingdom of God.

So, let me recap, it seems that the Biblical picture is that until the resurrection of Jesus, all who died went to Sheol or Hades. When Jesus died he went to Paradise which apparently is part of Hades.

He also went to what is described as Tartarus. The word appears only once in the New Testament (2 Pet. 2:4) and to add to the difficulty this is also translated as 'hell'. Scripture does not say that any human beings went to Tartarus but rather fallen angels. In 1 Pet. 3:19 we read that Jesus went to preach to the fallen spirits. These were not the spirits of men because when the Bible means that it says it clearly, as in "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." (Heb. 12:23)) And that word 'preach' does not mean to evangelise, it means to proclaim. Jesus was not seeking to evangelize and win these fallen angels; he went to tell them the battle was over; they, as servants of Satan, had lost and he, Jesus, was victorious. All the righteous from the Old Testament, held captive in death, were released: he had the keys of death and Hades.

So what is the situation now? Well, it seems that we who believe in Jesus go straight to be with him. Unlike those of the Old Testament, we do not go to Hades. Paul tells the Philippians that he is faced with a dilemma. He is in prison and he doesn't know the outcome; maybe he will be released, which will be a greater benefit to them, or he may be sentenced to death, and he says:

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. (Philp. 1:23)

Paul, is convinced that when he dies he will be with Christ. However, that does not necessarily mean that he will immediately enter the final state of heaven. Listen to what he writes to the Thessalonian Christians:

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise

first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. [1 Th. 4:15-18]

It seems that what Scripture is teaching is that all those who have gone ahead of us in faith have already entered into the closer presence of Christ, they are with him, and we go to join him with them; but the final state of glory is something we all enter together. I love that thought: no one gets there first, all believers in Jesus, get there together with him. In my imagination, and you must not take this picture too literally, I imagine all those who have died in faith gathered with Jesus outside some great and wonderful place and asking excitedly, "Can we go in now?" and Jesus is joining in the joy and excitement saying, "Not just yet, there are still some more to come." Finally, when all the elect are gathered together, Jesus cries out, "Right, in we go..." and we all go in together.

It has to do with the time when Jesus will have put down all rebellion and when the last enemy, death, has finally been destroyed - at present death, like Satan himself, has been defeated but not destroyed. Paul says:

Then the end will come when he (that is Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father... When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all. [1 Cor. 15:28]

Incidentally, I trust you appreciate that eternal life is not the same as everlasting life. Everlasting life could be no more than this life going on and on for ever and ever. I don't know about you, I love this life but I certainly don't relish the idea of it never coming to an end; I hope for something better than this. Eternal life refers

to quality not quantity. It is everlasting because it is the life of God himself in us, but it is a new quality of life, far superior to this.

And because it is eternal it exists now - I mean it wouldn't be eternal if it didn't begin until after death would it?. No, we enter eternal life in this life here on earth. Listen to what Jesus said:

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." [John 5:24]

If you have made Jesus your Lord and Saviour, you already have eternal life because his life is in you. More, Jesus himself is in you and he is eternal, so of course you have eternal life. Let me share with you something I discovered fairly recently - certainly during the years since I retired. Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." [John 8:51]

Now, there are a number of Greek words which the Bible translates by our word 'to see'. The Jews who heard Jesus say this took it literally to mean that such a person would never die and they used it as evidence that Jesus must be demon possessed. However, the particular word Jesus uses here means 'to notice particularly'. I tell you where else it comes; do you remember on Easter Sunday the two disciples run to the tomb. John gets there first and 'sees' that it is empty; the Greek word translated 'see' there, implies a glance. But when Peter arrives, he goes into the tomb and he 'sees' that the bandages round the head are separate from the bandages round the body - he *particularly notices* that. Well the word 'see' here is the same one, 'to notice particularly'. It seems that what Jesus is saying is that those who, in this life, love him and keep his word will not particularly notice death. We will be busy living this life with him and serving him and it

will be one of those occasions when it seems that he is particularly close. I expect you have experienced those times yourself - for me they are all too rare and I wish they lasted longer. Perhaps it happens when you are lost in worship or something has happened when you need him particularly, and his presence is so real. In fact, on this occasion, you will realise that he has never been quite so real, and you will be busy enjoying him more than you have ever enjoyed him before and then it will suddenly occur to you - "Good gracious, I must have died." Isn't that lovely? If we belong to Jesus now, we will not particularly notice death.

Now, I wish I could stop for a moment and tell you to get up and stretch your legs because I have given you a lot of teaching and I want to change tack briefly and talk not about heaven but about hell. Will those who reject the salvation of Jesus live for ever in torment?

Let me explain first of all that the mainstream teaching of the Church, or certainly the Church of England and the evangelical wing in particular, is that the human soul is indestructible and that the enemies of God are destined for everlasting fire. However, I have come to reject that view. Let me explain why and then you make up your own mind. (And when Rick and Bev, your pastors, come back you can tell them what I have said and I will never be invited here again.)

First, do you remember that when Adam sinned God drove him out of the Garden of Eden saying,

The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live for ever. (Gen. 3:22)

Here God expressly prevents man from living for ever in his fallen state. That seems to me to be pretty conclusive and I just do not understand how evangelicals, who set such store by the truth of Scripture, can claim that unredeemed human kind will live for ever, let alone that it will be in torment in hell.

Secondly, there is the statement in Paul's first letter to Timothy:
God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords who alone is immortal. [1 Tim 6:15/16]

So, if God alone is immortal, surely that means that unless a person is in God he or she does not have immortality, so they cannot live for ever.

How, then, has the belief arisen that unbelievers will be tormented in hell for ever? I think it must be the references in Scripture to them being cast into everlasting fire. However, I suggest that this has led to confusing the fire and the torment. Let me explain; there are two words in the Bible which we have translated as 'hell'. One is Hades which, as we have seen, refers to the place of the departed, and the other is Gehenna, which is hell fire. Now the implication of that becomes clear when you understand that just outside Jerusalem there is the valley of Gehinnom, which was the local rubbish tip. Here the fires were kept burning continually. All the waste rubbish of the city was thrown into it and was burned up. And so the fires never went out, but any particular piece of rubbish was totally destroyed; it did not go on burning for ever. By speaking of Gehenna Scripture is clearly referring to the valley of Gehinnom. To me the picture is clear: All the rubbish of society - that which is unfit to dwell in the eternity of heaven - will be cast into the all consuming wrath of God. That wrath is continuous in the sense that anything contrary to God and his will must be destroyed. We are back yet again to that passage I have quoted just now, 1 Corinthians Chapter 15 and verse 24:

And then the end will come, when he (Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

That is to say, the fire of the wrath of God is eternally set against anything that would disturb the perfect eternal harmony of heaven; but in the consummation of all things, there will be nothing to suffer that wrath because it will have been destroyed.

I would just add one brief comment. There are one or two texts which might, at first sight seem to imply that the torment is eternal, for instance:

And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." [Rev 14:11]

But notice it is the smoke of their torment that rises. Think of those towers of the World Trade building in Manhattan. On the anniversary of the attack a month later TV pictures showed that the smoke was still rising. But, sadly, the people had long since perished.

That is the reason why I believe, based on the words of Scripture, that unbelievers will not suffer eternal torment. I would add also that for me, in my knowledge of the Father I have come to know through Jesus, I cannot conceive that he would allow that there should be anything anywhere throughout eternity, in rebellion against him and suffering torment. Scripture says that God is to be all in all, so how can anything exist in eternity where God is not? Having explained all that, do not misunderstand what I am saying. I do not believe everyone will be saved, and I do believe that hell exists and that, sadly, some people will end up there. Scripture refers to hell far too frequently to dismiss that; but I do

not believe anyone or anything will exist in torment for ever. They will have been annihilated.

So let me close on a much more encouraging note. The references in Scripture to the Saints in glory and the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, encourage me to believe that we who believe will retain our individuality. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians, here we have an earthly body which is perfectly suited to life in our present environment; I mean, we don't go floating off the earth into outer space. So we will have a new spiritual body, perfectly suited to the life of heaven. However, it seems that there will be a totally different way of recognising each other. Do you remember the number of occasions when the risen Jesus was not recognised? Mary did not recognise him at the tomb until he spoke her name. The two on the road to Emmaus did not realise it was Jesus until they invited him into the house to eat and they recognised him when he broke the bread.

Have you ever wondered what we will look like in heaven? I mean my grandmother died when I was about 6; she knew me only as a little boy. Ben & Ross, my grandchildren, know me only as an old man. How will both my grandmother and my grandchildren recognise me when we are all together in heaven? It seems that the risen Jesus was recognised not by what he looked like but by the person he was, the person he is. Maybe it will be like that with us, I don't know; but I am sure we will recognise each other.

There is another thing I must point out, and I hope it will not distress you. In heaven we shall not be married. Some people, even Christians, seem to think that the life to come is no more than this life continued in glorious Technicolor. In fact it is a totally different quality of life where Jesus will be the very centre of our being. Forgive me if I share something very personal, but

it may help you to understand. Shortly after my wife died, a friend said to me, "There is something I think you would like to know. You may remember that I visited you both about a month before Sheila died. You happened to be out of the room and she and I were chatting when she said, 'I love Ken and the family dearly, but I cannot wait to be with Jesus.'" She died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack four weeks later. I am so glad that my friend shared that with me, it is so encouraging; that is how we ought to be - in a deeply loving relationship with each other, but with Jesus as the centre of our lives. The bottom line is that God made us for himself not for each other.

We cannot, any of us, choose the manner of our death, (unless we commit suicide, which is not an option) but it seems to me to be a tremendously exciting adventure. When I am dying, if it is possible, I intend to be looking for Jesus who, I believe, will be there to greet me. With him, I believe, there will be so many of my friends and loved ones, all waiting to welcome me. Maybe amongst them there will be the child whom we lost in a miscarriage; if so, that will be so very exciting meeting a child I never knew. Of course, Sheila will be there. Just what our relationship will be I do not know. Somehow it is going to depend on our relationship with him for whom to live is life and to die is gain. Sheila and I and all those I love will share in the glory of the Lamb and we shall say to each other, in whatever language or means of communication we have in heaven, "Isn't he wonderful!"