

After Here
Beyond Death
September 19/20, 2009

Let's pray together, shall we?

We are in the second week of our series, "After Here" and as Ladell said, we are talking about what happens to us after our time on this earth has ended.

- Last week if you were here you know we talked about why there is reason to believe that *anything at all* happens beyond this life, specifically, why there is reason *to hope for a better life* beyond this life. (If you weren't here, I encourage you to pick up the CD, DVD or check out the message online at our website).
- Next week we're going to talk about the

return of Christ, at which time the *big* “after here” experience begins when the whole world gets renewed, restored and regenerated.

- And in the week after next, we’ll talk about what *that* world – *that* life – will be like. It’s going to be exciting.

But today, we’re going to look at what the Bible says is going to happen after our life on earth ends and *before* those events take place.

You can sort of plot it out like this in a timeline.

At some point in the future, Jesus is going to return – literally, physically, and visibly – to this Earth.

After that, God’s Kingdom will come in fullness on the renewed, restored and regenerated creation.

And most likely, if history is any indication, most of us are going to die between now and then.

So, the question is ... what happens to us in that interim period of time?

That's what I want to talk about today. Actually, I'm going to go a little further than that in this message and talk a little bit about what happens to us as individuals *after* Jesus' returns. I think you'll see why it's important to do that as we go through this.

But before we begin, I think I need to make a few – how shall I put it? “Pastoral remarks.”

1. Some of you have lost loved ones recently; some of you are in the process of going through that right now. Please understand that even today's message may sound a bit academic in the presentation (you can see we have a chart

already going and it's going to fill out) I do not want to trivialize the emotional impact of what you're going through or what you've been through. I don't want to hurt anyone or add to anyone's pain in the way that we talk about these things today. I realize that some of us are in the valley of the shadow of death, and it's no fun. You just need to know that my heart feels for you even though my head is going to be very academic this morning.

2. I should also say that I'm pretty sure that I'm going to say things in this message that will surprise some of you and maybe even make you angry. Some of you will probably think at some point in this message, "I can't believe that our pastor believes *that!* He is such a liberal." Some of you will think that.

And some of you will hear something and

say to yourself, “I can’t believe he’s such a fundamentalist!” You are, by the time we’re done.

Just so you’ll know: I don’t really care about being a labeled liberal or a conservative. What I care about is being a seeker of truth. And I believe *God* gave the Bible to us so that we can know the truth that we need to understand. However, I also believe that it’s not always as clear as we would like it to be and we have to wrestle with the tension when we read the scripture of “it might be saying this” or “it might be saying that.”

Even the Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, wrote that in our present fallen human condition, we see spiritual reality as if we were looking at it through a dull mirror. What that means is that when you look at something in a dull

mirror, you can see the big features, but the smaller details are hard to make out. And that's how it is when it comes to this issue of "after here."

3. One more thing I need to say before we get into this: when it comes to the experience of "after here," we need to understand that much of what is in the Bible on this subject is written in poetic or parabolic or apocalyptic language. Poetic, parabolic (or parables), and apocalyptic (special language used to describe end-of-the-world conditions – we'll talk more about that next week). The point is that the imagery in this kind of language is not necessarily meant to be taken literally. However, what the imagery implies *is* meant to be taken literally – and seriously.

The Big Picture

Ok, with all that said, let's get into it. What does the Bible say about what happens after we die? A lot!

So I thought about the best way to do this and I decided that a picture/chart would be best, so if you're following along in the outline you'll need to draw your own little boxes, etc.

First, let's draw a line at the top of the page and say that everything above the line represents "here" ...

... with "here" being our life right now on this planet. Everything below the line is "after" – after we die (and we going to assume that Jesus hasn't come back before that happens).

OK, that's the easy part.

What happens next? That's where it's not so easy.

Some people understand the Bible to teach that, from the time we die until the time Jesus returns, we "sleep" (so to speak). Our body goes away in some form or fashion and we are simply not aware of anything else until Jesus returns.

So let's mark that on the chart. We "sleep" until Jesus returns.

By the way, the Bible refers to this as "sheol" – which literally means "the place of the dead" or "gravedom" – the domain of the grave. It's not a place of punishment or reward because it's not a place. It's just a state of non-being. Some people believe that this is what happens – temporarily, until Jesus returns – after we die.

On the other hand, some people read the Bible as saying that we're conscious during that time. We don't have a body, they would argue, but we do have a spirit or a soul. And though it cannot experience anything physical, it is aware of what's going on around it.

So let's put that option on the chart as well. ("conscious")

(And I'm using dotted lines at the top to represent the fact that these represent two different understandings of what the Bible is saying).

Now, those who think the Bible teaches the "conscious" state (which represents the majority of traditional Christian thinking) see three possible experiences of that consciousness.

First possibility: the experience of what the Bible calls "Hades" (often translated as

Hell in many versions of the Bible).

This is obviously not a good place to be. If you've ever seen medieval art depicting "Hell" this is the concept, this is the place after death to which it refers.

Second possibility: the experience of what the Bible calls being "with God" (often thought of as being "in Heaven" because that's where God is – in Heaven).

And again, much of Christian art depicting Heaven is visualizing *this* place after we die.

So, this "conscious" view says that when we die some of us are going to go to Hades or Hell; some of us are going to go to be with God in Heaven.

Of course, some believe there is also a third place in which our soul could reside after death.

It's called Purgatory.

This is typically associated with Catholicism, but there are many other Christian denominations who understand this to be true as well.

It's kind of a middle option between Hades and Heaven, and the word itself defines its purpose. The root of the word "purgatory" is "purge." And the idea is that, even though folks believe in Jesus and are forgiven of their sin, there is still sin that needs to be purged from their soul. So they – their soul or spirit, I should say – their soul or spirit goes to purgatory until that purifying process is complete. Then when that's done, their soul or spirit gets to go to be where God is, in Heaven.

Now, I should point out here that the scriptural support for this idea is a little less robust than

the other ideas. In addition, the idea of purgatory, if you're up on your history at all (specifically, the use of it as a form of spiritual manipulation back in the 1500s) was the tipping point for Martin Luther and the reformers who followed after him.

Maybe you've heard the story: The Pope's chief fundraiser at the time who was trying to raise money for the Basilica back in Rome would go from church to church trying to raise money and the campaign slogan was this: "when a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." So if you were in church that day and you were thinking about your dearly departed and thinking "they're in purgatory" then you would just be totally motivated to give. Because who would not want to get their beloved into Heaven. That caused Luther and others to adopt the principle that "if the scripture doesn't teach this, then neither should we - sola scriptura, scripture alone"

and led to the development of the Protestant churches.

So, where are we? Some people think the Bible teaches that we're sleeping when we die. Others think that we're conscious, so to speak, in one of two (or three) places.

However, both interpretations agree on what happens next.

Jesus returns and everyone is raised from the dead. So, let's draw that onto the chart as well. Jesus returns and there will be a resurrection of every human being who has ever lived.

So, either you sleep until Jesus comes back ... or your soul is in some intermediate state of being until then ... but either way, when Jesus comes back to this Earth, all humanity will be raised and then there will be judgment. The Bible says

there is going to be a judgment, very clear ... which means that some people will be raised to eternal life and some people will be raised to ... well, let's go one step at time. Let's talk about eternal life, first.

Some people – as we have talked about on many occasions – are going to be raised with bodies that can never die. And they'll live as part of the renewed, restored and regenerated Earth, forever.

As I said at the beginning of this message, this is the topic for two weeks from today. So, I'm not going to spend any time on it this morning.

And now, we have to write the word that causes so much consternation for all of us, which is ...

“Hell.”

Hell.

You simply cannot read the Bible without coming to the conclusion that there is a real place and a real experience called Hell, and some people go there. You can debate what the place is and you can debate what the experience is, but there is no way to not put it in the picture unless you just rip whole pages out of the Bible ... and some people do that. They do that because they cannot in their head resolve the idea of a loving, merciful God who would allow such a place to exist. There is some merit to that and we'll talk more about that a bit later, but let's keep on with the chart because there are two opinions about Hell.

On the one hand, when some committed, knowledgeable, wise, intelligent, God-honoring Christians read the Bible ...

... they understand it to be teaching that Hell is a place of eternal punishment.

Whether it's fire, or darkness, or some other form of terrible existence that people experience: that's debatable. What's *not* debatable – in their understanding – is that it *doesn't ever end*. It's eternal.

On the other hand, there are other committed, knowledgeable, wise, intelligent, God-honoring Christians who read the same scriptures ...

... and understand them to be teaching that Hell is a place of final and ultimate destruction.

“All people are raised,” they would say, “and those without Christ are judged and sentenced to final destruction in what the Book of Revelation calls the Lake of Fire. It will be a terrible end, but it doesn't go on forever.”

Ok, so do you have the picture? Let's just walk

through it again, very quickly.

Some people understand the Bible to teach that, after you die, you “sleep” (so to speak) – you’re in the realm of “gravedom” until Jesus returns. Others believe that it teaches that, after you die you “wake up” (so to speak) in a state of spiritual consciousness that could be described as Heaven, or Hades or Purgatory.

In either case, when Jesus returns, those who are dead are raised to be judged (along with those who are still alive). Some will get to experience eternal life in the renewed, restored and regenerated creation – that *big* after-here experience that the Bible points to. And some will experience punishment and separation from God in an existence called “Hell.” Some people understand that to be a perpetual experience. Others believe it to teach that it’s the final destruction of everything that is not transformable.

And this week, if you're a part of a message based small-group, you'll get to look at some of the scriptures that support *all* of these ideas (which is why I haven't gone through any of them this morning).

Seeing the “Other Side”

Now, I know at this point, we look at this chart and some of you are probably thinking, “Great, Rick, thanks for explaining all the options to us. But what do *you* think? What's your take?”

Well, I'll tell you.

When I first became a Christian, I was taught the “consciousness” option; that there was a Heaven and a Hell after we die, that there was no purgatory, and that the final judgment of Hell, after Jesus returns, was a punishment for

non-believers that went on for all eternity.

And, I should add, I was also taught – well, maybe not taught, but it was more implied – that those who believe the Bible teaches something else from that were “compromisers” – that they were somehow afraid to stand up for God’s truth in front of the world (as if believing that Jesus literally rose from the dead doesn’t require you to do that). So, I’ve always had a skeptical view of those other ways of understanding the Bible and those people who understand them in that way.

But, the more I have studied the scripture in recent days, and the more I see of the big picture of what God is up to in history, beginning from the creation and going through the calling of Abraham and creation of Israel, the whole thing. When you look at the big picture, the more I have come to believe that some of those ideas, that are not what I

originally started with, have merit. And this is where some of you are going to think that “oh gee, our pastor is going liberal on us!” because I would guess that a fairly large percentage of this group comes from the same kind of tradition or perspective as I do.

As I said before, I’m not interested in being conservative or liberal. I just want to be biblical. So, what I want to do in the next few minutes is to help you see the value of the “other” positions. I’m not trying to prove that those are right because, quite honestly, the only thing I’m sure of is the *entire picture* I presented, with all of its options. That picture, I believe, contains the reality of what’s going to happen. In some form or another, we’re going to start at the top and we’re going to go to the bottom. I’m confident of that.

OK, let’s take a look at the “sleep after death” idea, which again, is not what I was taught.

Probably many of you were not taught that. Here's something I never knew until just recently:

1. The “sleep” understanding is consistent with Hebrew theology; but the “conscious” understanding is more consistent with Greek dualism (spirit vs. matter).

Hebrew theology from the very first pages of the Bible indicates that you cannot separate a body from a spirit. There is no such thing as a living soul without a body in Hebrew thinking (which, by the way, is important to understand because Jesus was Jewish, the Apostle Paul was Jewish, which means that Christianity rose out of Judaism). Christianity was the fulfillment of the promise of Judaism. So this is important to understand.

In any case ...

Check this out:

The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being[literally, nephesh = "soul"]. Genesis 2:7 (NASB)

There is no separation of body and soul here. Man didn't become a living soul before he (and she) had a body. The body doesn't contain the soul in Hebrew thinking; it *is* the soul, inseparable. Which explains why so much of the OT implies that when the body dies, the consciousness is gone as well. You are in a sleep-like state. In fact,

Paul communicates the same idea when he tells the Thessalonians to not lose hope about the people who have died:

This was the focus of the message from last week.

*Brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be ignorant about those who have died [Greek means, literally- "fallen asleep"]. We don't want you to grieve like other people who have no hope. 1
Thessalonians 4:13 (GW)*

Jesus referred to this idea as well, when he came to raise Lazarus from the dead - remember that? All the folks were so upset and grieving over Lazarus and Jesus said, "He is sleeping. He is merely sleeping. I'm going to raise him up."

So, the sleep understanding has a lot going for it because it is rooted in the Hebrew understanding of the body/soul.

And the "conscious" idea on the other hand has some what of a negative associated with it because it reflects more of the Greek idea of

dualism. Here's what I mean by dualism: the Greeks and many other cultures had come to believe that the universe was divided into two parts: the spiritual and the material.

Now, the Bible holds to that idea as well. There is a spiritual dimension. God is Spirit. However, the Greeks took that even further and they defined material (matter-things you can see and touch) to be evil, cursed, unredeemable and spirit, on the other hand, to be totally good. That's the total opposite of the Hebrew idea that everything created by God is good – a huge difference.

So, for the Greeks, the best thing that could happen, they thought, would be to escape the flesh and go out to be a spirit, floating around somewhere. Totally different idea than the Jews had. Their idea (the Jews), and you see it all over the OT and the new, was that the best thing that would happen would be a

resurrection from the dead.

Unfortunately, many would say, the Greek thinking *had a huge impact on Christian thinking in later centuries*. In fact, it is hard to overestimate the impact of Greek philosophy on the development of Christianity, especially as the gospel spread outside of the immediate circle of Judaism in which it was born.

And, eventually the idea of spirit/matter dualism began to creep into Christianity in many ways, one being that people began to read the scriptures from the Greek paradigm of the “soul-consciousness after death.”

Was that a good thing? Maybe. Maybe not. For me, it makes me wonder if there might be more credence to the “sleep” option than I used to think. I’ll just throw that out and you can make your own decision.

Now, let's look at the "Hell" options – and I know that sounds almost sacrilegious. When you look at it closely, just in terms of sheer volume ...

2. The "Hell as final destruction" understanding is the more dominant teaching of the scripture.

For instance ... the Old Testament utilizes 50 Hebrew verbs and 75 figures of speech to describe the ultimate end of the wicked—and every one of those sounds like total extinction.

In addition, although Scripture clearly affirms a resurrection of both saved and unsaved people, the Bible nowhere says that those who are unsaved, those who are lost, will be raised immortal with new bodies that are going to live forever, as the saved will be.¹

In addition, the Apostle Paul seemed to imply this idea when he wrote:

Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction ... Philippians 3:19 (NIV)

And to the Thessalonians:

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels ... He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus [again, that is the judgement].

*They will be punished with everlasting destruction ...
2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 (NIV)*

Everlasting destruction. Now of course, some would argue that the “everlasting” idea means

that the destruction goes on and on and on. How can that be? In fact, the exact meaning of that word in Greek is debatable. It could also mean many ages, or for a long time. So, the process could be a long time, but there is a destruction.

Now, all of that is worth thinking about, in my opinion, but the most interesting support of the “Hell as final destruction and not eternal punishment” idea is that the Greek word most frequently translated as “Hell” in our Bibles is *Gehenna*. Jesus used this word a lot, especially if you read the Sermon on the Mount, that’s the word – Gehenna.

Gehenna is the Greek word for the Hebrew place called “valley of Hinnom,” which was the garbage dump outside of the city of Jerusalem. And what would happen was people from the city would take their garbage out to the dump and there was a fire that was constantly

burning. So when Jesus was teaching and he said some people are going to go to Gehenna, the image that people would get was that those people, because they have rejected God and have chosen to be wicked, they're going to end up in a place like that. And the image they would have in their mind was that when garbage goes to the dump, what happens - it burns up. It's consumed. The point of Jesus using the word "gehenna" was to clearly show that those who were not following Christ, not following God, were going to be burned up and destroyed. So, there are some reasons why you might hold that option up a little higher, if you're from where I am theologically.

Of course the objection is: If you start telling people you're not going to burn in Hell for eternity and basically you're going to go through a judgement and God is going to say "okay that's it, you're done." Then, don't you lose a motivation for people to repent? You

want people to repent and turn to God so you put the fear of God in them, “you’re going to burn for eternity.” Now you’re just throwing that away.

One writer says that if God were trying to use the threat of eternal torment as a deterrent to sin, then John 3:16 might read: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not *burn forever*, but have everlasting life.” And God could have made that plain in many other verses as well. But God doesn’t. He says, “whosoever believes in him should not persish” which indicates that we’re going to die, and exist no more. What faces those who refuse God’s gift of salvation, this author writes, is annihilation. They will be terminated, gone—history.

Now, if it sounds like I’m convinced of this idea,

I'm not, mainly because it seems a little redundant to me, from my limited human perspective, to resurrect people in order to just send them to a second death. Why not just leave them dead?

So, I'm not really sure I buy this idea. Perhaps there is some other middle position out there? I don't know ...which, again, illustrates the point that not everything is clear about this.

Clarity – What We *Know*

However, having said that, some things *are* clear. Some things are very clear, and that is what we need to focus on as we bring this message to a close. Do not miss this:

1. Jesus is returning and a judgment will follow.

No doubt about it. Very clear.

Now, whenever we talk about judgment, there is going to be this time when Jesus returns and people are judged. The question always comes up, what about people who have never heard or didn't understand the gospel? People in the remote villages of Africa? Little children? Babies? They can't understand.

Some would argue that if you don't have salvation experience with Jesus – if you've never prayed the prayer of salvation, if you don't pray to ask Jesus to be your savior, then you're out of luck. You're going to end up in Hell, whatever Hell turns out to be.

Personally I'm a little uncomfortable with that. From a human point of view, that seems pretty unfair, I don't understand it, so I hesitate to make a blanket statement like that.

However, what I would not hesitate to say is that ...

2. People who hear the Gospel and reject it are clearly lost. Furthermore, for those people, there is no indication that somewhere along the line there is going to be another opportunity to repent and believe in Jesus.

When you look at the chart that we put up earlier, I don't think you can find any place in the Bible that says "oh, and right here there is going to be another presentation of truth. So now that you're standing on the edge of Hell ..." And so you go "maybe I shouldn't go ..., "I believe!" I don't think you can find that in the Bible, okay? There is no hope, there is no opportunity for those who reject the gospel. They are clearly lost.

There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12 (NLT)

Paul writes:

*How shall we escape if we
ignore such a great salvation?
Hebrews 2:3-4 (NIV)*

It's a rhetorical question. You can't! If it's been presented to you and you ignore it and reject it, there is no escape. You are lost.

Which then leads to the question of the fairness of hell ... so people are lost and are going to end up in Hell, whatever that turns out to be. Obviously it doesn't seem fair to people who haven't heard or didn't understand and I'm not going to push that point. But one thing I am going to push and I am sure of is that ...

3. Hell is the fair and natural end for people who don't think they need or don't want Christ.

Now here is why I say this is fair. Just think about your life. Every day you get up and you make choices. I make choices. God has given us freedom. In this life God is not hitting you or me over the head saying “Hey, you better believe.” What does God let us do? He lets us walk our own way. It’s not unreasonable to assume that that process is going to continue after this life. If you did not want to love God now, why is God going to force you to love him then? It’s consistent. If you don’t want to be part of what God is doing now, why would he force you to be part of what he is doing then? See, it *is* fair. It is just that some people who decide this, end there, and I’m pretty sure about that.

Last thing we know for sure, and this is the bottom line ... regardless of all we don’t know for sure is that, if we are hearing the gospel, if we are aware of our sin problem and what God has done about it and proposes to do about it ...

4. Jesus is our only hope and we need to embrace that hope.

Paul once wrote:

As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you."

*Indeed, the "right time" is now.
Today is the day of salvation.
2 Corinthians 6:1-2 (NLT)*

Today is the day of salvation.

How do you embrace that salvation? And what I'm going to say here is very important so I want to invite you to listen very carefully because your eternal destiny might depend on

these next few moments.

Paul explains ...

When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:4-5a (NIV)

God saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Paul says, God's saving of people who are sinners – people like you and me – is based on His mercy, not on our attempts to be righteous.

But how does that work?

Again, Paul explains:

God saves us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he

*poured out on us generously
through Jesus Christ our Savior
... Titus 3:5b-6 (NIV)*

This is the key – rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, a rebirth and renewal that’s going to happen to the whole creation at some point, but happens in us right now because of what Jesus did to save us.

And what Jesus did to save us (we know from basically the whole New Testament) was to live the life we couldn’t live (the life we should have lived) and then to die the death we should die as sinners. He is our substitute. If we get to go to the interim Heaven or if we get to go to the final New Creation, it’s only because of what He did, not because of what we do or try to do.

Which is exactly how Paul concludes his thought:

... so that, having been justified by his grace [favor that we don't deserve and can't earn], we might become heirs [or inheritors] having the hope of eternal life [Heaven and/or life on the renewed, restored, regenerated Earth]. Titus 3:7 (NIV)

So, what does all this mean?

It means that, if we want to wind up in the “good places” on the big picture, we need to stop trusting in our own ability to stand before God. It means we need to admit that we are sinners in need of a savior and that Jesus is that savior. It means that we put our trust in him, instead of ourselves, to save us.

Friends, here's the deal. Some of you are going to die, soon. Some of you are going to die later.

You don't know when it's going to happen. The truth is someday you are going to die. You are going to stand before God. You don't have any control over that. However, there is one thing you do have control over: it's what you do with the offer of salvation that God has put right in front of your face. Would you make today the day of salvation? Would you turn to Jesus today and ask him to be your savior? And here is what I'm going to do. I'm going to pray a little prayer here, that if I was in that position. And I did this many years ago, where I just came to this realization. Some of you may be coming to this realization today. You're seeing the big picture and you're going "oh man, I get it." I'm going to pray today as if I was in your shoes and you just pray along with me. There is no magic in these words, just a way of expressing these things to God.

If you prayed that prayer this morning, once

again, there is no magic in the words, but just an opportunity to express that. As Ladell said, at the end of next month, we're going to have a baptism and that is a way to express that and there is information on how to do that after we close with this song.

ENDNOTES

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<http://www.truthortradition.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=13>

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