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# After Death What?

**Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 5th October**

Psalm 92:1-6, 13-14 • Luke 16:19-31



After death what? Let me begin by saying, today's Gospel passage is not an easy one to unpack. It could well be the single most instructive passage in the NT where Jesus gives us some idea of what happens between death and resurrection.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you have unique insight into the area that we are looking at this morning. Encourage us as we contemplate our future as believers. Energise us as we seek to share the good news with those who do not yet know you, amen.

The passage deals with two main issues. Firstly, our responsibility and accountability when it comes to caring for those in need. Secondly, what happens to those who die before the second coming of Jesus and the ushering in of the new heaven and the new earth.

In the story Jesus tells one character has everything. He lives a lavish and wasteful life. He is either oblivious, or simply doesn't care about the needs of a poor beggar right outside his house.

Given the world we live in, a world of billionaires and beggars, much of Jesus' story does not need unpacking. The part that does need unpacking is what happens to both these men after death.

Firstly though, lest we over literalise some of the imagery we find in the story, let's acknowledge we often convey, or emphasise a truth, by using language we don't expect anyone to take literally.

A few weeks ago the Springboks crushed us. I've told you a million times not to do that. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. This bag weighs a ton. It feels like my head is going to explode. I cried my eyes out. He never did do anything like it, but I remember my dad once saying to me. "Do that again and I'll knock you into the middle of next week". I didn't take it literally. But I sure got the idea.

Just so, Jesus used symbolism, allegory, hyperbole to make a point. "if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. Better to go through life with one eye, than have two eyes and be cast into hell". We are not meant to take that literally. But we are to deal with things might lead us into sin, lest we face the consequences.

An very important qualifier here. While believers in Jesus are called to use their resources "carefully", that is not the basis of our salvation.

Our salvation is based on the cross. Our future in Christ is secure. As the Apostle Peter says, " we have a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us".

The future of the poor man in Jesus story, who despite everything, must have trusted in God, was a fulfilment of the meaning of his name. Lazarus, "God helps".

The future of the rich man is also shown. The rich man who was:

- firstly, indifferent to the needs of the poor man at his gate.
- Secondly, was trusting in his wealth, and we can take it, that he had little, or no consideration for God in his life.

What is the future for such people? What comes after death?

I was catching up with a retired bible college lecturer at Bishop Brian's funeral a few weeks ago. He has been researching and compiling the accounts of near death experiences. Given medical advances there has been an exponential growth in stories of tunnels of light and that sort of

thing. He commented, “it’s a great way of opening up the subject of what comes next, and sharing the gospel”.

Further, apart from angelic beings, there is only one of us, Jesus, fully God, fully human, who has experienced the glories of heaven, so is the most qualified to speak with authority on what comes next.

Another qualifier. Judgement and what follows is a future event. We will affirm that in the creed following the sermon, the opening of the word. We will affirm together. “He”, that is Jesus, “will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

Back to Jesus story, and the use of language that’s conveys truth, but does not need to be taken literally. If Jesus is the only one who knows what heaven is like, and so can contrast what it is like to be fully with God, as compared being in a place where there is nothing of God, he is obviously speaking of things beyond our knowledge. So how best to give us an idea of such things? By using things that we do know about.

One example is the use of the imagery of a place called Gehenna, a word translated sometimes as hell. Gehenna was the waste dump area outside Jerusalem. There would be a fire burning continually, and there were even these big worms that would feed on the refuse. So the imagery of this waste area of destruction and fire was utilised to try to describe the worst place we could find our selves.

Again we should not, I believe, be literal and think of hell, a word used interchangeably with the word Hades, which simply means the realm of the dead, as a place eternal burning, and flames and never ending destruction.

After all, how can you have both outer darkness, one description of being cast from Gods presence, and eternal fire, another description of the same thing? For that matter, how can you have eternal destruction? You are either destroyed or not. Everlasting, ongoing destruction is a contradiction in terms.

One picture symbolises that which has no amount of the light of Christ. Outer darkness. Another picture symbolises something of what that must be like to have nothing of the life of Christ. Destruction.

So being careful not to unhelpfully literalise some of the imagery in Jesus story, what can we learn.

Firstly, No second chances. I told you the story of my Catholic grandfather, who in one of my last conversations with him before he died, told me he thought he would get into heaven when I asked him, but he would probably have to do a few thousand years in purgatory first. Did I have good news for him.

No purgatory. And no “everybody gets into heaven in the end”, as the universalists believe. It would seem to me to be a travesty of justice to think that Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pol Pot and various other ones we could probably list today, who would not face the consequences of their evil.

No second chances. Between the two places described in Jesus story there is a chasm that makes crossing from either side impossible.

The rich man on realising this begs that his brothers are warned and asked that something supernatural and spectacular would happen to save them sharing the same fate.

He is told they have Moses and the Prophets. They can listen to them. “No but if someone returns from the dead that will convince them.”

- Really! Has Jesus resurrection from the dead been enough to convince those who do not want to believe? Obviously not.

The second thing we can take from the passage is the importance of scripture. Scripture is God's revelation to us. In it we have all that we need to lead us into the truth of who God is, and what that means for our lives.

Remember Jesus and the two on the Emmaus Rd? How, starting with Moses and the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures.

That would have been the Old Testament at that point. Still enough to lead ones to a knowledge of God and an understanding of how we should live. We now have the New Testament and it's revelation in regards the work of Christ and the good news of the gospel.

Thirdly, the spectacular and supernatural will not be enough in itself to convince someone of the reality and truth of God.

If someone is heard hearted, and stubborn minded, unwilling to listen to what God has said to us through his word, even a message from a person raised from death will not convince them. Further, what I might believe to be a supernatural and evidential thing today, I may well discount as wishful, or delusional thinking tomorrow.

Back to the Emmaus road encounter. It was only as Jesus opened the eyes of these two believers that they were able to Jesus for who he was. The passage hints that the believers were being spiritually blinded up to that point by the enemy of souls. “and their eyes were kept from seeing him”, the text says. That opens another whole area that we won't go into here.

Suffice to say, the spiritual work we need is the work of the Holy Spirit. Supernatural events, in and of themselves, are not, nor can they be, the basis of our faith.

So to end: Why look at the story and why did Jesus tell it? Because the choice we make regarding Jesus in this life matters. It matters for all eternity. And here is my key point that I want to make.

Unless we take seriously the future for believers, and unbelievers alike, we may not have the fire in our bellies, the anguish in our heart, or the hope that we need, to fuel and empower us to live and share the gospel.

One last picture from Bishop Derek Eaton's helpful book, Life after Death.

Genesis and Revelation both talk of a garden. The imagery is Persian, Middle Eastern. It calls to mind the king's garden, or the king's paradise.

Remember as Jesus was crucified, and one of the thieves being crucified along with him, came to recognise who Jesus was. He turns to Jesus in faith and says, “Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom.” What was Jesus answer? “today you will be with me in paradise.” Not heaven, paradise.

Picture Buckingham palace. You have an invitation into the house spoken of in John 14. “In my Father's house there are many rooms”.

But at this stage, between, death and resurrection, you are still in the king's garden, the king's paradise. You are with Jesus and it might seem heaven, but there is better to come. Entrance into the palace.

A palace may well have a dungeon. Those who are there are also aware of their fate and that things are going to go from bad to worse. So while the believer is experiencing the presence of God, the unbeliever is experiencing something of the absence of God. At this point, in the intermediate state, is less intense than what it will be in the final state.

Glory in the presence of God or eternal separation? Jesus gives us one of only two options. Without literalising the language Jesus uses here and elsewhere, there is a pretty strong warning that we would not want to be in a place where there is nothing of the presence of God, and where evil is free to be fully expressed, and fully experienced.

Apart from the creation, that which shows both God's handiwork and God's glory, what revelation has God given that the world might believe?

- We have the word written and the Word living in Jesus Christ.
- We have the evidence of the resurrection.
- We have the Spirit of God that can enliven and open our minds and hearts to the truth.
- We have the church, the body of Christ here on earth, that at its best, has given witness to the truth and power of the gospel for the last 2000 years.

We live in hope, and thanks be to God, we can die in hope.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, help us so to live that your presence is made real, and all may enter into your eternal glory, amen.

