

“Eternity: What Awaits After Death”

Sermon # 3

“Heaven is Even Better Than You Imagine”

Luke 16:19-26

Today we return to our series “Eternity: What Awaits After You Die” and today we return again to Luke 16:19-31 to look at two men and two destinies. This morning we examine the subject of “Heaven: It’s Even Better Than You Think.” This subject is much more complex than I originally thought and so I have added at least three more to the series.

Next week – “Hell It’s Forever and It’s not Funny”

June 11th – “The Great Transformation”

June 18th – “Living In the New Jerusalem”

June 25 – “Living In the Light of Eternity”

In Luke 16:19-31 we find the story of two men and what happens to them after they die, here we are given a clear picture of the most basic truth, that there are only two possible destinations after death: Heaven and Hell. Each is just as real and eternal as the other.

If we are to judge by what is said at most funerals, you would think that everyone is going to eventually make it to Heaven. This only confirms what we find in society as a whole. It is a little amazing to understand that for every American who believes he is going to Hell, there are 120 who believe they are going to Heaven. Yet as Randy Alcorn states in his book entitled “Heaven” “...Heaven is not our default destination. No one goes there automatically. Unless our sin problem is resolved, the only place we will go is the true default destination....Hell.” [Randy Alcorn. “Heaven.” (Coral Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2044) p. 23.]

Unless we surrender our lives Jesus Christ, we are headed for Hell. We will return to the subject of how to be sure you’re going to heaven as our last objective in the message.

Let’s turn to Luke 16:19 and see what we can understand about heaven itself, “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. (20) But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, (21) desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. (22) So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. (23) And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) “Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his

finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ (25) But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. (26) And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”

Next week we will look at the Rich Man and his torment in Hell but this morning we are going to examine the fate of Lazarus as he awoke in heaven,

Scripture tells us in Eccles 12:7, “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.” There is no purgatory, no limbo, no soul sleep. The body when separated from the spirit remains behind temporarily. It does not matter if it is buried, if it is cremated, or lost at sea. Sometimes the question is raised, how can God raise the dead if the body has been somehow destroyed? If you think about it if you can raise the dead, you can raise the dead. Dust or ashes will not matter.

Scripture tells us that at death our bodies are committed to the grave where they return to dust but our spirits go immediately either to Heaven or Hell. In our text Lazarus and the Rich man both have conscious existence immediately after they died. Jesus told the dying thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul stated in Philippians 1:23 that to die was to be with Christ and in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that to be “absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”

The bodies of those believers who have died awaits the day according to (1 Thess. 4:16-17) when the Lord will return from Heaven with a shout and when the trumpet sounds, the graves are going to splint asunder and the disintegrated molecules are going to be reformed into our gloried bodies. .

Our text lays a foundation for us, about what happens when our loved ones die. The Bible teaches that before the ascension of Jesus Christ there was a place that the souls of men and women went to at death. (Look with me at the diagram in your notes). This place is composed of three compartments; Paradise or Abraham’s bosom, The Great Gulf fixed and Hades. Abraham’s bosom or paradise is the place where the souls of the believing dead go, a place of comfort. When Lazarus dies, his body goes in the grave and he goes to Paradise. Hades is the place of torment and it is the place that the souls of the wicked dead go. The Rich man dies and he awakes in Hades the place that all go who do not place their trust in God. And between Paradise and Hades scripture tells us that there is a great gulf fixed (v. 26). According to Jesus there is a chasm between these two places that cannot be crossed under any circumstances.

The Intermediate Hell. The unbelieving souls in Hades remain there (in an intermediate Hell) until a particular point in the future at the Great White Throne Judgment when Hades gives them up and all its inhabitants are judged and passed into the lake of fire. This judgment is told in Rev 20:13-14, “The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades

delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged each one according to his works. (14) Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire...” Here is what happens, when an unbeliever dies today, their body goes into the grave and their soul and spirit goes to Hades. Then one day in the future after the judgment Hades and all its inhabitants will be cast into the lake of fire, which is the permanent Hell.

The Intermediate Paradise. Every believer who died before the ascension of Christ went to Paradise. Their position remained unchanged until Jesus ascended to the Father. In the Old Testament when a believer died, their bodies went into the grave and their soul and spirit went to Paradise. But when Jesus died on the cross, was buried and he rose again, on the day of his ascension something changed. In Ephesians 4:8-10 we are told, “Therefore He says, ‘When he ascended on high He lead captivity captive And gave gifts to men. (9) Now this, ‘He ascended’ – what does it mean but that He first descended into the lower parts of the earth. (10) He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.” This passage says that Jesus descended into Hades and he lead captivity captive, he emptied Paradise and took all the believing dead with him to the third heaven. There is no longer an intermediate Heaven; Christ took all the Old Testament saints and all those believers to Heaven. Now when a believer dies their body goes into the grave to await the resurrection and their soul and spirit go to be with the Lord in Heaven.

<p>Intermediate Heaven Paradise/Abram’s bosom Luke 16:22 Souls of Believers</p>	<p>Old Testament Intermediate State Great Gulf Fixed Lk16:26</p>	<p>Intermediate Hell Sheol/ Hades(Heb) (Greek) Luke 16:23-24 Souls of Unbelievers</p>
<p>Ascension of Jesus Christ Descended into Hades Took O.T. believers to Paradise (Eph 4:8-10)</p>	<p>New Testament</p>	<p>Great White Throne Judgement (Rev 20:13-14) Hades Cast into Permanet Hell</p>

Having established what happens to the believer at death I want to take a few moments this morning to briefly address three questions concerning Heaven, (1) Heaven: What Is It? (2) Heaven; What Will We Do When Get There? (4) Heaven: How Do We Get There?

First, Heaven: What Is It?

Randy Alcorn in his book "Heaven" makes the point that books about heaven are notorious for saying that we can not know what Heaven is like, but that it is more wonderful than we can imagine." [Randy Alcorn. Heaven. (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2004) p. 17]

Often Paul's words in 1 Cor 2:9 are quoted, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him." The problem of interpreting this passage in this way is that it fails to consider the rest of the passage for 1 Cor 2:10 goes on to say, "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God." The Holy Spirit speaking through the Word of God does explain what Heaven is like. God tells us enough about Heaven for us to understand and anticipate what awaits us there.

Others use 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 were it says that Paul was "caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (1 Cor 12:4). But really all that this verse says is that Paul was forbidden to discuss his experience. In contrast He commanded John to tell of his prolonged visit to Heaven (Rev.1:19), which he did in detail in the book of Revelation.

When our time on this earth is over, we going immediately to start spending eternity in one of two destinations. For the believer, when this earthly life is over, we as God's children will be able to come home for the very first time. But what is this home like? If heaven is our home then it has to have those qualities we associate with home.

"Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2). He didn't say, "I go to an indescribable realm devoid of physical properties, where your disembodied spirit will float around and which is nothing at all like what you've ever thought of as home." [Randy Alcorn. In the Light of Eternity. (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 1999) p. 12]

The term "Home" is used to describe Heaven for a reason it is more than just a metaphor. It describes a real, actual physical place. It is a place that we will share with our loved ones who have gone on before us and those who will follow after us, it is a place of comfort, security and refuge. It is a place of wonderful conversations and meaningful mediation. It is a place of delicious smells, and wonderful food and opportunities to continue using our God given gifts.

I want to briefly address four questions concerning Heaven.

- What will we look like? We will look like ourselves. Why? Because we'll be ourselves.

We need to get this through our heads once and for all time. People do not become angels when they die. Angels were created Angels. They are not humans who have died. People and angels are two different kinds of beings.

- Will we know each other in heaven?

Certainly. If anything we will know each other better. When Elijah and Moses appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:30) the disciples knew who they were and I don't think they were wearing name tags.

- Will we remember our lives on earth? Yes.

One verse that is often quoted to prove that we will not be able to remember our life on earth is Isaiah 65:17 which says "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind." What we need to understand is the person doing the forgetting is God. It is the same as saying, "I will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34). It means that God has chosen not to call to mind or hold against us our past sins.

- Do those in heaven know what is happening on earth?

Hebrews 12:1 tells us to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, knowing that we are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses." The saints of old have not only left us examples to follow but perhaps cheer us on from the sidelines.

There is a little poem that I think expresses what it will be like to arrive in heaven entitled "Just Think."

"Just think

Of stepping on shore and finding it heaven

Of taking hold of a hand finding it God's hand

Of breathing new air and finding it heavenly air

Of feeling invigorated, and finding it immortality

Of passing from storm and tempest to an unbroken calm

Of waking, and finding it HOME!" [source unknown]

If Heaven is like home, then we need to understand that it is not what is in our house but whom that makes it a home. As we get older more and more people who are important to us, precede us to heaven. When we consider those who populate Heaven, Heaven is no longer about what the streets are made of, but about people. People who we love and whom we miss – people who are precious to us and whom we long to see.

Think for a moment of the saints of all the ages that are already there, then add your own special list of loved ones already there, then add the beloved presence of Lord and Savior and Heaven is precious indeed.

Secondly, Heaven: What Will We Do There?

According to a 1997 Time magazine poll, 43% of Americans believe that we will play harps in heaven and 36% think that we will have halo's in heaven. But harps and halo's are never mentioned in the Bible in connection with what all believers will be doing in Heaven (Unless it is a misinterpretation of Rev 5:8). The only things we can know for sure about heaven are the things revealed in the Bible everything else is just speculation and hearsay. "Make no mistake – one of Satan's favorite tactics is feeding us an unworthy, dull and distorted view of heaven. He knows we'll lack motivation to tell others about Jesus when our view of heaven isn't that much better than our concept of hell." [Randy Alcorn. "In the Light of Eternity." (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 1999) p. 3]

John Eldredge in his book "The Journey of Desire" states "... nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service... we have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our heart sinks, Forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news? And then we sigh and feel guilty that we are not more 'spiritual.' We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can." [John Eldredge. "The Journey of Desire: Searching for the Life We've Only Dreamed Of." (Nashville: Nelson, 2000) p. 111]

I believe that we be worshipping but that is not all we will be doing, one of the things we will be doing in heaven is continuing to learn. In Eph 2:6-7

Paul says, "and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, (7) that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." The word translated "show" means to reveal, in a progressive ongoing way.

The columnist Paul Howard has made a career out of telling "the rest of the story." In Heaven we will be engaged in hearing "the rest of the story" over and over again. We are going to be stunned to learn how God has orchestrated the events of our lives to influence people we never even knew about.

Occasionally one of you in the congregation will bless my heart by telling how something you have learned through the messages has touched your life and how God caused it to be at just the right time to help you. That is always an encouragement to me.

Once in a while I receive an e-mail from a pastor in some other part of globe, telling me how much a sermon posted on the Internet helped them in some way. I believe heaven will be such a time for all of us. You may remember the song by Ray Bolz entitled "Thank You For Giving To The Lord." He envisions a scene in heaven. Where one by one individuals come to tell you how your life had touched their life for God. What great stories we have awaiting in Heaven, if we will just be faithful in living for the Lord.

Third, Heaven: How Do We Get There?

An Indiana cemetery has a tombstone over a hundred years old with the following inscription,

"Pause, stranger, when you pass me by:

As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, so you will be.

So prepare for death and follow me."

An unknown passerby had scratched these additional words on the tombstone;

"To follow you I'm not content,

Until I know which way you went."

The sobering news about Heaven is that it is not true that all roads lead to Heaven. It is supremely important that we make sure that we are going to heaven! But, can we know for sure that we have eternal life? Can we know for sure that we are headed for heaven? The apostle John wrote, in 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you that believe in the name of the son of God so that that you may know that you have eternal life?" We can know for sure that we will go to Heaven when we die! But as I have already stated in this message, no one goes to heaven automatically or by accident. It is a conscious choice.

Jesus said of himself "I am the door; if anyone enters through me he shall be saved"(John 10:9) In John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

End with video – "You Can Only Imagine"

