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“He/She is in a Better Place.”

Revelation 1:12-18; Hebrews 9:27-28

Introduction

I have officiated dozens of funerals over the years as a pastor, which means that I was involved in the planning of the service, the delivery of a sermon, and some form of committal service involving the burial of the deceased's body or placement of the ashes of those bodies that were cremated. The first funeral I officiated was that of my 47-year-old father and since I have been responsible for burying people of all ages as young as grade school to the oldest who was 101 years old. I have been asked to memorialize people from all walks of life, many of whom loved and walked with Jesus as fellow Christians and some who were not Christian. The one thing that every one of the funerals and memorial services I officiated have in common is that every family and friend of the deceased who asked me to officiate the service of their loved one believed and articulated their belief that he/she was in a better place.

Just as the old spiritual is true: “Everyone wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.” So, it is true that we will grope for reasons to believe that our loved ones are in a better place regardless of what they believed or even how they lived. Most people do not want death for anyone they love, and when death does come, we want heaven for those we love.

After officiating so many funerals, I had come to the place in my experience as a pastor that I believed that I had experienced just about everything there was to experience related to funerals and grieving family member. I am old enough and have seen enough to know better. I remember Ian White's family who reached out to Northwest Baptist Church (the first church I served as the Lead Pastor in Colorado). Ian was not a Christian, nor was his family; he was found dead on the front steps of his apartment and was 34 years old. I remember their response when I sat down with them to plan Ian's memorial service and their request after I asked if they would like a song or two for those present to sing in honor of Ian's life. I expected something like *Amazing Grace*, but Ian's family wanted everyone to sing *Free Bird* by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

I remember a woman who started attending the church I planted in Colorado and the grief she carried with her with the death of her husband. I still remember the Sunday she wanted me to know that her dead husband was with her. In that moment I thought she meant his spirit or memory, but no... I discovered what she meant when she opened her purse to show me the urn that contained the ashes of her deceased husband. She brought the urn with her every Sunday she came, and I believe that she even sat her husband's urn on the chair next to her. I guess for this woman, the better place for her husband was in her purse.

How do you know if a person who has died is really in a better place? What evidence does one have to make such a claim?

What Happens After We Die?

One of the things I say at every funeral is that when we die, we will experience the immediate judgment we are warned about throughout the Bible. In Hebrews 9:27-28, we have one such warning: **“And just as it is destined for people to die once, and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.”** But what kind of judgment are we destined to face?

To begin, you need to know that there are two types of judgment every human will face, the first has to do with where our disembodied soul must go, which is temporary. The second judgment we will all face is permanent. For the Christian, the day that you die will be the moment you will be in the presence of Jesus just as we are promised in the Bible: **“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—but we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord”** (2 Cor. 5:6-8).

Jesus told a parable in the Gospel of Luke about a rich man who lived a life of luxury while ignoring the poor man by the name of Lazarus (not to be confused with Jesus’ friend who Jesus raised to life in John 11:1ff.). In Jesus’ parable, both men died; Lazarus’ soul went to where Abraham’s soul dwelled while the rich man’s soul went to Hades where he suffered torment. Of Hades, the rich man begged for a drop of water to ease his torment because, his words: “I am in agony in this flame” (see Luke 16:19-31). Before Jesus told His parable about the rich man and Lazarus, He said this about money: **“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”** (Luke 16:13). The rich man was not in hell because he ignored Lazarus, he was in hell because he loved his money more than God. Had he loved God, he would not have been able to ignore Lazarus.

Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about love or heaven, and he did so for a reason. He spoke so much about hell because he came, **“...to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). The reason why Jesus described the distance between the rich man in hell and Lazarus in heaven as a **“great chasm”** is because hell is the place where those are sent who, **“will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power”** (2 Thess. 1:9). Jesus described the place the rich man went to immediately after he died in the following ways: A place of torture (Matt. 18:34), a place where the wicked are cut to pieces (Matt. 24:51), and a place of scourging (Luke 12:47-48), a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 24:51; Luke 13:20), and a place of outer darkness (Matt. 22:13; 25:30).

Just as there is a new heaven and earth that is promised to the Christian, at the same time there will exist the lake of fire where the devil and his demons will be cast into forever. The lake of fire is described as a place where, **“...their worm will not die and their fire will not be extinguished; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind”** (Isa. 66:24b). In Revelation 20:11-15 we are told of a second judgment that we all will face:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them. 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.... Then 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.

There are only one of two outcomes every person will face the moment of death: eternal life with Jesus that will eventually include a physical resurrection and life on a new and resurrected earth, or eternal death apart from Jesus that will eventually result in eternity in the lake of fire. Neither the lake of fire nor a resurrected life with Jesus on a new earth are temporary, but eternal.

So, the question we need to answer is if it is true that every person who dies is in a better place?

Jesus Is the Hope of a Better Place

There are scores of Bible passages we could have looked at today to discover whether it is true or not that all people eventually go to a better place after they die, but I thought we could settle on Revelation 1:12-18. For me, this is one of the most hopeful and encouraging passages in all the Bible! In verses 12-16, we are given certain details about Jesus to clue us into who He really is. There is a lot packed into these verses that we simply do not have the time to examine, but there are some things that I must show you in order to address the topic of this sermon.

Jesus is a Better High Priest

First, Jesus is a better priest. Every year, on the Day of Atonement, a high priest would go into the temple in Jerusalem to enter a place called the "Holies of Holies" to bring a sin offering into the presence of God on behalf of Israel. The high priest would do it with a rope around him just in case he died, and his corpse had to be pulled out due to any sin not yet addressed in his own life before entering. The High Priest wore a long robe and was fitted with a type of belt or sash that was laced with gold. Once a year, every year, the High Priest would act as a representative and advocate for all of Israel.

As you know, Jesus died on a cross as "the Lamb of God" for our sins; when John turned to see the voice that was speaking, He saw Jesus dressed as a High Priest because the sacrifice He made was sufficient to cover all our sins for all time, once and for all. For this reason, Hebrews describes Jesus in the following way: "**But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things having come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made by hands, that is, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all time, having obtained eternal redemption**" (Heb. 9:11-12).

Jesus is the Only Sufficient Savior

What follows in verses 14-17 are characteristics which reveal why Jesus is sufficient to redeem and save sinners such as us. First, His hair is white like wool and as bright as snow because He is profoundly and divinely wise. Yes, Jesus is fully man, but He is also fully God; Jesus is the Son and at the same time He is the ancient of Days with all the wisdom of eternity (see Dan. 7:9-14). Second, Jesus' eyes were "like a flame of fire" which speak of His ability to see and know all things as God can only do. Third, His feet were like burnished bronze to symbolize His omnipotent strength to judge the nations, crush Satan, and triumph over death as the author and

giver of life. Forth, Jesus holds the seven stars that serve as the seven messengers to the churches of which He holds in the palm of His hand; the point is that Jesus is also divinely sovereign. Fifth, out of the mouth of the Savior comes a sharp two-edged sword symbolizing His right to Judge as King of kings and Lord of lords. Sixth, the face of Jesus shines like a powerful sun because of His holiness, majesty, and absolute beauty as One worthy of our worship because He is God.

Jesus is presented in Revelation 1:14-16 in the way that He is because of what Adam lost in the garden due to his sin and rebellion; Jesus is the only One qualified to redeem what was lost, for He is the second and greater Adam who is fully man and fully God in one Person. Simply put, because of Adam's sin, we are sinners under a curse that God alone is able to sufficiently and completely reverse; Jesus was qualified to do just that!

Jesus is the Great I AM

The One titled the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5), the Lord of Glory (1 Cor. 2:8), the Pioneer and Perfecter of our Faith (Heb. 12:1-2), and the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16), is "the first and the last." Where else have we seen that kind of language: "I am the first and the last"? I will tell you! We see it in a host of passages, but Isaiah 44:6 will suffice: "**This is what the LORD says, *He who is the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of armies: 'I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.'***" Because He is the "first and the last" He conquered death because, as the Living One, "...it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

When John saw Jesus, he fell at His feet like a dead man, but Jesus declared to him: "**Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore...**" John had no reason to fear because Jesus stood as a greater High Priest on John's behalf, He was the sufficient savior John spent a lifetime following, and Jesus was the only One qualified to pay the penalty for John's sin by becoming a curse in his place. John not only believed this, but trusted that Jesus was all that he needed, and that is why he had not need to fear.

Conclusion

This Jesus is the "Almighty" and the "Alpha and Omega" (Rev. 1:8; 22:12-13). He is the "Author of Life" (Acts 3:15). He is the Bread from Heaven (John 6:32), the Bread of Life (John 6:35), and the Bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16). He is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4) and He is the Deliverer (Rom. 11:26). He is the Good Shepherd of the 23rd Psalm (John 10:11). He is the rightful Heir of All Things (Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus is the Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3:14), the Horn of our Salvation (Luke 1:69), and the Great I Am (John 8:58-59). He is the Light of the World (John 8:12), the Gate for the Sheep (John 10:7), the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25), and He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6)!

If all who die eventually go to a better place when there exists a very real hell designed by God for the punishment of sinners, then why did Jesus who is the "first and the last" willingly take on flesh to become like us for the purpose of dying for us to redeem sinners like us?

If some don't go to a better place, but most "morally good" people do, then why did Jesus say in conclusion to His sermon on the mount: **"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is narrow and the way is constricted that leads to life, and there are few who find it"** (Matt. 7:13-14).

If religious people end up going to a better place, then why did Jesus warn us of the following possibility? **"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; leave Me, you who practice lawlessness'"** (Matt. 7:22-23).

If there is another way to a better place other than through and with Jesus, then why in the world did He so confidently and boldly declare the following:

"If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, this is the one who will save it. For what good does it do a person if he gains the whole world, but loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory and the glory of the Father and the holy angels." (Luke 9:23-26)

There is a judgment we must all face. The verdict from the moment of conception is this: **"...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"** (Rom. 3:23), and judgment for our guilt: **"The wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our lord."**