

WHAT IS YOUR DESTINY

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 27, 2016
based on Mark 16:1-7, Ephesians 2:4-7**

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life,” during which we have been looking at key Biblical truths which are transformational when we take hold of them. If you missed some of the series, there is information in this morning’s bulletin about how you can access the series through a video download or a podcast or a print copy of each message. Today we are focusing on the final truth in the series—the Biblical answer to the question, What is your destiny? Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

One of the things we have observed in this series is that there is among human beings a kind of universal spiritual awareness, a deep sense of God, so much so that scientists have said that human beings seem to be hard wired for God. Virtually all ancient cultures, in every place and every time, believed in God, and even today in our rather secular society, people who have no connection with a church will still often say that although they are not religious, they are spiritual. There is also among human beings a universal moral awareness, so that people not only have a sense of right and wrong, but there has been an astonishing level of agreement across human cultures and times as to what exactly is right and what is wrong, as though God implanted a moral conscience within the human soul. This morning, we can also observe that there is among human beings a universal sense that there is something beyond death; almost all ancient cultures believed in some form of afterlife.

The Bible explains all this with the statement that we have been created “in the image of God” [*God created humankind in His image; in the image of God He created them. Genesis 1:27*]*—*we have been given by God a basic spiritual awareness. But we also observed in this series that we have a basic human problem. Our fundamental problem is sin—the Biblical term for the fact that we turn away from God and forget God and go our own way and so end up in alienation from God. In the condition of sin, our spiritual vision becomes distorted; so although people believe in God, they begin to imagine all sorts of fanciful things about God. In sinfulness, our vision becomes very much focused upon ourselves, and thus as people have thought about God, they have often begun to imagine that God is very much like ourselves. Most ancient people thought that there were many gods, just as there are many of us, and that the gods are often squabbling, just like us. Likewise the human moral vision becomes distorted, again along the lines of our own human perspective and interests. So, for example, people everywhere have affirmed the moral principle that murder is wrong, but they have often wanted to apply that principle only to their own clan or their own tribe or at most their own nation or religion. Similarly, when it comes to the idea of afterlife, people have let their imaginations run along the lines of their own personal self-interest. In

ancient Egypt, for example, there were elaborate myths about the afterlife, along with a hope that you can somehow take your wealth with you. Thus rulers were buried with loads of treasures, so that they might have an opulent afterlife.

It is very interesting in this context to note what the Bible says about the afterlife. Look in the Old Testament for ideas about heaven, and you will find heaven mentioned as the realm of God—the abode where God dwells. But will we as human beings go to heaven after death? Start reading in Genesis 1, and you will read page after page, chapter after chapter, book after book, and you will find no mention of the idea that we will go to heaven in almost all of the Old Testament. This is astonishing, particularly in light of the fact that the Hebrew people had had extensive exposure to Egyptian culture and the elaborate notions of afterlife in Egyptian religion. But to all those ideas of afterlife, the Hebrew people said, Hogwash. They saw the entire structure of afterlife mythology as empty human speculation. Instead, the Old Testament merely says that all human beings after death go to Sheol. Sheol, the abode of the dead, was conceived as a misty realm where there is nothing remaining but a faint shadow of what human beings were on earth. As Ecclesiastes put it, “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.” (Eccl. 9:10), or the book of Job says, “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so it is with all who go down to Sheol.” (Job 7:9)

So why did Old Testament Israelites believe in God if they did not think they were going to heaven? Obviously, for them, faith was not a way of getting yourself into an afterlife. They believed in God because God is God. They believed in God the same way that you believe in the sun—because God is real, and, far more than the sun, God is the source of our life and blessing. They gave God worship and praise, not in order to get a ticket to heaven, but because God is worthy of our worship and praise.

Note that Biblical faith is God-centered. It is not about me; it’s about God. In contrast, a great deal of human speculation about the afterlife is very much me-centered. Think again about ancient Egyptian religion. The Pharaohs pressed countless laborers into grueling service in order to build giant pyramids, not for the glory of God, or for the sake their people, or for the later Egyptian tourist industry, but for the sake of themselves—because they thought that the grand structure of the pyramid would somehow ensure them a place of grandeur for all eternity.

But such self-centered thinking about the afterlife continues in other forms to this day. In American culture today, a widespread notion about heaven is the idea that *heaven is a happy place where nice people go when they die*. Heaven, people like to think, is a kind of personal paradise where you get to do for all eternity all the things that you found fun on earth. Heaven thus becomes essentially an everlasting extension of my preferences and my desires.

The human tendency to imagine heaven in self-centered terms has reached an extreme and very dark expression today. We are seeing it repeatedly in the actions of Islamist terrorists. Radical Islamists want to think that if they murder people that they

both envy and hate, they will enter into heaven; and heaven, they imagine, is a place where they will get all the pleasures they always wanted but never had. So, as a suicide bomber, I can give full expression to my hate, escape the crummy existence I have here on earth, and vault into a heavenly land where I get all my desires, and I can do it all in one spectacular explosion—the ultimate expression of selfishness.

What a difference we see in Jesus. Jesus in his death absorbed the hatred of the world onto himself; and in his resurrection, he did not launch into a perpetual vacation in a personal paradise. He became the intercessor for a sinful humanity, and engaged himself, through the ages, in love for all people. Jesus's focus was not on himself but on God and God's love for all humanity.

So what, according to Jesus, is our intended destiny as human beings? In Jesus' day, there was a widespread notion in the surrounding culture of heaven as a happy place where nice people go when they die. Greco-Roman culture had the idea of the Elysian fields—an eternal realm of pleasant meadows and sunshine and soft breezes, where people who had been good on this earth would get to do fun and happy things forever. Note how the popular thinking about heaven today has a great deal in common with this old Greco-Roman idea, but not so much in common with Jesus. Jesus never used this sort of imagery for heaven; in fact, he never gave much description of heaven at all. Instead, when Jesus spoke about where he was going beyond death, he consistently made the same clear statement. To the disciples during Holy Week he said, "I am going to the Father," (John 14:28) and on Easter morning, speaking to Mary Magdalene in the garden near the tomb, he said, "I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17) Our destiny, according to Jesus, is not some sort of eternal personal playground. Our intended destiny is God, to live in the love of God.

One of the striking features of contemporary imaginings about heaven in America is that God is very often left out of the picture. You can see this in a lot of movies that feature heaven in some way, but you see it often in the way people will talk about heaven as a place where nice people go whether or not they ever even thought about God; and heaven is often envisioned as a kind of perpetual Disney World, a place of endless entertainment and happiness, where God is not really part of the picture. I like Disney; but without God, even an eternal Disney World would not be heaven. People would soon be bored, and would be grumbling about all sorts of things, and fighting with each other about who was cutting in line.

If there is anything that is clear in Jesus, and in the whole of Biblical teaching, it is that it is only in God that we will find real and lasting joy, it is only in God that we will find genuine fulfillment, and it is only in God that we find life. If we want to enter into heaven, indeed if we want to enter now into a life of joy and wholeness, we need to follow in the way of Jesus and lift our life to God.

This is why, in the Biblical understanding, heaven is not actually a place. It is condition of being in fellowship with God. Thus when Jesus said that he was ascending to his heavenly Father, it was exactly the same thing as saying that he was going to heaven. To enter heaven is to enter the fullness of everlasting connection with God, everlasting sharing in the love of God.

But if heaven is a condition of eternal fellowship with God, the central question becomes: who can enter into heaven? Jesus gave a very clear answer to that when he said, “The righteous will enter into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46) This makes total sense when we understand that heaven is fellowship with God. The “righteous” are not simply people who are “nice.” The righteous are people who are genuinely living in fellowship with God—people who are following God’s commandments, living in God’s ways, truly showing forth the love of God—people, in short, who are living such a connection with God that that connection will continue beyond death.

But if this is the case—if it is the righteous who enter into heaven—then most of us are in serious trouble, because we are sinners. Our primary problem is precisely that we are not living in a full connection with God; we have not truly followed in God’s ways. As the prophet Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray.” (Isaiah 53:6) This is why, as we noted earlier in this sermon series, we need a Savior, because we fall well short of God and thus well short of heaven, both in this life and for eternity.

The answer comes to us in Jesus Christ. Christ offers his life on the cross so that we can be forgiven, so that we who are sinners can nevertheless be reconciled with God, and brought into loving connection with God, as we accept what Christ has done for us. We do not qualify as righteous, but the New Testament says “we are accounted as righteous through faith in Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 2:16) Christ puts us right with God, and so makes possible eternal life with God.

This is why the Old Testament never speaks of life beyond death, until very late passages, when the prophets were beginning to anticipate what God would do through Jesus Christ—because eternal life in heaven only becomes possible for a sinful humanity through Jesus Christ. Christ opens the way for us into heaven, so that even those of us who have not been as good or nice as we should have been can be brought by means of Christ into joyous eternal connection with God.

Thus heaven is not a happy place where nice people go when they die. Heaven is eternal fellowship with God into which even sinners can enter through Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul summarized this truth well in the passage we heard from Ephesians: “Even when we were dead through our sins, God made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with him . . . so that in the ages to come He might show us the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us through Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 2:5-7)

We have a wondrous destiny, made available to us through Christ, and when we take hold of that destiny in faith, it begins to transform life now. For when we know that

we are accepted by God and heading toward the everlasting love of God, we begin to live now in the mercy and love of God, and we realize that our purpose is to show that mercy and that love to others. With Christ, we lift our life to God; and so we can not only have the sure hope of eternity, but we can begin already in this world to create something of the goodness and the joy of heaven.