

IS THERE AN AFTERLIFE?

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 11, 2017
based on Psalm 73:26 and Mark 12:18-27***

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a summer sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven,” during which we are consider the whole idea of life after death and what we can believe. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

It is the strange and twisted nature of our age that some of those who believe most fervently in heaven are the ones least likely to go there. Last week’s knife-wielding attackers in London, who shouted “This is for Allah” while stabbing innocent people, had a very fervent belief in heaven—they believed that their own likely death would be a martyrdom that would vault them immediately into eternal paradise. They were thinking a lot about heaven last weekend, even as they were engaging in behavior than put them about as far from God and heaven as one could be. Meanwhile, the people who were stabbed or run over, who had been enjoying an evening in the pubs and clubs, probably had not been thinking much about heaven at all. The whole episode thus illustrated two key truths about human thinking concerning the afterlife: first, people often aren’t thinking much about the afterlife, even though their own death may be much closer than they expect; and secondly, when people do think about the afterlife, they often entertain fanciful and self-centered notions that are entirely of their own making.

The Biblical message moves in sharp contrast to both of these human tendencies. The Bible is bluntly honest about our mortal condition and urges us to remember that we are only here for a brief span. “Make us to know the shortness of life,” says the Psalmist, “that we may gain wisdom of heart.” (Psalm 90:12) At the same time, even as the Biblical Word acknowledges our mortality, the Bible rejects all forms of speculation about any sort of afterlife.

In the various religions of the world, there are many ideas about the afterlife. We will consider a number of those ideas in the future in this sermon series. Some of the most elaborate speculation about the afterlife in the ancient world occurred in Egypt, where the Egyptian Book of the Dead outlined a highly detailed journey that one supposedly took into the afterlife, and where the pharaohs built pyramids in order to assure themselves a glorious place in eternity. You would think that since the Israelites spent centuries in Egypt, first as settlers and then as slaves, and since even after the Exodus they lived in close proximity to Egypt, they would have been influenced by all those highly developed notions about the afterlife. But what is extraordinary about the Old Testament in this regard is its pronounced reticence to say anything about the afterlife at all.

Read the first five books of the Bible—what the Jews call the Torah and Biblical scholars call the Pentateuch—and you will find nothing about life after death. Keep reading through the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II

Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and you will still find nothing about the afterlife. You will find reference to heaven. Heaven is the realm of God, where God dwells over all. But will we go to heaven when we die? Most of the Old Testament says nothing about that. What about all those elaborate Egyptian ideas about the afterlife? Hogwash, from the Biblical perspective. So what did the Hebrew people think happened to those who died? Your bones get buried, and your legacy, whatever it may be, will continue on through your descendants and the larger community of which you were a part. As for you personally, ancient Hebrews felt that at death you simply enter into nothingness; you no longer have any conscious existence. As the Psalmist put it, "The dead do not praise the Lord." [Psalm 115:17] The ancient Hebrews had a name for that realm of nothingness where the dead dwell; they called it Sheol, or the Pit. If they tried to envision Sheol, they thought of it simply as a gloomy realm where the dead are mere shadows. As Job put it, "Are not the days of my life few . . . before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness" [Job 10:20-21], or as Isaiah put it, "Sheol cannot thank You, O God, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness" [Is. 38:18]. It is sobering that the name of our youth room under the sanctuary is "the Pit." But our Pit is a much more hopeful and happy place!

Notice that the Pit or Sheol in the Old Testament view was not hell—it was not a place of torment—but it was also not heaven. It was essentially nothingness. Note also that in the Old Testament view, everyone upon death goes to Sheol; as it is said in the book of Ecclesiastes, "The same fate comes to all, to the righteous and to the wicked, to the good and the evil. The dead know nothing; they have no more reward . . . their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun." [Eccl. 9:2,5-6] What this means is that if you are going to find fulfillment and meaning, you need to find it in this life; for as the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, "So whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." [Eccl. 9:10]

So why did the ancient Israelites believe in God and follow God if they thought that their final destiny was the Pit? Obviously, they did not consider religion to be a ticket to heaven. They did not believe in God because they hoped to get themselves into eternity. They believed in God because God is God. Biblical faith is God-centered, a response to the reality of God. Thus it is in radical contrast to the religious fanaticism that was on display last weekend in London. For the knife-wielding jihadist, religion is entirely self-centered—it is projection of one's own personal desires, a way of giving full vent to one's hatred while aiming for a self-centered paradise in eternity. But in the Bible, people are called to be faithful to God, regardless of personal desires or reward.

What is clear in all this is that Biblical people of faith formed their beliefs not as a projection of their own wishes but in response to God and what God revealed to them. Thus

in early Old Testament times they did not believe in life after death, because God had not revealed anything to them about life after death.

Over time, however, as people continued to follow God, they began to get flashes of insight that perhaps God would open a way into something more—into life beyond the grave. This can be seen, for example, in the book of Job. We have already noted that the book of Job generally reflects the traditional thinking about Sheol, but there is a striking passage where suddenly Job has a remarkable vision—it is a vision of a redeemer figure who would one day come and open up a way through death into the presence of God. As Job said, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last He will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God." [Job 19:25-26]. Likewise the prophet Isaiah had a vision that God would one day destroy death; as he put it, "The Lord will destroy the shroud of death that is over all peoples; He will swallow up death forever . . . Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!" (Isaiah 25:7-8, 26:19) Moreover, there was extraordinary case of Elijah, who at the end of his earthly life was lifted up by God into heaven, in a dramatic fashion.

Along with these occasional revelations, people also were growing in their understanding of God, and the more people came to understand God—that God is a God of love and justice—the more they found reason to believe that God may very well have something in store for people beyond the grave; for if God is a God who loves us, will not God want to keep His loved ones in life? And if God is a God of justice, will not God most naturally have a reward for the righteous beyond this life, and a punishment for the wicked?

Increasingly, the idea that God would open up a door through death into everlasting life began to penetrate into the minds of people. It was a hope expressed in the book of Daniel, the latest writing in the Old Testament, in these words: "Those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." [Daniel 12:2]

By the time of Jesus, the concept of eternal life was a hotly debated topic in Israel. Some Jews felt that there was good reason to believe in the promise expressed by Daniel, but other Jews, principally the party called the Sadducees, rejected the notion and insisted that this life is all there is. The Sadducees considered only the Torah to be authoritative, and since the Torah appears to say nothing about life after death, the Sadducees did not believe in it. It was the Sadducees who confronted Jesus in the passage from Mark that we heard earlier. They sought to entrap him by referring to an ancient Israelite law which said that if a man died without children, it was his brother's responsibility to marry his widow and so provide for her and hopefully produce children who would carry on the brother's name. They sketched out a scenario in which a woman, according to this law, went through seven brothers, with each one dying in succession, and she would marry the next. She must have

been really hard on these guys. But the Sadducees then posed the question, “In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.” (Mark 12:23) Since in that culture it was not possible for a woman to have seven husbands at once, this question seemed to make the afterlife an absurd notion.

The Sadducees accepted only the Torah, so Jesus quoted the Torah against them. He lifted up a passage from the book of Exodus and said, “Have you not read, in the story about the bush, how God said to Moses, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.” (Mark 12:26-27) This is one of the most pointed statements that Jesus makes anywhere in the gospels. To those who would deny the possibility of life beyond death, Jesus says, “you are wrong.”

The truth that God was progressively revealing through the Old Testament prophets comes to full expression in Jesus—that there is, by God’s grace, life beyond the grave. That truth becomes clear in Jesus because it is through Jesus that God would actually open the way into life beyond death. Jesus’ death on the cross for our sin and his resurrection from the dead make eternal life for us possible. Thus in the Scriptures the hope for heaven is not human speculation or wishful thinking. The promise of heaven is what God creates by sending us Jesus Christ.

As this sermon series progresses, we will consider many aspects of life beyond death. How are the dead raised? What is heaven like? Can non-Christians go to heaven? What about hell? How can we know what is really true? What difference does all this make for life today? What we will find throughout this series is that the Bible maintains a withering skepticism toward all the fanciful notions that human beings have tended to come up with about the afterlife. The Bible affirms instead two clear truths—we are mortal; and God is real, and it is in God that we can find genuine hope. As the Psalmist said, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (Psalm 73:26)