

HEAVEN – Part Two
“Sleep, Work, or Rest?”
Sermon – February 17, 2019

I want to start this morning by telling you a short story of Brittany Maynard. Brittany had a cancerous tumor in her brain and struggled day to day to cope with her illness. As her cancer progressively worsened to the point where it became terminal, she made the decision not to prolong the suffering that she and her family were experiencing.

Knowing the end was near and, not wanting to experience the increased suffering that her cancer would soon bring, Brittany chose to “die with dignity” which is just another word for assisted suicide. Brittany found a doctor in Oregon who prescribed a lethal dose of pills which she could take at whatever point in time she chose. For Brittany to “live” meant pain and suffering, not only for herself but also for her loved ones. To “die” for her was to avoid this suffering. In her mind what she would gain from death would be the elimination of suffering. So on Saturday, November 1, 2014 Brittany, surrounded by her loved ones, took the pills and ended her life.

Though I searched through the many stories written about her I could find no mention that Brittany believed in Christ or even in an afterlife. But based on her own words and her understanding of what awaited her after death it is hard to believe she did. What Brittany expected to receive after taking her own life was the end of suffering. But without faith in Christ what awaited her after death would have actually been more intense suffering that she experienced on earth. And there would be no end to this suffering no matter how hard she tried. If she had no faith in Christ instead of experiencing an absence of pain Brittany may have awoke to her worst nightmare.

As I said last week better to know now what awaits you after death than to guess and find out too late you were wrong. That’s why last week I asked the question, “What happens after we die? And I gave examples of some who claimed to have experienced a near-death experience, where they leave their body on earth and journey to heaven. When hearing of these accounts it’s easy to embrace these events as truth, because most of them are very comforting and bring about an expectation of good things when we die. But ultimately Scripture is our only guide for unfiltered truth. So it is to there we must look.

The Bible is full of information on what happens to us after we die. In the book of Philippians Paul gives us our first clue. He said:

PHILIPPIANS 1:21,
“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Paul believed there was something to be gained in death; that death was a transition into something better than what life on earth had to offer. He looked forward to His death, not for its emptiness or lack of suffering as Brittany had, but for its promise of a better and more fulfilled life. Paul believed that life after death was full of promise and hope.

Brittany’s expectations of life and death were the exact opposite of what Paul was saying. Paul knew that from his death would come much more than the elimination of suffering. From his death would come a face to face meeting with the One he loved and was willing to die for. And that was Christ Himself. Paul, who wrote 28% of the New Testament knew Christ, knew where he was going when he died, and knew what awaited him there. It was not oblivion or simply a lack of pain. It was a place of joy

unending.

So what else do Paul and the other writers of Scripture have to say about what happens to us after death? It tells us in John 14:2-3 that Jesus has left this world and is preparing a place for us in His Father's house, and we look forward to going there. But some have stated there is an "in-between" place, either an interim state of mind or an interim place of existence to which we go before to the place which Jesus has prepared for us.

There are two main theories which we will look at today: the concept of "Soul Sleep" and the concept of "Purgatory". Truly only God Himself knows what happens after death. So it is to His word that we will look to see if any one of these theories line up with the word of God. Let's look first at the concept of "soul sleep".

SOUL SLEEP

Groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists claim that we are no longer conscious beings at the time of our death but that our soul either ceases to exist or is asleep. They call this "soul sleep", meaning that once a person dies, they enter a state of unconsciousness. They also claim the dead remain in this state until the Second Coming of Christ which brings about their resurrection from the dead.

The Bible does use the term "sleep" to describe those who have died. Jesus said that His friend Lazarus had "fallen asleep". But when questioned by the disciples he explained what he meant by sleep. He said, "*Lazarus is dead*" (John 11:11-14). In 1Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul also talks about believers who have died as having "fallen asleep" but he goes on to say they will one day be raised from the dead. So both Paul and Jesus used the term sleep to refer to those who have died.

So the Bible does use the term "sleep" to describe those who have died, but does it also state that those who have died have no conscious; that they are unaware of what is happening around them? The answer is no and here is just one Scripture to prove it.

REVELATION 6:9-11

"When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been would be completed also."

We see from this Scripture that the dead in Christ are conscious and aware of what is happening around them. They are not in an unconscious state. They are able to speak and be spoken to. They can hear and respond. They can wear robes and wait patiently for God's plan to be fully fulfilled. What we get from this depiction of those who have been martyred and died is that there is no such thing as "soul sleep". The dead in Christ are fully "awake", able to move about and interact with others. While it is true they are awaiting their resurrected bodies, they are doing so actively and not in a state of sleep. This Scripture and others refute the false teaching of "soul sleep". Let's move now to the idea of Purgatory.

PURGATORY

Purgatory is the name the Roman Catholic Church uses to describe an 'in-between' place to which

we go after death. The Catholic Church claims this is a temporary place outside of Heaven where those who have died in the grace of God can atone or make amends for their sins through personal suffering. To quote their web site, Purgatory *“comes from the belief that some die with smaller faults for which there was no true repentance, and also the fact that the temporal penalty due to sin is at times not wholly paid in this life.”*

They further say that those who depart this life *“in God’s grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.”* When they speak of “venial faults” they are referring to their belief that not all sins are equally bad before God. Essentially what they are saying is this: There are two classifications of sin: those which are really, really, bad sins and those which are only somewhat bad. Grace will guarantee anyone who confesses their sin entrance into Heaven, but the working out of repentance may take a while. Those who do not fully work out their repentance for their venial (or smaller) sins must spend some time in Purgatory completing the cleansing of their sins. The thought is that on earth we tend to concentrate on making amends for our larger, more grievous sins at the expense of our lesser ones. Hence the need to continue making amends for these smaller sins in Purgatory.

This amount of “cleansing” or atonement depends on the number and type of sins a person commits. If a person’s life ends before payment is completed on earth, they must then make up the difference in Purgatory. This is the basic description of Purgatory – an “in-between” place where the dead in Christ go after they die before they are granted entrance into heaven - a place where they work out the penalty for their disobedience.

Like the concept of “soul sleep” the idea of having to pay for your sins even after you have been forgiven comes from the story of the unforgiving slave. In this story Jesus is not talking about heaven per se, but He does relate the actions of the human master to the actions of our Heavenly Father.

MATTHEW 18:23-35

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

“So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’

“So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

“Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

You may remember when Jesus taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer, He finished by saying *"If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."* So the story He relates here does have a consistency of teaching about it. But is it the specific action of unforgiveness that is at the heart of the story of the unforgiving servant, or is the real issue the attitude of the heart and the fruit that is brought forth from it? Let's take a closer look.

For the sake of argument, let's say this unforgiving servant is a true believer in Christ. If so, then the issue becomes whether this passage is speaking of our after-death experience or something else. Is Jesus trying to make the point that God will require some sort of payment from us after we die if we live lives of unforgiveness here on earth? Could it be that His main point is the theological issue of the impossibility of ever being able to pay back enough to compensate the God of the universe for all the sins which we have committed? Or is Jesus addressing moral issues such as the actions we must manifest in our response to the great debt of sin which God paid for us? In other words, when Jesus tells the story of the harsh master demanding payment for already forgiven debt is He speaking of future things to come or things that currently are?

Even though Jesus starts out by saying *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to..."* there is nothing in this passage to say that He is referring to a believer's future state after death. Just as the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a mustard seed or leaven, ten virgins or a hidden treasure found in a field, the Kingdom of Heaven is not these things. Neither is the kingdom of this harsh master the Kingdom of our Lord. All of these things are like the Kingdom of Heaven but none of them are the Kingdom of Heaven.

If the unforgiving servant is indeed a believer then, like other passages where earthly things are compared to heaven, I believe in this passage Jesus is referring to a believer's life here on earth and how God will not tolerate our unforgiving spirits when we have been forgiven of so much. Because He promised to make us into the image of His Son, God will do something in this life to make us realize the error of our ways. And that's why Jesus speaks of payment for debt. We need to freely give what we have freely received (Matthew 10:8).

So though we can, from this passage, get a concept of payment for sin after receiving forgiveness for it, we cannot truthfully say this passage speaks of any repayment plan for believers occurring in a place called Purgatory to which people go after death. And I can find no other Scriptures to support this idea. But I can find Scriptures that say the exact opposite.

[Note: If the unforgiving servant in this story is not a believer then I believe God is saying something different. Our Heavenly Father, through Jesus, has offered forgiveness to all who call upon His name and seek His mercy. Some may initially seek after God's mercy for the wrongs they have committed, but if they do not manifest this same forgiveness towards others then the genuineness of their confession is called into question. This unforgiving servant is not manifesting the traits of being forgiven. His evil nature got him into debt and when shown mercy he did not manifest the same mercy to others but rather manifested that his heart was not changed by the forgiveness he received. That is why Jesus told Peter he must forgive the brother that sins against him "seventy times seven" symbolizing never ending forgiveness (Matthew 18:22).

Because the unforgiving servant did not forgive even once the forgiveness which he had just received, he will be subject to eternal punishment, not in a place called Purgatory from which he may eventually find release, but in a place called Hell where there is no ability to repay his debt. Only the gift of God through Jesus is sufficient payment for sins debt. Since the unforgiving servant showed no

outward sign of receiving the grace he had just received the unforgiving servant will remain in Hell eternally as payment for his sin debt. Jesus is warning us that if we do not accept God's grace as full payment for our sins and act accordingly by letting God's grace permeate our heart, then we will be subject to judgment and in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:22). This is consistent with other Scriptures regarding our inability to repay God's grace.]

When dealing with Purgatory we cannot ignore its foundational concept of having to atone for our sins. We may all agree that grace is a sufficient ticket for entry to heaven, but must we atone for our sins as a punishment for committing them? Must we ourselves pay an additional penalty for our sins in addition to the penalty Christ paid for us before we can gain entrance into heaven after death? The books of Hebrews, Isaiah, and Ephesians all say no.

HEBREWS 2:17

"(Jesus) had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people."

ISAIAH 53:5-6

"But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

So we see from these Scriptures that payment and punishment for sin is required. God is a holy God and He punishes any and all sin and requires restitution to be made for it. But notice what God accepts as atonement for our sins. It is not the work of atonement that we do but rather it is the atonement work of Christ alone. The Lord caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was the perfect and only acceptable sacrifice for sin.

So yes, atonement for sin is required but not from us. We could never atone for even one sin; not in this life or in the next. Only Jesus could pay it all. And He has already done so once for all. There is no need for any future atonement for sin. There is no more work to be done. Jesus paid it all at Calvary. So if Jesus did all the work of salvation for us, is there any more work for us to do? The answer is no. Salvation is a gift of God and does not come as a result of anything we can do to earn or atone for it either in this life or in the next.

Here is another Scripture to confirm that there is no work to be done by us after death regarding our salvation.

REVELATION 14:13

"And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, 'Write, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!"' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.'"

We see from this passage that the dead in Christ rest from their labors. They are not perfecting themselves before they gain entrance into heaven. This Scripture and others already presented settle the issue

of us having to work to attain forgiveness after death. When we die we cease from our labors. There is no work to be done after we die.

So who is responsible for making atonement for sin? Whose penance will God accept, ours or Christ's? And who is responsible for "complete forgiveness"? Christ may have paid the entrance price but do we need to complete the payment for our sins even after we have received grace in order to become fully forgiven? The answer is a resounding "NO".

And this gets us to the heart of the deception of Purgatory. There has always been only one acceptable sacrifice for sin and it has never been the one that humans provide. There has never been any good work that could satisfy any penalty that God required for sin except the good work of Christ on the cross.

So to even entertain the idea of perfecting ourselves by paying for our own sins, whether in this life or the next, is to introduce heresy into the church. And to say that we have been saved by grace but that we cannot inherit its promise of eternal life until we pay the penalty for our sin is to say that the penalty that Christ paid is incomplete and needs the added work of personal penance in the afterlife in order for it to be effective. This could not be more inconsistent and contradictory to God's Holy word.

Now we have one more issue to address, and that is the issue of whether any sort of interim period exists at all before we enter heaven. We have already shown from Scripture that there is no "Soul Sleep" and no "Purgatory". Let's now see what Scripture has to say about whether or not there is any interim period or delay before entrance to Heaven is granted. We'll do this by looking at two Scriptures.

LUKE 23:43

"And (Jesus) said to (the thief on the cross,) 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.' "

The word "Paradise" means "garden" or walled enclosure and is synonymous with Heaven. It is used here and in 2 Corinthians 12:4 where Paul says he was caught up to Paradise, and in Revelation 2:7 which Jesus speaks of a Paradise where God and the tree of life dwells. (You may remember that there was a garden in Eden, also known as the garden of God, where the tree of life was planted and where God dwelt with Adam and Eve before the fall.) Paradise, then, is just another term for the place where God dwells. So when Jesus told the repentant thief on the cross that He would be with Him that very day in Paradise He meant He would be with Him in Heaven. Jesus did not say there would be an interim period of waiting before entry.

Here is another example of skipping any intermediate place and going directly to Heaven.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:5-9

"Now He who prepared us for this very purpose (a heavenly, eternal body) is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. 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 - ...

"we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him."

These two passages show us that there is no intermediate state. When we leave our bodies behind in death we are immediately with the Lord. There is no "waiting" or intermediate period of time. Where the

Lord is is where we shall be. And where does Scripture say Jesus is? In Heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father.

Why did I spend so much time on this issue of what happens to believers after death? Because I want you to be able to know what you believe and why what others teach is not scripturally sound. I don't want you to be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine that you hear. I want you to know the truth and to walk in it. I want you to know that to die is gain and that all believers in Christ will experience that gain immediately upon death.

It is in Christ alone that that our hope is found. He conquered both death and sin. And as He stands in this victory so do we; we have been bought with the precious blood of Christ. Because of Him sin's curse has lost its grip on us. No power of hell, no scheme of man will ever be able to pluck us from His hand. And no doctrine of man can convince us otherwise. It is in the power of Christ that we stand. And it is by faith in His atoning blood that we will enter heaven the moment after He calls us home.

When Christ said, "*It is finished*" that is exactly what it was – finished. Everything that needed to be done to redeem sinful man had been done. Nothing was incomplete. As the song we sang earlier said, "*Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow.*"

And that hope is found not in penance in the afterlife, but in Christ alone. He is the One in whom we put our trust. He is our cornerstone, our solid ground upon which we can rest, secure in the knowledge that when we die we who believe will go directly into the presence of Christ. In His love, in His death, through the precious blood and in the power of Christ we stand. All other ground is sinking sand. Amen.

IN CHRIST ALONE

In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm to the fiercest drought and storm

*What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when striving cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand*

In Christ alone who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
The gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save

Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
*For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live*

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day

Up from the grave He rose again

*And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ*

No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny

*No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand
Here in the power of Christ alone*

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