

Words on the Wall: What Happens when We Die?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 23:32-43

What happens when we die? What happens to us, what happens to our loved ones at the moment their breathing stops and their heart stops pumping and the synapses stop firing? Where do they go? What do they know? These aren't just questions we casually wonder about; these are big questions at the center of our life. Of course, we aren't always thinking about these questions. In the middle of a grocery run, on your way to a meeting, in the middle of a hectic day at work, you're not thinking about the afterlife. But when you go to the funeral home and pay your respects to the grieving family, and you walk by the coffin and see this person who was someone you knew and laughed with and enjoyed, lying there caked in makeup and so obviously gone, you wonder: Where is this person right now? What sort of state is she in? What can she see? Can she see me standing here looking at her body? Will she be able to keep track of who shows up at her own visitation and funeral? And can she see other things where she is? Is she right now meeting old friends, talking to the faithful departed? Is she hanging out with Moses and trading stories with Paul, listening to David play the lyre? And what does she look like? If you die at 80 do you look like an 80 year old in the afterlife? Heaven won't look like Raybrook manor will it? Do we get some of our youth back? And what about children, if a child dies in infancy will a parent meet that child as an infant or as an adult? And if there are only adults there, won't heaven be boring without children? Does she have any consciousness at all? Maybe she's just asleep, waiting for the last trumpet. Maybe she is simply resting in peace? Or is this it? Is this just the end? Cold, unconscious oblivion. The questions are always there just below the surface. And in the right places, in life and death places, they all come surging to the surface with some considerable force. And here in our passage we have one of the few times where Jesus more or less directly addresses these questions. On the day of his crucifixion, everyone else abandons Jesus, but there is one man who expresses something like faith in Jesus, he's the so called "good thief." Facing his own death, the criminal turns to Jesus and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus says to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." What exactly is Jesus promising here? What does he mean? What is he saying about death and what comes after it? Every word of this saying matters. And this morning, as we think about that shadowy boundary between death and life, I want to listen very closely to Jesus word to us. I want to listen word by word to what Jesus means to tell us about what happens when we die.

Jesus says 'with me.' Today you will be with me in Paradise. The 'with' is important. Let's recall the dying criminal asked for. He asked, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." That's a relatively small request. The thief is asking for Jesus not to forget him and to put in a good word for him if he can. 'Remember me' means please don't let me drop off your radar and do what you can to help me. When he says, 'Jesus, remember me,' the dying thief is asking for a few small crumbs of grace but Jesus gives much more than that. The thief says, "Jesus remember me!!" Jesus says, "You will be with me." The criminal is asking for a few crumbs from the master's table.

Jesus gives him a banquet. People have argued about the way we will be with Jesus in the hereafter. Will we be with him in a vague misty, cosmic sense? Will we be with him like a drop of water is with the sea? Will we be with him in the sense that he will keep us fondly in his mind and memory? But when the thief makes a vague and misty request “Remember me” - Jesus comes back with a much more personal “with me.”

This is not something cosmic and misty. It suggests an afterlife connection that is personal and intimate. It suggests something warm. This is the message of the catechism too! It lays out a short version of the doctrine of the intermediate state. When I die, my soul will be taken to Christ. Later, at the last judgment, by power of God, my body will be resurrected and reunited with my soul and I will be with Jesus. So, in our passage Jesus promises, when you die, you will be with me.

Jesus says, ‘Today’. TODAY you will be with me in paradise. What does Jesus mean by ‘Today’? Here’s a case where punctuation matters. Where do you put the comma in this sentence? Do you put it before or after the word today? Do you put it after? Then the sentence reads: “Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.” In that case the today refers to the day of Jesus’ saying and it doesn’t tell us anything about when we will be with Jesus. Or do you put the comma before today? Does the sentence read the way “Truly I tell you, Today you will be with me in paradise?” In which case Jesus is saying that the thief will be with Jesus starting today, starting immediately. The Greek doesn’t have the comma so you have to choose. Every major translation goes the second way. Every major translation suggests that Jesus means to tell the thief that his time with Jesus in Paradise starts today. And they have good reason for doing so. Not only does the Greek lean that way, but that fits the request of the thief. The thief’s request has some temporal uncertainty. The thief asks, “Jesus, at the point when you come into your kingdom, whenever that is because I don’t know when that will happen, remember me.” Jesus says “Forget about whenever! I’ll tell you when you will be with me! It’s today!! It’s now! Now is the day of salvation.” And that’s the catechism too: our soul will go to him ‘immediately’ ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Jesus says “Paradise.” Today you will be with me in Paradise. What exactly is paradise? When people today use the word paradise it’s usually in reference to a place of great natural beauty. Paradise is sandy beach with blue water, white sand, green palms and warm sun. When they talk like that they’re echoing the way the Bible talks about paradise. The Greek word here is from a Persian word for an enclosed garden. It’s also the word that the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint) uses for the Garden of Eden. So when the thief heard Jesus speak the word paradise, he would have thought of that garden where Adam and Eve walked with God in joy and peace. Does that mean that this man can expect to finish the day strolling barefoot through a garden with Jesus? When we die will we be ushered into a national park populated by happy nudists? I don’t think so. I think when Jesus says Paradise, he does not mean to give a precise description of the geography, plant life and fashion habits of the hereafter. He means to evoke a place where we will have perfect intimacy of God. The Bible actually tells us very little about the intermediate state. There’s material in Revelation about the new creation - that period at the end of time after the last judgment - but there’s very little in Scripture about that what it’s like when our soul is with Jesus. I know that’s not what you want to hear. We want a clear picture of what our loved ones

are doing right now, but that picture just isn't given. Consider 2 Corinthians 12:2. It's one of the only other times in the new Testament where the word Paradise is used and in that passage Paul says that he knows a man who was caught up to the third heaven which he calls paradise. This man was caught up to paradise and "heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat." The geography of the new heaven is not given to us. And if we saw it, it's not clear that we would be able to explain it. It would be like coming to people who'd lived their whole life underground eating grubs, and trying to explain to them sunshine and blue sky and the taste of a fresh orange. The Catechism follows scripture here. When it speaks of heaven it too is deliberately imprecise. It doesn't give an exact description. It promises instead a "Perfect blessedness such as no eye has seen or no ear has heard." We may not be able to describe it or imagine it properly, but there is a place. A beautiful place. A place of joy and personal intimacy with God, and the thief will be there with Jesus today. And we will be there with Jesus someday. Jesus says to us, "Paradise." Jesus says, "You." "You, Mr. Thief, will be with me in Paradise." Who was this person, this 'you' to whom Jesus speaks? Luke calls him a criminal which is a general word for an evildoer, but obviously his crime was dangerous and violent, because he was being crucified. And it must have been unusually bad, because the criminal himself seems to think that he deserves this punishment. Mark calls him a bandit. A cut throat. It's the same word that is used in the parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the people who attacked the man and left him for dead. So maybe that's who this man was. He was one of those guys who waited in the bushes along the road to Jericho and when he saw some innocent coming, he would jump out and beat the man with a stick until he was dead and run off with his stuff. This is not a nice person. Picture a concentration camp guard on the cross with Jesus. And Jesus says to him, "You!" "I want you to be with me." Typical Jesus. Think of all the 'yous' that Jesus welcomes to his table in Luke. There sits the bandit, and beside him there's the prostitute who washed Jesus feet. And beside her is the heretical Samaritan who had all his theology wrong, and then across the way you see the tax collector who begged for mercy in the temple, and there's the Prodigal Son who partied away his dad's money. He's passing the bread to Zacchaeus the tax collector, who's got his arm around the unclean leper Jesus healed. It's quite a dinner party. It's not the kind of dinner table you'd choose if you were networking for success. But if you were tired and broken, if you were depressed and afraid, if you were ashamed of yourself and looking for a new start; it's exactly the kind of party you'd be looking for. Luke gives us a beautiful picture of the church: A table full of broken people who are learning how to live again by looking to Jesus and helping each other along the way.

One more word. Jesus says, "truly." Truly I say to you. Verily, verily, I say to you. This is a speech pattern in Greek. When you begin your sentence this way, you are trying to show everyone that you are very serious about what's to follow. 'What I'm about to say is true. Count on the truth of these words. Lean on these words.' You actually know the Greek word here. It's probably the first Greek word you learned. It's amen. The same amen that we put at the end of our prayers. What does the word mean? The catechism tells us: Q&A 124 asks "What does that little word Amen mean?" Amen means, "This is sure to be." Amen means this is a sure thing. As we reach the end of our life, most of us will not be sure. When death comes to your house one of the things he brings along is a suitcase full of doubt. Even people who've been in church twice a

Sunday their whole life, people who have taught church school and been on council, people who have sung hymns with heart and voice every one of their Easter Sundays, when death comes they feel unsure. 'I've believed it my whole life, but is it really true? I don't feel sure. Pastor, help me feel sure.' It doesn't happen to everyone. Some saints sing psalms of faith right to the end, but most people find themselves weathering storms of doubt. We pastors have no words that can make those doubts go away. We have no instant proof we can offer to the dying that all this talk is true. I could tell you about near death experiences I've read about. I could tell you about powerful signs I've witnessed of God's presence in the midst of death. And those stories are good and true and encouraging, but maybe the best words are still the words Jesus gave us, maybe the best words for us to hear as we near our death are the last words Jesus spoke directly to us before he died. We may not be able to fully understand these words, but we can grab hold of them, we can lean on them, because they are true. They are a sure thing. "Truly I say to you, today... you... will be with me... in Paradise."

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