Remain steadfast in the hope of the resurrection

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Romans 8:38-39

Paul gives us confidence that once we belong to Jesus, nothing will be able to take us away from Him. And that’s because Jesus has shown Himself more powerful than all these things.

Jesus has life in Himself, He doesn’t need anyone to give it to Him. He is the One who gives. He has experienced death and overcome it; it could not hold Him. Satan did his best to temp Him and to destroy Him and entirely failed. The demons screamed at Him but had no choice than to obey Him.

Jesus is eternal; He has always been and always will be. Nothing past or in the future is unknown to Him. Nothing takes place without His okay. The power of death, the power of sin, the power of the evil spirits have proven no match for Him.

He has descended to the depths of the realm of the dead and rules from the highest heaven. Everything that has been created has been created through Him.

There is nothing that can separate us from Him once we are His. What peace we have as His people.

In Christ’s love

John

4-24-22

Luke 16:19-31

We will come back to our study of Genesis in a few weeks, but I thought this might be a good time to consider some other topics in the Bible; especially as we are just coming from our Easter celebration. We have recently spent time considering the death of Jesus; how He suffered and died on the cross to pay the price for our sins and to make salvation possible. We’ve also looked at His resurrection. In this He demonstrated His victory over death; He is stronger than death and death is not able to hold Him. In this we also have the promise of a future resurrection.

Well, what about the time in-between Jesus’ death and resurrection? What about the time during which He was dead? While there is some difference of opinion over what happened, I believe that there is pretty clear Biblical evidence of what took place; perhaps not in great detail, but enough for us to understand its importance. There is also a lot of confusion about where Jesus went and what He did while He was in the grave. Hopefully we can clear some things up.

The account Jesus gave of Lazarus and the rich man has many points to consider and a lot of deep meaning. It is my intent to just use one of those points as a starting place: The point is that there were two areas where the dead people resided. Notice also that I said that this was an account. At first glance, Jesus’ story seems to be a parable. But it has a couple big differences from a parable.

First, one of the characters is actually named. Parables tend to be about general people: a farmer, a man, a woman, a tax collector. Here we have a poor man who is named Lazarus. By the way, this is not the same Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead; the brother of Mary and Martha.

Secondly, the parables Jesus tells are a story about one thing, that actually have meaning for something else. For example, a man finds a valuable pearl and sells everything he owns to buy it. Jesus’ point has nothing to do with pearls or selling everything you own. He is talking about the priceless Kingdom of heaven.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, it is about the rich man and Lazarus and what happens to them. Now from what happens to them we can draw conclusions about reality and what can happen to us. We can take the points of the story as fact. We must also keep in mind that this account takes place before Jesus’ work on the cross. Before our sins could be atoned for.

The part of this story that I want to look at is that there is a place for the souls of the dead to go. The Bible is clear that even though a person’s body dies, their soul continues in consciousness. For example, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that he would, “*prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.*” This is the current case for a Christian; when we die, our soul goes to heaven to be with Jesus, even though our body has died.

Because of sin, God had to make a place for the souls of the dead. If we hadn’t sinned in the garden of Eden, we wouldn’t have died. And we couldn’t simply go into heaven because even those who are righteous by faith were still stained by sin and so could not be in God’s presence. So, what we learn is that there was a place where the souls of people who had died went to. We also learn that this place had two separate compartments: One compartment for the unrighteous, which is where the rich man went and was in torment; and another compartment for the righteous, which is where Lazarus went and was comforted.

More generally speaking, before Jesus, there was a place for the souls of the dead to go to wait. One area or compartment held those who died in their sins with no faith in God or hope for a Messiah. They had no righteousness accounted to them because they did not believe God. This area is a place of torment as indicated by the presence of flames.

The other area was for those whose faith was in God, who believed His promises, and held to a faith in God’s Messiah. In the account that Jesus told, we see that this is a place of comfort and consolation. This is what is meant by Lazarus being in Abraham’s bosom. Another Old Testament story tells us that it was also a place of peace. In the book of 1 Samuel chapter 28 is the account of king Saul coming in desperation to a witch and asking her to call up the prophet Samuel who had died. Samuel actually came, showing that he was a living soul, and asked, “*Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up*?” He was in the place of the righteous dead where he was at peace and rest.

Another way for us to describe this section of the place of the dead is that it’s where the Old Testament saints were. Remember that saints are simply those who are faithful to God in the Old Testament and those who believe in Jesus in the New. Each of us here who believe in Jesus Christ for salvation is a saint.

Part of the confusion is that the place of the dead has several names in the Bible and even in different translations: Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, Abraham’s Bosom, Paradise, and even Hell. All these names refer to the place where the souls of the dead go, or to one of the compartments.

All of this to give us some background about where Jesus was after He was crucified and before He was resurrected: He was in the place of the dead. So, what happened there? First Peter 3:19 tells us that after Jesus died, His spirit was made alive, “*in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison*.” Jesus had a human soul and it went to the place of the dead and spoke to the souls or spirits there. This would have been both the righteous and the unrighteous souls. There are also indications that He made proclamation to some of the fallen angels, but that’s a whole other subject.

Jesus’ descent to the place of the dead teaches us some things but there are also some false teachings that I want to bring up. Most importantly, Jesus did not go to hell and suffer. This idea comes partly from some translations using the word “Hell” instead of “Hades”. But even more it comes from the Apostle’s Creed. One line from the creed says either “He descended to the dead” or “He descended into Hell”. Now, the Bible translations are good translations and the Apostle’s Creed is a good creed; we just need to understand what they are saying.

The problem is, of course, the word “Hell”. It’s not worth going into all the details of what is happening with this word. If anyone is interested, I can give you a reference that gives a deeper explanation. Basically, the issue is two very similar Latin words which mean dead and hell. Additionally, in the early centuries of Christianity, the idea of hell simply meant a place of the dead; it didn’t have the idea of torment that it does for us. So, the two Latin words were interchangeable. The whole idea was just that Jesus went to the place of the dead.

When Jesus was on the cross, just before He gave up His spirit, He said, “*It is finished*.” Jesus’ suffering was done. He had paid the price for our sins entirely. He had borne the full weight of God’s wrath. God’s justice was satisfied. There was nothing left for Him to do as far as being our atonement. There was no reason for Jesus’ soul to suffer torment in the place of the dead.

Jesus knew that He was going to the place of the righteous dead. This is why He told the believing thief, “*Today you will be with Me in Paradise*.” They weren’t going to heaven just yet. Although Jesus had finished the work of atonement, He still had more to do. Something we see here again is that Jesus is fully human and on the cross of Calvary He truly died. Things happened to Him just as they did to any other human. His physical body died and it was laid to rest in a tomb. But then His soul went to the place of the dead; just like any other person. Jesus was fully human: His DNA was intact, He had all His chromosomes, and He had a soul. And He still does.

The souls who were in the place of the righteous dead were waiting. They were still waiting for the Messiah, just as they had done during their lifetimes. They were no longer suffering, but they were still waiting. By Jesus coming to them, their wait was over. Jesus came to them and made proclamation. He proclaimed His victory over sin. See, this is not Jesus still suffering, this is the beginning of Him being exulted. He didn’t come to win their freedom; He had already won it.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we are shown that although they cannot cross the chasm in between them, they can speak across it. Jesus also proclaimed His victory to those on the unrighteous side. You see, they were also waiting, but they were awaiting the final judgement; and they still are. Jesus’ proclamation to the unrighteous souls was not a second chance, this is not universalism, this is not purgatory. This was His announcement of salvation for those who had believed God in faith; and of judgement for those who had not.

The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 2:9-11, that because Jesus obediently suffered a shameful death on the cross, “*For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*.”

What Paul wrote will have its final fulfillment at the end of time and with the great white throne judgement. But we already have its beginnings. On earth, all His followers gladly bow the knee to Jesus. After His death, He went to the place of the dead, that the righteous would gratefully bow to Him and the unrighteous would know what is coming. After His ascension He was seated at the right hand of the Father where all of heaven bows to Him. Jesus is exulted on the earth, under the earth, and in heaven.

Something very special happened when Jesus’ soul entered the place of the dead. Although His was a human soul, it wasn’t just any human soul. This was the soul of the God-man. The place of the dead could not hold Him. Even more, He could release those who were held there. This is why Jesus said in Revelation 1:18, “*I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades*.” In other words, He is more powerful than death and He can bring people out of the place of the dead.

Also, in Ephesians 4:8 it quotes the prophet: “*When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men.*” The Old Testament saints may have been captive in paradise, but they were still captive. They weren’t in heaven. Also, they were waiting. When the soul of Jesus came to the place of the dead, their wait was over; their Messiah had come. But even more, Jesus brought them out of the place of the righteous dead and into heaven. And in heaven is where Jesus is in His resurrection body.

So now, that place of the righteous dead is apparently empty. The Old Testament saints and all the saints who have since died in Christ, are with Jesus in heaven. And Jesus has a glorified body; which is the promise to them that they too will receive a glorified body; all in the Lord’s good time.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we praise You that You finished Your work of redemption on the cross. Your work was complete and perfect, lacking in nothing, a full propitiation of our sins. In Your humanity, Your soul went to the place of the dead. But in Your Godhood, You emptied it of Your people.

Even in the depths of the earth, You are exulted. You are Lord of all and Lord everywhere. The day will come when no one will resist bowing before You and proclaiming You Lord. You are worthy and this is right.

Thank You Jesus. In Your death, You freed us from the punishment of sin and bestowed Your righteousness on all who believe in You. In Your descent to the dead, You experienced all that Your people experience so that You are the perfect high Priest. While there, You obtained the keys to the place of the dead, so that You might lead Your people out. And in Your resurrection, You demonstrated Your victory over death and gave us the sure hope of eternal bodily life.

Thank You Jesus

Amen