

LIFE THROUGH THE SON

John 5:25-30

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, April 27, 2008

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn. 5:25).

One of Jesus’ most dramatic miracles was the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When he learned of his friend’s illness, Jesus did not race to his side, but said, “It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (Jn. 11:4). Lazarus died, and four days later Jesus stood before his tomb. He “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips” (Jn. 5:43-44). Because of this miracle, Jesus’ opponents could no longer dispute his deity, so they entered into the conspiracy that finally achieved his death.

This dispute over Christ’s deity, and the desire to murder him because of it, has its origins in John 5. Jesus had healed a paralytic on the Sabbath and the religious leaders objected. Jesus answered by stating that just as God his Father works every day for the well-being of people, so also should he. This incensed the leaders all the more, since now he was claiming deity for himself. Jesus followed this with a defense of his claims, probably spoken before the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. First, he spoke of his relationship with the Father, and mentioned that the Father has granted him judgment (Jn. 5:22-23). This required some elaboration, which Jesus gives in the second portion of his defense. He explained, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn. 5:25).

THE DEAD WILL HEAR

Few topics are more important than the matter of life after death. Is there life after death? If so, what will it be like? Is there a heaven and is there a hell? If so, how is this decided? These are questions we ought to ask, since every one of us is destined to die.

Surveys show that there is a great deal of confusion regarding the afterlife. In a recent survey, two-thirds of Americans expressed confidence that there is life after death, and 83% stated that it would be a positive experience. 72% believe in heaven, but only 56% believe in hell, and 31% believe in hell as a literal place of torment. The general state of confusion is more clearly seen when people are asked about reincarnation. 47% of Americans agree that their soul will be reborn in a different body – perhaps other than a human one – including 20% of self-proclaimed born again Christians.¹

Given this confusion, it is all the more important for Christians to know what the Bible teaches about life after death. Jesus' statements before the Sanhedrin give us important information that ties in with the Bible's whole teaching. We may organize his remarks into three headings: first, there is a day of judgment to come when every human who has ever lived will be raised to stand before Jesus Christ; second, the Father has granted Jesus the authority to execute judgment; and third, resurrection will mean life for some but judgment for others.

The Bible teaches that our souls do not perish in death. This is something that people understand even without the Bible. Solomon commented that God "has placed eternity into man's heart" (Eccl. 3:11). This is why atheistic claims that our existence ceases at death never gain much traction with people: our intimate acquaintance with the human soul simply does not allow such a view. Perhaps the best summary of the Bible's teaching on the immediate aftermath of death is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens,

¹ George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape* (Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. (XXXII.I).

One important point is that death separates our souls from our bodies. You will often hear it said of a lame person who dies that “he can use his legs again.” But this is not true; we regain our bodies not immediately after death but only in the final resurrection. As Solomon said of death, “The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7).

Secondly, those who die immediately pass into one of two conditions. The unjust pass immediately into a place of torment. In one of his parables, Jesus spoke of a wicked rich man who died and went to hell, being “in anguish in [the] flame” (Lk. 16:24). But the righteous pass immediately into glory. Their souls are perfected in holiness and are received into God’s presence. Thus, Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43). Paul states that in death believers are “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).

Knowing this emboldens Christians to die triumphantly, having our fear converted into joyful anticipation. Death is a precious opportunity to witness the gospel and give glory to God. Paul said, “To me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). As Thomas Watson reasons, “What hurt does death, but take us from among fiery serpents, and place us among angels? What hurt does it do, but to clothe us with a robe of immortality?”² Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Death -- what is it? It is the waiting room where we robe ourselves for immortality... Death is the gate of life; I will not fear to die, then.”³

Jesus looks beyond our deaths to the day of the final judgment. He says that then our bodies will be raised so that we are rejoined with them. “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live... An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out” (Jn. 5:25, 28-29). Just as Jesus

² Thomas Watson: *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1958), 304.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon: *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker,), 1:229.

once summoned his friend Lazarus from the grave, on that coming day he will call the entire human race, and all will rise from the grave. On that day, not only the righteous but the entire human race will be rejoined to their resurrected bodies; having lived in the body, we will stand for judgment in our bodies before the Lord.

Jesus tells us how this will be: “The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God” (Jn. 5:25). The voice that stilled the waves, offered rest to the weary, and gave forgiveness from sins, will then speak with irresistible authority. The One whom John described as “the Word... through whom all things were made” (Jn. 1:1-3), will speak with divine command to all the creation. None will refuse his voice and “all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out” (Jn. 5:28-29). That was an audacious claim for Jesus to make, but when he said, “An hour is coming,” he added, “and is now here” (Jn. 5:25). Jesus proved his power to raise the dead in the future by raising the dead in his first coming. Even his healing of the lame man by the pool proved his divine command over life and death.

CHRIST’S AUTHORITY TO JUDGE

Jesus spoke these words mainly to support his claim as God’s divine Son. He then elaborated, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (Jn. 5:26-27). Jesus had earlier mentioned two “greater works” that reveal his deity (Jn. 5:20). These are the giving of life and the execution of judgment. These two works – above all the others – reveal his divine prerogatives: Jesus has power to give life to the dead and has authority to judge the world.

Both of these come from the Father, who “has life in himself” (Jn. 5:26). That is an important statement. St. Augustine contrasted God with a man who goes about at night with a candle. When the candle goes out, he is left without light. But God needs no candle, for he is himself light. Likewise, God does not receive life from some outside source, but he is self-existent as the source of all life. Jesus says the Father “has granted” that the same should be true of him – an awesome claim to deity. This statement delves into deep canyons of truth, far deeper than our puny minds can go. But it tells us that the

Son has the life of God because it is “granted by the Father.” This does not mean that there was ever a time when God the Son did not have life. What it means is that divine life is eternally given by the Father and eternally received by the Son in a union that has no beginning or end. Theologians refer to this as the eternal generation of God the Son from God the Father.

Just as the Father has granted life to his Son, Jesus says, “He has given him authority to execute judgment” (Jn. 5:27). Jesus has authority to condemn and forgive, which are divine prerogatives. Notice how openly Jesus refers to himself as “Son of God” and claims to have the same divine life as God and to have God’s authority to sit as judge. These are bold statements that can lead only to worship or condemnation. C. S. Lewis pointed out that Jesus intended to require us either to accept or deny his claims to deity, ruling out mere appreciation of him as a nice moral teacher: Lewis famously wrote:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic... or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse... Let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁴

Jesus did not seek a tepid sentimental response: he demands faith as Savior, obedience as Lord, and worship as God, and considers a refusal to grant these as a brazen rebellion against his throne.

Jesus made this especially clear when he gave the rationale for the judgment God has given him: “[God] has granted him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (Jn. 5:27). Many writers suggest that this speaks of Jesus’ fitness to serve as our judge because of his participation in the human race. One says, “Because of His alliance with man’s nature, because of His sense of man’s infirmities, because of all He did and suffered for man’s sake as the Son of man, the Son is that Person of the Trinity who is most fit, as well as most worthy to be man’s judge.”⁵ This is true, but it is not all. The title “Son of Man” refers to Jesus’ Messianic office. The term comes

⁴ C.S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity*, p. 56.

⁵ Burgon, cited in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,), 1:299-300.

from Daniel's prophecy, which showed "one like a son of man" who would come before the Ancient of Days at the end of history to receive "dominion and glory and a kingdom... an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away" (Dan. 7:13-14). The Son of Man is the One who not only became human but who did so to restore God's reign over the creation, and who returns to heaven in glory to receive power and dominion forever. This, too, was an astounding claim to deity that Jesus' original hearers could not and did not mistake. It ought also to shape our thoughts, so that while we think of Jesus with love and gratitude, we also think of him in reverent awe, the Son of Man who receives from God the throne of the universe forever.

Jesus concludes this passage by saying: "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn. 5:30). This tells us two things about Jesus' coming judgment. First, it will be just and true. If you seek to stand on your own two feet before the Lord Jesus Christ, then you had better be prepared to hear the truth about yourself and to face the most strict justice. You will not survive it. Those who think it a light matter to be judged by Jesus have not paid careful attention to the Gospel accounts. Jesus will not lower God's standards of perfect righteousness and he will not bend the truth. This is a legal court in which the heavenly Judge must and will do what is right, acquitting none who have broken God's law.

Secondly, Jesus' judgment has the goal of glorifying God by doing his will. When we come to stand before Jesus, his motive will not be our well-being but God's will and glory. If we stand in our sins, he will glorify God by our eternal condemnation. And if we have been cleansed by his blood, Christ the Judge will glorify God by declaring our justification. This is a comforting thought for those who trust in Jesus: our sins having already been punished on the cross, it is not merely God's grace but also God's justice that grants us a legal claim to heaven.

LIFE OR JUDGMENT?

As enthroned Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus will speak the words that bring our bodies to life and summon all humanity to stand before his seat of justice. There, we will face two possible

outcomes: life or judgment. Jesus said he will raise “those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (Jn. 5:29). This is the reality that most people neglect in all their calculations. Life does not end with death, nor does it inevitably lead to a new and pleasant journey, regardless of how we have lived. The writer of Hebrews said: “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). Do you live in awareness of that great reality? Ignoring it will do no good, for judgment is appointed in the unbreakable counsels of God.

What will take place in that judgment, as all humanity who has ever lived rises to stand before the Son of God? Interestingly, it was the apostle John who gave the clearest picture on this, in the Book of Revelation. In a vision of the final judgment, John recorded:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. *Revelation 20:11-14*

On the Judgment Day, at which each of us will be present along with the entire human race, two books will be opened. One is the Book of Life, in which are written the names of those who trusted and served the Lord Jesus in this life. These only have permission to enter into heaven (Rev. 21:27); the angels sing, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates” (Rev. 22:14). Christ’s people will not be condemned for their sins, although they will present their good deeds to Christ and be rewarded according to them. Paul explains, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10). Those words were written about believers, who though free from the punishment of hell will give an account of their lives to the Lord prior to entering heaven.

But for those whose names are not written in the Book of Life, another book will be opened, in which a perfect record of their entire lives is found. Every deed, every spoken word, every thought and

desire, will be judged according to the perfect standard of God's holy law. The penalty is fixed in advance, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). One single sin will suffice to bring condemnation; indeed, according to God's holy perfection, every sin demands it. This is a dreadful prospect, since every one of us has a record literally filled with violations of God's law – idolatries, blasphemies, hatreds, lusts, thefts, and lies. There is no one whose life can stand such scrutiny, so John concludes, "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 21:15). This is why the cross of Christ is the one refuge for all who will face this judgment! Only by placing our sins upon Jesus through faith, nailing them to the cross, can we stand sinless on that day, with our names written for salvation in his Book of Life.

We know from the repeated teaching of Scripture that no one can be accepted into heaven on the basis of their works – Jesus states in John 5:24 that eternal life is received only through faith in him. But notice that in the judgment he speaks of both good works and evil: "Those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn. 5:29). One reason for this is that Jesus is speaking here about judgment. When speaking of salvation he talks in terms of God's grace and faith, by which alone we can be saved. But the condemnation of wicked is based on their deeds. Nonetheless, we should observe that all those who are saved by faith alone consequently live in a manner that is characterized by goodness, and that Jesus will point this out to all those who are being condemned. As James stated, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (Jas. 2:17). So to be a true believer is not to be free from sin – we all sin in this life – but it is to have a life increasingly characterized by godliness. Biblically speaking, if our faith results in no works, it is a false faith that cannot save. How wonderful it is that Christ will not forget our good works and service offered to him in faith, and that the world which despises us now will one day witness Christ's own blessing on our lifestyle of obedience.

By speaking of "the resurrection of judgment," Jesus is clearly referring to hell. Many scholars want to turn down the temperature on hell and deny its terrible reality. But the Bible's teaching cannot be revoked and in the end its reality cannot be avoided apart from Christ.

Hell is not a place where worldly sins may continue to be enjoyed. Hell is not a place where those who avoided God in this life may continue to rebel in peace. Nor does hell signify the annihilation of souls so that they simply cease to exist, as is often asserted today. Rather, hell is the conscious experience of eternal, bodily torment for all who are condemned by God. While our minds cannot bear to dwell on it, we must state the truth as declared by the Lord. The most terrifying statements about hell were spoken by Jesus himself. Jesus called it “a fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:42). He said that there “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mk. 9:48). Nothing is more important than to escape our just condemnation in hell, and therefore no need is more urgent than to take refuge in the Savior Jesus Christ.

WHEN DESTINIES ARE DECIDED

Jesus directs our attention to the coming Day of Judgment in order to emphasize his own role and the proof it gives to his deity. There is no person who will not be present on that day to be judged. But I must point out that our destinies are not decided on that day. Rather, our eternal destinies are decided now. There will be no more final day than the Day of Judgment. But in a very real sense, today is a more fateful day even than that.

Jesus suggested this very truth, stating, “An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn. 5:25). Our bodies will come to life on that future day of resurrection. But there is a present, spiritual resurrection for all who hear Christ’s Word and believe. The great reality of this present life is that men and women are dead to God, but Christ is calling them to life through the preaching of his gospel. The hour of judgment is right now, as Christ’s Word is taught and proclaimed. Those who do not hear and believe will continue in a state of spiritual death that will lead to eternal, bodily death at the final judgment. But those who hear and believe will live, both now and forever, with eternal life. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” Jesus said, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to

life” (Jn. 5:24). Therefore, Paul said, “Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

Understanding life after death therefore tells us not merely how to die, but, more importantly, how to live. The Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal, was famous for saying that he first calculated the end and then determined the present based on it. Likewise, we must live as those who know the truth of life and death and judgment. As we begin today a new year, this is the reality to which history is advancing! It is a truth that is unchanged by the turn of the seasons, and unchallenged by the passage of time. How can we not tell people who do not know? And how can believers not live as those who will stand before Christ, eager to present to him works of faith and godliness fit for the glory to which we are destined through our faith in him?

This was the apostle John’s own application to the Christians of his day. In his first epistle, John wrote words of comfort and joy for those who trust in Christ, looking forward to the glory that awaits: “Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2). What a glorious hope, with which every Christian should face both life and death! But he added a challenge that necessarily follows: “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3).