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Sermon 24

Hebrews 9:23-29

Joseph Tucker

I know a lot of people don’t like to talk about death and we try to prevent talking about death as much as possible. We try to put it off, if we’re honest. A lot of us aren’t trying to die. But, ultimately, it’s a reality. Death and dying are not a lot of people’s favorite topics of conversation. We put off meeting with lawyers to make a will, probably because we don’t like meeting with lawyers, but if we need a will we don’t like meeting with them to create a will, to talk about not being here. We don’t like the idea of not being here, because death’s uncomfortable. It’s unknown. That shouldn’t be shocking to us but oftentimes it is.

I got a text the other day that a guy my family has known my whole life passed away. I was on a lawnmower when I got the text and I just stopped and cried. I wasn’t crying out of grief; I was crying out of joy because I know that he’s face-to-face with his Savior right now, because he knew Jesus. But whether it’s someone we know who knew the Lord or whether it’s someone we know who didn’t know the Lord, when we hear that someone has passed away, it’s still shocking. It’s unnerving. It's out of the ordinary, even though we know it’s coming. We know life is short and that it will, sooner or later, come to an end.

We know that God was the first to mention death. We read the Bible and in Genesis 2, the Lord was the first one to mention death in the creation account. He was telling Adam the consequences for rebelling against His word. We see the first act of rebellion in Genesis 3 and death enters the scene. And it’s not Adam or Eve’s blood that was shed, but it is God who sheds the blood of an animal to cover the sins of His people. And God said that because of sin we would all die, and He’s kept His word. We do all die. From dust we were made and to dust we will return. Death is divine judgment over sin.

As we learned last week, in Hebrews 9:22, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. There’s no acceptance, there’s no blessing, there’s no joy, there’s no light, there’s no hope, there’s no future, there’s no salvation, there is no life. The bad news is that we will all die.

One question that I’ve found over the course of my life that gets people’s gears turning more than almost any other is asking people, “What do you think happens when we die?” If you’re a believer and you know you should share the Gospel but you don’t know how to start that conversation, that’s a great one. Just ask somebody, “Hey, what do you think happens after we die?” Everybody is going to die eventually, and everybody should have some answer to that question. It brings up thoughts like, “Man, I don’t know what happens. What do you think happens?” Then, what did they just do? They opened a door for you to share the Gospel, for you to share God’s Word. What do you think happens after we die?

I wanted to take some time to talk about what we don’t believe happens after we die. We do not believe in reincarnation. We don’t believe that you come back to live in some alternate form on this Earth. There are no do-overs, there are no second chances. My boys have started recently playing Nintendo 64, which is a really old gaming console, if you’re familiar with video games. My wife and I still have some from college; 007 and Goldeneye. Anybody familiar? Yeah. So, they started playing that game and the first ever first-person shooter game and I think still the best ever – the graphics are not great but it’s amazing, because it’s super old. But, in that game, when you’re fighting other people, you get killed. You die in the game. Guess what happens. Game over? No, you respawn somewhere else and you just get to keep going. You lose all your guns, but you get to go find new ones. You just get killed and pop up somewhere else. You’re in the bathroom now instead of the hallway. Whatever.

But the reality is that for us, we know – we know this – life is not a video game. We don’t just respawn when we die. We are linear people. We don’t believe in circular history. Christians believe that there’s a beginning to life. There’s a beginning to time. There’s a middle, a turning point, and then there’s an end. Death isn’t the end for anybody. We don’t believe in annihilation. We do not believe that when you die your body goes in the ground and then there is absolutely nothing. That there’s just a void, a vast emptiness. We do not believe that. We don’t believe in purgatory. There is no place of temporary punishment after death for those who have not paid for their transgressions while they were living. There are no second chances. You can’t spend time somewhere and then eventually get to Heaven. The Bible doesn’t teach that. The Bible doesn’t mix well with Greek mythology.

I remember being in high school and I had to do a project one time and create layers of Dante’s Inferno. Maybe you’re familiar with that; maybe you’re not. You can go read Dante’s Divine Comedy. But the Bible doesn’t mix well with Greek mythology because truth doesn’t mix with lies. We don’t believe in universalism – the false doctrine that everyone will eventually be saved in the end. That there’s no Hell. That God doesn’t have wrath over sin. We don’t believe in that. We believe that every person will exist forever in either eternal punishment or eternal bliss, eternal life, with the Lord. We believe in Heaven and we believe in Hell. Why? Because Jesus taught it. Because the Bible says, and Jesus said, in Luke 12,

Don’t fear those who kill the body and then after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him, who after He has killed has authority to cast into Hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him!

To not believe in the doctrine of Hell is to not believe in the Gospel, because it makes the good news of the Gospel so much sweeter because of this awful reality, because of the fury of the wrath of a holy God. That’s why we believe in the Gospel, that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; that there is a way to not experience eternal punishment for our sins forever.

We’re going to see from our text tonight that death is inevitable. We all face death, and we will give an account for our lives on this Earth, in front of a mighty God.

Let’s read our passage together. If you’re not there already, Hebrews 9. We’re going to read the last paragraph of Hebrews 9, starting in verse 23.

**23**Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites…

He’s talking about what he described in verses 18-22.

…,but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. **24**For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. **25**Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, **26**for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. **27**And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, **28**so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

So, the better sacrifice is mentioned in verse 23 is Christ’s death on the cross. Nothing is better than that. Jesus’ blood purified, not the physical Temple, which was a copy and a shadow of a greater reality. Some will argue that the ‘heavenly things’ mentioned in verse 23 is actually us; that we, as followers of Jesus, are actually temples of the Holy Spirit and He dwells inside of us. And that’s true – God’s church, His bride, His children are being built together, growing into a holy temple in the Lord. And others argue that because of the context, the ‘heavenly things’ in this passage is referring to Heaven itself, not us. Look at verse 24. Christ entered into Heaven, itself, and is in the presence of God on our behalf. So, this tells us where Jesus is currently and why is He there? We’ve talked about this already, right? He’s in the presence of God, right now. He’s there for us. He’s mediating for us. He’s interceding for us. He’s our anchor, for us. He’s our advocate, right now, for us. Christ’s perpetual presence provides assurance for our salvation. We have eternal security and validity because

of His sacrifice, because He’s still there securing our access to the Father.

Verse 25 tells us that He didn’t have to make His sacrifices repeatedly, like all the other high priests, because His sacrifice was himself. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would walk into the shadow, or the copy, of the Holy of Holies, with a bowl of blood not his own. It was a bowl of blood from an animal. But verse 26 tells us that Jesus’ sacrifice was once for all. This once for all sacrifice put away sin forever and brought an end to an age. The age of animal sacrifices is over. The sacrifice of Jesus is superior in every way. It required no follow-up. It was the end of an age and the beginning of a new age. Jesus’ blood was singularly sufficient enough to secure our eternal redemption. Our debt has been paid off. God’s justice has been satisfied completely.

Some of you know that I drive a 2000 Toyota Four-Runner. I bought that car in 2009 and I got a large loan to buy it. I think I paid that loan off in 2019 or something like that. It might have taken a decade. But, if you’ve ever had a car payment, you realize how much that takes out every month. You’re like, “Oh, I see that coming out of my bank account every month. That’s fun.” No, it’s not. Debt is not fun. I will never forget, though, because I had it on auto draft, watching and knowing that it’s getting close to being done. The debt is going to be paid off. Now, I didn’t have to do this, but I stopped the payment, and I went and got cash out, so that the next time I paid it, I could walk into the bank and hand them the money, and be like, “Done! I don’t owe you anything else.” That felt really, really good. Then, they didn’t automatically hand me the title, but they mailed me the title later. So, I own that car. I paid that thing off. It's mine. Do you know what’s amazing about that? The bank’s not calling me every day, like, “Hey, pay up!” It's already been paid. My debt has been satisfied. I’m not paying anything anymore. The account is settled.

Every time or I sin, God’s not calling you up and saying, “Hey, you need to get resaved. You need to get rebaptized. Hey, you need to rededicate your life.” Why? Because that’s not how we got saved in the first place. None of those things save us. Only Jesus saves us. Jesus’ once-for-all action. This sacrifice, this offering, changed absolutely everything. What’s amazing is that He didn’t stay dead. Jesus’ death saved you once for all, but His life sustains you and gives you hope beyond the grave. That’s why, as believers, we don’t have to be afraid of death. We don’t have to fear that day that’s coming, because we know One who has overcome the grave. Because of Jesus’ death, His blood washes away our sins, and we are forgiven. But because of His life, His resurrection, we can have eternal life with Him.

Romans 6 says,

9We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him. 10For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. 11So, now you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Christ died, Christ lives, never to die again. It's not a repeated sacrifice. His death and life are means of eternal salvation for us. Nothing else matters. Nothing else can save. Nothing else can sustain. And even Jesus died once, and so will you and me.

Look at verse 27,

27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,

So, back to our question. What do you think happens after we die? The Bible gives the answer. It says, “judgment.” We will each die, we will each stand before the Judge of all, our Creator, and have to give an account for how we lived our lives.

I know some friends who joking say, because it says in the Bible, “every misspoken word.” We have to give an account for every misspoken word. Everything we’ve ever done, everything we’ve ever said, we will give an account for it.

Revelation 20:12 says,

**12**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.

Every single one of us will be judged and we will be responsible for our actions whether we like it or not. So, I wonder, what will you say? It's a sobering thing to think about dying. It's a sobering thing to think about standing before a holy God, where we have no excuses whatsoever, where we cannot hide at all. God’s Word is clear. It speaks with authority, it’s speaks with finality. It's appointed for us to die once. Even Jesus died only once. The author has made that explicitly clear – once for all. What’s amazing is that God knows your birthday. A lot of people know your birthday, too. But God knows your birthday and your deathday. His Scriptures are clear – it’s appointed for us to die once. He appointed it. The psalmist says, “You know all of my days before I even lived one of them. Every day that was ordained for me was written in your book before one of them came to be.” He knows your birthday and He knows your deathday. He knows when you will breathe your last. We don’t know. We don’t know, but we do know we will have to answer for everything we’ve ever done and everything we’ve ever said. Our Creator God will call us to give an account.

Now, if this was the end of chapter 9, that would be pretty depressing, right? It would be pretty depressing. But, thankfully, that’s not the end. Look at verse 28. Because of the Gospel, we have hope.

**28**so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

So, what will we say, standing before a holy God on judgment day? For followers of Jesus, there’s only one proper response, “Christ died once for me! On my behalf, in my place!” Those three-word phrases are beautiful Gospel proclamations that we should repeat to ourselves over, and over, and over again. “Once for me. In my place. On my behalf.” It never has to happen again. I don’t have to beat myself up every time I sin. I can’t pay for my sin anymore, because Christ has already paid for it. I’ve been forgiven. I’ve been set free.

This last verse brings to mind, not only Jesus’ first coming but His second coming. In Jesus’ first coming, He came to seek and save the lost. He came to deal with sin. He came to offer himself once for all. He came to bear the sin of many. Right?

Mark 10:45,

For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

But His second coming is different. His second coming is different. His first coming, He came riding in on a donkey. He was born in a palace? No, in obscurity. His second coming is going to be a lot different. He’s coming on the clouds. He’s coming on a white horse. He’s coming very differently than He came the first time. He’s not coming quietly the second time. Verse 28, Christ will appear a second time. This time, not to deal with sin but to gather His people to himself. He will come to get those who are eagerly waiting for Him, to completely our salvation, to bring us home. This is the consummation of our salvation.

Now, for the original audience, the people who were first reading or hearing this letter, this would have brought to mind the great anticipation within the crowd that gathered outside the Temple during the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would go in with that bowl of blood, to cleanse the Temple and the people of their sins. The people would have all waited outside, with great anticipation, eager to see if God had accepted this temporary sacrifice, because it meant their forgiveness. William Lane said,

They waited anxiously outside the Sanctuary while he fulfilled his office within the Most Holy Place. Not until he emerged from the sanctuary was the tension relieved. His return provided assurance that the offering which was made on their behalf, had been accepted by God. The excitement, relief, and joy of the people at the return of the high priest from ministering in the sanctuary is inexpressible.

Man, this makes me wonder – am I eager for Jesus to return? Am I waiting eagerly for Jesus to return, or am I eager for other things? Right? So, what are you eager for? Only you can answer that question. What are you eager for? You might be so eager for something that other people know what you’re eager for. But what are you really eager for?

At one point in my life, I, sadly, have to confess that I thought, “Jesus, don’t come back yet because I haven’t gotten married. I really want to get married, Jesus. Can you just not come back until then? I want you to come back but just don’t come back until I get married.” Was I eager for Jesus to come back? No. I didn’t love Jesus. I loved myself. I wanted other things more than I wanted Jesus. What are you eager for? Are you eager to go to college? Are you eager for retirement? Are you eager to get married? Are you eager for grandkids? Are you eager to have a kid of your own? Are you eager for a relationship that you don’t have yet? What do you really want? What are you waiting for? Are you eager for the perfect job? Are you eager for the perfect house, the perfect car? What are you eager for? Sadly, oftentimes we are more eager for temporary things than we are for Jesus to come back.

I love Titus 2, because it captures Jesus’ first and second coming in one passage. Titus 2:11-14 says,

**11**For the grace of God has appeared, …

That’s His first coming.

…bringing salvation for all people, **12**training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **13**waiting for our blessed hope,

That’s Jesus’ second coming.

…the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **14**who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Jesus will return. He’s coming back. And this is a message of hope for believers. We have life after death. This is good news, because the ultimate sting of death has been defeated. 1 Corinthians 15 is explicit,

Death is swallowed up in victory. Oh, death, where is your victory? Oh, death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise God for that. But Jesus’ return is not a message of hope for unbelievers. In John’s gospel, he says that after Jesus’ return that there will be a resurrection of believers for eternal life in Heaven and there will be a resurrection of unbelievers for eternal existence in Hell. The question is, are you eagerly awaiting Jesus’ return or are you fearing it? For the believer, Jesus’ return means full enjoyment in His presence and our inheritance. For the unbeliever, it means the full wrath of a holy God over their rebellion and rejection of a Savior. So, what will the Lord Jesus find you doing when He returns?

If you ask yourself that question, that could change some things that you do in your life. Do I want Jesus to find me doing this when He comes back? What will the Lord find you doing when He returns? In Luke 12, we’re told a parable about the master of the house returning to His servants. In verse 35, it says,

**35**“Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, **36**and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. **37**Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. …. **40**You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

You don’t know when He’s coming back, but He’s coming back. Are you going to be ready? Are you waiting eagerly? Are you going to stay awake? What will the Lord, the Master, find you doing when He returns? We should be rejoicing. We should be rejoicing in the debt-free life we’ve been given. The penalty of our sin has been paid. We should eagerly wait and enjoy the freedom from the power of sin that we have right now, when we live in the Spirit and not in the flesh. We should look forward to the freedom from the presence of sin in the perfect communion with our Lord when He returns. Yet, right, now, we still wrestle with sin, and we stay here still to face death. Yes, it’s a defeated foe but it’s not gone yet. Jesus is coming back at an hour we don’t expect, but He expects for us to be eagerly waiting for His return.

So, I put this before us, that we need to be worshipping and witnessing while we wait. That’s what we, as followers of Christ, are called to do. We’re called to be worshipping and witnessing while we wait. 2 Peter 3:11-15 says this,

**1**Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, **12**waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! **13**But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

**14**Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. **15**And count the patience of our Lord as salvation…

We should be eagerly waiting for His return. Right? We should be living lives of holiness, training ourselves for godliness. We should be pursuing Him, saying ‘no’ to ungodliness and saying ‘yes’ to Jesus. Saying ‘no’ to ourselves, we should be waiting for Him to find us ready for Him to come back and to get His bride.

What are we doing while we’re waiting? We need to be worshipping. We need to be witnessing. Isaiah 64 says,

From of old no one has heard  
    or perceived by the ear,  
no eye has seen a God besides you,  
    who acts for those who wait for him.

So, a few application questions as we close. Are you diligently serving Him with your life? Are you worshipping Him with all that you are? Are you at peace? Do you have shalom? Are you whole in Christ? Are you bearing witness to a lost and dying world about His life, death, and resurrection? Are you thanking Him for not coming back? For, as that 2 Peter passage said, His not coming back means salvation for many. Are you thanking Him for not coming back yet? Are you praying for your unbelieving friends? How are you waiting? We need to be worshipping and witnessing while we wait eagerly for Jesus’ return.

Let’s pray.

Father, we praise you for your Word that does not lie. We thank you so much for telling us the truth about life, for telling us the truth about death. We thank you that you have not hidden the most important things from us. Lord, forgive us when we try to act like we are sovereign over our own lives, like we’re in control of our own lives. Forgive us when we try to call the shots, when we’re eager for so many other things and you are far from our thoughts. Forgive us for not eagerly waiting for you, Jesus, to come back. But while we are waiting, I pray that your Church would be worshipping; that we would worship you with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that we would witness to those in our sphere of influence who do not have any hope, who don’t have an answer for what happens after we die. Thank you, Oh God, for giving us answers in your Word. May we be found faithful to point everyone to your Word. Because we don’t have all the answers, but you do. Your Word does. May we be found faithful when you return. May we be worshipping. May we be witnessing while we wait eagerly for you to come get us and take us home. In Jesus’ name, Amen.