

Where have they Gone?

Unbelievers and the Intermediate State

It's the kind of question a child so often asks, but also the question that adults find so hard to answer; then again, it's the question that pastors most dread facing. When someone has died and there is no indication they were ever converted, where do they go when they leave this world behind?

It's a question that throws up issues at two levels. There is the issue of what the Bible says in answer to it (and how much or how little it says in doing so); but there is then the issue of how we handle those answers in a pastoral context. This is one of those areas of Christian life and ministry where the gap between theological textbooks and the real life struggles of pastoral care seems to yawn like a chasm.

No matter how hard it may be to face these issues, we simply cannot ignore them. Sooner or later every pastor is called upon to officiate at the funeral of an unbeliever and offer words of comfort and support to grieving friends and relatives. When that happens, we need to be ready.

A Time to Speak and a Time to Refrain from Speaking

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes is right when he says there is a time for everything under the sun. So there is 'a time to be silent and a time to speak.' The great temptation in any kind of pastoral situation is to say too much. People look to us for words and counsel and we feel constrained to pour them out – often without thinking. Ministers need to know the limits of their wisdom and the boundaries in what the Bible has to say. There is much we do not know and we are unwise if we do not know where and when to draw the line in what we say.

That is especially true in the realm of bereavement counselling. It is not hard to be correct in what we say – in that we accurately convey what the Bible teaches – and yet be clumsy in the way we say it. Job's friends are the classic example. In much of their counsel they cannot be faulted in theological rectitude; but instead of being Job's comforters, they become those who crush his spirit. They are utterly devoid of sensitivity to the man they are trying to help.

Paul wisely says there are times when we must simply 'mourn with those who mourn.' Regardless of what thoughts we may be thinking, at such times some words are not appropriate and even some of the truest thoughts are better left unsaid. There is no shame in pastoral silence.

Will not the Judge of All the Earth do Right?

The struggle for us as pastors in many situations in which we are perhaps too eager to speak is that we are convinced we know the answers. So, when we find ourselves burying a person who showed no sign of conversion in life, there seems to be a certain logic that compels us to declare that person to be in Hell. That logic may well be sound, but at the same time not biblically wise.

The minister may be a pastor, but he is not a priest. It is not for him to pronounce on the eternal destiny of any individual. Jesus says there are many who give convincing displays of saving faith in this world, but will be barred from heaven in the next.

Likewise, there will be those who have not been able to give such evidence and whose faith is tenuous, yet real. There are others who have genuine deathbed conversions and, given the circumstances of dying these days, they may be so sedated as to find it impossible to articulate it to those around them, or they may simply be alone. The bottom line is simply that 'the Lord knows those who are his' and we can honestly say to those who grieve in such situations, 'will not the Judge of all the earth do right!'

There is a real need for pastoral insight and sensitivity in and around the time of any person's death, but perhaps especially when it is the death of someone who we believe is unsaved. We cannot alter the destiny of those who are no longer with us, but we can be used to influence the fate of those who are. Such times can be wonderful gospel opportunities, but equally – if handled unwisely – they can become a stumbling block to the truth.

Be Prepared in Season and out of Season

We need not only to be prepared ourselves for such situations, but we need to prepare those under our care as well. That means teaching them. It is no good waiting for the crisis to come before we try to instruct – people are in a poor frame of mind and spirit to be able to cope with instruction under such circumstances – instead we need to weave biblical instruction in all its breadth into our regular teaching ministry. People need to learn about death in the cold grey light of life.

Instruction about death and the afterlife is a vital part of the 'whole counsel of God' that shapes the lives of his people. From earliest times the prevailing understanding of these things has been moulded by the myriad fallen cultures of the world and of history. Each in its own way has had to face the harsh reality of death and each has come up with ideas and superstitions to enable people to cope with it. The problem is they are based on myth and conjecture, not truth.

The warrant for believing what the Bible says in this realm is precisely because it is the truth. It not only purports to be the Word of God from heaven, but it bears the marks of being such. So it speaks with authority, not as a finite, fallible voice from within our fallen world, but as the transcendent voice of the God who made it, rules over it and holds the answers to its deepest needs.

Supremely it speaks as the voice of the Saviour God. The One who, through his Son, has 'destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' He not only tells us all we need to know about death and what lies beyond, but more than that, he tells us what he has done to guarantee deliverance from the power of death. We would be failing in our responsibility as those who minister that word to overlook the full scope of what it says on this sobering theme.

Brothers, I would not have you Uninformed

What, then, do we need to teach our people in relation to this issue? We certainly need to begin by dispelling some of the main myths that abound in the guise of various 'Christian' traditions.

There is the myth of Purgatory as one of the most popular. This is an idea that emerged from within Catholicism in Mediaeval times which envisages a place (as its name suggests) where souls can be further purified from sin before their final destiny

is decided. The roots of this teaching are found, not in Scripture, but in the Apocrypha. Second Maccabees speaks of Judas Maccabeus taking up a collection to make atonement for the dead that they might be delivered from their sins. That somewhat scant reference was developed into a full-blown doctrine in Roman Catholic tradition that envisaged disembodied spirits in a state of limbo between heaven and hell. The chances of their deliverance could be improved by various means including the offering of indulgences – literally paying for their release – a practice that was one of the main catalysts in the Protest of the Reformation.

The concept of Purgatory may well appeal to those who struggle with the finality of death and who want to hold on to some thread of hope for departed loved ones who showed no sign of faith in life; but it has no basis in Scripture. Therefore it can have no place in the teaching of the church.

Another widespread misconception that is linked to the idea of Purgatory is the practice of praying for the dead. It follows that if there is even the vaguest possibility that a person's destiny might be altered after death, then there is merit in praying for them. Again, regardless of the sentimental appeal of this concept, it flies in the face of the Bible's clear teaching that 'man is destined to die once and after that to face judgement' (He 9.27). There are no further opportunities for salvation after death.

Closely linked with praying for the dead is the thought that we can communicate with them. The Old Testament is strong in its condemnation of mediums and spiritists and its prohibitions carry through into the New Testament world. This should not only challenge the alarming increase in the popularity of séances that we see today, but also the growing practice in many Christian circles of allowing eulogies being addressed directly to the dead during funeral services.

One other major myth that we need to challenge is the notion of soul-sleep. Although not widespread in Christian teaching (it tends to surface more in the cults), it is not uncommon for Christians to latch on to the Bible's use of the language of sleep in relation to death and dying and assume that it is referring to a state of unconsciousness for the dead between the moment of death and the final resurrection. One only has to think of Christ's parable on the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16.19-31) to realise that Jesus taught a very real state of consciousness for those who had died, but whose bodies had not yet been resurrected.

Arguably the most serious challenge facing the church today in its view of what happens to the impenitent after death is annihilationism. It is packaged in various forms and presented under different titles – 'conditional immortality' having a more positive ring to it – and it is promoted by a growing number of well-known evangelical leaders. Whereas one can undoubtedly sympathise with the concerns that lie behind such views – the thought of the anguish of never-ending torment simply cannot be softened – attempts to justify them exegetically from Scripture rely more on weight of logic than the text.

Spirits in Prison

Scripture has much less to say about what happens to the souls of those who die outside the faith between death and the resurrection than it does about believers. Much of what we glean on this subject is by way of negative inference drawn from

the blessedness of the spirits of the just. Even where the Scriptures speak more directly about the fate of the unjust, the two major references to the intermediate state of the lost are not without their difficulties. Bearing these things in mind, there are nevertheless several details over which we are left in no doubt.

The spirits of unbelievers are held in a place and state awaiting the day of judgement and their final condemnation. Peter speaks about the disobedient spirits of the days of Noah who are now 'in prison' (1Pe 3.18-20). Whatever the uncertainties of that text, it can be understood as pointing to a remand centre for the spirits of the impenitent that is described in the language of incarceration. This stands in stark contrast to the language of Paradise, rest and holy perfection used in relation to the spirits of those who die in faith. The very allusion to prison in this context points to the ultimate loss of freedom that coincides with death.

Worse than that, Jesus makes it clear that this place not only is a prison, but also a place of torment. In his parable about the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus speaks of the rich man being in a place that is fixed and unalterable, but also a place where its occupants suffer terrible anguish (Lk 16.24-26). Some people argue that this is only a parable and so cannot bear the weight of a full-blown doctrine; but it is inconceivable to think of Jesus using such details in a parable on the afterlife if they were not consistent with reality. Although the torment of the hell of the intermediate state must be distinguished from that of the place described elsewhere in relation to final judgement, its torments are not merely the extension of a life spent rejecting God in this world, but also a foretaste of the consequence of that rejection in the eternal world to come.

What little we know about this place and the state of those who will be there only lends weight to the exhortation to the living that we must 'flee from the wrath to come.'

Teach us to Number our Days Aright

What the Bible says about the experience of those who die in their sins between the point of death and the day of resurrection ought to impact our ministries at three levels.

At the most basic level it lends weight to that note of urgency that should characterise the evangelistic element in our preaching. It is not merely the prospect of final judgement and the eternal state of the lost that should fill us with dread, but the fact there is an immediate judgement – the distinguishing between the saved and the lost – that follows death. Unrepentant sinners will have no respite after death, but will straightaway begin to reap the never-ending consequences of the life they have lived on earth. Every aspect of the punishment sin deserves is too awful to contemplate and should bolster our efforts to persuade people to be saved.

At another level, as we have seen in what we've looked at more fully above, we need to teach people with pastoral wisdom, grace and sensitivity so that they are aware of the biblical teaching on this issue and not be deceived by the myths and superstitions that abound. That will of necessity mean looking for opportune times to instruct and being careful in how much we do and do not say.

The most sobering impact these truths can have upon our lives and ministries comes as we contemplate the experience of Christ on the cross. In the hours we see him suffering torment there in this world while still alive, we are allowed to witness the horror of what those who die without him will begin to experience the moment they leave this world behind. The glorious irony of the gospel is that all who put their trust in him are assured of being forever spared the anguish he endured!

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