

I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Intro. Guests.

B. On this communion weekend we continue the Planted series – and continue our special focus within this series – by looking again at Eternity. Today’s sermon is entitled, “What happens when we die?” Right now

II. Intro

A. Five big questions animate our lives. Our answers to these questions – whether thoughtful or inane, whether developed after lots of thought, prayer and introspection, or picked up from a late night comedian or embraced four beers into a fraternity bull session – our answers are always playing in the background, shaping how we live.

B. These questions are all related and interwoven. Your answer to one generally shapes the other four, although sometimes people’s answers so undeveloped that they are not internally consistent.

C. What are these questions:

1. Question One: Who am I, or what am I? Am I the result of the random collision of space, time and chance – some well-ordered space dust? Am I the temporary pinnacle of the evolutionary process, the downline of something that emerged out of the primordial soup ten billion years ago, and – through ten million random mutations – have reached this point? Am I a hairless ape, a carbon-based bi-ped eking out life on the third rock from the sun? Or am I a created being, made by an All-Powerful personal God and endowed with purpose and meaning? Or am I something in between? Do I have a soul? Who – or what - am I?
2. Question Two: What is the greatest good? What is the most important thing? What ultimately matters? All of which are different ways of asking, what is God? Does the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob exist? Or, if not, am I the greatest good? Is love the real ultimate? Is pleasure? What ultimately matters?
3. Question Three: What is expected of me? What does the good life look like? If there is no god, then it would appear as though my only thoughtful options are: nihilism (saying nothing matters), or existentialism (saying nothing matters but I am going to act like some things do) or perhaps hedonism (I am going to eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die). If there is a god who made me, and I am accountable to him and going to be assessed by Him, exactly what will I be assessed on?
4. Question Four: What happens when I die? Is what we see all we get, or do I live on? If I live on, do I come back in this world as something else – am I reincarnated? Or is the Bible right when it says that we die once and after that face judgment?
5. And finally, Question Five: Where do I go to get answers to these questions? Do I look inside my heart? Is the answer based on reason? Science? Philosophy? A book? Has God revealed His plan in some way? How do I know what I know?

D. We are in a series called Planted – in which we are unpacking the big, foundational truths of the Christian faith. And right now, we are looking at those topics that are most focused on eternity - on what theologians refer to as personal eschatology.¹ So our focus is on questions three and four: What is expected of me? And what happens when I die?

E. Last week I talked about death. I noted that it means separation – spiritual death describes the separation of us from God, and physical death is the separation of our body from our soul. I then went on to say that: 1) death is certain; 2) it is ugly; 3) Americans face death poorly; but 4) that Jesus defeated Death. That for those who know Christ, death has lost its sting. Indeed, in I Corinthians 15 we are promised that one day death will be destroyed.

F. Today I want to focus on what happens when we die – paying particular attention to judgment. Which means I have done something impressive. I have managed to find a topic less appealing than death. There is a lot of speculation out there – a lot of crazy ideas based on some amalgamation of near-death experiences, the views of Eastern religions, wishful thinking, TV shows about angels and more. As a result, it is likely that some of what you think about what happens when we die is wrong.

III. I am going to start reading in 2 Corinthians 4:16

A. As you may know, Paul visited Corinth - a city in Greece – during one of his mission trips. And he started a church there. A short while after moving on, he heard things were not going well, and so he wrote what we now call 1st Corinthians. That letter was not well received by everyone, so he went back – he had some hard meetings during his “visit of anguish and tears.” He later followed up this visit with another letter – which we do not have, in which he reminds them of his love.

B. It seems that by this point he has won over most of the people, and so he writes another letter – which we call 2 Corinthians. It deals with some more reconciliation issues, some teaching on generosity and wraps up with some comments to those who still reject his authority and oversight.

C. I am going to begin reading in 2 Cor. 4:16f, because it alludes to The Intermediate State – the time between our death and the final resurrection, when we exist in a disembodied state – either with God or cut off from him.

D. When we die, our body goes into the ground (ashes to ashes, dust to dust) and then our soul goes to be with Christ or is cut off. (There are several places where Christ talks about separating – the sheep and the goats, the good fish and bad fish, the wheat and tares. This is not fully and finally heaven or hell. At the end of the age there is a resurrection – we get a new body – and then we face judgment. The Bible talks about two – the Bema seat of Christ (for Christians) and the Great White Throne judgment.

IV. 2 Corinthians 4:16:

A. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

V. Turning to chapter 5:

A. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.

1. This is referring to our soul without our body. Remember, heaven is not a mystical, magical, ethereal, vaporous, never-never-land. It's real. Heaven is more real than Chicago, because in one thousand years there will not be a Chicago but there will be a Heaven.

B. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed,

1. The goal is not that our soul is finally free of a physical body. That is what the Greeks thought and taught. That is not what the Bible teaches.

C. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

D. When we die our body and soul separate. Our body goes into the ground – ashes to ashes, dust to dust. If we have been born again, our soul goes to be with God.

1. This is not the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory.² Nor is it a reference to what some call soul sleep. There are a number of passages – most significantly, Christ's comment to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise"³ and Paul's line – to be absent from the body is to be present with Christ – that seem to negate this.⁴ which suggests that after we die we are not in "soul sleep." That after we die our soul is immediately in the presence of God.

E. However, we are not yet done. We await a resurrection – a reunification of our body and our soul. We await our upgraded body. The one that will never age or be subject to death. That is the promise.

1. In I Cor. 15 we are told that Jesus is the first born from the dead, and that we will follow. I Corinthians 15:52 says. "**The dead will be raised imperishable.**" We are going to get renewed bodies.⁵

F. Back to verse 4 – where we get Paul being Paul, it's a bit confusing as he compares being alive, being in the Intermediate State or having our resurrected body: **For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.**

G. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For 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.

VI. We do not get all of our questions answered. But we get enough to know that:

A. When we die, our bodies go into the ground and our spirit goes to one of two places – you can read more about this in Luke 16. At the end of the age there is a resurrection – at which time we get an upgraded, immortal body.⁶ And then we will face judgment.

VII. And we are told a quite a bit about this judgment.

A. We are told that it is certain – that everyone will be judged. The Bible actually mentions two different judgments - the bema seat judgment, which is the judgment for Christians, and the Great White Throne judgment⁷ which is for others. But the point – made in Jude 14, Hebrews 9:27, and our passage today – I Cor. 5:10 – is that we will all be called upon to offer an account of our life.

B. We are told that Jesus is the Judge – which is something he repeatedly claimed.⁸

C. We are told that we are judged on what we know. Some protest the idea of judgment, believing that people are punished for rejecting Christ when they never heard about him. The Bible never makes that claim. In Romans 2 it is clear that we will be judged against what we know. Francis Schaeffer says we are all wearing an invisible tape recorder around our neck and it is recording all the times we tell someone else what they should be doing. The suggestion being, we are judged on the basis of that.

D. Matthew 25 – which is one of the scarier passages in the whole Bible - makes it clear that judgment is public.

E. I Corinthians 4 and Matthew 12 make it clear that it is comprehensive – that is, that it includes everything we have said and done in our life – including things hidden.

F. The claim is that the judgment we face is fair – it is just. We are not judged by a jury with impartial knowledge. We are judged by an all-knowing judge.

G. And of course, there are many places⁹ – including today’s passage - that make it clear that we are judged on the basis of what we have done - our works. 2 Cor. 5:10:
For 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.

H. There is more - we are told: 1) that we should have a holy fear of the judge; 2) that Jesus (as judge) will be ashamed to identify with those who have been ashamed to identify with him (Mark 8:30). I could go on.¹⁰ But I suspect I have your attention. Enough already.

I. If you are thinking, you are likely to be feeling a bit overwhelmed and perhaps confused. I think some of the ways a doctrine like this unsettles us are by design – and so I do not want to take a bit of unsettledness away. But I do want to help you understand it more fully, because I think all kinds of people get this wrong – liberals and conservatives. which means I need to speak to three issues:

VIII. For starters, let me say something to those of you who think the idea of judgment is horrific, barbaric and unworthy of God. Those who are more Liberal by disposition.

A. I will concede that it is not a popular idea. There is a reason why there is not a judgment section at Barnes and Noble. Those books would not sell.

B. I am assuming that you will concede that I have made the point the Bible teaches that there will be a judgement – that it is a prominent idea in both Old and New Testaments.¹¹ And also in the creeds – starting with the Apostles Creed, which declares that Jesus “sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he shall judge the living and the dead.”

C. I want to help you understand why it’s not barbaric – it’s good. I want to argue that there needs to be a judgment for life to have meaning. And that a loving God cannot simply call it all good.

1. The first place I will turn is to Arthur Miller’s play, *After the Fall*. Pulitzer Prize winning playwright of *Death of a Salesman* and others, in this play he has Quinten – the protagonist gives up on the idea that there is a God who judges – who gives rewards and punishments. At first, he feels liberated by this denial. But then one day, he realizes that if there is no Divine judge, then human life is meaningless. And that beyond that, there is no one to answer anything definitively, so life is just one long human argument over right and wrong.¹²

2. The second place I will turn is to the book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, by Croatian philosopher, theologian and Yale professor, Miroslav Volf. In it, Volf notes that some Western thinkers dismiss the idea of judgment, believing that it leads to human aggression. But, he argues, the opposite is true. “My thesis,” Volf writes, “is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in Divine vengeance. My thesis will be unpopular with many people in the West. But imagine, for a moment, speaking to people, as I have, whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, then leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. Your point to them, as you speak, is this ‘we should not retaliate.’ Why not? What will ever keep them from retaliating? I say this: that the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God. Violence thrives today, secretly nourished by the belief that God refuses to take the sword. It takes the quite of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence is a result of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, that idea will invariably die like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind. If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.”

a) Volf argues that those who think belief in Divine judgement leads to violence have probably not been the victims of real injustice or violence. On the contrary, when we deny Divine judgement, we feel forced to seek retribution ourselves, and are thus more likely to be sucked into an endless cycle of violence. However, if there is a Divine judge, then no one will escape God’s justice. Therefore, we don’t have to take matters into our own hands. We can trust that God will do what is right. There is a judge, and it’s not you!

D. I could go on to reflect on what it would say about a God who did not punish the wicked or reward the faithful. But I will simply note – we need there to be a judgment.

IX. Second, I want to say something to those of you who think judgment is right. Those in a conservative camp. I want you to see that we can't survive judgment.

A. The Pharisees and religious leaders thought that judgment was a good thing because they assumed they would get lots of kudos – that God was impressed. But these are the people Jesus went after.

1. The parable of the Prodigal Son in John 15 is Jesus dissing the Pharisees – who are the older brothers who think they are good and end up the ones estranged from the Father.

2. The parable of Pharisee and Publican in Luke 18 is a knock on the Pharisee who thinks he is good.

B. The idea that I am going to be judged by an all knowing, holy God for everything I have said and done is not good news. No one can withstand that scrutiny but Christ. We do not want justice from God, we want and need grace and mercy.

X. As Tim Keller notes, there must be a judgment or our life does not have any meaning. But there can't be a judgment or we cannot survive.

XI. Finally, there is one other thing that I want to comment on. I expect that some of you picked up on my claim that we will be judged on the basis of our works.

A. You may be thinking, “Woodruff, have you been watching *The Good Place*?”, where Ted Danson says everything we do is given a value and we come up with a positive or negative number and that determines our score?

B. Yes. I was told I needed to watch *The Good Place* before preaching on judgment. I made it through all of season one and part of season two. So I know a bit about what it claims. But I am not basing my suggestion that we are judged on works based on a Netflix sitcom. I am basing it on today's text – 2 Cor. 5:10, which was directed to Christ-followers.

C. What we need to understand is that, our eternal destiny hinges on our relationship with Christ. The only way we can enter into the full presence of God is if we are perfect. And the only way for us to be perfect, it to be given the perfect score earned by another.

D. But just as there are degrees of punishment in hell, there are degrees of rewards in heaven. In heaven we will not all be alike. This is why Christ tells us to store up treasure in heaven. This is why Paul warns us that some may find that they do not have much to show for their life. This is why he issues the warning we find in I Cor. 3: 10, which reads:

1. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

XII. Our life will be judged. Our work will be assessed. It will be a perfect assessment by an all-knowing God, but the clear teaching is, those who loved and served – those who obeyed, those who were generous with their time and money – will be rewarded. And those who were not will not. They will be saved but singed.

XIII. But wait, wont different levels of heaven lead to jealousy?

A. Aren't we all just going to throw our crowns at Jesus's feet?

B. If we are rewarded based on how we lived, won't some of us feel regret. But if there is regret it doesn't sound like heaven.

C. I can't work all of this out in the time allotted. It is worth noting that, on the one hand, John tells us that we will not feel any shame.¹³ But on the other we are told that Christ will "wipe away every tear." Which suggests that, at least initially there may be some tears.

D. In a few weeks, we will take another pass at this as we look more at Heaven.

XIV. Right now, let me say, reflection on what the Bible says about our eternal destiny should lead in three directions

A. First, it should cause us to run to Christ. The key point some of you need to hear is, Christ came to rescue people like me – who are not perfect. He will pay my moral debt and give me his righteousness. I want that.

B. Secondly, it should lead us to serve. It should help us see that our lives matter – our efforts matter – so we need to love and serve and give. We need to model our life after Christ as best we can. We need to invest it.

1. For many, judgement is a horrible idea because there are lots of things we have done that we are not proud of. But we can also be assured that He sees. No act of kindness goes unnoticed by Christ. Every kind word, every cup of cold water, every sacrificial act is noted. If you have been wronged and have suffered unjustly and quietly – he sees that. If you are sacrificing and serving – and you think no one sees. You are wrong; The only one you want to see does see.

2. The Matthew 25 passage I have noted a couple times is horrifying. Read it this week if it's been a while. But notice that before we get to the people who think they are doing better than they are, the first group of people are surprised to learn that they are getting lots of credit for acts of kindness they had long forgotten about. They had no idea their acts of kindness to others meant so much to Christ.

C. The third and final thing I will say is, it should lead us to do all we can with the time we are given. We should take next steps.

1. For some of you, now is the time to get baptized. For some of you, now is the time to volunteer. For some of you, now is the time to start a daily devotional reading program.

D. And with that I will wrap up by giving you an ongoing reminder of this. A while back someone handed me a piece of tape. We have created one here. It goes to 100.

1. Since I am 59, I rip off at 59.

2. Since I expect to live to 90, which is not guaranteed, this is how long I have.

3. This is the high end of the time I have to **“please him.¹⁰ For 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.”**

¹ Personal eschatology covers: 1) physical death; 2) the intermediate state; 3) bodily resurrection; and 4) judgment.

² I am not Catholic, so while I find aspects of the idea attractive, I do not think it’s what the Bible teaches.

³ Luke 23:43

⁴ A bit later in our text we will hear Paul declare, “We would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” 2 Corinthians 5:8.

⁵ Disembodied existence is *not* God's ultimate and final and greatest purpose for us. As great as it will be to be in heaven after we die, God has something greater in store: being resurrected from the dead so that we will live soul *and body* forever in the new heavens and new earth. While still alive, Paul stated that he was waiting eagerly for the redemption of his body (Romans 8:23).

⁶ At some point, those who have been justified will be glorified. Our sin nature will be no more. We will be made perfect in holiness. Hebrews 12:22-24

⁷ Revelation 20:11-15

⁸ 2 Timothy 4:1, John 5:26 and Acts 10 make it clear that Jesus is the judge. This makes sense, given that he alone is qualified: 1) He alone is both God and man; and 2) He is the mediator of the covenant of Grace.

⁹ See: Mt. 16:27, Romans 2:6, and Rev. 22:12 .

¹⁰ Judgment is Individual. Romans 14:12 makes it clear that we will each be judged for our life. There is more sense of a corporate and communal nature of our lives in the Bible than we feel in the West. But Paul’s point in Romans 14 is that we will each offer an account for our individual actions.

¹¹ The Bible has many examples of personal judgment (e.g., Korah [Num. 16:31-32], Ahab [1 Kgs.22: 23,34ff.] and Herod [Ac. 12: 22-23]) and national judgments (e.g., Egypt [Ex.14: 30-31; Isa. 19], Babylon [Isa.14; 21: 1-10], Judah [Isa. 1:21-31], Judah [Isa. 1:21-31], Edom [Isa. 21:11-17], etc.). It also has many references to final judgement – both of the lost (Great White Throne) and of Christ followers (bema).

¹² Thanks to Tim Keller for this insight. I found it in his sermon on John 12.

¹³ I John 2:28