

Isaiah 66:1-13

Psalm 66

Galatians 6:7-10,14-16

Luke 10:1-10,16—20

## Grief and Loss, Part 2

We began our series on Grief and Loss last week with an examination of what happens when someone dies. If we look at that loss from our perspective, then point to things like unbelief, anger, doubt, bargaining—all those things that counselors and books say we go through when we lose someone. But last week we looked at it in terms of the person who is taken from us, because when we have a biblical understanding of what happens to the person who dies, then we can draw on an overwhelming sense of Christian comfort and relief as we begin to deal with how that loss affects us. In other words, if we know that they're okay then the path to our own coping, relinquishment, and healing is easier to walk.

Now last week we only got as far as that point when our loved ones close their eyes to their mortality and open their eyes to their immortality (and if you need to go back and refresh yourself on what the mortal and immortal aspects of our lives are all about, I would encourage you to go back and listen to the podcast). And when they open their eyes at the start of their immortal phase of life, something interesting happens in what we call the “intermediate state” of our heavenly existence.

This intermediate state takes place between the point of death until that time when our bodies are raised in incorruptible perfection at the Second Coming of Christ when Jesus returns. Death we're familiar with. And the raising of the dead at the return of Christ is often preached as the sermon at funerals:

**But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have died, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will be no means precede those who are dead. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage on another with these words** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

But what happens in between those two events? According to Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:8, **“To be absent from the body is to present with the Lord.”** What does that mean? It's not a physical presence because the body is still here waiting for the Second Coming of Christ. It's a spiritual presence with the Lord as our non-physical, immortal self is ushered from the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of darkness, to the kingdom of Christ. Or as Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, **“And the body returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God Who gave it.”** This intermediate state is a state of conscious existence. It is a state where one's previous earthly

existence is left behind. It is a state that foreshadows the eternal state of those in fellowship with Christ. And it is a state of preparation for that eternal glory. I want to focus on that last item—a state of preparation for eternal glory.

Let me set the stage for this with an Old Testament example. Back when the Jews were passing through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, they encountered heathen tribes totally sold out to pagan gods and the most hideous practices you can imagine. The army of Israel would fight with their armies, and as God gave the Jews favor and victory, they would come back to the camp with the spoils of war—they came back with stuff that was now theirs. But just because it was theirs didn't mean they could haul it into their tents. It was spiritually tainted; it was foul; it had to pass through a test to make sure that only the best and most precious part of the spoils could come into the camp of God's people. It was a test of fire. And the stuff that endured the test of fire turned out being the **“the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead”** (Numbers 31:22). Even their own clothing had to pass through a cleansing process with water before they could come into the camp (cf., Numbers 31:19-24).

Well, God's rules don't change. And what He gave to the Jews as a basic principle of making sure that only the good and holy came into the camp set the stage for His eternal principle of preparation before allowing people to come all the way into the kingdom of heaven. You see, He redeemed and won us through Christ's battle with Satan—I guess you could say that we're Christ's spoils of war—and Jesus wants to take us home. But before we're given our mansions in glory, there's a final purge of any ick that we retain from this world. The intermediate state is where that “test of fire” takes place. It's found in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15,

**According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet as through fire.**

Our faith, even a feeble one, is bound to the foundation and victory of Jesus Christ. And as we live our lives here we add structure to that foundation. But no matter what we add, it passes through the test of fire. What's good remains, passes through, and is used by God to determine additional reward. What's not good burns off, but even so, that person's foundation of Jesus Christ passes through and he is embraced by Christ on the other side and enters God's eternal camp, the kingdom of heaven. And what's good to know is that this test of fire doesn't go on for years and years like some kind of purgatory. Once we've left these bodies, we've transferred from time to timelessness, beyond time, outside of time, and all of this probably takes less than the blink of an eye as we are made fit for perfect immortality with Jesus.

Now the key to this whole thing is that our passing from mortality to immortality through this test of perfection—this whole process that prepares us for life in heaven—is a one-way process. We are made absolutely perfect; no age, no disease, no pain, no suffering, no remorse, no regret, no anguish, no crying, no sin, no sorrow, no weakness, no anger, no fear, no selfishness,

no ambition except to focus our eyes on Jesus and be with Him. We are cast into perfection, immortal perfection fit for one place only: the eternal heavenlies. Nothing else matters. Nothing else calls to us. Nothing else barter for our attention. And because of that, there's no desire to come back. Everyone who has died in the Lord Jesus wouldn't come back from heaven if they could, and couldn't come back if they would.

That ties into the other thing about dying in the faith of Christ: it's a state where earthly existence is left behind. I say this for two reasons. The first is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. Listen to what he says,

**Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.... For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."**

It's a one-way process because it takes us to the home we've been designed for (remember, I talked about that last week), redeemed for, tested and refined for, and perfected for. That's good for the people who are in the arms of Jesus. What does that mean for friends and family left behind? Well, like I said last week, that should give us incredible comfort in the middle of our sadness because our loved ones are now the perfect completion of who they were conceived to be. But it also means that we should not expect our loved ones to hang around nor should we find ways to contact them. Remember them, yes. Communicate with them? The Bible calls that an abomination because if we shift our heart, comfort, allegiance, hope, trust, and guidance from Jesus to them, then we have made them our intermediary gods, and that is idolatry.

It's like Jesus telling the parable of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, in Luke 16:19-31. You know the story: a beggar sits at the gate of a rich man's house for years and the rich man never lifted a finger to ease his suffering or hunger. They both died; the rich man was sent to hell and Lazarus was sent to heaven. From hell the rich man looks up at Lazarus in the arms of Abraham; "Abraham, please send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and put a drop of it on my tongue to relieve me of this torment!" "You had your ease in life while he suffered. Now you are going to suffer torment while he receives good things." Then Abraham says something I want you to hear: **"And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us"** (Luke 16:26). And then he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers who are still alive to warn them, and again the answer is no. Once you're in heaven, you're there.

In fact, this is the only parable where Jesus actually calls someone by name which leads a lot of theologians to believe that this is more a true account than it is a parable. That's why the Bible is so harsh against mediums and seers and other ways people try to get messages to or from their loved ones or try to see their loved ones in all the coincidences that surround them. It doesn't work, it aligns you with demonic activity (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chronicles 33:6; Isaiah 8:19), and it shifts your comfort from Christ Who is our peace to the one who is gone. Or as Isaiah 8:19 says, **"And when they say to you, 'Inquire of the mediums and**

**necromancers who chirp and mutter,' should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?"**

I want today's message to be a part of that comfort God uses to heal the grief of loss. The people we love who acknowledged Jesus in their lives—even if it was just a little spark—are now free from pain and suffering. They have been purified and are made perfect. Their immortality is now complete. And they are with Jesus in heaven and there's no turning back. They are home, and that's where they need to be and that's where we need to let them be. Now that still leaves a gaping whole on our side of this great gulf that separates heaven and earth, and we are still tempted in our own hearts to cry out, "But God, You don't understand how I feel!" And that's what we're going to start looking at next week: God not only knows but understands what our grief and loss feels like. And that's why He's the one we want to have walking alongside of us when our world is turned upside-down.