"NO MORE TAXES"
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Very early in life, even in infancy, most people pick up some idea of "heaven."
Even the irreligious will often assuage their children's fears about death with some vague discussion of life after death.

Sometimes it's a school-mate who dies.
Sometimes a grandparent.
Sometimes nothing more than the death of a pet bird or hamster but when death first rings real to a young child they will often ask the hard questions not only about their loved one or thing but about themselves.
Will I die? When will I die?
What happens when I die?
Does it hurt? Where will I be then?
Where is grandpa now?

By early adolescence most of us have learned to mask our real fears and questions about death.
And if we are fortunate enough not to have lost anyone dear to us, we aren't even affected by the subject - it seems so distant, so irrelevant.

But as unaffected as we may be by the subject much of our early life, all it takes is the death of a special friend, a parent, a much loved grandparent, a child, or a spouse and we are thrown right back into those questions from earliest childhood:
Where is my loved one now?
What happens when I die?
What is death like?

We have been studying the book of Malachi for the past several weeks.
In his messages to the people he challenges their idea that it makes no difference whether one is good or bad in this life.
It seems that some of the people had become cynical, believing that it made no difference whether a person believed in God or not.
It appeared to them that the most anti-God, arrogant people were the most blessed in this life.

Malachi responds to that challenge in several ways but one of those ways was to reiterate that there is a day coming when God will come in all his justice and power.
I quote Malachi, "And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."

Malachi goes on in Chapter 4 to describe the difference between how the righteous will be treated when God comes and how the wicked will be treated.
Malachi only introduces the subject and I thought it would be helpful to spend a Sunday looking to what else God has to say about that great distinction between those who follow God and those who refuse Him.

We speak generally of the eternal destinies of people as being either heaven or hell.
Heaven we say is the place where the righteous will spend eternity
and hell is the place where the wicked will live forever.

But when does a person go to heaven or hell?
At death?
Or after some waiting period?
Is there a purgatory through which we must go before entering heaven?
What about our bodies?
They are buried. Is it just our spirits that go to heaven or hell?

The Bible teaches about a resurrection.
Is that literal? Do these bodies come out of the graves?
When does the resurrection take place?

What happens to us between death and the resurrection?

What about cremation? If the body is burned can it be resurrected?

Who are the righteous and the wicked? Which am I? Which are you?

Many people seemed fascinated by the subject of death and dying.
Not only the National Enquirer but also more mainstream magazines and books will often publish accounts of someone's near-death experience.

People will tell of warmth and peace.
They will tell of a light that beckoned them on.
They will speak of their disappointment at being called back to this life.

What do we learn about death from these personal accounts?
Nothing!

Do not misunderstand, we may learn something about the process of almost dying but we learn nothing about death itself - that condition in which we exist after we die.

In no case has anyone actually returned from the dead to tell about it.
The process of almost dying and being dead are two very different things.

The one has nothing to teach about the other.

Where then do we get our information? For many reasons which I do not have time to discuss now, we get the only factual information from God himself - through His Word.

To be able to get our minds around this large subject let's break it down into five parts arranged chronologically: Three time periods interrupted by two events. Life - physical death - the interim period - the resurrection - Eternity.

I. The first of those time periods is LIFE:

The only comment I need to make today about LIFE because we all know what that is by our own experience, is that the Scripture teaches that the decisions we make in this life affect what happens in the life to come.

In Hebrews we read, Men and women are "destined to die once and after that comes the judgment."

There is no after-death second chance taught in the Bible.

The Bible does not teach reincarnation - Though the implications of the old beer commercial were very wrong their theology was very right: "You only go around once"

And the Bible doesn't teach annihilation either. There is life after death but the kind of life you live after death is determined by your response to God in this life.

Now whether you believe the Bible or not is another issue but what the Bible teaches on those subjects is very clear.

II. Now what comes between life as we know it and that intermediate state or condition of which I spoke earlier is the event of dying.

What is dying like?

Earlier I said that while we may not learn anything about death from the near-death experiences of others we may learn something about the process of dying.

But rather than reading the sensational tabloid accounts of near-death, we would do much better to read of the death-bed conversations of the men and women of God who down through the centuries have written of their experiences and thoughts as death neared.

There is much to be learned but most of us find the subject too morbid to even consider it.

But whether we consider it or not eventually it comes.

What is death? Biblically it is when the body and the spirit of a person separate.

Today with our medical ability to keep the physical body functioning long after it would have in earlier times died, we create ethical dilemmas for ourselves.

It is not my intention to try to speak to these today though I have great compassion for those who must deal with the hard choices foisted upon them.

III. Let's go back now to our main issue: What happens at death?

The body and the spirit separate.
The body is buried and the spirit without a physical body goes somewhere.
WHERE?

Again we are tempted to quickly and imprecisely respond: heaven or hell, that's where we go when we die.

That's correct but not as correct as it should be to avoid confusion.

In the Old Testament there is a word that is most often used to describe the place where the dead go. That word is SHEOL - it is sometimes translated the "grave" or "death".

In the Old Testament there doesn't seem to be any specific indication of what that place is like. A person was either alive or dead.

But it is clear from several passages that even though they knew little about the intermediate place of death they looked forward to something else.

Look at Daniel 12:2-3

As you are looking for that listen to Job (the earliest book in the Bible) "After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh will I see God.

David wrote, "God will redeem my life from the grave (shoel) and he will surely take me to himself."

Now in Daniel 12:2-3 We read: READ

God teaches in the Old Testament that between physical death and the resurrection there is an intermediate state - a place where those who have died wait for the end.

In the New Testament, God gives us more information about this intermediate place.

Just as there is a Hebrew word in the Old Testament (sheol) that refers to the place of the dead so there is a Greek word in the New Testament that refers to the place of the dead - that word is Hades.

That Greek word Hades is translated into English as "hell".

Please note that nowhere in the New Testament is that word "hell" a reference to the place where the wicked spend eternity.

Hades or Hell is a N.T. word referring to the same place as "sheol" in the O.T.

God teaches in the New Testament as He does in the Old that between physical death and the resurrection there is an intermediate state - a place where those who have died wait for the end.

Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God's people who anticipate death and that intermediate state, look forward to what comes after - the resurrection.

But what about now? What about between death and the resurrection?
Is there a difference in the experience between those who belong to God and those who have refused Him?

Look in your Bible to Luke 16 beginning at verse 19.

There you will see Jesus' parable of the "rich man and Lazarus".

It doesn't specifically call it a parable but there is much evidence that is what it is.

As a parable, a story, we know that Jesus told it with a particular purpose in mind.

And though his purpose is evidently not to teach us about the particulars of sheol or hades or hell, it is apparent that it does give us some insight into that intermediate state.

First of all we see that both the wicked and the righteous are there.
Secondly, we see the experience of the wicked is negative and the experience of the righteous is positive.
Thirdly, we see the separation between them is fixed - you don't go from one side to the other.
Fourthly, we see that once you die you don't come back to this life.

And I have great confidence that these conclusions are true when they are corroborated by other passages of Scripture.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 the Apostle Paul tells of being caught up whether in a dream or not he doesn't know but he is caught up into the "third heaven".

The first heaven to people in Paul's day was the atmosphere.

The second heaven was the skies beyond - the stars, sun and moon.
The third heaven was the place called paradise - where God was.

This same word, "paradise" is used by Jesus on the cross when he responds to the believing thief crucified with him and says, "This day you shall be with me in "paradise".

The Apostle Paul says elsewhere in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that for him to be "away from his body is to be at home with the Lord."

So what happens at death?

For those who are NOT trusting Christ their bodies go into the ground awaiting the resurrection and their spirits go to Hades/Hell where they await the judgment at Christ's return.

Their experience is probably one of conscious suffering of some kind though of that we cannot be certain.

For those who <u>are</u> trusting in Christ their body likewise goes into the ground awaiting the resurrection, and their spirits go into the presence of the Lord - into "paradise".

Is that a separate section of hades as indicated in the parable of the "rich man and Lazarus"? I don't know but whether it is or not it is positive because both Jesus and Paul made it clear that it is something to be looked forward to.

But remember that while believers during this waiting period are in a positive situation it is NOT what God ultimately has in mind for us - that comes after the resurrection.

So what about those who are with the Lord now?

They don't have a body but their spirits are there:

Can they see the Lord and others in heaven and can they see what is happening here on earth?

Certainly they <u>cannot</u> see in some literal sense because they do not have a physical body.

But can they sense in some other way what is happening in heaven and what is happening here on earth?

Apparently they can sense something of what is going on where they are or else it wouldn't be positive.

But as to sensing what is happening on earth - we don't know though it seems unlikely since they are neither omniscient nor omnipresent. It

seems more reasonable to assume they know only what the Lord tells them.

Can we contact those who have died?

Whether we can or not seems open to question but whether we should or not is abundantly clear: Under no circumstances are the living to attempt to contact the dead. Deuteronomy 18:11 says it is absolutely forbidden.

What about purgatory?

The Roman Catholic council of Trent officially declared that "anyone who rejects the doctrine of purgatory is anathama"-damned to eternal punishment.

Purgatory was the Catholic attempt at explaining how a sinful person could be prepared to meet a holy God.

That intention is commendable because at least it acknowledged that human beings are not fit for heaven.

But it unfortunately finds the solution in the wrong way.

The Catholics taught that during this waiting period, people can atone for, be purged of, or make up for their sins? They can do it on their own in purgatory and they can be assisted by the prayers and masses of those who are still on earth.

There is no Scriptural support for this intermediate state, this waiting period after death being a time to purge oneself of sin.

Furthermore the idea of atoning for your own sins in purgatory denies justification by grace through faith in what Christ has already done.

The very idea of this intermediate state of the dead awaiting the resurrection being a purgatory - a place to purge sins - is wholly without merit and the very opposite of Biblical doctrine.

So what then of the dead?

Those who are unbelieving are in this waiting place called "hell" awaiting the resurrection and the judgment at Christ’s return.

those who are believers are with the Lord in a place He called paradise awaiting the resurrection of their bodies and the life to come.

IV. What comes next?

Life - dying - the in between, intermediate, waiting place - and then the SECOND COMING of JESUS, that next great event!

Revelation 19 describes in awesome imagery that cataclysmic day when Jesus comes again.

Paul describes it as a day when "the Lord himself will come down form heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God."

What happens then?

Paul says in that same I Thessalonians 4 passage that those who had died before - those who are with Christ will be have their bodies resurrected from the graves and will be united body and spirit.

But this body while the same in many ways as the body they had will be a new body in that it will be incorruptible. It will be a body with which they can live for eternity in the presence of the Lord.

God further teaches through Paul that those who are still alive at Christ's coming and are trusting in Him will be caught up into the air to meet the Lord and will, as he teaches in I Corinthians 15, in that instance have their bodies changed to be as incorruptible and eternal as those bodies that were resurrected.

What if your body was cremated, will that make a difference at the resurrection? If you think about it you will realize it cannot make any difference at all.

There is absolutely no Biblical prohibition of cremation.
I do believe a case can be made for treating the body with respect because it was created by God but whether it is buried in the ground or at sea or cremated or lost in a woods or desert will make no difference when our bodies are resurrected.

Whatever God needs of this present body to resurrect it as a new body he knows how and where to find.

But what of those who were not in Christ, those who were not trusting Christ when they died?

Are they resurrected at this time? LOOK at REVELATION 20

Revelation 20:4 says specifically they are not resurrected at the same time as the believing dead but wait until the judgment.

When Jesus comes again according to Revelation 20 he will first set up a physical kingdom on this earth and will serve as king for 1000 years.

If you will look at Revelation 20:11ff you will see that <u>then</u> Jesus will resurrect all those who are unbelieving.

Out of hades/hell they will come and they will stand before the Lord.
Who will stand before the judgment of Christ? Everyone? NO!
Only those who were unbelieving, unwilling to trust Christ.
And they will all be found guilty.

V. At that point we come to the 5th and final part of this chronology of time periods and events.

Life - dying - the intermediate state - the 2nd Coming and Resurrection (including the 1000 year reign) - and then comes our final destiny.

What we commonly call heaven and hell are more specifically referred to in the Scripture as Everlasting life and Eternal punishment.

The unbelieving in his resurrected body following judgment goes into what Revelation 20:15 calls the lake of fire.

Elsewhere in the Bible it is called gehenna, eternal fire, damnation, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, and eternal separation from God.

According to Revelation 21 coupled with 2 Peter 3 and Romans 8 we know that God will recreate the heavens and earth into a new heavens and earth.

According to the imagery of Revelation 22 this place where we will dwell for eternity will be large, unsurpassed in beauty, and of infinite worth.

The place where believers will spend eternity, the place we call "heaven" will be this earth - recreated!

And most important of all it will be the place where our Lord Jesus is.

God describes it in Revelation this way:

"Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wife every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...The throne of God and of the Lamb (Jesus) will be there and his servants will serve him. They will see his face.

The greatest feature of our eternal destiny is not streets of gold, or pearly gates, or large mansions, or any of a thousand other earthly wants -

the greatest prize of that day will be to see Jesus face to face.

Down through the centuries as God's people have waited for that coming again of Jesus - they have sung most beautifully and prayed most fervently for that day when we shall be with him.

Who are the righteous who will inherit this everlasting life with Christ?

In John 3 Jesus says that He did not come to earth the first time to condemn people but to save them.

He said that God loves us so much that Jesus came and died for us - he purged our sins.

If the Catholics were right about purgatory we'd spend eternity trying to make up for or pay for our sins against God and against each other.

But the only payment for sin that satisfies divine justice is the sacrificial death of Jesus the perfect Son of God.

He died for us and he offers forgiveness - a pardon.

A total purging of all our sin.

God said that "if we confess with our mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead, we will be saved. For it is with our heart we believe and are justified and it is with our mouth that we confess and are saved."

Are you ready for death and the 2nd coming of Jesus?

If we will come to him, humbly acknowledging our need of a savior,
admitting our guilt before God,
asking for mercy and pardon,
and trusting him to forgive us and give us new life,

He promises to make save us from the judgment to come
and to give us His life - everlasting life.

Will you come to him today?