

“Eternity“
John 8:12-30
September 24, 2000
Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

If we connect 8:12 with 7:39, leaving out, as we said last week, the account of the woman caught in adultery and observing that 7:40-52 do not include any remarks of the Lord but only record the conversations of others about him, then the “again” in v. 12 picks up the interrupted thread of the previous discourse. The *Mishnah*, the most important compilation of rabbinical teaching from near the time of Jesus Christ, describes for us the aftermath of the water-drawing rite that was part of the ritual each day of the Feast of Tabernacles. Remember, that apparently was the occasion for the remarks the Lord made in chapter 7 about the “living water.” After the water drawing and pouring ceremony, four great lamps were lit in the outer court of the temple and a celebration took place well into the night under the light of those lamps. “Men of piety and good works,” the *Mishnah* tells us, “used to dance before [the lights] with burning torches in their hands, singing songs and praises.” The orchestra would play and the music and the dancing would continue until morning. Some said that the entire city of Jerusalem was bathed in the light that came from that celebration in the temple. [*Sukkah* 5:1-4] Perhaps it was in this context that the Lord said, “I am the light of the world.”

- v.12 This is the second of the “I am” sayings in John. “Light,” of course, was an important OT image for the presence and blessing of God. When God appeared to men he did so with light and glory. The Israelites sang, “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” [Ps. 27:1] The law of God was a light to their feet. Indeed, one scholar puts it this way: “Light is Yahweh in action.” [Carson, 337-338] We know from Isaiah that the servant of the Lord would be a light to the Gentiles. And in Zechariah 14:5-7, where we also find the reference to the living water flowing from Jerusalem – remember, his remark about living water was the last remark of the Lord’s to the crowds before this remark about light – also includes the promise of continual light on the last day.
- v.13 Such astonishing claims obviously raise the question of Jesus’ authority to make them. The Pharisees appear to be quoting Jesus back to himself. In 5:31 the Lord said, “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid.” But, of course, the Jews have misunderstood him. They know nothing of the validity of his testimony because they do not recognize him as coming from the Father in heaven.
- v.15 He means that he does not judge as his opponents do, according to the flesh or in the way of sinful men. Cf. 9:39: “For judgment I came into the world.
- v.19 As so often in the Gospel of John, the Lord’s remark is completely misunderstood because it is taken on a merely human plane. They thought he was talking about his human father.

- v.21 The NIV's "once more" is the same "again" we had in v. 12. It indicates a pause, but also the fundamental continuity of thought in what follows with the preceding thought. And that is what we find. The themes of vv. 12-20 will now be elaborated still further. V. 21 also repeats the thought of 7:33-34. "Going away" is a reference to Jesus' death.
- v.24 As your NIV margin tells you, the literal reading is "If you do not believe that *I am*", the same phrase as in the "I am" sayings and rather clearly a claim to deity, a point that will not be lost on the Jews as we will see later.
- v.28 Again, the statement must be taken in context. He is not saying that all the Jews will believe on him as a result of his death on the cross, but the cross will be the ultimate revelation of the identity of Jesus and many will believe as a result of it. And those who do not believe will some day be condemned for their failure to recognize the one they "lifted up" on the cross, whose witness to his true identity was so clear but which they would not accept.
- v.30 This had happened before as a result of the Lord's compelling teaching at a feast in Jerusalem (2:23). John leaves us in doubt whether this faith will prove to be spurious or genuine.

The Lord repeats himself frequently in the Gospel of John. Even the casual reader senses in the later chapters that he has heard some of this before. And it is certainly the case here. There is a great deal of overlap between our text and chapter 5 and chapter 7 and in what follows in chapter 8 we will discover that overlap again. It is not exactly the same. There is new material and the points made before are put in a somewhat different form. Still, this is ground the Lord has covered before.

And what must be our response to that? Should we hurry over it and pass on to something new and more interesting because unlike what we have read before? Or, rather, should we gather that what is said over and again must have a special importance and deserves our consideration and reflection even a second or a third time in the space of some few weeks?

Surely the latter. What is given much time and attention in Holy Scripture and in the teaching of our Lord must be all the more carefully pondered by those who wish to have the mind of Christ. John wrote his Gospel to give us a true understanding of the Lord Jesus and what it means to believe in him and why we must believe in him. He clearly thought, as did the Holy Spirit behind him, that these themes were central to his purpose.

And all the more must that be true if that teaching contains some of the most solemn and difficult parts of the Lord's entire message. We have it again here as we did in chapter 7 and in chapter 5 and, in a different form, in chapter 6. It is summarized for us in v. 21: "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." And, lest we mistake the emphasis being laid on this statement, the Lord repeats it in v. 24: "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be – or, as the NIV margin has it, if you do not believe that I am he – you will indeed die in your sins."

Here in the most unmistakable and emphatic form the Lord sets before us the great issue of his life and his teaching for human beings: life or death in the world to come. It is everywhere the great burden of the Lord's teaching, the imperative of his appeal to men, that if they do not believe in him they will perish in their sins. And then he drives the point home by saying that "they will look for him but will not find him, because they cannot go where he will be."

Commentators have taken that part of the Lord's remark in different ways. Some have taken the Lord to mean that the Jews were looking for him in the wrong way, with false motives and false religious principles – they were looking for him in the way of the flesh as suggested by v.15 – and as a result they would never grasp his true identity or the true significance of his life and work in the world. In other words, the looking for Jesus mentioned here is the looking that took place while Jesus was among the Jews. They will look but not see and so will die in their sins.

Others link the phrase to the next phrase about dying in sin and think that what the Lord is describing is the despair of unbelief in the moment of death. At that moment there will be no peace for them, only hopelessness, because the one they rejected is the only one who could have helped them in that hour.

Still others think that the phrase "you will look for me" refers to the Jews continued search for the Messiah. They point out that it is unlikely that Jesus thought that the Jewish religious leadership would continue to seek Jesus personally. They would be only too glad to see him go and, of course, later would do their best to silence reports of his resurrection from the dead. But, the Jews would continue to look for the Messiah. If they do, however, they will not find him, they will be seeking a phantom, for the real Messiah had already come among them and they rejected him.

It probably doesn't make all that much difference how we take that phrase. One way or another it emphasize the fact that their unbelief will cut them off forever from God and life and happiness in the world to come. They will die in their sins because they have rejected the only one who could free them from their sins. And, without doubt, the clear implication of these verses is that without faith in Christ one must die in his sins. "If you do not believe that I am he," the Savior said, "you will surely die in your sins."

This is a dreadful truth and I have no doubt that it was spoken, however firmly, however emphatically, nevertheless with a tone of compassion and sympathy. The Lord Jesus could see, as no man ever before or after, the consequence of life in this world. He could see eternal life or death resting on a man or a woman as he or she stood before him. He could see the aftermath far ahead when men, such as those men before him that day, chose death instead of the life he offered them.

Now, you and I know that this dreadful truth – that multitudes of men and women will die in their sins because they do not embrace the Lord Jesus as their Savior from sin – is a most unwelcome truth in our day. It has always been unwelcome, to be sure, but it is unwelcome to an unusual degree in our time. The reasons for this are numerous. People are more disinclined to weigh the matter of death and its issue because they live longer, by and large, and find it much easier than people in earlier times did to forestall the question until it is too late to do anything

about it, even to think seriously about it. We encounter death much less, we have to face it much less than people have in the history of the world up to our own generation. We have grown accustomed to keeping death and its consequences at arm's length and resent the suggestion that we are wrong to do so!

And then we have an actively, openly hostile cultural elite, speaking in the various media, that has demonized the very ideas of divine wrath and of the necessity of faith in Christ – or of any exclusive or absolute religious viewpoint for that matter – as barbaric, discriminatory, and intolerant. Jesus Christ today is an exclusivist and absolutist in a relativist world. He does not fit in. At least the Jews in that day accepted the reality of blessing and punishment in the world to come. There were those that doubted it, as there have always been, but then as now they were a very small minority. What we have read Jesus say in our text this morning is heresy pure and simple to the opinion shapers of our time.

And then there are the creature comforts and the pleasures of worldly life that make the world to come seem very far away and, frankly, quite pale and colorless in comparison. It was easier to think of the world to come, to contemplate the condition of those who had died, before aspirin had been invented, before air-conditioning, before television, and before the world began to move at such a hectic pace.

But none of this changes the truth our Savior taught. None of it, for that matter, even changes the truth that everyone knows and most openly believe, however little they attend to it. *Listen*, there are only three possibilities. After death, either people enter happiness, enter punishment, or enter oblivion and simply cease to exist. One has only to read the obituaries in the newspaper to discover that most folk do not believe that oblivion awaits us after death. Most folk think happiness awaits them, certainly awaits their loved ones, for the newspaper records their conviction that their loved ones live on under the wise and merciful protection of God in heaven. Of course, the Jews in Jesus day thought that too. But, of course, the generality of folks, then and now, think of that future as the reward of those who have been good.

But, what of the villains? No one thinks of Himmler or Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot or John Wayne Gacey now enjoying the same paradise with their grandparents or their parents or their lost child or husband or wife. No, the fact is, we know, by and large, of the need for punishment and reward. We know that the next world must put right what is not put right here.

The problem is we find it easy to think that we and most everyone else are good enough not to need to worry about that future world or its outcome. Jesus, in the Gospels, repeatedly warns us in every conceivable way not to be so self-congratulatory, to be so superficial and worldly in our judgment, to be so sentimental and un-serious about what is the most catastrophically serious question looming over human life.

It was to religious people in his own day, people who would have taken a happy afterlife largely for granted, to whom the Lord on one memorable occasion, when asked about a tragedy in which numbers of people had been killed, said “I tell you...unless you repent, you too will all perish.” [Luke 13:3]

Here as well he addresses himself to religious, moral, upstanding people, people who shared a large part of his own worldview, and told them that apart from faith in himself, they too would die in their sins. They didn't doubt, of course, that many others would die in their sins. The concept of punishment in the world to come was not foreign to them as it is to many in our day. They simply never took seriously the possibility that such a fate should overtake *them*. *Believe me, the longer I live, the less reason I think I have to believe that what most people imagine to be true is in fact true.* Counting noses is no way to get to the truth. It is particularly no way to get to hard and difficult and unpleasant truth.

And certainly that is true in particular at this point, this solemn, this depressing and fearful prospect of multitudes dying in their sins, this teaching that everyone shies from, that every one is repelled by. I certainly am. I find this dread prospect so unwelcome that I know I think about it and contemplate it far too little, far less seriously than it deserves.

Some of you may have seen some of the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympic Games a week or so ago on the television. I saw just a few minutes, but, in the providence of God, they included the blazoning of the word "Eternity" in bright lights in that stadium and before those 120,000 spectators. Bob Costas, the NBC commentator explained that word "eternity" is a famous part of the local history of Sydney, Australia. He knew the basic story, but not as much of it as I will now tell you.

It seems there was a down-and-outer named Arthur Stace, a drunk son of drunk parents, a petty criminal. He was born in 1884 and was a little man, 5'3" and weighing scarcely a hundred pounds. He was arrested repeatedly from the age of 15. He went to the First World War, was gassed and returned to Australia almost blind in one eye. He returned to drink and to petty crime until in August of 1930 he found himself at a mission where he hoped to find some food. It was the depression and things were so bad men were willing to endure an hour and a half of preaching just to receive their tea and cakes. Well, that meeting changed Arthur Stace's life. He became a Christian, he stopped drinking, he got a decent job.

Some months later he heard an evangelist speak at church. He heard the evangelist say "I wish I could shout **ETERNITY** through the streets of Sydney." According to Stace, "He repeated himself and kept shouting **ETERNITY, ETERNITY** and his words were ringing through my brain as I left the church. Suddenly I began crying and I felt a powerful call from the Lord to write **ETERNITY**. I had a piece of chalk in my pocket and I bent down there and wrote it." That was more interesting than it might seem, for Arthur Stace was illiterate and what little he could write, his own name, for example, he wrote in execrable, virtually illegible, handwriting. He himself felt that the Lord had given him a special ability to write that word. He wrote it thereafter in a beautiful copperplate script.

For years afterward, Arthur Stace would rise early, usually before dawn, and wander through the streets of Sydney, a different section every morning. He dressed formally, in gray felt hat, tie and double-breasted navy blue suit. And as he walked, every so often he would stop, pull out his chalk, and bend down and write **ETERNITY** on the sidewalk. He would move on a hundred yards and write it again. For 37 years he did that and, so they say, in that time he wrote the word

more than half a million times. The rain would wash the chalk away, but soon thereafter the word would appear again.

For a long time no one knew who was doing the writing. The entire city wondered. The newspapers tried to find out. A few imposters claimed to be the one, but Arthur Stace was discovered in 1956 when his own minister caught him at it. And now, near the waterfall in Sydney Square park, there in the paving is the word **ETERNITY** gleaming in wrought aluminum.

Now, tell me, who got it right? Who understood the mind of the Lord? Arthur Stace, the diminutive man who sought to keep the world to come and the great issue of eternal happiness or woe in front of a careless world, or those thousands upon thousands of spectators in the Olympic Stadium who gave a brief thought to an eccentric figure of Sydney's history and then immediately turned their thoughts to the next part of that extravaganza going on before them. How few people there are who give any thought whatsoever to the prospect of dying in their sins, though Jesus has warned the world repeatedly of how real that prospect is for vast multitudes of human beings.

The Lord Jesus in the gospels does not talk much about the immediate blessings of faith – though they are wonderful beyond the power of words to describe. What a marvelous thing it is to be a Christian: to walk with God in this world! He doesn't talk much about the transformation of human society and culture that the truth of God can bring to pass. He doesn't talk about raising the standard of living of the poor or the transformation of societal structures so as to secure justice for the oppressed. I don't say that the Bible never addresses these matters; it surely does. But there are not its primary subjects by any means. *But Jesus does talk long and hard and over and over again about eternity* and about life or death in the world to come hanging in the balance when one considers him and weighs becoming his follower. We hear him utter warning after warning about the fate of the unbelieving in the world to come.

Perhaps you think: I am a Christian already. I don't need to hear about eternity. I need help with my marriage or finances or children or help to control my sins. Oh, my friend. Here is the help. Eternity! And a mind fixed on the issue of life and on Jesus Christ who alone can raise men to eternal life. That will do more for your marriage or your finances than anything else. A great engine of everything good. That is eternity in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Believe me, I deal with people all the time whose primary mistake is that they are thinking about their lives and dealing with their problems as if there were no world to come, as if life here were all they had to care for.

Can anyone read the Gospels and think that that immense crowd in the Sydney stadium was right in its cheerful unconcern or that Arthur Stace was wrong to remind as many as he could of the looming prospect of an eternity into which it is very possible to go while still in one's sins. How unlike Arthur Stace I am far, far too much of the time. How much wiser and better a man I would be were I more like him, more determined, even desperate to live my life *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the view of eternity, with eternity in view. How fundamentally it changes one's perspective on everything and especially how it changes our view of Jesus Christ. How

eternity makes him greater and greater to us as our Redeemer, how the prospect of life and death makes Jesus Christ so much more vital to us at every moment.

And, like Arthur Stace, eternity makes us so much more careful, so much more determined to live our lives in a way that becomes a follower of Jesus Christ, who came to grant eternal life to those who otherwise would die in their sins.

God! Fight we not within a cursed world,
Whose very air teems thick with leagued fiends –
Each word we speak has infinite effects –
Each soul we pass must go to heaven or hell –
And this our one chance through eternity
To drop and die, like dead leaves in the brake...
Be earnest, earnest, earnest; mad if thou wilt:
Do what thou dost as if the stake were heaven,
And that thy last deed ere the judgment day.

Is that not what any man or woman must aspire to and strive for, that spirit, that holy zeal, who has heard the Lord Jesus this morning speaking of men – even religious men – dying in their sins? Let those words never be said of you, my friends, “Where I go, you cannot come.” And, so far as it depends on us, let them not be said of others either.