

***“Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.”***

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

When I began to write this sermon, I thought about calling it, “What Happens When I Die, Part 2”. After all, this is the second sermon based on your requests this summer that has to do with the things of eternity. I do not find it surprising that we have lots of questions about heaven and hell and what happens to us when we die. As I said in the earlier sermon this summer, we all have to face the reality that life, as we know it in this world, is fleeting at best. Paul reminds us: ***“For the wages of sin is death.”*** (Romans 6:23, ESV) And, in case that isn’t clear enough, he also reminds us: ***“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** (Romans 3:23, ESV) We are sinful people, and we cannot escape death. No one can. Therefore, since death is an inevitable part of our life, we wonder, “what happens when I die?”

I remember teaching a bible study on heaven some years ago, and a lady in attendance said, “Pastor, you make heaven sound so wonderful that we all want to go there!” When I suggested that I could try to organize a bus trip for the following Thursday, she seemed a bit less eager to get on board. We like the thought of heaven, although we aren’t necessarily in a hurry to get there. We just want to be sure that heaven is going to be worth the wait—and let me assure you, in the words the Holy Spirit inspired in Paul: ***“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”*** (Romans 8:18, ESV)

If we are honest with ourselves, one of the reasons we have so many questions about what lies ahead in eternity has to do with the fact that we know there are two sides to the eternity coin. Heaven is eternal life with our God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the glory of His Kingdom, which has no end. But we know that there is also the reality of hell, which in our text is simply referred to as ***the second death***. I don’t think we talk as much about hell as we used to—or even as much as we should. I know that there was a time when sermons seemed designed literally to “scare the hell out of people”, by making it extremely clear just how horrible hell was going to be if you didn’t repent. Jesus speaks of hell in our Gospel lesson today, saying; ***“In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out.”*** (Luke 13:28, ESV) Hell is so bad that Jesus says: ***“And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”*** (Matthew 18:9, ESV)

You and I do not need to fear the reality of hell. We find comfort in the words of our text today. John is given this wonderful vision of heaven and declares: ***Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.*** Even as we look to the days ahead, we do it in the confidence that God the Son, who took on our human flesh and blood so that He could take our place under His own perfect, divine law; and who gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice of atonement for us, has indeed saved us from our sin. He has brought us life in His own resurrection and has promised to bring us to be with Him in His glorious kingdom. We are free from the fear of the flip side of the coin, for we cling in faith to the life we have as God’s baptized children, redeemed and alive in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Every once in a while, my grandfather would take me to watch the Kitchener Panthers play AA baseball. I remember the vendors would be calling out as you came into the stadium, “Get your score card! You can’t tell the players without a scorecard!” Grandpa would always pick up a scorecard, and would go through the box scores and record the actions of the game on the scorecard. I don’t think people do that anymore. After all, you can get all the stats online on your phone. Now you just have to look at the Jumbotron.

Sometimes reading Revelation makes you want to say, “Get your scorecard! You can’t figure out what’s going on without a scorecard! There’s so much happening in the few opening verses of this chapter. John talks about the binding of Satan for a thousand years. He talks about thrones and those who have authority to judge. There are the souls of those who died because of their testimony of Christ. There is the beast, and the mention of the mark of the beast. John tells us there is a first

resurrection—so there must be at least a second resurrection. If there is a second death, there was a first death. It can all seem so confusing. What’s it all about? It seems so hard to tell the players without a scorecard.

There are also many different views of these verses, as we have discussed in the past. I am always willing to sit with you and help you understand. I’m going to help you sort it out by being your jumbotron today.

Our question today was about the second death, so let’s start there. The Bible doesn’t specifically mention the “first death”, in contrast the “second death” of Revelation. But there are many places where it is clear that, because of our sin, we are the walking dead. Paul declares: **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience”** (Ephesians 2:1-2, ESV). Right from the time of Adam’s disobedience, sin is death and it brings death. As the descendants of Adam, inheriting our sinfulness from him, we are already dead. The first death is our sinfulness, which cuts us off from the life God intended for us. It reaches its ultimate conclusion as we all come to the end of our earthly existence in death.

No one likes the thought of dying. As horrible as the thought of death is, the reality of the second death is worse. John tells us what the second death is a few verses after our text: **“Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”** (Revelation 20:14, ESV) When Jesus describes Judgement Day, He separates the sheep from the goats, and says to the unbelievers: **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** (Matthew 25:41, ESV) Hell is the second death. That can be somewhat confusing, for hell isn’t an annihilation or removal from existence. It is a place of sorrow and suffering. It is the only place from which God has withdrawn His presence. That is what makes hell so terrible. God is not there. Isaiah speaks of those who die as enemies of God, and says: **“For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”** (Isaiah 66:24, ESV) The second death is simply the sorrow and suffering of hell—which we often describe simply as “eternal death”.

John is very specific, though: **“Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power.”** We, who were dead, are alive in Christ! Condemned because of our sin, we are now assured that we have passed from judgement to life. Neither the first death nor the second death have any power or authority over us. We have the same glorious hope that Christ gave to that thief on the cross: **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”** (Luke 23:43, ESV)

The first death is the death of sin, which ends in the death of the body in this world. This death ends for us when we are raised to life by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul declared: **“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”** (Ephesians 2:4-5, ESV) This is what John is talking about when he says we are blessed when we share in that first resurrection. Sin is death, and it leads to death; faith in the dying and rising Christ is life, and it brings us to life.

We also look forward to what could be called “the second resurrection”. The Bible doesn’t speak this way, for alive in Christ, we just go from life to life, even though we make that journey through the door of death in this world. The day will come when we will find the full joy and blessing of our life in Christ, as we live in the perfection of heaven. The hope we have is the same as that of the inspired writer of Hebrews, who assures us: **“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”** (Heb. 12:22-24, ESV)

In our Gospel lesson today, someone asked Jesus a question that is asked far too infrequently in our day and age: **“Lord, will those who are saved be few?”** (Luke 13:23, ESV) Hell is a very real place, but no one expects to go there. I’ve never been to a funeral where anyone has stood up and said, “we’re sad that David is in a worse place, because he is now suffering the torments of hell”. We may have our fears, our suspicions and even our beliefs that this is true, but we strive not to believe it. No, we always hear someone say, “well, at least they are in a better place”. Or there are many who took the bad advice of John Lennon, who said: “Imagine there’s no heaven; It’s easy if you try. No hell below us; Above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today.” That’s what people do. They only live for today. Sadly, the answer to the question, “will those who are saved be few?” is that there are more people lost in their sin and unbelief than those who cling for mercy to the cross of Jesus Christ. God grant that we may still work to share with others the hope that is in us. We know that we deserve that second death, but we hold, with an unwavering faith, to the loving grace of Christ, who gave His life for us, and who lives to be our life. The Holy Spirit has brought us to faith—faith that is the first resurrection. In that faith, we also know that we will rise to life in the second resurrection on the last day, to live with our dear Saviour as His precious people forevermore. Amen.

