

Death from Unbelief

HN/SS 24/4/05 am

Reading: Matthew 25:1-13, John 8: 21-36

Study Text: John 8:21-24

Sing Psalms: 23,49:1 -7, 49:16-20,50:1 -4

They were all waiting for the bridegroom to come. The night stretched on and they got drowsy and slept. At midnight the cry rang out – he has come, the bridegroom has come. They all jumped up to go with him into the wedding banquet. But five of the ten found themselves in the dark – they had no oil for their lamps. By the time they managed to buy more oil the door to the wedding feast was closed. It was shut tight and they could not enter. No amount of pleading persuaded the bridegroom to open the door. I do not know you he said.

Jesus told this story to illustrate his second coming. *You do not know the day nor the hour when the Son of man is coming* (Matthew 25:13). Our text is about his first coming, yet there are parallels. The Jews were waiting for Messiah to come. They were looking for him and expecting him, but when he came they did not recognise him. They continued on in the darkness – and still the Jews continue on in this darkness today.

But Jesus has been, and gone away. He came, he died on the cross, he rose from the dead and he ascended to heaven. He returned to the Father who sent him. He told this to the Jews before he went away. He said I am going away. The Jews had been prepared by God for this very time. They had the prophecies; they had the word of God. But when the time came, when the Son of God came they would not accept him. Why? Because of unbelief. *You did not believe that I am.*

Our society has been blessed with the knowledge of the word of God. Parents have had the blessing of being sent to Sunday school, children have the blessing of hearing the Scripture in school; there are churches in every suburb – unlike many parts of the world. But what do we see? Unbelief! The sin of unbelief is rampant in our society. Consequently death stalks every door. *The wages of sin is death* – right (Rom 6:23). *You will die in your sins* said Jesus. Only a fool would argue with his conclusion.

The sin of unbelief is the most dangerous our society faces. ‘Immorality slays its thousands, but unbelief its tens of thousands’ writes Ryle. All sin is serious, all sin is offensive to God, but the sin of unbelief is most offensive. Unbelief closes the door to the grace of God and the forgiveness of sin. It closes the door to life.

Destiny

Jesus continued speaking to the Jews. They were probably still in the temple. Some time has elapsed since he last spoke. Moreover, it was probably only a matter of months before Jesus would be arrested, tried and crucified. He would rise from the dead and return to his Father in heaven. Jesus spoke prophetically of these events here in this chapter. He told them *I am going away* and later *when you lift up the Son of man* (8:28).

Jesus had previously announced his imminent departure (7:33). At that time they thought he must be going to some distant country where they would not be able to find him. Now they are a bit closer to the mark asking *will he kill himself*. Jesus had brought up the subject of death – *you will die in your sin* – and he was indeed going to die. It would not be by suicide of course, although it would be a death over which he had full control (John 10:18). But his death would be followed by resurrection and his returning to the Father. That was the place where he was going, back to his heavenly home.

Suicide was thought of as desperately wicked by Jews at this time. It would inevitably bring the punishment of hell on its perpetrator. Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, speaks strongly about taking ones own life – even the bodies of enemies were given decent burials but the bodies of suicides remained unburied till sunset. The Jews could hardly believe Jesus would do such a thing. It was more a response of bewilderment. What does he mean saying *where I go you cannot come*.

Jesus went on to contrast not only his origin with theirs, but also his outlook. His is from above he said while they were from beneath, meaning they were of the earth. They lacked spiritual discernment as evidenced by their response to his going away. They believed in God, or so they said, but their lives showed little evidence of this. They were focused only upon the things of the world. That is the effect of sin. Sin blinds men to spiritual realities.

Darkness

But Jesus, the light of the world, was there before them revealing spiritual realities – if only they would believe him. He is the light that reveals the reality of heaven. In him everything becomes clear; in him the darkness is overcome. But they remained very much of the world.

Paul reminds us that *our citizenship is in heaven from where we eagerly await the saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ* (Philippians 3:20). He tells us to *set our mind on things above not on things on the earth* (Colossians 3:3). We are in the world – we cannot escape this fact- but we should not be of the world as these Jews were.

It was a strange thing for Jesus to say to these religious leaders, but there it is- *you are of this world he said*. He had of course begun his ministry by cleansing the temple (John 2). The world had literally entered into the very courts of the house of God. And today – what are we to make of all the ceremony and ritual that has gone on in Rome. How much is religious and how much political? It has made good television also. And what about more modern churches that find it expedient to get into business enterprises. ‘Come to our lecture on business management’ I heard being advertised the other day by a large city church. The line between ‘of this world’ and ‘not of this world’ gets blurred at times – but not in the eyes of Jesus.

‘This world can be a very attractive place for those who live in it and there is the constant temptation to make it the centre of everything in life. To be of the world in this way is to miss the greatest good’. Let us remember the things of this world are passing away. They are temporal. Everything we see is *temporal but the things that are not seen are eternal* (II Corinthians 4:18).

You will seek me said Jesus. *You will seek me and not find me* he said earlier (7:34). They will seek him when he has gone away. They will seek him when it is too late. Now was the opportunity for these men to hear and to believe in Jesus Christ. He would soon be gone – gone back to his heavenly glory. They would live to regret the opportunity they had- and they would die regretting it also.

Their hearts were becoming more and more calloused as they heard the words of God. They immediately snuffed out any spark of light that entered their souls. They would not turn from their sin and seek the Lord while he was to be found. *Then they will call on me and I will not answer, they will seek me diligently and they will not find me* (Proverbs 1:28). Very solemn words are they not? But this happens after the Lord says *I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded* (Proverbs 1:24).

Some bemoan missed opportunities on the stock market or the property market. They bemoan missed opportunities for promotion or for better relationships. But it is the missed opportunity to believe in Jesus Christ and receive eternal life that many will regret the most on the day they leave this world. Yes – they will *die in their sin* said Jesus. They will die and go to the place prepared for them – by the devil!

Death

Three times in these verses Jesus said *you will die in your sin(s)*. Just as he was in no doubt about his destiny he told them there was no doubt about theirs – *if you do not believe that I am*. Our version has I am ‘He’ – others expand to I am ‘the one I claim to be’.

We have a difficult grammatical structure here for there is no predicate in the sentence- is does not seem to refer to anything. Previously Jesus said *I am the light of the world*. Here it is just I am – *believe that I am*. Back in the Old Testament we find that when Moses asked God what his name is he was told ‘I am who I am’, and to say that ‘I am’ has sent you (Exodus 3:14). God also said to Isaiah ‘I am he’ (Isaiah 43:10). ‘I am’ then was closely connected with God’s revelation of himself, and that is why Jesus is using this term here – I am sent by the Father, I am God the Son.

You will not surely die. Have you heard those words before? This is what Satan said to Eve as he tempted her to disobey God. She believed him; she listened to the voice of Satan rather than to God. And what happened – she died. Too many people listen to the voice of Satan and not the word of God. Jesus said if you do not believe I am, if you do not believe that I was sent by the Father and that I speak the truth, you will die in your sins.

Do you believe that? Do you know that you were born in sin? Do you know that if you do not believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord you will die in your sins? If you believe in Jesus with all your heart, if you can say Jesus is my Lord, then know that you will not die but have everlasting life. Do your friends know this?

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