

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT - PART 4
What Jesus taught about death
Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage: Jn 11:1-14, Rev 1:17-18
Subject: Why we do not need to be afraid of the sleep of death
Complement: because Jesus holds the keys of Hades and of death.
Exegetical idea: We do not need to be afraid of the sleep of death because Jesus hold the keys of Hades and of death.
Homiletical idea: **You do not need to be afraid of the sleep of death because Jesus has the keys!**
Purpose: To help my hearers to understand the teaching of Jesus regarding death and to give them the assurance that they do not need to fear death because Jesus holds to the keys of death and the grave.

Introduction

Several years ago, my wife and I traveled to Tennessee for a family vacation. Bodil took her faithful suitcase with her, that we have affectionately named “Buford.” As you can see, Buford is a fairly large suitcase. It can hold almost everything that you might need for a vacation, even if you are planning to stay for several months! Trust me. We had everything we needed. There was only one problem. When we arrived in Tennessee we discovered that we had forgotten the key to the suitcase. Buford was locked, and without a chisel or a chainsaw we weren’t getting it open! And the key was 2000 miles away!

That experience reminded me of another incident with a key that occurred many years ago when our youngest son Jonathan was just a little boy. Jonathan acquired a very special key. In fact, he still has it. Here it is. He bought this key at the gift shop at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, PA. He was told that this was the key to the lock on the massive front door of Independence Hall. He only paid \$5 for the key, so he was sure that it wasn’t the original. But

Jonathan's inquisitive mind was curious to discover whether or not it was indeed an exact replica of the original. So when no one was looking, Jonathan and his daddy sneaked over to the massive front door of Independence Hall, put this key into the old metal lock, and turned the key! To our amazement, it worked! This key locked and unlocked the massive front door of Independence Hall. Well you can only imagine how important Jonathan felt at that moment. He had the key. He had the key to Independence Hall! He was holding the key to Independence Hall right there in his hand. And he felt important!

The Bible talks about some keys that Jesus holds in His hand that are much more important than the key to our large green suitcase or even the key to Independence Hall. We are going to learn about the keys that Jesus holds in His hand as we consider together what Jesus taught about death.

This is the fourth sermon in our series entitled "What Jesus Taught." If you've been here from week to week, you've heard us discuss what Jesus taught about salvation, what Jesus taught about the Scriptures, and what Jesus taught about the Sabbath. If you missed any of these sermons, you can pick up a complimentary CD in the lobby or watch the sermons on our church website at www.forestlakechurch.org.

This morning, we want to consider what Jesus taught about death. I'd like us to begin with a strange fable that Jesus told. It's a fable about two men, a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. This story is recorded in Luke 16:19-31. "....."

During the time of Jesus, the Jews recounted numerous fables and legends about imaginary situations. And many scholars suggest that this story was one of those popular fables. But why does Jesus tell this strange parable? Is His intention to teach doctrine, to tell the truth

about death, or to make some other point using a popular fable of His day? Well, let's look at the story more closely. There are three main characters in the story: a rich man, a poor beggar named Lazarus, and Abraham. There is no evidence from the story that the rich man was an unrighteous or ungodly man. We are simply told that he was rich, he lived in luxury. There is also no evidence in the story that the beggar Lazarus was a godly man, a man who placed his faith in God. But the story goes on to tell us that both of these men died. The beggar is carried by angels to Abraham's bosom, which was a popular concept among the Jews. The rich man ends up in Hades, a Greek word which simply means "the grave." Hades is the equivalent of the Hebrew word "Sheol." And here we meet our first problem with taking this story as a literal description of what happens when we die. Because no where in the Old or the New Testament is Sheol or Hades described as a place of torment. But this story describes Hades as a place of torment.

What's even more troubling if we read this fable as a literal description of what happens when we die is the fact that the place of the saved, Abraham's bosom, and the place of the lost, Hades, are so close to each other that it's possible to see what's happening from one place to the other. And it's even possible to talk to people across the gulf. Does that sound like heaven to you? A place where you could hear the screams of tormented loved ones forever and ever? Jonathan Edwards, the famous American preacher argued that the agonies of the damned enhance the bliss of the redeemed. But I can't agree. The agonies of the damned enhance the bliss of the redeemed? Does that make sense to you?

I believe that it is a mistake to base any doctrine on this or any other fable. Would it really bring any relief if Lazarus dipped his finger in water, reached across the gulf, and cooled

the tongue of this rich man who is in fiery torment? The whole story just doesn't make sense if it's a literal description of what happens when we die. So what is the point that Jesus is trying to make? I believe that the answer is found in Lk 16:26. "....." Once death comes, we have no more opportunity to change. Jesus has just told 4 others parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, two lost sons, an unjust steward who just lost his job, and then he tells this fable about a lost opportunity. The rich man missed the opportunity to make wise choices before his life came to an end. Because once life comes to an end, there is nothing can be done to make any changes. That's a lesson that we can learn from the fable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Now if it's dangerous to build any doctrine about what happens when we die based on this fable which obviously cannot be taken literally, where else in the gospel record do we find what Jesus taught about death? I want to draw your attention to another story, also about a man named Lazarus, but this story is true. It's recorded in John 11. Let's begin reading with Jn 11:1-3 "....."

Lazarus, and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, were friends of Jesus. Jesus stayed in their home in Bethany when He was in the vicinity of Jerusalem. How do you think that the disciples expected Jesus to respond to this urgent appeal? I agree. They expected Jesus to stop everything He was doing and head straight to Bethany. But He didn't. The Bible tells us in Jn 11:4-6, "....."

While they are on their way to Bethany, Jesus shares some important teaching about death. Look with me at Jn 11:11. "....." Jesus chooses His words very carefully here. Jesus is perfectly aware of the fact that Lazarus is not taking a nap. He knows that Lazarus is dead. But Jesus specifically chooses to use the word "sleep" to describe Lazarus' condition in

death.

Do the disciples understand what Jesus is saying? No. Listen to their reaction, recorded in Jn 11:12-14. “.....” Jesus spoke of death as a sleep, and His followers understood when the redeemed would be raised from the sleep of death. Notice the words of Jesus to Martha and Martha’s response, recorded in Jn 11:23-24, “.....” Undoubtedly, Martha had heard the teaching of Jesus concerning death, recorded in Jn 5:28-29. There Jesus says, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation.”

What Martha failed to comprehend was the fact that Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus, who is the Resurrection and the Life, can also bring about a special resurrection prior to the resurrection at the last day. So Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” And even Martha gets the idea that something out of the ordinary is about to happen. We continue the story in Jn 11:38-43. “.....” I want you to notice that words of Jesus here. What does He say? Lazarus.....come forth! Lazarus....come out! Notice, Jesus doesn’t use the language of the fable in Luke 16. He doesn’t say, “Lazarus, come down from Abraham’s bosom,” even though that was a common Jewish belief. Jesus doesn’t say, “Lazarus, come up from the place of torment in Hades.” What does Jesus say? “Lazarus, come forth.” And the Word of God tells us in Jn 11:44, “He who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.”

Have you noticed that after his special resurrection Lazarus doesn’t say anything about

his experience during the previous four days? He doesn't say, "O, let me tell you what it was like in Abraham's bosom!" He doesn't say, "O, thanks for delivering me from the torment of Hades." Why? Because he wasn't up somewhere or down somewhere. He was in that rock tomb. That's why Jesus said, "Lazarus, come forth!" Jesus was waking Lazarus up from the sleep of death. "Ah," you say, "if Lazarus was in the sleep of death, how did he hear Jesus call him?" That's a good question. And the answer is simple. Lazarus heard Jesus call him in the same way that all who are in the graves will hear the voice of Jesus at the resurrection on the last day. The word of Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, the word of Jesus is so powerful, that in the milliseconds that it takes for the sound to leave his mouth and travel to the place where Lazarus lies in the sleep of death, a miracle of recreation occurs. Remember, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha told Jesus that her brother's body was already stinking. His body was decomposing. But the word of Jesus is so powerful, the word of Jesus is so full of life, that a miracle of recreation occurs as soon as He speaks, and by the time those words reach the ears of Lazarus, the resurrection is already occurring. Lazarus hears the words of His Savior, and just as he has obeyed Jesus during his life, so now Lazarus continues to obey Jesus, and he comes forth from the tomb. Jesus, the Life Giver, woke Lazarus up from the sleep of death.

The apostle Paul testifies that the Lord Jesus also shared the truth about death with him. Listen to Paul's testimony to the believers in Thessalonica. 1 Thess 4:15, "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 by no means precede those who are asleep." What sleep is Paul talking about here? The sleep of death. Paul continues, "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." Paul

tells us that he receives this truth from the Lord. The dead in Christ are asleep. But they will not sleep forever. Someone ought to say Hallelujah out there! The dead in Christ will not sleep forever. They will awake from the sleep of death when the Master calls them. They will hear the Savior's voice when He calls.

You see, my brothers and sisters, the precious truth that Jesus taught about death is not only that death is a sleep, but Jesus also taught that He holds the keys of the grave and of death! Listen to the words of Jesus, recorded in Rev 1:17-18. "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of death."

You don't need to be afraid of the sleep of death because Jesus has the keys! Jesus has the keys! When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and was laid in the garden tomb, Satan thought that he had finally won. Jesus was dead. But Satan forgot one very important point. Jesus has the keys of death and death's domain. And early Sunday morning, Jesus responded to His Father's call. He unlocked death's door and came forward as more than a Conqueror. Oh death, where is now your sting? O grave, where is now your victory? Jesus conquered death and death's domain. Jesus has the keys. And Jesus not only conquered death and death's domain for Himself. He conquered death and death's domain for all who believe in Him.

You do not need to fear death anymore. You do not need to fear the grave anymore. You believe in Jesus. You have received Jesus. And Jesus has the keys. Even if you fall asleep in death before our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ returns in glory, you won't stay sleeping forever. You won't be locked up in the tomb forever. Jesus has the keys. "Do not be afraid," Jesus tells us. I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives and was dead, and behold, I am

alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of death.”

That’s why Jesus says, “Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” Jn 11:26 You may take a short rest in the sleep of death. But that’s not the end of the story. Praise the name of the Lord. That’s not the end of the story. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.”

Do you believe in Jesus, the Son of God. Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord? Then death has lost its sting. The grave has lost its victory. You don’t need to be afraid of the sleep of death because Jesus has the keys! Those keys are more important than the keys to any suitcase! More important than key to the massive front door at Independence Hall. Jesus has the keys of Hades, the grave, and of death. In Jesus, death has lost its sting. The grave has been defeated. You don’t need to be afraid of the sleep of death because Jesus has the keys!

CHRIST AROSE

by Robert Lowry (1826-1899)

Low in the grave he lay, Jesus my Savior,
waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord!

Refrain:

Up from the grave he arose;
with a mighty triumph o'er his foes;
he arose a victor from the dark domain,
and he lives forever, with his saints to reign.
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Vainly they watch his bed, Jesus my Savior,
vainly they seal the dead, Jesus my Lord!

(Refrain)

Death cannot keep its prey, Jesus my Savior;
he tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord!

(Refrain)