

The Life to Come
November 10, 2019
Luke 20:27-38

“Does it hurt?” “Where are they going?” “What is it like?” “Will we see them again?” These questions and more are common questions young children ask when they first encounter death, dying, and the afterlife. Maybe it’s the death of a family pet, a grandparent or great grandparent, or the death of a character in a book or movie. Admittedly, these questions that they ask, they are great questions with probably even greater answers. Unfortunately, these are questions we as adults do not know the answers to. Given we are alive and death is a once-in-a-lifetime event (for most), very few can answer this question with any certainty. No one alive today can really describe what it is like to die. As a result, we have theories and beliefs about how much death hurts, where a person/animal goes when he/she dies, whether or not we will see them again, etc. This however does not stop us from wondering and seeking answers, even from those young children asking the initial question.

As a child, I can remember both asking and being asked what Heaven looks like in my Sunday School class. I was yet to read the Book of Revelation and read the exact dimensions of the City of God, the stone composition of the twelve gates that represent the twelve tribes, the length and width of the river flowing with milk and honey, etc. I don’t recall what answers I received when I asked, but I do recall thinking that Heaven was just this giant, flat cloud. Everyone would be there walking around in white robes, looking exactly as they did when they died (in my mind, old and wrinkly, not yet realizing children die too). There were no hills, mountains, no sign of God, really, but everyone is talking, conversing, laughing, enjoying themselves, and for my six-year-old self, that seemed to be good enough.

One question I have never heard asked nor have I ever asked is one I feel like we all need to consider: “What does belief in the afterlife mean to you?” In other words, what is the value of having such a belief in that which cannot be experienced until our life experiences are at an end? This is a curious question, not only because it’s rooted in Jesus’ response to the Sadducees in today’s reading, but also because it really gets you thinking about *why* you believe in the afterlife in the first place, a question only you can answer for yourself.

In the passage, Jesus is in Jerusalem, nearing his trial and death, and he’s approached by a group of Sadducees, a group of religious elites whose faith is embedded strictly in the Law and nothing else. They don’t believe in Heaven/Hell, resurrection, salvation, etc. These Sadducees, hoping to trap Jesus with their question, ask who would be a woman’s husband in the afterlife after she has married all seven brothers without bearing them any sons. They are making reference here to “Levirate marriage,” a law that dictates that a woman is to marry the next oldest brother of her husband should he die before she bears him any heirs, and the brother would then have the children born on behalf of the first brother. The woman in question, though, has gone through all seven brothers without bearing a single child.

Let’s take a moment to talk about this woman in question. Let us keep in mind that this was a heavily patriarchal society where women had no rights. A woman needed a man in her life to feed her, care for her, and make decisions for her, whether that was a father, husband, or son.

So, this woman has gone through the succession of marriages without bearing a son and now has no husband to care for her. Her father, assuming he is even alive, would not take her back, having given her away to the first husband. So, she then has no one to feed her, care for her, make decisions for her. In that time, there were no insurances, no social security, and there was no opportunity for women to work and support herself. So, she has no rights and no way to support herself now. As a result, she becomes marginalized, destitute, and widowed. In short, her life goes to Hell in a hand basket in no time flat.

Here is where Jesus' answer about the afterlife really picks up the pieces and makes sense of this woman's tragedy. He replies by saying that marriage has no place in the afterlife. There is no other family outside of God's family, therein eliminating all reason *to* marry in that time period. There is no death in the afterlife, therein eliminating any need to produce heirs or to worry about passing on the lineage. All persons are "children of God," meaning all persons are cared for by God, the "father figure." Essentially, the afterlife is something completely new and different from this life, free of all the worries/burdens born in this life. The afterlife is a new life all together, not a continuation of the life presently lived, and therein lies the reason we are taught to believe in the afterlife: it gives us hope.

There are many in our world who, unfortunately, find themselves in similar situations as the woman. Those who suffer from seemingly insurmountable debt, whether because of medical bills, credit cards, student loans, or the like; those who suffer from incurable, inoperable, and/or terminal illnesses; those who suffer with mental illnesses; those who live in war-torn countries or who face persecution every day; those who have no way of defending themselves or standing up for themselves because they have had their God-given rights denied to them for whatever reason; all these people and more live a life that is full of suffering. If the afterlife were merely a continuation of what already is, what hope would these people have for that something better? Yet, there is hope: hope that all that is going well shall continue to go well, if not get better; hope that those things which are not going well will get better; hope that, no matter the obstacles we face in this life or how long we face them for, they are obstacles for only a brief time; hope that, though we may not see our loved ones who have gone before us, we shall see them anew in due time. To have faith is to have hope, because, as one theologian writes, "seeing is not believing; rather, believing is seeing." Whatever obstacles you face at this moment, know this: Jesus died for us that we might all know eternal life and have hope for that which is yet to come, knowing it will be unlike anything we can possibly imagine.