

“PAYDAY, SOMEDAY”

Matthew 20:1-16 ¹

It may be that for some of you, this morning’s title reminds you of R.G. Lee’s famous sermon of the same title, preached many times around the country two generations ago. You can be glad this is not that, because delivering that sermon takes two hours! I’m using the title partly because it fits the morning’s text, and partly because I’m going to make a connection between all this and Memorial Day weekend.

Memorial Day, of course, is a day to honor those who have given their lives in the service of their country, and it often involves ceremonies at cemeteries. As I’ve thought about this weekend, I thought about the recent deaths of two friends in Louisville, and I’ve remembered the musings I sometimes entertain in such moments.

When that final appointment approaches, the appointment my two friends have kept, the appointment that none can refuse, nothing else will matter—neither appointments nor computers, neither stocks nor properties, neither family members nor friends—*nothing else will matter* as this world falls away and our appointment with God draws near. And so, as this life ends, whether soon or late, each one of us will face “Payday . . . Someday.”

As we begin our consideration, let’s look first at the morning’s text. Only Matthew recorded this parable, and its setting is crucial. If you’ll look back to Matthew 19:16 and following, you’ll see that prior to Jesus’ telling of this parable, He has just had the encounter with “the rich young ruler,” and noted how very, very difficult it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. Peter followed that with the question, “This fellow wouldn’t leave his wealth for you, but we have left everything for you. What reward will there be for us?” (Matthew 19:27).

And then, just before telling this parable, Jesus answered Peter, “*Truly I tell you, **in the renewal of all things**, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses of brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first*” (Matthew 19:28-30).

In the parable itself, the landowner—who represents God the Father—hired day laborers at five different times during the day, agreeing with the earlier hires to pay the customary wage of one denarius for the day’s work. At the end of the day, the foreman paid the last hires first, and paid them the same wage that had been agreed upon for a whole day’s work. Seeing this, the earlier hires understandably thought they would receive more, but they did not . . . and they complained about it.

The owner replied to this complaint by noting that he had kept the terms of their agreement and had not cheated anyone. He had simply chosen to be generous to those who had come last.

Now in those days, day laborers lived much more on the edge of hunger and starvation than many slaves did, and to miss a day’s work would have meant no dinner for those families. The narrative implies that those who went all day without being hired were not overlooked because there was no need of workers. They were unemployed because those employers who considered them viewed them as undesirable and unemployable. Like children on the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 27, 2018. Memorial Day weekend.

playground, these workers were unchosen not because there was no need, but because no one wanted them.

Jesus presented this landowner—God—as concerned about “the least of these” and as being very generous with them. This was partly a rebuke and a warning to Peter, noting that many would enter God’s Kingdom after its early days, and that God would bless those who came later just as God would bless those who entered at the first.

That message fits for us, as well. Many of us have been faithful church members and church leaders for many, many years, and there is a danger that we—the “early morning folk”—will complain and fail to welcome the “late afternoon folk” whom the Spirit will draw into God’s family in this place.

As we think about this parable, we need to remember that Jesus never shied away from talking about the rewards God intends for those who serve and love God; but Jesus warned often against mercenary motivations for such service. Those who serve God and God’s Kingdom out of deep gratitude and fervent love will be rewarded so richly that only God’s grace will be able to explain it. But those who serve God only for reward will find themselves bitter about even such abundant grace as will come. Well, that’s the gist of the parable; but I really want our focus to center on the wonders of God’s Payday, on the wonders of the Life to Come for those who serve willingly and gladly.

There are two more or less opposite errors into which we can fall with respect to the Life to Come. One error is to become “so heavenly-minded that we’re no earthly good,” and the other error is to become so earthly-minded that we care little for the life to come.

In *The Silver Chair*,² the fourth of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis’s protagonists are captured in a subterranean world whose rulers try to convince them that our world, “the Overworld,” does not exist, never has existed, and is nothing more than their own imagination. You and I face a similar struggle today with the advocates of Naturalism, who try to convince us that the Unseen World and the Life to Come do not exist, never have existed, and are nothing more than our own imagination. “What you see is all there is,” they say, and they say it loud and they say it repeatedly: “There IS no Life to Come.”

Over against this siren call, we place God’s Word to us given in Scripture: “*So if you have been raised with Christ, **seek the things above**, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your minds on things above**, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God*” (Colossians 3:1-3).

The Bible describes the Life to Come, the Unseen World for which we are to yearn, as “a city” and as “a country” (Hebrews 11:16). If we listen within, you and I long for a perfect world, without the corruption of sin, where God walks with us and talks with us in the cool of the day. We long for something similar to what the Bible describes in the Garden of Eden. And that is exactly what God promises us—a home that will not be destroyed, a kingdom that will not fade, a city with unshakable foundations, an inheritance eternal and incorruptible.³

“What God made us to desire,” Randy Alcorn noted, “and therefore what we *do* desire if we admit it, is exactly what God promises to those who follow Jesus Christ: a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth. Our desires correspond precisely to God’s plans. It’s not that we want something, so we engage in wishful thinking that

² C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (Macmillan, 1953).

³ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2004), p. 78.

what we want exists. It's exactly the opposite—the reason we want it is precisely because God has planned for it to exist. Resurrected people living in a resurrected universe is not our idea – it's God's."⁴

Now at the same time, when we think about “payday, someday,” it's important to remember that the experience I've just described in the Life to Come is not our default destination. No one goes there automatically. Sadly, our default destination is annihilation, because “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

Isaiah put it powerfully, though painfully, when he wrote, “*the LORD's arm is not too weak to save, and his ear is not too deaf to hear. But your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not listen. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers, with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, and your tongues mutter injustice*” (Isaiah 59:1-3).

The fact of the matter is that God loves us enough to tell us that **all roads do not lead to Heaven. Only one does: Jesus.** Jesus Himself told us, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Therefore, “*Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14).

My friends, there is a sign on that narrow gate, and the sign has one word on it that causes many to turn away. The word on the sign is “REPENT” (Mark 1:15).

She was well-to-do and well-educated, young, upwardly-mobile . . . and sick. The tests indicated acute liver failure, with little hope of survival apart from a liver transplant that seemed most unlikely. Here's how she told the story:

“In the face of death, I struggled to the hospital chapel. I wanted to tell God off face-to-face. I wanted to say, ‘You are a shyster! You've been passing yourself off as a loving God for 2,000 years, but whenever someone begins to be happy you pull the rug out from under them!’

“As I made my way down the aisle of the chapel, though, I lost my balance and fainted. When I came to, lying on the floor, I saw these words stenciled into the steps of the altar: **Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Be Merciful to Me, a Sinner.**⁵

“I don't know quite how God spoke to me in that moment, but somehow God said, ‘*You know what this is all about. It's about the moment of surrender. It's about bringing you to that moment when you will surrender everything to me. The doctors do the best they can, but I'm the only one who can heal you.*’

“And there in the floor of that chapel, I repeated over and over, ‘*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*’ There in that floor, I repented and surrendered my life to God, and then, somehow, I made my way back to my room.

“The next morning, after another series of tests, my doctor told me, ‘Your liver has started working again. We don't know why. We don't know why it stopped, and we don't know why it started up again.’ And I said in my heart, But I know. *Oh, but I know.* God brought me to the

⁴ Alcorn, pp. 7-8.

⁵ This short prayer from the 7th Century is known as “The Jesus Prayer.”

brink of death to get me to turn my life over to Him.”⁶ It was a severe mercy, but it was mercy nonetheless.

My friends, there is a “Payday, Someday,” and the gate that takes us into the Life to Come for which we yearn is the gate of repentance and surrender. Having reminded ourselves about this, let’s go through the gate and see what’s on the other side.

Look in your Bible once more at Matthew 19:28, where Jesus referred to “*the renewal of all things*.” Notice that Jesus said “*the renewal of all things*,” not “*the destruction of all things*”; and this choice of words is important.

The Bible makes it very clear that God has never given up on the original purpose for creation, yet we overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes the point over and over: **Reconcile. Redeem. Restore. Recover. Return. Renew. Regenerate. Resurrect.** Each of these biblical words begins with the *re-* prefix, suggesting a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost. That’s why Jesus referred to what’s coming as “***the renewal of all things***” (Matthew 19:28).

The Garden of Eden was not destroyed. What was destroyed was our ability to live there. In Genesis, God planted the Garden of Eden on Earth; in Revelation, God brings down the New Jerusalem, with a garden at its center, to the New Earth. In Eden, there was no sin, death, or Curse; on the New Earth, there’s no *more* sin, death, or Curse.

In Genesis, the Redeemer was promised; in Revelation, the Redeemer returns. Genesis tells the story of Paradise lost; Revelation tells the story of Paradise regained. In Genesis, humanity’s stewardship was squandered; in Revelation, humanity’s stewardship is triumphant, empowered by the human-and-divine King Jesus.

These parallels are too remarkable to be anything but deliberate. These mirror-image bookends demonstrate the perfect symmetry of God’s plan. We live today in the in-between time, hearing both the ancient echoes of Eden and the approaching sounds of the New Creation.⁷

When Peter preached his famous sermon on Pentecost morning, he referred to “*the time of the restoration of all things, which God spoke about through his holy prophets from the beginning*” (Acts 3:21).⁸ You have an insert in your worship order that lists thirty-six characteristics of the restoration and renewal that the Life to Come will bring. I’m not going to go over all that right now, but I hope you’ll take that home, look up every one of the Scriptures listed there, and ask yourself what their implications are for your life.

Sometimes we may become afraid of becoming the mercenary start-of-the-day workers from Jesus’ parable. We may become afraid that the whole idea of heaven is some sort of bribe. But here’s the good news. The Life to Come offers nothing that a mercenary soul desires. It is quite safe to tell the pure in heart that they will see God, because only the pure in heart want to.⁹

He was just a little fellow. His mother had died shortly after he was born, and his father, trying to be both Mommy and Daddy, had planned a picnic. The little boy had never been on a picnic, so they made their plans, fixed their lunch, and got things ready. Then it was time to go to bed.

⁶ John Powell, “Prayer as Surrender,” *Preaching Today* tape no. 108.

⁷ Alcorn, p. 85.

⁸ See also Isaiah 65:17-19, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:12b-13; Revelation 21:1-4.

⁹ C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain. Christianity Today*, Vol. 36, no. 7.

But the little boy couldn't sleep. He tossed, and he turned, and he was so excited that he could hardly stand it. Finally, he went into his father's room and awakened him.

"What are you doing still up? What's the matter?"

"I can't sleep."

"Why can't you sleep?"

"Daddy, I'm so excited about tomorrow!"

"Well, son, I'm sure you are, and it's going to be a wonderful day, but it won't be so great if we don't get some sleep. So why don't you get back in bed and get a good night's rest?"

The boy went back to his room, and his father went back to sleep. But before long, the boy woke his father again.

"What's the matter now?"

"Daddy, I just want to thank you for tomorrow."¹⁰

If we truly understand the idea of "Payday Someday," that's what we'll say, too:

"Father, I just want to thank you for tomorrow!"

My friends, Jesus told us that *"Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Then there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars; and there will be anguish on the earth among nations bewildered by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and expectation of the things that are coming on the world, because the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near"* (Luke 21:24-28).

Nothing else will matter then. Nothing. Not appointments or computers, not stocks or houses, not family or business. And then, with the redeemed of all the ages, we who are in Christ will stand and sing, *"Behold He comes! Riding on the clouds! Shining like the sun! At the trumpet call! Lift your voice! It's the year of Jubilee! And out of Zion's hill salvation comes!"*¹¹

On this Memorial Day weekend, *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

¹⁰ Benjamin Reaves, "Living Expectantly," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 65.

¹¹ Robin Mark, *Days of Elijah*.

**Behold, He comes!
Riding on the clouds!
Shining like the sun!
At the trumpet call!**

**Lift your voice!
It's the year of Jubilee!
And out of Zion's hill salvation comes!**

Payday, Someday, indeed!

Heaven: An Introduction

1. You're going to live forever . . . somewhere. When you die, you will go immediately into either heaven or hell (Luke 16:19-31).
2. Heaven is the REAL "never-ending Story," the home that God has prepared for you since the creation of the world (Psalm 16:11; John 14:2-3; 2 Corinthians 5:1, 6-8).
3. What God offers you is worth everything you've got to give (Matthew 13:44-46).
4. Whatever joy, and whatever pain you experience in this life is not even worth comparing to what God is going to do for you in heaven (2 Corinthians 4:14-18; Philippians 1:22-23)!
5. Heaven is full of outrageous gladness, joy, and celebration (Psalm 96:11; Isaiah 44:23).
6. People from every nation and tribe and people and language will be in heaven (Revelation 7:9).
7. God is preparing a feast beyond description to welcome you to heaven (Matthew 22:2; Revelation 19:9).
8. There will be no hunger or thirst in heaven. There will be more than enough for all (Revelation 7:16-17).
9. There will be no need for sleep in heaven (Revelation 21:25).
10. We will be able to see and hear everything, not just what is available to our senses now (Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9).
11. We will understand those things that we don't understand now (1 Corinthians 13:12).
12. God likes to make things, and there's just no knowing what kinds of interesting, wild, colorful, surprising things await us! (Genesis 1-2).
13. There will be some sense of time in heaven, but it will operate differently from time as we know it now (2 Peter 3:8; Revelation 22:2).
14. We will recognize each other (Luke 16:19-31).
15. We will know and recognize more people in heaven than on earth (Matthew 8:11, 17:1-5; Luke 22:17-18; 1 Corinthians 13:12).
16. We won't be married in heaven, but there will be continuity of special relationships (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35; John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20).
17. While we'll no longer be married in heaven, the nature of our relationship with our loved ones will be even better than on earth (Luke 20:27-40).
18. We are not going to be spirits without bodies, but we will put on new heavenly bodies (2 Corinthians 5:3; 1 Corinthians 15:47-51; Philippians 3:21).
19. Our heavenly bodies will never die. They will be perfect, full of glory and power, like Jesus' transfiguration/resurrection body (Matthew 17:2/Mark 9:2/Luke 9:29; 1 Corinthians 15:42-53; Hebrews 12:23).
20. Because our resurrection bodies will be like Jesus' resurrection body, we can expect that our eternal bodies will be touchable, warm, able to eat and drink, visually similar to our previous bodies, and recognizable (Luke 24; John 20-21; Philippians 3:21).
21. Further, our bodies will not be limited by time or space, but will be able to materialize and dematerialize at will, and able to operate independently of gravity (John 20:19-20; 1 John 3:2-3).
22. We will have work to do in heaven (John 5:17; Revelation 7:15).
23. Part of our "work" will be to praise God continually (Revelation 5:11-14).

Hell: An Introduction

24. Angels will one day destroy the world as we know it, after which God is going to make everything new again—a New Creation (Revelation 8-9, 16, 21:5).
 25. The New Heaven and the New Earth will be similar to the ones we know, but without any negatives or deficiencies. God will make everything new—as it was originally intended (Isaiah 65:17, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 3:12, 21:1-2).
 26. There will be no tears, no sadness, no separation, no pain, no death, no anxiety in the New Creation (Revelation 21:4).
 27. The New Earth will be set free from all natural catastrophes (Romans 8:18-23).
 28. The Bible indicates that there will be vegetation in Heaven (the Tree of Life). It seems likely that there will be animals, too—perhaps even the ones we have known here (Psalm 36:6; Isaiah 11:6-8, 65:25).
 29. The capital city of the New Creation—the New Jerusalem—will be beautiful beyond description (Revelation 21:10-27).
 30. It's possible to be pre-registered as a citizen of heaven (Luke 10:20).
 31. Jesus is the only way into heaven (John 14:6).
 32. The angels rejoice when you return to God (Luke 15:7).
 33. You can know for sure that you're going to heaven (John 3:16, 5:24, 6:40, 10:28; 1 John 5:13; Romans 10:9).
 34. Jesus could come back at any moment (Matthew 24:44; 2 Peter 3:10).
Are you ready?
 35. There will be different levels of glory, but every cup will be full to overflowing (2 Corinthians 12:2).
 36. You are preparing your own cup . . . even now (Luke 16:9).
1. Jesus talked about Hell as though it is real.
 2. Hell will be a conscious experience. Our bodies in hell will be able to feel pain, hunger, and thirst. They will be visually similar to our previous bodies, but will be imprisoned in eternal fire (Luke 16:19-31).
 - a. Jesus talked about hell as though it is fiery (Matthew 5:22; Luke 16:23).
 - b. There is a second death—the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15, 21:8).
 3. Hell is also described as a place of darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30; Luke 13:28; 2 Peter 2:4).
 4. The torment of hell goes on forever and ever, with no relief day or night (Revelation 14:9-12).
 5. Hell was prepared for the Devil and his angels, not for you (Matthew 25:41). But you can still get in.
 6. Ending up in hell is the natural consequence of refusal to listen to God's Voice (Matthew 7:13-14).
 7. There is no price too great to avoid hell (Matthew 18:9; Mark 9:43-47; Luke 12:5).