

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.2

Opening Comments

As we saw in term two this year, the Israelites were convinced that this life ended with death and the descent of all the dead to the realm of shadow and darkness that they called Sheol. We will be gathered to our ancestors in Sheol, but we will lose all connection with God and with the living. This is vividly stated by Ecclesiastes: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun” Ecclesiastes 9:4-6). Moreover, there is no judgment, and hence reward or punishment in Sheol. Moses descends to Sheol, as does Pharaoh. This also deeply troubles the author of Ecclesiastes: “Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone” (Ecclesiastes 9:1-3).

As I mentioned last week, this understanding of death changes in the 160's BCE, when the Jews experience persecution by their Greek rulers solely because they obey the law of Moses. In one highly influential account of this persecution, a Jewish mother and her seven sons are brutally executed because they would not obey the king's command to eat prohibited food. As one of them approaches his torture and death, he expresses the hope that he will live again. Speaking defiantly to the king, he says: “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to a renewal of everlasting life, because we have died for his laws” (2 Macc. 7:9). Note how this passage unites the themes of resurrection and everlasting life, which is a pattern we also see in Paul and John. This hope is combined with the expectation that there will be a judgment on the day of resurrection, so that those who go unrewarded in this life will be rewarded with everlasting life, and those who go unpunished in this life will go to everlasting shame and contempt. This position is clearly stated in Daniel, which was written at the same time as the persecution described in 2 Maccabees. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). This expectation is shared by Jesus, who tells us of the coming judgment when the sheep and the goats will go to their different destinations: “And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46).

The Gospel builds on the foundation of this Jewish expectation of future resurrection, judgment, and eternal life. The major difference is the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. This means that the time of resurrection has already begun, and that God will judge the living and the dead through the Lord Jesus, and the righteous who belong to him will inherit eternal life. As Paul tells the Athenians in the Book of Acts, God “has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us that those who leave everything to follow him will be the ones who will inherit eternal life. “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my name’s sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:28-29). Note that we inherit eternal life at the time of the renewal of all things, and not before then.

We see the same pattern in the letters of Paul. The resurrection of Jesus reveals that he is the one who will judge all, and he is the one who will restore all, culminating in the defeat of death, after which he will hand the kingdom back to God.

1 Cor. 15:²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection’, it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

Not surprisingly, we also see this pattern echoed in the Gospel of John. John tells us that God has given Christ the authority to judge all people, and he will do so on the day when he raises the dead, though unlike Paul, it is not God who raises the dead, but Jesus.

John 5: ²⁵“Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, ²⁷and he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not be astonished at this, for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹and will come out: those who have

done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation.”

However, the Gospel of John also significantly departs from the inherited pattern of resurrection, judgment and eternal life, as revealed in the line, “Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26). The contrast between the original pattern of future resurrection, and John’s vision of the presence of resurrection life in Jesus, is clearly presented in the story of the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus tells the grieving Martha that her brother Lazarus will live again, she expresses her hope in the future resurrection, as foretold in Daniel and 2 Maccabees. Jesus then corrects her in order to reveal his more radical vision of resurrection and eternal life.

John 11: ²¹Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ ²³Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ ²⁴Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ ²⁵Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ ²⁷She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

Resurrection and eternal life are not something in the future for which we have to wait, when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. Rather, resurrection and eternal life are present now, in Jesus, and thus our relationship to death in the present is radically changed. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

We can also see this contrast in the verb used to speak of our participation in eternal life. In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks of what needs to be done by those who hope to *inherit* eternal life. The followers of Jesus are to give up everything in the hope that in the age to come they might inherit eternal life. Hence eternal life is seen as something inherited in the future, when Jesus returns on the day of resurrection. Paul speaks in the same way in his letter to the Philippians. He wants “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow [he] may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11). In the Gospel of John, on the other hand, eternal life is not something we hope to *inherit* in the future, on the day when the dead are raised, but it is rather something that Jesus *gives* us *now*, which we receive when we believe in him. Jesus tells us that God sent him into the world to give eternal life to all whom God had given to him (John 17:2). The sheep whom Jesus calls to himself do not *inherit* eternal life on the last day, they are *given* eternal life *now*. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). According to John, God the Father has eternal life in himself, and God gives this eternal life to the Son, so that he might give eternal life to those who believe in him. “Just as the living Father sent me and I

live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me” (John 6:57). This is the meaning of the most famous passage in the Gospel of John. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Eternal life is not inherited on the last day when God raises the dead, but is given when we believe in Christ now.

The day of judgment also changes in John, for it does not take place when Jesus comes again on the last day, but takes place *now* in our encounter with Jesus. “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come under judgment but has passed from death to life” (John 5:22-24). On the other hand, those who do not believe in the Son are already condemned. “³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.” (John 3:36).

Finally, according to John, we do not inherit eternal life when the risen Jesus returns on the last day, but rather when we believe in Jesus as he is lifted up and glorified on the cross. Eternal life is ultimately given by the Son when he is crucified. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14). The concealment of eternal life in the death of Jesus is shared by those who believe in Jesus. “Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life’” (John 12:23-25). This is why Jesus tells Martha, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25).