

Sermon for Sunday, August 2, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"IS THERE LIFE AFTER BIRTH?"

St. Mark 8:27-38

Text: "For what does it profit a man, to gain the world and forfeit his life?
For what can a man give in return for his life?"

Mark 8:36,37

Dr. L. Nelson Bell was a medical missionary for some 25 years in China for the Presbyterian Church. His children were born there and he had intended to spend his life on the mission field. But World War II put an end to that dream and Dr. Bell returned to America. For the rest of his life he was to be one of the greatest lay leaders in the history of the Presbyterian Church. He was instrumental in founding the Presbyterian Journal and then later on the magazine "Christianity Today" which is the most read evangelical publication in America today. Late in life, Dr. Bell was elected by our denomination as Moderator. Of his children, one of them--Clayton Bell--today serves as pastor of the largest Presbyterian Church in America, Highland Park Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Texas. One of his daughters, named Ruth, married a Baptist preacher who went on to make a modest reputation for himself. His name is Billy Graham. Last week in Kansas City at the American Festival of Evangelism, Dr. Graham gave the closing address on Thursday night. There must have been some 12,000 in attendance. In his address, Dr. Graham told the audience about Dr. Bell and told of an incident concerning this great layman. Late in his life someone asked him, "Dr. Bell, of all the people you ministered to in your hospital in China, how many of them do you think might still be alive?" Dr. Bell thought for a moment and then replied, "Probably very few. That's why sharing Christ with them was the most important thing I did."

Well, that is a very profound statement, don't you think? There is a great debate going on today between liberals and conservatives as to the primary mission of the Church. Is the first task of the church to minister to the human, physical needs of man or is the first business of the church to share the good news about Jesus? Dr. Bell certainly cared about the physical needs of people. You simply cannot explain his going to China as a doctor any other way. Yet, he recognized that the most important thing he could do for a person was to tell him about eternal life.

Isn't that what our Scripture for this morning says? It says, "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" And of course the life Jesus is talking about is eternal life. Indeed, what does it profit man if he has everything the world has to offer but doesn't have eternal life? What does it matter how rich we are, how nice our homes are, how well-dressed we are, what nice places we travel to, if we die and go to hell? Is there anything we have that can buy back that lost eternal life?

Do you remember the story of the Rich Young Ruler? He wanted to be sure he had eternal life. So he came to Jesus and said, "Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said first of all he had to be obedient to the laws of God. Surprisingly enough, the young man had done that. I don't know about you, but I would have failed right there. I don't have that much success keeping God's commandments, do you? But that wasn't enough. It means you just can't be good enough to earn or deserve or win eternal life. Suppose I asked you this morning, "What are you doing to get into heaven?"--what would you say? If I asked you, "What are you counting on to gain eternal life?"--how would you answer?

Well, if any of us is counting on being good, that won't do it. Even if we keep the laws of God perfectly--which none of us is doing!--that still wouldn't get the job done.

Do you remember what Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler? He told him to get rid of his possessions--to get rid of those things to which he had given his heart--and instead give his heart to Jesus and to come, follow him. Well, I tell you, that was a hard choice! The man just couldn't do it. He wanted to but he couldn't. The Bible says he went away sadly. But he just couldn't put his total trust in Jesus only.

Let me ask you this question: when did that young man die? Well, physically he probably died some years later. But as for eternal life, he died the minute he said "no" to Jesus. When you say, "yes" to Jesus--in that instant you have eternal life. But when you say, "no", to Jesus--in that moment you forfeit eternal life. Isn't that what Jesus said? Do you remember what Jesus said that night to Nicodemus? He said, "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Yes, Nicodemus was a Master of Israel, but until he knew Jesus as his Savior, he was eternally lost. I heard someone say the other day that Nicodemus has the wrong degree. He had his M.I (his Master of Israel), but he didn't have his B.A. (his Born Again).

We are hearing a lot today--particularly from medical people--about so-called near-death experiences. And one of the best sellers written in recent years is entitled "Life after Life". Even Readers' Digest is getting into the act and the most recent issue has an article that talks about the growing body of medical evidence that there is life after death. But from the biblical standpoint, that is really the wrong question. Of course the Bible teaches there is life after death. The Bible teaches that man has an immortal soul that lives for all eternity. But there is an even more serious question. That question is this: where will that eternal life be spent? Will it be spent with God?

Well, that's the real question: where will eternal life be spent? And the Bible says that question will not be answered after you die. No, it will be answered right here on earth in this very life. Don't think where you will spend eternity will be decided after you die and stand before God. Don't think that after you cash it in that you will stand in judgment, the good weighted against the bad, and then your fate will be determined by which way the scales tilt. No, your fate is already determined. The real question is not is there life after death. The real question is this: is there life after birth.

Does that make sense to you? Eternity for us won't be decided after we die. It won't depend on the good in life outweighing the bad. No, eternity will be decided on the basis of our relationship to Jesus Christ. Isn't that what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old had passed away, behold, the new has come." Yes, when you accept Jesus you are born again. You are a new creation. You do have eternal life.

So the key to life after birth is Jesus. Do you understand why that is so? Let me tell you why Jesus is the key to eternal life. Go back to the third chapter of Genesis. If you don't understand chapter three of Genesis you can't understand the Bible. As the crown of his creation, the Bible says God made man--you and me. And then God did a crazy thing? He gave us free will. He wanted us to love him,

but he wanted it to be freely given. I suppose he could have programmed us to respond automatically to him in loving obedience, but God didn't want that. So he gave us freedom to say "yes" or to say "no".

Well, you know the sad story of what happened. Man used his freedom to say "no" to God. He turned his back on his creator. He wanted to be God himself. And when man broke his relationship to God, it broke man himself in every area of his life. Look at our emotional/mental life. When man turned from God brokenness entered there. Adam said to God, "I was hiding because I saw that I was naked and I was afraid." Fear--anxiety--the basis of all our emotional/mental disturbances--entered into our lives.

Or look at the social areas of our lives. When man broke fellowship with God the first thing that happened was a brother killed a brother. The history of man is repleted with his inhumanity to man and we are still hating, killing, and abusing one another. Or look at our physical being. Because we broke our relation to God, disease, old age, pain, sickness, death--all have entered our bodies. But the worst thing that happened to man when he said "no" to God was that he broke his spiritual relationship to God. You can call it depravity, you can call it original sin, you can call it separation or alienation from God, but whatever name you put on it, it is still death--spiritual death--eternal death.

But do you know what God did? He looked down on us poor sinful, broken people with all of our stupid egos, all of our failures, all of our brokenness and do you know what? He still loved us. So he did something about our brokenness. He sent Jesus down to take our place, to bear the punishment for our sins, to die in our stead. And then God did an incredible thing. He said to us, "If you accept Jesus and what he did as done for you, I forgive you. I restore eternal life to you." Isn't that just incredible? But that's what God offers us--healing, restoration, forgiveness.

In his play, Hamlet, Shakespeare asks a profound question about life. As Hamlet returns to Denmark from exile, he happens to come upon the grave digger who is digging a grave and in the process throws up the skull of the court Jester of Hamlet's youth. Hamlet feels the shock of mortality. What has this crumbling skull to do with the man he knew and loved? From the court jester his thoughts moved to the great men of the past. Could it be that mighty Caesar, once held in awe by the world, has become a lump of common clay that some man has used to mend a hole in the wall of his house? Now, this is no mere speculation about chemical changes in bodies; Hamlet is asking a profound question about the worth of a life in the long run. Is Caesar's life, or a friend's life, or his own life worth anything after all? Indeed, is there life after birth?

Well, Jesus answered that question. He said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." And then he asks, "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?"

Are there those of us this morning who are gaining the world and in the process losing eternal life? And if we do lose eternal life, what can we give to buy it back? Well, there is only one thing you can give to get eternal life. That is your heart--your life. I don't mean to frighten you, but statistically this week, or next week, or the week after, we will have a funeral from Central. It may well be me. It could also be you--or even the person sitting next to you. When that

time comes for me or for you, as it inevitably will, will there be life after death? No. No, not unless there has first been life after birth. No, not unless we have accepted Jesus as our Savior. And if we have, we will already have eternal life. Jesus once said, "Anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in Him who sent me, has hold of eternal life." That person has already passed from death to life. Jesus said he came that men--you and I--might have life. How about you? You've been born, but have you been born again? Do you have life after birth?