

2. WHAT DID JESUS SAY?

Let's start with a reminder for those of you who have joined this course for the first time today, or who have had such a busy week that you've forgotten what we said we are looking to do over these four sessions. The theme of this BRICK course is the afterlife: our aim is to look critically at the notions that we have inherited about what happens to us after we die, and especially regarding Heaven and Hell, and to test some of the assumptions that we have developed around these concepts.

One of our first observations last week was that the very words Heaven and Hell come from Norse mythology, and that Hel is not a place, it is a she: Hel is a goddess who guards the Norse underworld, the lowest of all their nine worlds. In realising this, we decided that we needed to go further and deeper to examine what lies behind these fundamentally pagan words and concepts, in order to discover the true nature and extent of the cosmology that we as Christians maintain.

We're doing this primarily by examining the Biblical evidence to see what the Old Testament says, before moving on to what the Gospels say, and then on to the development of the ideas that we find there through the rest of the New Testament, and later theologians and writers. Last week we began with the Old Testament, where we found an emerging picture with lots of different strands, some of which were complementary, others which appeared to contradict each other.

We found one strand saying simply that dust returns to dust, that there is no afterlife, but that all man's just deserts are meted out to him during his lifetime, good and bad. Another strand saying that the first step after death is into the pit or the grave – which then develops into a belief that these graves collectively comprise a domain beneath the earth called Sheol where the dead continue to exist in some shadowy form. This strand was coupled with the emergence of a belief that we comprise three different elements: the dust from which our bodies are made, the breath that God breathes into us, and a separate, independent element that we might recognise as a soul. Then there was another strand that Sheol has not one but two levels, including its associate Abaddon, which implies ultimate destruction of the dead in a way that Sheol does not.

But we also uncovered suggestions that there might be alternative destinations for the dead, distinct from Sheol; not a Heaven as such, as we might understand it, but certainly the possibility that there might be a separate domain for the faithful dead. This was linked to an emerging idea that there might be consequences in the afterlife for the faith and deeds that are demonstrated during a lifetime. We also found beliefs that the dead can in fact rise again, either as spirits conjured up by the living, or through a process of resurrection or revivification. And lastly we saw a new and rapidly developing narrative that death is the precursor to a corporate resurrection of the dead at the end of time at God's command, and a sorting which will lead some to eternal life, and some to shame and contempt.

We finished off by recognising that, at the time of Jesus, it was acknowledged that there were different belief systems among the Jews, and that there was no single, commonly held doctrine regarding the afterlife. Different sects had different views: the Sadducees held that there was no afterlife; the Pharisees that there was an afterlife involving the transmigration of good souls, and the eternal punishment of bad ones; the Essenes that the soul was immortal and enjoyed a free and unfettered existence after death; and others no doubt different again.

This variegated belief system provides important context for the consideration of Jesus's words in the Gospels. But it is equally important to acknowledge that, in the 200 or so years since the last book of the Old Testament was transcribed, Jewish belief systems had moved on again. Evidence of this evolution can be found mostly in a variety of non-canonical works which date around the turn of the

millennium and which – as much as if not more so than the books of the Old Testament – show the kind of thing that the Jews were talking about during Jesus’s lifetime.

One of the more famous and widely read of these is the book of Enoch: this dates around the same time as the book of Daniel in the second century BC, and it was undoubtedly known to both Jews and Christians in the first and second centuries AD despite not forming part of either’s holy scripture. It purports to tell of Enoch, the great grandfather of Noah, of whom we remarked last week that he is one of only two individuals in the Old Testament who do not die. Instead, in Genesis 5 it is said in verse 24: “*he was no more, because God took him away.*” The book of Enoch picks up the story at this point and, for the most part, tells of Enoch’s subsequent travels, visions and dreams in the afterlife, and what he finds there.

These revelations pick up on the narrative introduced in chapter 12 of the book of Daniel which we discussed last week. They confirm that contemporary Jewish theology, cosmology and eschatology embraced and developed that narrative, with its themes of the coming of the Son of Man at the end times, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement of mankind, the separation of the faithful and the unfaithful dead, the award of eternal life to one and eternal condemnation to the other. For our immediate purposes, the most interesting content comes in the first section of 1 Enoch, entitled the Book of the Watchers – as it’s here that we find a picture of the afterlife which fills in some of the gaps that were left in Daniel’s account.

In chapter 22 Enoch visits Sheol, which last week we identified as a single, undifferentiated domain where all the dead exist in a common state of insubstantial existence. However, the Sheol which is shown to Enoch has more dimensions than this: it is still a place where all the souls of men are gathered after death – but the purpose of their gathering is to await the day of their final judgement, which will happen at the appointed time. And there are in this Sheol four different sections for different categories of people: one for the righteous, where there is a spring of flowing water; one for sinners, who are held in pain and torment as a consequence for their misdeeds; one for those who were unlawfully killed, so that they can make accusation against their killers; and one for a separate category of sinners, whose sin is so bad that they will not be raised for judgement at the end times.

Having passed through these four different sections, Enoch is then shown seven mountains of which the seventh is in the shape of a throne, surrounded by trees, of which one is the finest and most fragrant. Enoch is told that this mountain is the throne of God, and the tree is being preserved until the end times, when it will provide fruit for those who are judged to be righteous and holy in the final judgement. Journeying on from there, he is shown a valley where the final judgement will take place, and which is described as an “accursed valley for those who are accursed forever”.

In a talk entitled “What Did Jesus Say”, you might think that all this is a bit off-piste. But in fact it is incredibly pertinent to what the Gospels say about the afterlife – because it demonstrates that, in Jesus’s lifetime, there was still a live and developing debate about what happens to us when we die; and that new ideas were emerging all the time to fill the gaps in people’s understanding of the journey from the moment of death. Through considering Jesus’s words in the Gospels we’ll attempt to identify how far the debate has progressed, and what ideas are authentic as compared to those which are not.

Our approach will be to pick out key passages from the Gospels which quote Jesus’s words in relation to death and the afterlife, and to see what we can glean from these. We’ll try to pick out what might confirm the strands of thought that we identified last week within the Old Testament; what might add something new and revelatory to those strands; and what might be perceived as a contradiction, either with what we have previously considered, or internally between the Gospel accounts. Our task will then be to reconcile these accounts into a definitive version of “what Jesus said”.

The first passage we'll look at is Luke 23.39ff, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, approaching the moment of his death. In terms of our quest, this will give us a glimpse of Jesus's insight into the journey to be taken from that moment onwards, where he thought he was destined to go, and the possibilities which were/are open to others at the same point of transition from life to death:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The interesting sentence here is the last one – and it's interesting in two very different ways. The first concerns the place where Jesus said he was heading. He describes this not as Heaven, which is elsewhere conveyed in the New Testament by the Greek word οὐρανός or, in the plural, οὐρανοί. Instead, it is referred to as "paradise" – a word that is neither Greek nor Aramaic: it is a borrowing from Avestan, an Old Persian or Iranian language, and it means an enclosed park or garden. The Hebrew writers of the Old Testament used it to refer variously to orchards or forests – but when the Old Testament was translated into Greek by the scribes of Alexandria in the third century BC, it was used repeatedly to describe the Garden of Eden, in Genesis and elsewhere.

There are, I suppose, three potential interpretations of Jesus's usage of the word:

- First, it could be literal. He could be suggesting to the criminal that they'll both be buried in the same funeral plot, the area where Joseph of Arimathea donated the tomb for Jesus's body to be laid in. John 19.41 describes this as a garden, although the Greek word he uses is not paradise but κήπος, a garden of fruit trees, or an orchard
- Second, it could reflect the contemporary belief that we have just identified in the book of Enoch, that there is a part of Sheol where the righteous await the final judgement, where there is a spring of flowing water. Jesus could feasibly be saying that both he and the criminal are headed there. However, the book of Enoch describes this as a "hollow place", and distinct from the gardens that are described as paradise which Enoch visits later in his journey through the afterlife
- Third, and most likely, it could be that Jesus considered that his next step after dying would be to enter paradise in the form of the Garden of Eden. Not Heaven – the place which the Jews called Shamayim, where last week we saw that only God lives, and where the dead cannot expect to go. What Jesus seems to be saying here is that, for the faithful dead, the ultimate destination is in fact the Garden of Eden, in full restoration of the way things were in the beginning

The second interesting point about this sentence in verse 43 is its punctuation – or rather, its lack of punctuation. The NIV translation with which most of us will be familiar has a comma between the words "truth" and "today" – a comma which creates a break in the sentence between two distinct clauses. The first clause has Jesus affirming that he will say something that is true; the second clause that Jesus and the criminal will today be together in paradise.

This reading has enormous implications, especially in the light of the belief systems that we examined last week. Old Testament thinking had it – as indeed did the book of Enoch that we have just discussed – that people die, they go into Sheol, they remain there until the end times, and then they are raised for the final judgement which determines whether they attain eternal life or eternal condemnation. Last week we identified only two people in the whole of the Old Testament, Elijah and Enoch himself, who escaped this fate through being spirited away by God Himself.

But here Jesus seems to be saying, it's actually possible for more than just Elijah and Enoch to skip the phases of the journey that go through Sheol. It's even possible for this criminal to move directly from life through death and into paradise without enduring any intermediate phase or period in Sheol. That this whole process can be achieved within a single day – which is the period of time that is implicit in the word “today” or, in Greek, σήμερον.

Unless, that is, the comma gets taken away ... because it should be noted that the comma in verse 43 is a late interpolation. At best, the only punctuation that appears in ancient Greek are full stops and question marks, and even these do not appear on the oldest manuscripts from which our current Bible is derived. Therefore the original text as written by Luke would not have had the comma that appears in the NIV. The importance of this consideration is that the whole meaning of the sentence can be altered by removing or repositioning the comma: it could just as easily read, *“Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise”* as it could *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* In other words, the criminal could move quickly and easily with Jesus into the Garden of Eden without passing Go, as it were; or, if you move the comma, the promise might merely be that the criminal will get to Eden, but the timeframe is less immediate and direct.

How, then, are we to address this? What should we believe? If we look elsewhere in the Gospels for evidence from the mouth of Jesus, we find support for both interpretations. There are two passages in John's Gospel, for example, which would appear to provide ample support for the belief that a simple faith in Jesus conveys swift and direct passage into Eden – for example:

- In John 5.24, shortly after he has affirmed that all power of judgement has been given to him by God the Father, and that he the Son will give life to whomsoever he pleases, Jesus says: *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and does not pass through judgement, but has crossed over from death to life”*
- In John 3.18, Jesus says, *“whoever believes in [the Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only son”*; and again in 3.36, *“whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him”*

In both these passages, John uses the present tense: Jesus says that the one who trusts and believes has eternal life – not that he or she will have, but that they have. Moreover, Jesus says explicitly that believers will not be subject to judgement, but have already transitioned from death to eternal life. The sense is therefore that the decision to trust and believe, and the conferral of eternal life, are simultaneous, and cut out all the potential middle stages. Meanwhile, those do not believe have already been condemned, and will not see eternal life – the verb tenses here conveying a sense that their past decisions will have implications in the future, when judgement takes place.

However, while this might appear decisive, there is another passage of John's Gospel which would appear to speak against this. In chapter 11 verse 25, Jesus says, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* Here the verb that John uses is in the future tense – will live, will never die. The sense here is that, even though the decision to believe may be taken now, the conferral of eternal life will not take place until some time in the future – the very reverse of what we have just concluded.

Our consideration of Jesus's words in John 5:24 should also not neglect the fact that they are followed (quite naturally) by verses 25-30. These talk of a time which *“is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live ... a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”* This might well be construed as saying that, at

the time of the resurrection, those who hear and recognise the voice of the Son of God will come into eternal life. In other words, eternal life will be granted only in the final judgement at the end times, and not before.

A further counterargument could be based on Luke 16.19ff, which has Jesus recount this parable:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’”

Prima facie, and within the context of our present discussion of whether those who die might progress directly to paradise on account of their faith, the parable would seem to make a clear statement that they do not: the beggar does not go straight to paradise, but instead to a different place, to Abraham’s side – or, in other translations, Abraham’s bosom. However, there are two caveats which prevent this conclusion being confidently drawn:

- First and most germanely, this is a parable. We know that Jesus told stories which used and spoke into people’s experience and understanding of everyday life – whether that be farming, household management, bonded labour, wedding feasts, pompous Pharisees, prayerful widows, or whatever else. What he may therefore be reflecting here is a scenario with which he knew his audience to be familiar, rather than a cosmologically complete and accurate exegesis of the afterlife. After all, his purpose in telling the story is to create a context through which he can illustrate the deafness of the Jews with regard to the Kingdom of God, rather than anything else. We would be on dangerous ground, I think, if we sought to say with any certainty that the story represents Jesus’s definitive view of the afterlife – in the same way that we should probably not take the parable of the sower to give Jesus’s considered viewpoint on agricultural techniques
- Second, Jesus says nothing about the beggar’s faith, but merely that he had a wretched life. Perhaps he did not know Jesus and therefore could not go directly to paradise – but he was someone whose goodness meant that he was able to make the first step in that direction, to access that part of Sheol which the book of Enoch says was reserved for the righteous? Perhaps he took the next and ultimate step at the final judgement, when his goodness was recognised and confirmed? Truth is, however, we simply don’t know: there is not enough detail in the story to support a forensic analysis of the kind we might like

Bearing these things in mind, and in the context of our discussion last week of what the Old Testament tells us of the afterlife, this parable is interesting and informative in what it suggests both about contemporary Jewish beliefs, and about Jesus’s reflection of them:

- First, it inverts the Old Testament’s position that God metes out all deserts both good and bad during a man’s lifetime. This contradiction of the “gospel of prosperity”, the belief that wealth

and prosperity are tangible indications of God's favour would have been quite shocking at the time, but is a consistent theme of Jesus's teaching

- Second, and linked to the first point, the parable suggests quite strongly that what we do in life has consequences in the afterlife – a continuation of the later thinking that we identified in Ezekiel and Daniel, that faith and deeds both are rewarded after death
- Third, the parable shows differentiation in the afterlife between the destinations of those who are deemed worthy, and those who are not. This builds on the idea that we examined in Ezekiel last week that there is separation of the circumcised and the uncircumcised at the moment of death – but Jesus's parable introduces something new here, something more in line with the book of Enoch and its suggestion that there is an initial, interim judgement made not on the basis of a man's faith, but on the basis of the life and deeds that he has demonstrated prior to his death
- Fourth, the different destinations in the afterlife are given names: the worthy go to somewhere called "Abraham's side" or "Abraham's bosom"; while the unworthy to a place which Luke calls Hades in a direct borrowing from Greek ideas of the underworld. Each of these might easily be presumed to represent an intermediate destination prior to the final judgement at the end times, as in the book of Enoch – although it should be noted that the parable neither mentions nor implies the future imminence of that judgement
- Fifth, the idea of "Abraham's bosom" seems to be a development of what we talked about last week when we discussed the use of the phrase "gathered to his ancestors" as a descriptor of the death of several of the Hebrew patriarchs, including Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and David. The coining here of "Abraham's bosom" seems to suggest that the phrase has developed into a solid concept that reflects the ideas in Ezekiel and the book of Enoch that there is an area of Sheol that is reserved for the faithful dead – and, by extension, inaccessible to the unfaithful
- Sixth, the parable echoes the idea in the book of Enoch that those who go to Hades may be subject to immediate punishment for what they did during their lifetime, without waiting for the final judgement
- Finally, there is no prospect of crossing over from Hades to Abraham's bosom, i.e., there is no prospect of sins being remitted, rehabilitated or erased through punishment in Hades. Whatever happens in life seems to have consequences that are permanent

So all of these beliefs can be found reflected in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. But we would be wrong, I think – and Tom Wright agrees, by the way – to say that they comprise the worldview of Jesus, purposefully and faithfully laid out.

The idea of punishment in the afterlife for those whose lives would warrant it is not explicit in the Old Testament. However, it is implicit in the passage we looked at last week in Daniel chapter 12 (*Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt*); and even more so in the two passages that we linked to Daniel 12 from Micah and Isaiah. These both speak of apocalyptic events occurring at some stage in the future which will create a new heaven and a new earth, and which will foreshadow God's people living in peace and harmony with each other inside an altered state of existence; but which will also involve a judgement or a separation:

"As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure.²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the LORD.²⁴ "And they will go out and

look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” Isaiah 66.22-24

“You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire.” Malachi 3.18-4.1

As we have already seen, this idea is more explicit in book of Enoch, where sinners are held in pain and torment in Sheol as a consequence for their misdeeds – some to be reassessed at the final judgement, and others whose sin is so bad that they will not be raised for judgement at the end times. We also know from Josephus that it was one of the principal tenets of the faith of the Pharisees.

In the New Testament, the Gospel which gives most detailed and explicit attention to the end times, and the nature and extent of the judgement that will follow, is Matthew’s. Chapter 24 talks at length of the wars, persecutions, tribulations, false prophets and portents that will precede the end times, and warns the faithful to be ready. Chapter 25 then uses the parables of the ten virgins and of the talents as precursors to verses 31ff, which describe the final judgement, the separation of people by the Son of Man in the same way that a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. This sifting process has a binary outcome: those who are blessed by God on account of their good deeds in life will receive their “inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”; those who are cursed will be cast away from God into “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”. The passage culminates in verse 46, which says: *“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*

Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, the place where sinners are punished in the afterlife is given a name, one that is new to our study of the Bible’s accounts, and that is Gehenna. The word is used 12 times in the New Testament, and Matthew is responsible for seven of those usages, with at least two others being derivative from his writing. Between them, Mark and Luke mention Gehenna just four times – three in Mark 9.42-47, as part of the same passage where Jesus warns against the corruption of the innocent; and once in Luke 12.5, which repeats the injunction of Matthew 10.28 that we should not fear each other, but rather the one who has the power to cast us into Gehenna.

Gehenna is presented as the ultimate destination for those who commit sins such as blasphemy, adultery, murder, and any crimes against the innocent. Thus Matthew portrays Jesus as saying:

“Anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.” Matt 5.22

And again: *“‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna.”* Matt 5.27-29

And again: *“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.⁹ And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of Gehenna.”* Matt 18.8-9

And again: *“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to Gehenna?³⁴ Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.”* Matt 23.33-34

Now Gehenna is actually an identifiable, locatable place. It appears to be a transliteration of the Aramaic form of the Hebrew “ge-hinnom”: this means the valley of Hinnom, whose exact location is

disputed but may be just to the south of Jerusalem. The valley of Hinnom appears in the Old Testament, in 2 Chronicles and in Jeremiah, as a place where the pagan god Molech was worshipped – the principal feature of which was child sacrifice by fire, an abominable practice which was ended by King Josiah in 2 Kings 23.

Gehenna is also mentioned in later, medieval sources as a place where the city burned its rubbish, especially that which was considered unclean. It is undoubtedly tempting to adopt this image of a valley where the impure was constantly burning as a compelling metaphor for Hell. However, the reference is discredited for two reasons: first, that it is made several centuries after the circumstances that it describes; and second, there is no archaeological evidence to support it.

Notwithstanding that, the folk memory from Old Testament times of this valley as a place where evil and fire combined no doubt persisted into Jesus's times. Exactly what Matthew meant when he used its name needs to be clarified: Gehenna is not the same as Sheol, and so does not refer to those parts of Sheol which the book of Enoch identified as reserved for sinners. We can infer this from the fact that, when the Old Testament was translated into Greek in the third century BC by Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, they routinely used the word Hades for Sheol, and not Gehenna. And Matthew himself makes separate mention of the name Hades in 11.23 and 16.18, which makes clear that in his own mind he saw the two as different things.

To Matthew, then, Gehenna is a name given to the place of eternal punishment that is described in chapter 25, into which the "goats" are condemned following the final judgement – one that links the horror of this outcome with the Jewish memory of the valley of Hinnom and the terrible things that happened there in Old Testament times. Elsewhere in the Gospel this outcome is described in slightly different terms, but with the same emphasis on fire, pain and torment, such as in the parable of the weeds:

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear." Matt 13.40-43

Or in respect of the faith of the Roman centurion:

"Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Matt 8.11-12. See also the ends of the parable of the wedding banquet in 22.13 and the parable of the talents in 25.30 for a similar fate being meted out to those who do not fulfil their responsibilities properly.

It is noticeable in these passages from Matthew's Gospel that the reasons why the dead are found wanting at the final judgement, and subsequently cast into the eternal fire of Gehenna, are twofold. First, there are the misdeeds that they committed during their lifetime. We have already quoted passages that highlight murder, adultery, slander and any number of missteps from foot, hand and eye as reasons for condemnation, to which we can add blasphemy in chapter 12.36-37: *"men will have to give account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*

In Matthew 13.41, which we have just considered, these are summarised as σκάνδαλα, which literally means traps that men fall into; and ἀνομία, which has the sense of lawlessness, committing unlawful acts or living outside the law.

But second, there is an implication that a lack of faith has the same result. This is certainly the thrust of the parables of the ten virgins and of the talents, whose theme is that the faithful should remain so until the end times, or else suffer the consequences; while the story of the Roman centurion in chapter 8 contrasts his faith and the reward he will receive with those of the Jews who do not recognise Jesus for who he truly is.

In considering this, we are drawn back full circle to John 5.25-30, which talks of a time which *“is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live ... a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”* Here John too offers the suggestion that there are two criteria to fulfil in the final judgement: first, do you have faith in Jesus? If so, then you will rise immediately to eternal life, according to John 5.24. Second, have you done good things or bad things – in Greek, τὰ ἀγαθὰ or τὰ φαῦλα, the latter word carrying a sense of things which are either paltry or insufficient, or careless and thoughtless. If good, then proceed to eternal life; if bad, then go the other way.

In this, John seems to make explicit a point that Matthew does not make. It’s a point that we contemplated earlier in this talk, and it is this: that faith in Jesus is the prior, paramount consideration. Those who hear and recognise Jesus’s voice at the time of the resurrection will live, they will avoid the judgement, they already have eternal life. In Matthew’s Gospel, it is not clear whether those who have faith receive this free pass or not; in Matthew’s most explicit passage, in chapter 25, it is solely the deeds of the resurrected dead that are considered, and not what they believe.

In John chapter 5, however, it is clear that faith is an initial determinant, and that the faithful proceed directly to eternal life while the remainder are judged for their deeds. This creates the possibility that there are, in effect, two waves of progression at the time of the resurrection: first, the faithful dead awake and are flagged straight through to Eden; and then there’s a second wave of arrivals, as it were, after the remainder of the dead are judged, and the doers of good receive their rightful recognition.

All of which brings us back to Jesus on the cross and the promise he made to the criminal hanging next to him, which we considered at the start of this talk. What we have subsequently explored can, I think, support the following conclusion. The criminal was never going to access eternal life on the basis of his own good deeds: he is after all a criminal, which is why he was on the cross in the first place. What will get him into paradise is his faith that Jesus is who he says he is – and this comes before, this trumps any considerations of whether he is a sinner or not.

One final passage to consider quickly before we sum all this up. In Luke chapter 20.34ff, Jesus says this:

“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶ and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. ³⁷ But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ ^{1b} ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”³⁹ Some of the teachers of the law responded, “Well said, teacher!” ⁴⁰ And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

What this shows, and we'll examine this in more detail next week, is that at Jesus's time people were already thinking about what eternal life would be like after the resurrection and final judgement have taken place – what kind of bodies they would have, whether they'd have the same relationships as they do now, how they would function. Nothing further to say on that now, but hopefully that's a little teaser that will encourage you to come back for our third talk next week ...

So: at the beginning of tonight's talk we set ourselves the task of creating a definitive version of what Jesus is quoted as saying in the Gospels with regard to death and the afterlife. I think that the passages that we have considered show us seven things:

1. Jesus's words can be taken to confirm the eschatological narrative which we looked at last week, the one which is first set out in Daniel chapter 12. This says that there will be a moment at the end of time when the Son of Man returns to earth, there is a final time of conflict and tribulation, the dead will rise, a final judgement will take place, and there will be a separation between those who are bound for eternal life in a new creation, and those who are bound for eternal punishment
2. Both Luke and John's Gospels give us sound reason to believe that, at the time of the resurrection, the faithful dead will pass straight into eternal life, without the need to go through the judgement that awaits the remainder – and that they are predestined to do so from the moment that they decide to trust that Jesus is who he says he is
3. Eternal life in this regard will be the reoccupation of the Garden of Eden, the paradise that Jesus speaks of in his last moments on the cross – a symbol of the new heaven and the new earth which is foretold in Isaiah 65.17 and 66.22
4. As for the remainder, the final judgement will sift out those who have committed good deeds, τὰ ἀγαθὰ, during their lifetimes, from those whose lives are marked by the commission of τὰ φαῦλα, σκάνδαλα, ἀνομία - careless, thoughtless deeds, insufficient good, failure to keep the law, falling into the traps that are set for them
5. Those who have done good will join the faithful in eternal life in Eden, where Luke 20.34ff implies that the form and function of our existence will be very different – again recalling the prophecies in Isaiah 65, where illness, death, want and war are alien concepts
6. Those who have not done good, however, will go into Gehenna, a place of fire and darkness and eternal punishment, where the only sound will be a wailing and gnashing of teeth
7. Finally, while it is tempting to see the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke's Gospel as a framework for Jesus's view of what happens between death and resurrection, it is probably more illustrative of the contemporary beliefs of his audience than of Jesus's own cosmology. These beliefs would appear to include that, prior to this resurrection, the faithful dead will exist in Sheol in a state of comfort which is nicknamed "Abraham's bosom", while there is an alternative and altogether more uncomfortable waiting room for the unfaithful and/or sinful dead.

Next time we'll look at how some of these ideas are taken and developed, primarily through the early church fathers, but also through later emerging doctrines. In the meantime, and in case what we've looked at tonight gives you cause for any concern, I want to leave you with these reassuring words of Jesus from John 14, words that he intends to be a comfort to his disciples – and, I think, also to us:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." John 14.1-4 [ENDS]