CoreGroup Guide | Afterlife - Part 1
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From Pastor Charity

Today we begin a new sermon series called *Afterlife: What Comes Next.* Over the next few weeks we'll talk about topics that we don't usually talk about out loud. This is a great opportunity to keep showing up for your CoreGroup! During this series we'll also be highlighting the Shared Practice of **Prayer**. Click on this link to review the "Start, Grow, Stretch" opportunities listed under Prayer. Assess where you are right now, choose a next step, and share it with your group.

Welcome

The afterlife. What is it really like? People have been fascinated by this question for centuries. You may have encountered creative depictions of the afterlife in classical texts like Dante Alighieri's "Paradiso" or in TV shows like *Lost* and *The Good Place*. Reading Genesis 2, you might have contemplated what the garden of Eden really looked like, or a street of gold from Revelation 21. Jesus even references paradise from the cross, but without much description about what actually happens when you die. As we celebrate All Saints Day on November 1, we consider together what we can learn about paradise from the Bible.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, in the Bible you repeatedly confirm the promise of an afterlife with you in heaven. As humans we are bound to this beautiful earth that we know and it's challenging to envision what heaven will be like. What will it be like to see you face to face? Use our time together to help discuss these important questions in this supportive space. Amen.

Ice Breaker

What superpower would you like to have and why?

The Head

The gospel of Luke shares a story of two thieves next to Jesus at his crucifixion. Our scripture today shares the assurance that Jesus gives one of the criminals about joining him in paradise.

> **Luke 23:39-43**
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> *39 One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? 41 We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*
> *43 Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."*

- According to this scripture, when does life with Jesus (or paradise) begin? Why did that matter to the original readers of this story; and why does it matter to us today?
- What's the difference between life with Jesus in the here and now, while living, and life with Jesus in paradise, after we die?
- Focus on the words "I assure you." What is the significance of this promise?

There are some other places in scripture that tell us something about this idea of paradise – Genesis 2, Psalm 88:3, Philippians 1:21-22, Revelation 20:4-5, and Revelation 22:1-5 to name a few. As time allows, pull up some of these additional scriptures and read through them together as a group.

- What do you notice in these verses that resonate with your own personal beliefs about what happens after we die?
- How do these verses relate to what Jesus tells the criminal in the gospel of Luke?
- In what ways could paradise be described as a place of rest after we die?

The Heart

When does a house become a home? You may envision living in a particular structure, but it's challenging to develop a real sense of a place without spending time inhabiting that space. As we read these descriptions of paradise with God, we can trust in Jesus' promise: "My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2)

- How does your heart envision this new home with God? What does this home feel like?
- What concerns, anxieties, questions, or troubles do you have about paradise?
- How does our hope for the future shape the hope we have in the present?
- How has your understanding of the afterlife been impacted by a loved one passing away?

The Hands

Talking about the afterlife feels counter-cultural in America today. Fire and brimstone sermons aside, few people are eager to enter into a conversation about their eternal future with God. This can be true even in the presence of a dying family member or a dear friend who has deep faith. Oftentimes as people near the end of their lives, we rely on the comfort of others and the words of reassurance that God provides through scripture.

That said, we need not wait until someone dies to contemplate what the afterlife means to us. This is a safe place to share your perspectives, concerns, and questions. There is no "right" or "wrong" because the truth is, none of us knows for sure what this looks like. But it still matters.

- What was new to you in this week's sermon or from our CoreGroup discussion?
- What aspect of the afterlife do you want to learn more about?
- How does what we believe about life after death impact how we live before death?
- How might you talk about what happens after we die with someone this month?
- What action besides a conversation might you take to connect with another person about the topic of paradise?

Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord our God,
for in you and your love,
we share with the saints in glory.

For all the saints who have gone before us
and revealed your love,
for those in weakness who have revealed your power,
for those who challenge us by their deeds,
we give you thanks and praise.

(David Adam, 1000 Prayers for Public Worship)

Going Deeper

One way to go deeper with this series on the afterlife is to attend our monthly prayer service, Prayers of the People. The next opportunity to join will be Tuesday, November 10, from 7-8pm, at The Gathering's Clayton site.

Additional Resources

UMC Communion of Saints: All Saints Day explained
Heaven by Randy Alcorn
Surprised by Hope by N.T. Wright