

Welcome to the Radically Christian Bible Study Podcast. I'm Travis Pauley, and here we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus. Each week I visit with Wes McAdams, minister and author, and together we explore biblical passages and topics. I hope you enjoy this study.

TRAVIS: All right, Wes. We're back.

WES: Fantastic. It's good to be back.

TRAVIS: It's good to be back.

WES: We really haven't had a break. Hopefully, when people hear this, there's no break, but we have taken a break from recording because we recorded the last, like, eight episodes in two sessions.

TRAVIS: That's right. It was a marathon.

WES: Yeah, we did. We did a podcast marathon, so, hopefully, we can knock a couple out today and -- yeah, so that's a little bit of a peek behind the scenes of the Bible study podcast.

TRAVIS: Yeah. We've got two questions for this episode, Wes.

WES: Okay. Try to squeeze two questions into one episode. I like it.

TRAVIS: That's right. The first one says, "Hey, Brother Wes, I really do enjoy listening to your weekly podcast. Can you please explain to me and your listeners why do people say that when they have a loved one or a friend pass away, they're in heaven with God? Can you please give me a biblical reference? God speed, Brother, Reggie."

WES: Reggie. Our good friend, Reggie, who is a member here at McDermott and has been a guest on the podcast.

TRAVIS: That's right.

WES: Before your time, I think?

TRAVIS: Yes, that was CrossTalk.

WES: Yeah, back when it was CrossTalk. Yes, absolutely. So Reggie is a good guy, a good friend. In fact, I got to visit with him a little bit about his question last night. But I think it's a good one. Where do we go when we die? That's a great question. Do we go straight to heaven? So a lot of our thinking -- and Reggie and I talked about this a little bit last night and it's something that I hadn't really thought about a lot until recently. I was listening to a podcast that I listen to quite a bit, which is the *Ask NT Wright Podcast*-- or *Ask NT Wright Anything*. Maybe it's "Anything." I'm not sure. I don't remember. I need to look that up. I'll look that up.

TRAVIS: That could get out of control.

WES: Yeah, that's true. That would be -- that could be anything. So -- but he mentioned something on that podcast that I had never thought of before, that a lot of our thinking is a reaction -- a lot of our thinking in Protestantism is a reaction to -- a response to Catholicism, because Catholicism taught for the longest time, and still continues to teach, that when a person dies they go to purgatory. No matter how faithful a person is, no matter how saved a person is, they teach that a person goes to purgatory and that, in purgatory, they spend a certain amount of time there being penalized for their sin and so they have to suffer a certain amount of time -- or live a certain amount of time in purgatory before they get out. A lot of the indulgences that were purchased, a lot of the

donations to the church in the Middle Ages was around the idea of purgatory, that if you donated money to the Catholic Church, then you would reduce the amount of time that your loved ones spent in purgatory. So you could donate a coin and get somebody out of purgatory, so to speak.

That really bothered people like Martin Luther, who said that has no basis in scripture and there is no teaching about purgatory in scripture or the indulgences themselves. And so he really pushed back against that idea, and a lot of the Protestant reformers pushed back against that idea, and they argued that a person doesn't go to purgatory; they go straight to heaven. Well, so our -- and when I say "our," I'm speaking very broadly. The Protestant idea became very much focused on going straight to heaven.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: Which -- okay. You know, I disagree with the purgatory concept. I don't think -- I agree with the reformers in that that had no basis in scripture, but I disagree that the main point of the New Testament is, quote-unquote, going straight to heaven.

Now, we need to break that down and talk about it because that's what Reggie's main question is, is should we say about a loved one that they went straight to heaven? Well, I mean, first, we could talk about, well, are they a Christian or are they not a Christian? Salvation has something to do with that discussion. But also, what do we mean by "heaven"? Like that's a good question. Like what do we mean by "heaven"? And this is something I've tried to preach about a lot lately

and something I've tried to focus on, that heaven is really very much a plural idea, the heavens. And we can mean a lot of things by "the heavens." You know, first of all, we could talk about the heavens in the sky where the birds are, or even the heavens where the sun and the moon and the stars are, so there's heavens. But then the biblical idea is that even beyond the things that are seen, there is a heavens where God is, the heavenly realm. And I don't think that it's helpful or accurate to simply think about that as a place that's even further up than the sun and the moon and the stars because that would mean that God, who lives in the heavenly places, is that far distant from us, that God is even further than that.

The way -- and it's really a metaphor -- and I think that's the best way to think about it, is that it's a metaphor, that it's almost as if -- if we were living here on this planet and above us is this veil, or curtain, that is the sky, and everything that's in the sky and then beyond that -- and just saying "beyond," meaning somewhere that we cannot see that is hidden from our sight, there is a realm in which God lives, and all of the spiritual entities -- and that's a multitude. It's a host. In fact, the way that the Old Testament spoke about God a lot was the "Lord of Hosts," and we don't stop and think, what does that mean? The New Living Translation translates that as "the God of Angel armies," and I love that. One of our songs even uses that phrase, "the God of angel armies. "

And so there are a multitude of personalities, entities, spiritual beings that live in the heavenly places. There's even battles that go on in the heavenly places, so it's not just the forces of good, but also the forces

of evil that dwell in the heavenly realms, and what that means is simply in the unseen places. It's not like you can get in a spaceship and go really, really high up and you'll find the heavenly places. It's simply saying that the unseen place -- in fact, you might even say that that's here, like that's -- because they're interacting. The spiritual forces are interacting and we are interacting with the spiritual forces, whether we recognize it or not. It's just that those things are unseen; there's a veil in between them and us. And everything that is in heaven, the city of God, that -- if you want to get real specific about where is God, well, he's in his city. He's in the city of God, which is in the heavenly places. The city of God is in the unseen realm. At some point, that veil that separates earth, where we are and what we can see -- that veil, or curtain, will be torn away, dissolved, and then we will see the unseen realm. And the city of God -- the way John describes it in Revelation is that the city of God will come down from heaven out of the unseen realm into the seen realm.

And so God is in his city, a city that we cannot see, and all of that is hidden from our sight because it's beyond the veil. It's in the hidden realm, in the heavenly places. Okay. So when we say "heaven," hopefully what we mean is simply the place that we cannot see, the spiritual realm that we cannot yet see, and hopefully we recognize that there are a lot of things happening there and we are not privy -- we don't have the understanding or we can't see those things, and we're not given that information. Now, when we talk --

Does that all make sense, by the way? Let me just stop there.

TRAVIS: Totally.

WES: Okay. That makes sense. Good. And I think that's a little bit different than what most people say when they say "heaven" because I think when most people say "heaven," they're just specifically thinking of the city of God and they're not thinking of, you know, a place that's unseen where there's forces of darkness and forces of light happening in the unseen realm. Okay. So that's heaven.

And then the question of, well, where do we go when we die? And first I have to say that there's just not a lot of emphasis on that in scripture, not nearly as much as we put on it.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: The biblical emphasis -- and we've talked about this ad nauseam so I will not go into it too very much, but the biblical emphasis is on resurrection. The biblical emphasis is on what happens when the Son of Man appears, or the son of God appears, for the second time, his second coming, and the dead in Christ are raised. That's where the biblical hope and the biblical emphasis is put. However, there are a few passages that mention our spirit, that is our nonphysical -- the force that drives our physical being, our breath that God gave to us, and when we die it leaves our bodies. And that's a very observational thing, too. I mean, if you've seen somebody die or you've been around somebody who's dying, the very last thing that happens is they breathe their last breath. You know, they -- people have observed that for thousands of years and that's very much an observational way of saying their spirit has left. And where does their spirit go? Well, you know, like Ecclesiastes says, the spirit returns to the Lord. The spirit returns to the Lord.

And Paul says -- in Philippians he's talking about -- let me see if I can pull it open real quick. Paul is talking about his life in prison and suffering, and he talks about life and death. This is in Philippians 1:21. He says, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I'm to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which shall I choose" -- between living in the flesh or dying -- "I cannot tell. I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."

So Paul says when you die, you depart to be with Christ -- or that was his expectation, was to depart and be with Christ. So we could say, I think with pretty -- with quite a bit of confidence, that when a person who belongs to the Lord dies, his spirit returns to the Lord. His spirit departs to be with Christ. What does that mean? Like what is that like? And, you know, well, where is Christ? Well, I think Christ is reigning at the right hand of the Father in the city of God that is in the heavenly realms, that is in the unseen places.

So does our spirit -- if I were to die right now, I believe my spirit would depart from my body and would go to the unseen realm to be with the Lord, to be protected by the Lord and, you know, cherished by the Lord. But what does that feel like or what is that like? Well, I will argue that we just don't know. And I think that we -- you know, we get some comfort from speculation to say, you know, they're rejoicing with Jesus or they're having a big party up there in heaven, and I just -- you know, I mean, I'm not going to criticize somebody for that, necessarily,

because we all -- we look for things to comfort us when we're grieving. But at the same time, I don't know that there's a whole lot of basis for that in scripture, for thinking that we know what that's like. It's kind of a mystery what that's like.

We do have one passage that we've tended -- and when I say "we," I specifically mean people that I've been around, you know, in my life have tended to build their life-after-death theology around, and that's the story of the rich man and Lazarus, and that comes from Luke chapter 16. And this story -- and I'm intentionally calling it a "story" because it's a story, whether it's a historical story or a parable. Now, just laying my cards on the table, I tend to think that it's a parable. Some people argue against it being a parable because they say, well, Lazarus has a name. In none of the other parables does anyone have a name. Well, okay, I get that. I understand. It's unique in that, but it would also be unique if it was a historical story. Like Jesus never told -- like, hey, here's what's happening in the unseen realm right now and here's what you can't see, so let me tell you this very specific story about heaven. I mean, Jesus didn't really tell -- so if it's a parable, it's unique in that someone in the parable -- not everyone, because the rich man doesn't have a name, but if it's a parable, it's unique because Lazarus has a name. But if it's not a parable, it's even more unique. Like this is a weird story that is unlike anything Jesus ever told. Jesus always taught in parables. That was one of his apostles' biggest complaints about him was that he always taught in parables. So if he's using like a real account of something that really happened that nobody else knew about and it's

-- I mean, then this is just a totally unique anomaly story that -- unlike anything Jesus said in any other gospel account. So maybe, but I just think that's incredibly unlikely.

One of the biggest problems facing Christians today is online pornography. One study says that 68 percent of churchgoing men and over 50 percent of ministers view porn on a regular basis. Of young Christian adults between the ages of 18 and 24, 76 percent actively search for porn. That's why I want to recommend Covenant Eyes. Their online accountability program helps those who are struggling with pornography and it also helps address the issue before it become a problem. So visit radicallychristian.com/covenanteyes to find out more. Okay. Now back to the Bible study.

TRAVIS: Well, and I think another point that I've thought of with the story of the rich man -- or the parable of the rich man and Lazarus -- not the "story" --

WES: You can call it whatever you want. I won't criticize.

TRAVIS: -- is that, seemingly, Jesus' whole point by telling that parable is talking about the supernatural and how the -- you know, seeing the supernatural, seeing the signs and the wonders, and the point he makes at the end -- or the point that Abraham makes in the parable to the rich man, you know, you coming back to life and getting -- or Lazarus coming back to life and telling your brothers, if they don't believe the law and the prophets, they're not going to believe a dead man.

WES: Yes, exactly.

TRAVIS: So it's like if the supernatural -- it's not going to -- it's not going to change your mind. It's not going to make you feel completely safe and secure. It's just something that's supposed to point you to God. At the end of the day, once that supernatural thing is over, you still have the same challenges that everybody has. You still have faith required of you.

WES: Yeah, and I think that that really hones in on what we have to talk about when we talk about this story, because -- if anybody's not familiar with the story, again, it comes from Luke 16, and it's a story about a man who is desperately poor -- like desperately poor. It says that he desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Like, I mean, he is desperately poor; he has nothing. He would take crumbs from the rich man's table, and yet he had nothing.

And then, by contrast, there is a rich man who is clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. Like, I mean, he just has everything. Like he gorges himself on food, and then, by contrast, there's this guy who lives at his gate who has nothing. And you're supposed to read that and be disgusted. You're supposed to read that and say what a horrible, horrible person this rich man is to allow someone to lie at his gate with nothing while he has all of these things. And then, of course, they both die and one of them is taken -- Lazarus is taken to be comforted in Abraham's bosom.

Now, even that -- even that, you have to stop and think, well, that has to be figurative, right? I mean, like that's a very poetic way of saying that Father Abraham is bringing home his, you know, suffering children to comfort them in the afterlife. That -- I mean, not literally every

human being is going to come to the bosom of -- like literally, like, hang out with -- right at Abraham's chest and be comforted for, you know, however many thousands of years. That -- I mean, surely we look at that and say, well, that has to be figurative, at least to some degree. It's a poetic way of saying that, you know, Abraham's people are being -- their spirits are being protected and loved and cherished in the afterlife. Even if during their life they suffered and they had a horrible life and existence, they are comforted in the heavenly realms, in "paradise," is what Jesus calls it.

So he says that Lazarus is taken to a place of paradise, a place of comfort, and then the rich man is taken to a place of torment in Hades, and "Hades" is the biblical way of talking about the place of the dead, the realm of the dead. The Hebrew word was Sheol. And, really, the idea, especially in the Old Testament in the Hebrew scriptures, "Sheol" just means the grave, I mean, the place where the dead spirits are. It's not -- it's neither good nor bad; it's just where the dead are gathered. And then, in this case, Hades is specifically applied to the place where the rich man is, and he's suffering. I mean, he's suffering so badly he wants even a drop of water to be put on his tongue. And the idea is now he is desperately poor, so desperately poor that he doesn't even have water and he wants even a drop of what now Lazarus has, and so it's all about the situations have been reversed. I mean, that's the entire point. The situations have been reversed. Because he was greedy and wouldn't share during his life, now his situation is reversed and there's no way to change it; it is fixed. That's the way that it is.

And to your point earlier, now his concern is, well, what about my brothers? They don't know. They don't know that this is the way that things are going to be. They don't know that they need to take care of the poor at their gates because they're just like me. They're rich, they've got purple clothes, they eat lots of food, and they've got poor guys at their gate and they're not taking care of them. And Abraham says to the rich man, they have the law and the prophets. They know. And so Jesus' entire point in this story is that, you rich people, do it now. Not because you see miracles, and you're not -- and they're not; they're not going to believe just because somebody raises from the dead -- and Jesus will. They have to believe because Moses and the prophets teach them this is the way to live your life.

TRAVIS: And you're not going to believe because you get, you know, a glimpse of the heavenly realms.

WES: Absolutely, yeah. Absolutely. And so to take this story and to make it all about where do we go when we die, well, that's just not what Jesus was talking about. Jesus was talking about how do we live? Now, you could argue, well, Jesus wouldn't have told this story if it was, you know, not accurate to reality. Well, I mean, sometimes the stories that he told were not exactly accurate to reality. I mean, Jesus exaggerated things for the sake of parables all the time. I mean, for instance -- people are, I'm sure, shouting at their podcast player saying, no, he never did that.

Well, okay, think about it. I mean, the woman who loses a coin -- I mean, when you find a coin, yes, you're excited, but you don't really

throw a party. Like that's not really what you do. You don't really throw a party. And Jesus would talk about, you know, tiny little mustard seeds that grow into these huge trees where all the birds of the air come and nest in its branches. Well, I mean, it's a point about the kingdom; it's not literally a point about horticulture. You know what I mean? Jesus isn't teaching an ag class. He's sharing truth about the kingdom and drawing a picture, and here he's making a point about how you treat the poor. If you expand this to make this a point about the afterlife, you really run the risk -- and, again, I'm not saying that it doesn't have bearing on that conversation, but what I am saying is if you expand it to where no longer the emphasis is on how you treat the poor and it's about where you go when you die, well, then you've really -- you're really running the risk of missing the point that Jesus is making.

So yes, Jesus does give us the picture -- and I think this is -- I think it's safe to say that when the righteous die, it will be good for them. Their spirits will be in a place of good protection and love and comfort. It's interesting. Like nothing -- Lazarus doesn't say anything. Like nothing is -- Lazarus doesn't say anything in the entire story. The rich man does and Abraham does, but Lazarus doesn't. We just know that he's being comforted and we know that the rich man is in torment, so take care of things now.

That's -- but, again, most of the Bible, both in the Old and in the New Testament -- most of the Bible speak of death as "asleep." Now, some would argue, well, that's just your body appears to be asleep. Your eyes are closed and you're not moving and so it just appears to be

asleep. Okay. Yeah, maybe. And so, you know, Ecclesiastes talks about our spirits return to the Lord. Also talks about people don't know anything. You know, once you're dead, you don't -- you're not doing anything. But, again, people would rightly argue that Ecclesiastes is hard to base anything on that because it's observational. It's saying look at life here under the sun, and it seems like a waste and what's the whole point, and you can see the big picture, God, but we can't see the big picture.

So there's just little glimpses, as you look throughout scripture, but I think it's safe to say that the spirits of the dead go to the heavenly places, go to the -- and when I say that, I mean the unseen places. Whether that's the wicked, and maybe it's their worst nightmare, or maybe they're asleep and it's literally a nightmare, or maybe they're asleep and they don't really know anything until the resurrection, or maybe the righteous are having the best dream they've ever had, or maybe they're conscious and their spirit is with the Lord and they're fully awake and conscious.

I'm okay -- I think that there are, you know, cases that can be made for all of those things, but -- but -- the big but in all of this conversation is that's not the hope of Christians. Our hope is not that our spirit goes away to a nice place when we die and there we're going to live forever. That's not our hope. And it really does bother me when I hear people say at funerals and I hear people talking about, well, now it's all over for them and now they've finally reached their reward. And, you know, I've even heard people say, "Now they've got their new body."

And I want to say, whoa, no, they don't have their new body. They don't have a body at all. What Paul would call it in II Corinthians -- in II Corinthians Paul says that when you die, your spirit is unclothed. You're a naked spirit. And he says that's not our hope. Our hope is not to be an unclothed spirit; it's to be further clothed. Our hope is for the resurrection. Our hope is for our body -- like this body that has died and perished, for it to be reconstructed and for it to be put back together, for it to be -- to come back to life and be transformed so that it's different than it is now. It's imperishable and immortal, and so it's changed and transformed and it becomes something brand-new and for our spirit and our body to be reunited and to be redeemed. That's our hope. Our hope isn't to float off to the city of God and live as a naked spirit forever. Our hope is to be resurrected.

TRAVIS: Well, and that is like a perfect segue into our second question.

WES: Imagine that. It's almost like I knew --

TRAVIS: It's like you knew what the question was. But we have another question. This is from Carol. She says, "Is cremation wrong? My husband and I have discussed this so many times and I have not found anything in the Bible to support it."

WES: That's a terrific question and I'm going to try to keep this pretty brief because I know we're running out of time, but I don't think cremation is wrong. I think that the attitude that sometimes accompanies cremation is not -- does not reflect a biblical worldview. Let me say that one more time. I don't think cremation is wrong. I do think that the attitude that sometimes accompanies cremation does not

reflect a biblical worldview.

So let me break that down for just a second. Jesus is going to resurrect our bodies, whatever shape our bodies are in. If I die at sea and my body is -- we won't even get into that -- or I die and I'm buried and my body turns to dust, as it will -- all bodies turn to dust -- then my body is particles, right? I mean, that's just the case and God will put me back together. And so all cremation does, in a practical sense, is just speed up that process. And so there's nothing that prevents God from resurrecting the body of people that are cremated any more than it does the body of people that are buried.

So there is no -- there is no reason to think that someone can't be resurrected once they've been cremated. But I will say that if our attitude is, well, I'm done with that body anyway. My goal is just to float away as a spirit and I'm done with that body anyway, that doesn't reflect a biblical worldview. The biblical worldview says, no, this body is important. It's very -- it reflects Platonism, from Plato in Greek philosophy, and even Gnosticism, that says the physical world is bad and we want to be disconnected from the physical world and go off to a spiritual realm.

TRAVIS: Which has gotten people in a lot of trouble over the years.

WES: Absolutely. For sure. I mean, it not only is reflected in the way we treat our own self, but the way we treat other people. And we say -- well, we'll go to a third-world country and we'll just preach to them about Jesus, but we won't do anything to meet their physical needs because those things aren't really important; what's really important are

their spiritual needs. Wrong. That's not biblical worldview. Biblical worldview says both are important. It's both important to love them enough to tell them about Jesus and it's important to take care of their physical needs. How can you tell somebody, "Be warmed and well fed," and do nothing to meet their physical needs? That's what the story of the rich man and Lazarus is about.

And so it's to say that the created world is important and that God is redeeming and making all things new and he will redeem my mortal body. And so if I'm buried with the hope of resurrection, great. If I'm cremated with the hope of resurrection, great. But if I do either of those with the attitude of "my body doesn't matter and I'm done with that," that does not reflect a biblical worldview. And so I think that we have to recognize the fact that that's why Christians, and Jews for that matter, have insisted on burial and not cremation for thousands of years, because of their hope in the resurrection, and why cremation was a pagan thing because the pagans didn't believe in resurrection.

Again, if a Christian wants to be cremated, that's one thing if they maintain a biblical worldview. That's -- I don't have a problem with that and I would never in a million years want to criticize that decision that someone has made or is going to make. But I will criticize a worldview that says the human body is not important because the human body is important, both in life and in death.

I really hope you enjoyed this Bible study and I hope you'll subscribe to hear future episodes of the podcast. A big thank you to Travis Pauley, as well as

our McDermott Road church family for helping to make this podcast possible, and a special thanks to all of you for listening. We love you, God loves you, and we hope you have a wonderful day.