

1: What Happens When You Die?

At Home with the Lord

July 18, 1993

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight – we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Today I want to begin a four-week series entitled, "What Happens When You Die?" By "you" I mean believers in Jesus Christ. If you are not a believer, the aim of these messages is to wake you up from the slumber of indifference to the question of death and eternity and to motivate you to consider Jesus Christ as the only way to eternal life and the only escape from hell and eternal death. "*I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me*" (John 14:6). There is no other way to God.

In this sermon I will try to answer from Scripture the question, "What happens immediately at the moment of death?" In the following four weeks the questions will be:

What happens to you at the coming of Christ?

What happens to believers at the Judgment?

What is our final place: a distant heaven, or the new earth where lions and lambs lie down in peace?

What is the most essential bridge that links this life and the next?

There is a long list of reasons why this theme seems crucial to me for our consideration. Let me mention a few of them:

1. The possibilities for joy and misery after you die are trillions of times greater than in the few years on this earth before you die. The Bible compares this life to a vapor that appears as you breathe on a cold winter morning and then vanishes (James 4:14). The Bible describes the time after death as "ages of ages." Not just one or two ages of thousands of years, but ages of ages; thousands and thousands of ages (Rev. 14:11). It matters infinitely what happens to you after you die.

2. This theme forces the question as to whether our faith is real, substantial, biblical, faith in objective, external reality outside ourselves. Namely, is our faith in God or is it a mere subjective experience of feelings and thoughts inside ourselves that function as an emotional cushion to soften the bumps of life and give us a network of friends. Facing eternity has an amazing effect of sobering us out of religious delusions.

3. Thinking about death and eternity helps keep God as the center of our lives by testing whether we are more in love with this world than we are in love with God himself. Does the thought of dying give us more pain at losing what we love on earth than it gives us joy at gaining Christ?

4. When the Biblical truth of this theme grips you it frees you from fear and gives courage to live the most radical, self-sacrificing life of love. The person who can truly say, "To die is gain," will be able to say like no one else, "To live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). But if you can't say, "To die is gain," then you will probably say, in one degree or another, "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). Being sure of what happens when you die is indispensable as a believer in Christ for your daily courage and for not losing heart through the pain and the diminishing health of this life.

That brings us to our text.

What Paul is doing in 2 Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10 is showing the Corinthians why he does not lose heart in spite of all the troubles and afflictions (4:8-12). Especially in view of the fact that he knows he is dying; his body is wearing away. Look at 4:16 – "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day."

It is utterly crucial that we not lose heart. Some of you have taken such a pounding physically and financially and relationally that you have often been tempted to "loose heart"; to give up. To say, "It isn't worth it." "Que sera, sera". "Who cares?" Paul faced the same temptation (vv 8-12) and this text holds one of the keys to why he did not lose heart.

To show that this really is crucial to his point here look at verses 6 and 8 of chapter five which is part of the same train of thought. Verse 6: *"Therefore, being always of good courage . . ."* Verse 8: *"We are of good courage, I say."* We'll come back to these verses in moment, but the point now is simply to show you that what Paul is doing here is giving the basis of being of good courage and not losing heart. That is the effect I would like it to have on you.

Now let's go back to 4:16 and follow his line of thought to see what is threatening to make Paul lose heart and lose courage, and what is keeping him from losing heart.

Verse 16: *"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying . . ."* Here is the threat he is dealing with: His body – "the outer man" – is decaying; it is wearing out. He can't see the way he used to (and there were probably no glasses). He can't hear the way he used to. He does not recover from beatings the way he used to. His strength walking from town to town does not hold up the way it used to. He sees the wrinkles in his face and neck. His memory is not as good. His joints get stiff when he sits still. In other words, he knows that he, like everybody else, is dying. His outer man is decaying. That's the threat to his courage and joy.

Now why doesn't he lose heart?

The first part of the answer is again in verse 16: *"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day."* He doesn't lose heart because day by day his heart, his inner man, is being renewed. If his decaying body tends to make him lose heart, something else tends to make him gain heart. What is it?

His renewed heart comes from something very strange: it comes from looking at what he can't see. Verse 18: *"We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."* This is Paul's way of not losing heart: looking at what you can't see. Recall how Jesus criticized the religious leaders in his day: *"Seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear"* (Matt. 13:13). In other words there was something to "see" in Jesus' life and teaching which they didn't see but should have seen. That has got to be reversed if we are to get our hope and our courage from Jesus and not lose heart. It has to be said of us, "Not seeing, they see; and not hearing, they hear. That's what Paul was doing in verse 18; he was looking at things that are not seen."

Paul illustrates this in chapter 5, verse 7: *"We walk by faith, not by sight."* This doesn't mean that we leap into the dark without evidence of what's there. But it does mean that the most precious and important realities in the world are beyond our senses now, and we "look" at them (v. 18) through what we know of Christ from faithful witnesses who have seen him and heard his voice. We strengthen our hearts – we renew our courage – by fixing the gaze of our hearts on invisible, objective truth that we learn about through the testimony of those who knew Christ and were taught by him (cf. Eph 1:18-23).

What truth? What do we fix our gaze on to experience day by day the renewal of the inner man in the face of death?

To answer this we look back to verse 17 for a powerful summary statement, and we look forward into chapter 5 for the unpacking of this summary statement.

Verse 17: We renew our inner man each day by looking at this truth: *"Momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."*

The decaying of your body is not meaningless. The pain, pressure, frustration and affliction are not happening in vain. They are not vanishing into a black hole of pointless suffering. Instead this "momentary, light affliction (he calls it that even though it lasted for years and was unremitting and often excruciating) is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

In other words, the unseen things that Paul looks at to renew his inner man is the immense weight of glory that is being prepared for him not just after, but through and by, the wasting away of his body. There is a correlation between the decay of the Paul's body and the display of Paul's glory. When he is hurting he fixes his eyes not on how heavy the hurt is, but on how heavy the glory will be because of the hurt.

Now what does he see when he looks to the unseen glory? As he goes on in chapter five he fills in some what he sees as he looks at the unseen.

Now the next two messages concern these verses: the resurrection body and the judgment of believers. But neither of these is the focus of this message. So if I pass over something too quickly, read the next sermon.

Verses 1-5 are about the hope of receiving new, glorious bodies at the resurrection. Verses 9-10 are about

the judgment and Paul's effort to please Christ the Judge. Our focus is on verses 6-8, the hope of being with Christ immediately when you die.

But let me read you the verses about the resurrection body because there is a crucial connection between this hope and the hope of being with Christ (without a new body) immediately when you die. Verses 1-5: *For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down [he's talking about his body which is decaying], we have a building from God [a building as opposed to a tent for a house – that is, something more durable and lasting, namely, a new resurrection body], a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house [this "tent-house," our present body] we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven [that is, our resurrection body; he mixes metaphors here shifting back and forth now between being clothed and being housed]; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked [in other words, he does not prefer to put off his present body like a garment and become a disembodied soul– that's what nakedness means]. For indeed while we are in this tent [this mortal body], we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed [we don't want to be a bodiless soul], but to be clothed [on top of our present clothes – he wants the second coming of Christ to happen so that he will not have to die and be without a body, but rather have his present body swallowed up in the glorious resurrection life of the new body], in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.*

We'll talk more about this in the next message. For now, here's the crucial point: If Paul had his preference he would choose to receive his new resurrection body at the second coming of Christ without having to die. And the reason he gives is that the experience of "nakedness" – that is being stripped of his body – is not something as good as having his body swallowed up by life as he is changed in the twinkling of an eye at the second coming of Christ.

This means that the great final hope of the Christian is not to die and be freed from our bodies, but to be raised with new, glorious bodies, or, best of all, to be alive at the second coming so that we do not have to lose our body temporarily and be "naked" (souls without bodies, cf. Mt. 10:28; Rev. 6:9; Heb. 12:23) until the resurrection.

But does that mean that dying and going to be with Christ does not happen, or that it is not good? No. Paul puts things back in perspective again in verses 6-8.

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord [the full intimacy we long for is not possible here] – for we walk by faith, not by sight – we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

Now get this. In verse 4 Paul says, "He does not want to be unclothed." His first preference is not to be "absent from the body." He says that in comparison to being over-clothed with the new resurrection body if he is alive at the second coming of Christ. That would be his first preference. But if that is not possible – if the choice is between more life here by faith and going to be with Christ – he prefers that God would take him; EVEN IF it means nakedness, that is, even if it means that he must be stripped of his body.

And the reason for this willingness to leave his body behind is not because the body is bad – O, how he wants the experience of the new resurrection body – but because being at home with the Lord is so irresistibly attractive to Paul. Verse 8: *"I prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord."*

Summary

So Paul renews his inner man by looking to unseen things. He looks at three possibilities and prefers them in descending order. First, he prefers that Christ would come and clothe his mortal body with immortality so that he would not have to die and be an incomplete, disembodied soul. But if God does not will that, Paul prefers to be absent from the body to living on here, because he loves Christ more than he loves anything else. To be absent from the body will mean to be at home with the Lord; a deeper intimacy and greater at-homeness than anything we can know in this life. Finally, if God wills that it is not time for the second coming or time for death, then Paul will walk by faith and not by sight.

In that faith he will be of good courage and, even though his outer man is decaying, his inner man will be renewed day by day through this faith in the unseen weight of glory.

Examine yourself. Do you share these biblical priorities and values in life?. Do you long mainly for the second coming? And secondly, do you long to be at home with Christ even if it costs you the surrender of your body? Third, are you committed to walk by faith until he comes or until he calls?

2: What Happens When You Die?

The Dead Will Be Raised Imperishable

July 25, 1993

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

What we saw last week was that the apostle Paul had three preferences about living and dying – in descending order. His first preference was not to die at all but to be alive when Jesus returns and instead of having to experience the separation of soul and body, that he would experience the transformation of his mortal body into an immortal one that would live with Christ for ever in the kingdom.

He says this in 2 Corinthians 5:4, "While we are in this tent (this temporary, mortal body), we groan, being burdened, because we don't want to be unclothed (i.e. bodiless), but to be clothed upon, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." He does not want to be "unclothed" in the sense of being stripped of his body. He wants his body to be swallowed up into the new spiritual, immortal body at the last trumpet when Christ descends from heaven to establish his kingdom and bring this age to a close. That's Paul's first preference.

He knows he cannot know, let alone control, when Christ is coming. So he is not sure if that first preference will come true. So he expresses his second preference, namely, to die and be with Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 he says, "*We are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.*" Rather than groan here and bear the struggles and sicknesses and sin of this life, he would rather die and be with the Lord.

In Philippians 1:21 he says, "*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" He struggles with the need to stay here for the sake of ministry against the longing to be done with the struggle and enjoy the immediate presence of Jesus. He says in verse 23, "I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better." So his second preference is this: if God wills for Christ to be delayed, then Paul would rather go to be with him – if Christ does not yet come to be with us – even if he must be stripped (even painfully stripped) of his body.

The third preference is that, if God wills, and if it is better for the people of the Lord and the glory of Christ, Paul is willing to remain on the earth and to walk by faith and not by sight. He is willing to postpone the deeper, more immediate intimacy of seeing and being with Jesus if that's God's will. In 2 Corinthians 5:6-7 he says, "*We are always of good courage and know that while we are at home in the body we are absent from*

the Lord, for we walk by faith and not by sight." He said to the Philippians that he would remain and continue with them all for the advancement and joy of their faith (1:25). So his third preference is to press on with the ministry and use his time on the earth to advance faith and joy in others as far as he can.

Now we need to ask if we are out of step with these three priorities. Do we set our minds on things that are above (Col. 3:2)? Do we live like our citizenship is in heaven and wait eagerly for the Savior to return (Phil. 3:20)? Do we feel like death would be more gain than loss (Phil. 1:21)? Are we so entangled with this world that leaving it is the worse thing we can think of?

When I pray for revival at Bethlehem and in the American Church this is mainly what I have in mind: Lord pour out your Spirit in such a way that your people desire Christ more than they desire other things and other people. Revival is the inflaming of love to Christ. Revival is not first miracles like healing or prophetic utterances or speaking in tongues – as precious as those things are (and I do mean precious!). It is possible to have the gift of healing, and yet love health more than we love going to be with Christ. It is possible to have the gift of prophecy, and yet crave pornography more than you crave the second coming of Jesus. It is possible to speak in tongues and love your gold rings and \$1200.00 suits and \$40,000.00 cars more than you believe that death is gain.

Which is why when I pray for revival I pray first for the most radical thing: the utter devotion and allegiance of your hearts to Christ. That you would love him so deeply and long for him so passionately that his coming would be your great hope, and death would be gain, and life would be for Christ and his kingdom.

To that end I want to focus here on the resurrection of our bodies as those who are in Christ. I am talking to believers and I am praying that unbelievers who hear me will turn from the dead-end street of self-reliance and believe. *"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved"* – you will be forgiven and after you die you will be raised to live with Christ forever.

It seems to me that the hope of resurrection does not have the same place of power and centrality for us today that it had for the early Christians. And I think one of the reasons for that is that we have a wrong view of the age to come. When we talk about the future and the eternal state we tend to talk about heaven, and heaven tends to imply a place far away characterized by non-material, ethereal, disembodied spirits.

In other words, we tend to assume that the condition that the departed saints are in NOW without their bodies is the way it will always be. And we have encouraged ourselves so much with how good it is for them now, we tend to forget that it is an imperfect state and not the way it will be, nor the way Paul wanted it to be for himself. Yes to die is gain, and yes, to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord, but NO this is not our ultimate hope. This is not the final state of our joy. This is not our final or main comfort when we have lost loved ones who believe.

For example, when the church in Thessalonica lost believing loved ones, the main comfort that Paul offered was not that they were with Christ (as true and wonderful as that is), but that they would be raised bodily from the dead in time to participate physically in the coming of Christ. He said (in 1 Thessalonians 4:15), "We who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep." "Precede"? What does he mean by that? Precede in what sense?

The next verse answers the question: *"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the*

voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first." "First!" Ah, there's the key. We will not precede them, for they will rise first. You see how different that is from the way we tend to comfort each other today. We would say, "We won't precede them, because they are already with the Lord." We would be thinking merely in terms of going to heaven. They got there first by leaving their bodies behind.

But that is not what Paul says. As true as it is, that is not the main hope or the main comfort for us Christians. What Paul does say is this: We will not precede them because they will be raised first. Not because they go to heaven first, which is true, but because they will be raised first.

In other words, Paul is not thinking mainly of heaven far away but of the glory of what happens here: their bodies will not be left in the grave while we have the joy of physically meeting the Lord in the air and welcoming him to his kingdom. They won't stay in the grave while we are changed in the twinkling of an eye and clothed with immortality. No, verse 17 says, "The dead in Christ will rise first. Then (and only then) we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them (not before them) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord."

And when he says, "with the Lord," he means with the one whom (because of the resurrection) we can see and hear and touch with our bodies – with eyes and ears and hands something like what we have now. That is our hope – to be with the risen Christ with a body like his glorious body. To know him in a form like his. Our final destiny and our eternal state is not an ethereal, disembodied state in a distant heaven. It is to reign with Christ here on the renewed earth. This hope was so vibrant for the early Christians that they comforted each other not mainly with the joys of the disembodied state after death, but with the hope of resurrection bodies (cf. Phil. 3:21).

Now look at today's text for one of the greatest descriptions of that event.

Verse 50: "*Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.*" What does that mean? Is it a wholesale denial of the bodily resurrection? No. "Flesh and blood" simply means "human nature as we know it" – mortal, perishable, sin-stained, decaying. Something so fragile and temporary as the body we now have will not be the stuff of the eternal, durable, unshakable, indestructible kingdom of God. But that doesn't mean there won't be bodies.

It means that our bodies will be greater. They will be our bodies, but they will be different and more wonderful. Verse 52: "*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*" When he says "the dead will be raised" he means we – the dead – will be raised. If God meant to start all over with no continuity between the body I have now and the one I will have why would Paul say, "the dead will be raised"? Why would he not say, "The dead will not be raised" (since they are decomposed and their molecules are scattered into plants and animals for a thousand miles) and so God will start from scratch since there are no bodies to raise, and he will make totally new bodies that have no connection with the old ones? He did not say that, because it is not true.

He said two things; the dead will be raised (that teaches continuity); and he said they will be changed – they will be made imperishable and immortal. The old body will become a new body. But it will be your body. God is able to do what we cannot imagine. The resurrection is not described in terms of a totally new creation but in terms of a change of the old creation. "*We shall all be changed*" (v. 51b).

Look back now at verses 37-38. Paul compares the resurrection to what happens to a seed when it goes into the ground. *"That which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own."* The point is there is connection and continuity between the simple seed and the beautiful plant. When you plant a wheat seed, you don't get a barley plant. But on the other hand there is difference. A plant is more beautiful than a seed.

Verses 42-44 applies the analogy to the resurrection body: *"So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."*

I can hear someone say, "Why bother!" Let it go. Who needs it. All that matters is the spiritual realities of love and joy and peace and righteousness and goodness and truth. Why the big fuss over arms and legs and hands and feet and hair and eyes and ears and tongues? It seems so earthly.

We will see more of the answer in two weeks when we talk about the new earth. But let me close with part of the answer today by pointing you to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. God did not create the physical universe willy-nilly. He had a reason, namely, to add to the ways his glory is externalized and made manifest. "The skies are telling the glory of God." That's why he made them.

Your body fits into that same category of physical things God created for this reason. He is not going to back out on his plan to glorify himself through human beings and human bodies. So 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says, *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."*

Why does God go to all the trouble to dirty his hands to reestablish your body and clothe it with immortality? Because his Son paid the price of his life so that God could be glorified in your body for ever and ever. "You were bought with a price, therefore glorify God with your bodies." God will not dishonor the work of his Son. That's why he will raise your body.

The sting of death is sin (15:56), but Christ bore the curse of sin. The power of sin is the law (15:56), but Christ satisfied the demands of the law. Therefore Paul cries out, *"Thanks be to God who gives the victory through Jesus Christ."* When Christ died he forgave sin and fulfilled the law and defeated death and obtained not just our souls but also our bodies.

Therefore God will honor the work of his Son by raising your body from the dead, and you will use your body to glorify him for ever and ever. That is why you have a body now. And that is why it will be raised imperishable.

3: What Happens When You Die?

All Appear Before the Judgment Seat of Christ

August 1, 1993

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, 3 inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. 4 For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. 5 Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. 6 Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—7 for we walk by faith, not by sight—8 we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9 Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

If you can make the leap of faith in the full blown creed of evolution that grips the minds of many modern people then you will believe that what happens to you when you die is no more significant than what happens to a tree when it dies. It's over. You go out of existence. You feel nothing, know nothing, have no consciousness. Your opinion would be that this sermon series is irrelevant. It has nothing to do with reality – what is really going to happen.

But if you find written on the tablet of your heart the truth that there is a Creator God, and that you are made to have a relationship with him, and that what separates you from whales and dolphins and chimpanzees is not mutations and chemicals, but personhood in the image of God, then you probably will lie awake at night and think about eternity – because, as Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "God has put eternity in man's heart."

And if, like millions of others, you have met Jesus Christ in the pages of the Bible and have been persuaded that he is worthy of your trust, then you do not have to be unsure about what is coming when you die. He has told us many things, to encourage us and free us from the emptiness evolutionary creeds and from the fear of death.

What we have seen so far is that believers in Jesus go to be with him when we die. Verse 8: "*We prefer to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord.*" For the those of us who trust Jesus as Savior and Lord "*to live is Christ and to die is gain*" (Phil. 1:21); "*to depart and be with Christ is very much better*" (Phil. 1:23).

The second thing we have seen is that there is more than leaving our body behind and going to be with Christ. There is also a resurrection of the body. That's what we saw last week: "*we shall all be*

changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Christ will come and change our body of lowliness into one like his glorious body (Phil. 3:21). He does not mean for us to be disembodied souls for ever. There will be a resurrection of the dead.

Today we focus on a third truth about what happens when believers die. The verse we are focusing on this morning is verse 10, "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*" Let me make four simple and obvious observations about this judgment and then tackle problem of why Christians will be judged if in fact Christ has already been judged for us (Rom. 5:8-9), and if there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

1. All Christians will stand before Christ as judge. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Not just unbelievers, but "we". And not some of us, but "all of us."

2. Our judge will be Christ. It is God's judgment too (Rom. 14:10-12, "We must all stand before the judgment seat of God"), but God "has given him authority to execute judgment" (John 5:27). So God the Son and God the Father are one in their judgment, but the Son is the one who stands forth as the immediate Judge, to deal with us.

3. Our judgment will be after we die. That's implied in the text, but Hebrews 9:27 makes it explicit. "*It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.*" We don't need to be more specific than that this morning. We need only say that before we enter the final state of glory with our resurrection bodies on the new earth, we will stand before Christ as Judge.

4. When we stand before Christ as Judge we will be judged according to our deeds in this life. "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*" This is not an isolated teaching in the New Testament. Jesus said in Matthew 16:27, "*The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every person according to his deeds.*" And in the very last chapter of the Bible Jesus said, "*Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to every person according to what he has done*" (Rev. 22:12). In other words the way you live is not unimportant.

Now the more difficult question: why is it important? Why are the deeds done in the body the evidence in this courtroom? Is the aim of this judgment to declare who is lost and who is saved, according to the works done in the body? Or is the aim of this judgment to declare the measure of your reward in the age to come according to the works done in the body?

I think the answer of the New Testament is both. Our deeds will reveal who enters the age to come, and our deeds will reveal the measure of our reward in the age to come. I will show you in just a moment why I think this, but let me mention the biggest problem for many Christians in saying this. It sounds to many like a contradiction of salvation by grace through faith. Ephesians 2:8 says, "*By*

grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not of works lest anyone should boast." Salvation is not "of works". That is, works do not earn salvation. Works do not put God in our debt so that he must pay wages. That would contradict grace. *"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Rom. 6:23). Grace gives salvation as a free gift to be received by faith, not earned by works.

How then can I say that the judgment of believers will not only be the public declaration of the measure of our reward in the kingdom of God according to our deeds, but will also be the public declaration of our salvation – our entering the kingdom – according to our deeds?

The answer in a couple sentences is that our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ's courtroom to demonstrate that our faith is real. And our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth to demonstrate the varying measures of our obedience of faith (cf. Rom. 12:3; 1Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11). In other words, salvation is by faith, and rewards are by faith, but the evidence of invisible faith in the judgment hall of Christ will be a transformed life. Our deeds are not the basis of our salvation, they are the evidence of our salvation. They are not foundation, they are demonstration. Now let me show you why I think this.

There is teaching both in Paul's writings and in the words of Jesus that believers will receive differing reward in accord with the degree that their faith expresses itself in acts of service and love and righteousness. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:8 Paul says, *"He who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor."* And in Ephesians 6:8 Paul says, *"Whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord."*

And most of us remember the parable of the talents (or pounds) in Luke 19:12-27. Jesus compares his going to heaven and returning to a nobleman who went away and gave to ten of his servants one pound each with the command to trade with them so that his estate would be advanced in his absence. When he returns one had traded so as to turn his pound into ten. And the nobleman says that his reward will be to have authority over ten cities. Another had turned his pound into five. And the nobleman said that his reward would be to have authority over five cities. Another had just kept the pound and done nothing with it. To this one the nobleman said, *"I will condemn you from your own mouth."* And he took the one pound from him.

Now what this parable teaches is the same thing Paul taught, namely, that there are varying degrees of reward for the faithfulness of our lives. But it also moves beyond that and also teaches that there is a loss not only of reward but of eternity for those who claim to be faithful but do nothing to show that they prize God's gifts and love the Giver. That's the point of the third servant who did nothing with his gift. He did not just lose his reward, he lost his life. Jesus says in Matthew 25:30, *"Cast out that slave into outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

That leads us to the second purpose of the judgment. The first, was that the judgment makes a public demonstration of the varying degrees of reward that Christians receive for the exercise of their faith in obedience. The second purpose of the judgment is to declare openly the reality the faith and the

salvation of God's people by the evidence of their deeds. Salvation is owned by faith. Salvation shown by deeds. So when Paul says (in v. 10) we *"will be recompensed . . . according to what we have done,"* he not only means that our rewards will accord with our deeds, but also our salvation will accord with our deeds.

Why do I think this?

There are numerous texts that point in this direction. One is Paul's letter to the Romans 2:5-7 where he refers to *"The revelation of the righteous judgment of God,"* and then says (in v. 6-8), *"[God] will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality [he will render] eternal life; but to those who . . . do not obey the truth . . . [he will render] wrath and indignation."* In other words, just as our text says, the judgment is "according to what a person has done." But here the issue is eternal life versus wrath.

Several times Paul listed certain kinds of deeds and said, *"those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God"* (Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). In other words when these deeds are exposed at the judgment as a person's way of life, they will be the evidence that their faith is dead and they will not be saved. As James said in James 2:26, *"Faith without works is dead."* That is what will be shown at the judgment.

Jesus put it like this – and he used exactly the same words for good and evil deeds that we have here in 2 Corinthians 5:10. He said (in John 5:29), *"An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment."* In other words the way one lived will be the evidence whether one passes through judgment to life or whether one experiences judgement as condemnation.

He says even though five verses earlier in John 5:24 he said, *"Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes has eternal life."* To hear and to believe is to have eternal life – it is by grace through faith. But when that faith is real – not dead – the life will change and Jesus can say, with no contradiction: the deeds of this life will be the public criteria of judgment in the resurrection. Because our works will be the evidence of the reality of our faith. And it is faith in Christ that saves.

Let me close with an illustration that I think makes clear how deeds will function in the final judgment. Remember the story of how two harlots brought a baby to king Solomon, each claiming that the baby was hers (1 Kings 3:16-27). They asked king Solomon to act as judge between them. He said that a sword should be brought and that the baby should be divided and half given to the one and half to the other. The true mother cried out, *"O, my lord, give her the child and by no means kill it."* Solomon said, give this woman the child, for she is its mother.

What was Solomon looking for? He was not looking for a deed that would earn the child. He was looking for a deed that would prove that the child was already possessed by birth. That is the way God looks at our deeds. He is not looking for deeds that purchase our pardon in his judgment hall.

He is looking for deeds that prove we are already enjoying our pardon. The purchase of our pardon was the blood of Jesus, sufficient once for all to cover all our sins. And the means by which we own it is faith – and faith alone.

That is what this communion is all about, and I invite you to prepare your hearts to remember and to savor the blood of Jesus.

Desiring God

4: What Happens When You Die?

Glorified and Free on the New Earth

August 8, 1993

Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. 24 For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

The reason God revealed to us in the Bible what will happen when we die is that knowing what happens to us when we die takes away fear and fills us instead with hope and confidence and anticipation. And when fear goes and hope in God overflows, we live differently. Our lives show that our treasure in God is more precious than the fleeting attractions of sin.

When we relish the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2), we don't yield to the sinful pleasures of the moment. We are not suckered in by advertising that says the one with the most toys wins. We don't devote our best energies to laying up treasures on earth. We don't dream our most exciting dreams about accomplishments and relationships that perish. We don't fret over what this life fails to give us (marriage, wealth, health, fame).

Instead we revel in the wonder that the owner and ruler of the universe loves us and has destined us for glory and is working infallibly to bring us to his eternal kingdom. We live to meet the needs of others because God is living to meet our needs. We love our enemies, and do good, and bless those who curse us and pray for those who despise us because our reward in heaven is great and we are not enslaved to the petty pleasures that come from returning evil for evil.

All this flows from our unshakable hope. When you know the truth about what happens when you die – and you believe it – that truth makes you free. Free from the short, shallow, stupid, suicidal pleasures of sin. I am preaching these messages to make you free to live for the glory of God.

In this fourth message in the series I want to talk about the final, eternal state. Where is it all going to end up? Before we look at our text in Romans 8 let me give an answer from another place in the Bible and pose a problem that I think our text answers.

Let's look first at Revelation 21:1-4. John says that there will be a new earth and that heaven will

come down, as it were, and God will make his eternal dwelling among men on the new earth.

1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, 4 and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. "

This is a beautiful picture of what is coming: a new earth, the people of God living there with no death, no pain, no tears. And best of all, God will not be far away, but will pitch his tent, as it were, in our midst, and dwell among us for ever.

The question raised here is this: When John says in verse 1, "The first heaven and the first earth passed away" (cf. Mat. 24:35), does he mean that the earth we live on and the sky over our head will be totally done away with and that God will start over with a totally new creation? It's a question like the one two weeks ago concerning our resurrection bodies: will God raise us up or will he start over with a totally new creation of different bodies for us? I argued for continuity between our bodies now and our bodies in the resurrection. And this is what I am going to argue for concerning the earth.

But what does John mean, "The first heaven and the first earth passed away"? Peter, in his second letter says something similar, but even more graphic. In 2 Peter 3:10-13 Peter describes how the present earth and heaven will "pass away."

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! 13 But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

Peter says that our great hope for the final state of eternity is new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells – the same as John in Revelation 21. He also speaks of the heavens passing away (v. 10). And he goes farther and three times says that there will be destruction of the present world. Verse 10: "*the elements will be destroyed with intense heat.*" Verse 11: "*these things are to be destroyed.*" Verse 12: "*the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat.*"

The question then is: Does this mean that the earth we live on and the heavens we live under will be totally done away with? And will God start over with a totally new creation?

First, I would say that when Revelation 21:1 and 2 Peter 3:10 say that the present earth and heavens will "pass away" it does not have to mean that they go out of existence, but may mean that there will be such a change in them that their present condition passes away. We might say, "The caterpillar will pass away and the butterfly emerges." There is a real passing away and there is a real continuity, a real connection. Or we might say, "The tadpole passes away and the frog appears."

And when 2 Peter 3 says that this heaven and earth will be "destroyed" it does not have to mean entirely "put out of existence." We might say, "The flood destroyed many farms." But we don't mean that they vanished out of existence. We might say that the immediate surroundings of Mt. St. Helen were destroyed. But anyone who goes there now and sees the new growth would know that "destroy" did not mean put out of existence.

And so what Peter may well mean is that at the end of this age there will be cataclysmic events that bring this age and this world to an end as we know it – not putting it out of existence, but wiping out all that is evil and cleansing it, as it were, by fire and fitting it for an age of glory and righteousness and peace that will never end.

Well, it *may* mean that. But does it *really* mean that?

Now we are ready to read this morning's text from Romans 8 with this question in mind. There are at least four reasons in these verses suggesting that the creation we know and the earth we live on will not be annihilated but will be renewed for our eternal joy.

1. In Romans 8:19-20 Paul says, "The anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope.

In verse 19 he pictures the creation – the heavens and the earth – as having longings and eager expectation. Something is coming that makes creation, as it were, stand on tip toe that something good is going to happen to her. Then verse 20 gives part of the reason why creation is so full of longing and expectation, namely, because the futility of creation – the decay and disaster and disease and pain – is a temporary curse that God put on creation, but there is a great hope coming. "the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope." God did not curse the creation with futility as his final word. He did it "in hope."

This means that creation is not appointed for annihilation but for restoration. He subjected it in hope.

2. The second reason Paul gives for why we should not expect creation to be annihilated is found in verse 21 (the content of the hope). *"The creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."*

The creation is not destined for annihilation. It is destined for liberation. It will be set free from the "slavery to corruption"—the futility that God subjected it to in hope. I think this is the clearest

statement of all that the earth and the heavens will not "pass away" or be "destroyed" in the sense of going out of existence. Paul says plainly, they will be set free from corruption. The futility will be destroyed. The bondage to corruption will be consumed in the purifying, liberating fire of God's judgment. But the earth will remain. And there will be no more corruption. No more futility. No more crying or death or pain.

3. The third argument Paul give against the annihilation of the present creation is found in verse 22: *"We know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now."*

What he says here is that the upheavals of creation are like labor pains during the last stages of pregnancy. In other words, something is about to be brought forth from creation, not in place of creation. Creation is not going to be annihilated and recreated with no continuity. The earth is going to bring forth like a mother in labor (through the upheavals of fire and earthquake and volcanoes and pestilence and famine) a new earth.

Jesus used the same imagery of labor pains when he said (in Matt. 24:7-8), *"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. 8 But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs."*

This earth is like a mother about to give birth to a new earth where righteousness dwells and where God reigns in the midst of his people.

4. Finally, Paul gives one last argument against annihilation of the earth in verse 23: "And not only this (not only does the natural world groan), but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body."

The reason this is so crucial is that he connects the redemption of our bodies – that is, the resurrection and restoration of our bodies after a lifetime of groaning – with the restoration of the creation. Our bodies are part of this present creation. What happens to our bodies and what happens to the creation go together. And what happens to our bodies is not annihilation but redemption: *"we await the redemption of our bodies."* Our bodies will be redeemed, restored, made new, not thrown away. And so it is with the heavens and the earth.

My conclusion is that our final habitation will be on the new earth, which will be this earth made new.

In Matthew 19:28 Jesus calls it *"the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne."* Creation will be "born again." In Acts 3:21 Peter calls it "the times of the restoration of all things of which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets."

And what did the prophets say about the new earth? Isaiah 11:6-11 gives us an example.

6 And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. 7 Also the cow and the bear will graze; their young will lie down together; and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Cf. Isa. 65:25; Mic. 4:3)

So history as we know it will come to an end with God at the center. His glory will be so bright as to make a moon out of the sun (Rev. 21:23). And on the earth there will be a great sea of knowledge reflecting the glory of the Lord back to him. And just as the rejection of that knowledge brought a curse on the creation, so the restoration of that knowledge will bring blessing to the creation and the animals themselves will be free from the curse and reflect the beauty of the Lord.

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