

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Epiphany 7 Year C

Gen. 45:3-11, 15; Ps. 37:1-11, 39-40; 1Cor. 15:35-38, 42-50; Lk. 6:27-38 Glad 20/02/2022

Who among us has *not* wondered about the afterlife? Especially when someone we know dies, we cling to the few descriptions the Bible gives us about what we imagine as “heaven.”

Heaven seems like a place that is other, separate, and perfect—kind of like God, himself. Isaiah, in chapter 25 of his book, writes of a place where peace will reign, where death will be swallowed up, and where tears will no longer fall. Jesus pictures heaven as a place where people who were once viewed as the least important will come first (Lk 13:30). In John chapter 14 he promises that there’s plenty of room in God’s house. John, also the writer of the Book of Revelation, uses exquisite and sometimes strange imagery to describe his own vision of heaven, but even he borrows some words from Isaiah (Rev 7:16-17).

Most of these images are encouraging and beautiful. When faced with the brevity of life and the seeming finality of death, we understandably hope for something more beyond our time on earth. Every funeral service I have ever conducted focusses on this hope that we all have.

What will the afterlife be like? People have thought about this question for centuries. In our text from 1 Corinthians 15, this morning, Paul hears people wondering about what happens when they die. Some of their questions are specific: “How are the dead raised? What will their raised bodies look like?” His answers aren’t always helpful or even kind. Take, for example, verse 36: *“Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”*

Of course, Paul is using rhetoric here, and the people he was writing to frequently asked pointed questions that were intended to stump him. Also, considering the rest of the passage, he does seem to appreciate those who genuinely want to know what happens to us after we die. I’m pretty sure that Paul wanted to know too. He gave us the best information he had based on his relationship with Jesus.

This is perhaps Paul’s most comforting assurance in our passage: *“If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44b)*. If you exist, then you are both body and spirit. You are more than what you can experience with your senses, and you are also more than some disembodied soul. You are both.

We don’t know for sure—and neither did Paul know for sure—what happens after we die. But the entire witness of Scripture gives us great hope—helping us to live the fullest life possible in our physical bodies on earth even as our spiritual bodies hope for and look forward to the fullest life possible in heaven with God.

In this passage, Paul gives one of the clearest, most concise definitions of the “gospel” found anywhere in the Bible. He shows how a denial of the resurrection of the dead is a denial of the gospel itself, and how believing in the gospel gives us hope for the next world as well as for the present.

But there was a problem at Corinth and verse 12 discloses this problem, which in turn, prompts Paul to write this chapter. Paul writes:

12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

You see, some of the Christians in the church at Corinth were saying that there is no “resurrection of the dead.” Denying the resurrection of the dead is seen in several different forms in the New Testament. The Greek pagans denied the resurrection of the dead, as we can see from the Book of Act. In his sermon to those in the market place of Athens, Paul preached these words:

30 “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this” (Acts 17:30-32).

The Greeks may have believed in the immortality of men, as spirits, but they did not seem responsive to the teaching that God raises the dead so that they may stand in judgment before Him.

The Jewish Sadducees didn’t embrace the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead either. In Acts chapter 23, we read:

6 When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” 7 When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) 9 Then a great clamour arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” (Acts 23:6-9)

The Pharisees did believe in the resurrection of the dead, and in spirits and angels, but the Sadducees did not—nor did they believe in miracles.

There were those in the church who professed to believe in the resurrection of the dead but who insisted that this “resurrection” had already taken place. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes:

¹⁶Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, ¹⁷and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:16-18).

In answering that first specific question of how our resurrection bodies will be raised, the first image he gives us is that of planting a seed in the ground and of the plant that springs up from the seed. He writes:

³⁶Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

The question, says Paul, very foolishly ignores the obvious examples of resurrection life all around us in the natural world. There is also something of an Old Testament ring to his challenge, "You fool!" Remember, the fool in the Old Testament is the person who refuses to acknowledge God's presence and activity in the natural order of things and in the human sphere. That is the ultimate foolishness.

Paul says that death is a necessary part of the process of resurrection. When a seed is planted in the ground, it dies. It actually decomposes. It must cease to exist in its original form as a seed before it can come to life in its final form as a plant. Jesus applied the same figure to himself. The week of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he was teaching in the temple anticipating his death and resurrection. He said, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (John 12:24).

Before Jesus could bear the fruit of our salvation, he had to die. The point Paul makes here is that the same is true for us. We can't be raised until we've died. In a sense we're not really buried or cremated; the reality is that we are sown just as a seed is sown, and from that sowing new life will explode. This view is unique to Christianity among all the philosophies and religions of the world.

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The second question Paul addresses is "What kind of resurrection bodies will we have?" Paul tells us that we will be wonderfully different from the way we are in our earthly existence. He writes:

⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

The body that is sown is a perishable body, but it is raised an imperishable body. It is sown in dishonour, 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. So, if there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

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Now, that's all well and good. It's certainly an encouragement. But where does that leave us, here and now? What has it got to say about our present life? And this is really the crux of what Paul is on about here. Let me begin to answer that question, with a short illustration:

A real estate agent once told the story of an old warehouse property he was selling. The building had been vacated and left empty for a long time. Unbeknownst to him, some unscrupulous homeless people had moved in and used it as temporary lodging. When the agent brought a prospective buyer to show him the property, he discovered that the doors were broken, the windows were all smashed and there was debris and garbage all over the house. The agent tried to reassure the buyer that he would repair the broken doors and windows and clean out the garbage. "Forget about the repairs," the buyer said. "When I buy the house, I'm going to tear it down and build something completely new."

You see, as Christians, when God takes over our lives, he is not content merely to carry out simple repairs of our broken lives, God means to remake us completely into new people. God's grace in us is not just about fixing and improving the old person but transforming the old person into a completely new person. As Paul tells us in today's reading from 1 Corinthians, this is because it's only the person who has been regenerated, made new, and transformed by God's grace who can share in the resurrection. The earthly person who has not been made new by God is incapable of sharing in the life of the resurrection. Paul writes:

⁵⁰ What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1 Cor. 15:50).

In this passage, Paul affirms that Jesus has won the victory over sin and fulfilled the law by dying on the cross and rising to new life. If Jesus hadn't risen there would have been no victory over sin and death. It's only in his resurrection that we see that the law no longer has any hold over him. He has satisfied its demands fully. And as a result we too can have the victory over death through Christ Jesus.

Therefore, he says, dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Stand firm in your belief in a risen Lord. Give yourselves fully to his work, because you can be confident in the knowledge that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. The power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is also at work in the hearts of those to whom you speak, and that at the end of this life God has a new body ready for you, that he has a rest prepared for you in his heavenly Kingdom.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.

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Paul then goes on to say that there will be a difference between the physical body and the resurrection body—between the old form and the new form. The plant that emerges from the ground looks very different from the seed that was planted. You could never imagine what the plant was going to look like just by looking at the seed. In the same way, we can't look at our present physical bodies and have a sense of what our resurrection bodies are going to be like, because we're going to be transformed into something new and gloriously different at the resurrection.

But there is a continuity. The seed changes radically, but it does continue the same life form. A wheat seed doesn't turn into a barley plant, and a kernel of corn doesn't turn into flax. The identity of the seed continues into the full-grown plant. In Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in his resurrection body, none of his disciples and followers recognized him until he chose to reveal himself to them. But once he told them who he was, they did recognize him. They saw the wound in his side and the nail prints in his hands. They knew his face. The promise for us is that we will have some kind of continuity of our personhood, our personality, our unique individuality, after death.

So in answering this question of how we are raised after death, Paul is asking us to believe that the God who has worked out this process daily through all of history in his creation of plant life can certainly do it with human beings.

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First, the perishable will be supplanted by the imperishable. We are irreversibly mortal now, but the good news of the resurrection is that we'll be raised for good, as eternally alive as Jesus Christ himself. The quality of life that we will experience in heaven eternally will also be imperishable.

Second, the dishonourable will be supplanted by the glorious. At the moment, we live in a fallen, flawed world, and we reflect that fallenness. One day, however, we will be raised in glory, to use Paul's phrase. When we get to heaven we won't be sinful anymore.

Thirdly, the weak will be supplanted by the powerful. In our resurrected bodies we will experience no limitation of weakness. We'll be filled with power, and we'll be able to accomplish anything in eternity that God calls us to do. It will be good, fulfilling, exciting, and challenging.

Finally, the natural will be supplanted by the spiritual. This earthly body of mine is strictly natural. This physical world is the only setting in which it can live and function. But my new resurrection body will be raised a spiritual body. Now, as Christians, we have the holy spirit within us. It now resides in an earthly body, which is tremendously limiting, but one day it will live in a spiritual body.