

On Death and Dying

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“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” John 6:40

I have participated in many funerals, and I can verify that there is no real comfort in the death of a loved one except in the promises of God. There is no true consolation except in the sure hope of the gospel. Yet many even in the church are still unclear of the Christian hope. The righteous man, Job, speaking out of great suffering and loss, many centuries before Christ walked the earth, said this:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! Job

19:25-27

Of what was Job speaking? He was speaking of the resurrection of the earthly body. Amazingly, it was given to Job by the Holy Spirit to see beyond the incarnation and the Cross, all the way to the Lord's return. Job was given the promise that even though his own flesh would be consumed, that in the end he would see Christ the Redeemer with his own eyes and in his own flesh, and he exclaims, "My heart faints within me!" My heart too is staggered by such a promise. How about yours? If this is the promise, how will these things take place? The apostle Paul writes the following:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

The beautiful euphemism in Scripture for the death of a believer is *sleep*, and it explains much of what we do at a funeral or graveside service. We grieve with those who have lost a loved one. To be sure, death is a hard absence, but between followers of Christ, a temporary one. We lay the body *to rest*, knowing that this is not the end of the story, for there will come a day, The Day, when the Son of Man, Jesus Christ himself, returns “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:30) We read that Christ will bring with him the souls of those who have fallen asleep, and the dead in Christ will be raised first, fully reconstituted, body and soul. The bodiless soul is but a temporary aberration. Then those who are alive at Christ’s coming will be

similarly changed and gathered to him. The apostle exhorts us to encourage each other with these words of hope! (see also 1 Peter 1:13) It is only logical to ask, “What will our resurrection bodies be like?” Anticipating the question, the apostle gives this answer:

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. 1 Corinthians 15:42-44

Raised *imperishable*, everlasting, never to die. Raised in *glory*, with honor and dignity. Raised in *power*, the same power that raised Christ. Raised a *spiritual body*, like Jesus’ resurrection body. He is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep,” (1 Corinthians 15:20) and “just as we have borne the image of the man of dust (Adam), we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven (Christ).” (1 Corinthians 15:49) While the spiritual body defies complete description based on what we are given, it is helpful to remember that Christ appeared to his disciples on multiple occasions after his resurrection and before his ascension. (see 1 Corinthians 15:5-8, Luke 24:39-43) Jesus encouraged them to touch him, to see his hands and feet, and even ate before them. A body indeed, but without the weaknesses and limitations we are familiar with.

The promise is that we will bear the image of Christ, that we will be like him. (see 1 John 3:2, 1 Corinthians 13:12) Whatever it means to “be like him” or to “bear his image,” it certainly includes a freedom from the old self, freedom from what Paul calls “the flesh” or the sinful nature, freedom from the sinful desires that reside with the natural body. (see Ephesians 4:22, Romans 7:18) Paul saw himself as held captive in the natural body. (see Romans 7:14, Romans 7:23) It’s true that we can and should

experience freedom from sin in this age, and for that we give Christ the glory and thanksgiving, but this experience of freedom is partial, intermittent, temporary in nature. (see Galatians 5:16-17, Romans 6:17-18) The *ultimate* freedom to which Scripture points us is a *complete* freedom from the sinful nature. It is this complete freedom that the apostle Paul has in view when he exclaims, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25) Whether strong or weak in the faith, when God applies his finishing touch of grace, it will be a massive quantum leap for us all. We will be freed, re-created, made new! And if you are willing to track further, even all of creation will participate in "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (see Romans 8:21) And he has given us his Spirit as a seal or mark, guaranteeing that this will happen for us. (see 2 Corinthians 5:5, Ephesians 1:13-14) If this is what we will be, what can be said of our final heavenly living condition? The apostle John leaves us with this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Revelation 21:1-4

If you are a student of eschatology, or the study of end time events, you know that there are differing views, which have been sincerely held in church history. Trying

to understand the sequence and meaning of these events, and the identity and role of key personalities is a matter of friendly debate. However, none of this should detract from what has been made abundantly clear in Scripture about our future. Jesus will return. He has promised to. (see John 14:2-3, Matthew 24:30) There will be a resurrection of the earthly body, and we will need those glorified and imperishable bodies to inhabit God's eternal kingdom, (see 1 Corinthians 15:50) which takes its final form in new heaven and new earth.

This is what Christians believe about their future, and even if you do not believe it to be true, don't want it to be? The specter of death hangs over us all. We cling to life. We want to live, and not die. We want to live, and live forever, but not like this, held captive in a "body of death" with its proclivity to sin. God loves us far too much to allow that to happen. (see Genesis 3:22) He has answered "Yes!" to all of mankind's deepest longings in Jesus Christ. We shall see him with our own eyes and we shall be like him. This is the Christian hope.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Titus 2:11-14