

Scripture: I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

II Corinthians 4:16-5.10

¹⁶That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. ¹⁷For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! ¹⁸So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever. 5. ¹For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. ²We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. ³For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies. ⁴While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it's not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life. 5 God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit. ⁶So we are always confident, even though we know that as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord. ⁷For we live by believing and not by seeing. ⁸Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. ¹⁰For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.

Luke 16: 19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Luke 23: 33-43

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with [two] criminals, one on his right and one on his left.... ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Sermon Text

Recently I was reading an online message board where the topic for discussion was “what happens to us after we die.” A large

number of people took the materialist view, that life is extinguished when life leaves the body. A few people expressed belief in the traditional Christian teaching: that death is followed by judgment, by resurrection of the body, by heaven and hell. And a surprisingly large number expressed a universal optimism grounded, as far as I could tell, on their viewing of such television programmes as “Ghost Whisperer.” One fellow said quite confidently that all people were destined to “pass over” “into the light,” but that it was ridiculous to believe that our ability to do so had anything to do with Jesus Christ. Clearly when people today hear the religious teaching they do not find it satisfying. It raises more questions for them than it answers: Most especially if we pin entrance into heaven on explicit faith in Jesus Christ, then what about those who live good lives and do not believe? What about those of other religions? And what about hell? Is it not a scandal to believe that that a good God would punish some people, however wicked, for all eternity? Granted that something special did happen to Jesus that allowed him to cheat death, how does that translate into a resurrection hope for us? Immortality of the soul is just believable – resurrection of the body confounds the human imagination. Easier just to believe that everyone goes “into the light.”

But is it not a little terrifying to base our belief about final things on the authority of a television screen-writer, someone who is well paid to write fiction that entertains? Christians have based their views of the last judgment, heaven and hell on the teaching of Jesus. We figure that since Jesus is the Son of God, he ought to know! And Christians base their belief about the intermediate state and the resurrection of our bodies at the second coming on the teachings of Paul. How did Paul know? We know that Paul exercised many of the charismatic gifts: the gifts of knowledge, of prophecy and of visions. We believe God revealed these things to Paul so that they might be recorded in Scripture for us.

In common with the Pharisees at the time of Jesus, Paul believed in the resurrection of the dead. Christ’s resurrection from

the dead, for Paul, was the great proof that God’s will for all who have died, is bodily resurrection. The Jewish hope for resurrection of the body is quite different than the hope of the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato and his school, which was for the immortality of the soul. For the Greeks the soul was noble, the body was crass. The way that one got close to the divine was by leaving the body behind -- by transcending the body -- so the Greeks could not picture a life to come in which the body would have any part. But the Jewish view of the body was different. Embodied life was good. It was the way God meant us to live. God’s ultimate seal of approval on the body was when God himself became incarnate -- became embodied -- in Jesus Christ, and when Jesus, after rising, continued to bear a body, and indeed bore it away into heaven with him, where even now he sits, in our flesh, at God’s right hand. So Jews, and particularly Jewish Christians, had no problem believing that the body would have a share also, in the life to come.

Now thinking on the resurrection body over the ages has always insisted on two things: First, that it is the *same* body which has died, that, later on, God raises up. Second, that the body is *different* -- qualitatively different. Paul says in I Corinthians that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; what dies is a physical body, what is raised is a spiritual body. The mortal has put on immortality and the perishable has put on imperishability. This is exceedingly hard to imagine, but what Christian thinkers have wanted to affirm is that there is a continuity of our identity, of our history, even of our appearance, between the life we have now and the life which is to come. But at the same time, our resurrection body will be fitted to the life of our perfected and immortal soul. It will be glorified. It will not limit the life of the soul, as the bodies we now have limit us.

I remember when my grandmother was dying she told me that her essential self felt not one bit different than she had as a teenager. She felt betrayed by her body which was riddled with cancer. She felt that her insides and her outsides did not match. I

have heard others express a similar thing: they say they catch sight of themselves in a mirror and think at a certain point: “who is that old guy?” Or they find that what they think they can do, in the way of lifting or moving with speed, is out of synch with what they really can do. It’s because they *remember* what they used to be able to do and, because they still feel like the same person on the inside, there is a sense of surprise when they realize that their outsides can do it no longer. As a believer in the resurrection of the body, I consider this to be evidence of the fact that, like our baby teeth, we outgrow, and are *meant* to outgrow, the bodies we have now. They are all too clearly perishable, but there is something about us that is also imperishable -- that longs to be clothed with a better body.

In the bible there are several examples of people who are raised from the dead -- the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, Lazarus of Bethany. But none of these have yet their resurrection body. God raises them and it is truly miraculous, that for instance, in the case of Lazarus, God is even able to reverse the decomposition of the body, which Martha alludes to when she says “it’s the fourth day now and there will be a stench” (John 11.39). But the fact that these bodies are not yet resurrection bodies is shown from the fact that they will die again. When Jesus steps out of the tomb on Easter morning, he shows us the only example this world has ever seen of a resurrection body. So it’s worth thinking about what we know of that body. It is, first of all, the *self-same* body that was laid in the tomb. It bears the marks of the history that that body has undergone, and Jesus makes quite a point of showing his disciples the prints of the nails in his hands, and of the spear in his side, so that they might know that it is he, and no-one else. The resurrection body is *continuous* with the body we have now in that it is able to eat and to drink, it is not a ghostly apparition; *yet it is also far different* from a regular body in that it is able to pass through locked doors, and move between all points in time and space, seemingly at will. There is some question about whether or not Jesus bore the same appearance after his

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resurrection. Mary Magdalen meeting him in the garden, mistook him for the gardener, but knew him when he spoke her name. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not know him while he walked and talked with them, but they knew him in the breaking of bread. It's like when people attend their 40th high school reunion. They say things like: “I wouldn't have known him till I heard his voice.” Yet after you penetrate time's disguise, you can see the

continuity of appearance as well as of other features, like the voice and the personality. I imagine that after they got over whatever it was that made Christ appear different, his disciples would have been able only to see the continuity with the old appearance of their friend, and would have wondered why they didn't see it right away. In the first letter of John, it says “we do not yet know what we shall be, but when Christ appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” It's a puzzling statement, isn't it? It suggests

Westminster Confession of Faith ch. 32-33
(updated language version)

32.I. Human bodies, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; Their souls, however, were created immortal.
So they neither die nor sleep,
but return straightway to God who gave them.
-- The righteous, now perfected, enjoy God and await the full redemption of their bodies.
-- The wicked, suffer separation from God, and await the final judgment.

Apart from these two states of souls separated from their bodies, Scripture knows of none.

32. II. At the last day, those still alive shall not die, but shall be changed: Those who have died shall be raised up in their own bodies
-- the same, yet fitted for immortality --
and shall be united again with their souls forever.

32.III. Christ's resurrection empowers all of Adam's race to rise,
-- But the unjust rise to dishonour;
-- the just to honour.
They breathe the Holy Spirit,
and so are conformed to the glorious body of Christ.

33.1. God has appointed a day of judgment.
On that day, Jesus Christ, to whom all authority has been given,
Will judge both angels and men.
We must all appear before Christ's tribunal, to give an account
of our thoughts, words and deeds, and to receive for them what is just.

33.2. On that day God's glory shall be fully known
-- his mercy to those in Christ, whose end is heaven
and his justice to the wicked, whose end is hell --
Heaven means everlasting life, fullness of joy, and the presence of God.
Hell means eternal destruction, torment, and separation from God.

33.3. Christ, while among us, told us of the judgment,
that we might flee sin, and know our troubles are not forever.
Yet, Christ would not tell us the day or the hour,
that we might be ever-ready,
Watching and praying: “Come Lord Jesus; come quickly, AMEN.”

that our nearer vision of God, is what changes our appearance. It kind of reminds me of that other time in the bible where it says that Adam and Eve knew they were naked – began to see themselves differently – because their relationship with God had changed. Or that time on the mount of transfiguration where God communed with his son and gave glory to his son, a glory that changed his appearance before the eyes of his disciples.

Whatever we shall look like in the resurrection, these two things are sure: we shall be recognizable as ourselves, and yet we shall have bodies suited to eternal life with God.

But when do we get this body? Historically theologians in our Reformed tradition, have spoken about an “intermediate state” – a time *between* our death and the general resurrection at Christ’s second coming, when we are *disembodied* but *experiencing* whatever eternity holds for us: either fellowship with God in heaven, or separation from God in hell. The intermediate state is a way of reconciling what Paul says in I Thessalonians 4, when he seems to tie the general resurrection to Christ’s second coming at the last day, and what Jesus says to the thief on the cross about an *immediate experience*, upon death, of the heavenly reward: “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” Those who speak about the intermediate state usually cite II Corinthians 5, where Paul speaks about an embodied future, and the groaning of souls toward the day when they will be fully clothed with their heavenly dwelling. The intermediate state is also a way of answering those who contend for “soul sleep”: an unbiblical view where those who have died lose consciousness until the last day.

The intermediate state is not to be confused with the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. While in the interim period, souls experience whatever is eternally in store for them: whether heaven or hell. And the Westminster Confession says that “besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none” (chapter 32.1). Purgatory envisions a third place, an in-between place. It comes from the idea that even those who have believed Christ are sinners, and must be fitted for heaven

by enduring a time of punishment which purges them of their sin. Christian doctrine has always struggled to reconcile what it says in Scripture: that our salvation is by faith, but our judgment reflects our works. Purgatory is one way of saying that we receive a temporal punishment according to what we have done in life, but an eternal reward or punishment according to what we have believed. However, protestants reject purgatory because it is not mentioned in Scripture, and because we believe that God regards us as holy and is able to make us perfect on account of our connection with Christ. Since he bore the punishment for all sin on the cross, we are free to enter into heaven because of him.

Personally I think there are other ways you can interpret II Corinthians 5, and other ways you can reconcile I Thessalonians 4 and Luke 23 without arriving at a doctrine of the intermediate state. But I will affirm and will teach the faith expressed in the Westminster-Confession because it reflects the conclusion of minds greater than my own. Basically I think we are in a very speculative area here. What the Bible does assure us of, is that those who believe in Christ can go to their deaths knowing that they will be cared for by God and looking forward to the immediate experience of heaven.

As a dog owner I have often thought that we learn some of spirituality's most important lessons from our canine friends: One Christian doctor told the story of what happened one day when he took his dog on a house-call. He left the dog downstairs and went to the sick-bed of his patient, who was dying. The patient turned to him and asked: “Doctor, what is death like, and what lies beyond it?” As the doctor was trying to think of how to reply to so difficult a question, he heard his dog scratching at the door. He



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explained: “that is my dog. He has grown impatient waiting downstairs and although he knows nothing of what lies behind this door, he wants in, because he knows his Master is there.” May it be like that with us. That we believe what God has given us to know in this area that stretches our imagination to the limit, and that for the rest, we trust the Master and desire with all our hearts to be with him.

And now unto him who died and was buried and who rose again, that great shepherd of the sheep, who tends and herds us and keeps us safe, be all honour and glory, both now and forever.