

May 1, 2022
Hope, Heaven, and the Here and Now
1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld reports the number one fear for most people is public speaking. The number two fear for most people is dying. The logical consequence, then, is that if you have to go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than giving the eulogy. 😊

I suspect death is actually a greater fear for most people than public speaking. We don't talk about it. This is odd because not all of us may have to speak publicly, but there is a 100% chance each all of us will deal with death: the passing of loved ones, and our own mortality (unless the Lord returns very quickly). It's a non-negotiable, non-avoidable part of the human experience. Poor Lazarus went through it twice. We need to talk about it.

1. What comes after?

For us who believe in Jesus, death is not the end. As people who believe in Jesus, we have good reason to talk about it. Why? We have HOPE in the face of death. Our God, our Saviour, Jesus experienced death, overcame death, and destroyed the power of death. Jesus, through His own experience of death and resurrection, blazed a trail for all of us. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul paints a portrait of death as the means by which, in the twinkling of an eye, we are transformed into immortality, into an eternity with God.

This is not to say we look forward to the process of dying or death itself (Jesus didn't). The process may be very difficult. It is to say we don't need not be afraid of what comes after.

This is also not to say that we shouldn't grieve when someone close to us dies. (When Lazarus died, Jesus wept). Our sorrow is real because our loss is real. It is to say, we don't despair. Our hope in the resurrection means one day, someday, we will be reunited.

For someone who doesn't know Jesus, what comes after can be a bleak question (which is one reason death is a taboo topic). Even for those of us who do believe, we may have nagging fears. When we stand in the presence of God, covered in the muck and mud of our lives, what's going to happen? We like to think we have been "good" people, but have we been "good *enough* people"? If we kept 5+1 of the Ten Commandments is that enough?

In the movie *Mary Poppins*, Mary has a measuring tape she uses to measure Jane and Michael, the two children she nannies. Her measuring tape shows Michael as "extremely stubborn and suspicious" and Jane as "inclined to giggle; doesn't put things away." Mary herself comes out as "Mary Poppins – practically perfect in every way." What about you? What about me? How will we measure up when God gets out His measuring tape?

On the cross, Jesus took all the muck and mud, all our imperfections, all our sinfulness upon Himself. He took upon Himself the condemnation we all deserve. Our sins are all paid for. They are wiped away. The death and resurrection of Jesus have once and for all broken

down the system of trying to obey the Law to get to heaven. So, when God looks at us on that day of days, He will not see us dirty and broken. He will see us clothed in pure white garments, the garments Jesus ought to wear as the one, perfect person (Galatians 3:27).

Here's the revolutionary good news: when God sees us, He sees us as perfect as Jesus.

"Death gets its power from sin," writes Paul, *"and sin gets its power from the Law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ."* (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). Jesus broke the power of sin. And in doing so, He also broke the power of death.

Jesus hanging on the cross, prayed, *"Father, forgive them"* (the people who were brutally torturing and killing Him). He forgives us all, anything. Can you believe that?

Some of us struggle with forgiveness: not with forgiving others (although that may be a problem, too), but accepting God's forgiveness. Forgiving ourselves. Something in our past (or maybe our present) is evil. We know it. We feel the guilt. We may confess it to God. But we're not sure He forgives us. Could He really forgive ***me***? The good news is that God can – and will – forgive anyone anything.

Practically what does this all mean?

2. "Your body is buried as a natural human body, but it will be raised as a spiritual body" (15:44)

Is life after death really all that good? What's it like? The Corinthians were struggling to figure this all out. So, if there is a resurrection, do just our souls get raised? The Greeks believed in a dichotomy between your soul and your body – your physical, material body was evil, corrupt, and would pass away. There might be hope for your soul, pure and spiritual – but without a body. They could handle some sort of "spiritual" resurrection (maybe), but certainly not a physical one. What would that be like? Would we know one another?

God and His Word are not Greek. In God's Kingdom, including the Jewish tradition, your body and soul are inextricably connected. You cannot have one without the other. Jesus holds these aspects of our personhood in tension, separate but inseparable. It was a struggle for Greeks, like the Corinthians (and us) to comprehend this. The key words are often translated "physical" or "natural" body and "spiritual" body (15:44). These English translations can give us a totally wrong impression about what resurrection is all about.

- The first word, ***psychikos***, "does ***not*** mean "physical" in our sense of having a flesh and blood body. It comes from the Greek *psyche* meaning our human life force or "soul" (as in "psych-ology"). In Greek thought, *psychikos* is ***not*** referring to what the body is made of, but what power or energy makes it go (Paul is writing to people in Corinth, Greece, only a few kilometers from the epicentre of Greek philosophy, Athens). Paul is talking about our present bodies, powered by the normal human life force (or "psyche") we all possess. It gets us through the present life but ultimately wears out. Those of us who are aging (all of us) know all about that.

- The second word, "**pneumatikos**," does not mean "spiritual" in some ethereal, non-bodily sense. It comes from the Greek word "*pnuema*" or "*spirit*" (also the word for the Holy Spirit). Paul is talking about a future body – just as physical/recognizable/touchable – now powered by and filled with God's Holy Spirit.

Paul is asking us to think about the difference between what we're made of and what makes us go. It's like asking, "*Is your car body made of steel or fiberglass?*" (**what it's made of**) or, "*Is your car powered by gas, diesel, or electricity?*" (**what it's powered by**). **Paul is talking about what powers us ... not what we're made of.**

Our "naturally-powered" bodies are wearing out. Our "Spirit-powered" bodies are yet to come. Paul is asking us to picture a whole new physical existence, we cannot comprehend. "*We sometimes speak of someone who's been very ill as being a shadow of their former self,*" says Tom Wright. "*If Paul is right, a Christian in the present life is a mere shadow of their FUTURE self, the self the person will be when the body that God has waiting in his heavenly storeroom is brought out, already made to measure, and put on over the present one – or over the self that will still exist after bodily death.*" In the future we will be even more "body-full" than we can possibly imagine. That's a different way of thinking, isn't it?

When Paul says "*flesh and blood will not inherit the Kingdom of God*" he is using referring to this *psychikos* naturally-powered physical body of ours. This is in contrast with the future *pneumatikos* Spirit-powered physical body of ours: incorruptible, eternal, destined-to-everlasting-life, powered by God's Holy Spirit. We will have a physical body in eternity. Fueled by the Spirit, it will not decay and fall apart like this one.

3. Right now? "Therefore, be strong and immovable" (15:58)

Philip Yancey writes: "*My wife Janet once worked with senior citizens near a Chicago housing project judged the poorest community in the country. About half her clients were white, half were black. All of them had lived through harsh times: two world wars, the Great Depression, social upheavals. And all of them, in their seventies and eighties, lived in awareness of death. Yet Janet noted a remarkable difference in the way the whites and the blacks faced death. There were exceptions, of course, but the trend was this: many of the whites became increasingly fearful and uptight. They complained about their lives, their families, and their deteriorating health. The blacks, in contrast, maintained a good humour and triumphant spirit even though they had more apparent reason for bitterness and despair.*

"*What caused the difference in outlooks? Janet concluded the answer is hope, a hope that traced directly to the blacks' bedrock belief in heaven. 'This world is not home, I'm just passin' through,' they sang. These words and others like them ('Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home') came out of a tragic period of history when everything in this world looked bleak. But somehow black churches managed to instill a vivid belief in a home beyond this one ...*

"*Somehow these neglected saints have learned to anticipate and enjoy God in spite of the difficulties of their lives on earth. When we get to heaven, many of us may be surprised to*

learn what it means to enjoy God. For others, such as these elderly blacks in the slums of Chicago, that joy will seem more like a long-awaited homecoming than a visit to a new place. Who knows, they may save a few hundred years' awkward transition."

We can be strong and immovable in this life, knowing we will be with Jesus, forever.

4. Right now? "Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless." (15:58)

"Paul doesn't say 'therefore enjoy the presence of Christ', though he might have done, or 'therefore look forward to your glorious future', though he might have said that as well," comments Tom Wright. *"He says 'therefore get on with your work in the present, because in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' That is at the heart of the meaning of the resurrection."*

Life now matters. What we do, now, in the present somehow carries forward into God's future. Jesus and the New Testament writers make it clear we don't earn our way to heaven. We are called to become more and more like Jesus. We are called to pray His Kingdom come and His will be done here on earth, **and then** be about the business of trying to make that prayer come to pass. We share the good news about Jesus. We work to see His will, justice, and hope come on earth as they are in heaven.

William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a strong Christian, was key in abolishing slavery in the British Empire (including Canada). Nellie McClung and the other "Famous Five" who championed women's rights in Canada were motivated by their Christian faith. Tommy Douglas (1904-1986), a Baptist minister, pioneered universal health care in Canada. Faith in heaven leads us to act on earth.

I appreciate C.S. Lewis' insight: *"If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."* We live in a dynamic tension between heaven and earth – we hope for eternity; this is not all there is. AND we live as citizens of heaven with the task of "heaven-izing" earth at the same time.

Death's power is broken. It cannot hold us or our loved ones. We have life hereafter. *"Death has been swallowed up in victory."* (15:54, quoting Isaiah 25:8). We are fully aware of the eternal hope that awaits us, that we will move on. But right here, right now, we live fully for Jesus. This world has our full attention. We do our best to "heaven-ize" earth, to see His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.