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What Happens When a Christian Dies? 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

I'm dying. I don't say that because I've just returned from the doctor with a fatal diagnosis, whether of cancer or heart disease, but I'm dying. So, too, are you. With each passing moment, no matter how vigorously we exercise and how nutritiously we eat, we are deteriorating physically. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "our outer nature is wasting away." Nevertheless, and for this we praise God, "our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (v. 16).

But death is approaching, for some faster than others. Later today, at 2:00 p.m., we will gather to remember and celebrate the life of Rob Griffioen. His death, last Sunday, left behind a loving and faithful wife, Stephanie, and his five-year old son, Josiah.

So where is Rob? What is it, precisely, that he now sees and feels and experiences, or is he, as some would argue, "asleep", unconscious, lifeless in the grave until the second coming of Christ? The most explicit answer to this question, in all of Scripture, is found here in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10.

I've witnessed a lot of death in my family in recent years: my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, a cousin, three uncles, and three aunts have passed away. All were Christians. Like you, I want rock-solid, revelatory assurance, not merely speculation, about where they are. Twice in this paragraph Paul speaks with unshakeable confidence, declaring that "*we know*" (vv. 1, 6) what has happened to them and where they are.

It's important that we read 2 Corinthians 5:1 in the light of what has preceded in 4:7-18. Paul writes, "For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (5:1). The "tent" or "earthly home" (5:1), i.e., the physical body, is one example of the many "transient" things "that are seen" (4:18), just as "the building from God" (5:1) is one example of the "eternal" things "that are unseen" (4:18). Similarly, the "destruction" (5:1) of the earthly body is simply the ultimate outcome of what Paul described as his repeated encounters with death or his carrying about in himself the dying of Jesus (4:8-12).

What is this "building from God" that is ours following physical death?

Some argue it is a reference to *heaven* itself, or an abode in heaven (cf. John 14:2), perhaps even *the New Jerusalem*. Others say it refers to *the body of Christ, i.e., the church*. On the other hand, it may be a reference to *an intermediate body*, i.e., a bodily form of some sort suitable to the intermediate state but different from and only preparatory to the final, glorified, resurrected body (cf. Matt. 17:3; Rev. 6:9-11). The fourth option is to see here a reference to the *glorified, resurrection body*, that final and consummate embodiment in which we will live for eternity.

There are two fundamental reasons for embracing the fourth option and understanding Paul as referring to the final resurrection body (cf. Phil. 3:21). First, the "building" or "house" in v. 1b stands in a parallel relationship with "home" in v. 1a. Since the latter refers to our "earthly, unglorified" body, it seems reasonable to conclude that the former refers to our "heavenly, glorified" body. Secondly, the description in v. 1b ("not made with hands," "eternal," and "in the heavens") is more suitable to the glorified body (see especially 1 Cor. 15:35-49). Paul's point would be that our heavenly embodiment is indestructible, not susceptible to decay or corruption or dissolution.

The major objection to this view is Paul's use of the *present tense*, "we *have* a building from God" (not "we *shall* have"). This seems to imply that immediately upon death the believer receives his/her glorified body.

But this would conflict with 1 Corinthians 15:22ff.; 15:51-56; and 1 Thessalonians 4-5, all of which indicate that glorification occurs at the second advent of Christ. Furthermore, frequently in Scripture *a future reality or possession is so certain and assured in the perspective of the author that it is appropriately spoken of in the present tense, i.e., as if it were already ours in experience*. Thus Paul's present tense "we have" most likely points to the *fact* of having as well as the *permanency* of having, but *not* the *immediacy* of having. It is the language of hope.

It has been argued that perhaps Paul uses the present tense because the passing of time between physical death and the final resurrection is not sensed or consciously experienced by the saints in heaven; and thus the reception of one's resurrection body *appears* to follow immediately upon death.

But against this is the clear teaching of Scripture that the intermediate state is consciously experienced by those who have died (as we will soon see in 2 Cor. 5:6-8; cf. also Phil. 1:21-24; Rev. 6:9-11). It is clear that the deceased believer has "departed" to be "with Christ" (Phil. 1:23) and is therefore "with" Christ when he comes (1 Thess. 4:17). It would seem, then, that some kind of conscious existence obtains between a person's death and the general resurrection (this is why we refer to this time as the *intermediate state*).

Even though Paul appears to envision the possibility (probability?) of his own physical death, he still has hope that he will remain alive until Christ returns. Look again closely at vv. 2-5.

In these verses Paul speaks of his desire to be alive when Christ returns, for then he would not have to die physically and experience the separation of body and spirit, a condition he refers to as being "naked" (v. 3) or "unclothed" (v. 4). Paul's perspective on life and death may therefore be put in this way:

It is *good* to remain alive on this earth to serve Christ (see Phil. 1:21-26).

On the other hand, it is *better* to die physically and enter into the presence of Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21b, 23).

However, it is by far and away *best* to be alive when Christ returns, for then we avoid death altogether and are immediately joined with the Lord in our resurrected and glorified bodies.

Here in v. 2 (which is repeated and expanded somewhat in v. 4) Paul mixes his metaphors by speaking of putting on or being "clothed" with a "building". But it is more than simply putting on a garment: it is putting on of a garment *over* another. The heavenly, glorified body, like an outer vesture or overcoat, is being put on over the earthly body with which the apostle is, as it were, presently clad. In this way the heavenly, glorified body not only covers but also absorbs and *transforms* the earthly one (see Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:53).

If he remains alive until Christ returns he will be found by the Lord clothed with a body (the present, earthly one), and not in a disembodied state (v. 3). To be without a body is to be "naked". Clearly, Paul envisaged a state of disembodiment between physical death and the general resurrection (cf. "unclothed" in v. 4).

But what assurances do we have from God that he will in fact supply us with a glorified and eternal body that is no longer subject to the deterioration and disease we now experience? The simple answer is: the Holy Spirit! Paul's statement in v. 5 is a reminder "that 'the earnest of the Spirit' is not a mere static deposit, but the active vivifying operation of the Holy Spirit within the believer, assuring him that the same principle of power which effected the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead is also present and at work within him, preparing his mortal body for the consummation of his redemption in the glorification of his body" (Hughes).

For the Christian, death is not to be feared. For we know that whatever illness or debilitation we experience now, whatever degree of suffering or hardship we must face, there is promised to us by the Spirit a glorified, Christ-like, transformed and utterly eternal abode, a body in which there is no disease, no pain, no deprivation, and no decay.

"The best case scenario," Paul seems to say, "is to be alive when Christ returns. That way I could transition instantaneously from this 'garment' (my current physical body) into that glorified 'garment' (that is and will forever be my resurrected body). I don't want to get 'undressed' but to put the garment of eternity over the garment of time in such a way that the former redeems and transforms the latter. But in all things I yield to the timing and purpose of God, and rejoice in the assurance, the rock-solid guarantee from the Holy Spirit, that physical death is not the end but the beginning."

The Christian Perspective on Death

I vividly remember the first time I watched a person die. I had been called, on countless occasions, to the home or hospital room of someone who earlier had passed away, but not until I actually watched a man breathe his last breath did this passage in 2 Corinthians strike me with full force.

Not so much as a nanosecond beyond his final breath, he was gazing directly, joyfully, painlessly, and eternally into the eyes of his Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Fully conscious and wholly free, he fell rapturously into the arms of the one who, from then and forevermore, would never let him go.

This is the rock-solid assurance, the blood-bought promise, signed, sealed, and delivered by the unshakeable guarantee of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:5), of every born-again believer in Jesus Christ.

We begin with the observation that while vv. 6 and 8 should be read together, v. 7 is a parenthetical explanation of v. 6b. Paul couldn't have said it with greater clarity: to be *in the body* (i.e., physically alive) is to be *absent from the Lord* and to be *out of the body* (i.e., physically dead) is to be *present with the Lord*.

Paul's point is that as one must be *either* in *or* out of his body (for there is no third alternative), so he must be *either* absent from *or* present with the Lord (for, again, there is no third alternative). To the question, "when a Christian dies does he/she *immediately* enter Christ's presence?" the answer must be Yes. Three things support this conclusion.

First, in v. 6, residence in a physical body is contemporaneous with absence from the direct presence of Christ, implying that when the former ceases so also does the latter. Observe the temporal indicators: "*while* we are at home in the body, *we are* away from the Lord." And what v. 6 may only imply, v. 8 explicitly asserts: "we would rather be *away from the body* and *at home with the Lord*."

Second, according to v. 7, walking by faith and walking by sight are the only two possible ways of relating to Christ. When the former ends, the latter begins. We now walk by faith, in the sense that we can't see him. But when we die, faith gives way to sight, not that we cease to believe in him but in the sense that we add to faith the experience of literal, visible communion. In other words, "the separation . . . is relative not absolute: though absent from sight, the Lord is present to faith, yet it is not until he is present also to sight that Christian existence will reach its true goal of consummated fellowship with him" (Harris, 397-98).

Don't be misled by this verse. Paul is not suggesting that we are now bereft of communion with Christ or that it is merely illusory. It is simply incomplete or imperfect. Being physically alive is not an obstacle to true spirituality. We can still know Christ and enjoy him, as Peter makes clear in chapter one of his first epistle: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

The difference between the "dead in Christ" (believers who have died and gone to be with the Lord) and living Christians is not one of status, as if to say the former are "truly saved" or "more in Christ" than the latter. Rather, it is, first, a difference of disembodiment vs. embodiment. Second, it is a difference in "the *quality* of their fellowship with Christ and the *degree* of their proximity to Christ" (Harris, 402).

Therefore, 2 Corinthians 5:7 is designed to soften the blow of v. 6b, or to explain in what sense being "in" the body entails "absence" from Christ. Our absence from Christ is only *spatial*, not *spiritual* (cf. Mt. 28:19-20; Col. 1:27; John 17:23,26). While in the body we do not literally *see* Christ (at least, most of us don't!), but rather we walk by faith in the *physically* absent and *unseen* Lord. Death brings us into spatial proximity and visible contact with Christ. Thus death, rather than severing our spiritual relationship with Christ, heightens and enhances it! Death brings us into the immediate vision of our Savior and the increased intimacy of fellowship which it entails.

Third, that physical death of the believer issues immediately in conscious presence with the Lord is the teaching of Paul in Philippians 1:20-24. There Paul describes the tension he feels between wanting, on the one hand, "to depart (i.e., die physically) and be with Christ", and, on the other, remaining "in the flesh" (i.e., physically alive) so that he might engage in "fruitful labor" on behalf of the churches he has established.

There are two important theological implications to be noted.

First, what becomes of the Roman Catholic doctrine of *purgatory*, according to which the Christian at death must endure additional purification from sin before entering the bliss of Christ's presence? Clearly it is eliminated.

Second, what does this mean for the doctrine of soul sleep, or *psychopannychia*, which asserts that Christians at death enter a state of complete unconsciousness, to be "awakened" at Christ's return? It, too, is eliminated. What, then, does the New Testament mean when it refers to death as "sleep" (see Mt. 27:52; Luke 8:52; Jn. 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6,18; 1 Thess. 4:13)?

Several things come to mind. For example, sleep implies rest from *earthly toil*, the cessation of activity in *this* realm. Thus one is asleep to *this* world, but alive and very much "awake" in the next. The imagery of sleep is also used to describe death because the *body* does sleep, in a manner of speaking. In other words, the body is at rest, without activity or life. But nowhere does the Bible say that the "soul" or "spirit" sleeps or is unconscious. Finally, sleep is used to illustrate that the pain of death as a penalty for sin is gone for the Christian. Death for the believer, rather than something to be feared, is like dozing off for a nap (see Luke 16:19-31; Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 12:26-27; Rev. 6:9-11).

Countless are the times, following a funeral, that I have been asked: "Where are they now? What are they experiencing?" And it has been my great joy to say, with complete and unshaken confidence: "They are with Jesus, in his presence, beholding his beauty, enthralled by his splendor, breathless with unbroken joy, adding their voice to that of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders and the myriads of angels and the multitude of the redeemed, singing 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'" (Rev. 4:8).

The Judgment Seat of Christ

To this point in our consideration of what happens when a Christian dies, most everyone is pleased with what Paul has written. So why spoil everything by talking about judgment? I can anticipate what people will say: "I was thrilled when you described the reality of the intermediate state and the assurance of bodily resurrection. I was ecstatic upon hearing that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. But judgment? Couldn't you have conveniently skipped over vv. 9-10? Well, no, I couldn't. Paul didn't, so neither can we.

Let's be clear about one thing from the start, something that I believe may go a long way in putting to rest your fears about judgment. In one of the most encouraging and liberating texts in the New Testament, Paul wrote: "There is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). In other words, whatever else Paul may have in mind in 2 Corinthians 5, if you are "in Christ Jesus" by faith you need never, ever fear condemnation. That being said and settled, what ought we to expect, following death, at the judgment seat of Christ? The best way to answer this question is with several observations that are evoked by Paul's statement.

First, what is the *nature* or *purpose* of the judgment? In view of Romans 8:1, as well as John 3:18; 5:24; Romans 5:8-9; and 1 Thessalonians 1:10 (just to mention a few), eternal destiny is not at issue; eternal reward is. This judgment is not designed to determine entrance into the kingdom of God but reward or status or authority within it.

Second, *when* does this judgment occur: At the moment of physical death? During the intermediate state? At the second coming of Christ? Paul doesn't seem concerned to specify when. The most that we can be sure of is that it happens after death (see Heb. 9:27). Having said that, I'm inclined to think it happens at the second coming of Christ (cf. Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12), at the close of human history, most likely in conjunction with that larger assize that will include all unbelievers, known to students of the Bible as the Great White Throne judgment (see Revelation 20:11ff.).

Third, we should take note of the *inevitability* of judgment for everyone ("we *must all* appear"). This is not a day that can be set aside as irrelevant or unnecessary. It is essential for God to bring to consummation his redemptive purpose and to fully honor the glory of his name among his people. No one is exempt. Paul himself anticipated standing at this judgment, for it served (at least in part) as the motivation for his grace-energized efforts to "please" the Lord (v. 9).

Fourth, Paul emphasizes its *individuality* ("*each one*"). As important as it is to stress the corporate and communal nature of our life as the body of Christ, each person will be judged individually (no doubt, at least in part, concerning

how faithful each person was to his or her corporate responsibilities!). Paul said it in similar terms in Romans 14:12 – “So then *each of us* will give an account of *himself* to God.”

Fifth, we should observe the *mode* or *manner* of this judgment (“we must all *appear*”). We do not merely “show up” at the judgment seat of Christ but are *laid bare* before him. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:5, the Lord “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”

Is it not sobering to think that every random thought, every righteous impulse, every secret prayer, hidden deed, long-forgotten sin or act of compassion will be brought into the open for us to acknowledge and for the Lord to judge? But don’t forget: “There is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1)!

Sixth, this judgment has an *identity* all its own (it is the “*judgment seat* of Christ”). Most Christians are by now familiar with the term used here: *bema*. The use of this word in v. 10 “would have been particularly evocative for Paul and the Corinthians since it was before Gallio’s tribunal in Corinth that Paul had stood some four years previously (in A.D. 52) when the proconsul dismissed the charge that Paul had contravened Roman law (Acts 18:12-17). Archaeologists have identified this Corinthian *bema* which stands on the south side of the *agora*” (Harris, 406).

Seventh, of critical importance is the *standard* of judgment (“what he has done in the body, whether good or evil”). Reference to the “body” indicates that the judgment concerns what we do in this life, not what may or may not be done during the time of the intermediate state itself.

According to the ESV, we receive “what is due”. In other words, and somewhat more literally, we will be judged “in accordance with” or perhaps even “in proportion to” deeds done. The deeds are themselves characterized as either “good” (those which “please” Christ, as in v. 9) or “bad” (those which do not please him).

Eighth, the *result* of the judgment is not explicitly stated but is certainly implied. All will “receive” whatever their deeds deserve. There is a reward or recompense involved. Paul is slightly more specific in 1 Corinthians 3:14-15. There he writes: “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” The “reward” is not defined and the likelihood is that the “loss” suffered is the “reward” that he or she would otherwise have received had they obeyed.

Can anything more definitive be said about the nature of this recompense? Jesus mentions a “great” “reward” in heaven, but doesn’t elaborate (Matt. 5:11-12). In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25; cf. Luke 19:12-27) he alludes to “authority” or dominion of some sort (but over whom or what?). Paul says that “whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord” (Eph. 6:8).

According to 1 Corinthians 4:5, following the judgment “each one will receive his commendation from God”. Both Romans 8:17-18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17 refer to a “glory” that is reserved for the saints in heaven. And of course we should consider the many promises in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3, although it is difficult to know if they are bestowed now, during the intermediate state, or only subsequent to the second coming, and if they are granted in differing degrees depending on service and obedience or are equally distributed among God’s children (see Rev. 2:7, 10, 17, 23; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. also Matt. 18:4; 19:29; Luke 14:11; James 1:12).

Perhaps the differing nature and degree of reward will be manifest in the depths of knowledge and enjoyment of God that each person experiences. People often balk at this notion, but they shouldn’t.

Hardly anything will bring you more joy in heaven than to see other saints with greater rewards than you, experiencing greater glory than you, given greater authority than you! There will be no jealousy or pride to fuel your unhealthy competitiveness. There will be no greed to energize your race to get more than everyone else. *You will then delight only in delighting in the delight of others. Their achievement will be your greatest joy. Their success will be your highest happiness.* You will truly rejoice with those who rejoice. Envy comes from lack. But in heaven there is no lack. Whatever you need, you get. Whatever desires may arise, they are satisfied.

The fact that some are more holy and happier than others will not diminish the joy of the latter. There will be perfect humility and perfect resignation to God’s will in heaven, hence no resentment or bitterness. Also, those higher in

holiness will, precisely because they are holy, be more humble. The essence of holiness is humility! The very vice that might incline them to look condescendingly on those lower than themselves is nowhere present. It is precisely because they are more holy that they are so very humble and thus incapable of arrogance and elitism.

Some people in heaven will be happier than others. But this is no reason for sadness or anger. In fact, *it will serve only to make you happier to see that others are happier than you! Your happiness will increase when you see that the happiness of others has exceeded your own. Why? **Because love dominates in heaven and love is rejoicing in the increase of the happiness of others.*** To love someone is to desire their greatest joy. As their joy increases, so too does yours in them. If their joy did not increase, neither would yours. We struggle with this because now on earth our thoughts and desires and motives are corrupted by sinful self-seeking, competitiveness, envy, jealousy, and resentment.

Conclusion

“Let us consider this settled,” said John Calvin, “that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection” (*Institutes*, 3.9.5). All non-Christians and, sadly, some professing believers, would regard that as a statement of unparalleled lunacy. For them, the “day of death” is something to dread, the prospect of which evokes fear and the avoidance of which justifies any sacrifice, even that of truth and virtue.

But not for the Christian. Not for the man or woman who by faith is “in Christ.” We can, as Calvin said, “joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection” because, far from being an experience of dreary darkness and unremitting despair, death for the Christian means immediate entrance into the glorious light of the presence of Jesus Christ.