

You have heard me on several occasions complain about the largely un-biblical way most people--and I mean most Christians--think about Christian hope, that being going to heaven with little thought or understanding about the resurrection. This is because much of Christianity--and for a very long time--has made the goal of being a Christian getting to heaven rather than following the Lord Jesus in this life. The contrast between what many people think and what the NT really teaches comes out quite clearly in these words of the apostle Paul. And should force us to see our lives in terms of the Biblical Story which we often forget. Let's consider three major beliefs Paul teaches.

First, God our Rescuer. But from what? In these first verses of 2 Corinthians 4 (13-18), Paul begins with a quotation from Psalm 116: "*I remained faithful, and so I spoke,*" (vs. 10). In a psalm that rehearses the experience of someone in great danger--even threat of death--and then is rescued by the Lord, the apostle Paul quotes the psalm, "*we also believed [or remained faithful] and so we speak.*" Speak what? "*Because we know the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence,*" (vs. 14). He elaborates on the resurrection hope: "*Even though our outer nature is wasting away--(our present mortality), our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal,*" (vss. 16-18).

The apostle says this because he understands his life--and the Christian life--as in

a similar context of Christ's suffering, danger, and death. Remember from the immediate previous verses: "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus...*" (4:8-10)--that is, identifying with and experiencing the pain and suffering of this world even as did Jesus. But as the psalmist spoke of hope and deliverance, so does Paul. And that hope and deliverance he speaks is not going to heaven, but thanksgiving to God who raised Jesus from death and made him Lord of all, and will raise us up with him. Paul's life ministry--and again that of every Christian--is to extend grace to others, that they too come to know the Lord, know this hope, and so "*increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God,*" (vs. 18).

Paul here is explaining why he doesn't lose heart despite the difficult circumstances that his life and faithful ministry have brought upon him. Some in Corinth may think he should be discouraged and in despair. But he doesn't. Why? Because he sees his life in the context--the Story--of the Lord Jesus Christ, he knows and lives the Christian hope of the Resurrection to come. He doesn't say, "*Well, God is good, and when I die, I'm done with this world and will go to a glorious heaven forever.*" He does NOT say that--as many Christians do. Now yes, there is in present life "*slight momentary affliction,*" (vs. 17), which is very similar to his statement in Romans 8:18, "*I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.*" No, his hope is in something yet to be, something glorious.

He makes a contrast between the "*seen*" and "*unseen*", the "*temporary*" and "*eternal.*" But he is not contrasting the material world here with a supposed "spiritual" world to come. Rather he is talking about the present world or age in which we live with

the future world, or God's eternal kingdom to come "*on earth as it is in heaven.*" And that world, God's fuller and true reality, will come and be more--not less--richly physical in ways we can hardly imagine, but at present "*cannot be seen,*" (vs. 18).

So Paul in the immediate previous verses and here declares an understanding--the Christian understanding--about life in the present and to come--life with its present sufferings and the life of future resurrection to come. He declares that the glory we presently have, while like "*treasure in clay pots*" (vs. 6), is nothing compared with the resurrection glory that is yet to be revealed for us. In fact, the huge, often overwhelming sorrows and difficulties that Paul endured--and us, too--are not only "*slight momentary affliction*" but are "*preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,*" (vs.17). The present body in its suffering is but our beginning, a kind of initial clothing for a fuller self that will one day be much more fully clothed. To use a bug illustration: The cicada larva first lives in a soft husk, goes underground, the husk hardens, and then it breaks that exoskeleton and flies away in a beautiful freedom. Its former exterior shell is but preparation for its greater new life to come. In Colossians 3:3-4, he expresses it: "*for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory*"--Resurrection!

Now secondly, we have "*a body waiting.*" In these next verses (5:1-5), Paul speaks of our bodies as like "*an earthly tent...for in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling*"--a way of contrasting our present mortality with the immortal form to come. Yet, "*we have a house not made hands,*" meaning our glorious resurrection bodies to come. Comparatively, it's as though he says, "*I live in a tent at present, but one day I will live in a palace.*" Now, we need to make this point. The

teaching of much Christianity is that at the end of life, one immediately either goes to heaven or hell for all eternity. It's in some of our official church confessions. Yet this is not the whole picture and somewhat inaccurate. Here, as well as in other places in Paul's letters, "heaven" is not so much the place we go when we die--though we do--but more importantly it is the place where God has our future bodies in store for us for the age to come, the New Creation. Paul uses two pictures here for to make this somewhat clearer.

First, he refers to our present body as like a "house" or "tent." Many people lived then, and Paul himself was a tentmaker. This enables him to say both that the present body can be exchanged for a better one in due course, and that being embodied--having a body as a human being--matters. While it says one will lose one dwelling place and gain another, it also says strongly that the point of this dramatic change is not to give up having a body altogether, but rather a better one is coming. We can all relate to that.

Then he combines this with the idea of the body as "clothing." Christian hope for the future is not about becoming disembodied--as a free soul going to heaven--but about being re-embodied. We don't, as he says, want to turn out to be "naked", a bare spirit or soul without any "clothing". In fact, the hope he expresses in vs. 4 is seen in terms of putting more clothes on, on top of the ones we're already wearing. We don't want to be unclothed, but to be more fully clothed. And the transformation he has in mind, just as in 1 Corinthians 15, is that whereas the present body is "mortal", "doomed to die" heading for corruption and decay--whether we like it or not--the body that is to come will be full of life, a life that nothing can harm or destroy, a body in that respect

like Jesus himself.

In a few words, Paul makes a clear point. The present version of the human body, as he says in 1 Corinthians 15:47-49, is “earthly,” in the sense that is made of earthly material, belongs on the present earth, and will eventually return to it, “*dust to dust, ashes to ashes.*” The new body, however, which in 1 Corinthians he speaks of as “spiritual,” does not mean non-material, but means “animated by the Spirit.” That body to come waits for us in heaven, where God is. It is a kind of body which will never wear out. When he says, “*not made with hands,*” he is using a Jewish idiom meaning “*made by God, not human hands.*” Our resurrection body, then, will be similar to the present one in some respects but quite different in others. It’s not easy to say exactly what it will be like, in part, because it’s hard to describe what is in a sense indescribable. But we have some idea, and that is presented to us by the resurrection of Jesus himself. Paul and the other NT writers see Jesus him-self as the model, the prototype of the body we are meant to have. That is why Paul calls Jesus’ resurrection as like the “first fruits” of the harvest (1 Cor 15):20). What happened to him at the beginning will happen for us at the last. And the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of it: “*He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us his Spirit as the guarantee,*” (5:5). There’s an old expression, “*clothes make the man.*” Well, in a sense, that is exactly what Paul is saying here. The persons we ultimately long to be will find their fulfillment when we are “clothed” with resurrection bodies, becoming more fully and outwardly like the glorious person of the Risen Christ Jesus our Lord. Again, Paul in Colossians 3: 4, “*When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory*”--Resurrection! But even in our present bodies, we carry in us the hope of

something much greater to come--new resurrected selves for a new world to come. Yes, indeed, there is a body waiting for us.

The third thing Paul speaks to here in these verses is the Judgment Seat of Christ (5:6-10), what we refer to in the Creed, when we say, "*He shall come again to judge the quick and the dead,*" that is, those alive at Christ's Coming and those who have died. In the ancient Roman world, civil judgments were rendered by officials in a very public forum to which anyone could go and observe. So for Paul to say everyone will appear before the judgment seat of Christ made perfect sense. As he pictures it, everyone will be brought to the center of town to stand before the Christ and receive the reward for the things which they have done while living in their bodies. This is one of the most straight-forward statements anywhere in the NT of the last judgment.

I said a little earlier that for many, the matters relating to heaven or hell are forever fixed in their minds a certain way, and it all happens at death. A closer reading of the NT on such things indicates there is more to it than that. In particular, the idea about going off to heaven as a final destination can mislead people into thinking that correct Christian teaching about what happens after death is that you leave the body behind and go off into a non-bodily/spiritual/non-material state where the "soul" is saved forever, and that's that. But Paul teaches instead that we shall be given new bodies, but not immediately when we die--unless one is alive at the Lord's Return. We will receive these new bodies on the great day of resurrection. After that there will come the great Day of Judgment, when all persons will have to answer for their lives. He says it Romans 14:10: "*For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God,*" No wonder Luther said, "*Every Christian must believe for himself, because every Christian will die*

*by himself.”*

Now Paul speaks of a time between the time of our death and the time of final judgment. His picture of the resurrection in the previous verses 1-5 is not a picture of something that happens immediately after death, but of something that happens to enable us to stand before our Lord when he comes as judge. And what goes on in between? Paul says, when he dies, he will be “*at home with the Lord,*” (vs. 9; also Phil 1:23). As he puts it, to be in this body now and in this age is to be “*away from the Lord*”—not in a bad sense but not in a complete sense either. During this life, we know the Lord by faith—“*we walk by faith, not by sight,*” (vs. 6b). The Lord is in heaven. We—as it appears—are on earth. The two spheres of heaven and earth are ultimately to be brought together (Eph 1:10), but are not yet. God’s kingdom has not come “*on earth, as it is in heaven,*” yet. When that happens, the central feature will be the presence of Jesus himself on the throne of God in the center of the New Creation (Rev 21-22). But that’s then, not now.

So for now, when one dies now—before the Lord comes again—one goes from the body to be “*home with the Lord.*” Yet, it’s not heaven that is home, but being “*with the Lord.*” That is good, but not our glorious destiny. So until then, “*whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please the Lord. For all of us must appear before the judgment of Christ.*” And that brings us back to the matter of judgment.

We might ask: Isn’t it odd that the apostle Paul who speaks so powerfully about “justification by faith” speaks here of doing our best to please the Lord because one day we will stand before him to receive the reward and recompense for what we have done? How do these two things go together? The answer is that Paul always assumes and

teaches the reality of a future judgment. When he makes statements such as *“there is no condemnation for those in Christ,”* (Rom 8:1), this does not mean how we live our lives is irrelevant to our faith. Rather, Paul always connects our “justification” in Christ with our lives in Christ, which are lived in the power of his Spirit, to enable them to become the kind of persons “justified” people are. As he says in Romans 6:2, *“How can we who are dead to sin go on living in it?”* To live as “justified-by-faith” people means we have learned the meaning of grace, forgiveness, and love as Jesus taught us and showed us. Such matters need more attention than we can give here, but our whole look at Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount we have considered speak to this directly. So in that Great Day to come, as pictured in the Jesus’ parable about the sheep and goats, and to use Paul’s image, our lives will be brought before him to answer for the way we have lived them. Such a prospect sounds rather solemn. So it is. But it has a very positive side as well. For God will reward--how Paul doesn’t say here--people for what they have done, and how they did it. His teaching here is not meant to cloud our prospect of future blessedness but to spur us --*“making our aim,”* he puts it--to do all those things pleasing to him, knowing our Lord knows and cares about what we do, as well as what we don’t.

But more than that, we are spurred to act because of love, if we do know the Savior’s love. We see the life of faith is not merely for our own benefit but for that of others, even as Jesus’ own living--and dying--was for others. So as he was, so we are meant to be also as his followers. Philip Hughes writes on this passage: *“To have the glorious hope of being transformed into the likeness of Christ at His appearing in no way absolves us from responsibility for the manner in which we conduct ourselves now. If*

*our deepest longing is for that consummating moment when we shall at last be transfigured into His image, then it should be our present concern to progress daily, by the grace of God, towards the goal of Christlikeness. Love for the Master because of his matchless love for us should be sufficient incentive for us to follow devotedly in His steps.*-- (2 Corinthians, p. 179). Remember, this judgment is for the redeemed. It instructs us that we are to live our lives in the Story of Christ, to set them purposely--for that is where they are--in the con-text of his life and ministry. For that is what we are all called to be--his ministers, his servants--who by our lives should have good reason to hear from the Lord's lips, "*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the kingdom.*" Let us so live. Amen.