

What Happens When the Believer Dies?
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:21

Dr. Steve Horn

March 6, 2016

Introduction: We are going to take a break from our ongoing series on discipleship. Call it a break with a definite purpose. We have a few more items that I feel are important for us to have a comprehensive view of discipleship, but I want us to have a bit more intentional focus on our upcoming revival. So, to help us prepare, I want to think about a subject that quite frankly, we do not like to think about—dying. But not just dying, but “What happens after we die?” To put it rather bluntly, when we die, some people go to heaven and some people go to hell. So, to emphasize the point, I want to spend today talking about heaven and next week talking about hell. Which one do you talk about first? That’s a good question and one that I struggled over in preparation. But, here we are today to talk about heaven. I hope that you will return next week to talk about hell.

Several years ago now in a particular semester of our FAITH evangelism strategy I was teaching a particular group that had a large number of high school students in the class. On the week that we were talking about heaven (the “H” part of our FAITH outline that we learn) they revealed something to me that broke my heart. We were talking about heaven and hell and the fact that most people believed in a heaven, but not in a literal hell. These high school students began to challenge me on that statement. They said that their generation finds it easier to believe in hell than they do in heaven. I asked them why they thought that was true. Their answer broke my heart. In essence, they said, “Our generation has seen so much evil. It is easy to believe there is a place from which that evil comes. We haven’t always seen a lot of good.”

Now the reason that is such an important revelation is that this view impacts the way we approach others with the Gospel.

The Bible has much to say about the experience of death being a positive thing. The Psalmist wrote, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his godly ones. 116:15. John in Revelation wrote, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” (Rev. 14:13) How can these things be said? How can death be precious and blessed?

Well, let’s hear and meditate on Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians. In the passage are several reasons why death is our friend and not our foe for the believer.

Text: ¹⁶Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. ¹⁸So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

5 For we know that if our temporary, earthly dwelling is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands. ²Indeed, we groan in this body, desiring to put on our dwelling from heaven, ³since, when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴Indeed, we groan while we are in this tent, burdened as we are, because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, so

that mortality may be swallowed up by life.⁵ And the One who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave us the Spirit as a down payment.

⁶ So, we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we walk by faith, not by sight,⁸ and we are confident and satisfied to be out of the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the tribunal of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or worthless.

¹¹ Therefore, because we know the fear of the Lord, we seek to persuade people. We are completely open before God, and I hope we are completely open to your consciences as well. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to be proud of us, so that you may have a reply for those who take pride in the outward appearance rather than in the heart. ¹³ For if we are out of our mind, it is for God; if we have a sound mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: If One died for all, then all died. ¹⁵ And He died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the One who died for them and was raised.

¹⁶ From now on, then, we do not know anyone in a purely human way. Even if we have known Christ in a purely human way, yet now we no longer know Him in this way. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come. ¹⁸ Everything is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, certain that God is appealing through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God." ²¹ He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Introduction: Paul is a maligned preacher by this point in his ministry when he writes this letter to the Corinthians. In many respects, the purpose of 2 Corinthians is a self-defense of the credibility of his ministry. First Corinthians has been something of a harsh letter. He has had the unenviable task of pointing out many wrongs in the church. The Corinthians have presumably fired back another letter, and this letter seeks to give defense to his ministry.

At the heart of his defense is the defense of the Gospel. Some might think Paul out of his mind (v. 13), but the theological conviction that drives his passion is that those who believe in Christ will go to Heaven, and those who do not believe in Christ will go to Hell. That must be our conviction. When that is our conviction, we cannot be silent.

As a way to highlight the Gospel, Paul reflects on the death of the believer and the glory of Heaven. Think of it as what we exchange in life on earth for life eternal.

5 Wonderful Exchanges that are Made in Death:

1. Exchange of decaying body for new spiritual body

This exchange is pointed out in 2 Corinthians 4:16. The truth is our bodies are decaying. Many of you have experienced having to watch the decaying body of a loved one. You know how hard that is. In fact, when life reaches that point, death becomes appealing to end the misery of this life. This is

especially true when we realize that we inherit a body that, as the book of Revelation points out, knows no pain, no sickness, and no death.

Many of you know the name Joni Erickson Tada. She is a quadriplegic. She writes:

I remember one time being at a convention banquet, when the speaker closed his message by asking everyone in the room to kneel for prayer. All five hundred people pushed their chairs away from the table and got on their knees – all except me. I sat there crying; oh, not because I felt awkward, or sad that I was the only one in the entire banquet hall who was still sitting up, no, I cried because as I looked around I was struck with the beauty of seeing so many people bow in worship. I remember breathing a prayer: "O, Lord Jesus, I can't wait for the day when I will rise up on resurrected legs. And the first thing I will do is to drop on grateful, glorified knees."

That's what Heaven is like.

2. Exchange of affliction for glory

This earthly life is filled with tribulation. Jesus warned about that would be the case. But, notice what Paul is saying here. The affliction is light. Elsewhere, Paul would say that our affliction now is not worthy to be compared to the glory that is going to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18) Our groaning is going to be replaced with praise.

That's what Heaven is like.

3. Exchange of temporal for eternal

God made us for eternity, but we struggle with placing the things of earth as priority over the things of heaven. In sum, if it is heaven that really matters, that ought to be evident in our life here on earth. Being focused on eternal things is why C.S. Lewis said that life is only the title page.

That's what Heaven is like.

4. Exchange of faith for sight

The person of greatest faith still walks by faith, but in Heaven we won't need faith because the things that have required faith in this life will be seen.

That's what Heaven is like.

5. Exchange of life for reward

We don't understand a lot about rewards in heaven, but this passage suggests we will give an account. There is the judgment of Heaven and Hell, but there is the judgment of the believer with rewards.

That's what Heaven is like.

So What?

1. We should live to persuade people.

Don't be afraid to be persuasive. Before the Apostle Paul died he had opportunity to present the Gospel to governors and kings. Once, someone named King Agrippa asked Paul "Are you going to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?" Paul answered, "I wish before God that whether easily or with difficulty, not only you but all who listen to me today might become as I am." (Acts 26:28-29)

2. We should live for the One who has purchased us.

We no longer live for ourselves, but for the One who purchased us for salvation. That is a reasonable response.

When you put these two ideas together, you get our purpose:

We are ambassadors for Christ.

This title seems to imply several things.

- We are Representatives.
- We are sent.
- We are not by ourselves.

George Shultz was Secretary of State during the Reagan administration. Before newly appointed ambassadors left to their assigned country, Shultz met with them. He would have them go to a globe he kept in his office. He would instruct them to find their country on the globe. As a final test, so to speak, he would make the candidate go to the globe and prove that he or she could find his country. Mike Mansfield was appointed to be U.S. ambassador to Japan. In his customary way, Shultz asked Mansfield to go over to the globe and find his country. Shultz would later say that what Mansfield did changed his way of thinking. Mansfield went to the globe, spun it, and put his finger on the United States. He said emphatically, "That's my country." Shultz said from that day forward, new appointees were told that story. He would send them off with these words, "Never forget you're over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You're there to represent us. Take care of our interests and never forget it."

We are ambassadors for Christ! We represent Him. We represent the Gospel.