

II Corinthians 4:16-5:10 What happens when we die?

Introduction

In funeral services of various kinds an overwhelming majority will affirm some form of belief in life after the grave, apart from the conviction humanists and atheists. One of the early Christian statements of faith, recited in church is The Apostles Creed, which includes these lines: *I believe in...The Resurrection of the body, And the Life everlasting.* In the funeral of a believer it is common for the officiating minister to state words like these, which originated in the 1662 version of the *Book of Common Prayer*, though based on various biblical texts. *Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.* This is a clear description of the distinctive Judaeo-Christian emphasis on life beyond the grave. Jesus was the first to be raised, never to die again; but we as His followers will one day experience that same transformation as Paul told the Corinthians in I Corinthians 15:20-22: *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* Yet what happens when we die - between then and the return of Jesus Christ? We have all sat around in bus stations or airport lounges and it has felt like 'forever'! Some people, especially in some of the minor cults, have come up with a theory called 'soul sleep' in which after death we simply stay asleep, not conscious of the time between our death and Christ's return. Is this what we have to look forward to immediately after death? More importantly how do we view the present circumstances we are experiencing in the light of the future God has prepared for us? These are some of the issues Paul will address in the next section of his letter to the church in Corinth.

1. Our Goal –Eternal Glory (II Corinthians 4:16-18)

Paul has been speaking about the wonderful message we have to proclaim and the need to proclaim it with integrity, like a light shining in a dark place. Yet we do so in human weakness, totally dependent on His strength and resources. After all if God the Father has the power to raise Jesus from the dead then He can handle all the issues I am likely to face. In the final section of chapter four the apostle provides his and our motivation for serving the Lord and making the best use of our time here on earth. He speaks first about: (a) **Perseverance** (v16a) *Therefore we do not lose heart.* The apostle has made the same point in II Corinthians 4:1 *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.* However, there he was looking back to the previous chapter and the glorious truths we have to proclaim about our amazing God, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Here he is looking forward to what lies ahead of us beyond the grave. There is a constant tension between the 'now' and 'not yet' of our inheritance in Christ. Paul explained something of this in his own experience in his letter to the Philippians: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me* (Philippians 1:21-26). Our time here is short so we must continue focussed on the calling to which He has entrusted us, maintaining that fire in our hearts, that passion for His glory, that determination to see His

name honoured throughout the earth. God is at work in our lives! God has used you and me to influence and indeed to reach other people for Him. Collectively the Christian Church is experiencing amazing growth, despite the horrific opposition and suffering being endured in many countries today. Thank God for the encouragements we hear from the Middle East and even from parts of Africa where God is working in people's lives. We will not give up.

(b) **Transformation** (v16b) *Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* Old age does not come alone. The aches and pains and loss of strength can be depressing and frustrating when we cannot do the things we once enjoyed. Yet even in an age when the cult of youth is king in our secular culture and those older, especially women, are banished from the TV screen, to be replaced with younger models, the perspective of the people of God should be different. We do not live in denial and pretend that we can vanquish the ageing process. Expensive face lifts, botox injections and innumerable creams only delay the inevitable! At each stage of life there are blessings and challenges, both are a part of the tapestry of life with its many inter-connected threads. One of the most powerful forms of witness through our church has been the partnership of younger and older people serving the parents and their children through the parent and toddler ministry on a Monday morning. This kind of inter-generational activity is increasingly rare in our society and is something we might sometimes take for granted. We may not have the energy we once had but it should not be a reason to diminish our prayer life. On the contrary time pressures might be less without the requirements of formal employment –even though many people have remarked in my hearing that they cannot imagine in the past how they found time to go to work! In the inner person, in our character and relationship with the Lord we can grow more like Him. Our goals and ambitions will of necessity, in terms of things of this life, be different to when we were younger, but our focus on Jesus and our passion for His glory should remain the same. In more general terms it was the Christian approach to human life that led to the value of and care for the very young and the elderly in society. In a world where the denial of the sanctity of life for the very youngest (in abortion legislation) and the lack of adequate care for the elderly is increasingly common, Christians (and not just Christians to be fair) will wish to honour older people and treat them with the dignity they deserve. We cannot stop the physical ageing process, but we can actively promote and encourage growth in grace and Christ-likeness in our inner person, because one day we will be like him.

(c) **Glorification** (vs17-18) ¹⁷ *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* ¹⁸ *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* Perseverance and transformation are accompanied by glorification. Are there times when things get too much for us? Yes! work issues, health concerns, family matters, things in society, our neighbourhood and even at times in our church there are issues that cause us to be despondent and even sometimes distressed. In such a context Paul says remember what is temporary and what is eternal; how apt his words are; how often I need to be reminded of this fact, and I suspect many others of us here as well. A lot of people around us behave the way they do because they think that this life is all there is, which leads to short-term thinking and not building for the future. As Christians we know that we are part of something much bigger; of universal and eternal significance, even if our part in that is perceived as small and in the world's eyes insignificant. This is a point that Paul repeated in a number of letters, including to the church in Rome. *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* ¹⁹ *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed* ²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the*

one who subjected it, in hope. ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently (Romans 8:18-25). Ira Sankey, the famous singer who accompanied D.L. Moody in his evangelistic campaigns in Scotland in the late nineteenth century, tells a story about Robert Annan of Dundee: Having carried in my pocket for several months the words of the hymn “Eternity,” which the author, Ellen M. H. Gates, had sent me, I handed them, one day in Chicago [Illinois] in 1876, to my friend P. P. Bliss, asking him to write music for them. Three days later he had composed the tune. The hymn was much used at our meetings both in Great Britain and the United States. Before singing it, I used to tell the story of Robert Annan, of Dundee, Scotland. He was one of the worst men who ever lived in that town, but after having been converted became one of the most useful missionaries of the place. On leaving his little cottage home one morning to go to his mission work, he took a piece of chalk from his pocket and wrote on the flagstone of the walk which led to his house the single word “**Eternity**.” A few minutes later he saw a child fall from one of the vessels in the harbour. Being a bold, strong swimmer, he threw off his coat and shoes, and plunged into the bay. He saved the child, but at the cost of his own life. His body was carried home over the word “Eternity,” which he had written a few hours before. On my last visit to Scotland, about five years ago, I went to see his widow, and found that the writing had been cut into the stone by direction of the Honourable James Gordon, the Earl of Aberdeen. Thousands go to see it every year. Mr. Annan’s minister took me to the beautiful cemetery at the place, where a fine monument ten feet high, marks the last resting-place of the hero. Some years ago that street was demolished, but the paving stone in question was rescued and is now located at the entrance to St Peter’s Free Church in Dundee. This man’s life and the word imposed on the memories of many citizens of Dundee as a result of his witness, is a word that we too would do well to keep at the forefront of our own memories, as it keeps everything else in perspective.

2. Our Future – Eternal Life (II Corinthians 5:1-8)

(a) **The heresy of ‘soul-sleep’** It is likely that some of us here have never heard of this deviation from historic Christianity. In essence it teaches that after we die on earth our body decays in the earth and is destroyed but our spirit /soul may go to heaven but is in a state of unconsciousness until the return of Jesus and the end of the age when we get our new resurrection bodies. This is a practical issue as all of us know of believers who have died in the last few years and are deeply interested in what is happening to them just now. It is also of personal interest because if we die before Jesus’ return then we too will enter this intermediate state –if this viewpoint is correct. (i) It is essential to have a body Proponents of this viewpoint tend to argue first that a body is essential for a person to function in any meaningful way. The senses could not operate nor would the flow of thoughts in our minds. For example, should I be describing a house you have not visited, or a person you have not met, in a conversation with you, then it is likely that you would have a physical image of a house or a person in your mind; (ii) Scripture portrays death as sleep Furthermore advocates of this viewpoint draw our attention to the fact that Scripture often represents death as sleep. In Deuteronomy 31:16a, in the King James Version (but not modern versions), it states: *And the Lord said unto Moses, Behold, thou shalt **sleep** with thy fathers*; more modern versions, for example the NIV, render it *And the Lord said to Moses: You are going to **rest** with your fathers*. The same word is used in I Kings 2:10 where King David’s death is described using this same term: *And the Lord said to David: You are going to rest with your fathers*. Likewise in

Job 7:21, the great patriarchal figure declared in the KJV: *And why dost thou not pardon my transgression, and take away my iniquity? for now shall I **sleep in the dust**; and thou shalt seek me in the morning, but I shall not be.* In the New Testament similar vocabulary is also found. In John 11:11-14 Jesus had a conversation with His disciples about their mutual friend who had died. ¹¹ *After he had said this, he went on to tell them, Our friend Lazarus **has fallen asleep**; but I am going there to wake him up.* ¹² *His disciples replied, Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.* ¹³ *Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.* ¹⁴ *So then he told them plainly, **Lazarus is dead.*** In Acts 7:59-60 after the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, Luke records: *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.* ⁶⁰ *Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. When he had said this, he fell asleep.* They may also recall Paul's words in I Corinthians 15:51, in that magnificent chapter on the resurrection of Jesus: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all **sleep**, but we will all be changed.* (iii) Scripture records no information about things experienced by people raised from the dead Proponents of this viewpoint also claim that there is no description in the Bible of what believers are doing in heaven, prior to Jesus' return. This they claim supports their view that believers are doing nothing in heaven, prior to Jesus' return. This is of course an argument from silence which logically proves nothing on its own.

(b) **A Response to this teaching** (i) It is simply wrong to say that consciousness can only exist when connected with sense experience. In heaven our Lord Jesus is unique in that He has taken His resurrection body back to heaven. God the Father and the Holy Spirit, together with the heavenly beings do not possess physical bodies like us. In John 4:24 Jesus told the Samaritan woman that: *God is Spirit.* It was part of the humiliation of Jesus when He came into this world that He took a physical body like us, with all its limitations –such as being capable of being present in only one place at a time. Yet God and possibly also some of the heavenly beings are both conscious and exist perfectly happily without physical bodies. We may struggle to grasp life in that way, but that is part of our human limitations to be unable to understand it. Just because we as creatures cannot understand it does not make it impossible. We may have intelligent pets at home –but discussing law, physics and a whole lot more subjects with them is a waste of time –even if they appear to be listening to us very carefully! (ii) The use of the word *sleep* in the Bible to refer to the death of particular individuals is metaphorical language that gives a word-picture that describes someone who has ceased to engage in the activities they carried out when alive. There are, for example, a number of culturally-appropriate forms of expression that we can use to indicate that someone has died, yet they carry the same meaning. To build a theory out of a figure of speech is simply wrong. Proponents of this view would need to show from the Bible evidence that clearly supported this position, which is not the case. We take delight in verses such as Revelation 14:13: *Then I heard a voice from heaven say, Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they will **rest from their labour**, for their deeds will follow them,* but even more pleasure in verses that indicate active pleasure at our entry into heaven after death.

(c) **Our situation in heaven** ¹ *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.* ² *Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling,* ³ *because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.* ⁴ *For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.* ⁵ *Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.* ⁶ *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.* ⁷ *We live by faith, not by sight.* ⁸ *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be **away from the body and at home with the Lord.*** David, in Psalm 16:10-11 is conscious that there will be some extraordinary events taking place in the future life of the coming Messiah, such as His violent death (Psalm 22) and resurrection

(Psalm 16:10), but for David who would die before that time there will still be something to look forward to prior to the bodily resurrection. Why was he so happy?: *because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.*¹¹ *You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy **in your presence**, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.* Neither David nor anyone else can have this pleasure while sleeping or unconscious! Jesus, in Matthew 8:11-12, spoke of life after death in these terms: *I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.*¹² *But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* However we understand these verses it is clear that the people described are conscious and active participants in what is going on. Jesus, in His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, makes this request in verse 24: *Father I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am , and to see My glory...* [and not in our sleep!] Are the saved believers in heaven currently praising *the Lamb that was slain* in their sleep? [various references, for example, Revelation 7:9-10: *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.* ¹⁰ *And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb*]. Do the martyrs (Rev.6:9-10: *I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.* ¹⁰ *They called out in a loud voice, How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?*) cry for justice in their sleep? Or the ones serving the Lord *day and night* (Rev.7:15) doing so while unconscious? In the light of the cumulative evidence of the Scriptures, not just II Corinthians 5:7-8: *We live by faith, not by sight.* ⁸ *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be **away from the body and at home with the Lord**.* Part of the concern behind these speculative theories is the apparent problem of ‘hanging around’ for two thousand years or more for the end of the age in heaven. What they have forgotten is that time is part of the created order. In the life to come we enter eternity and time is no more. We cannot be late or early for anything; a fact that will be a big encouragement for those of us who struggle with time-keeping! We will look forward to our resurrection bodies, but the joys of the age to come will more than compensate prior to Christ’s second coming. The Greek cultures of the Roman world looked forward to immortality free from a physical body and saw such a position as a future liberation. Paul stresses here this is not our hope- we look forward one day to a glorious resurrection body, when Jesus returns with His saints who have already died, to collect those who remain on the earth. Although followers of Jesus shared with these people the conviction that this life was not the end and that the best is yet to come, by contrast we believe it will be in a physical world in fulfilment of God’s original plans for His creation.

3. Our Accountability –Eternal Reward (II Corinthians 5:9-10)

(a) **Our Goal** (II Cor.5:9-10a) ⁹ *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* ¹⁰ *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,* In Roman cities the governor sat on the judgement seat to hear court cases, as Paul knew well from his time before Gallio’s court in Corinth (Acts 18:12). This was a serious matter as the most serious penalties could in principle be given to guilty defendants.

However, Paul is much more concerned by a much higher court and a greater judge, before whom we shall all one day appear, the Lord Himself. In the light of this reality it is no wonder that Paul says in II Cor.5:9: *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* Is that what you do? Much of our lives other people in our church family, and even our human family, know little about, unless we care to tell them. But, there is one person who knows and sees everything and it is before such a One that we will stand on that day. It is not your husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, brother or sister who makes that call but the Lord of glory. It is not the mocking person in the street, the cynical colleague in the workplace or the caustic critic on the TV, but the One who hung on a cross and said: *Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). It is not the helpless victim of injustice or oppression or one of the starving multitudes in parts of Africa who will judge you and me, rather the One who rebuked Peter for chopping off Malchus' ear in the Garden of Gethsemane and said in Matthew 26:33-34: *Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?* ⁵⁴ *But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?* Without exception, every man, woman, boy or girl, who has walked this earth will stand before King Jesus –*the King of Kings and Lord of Lords* (Revelation 19:16). What is your number one goal? Is it the same as that of Paul? It needs to be as that is why you were placed on this earth in the first place. (b) **Our Reward** (II Corinthians 5:10b) *that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* Our salvation is eternally secure because Jesus obtained it on the cross. However, our judgement as believers covers rewards for service rendered; and all our works will be tested to discern their quality. In I Corinthians 3:10-15 Paul explains this point in more detail: *For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.* Are you /am I as Christians on course for a pleasant surprise or an awful shock or a bit of both when we stand before Him? May our goal be to put Him first throughout our lives and on that day be delighted to hear Him say: *Well done good and faithful servant...come and share your master's happiness* (Matthew 25:23), Amen.

[The words of the Ellen Gates hymn mentioned in the sermon]

Oh, the clanging bells of Time!
Night and day they never cease;
We are wearied with their chime,
For they do not bring us peace;
And we hush our breath to hear,
And we strain our eyes to see
If thy shores are drawing near,
Eternity! Eternity!

Oh, the clanging bells of Time!
Now their changes rise and fall,
But in under tone sublime,
Sounding clearly through them all,
Is a voice that must be heard,

As our moments onward flee,
And it speaketh, aye, one word,
Eternity! Eternity!

Oh, the clanging bells of Time!
To their voices, loud and low,
In a long, unresting line
We are marching to and fro;
And we yearn for sight or sound,
Of the life that is to be,
For thy breath doth wrap us round,
Eternity! Eternity!

Oh, the clanging bells of Time!
Soon their notes will all be dumb,
And in joy and peace sublime,
We shall feel the silence come;
And our souls their thirst will slake,
And our eyes the King will see,
When thy glorious morn shall break,
Eternity! Eternity!