

The Funeral Service of Magnum Tulfo
January 3, 2019

The Mysterious Life of the Dead in Christ
2 Corinthians 5:1-8

What the Apostle Paul is talking about in the verses we have just read is what theologians call “the intermediate state.” That is, the period between a person’s death and the Second Coming of Christ and the resurrection of the body. When Paul speaks of “the tent that is our earthly home” he is referring to our body. The tent is destroyed, in Paul’s figure of speech, when a person dies. That is obvious and uncontroversial. The body is dead. Its functions have ceased. And we bury it in the ground.

The great message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the burden of the good news, the distinctive proclamation of the Christian faith is two-fold. First, when a person dies he or she does not cease to exist; he or she doesn’t even cease to exist in a conscious state. When Jesus told the believing thief being crucified next to him, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise,” he meant, and very obviously, your personal life will continue upon your death but in a much happier state. *You* will be with me in Paradise. His body would be very likely thrown into some unmarked grave reserved for criminals; but *he* would be in Paradise. This is Paul’s point when he says that “while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord” and when he says “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” In another place Paul says still more boldly that for a Christian death *is better by far*, precisely because *we* will be together with the Lord; to be absent from the body, he says, is to be present with the Lord.” That is the first thing. The soul never dies: neither the believing soul nor the unbelieving soul. Both continue in conscious existence.

Second, the entire significance of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the defining event of human history according to the Bible, is that the body will live again. It is to that fact that Paul is making reference when he speaks of our being naked – that is, without our bodies – and of our being clothed with our heavenly dwelling. To be with the Lord in heaven, even without our bodies, is better by far. But, made as we have been made – souls and bodies together – we will never be content to be disembodied souls. We long for our full, complete, and perfect

personhood, which all believers will receive at the same time, when Christ comes again and the bodies of all men are raised from the dead. Indeed, Paul dares to say that we groan in longing for that fullness of human life for which we were made and for which we were saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So when we die our souls live on. If we die in Christ, trusting ourselves to his conquest of sin and death on our behalf, we live on in heaven with the Lord. But better by far as that life is in comparison to our life in this world, it is not yet the fullness of life. That requires the reunion of body and soul that comes at the end of history.

Holy Scripture is not very forthcoming regarding the circumstances of the believer after his or her death. It is a temporary condition, a wonderful condition, but it is a strange condition, that of a soul without a body. Let me say that no one should scruple at that. For all that some have attempted to argue that what we call the soul is nothing more than the activity of the brain, nothing more than our physical, bodily life in its mental expression, the fact is there is very little to commend that conclusion and powerful arguments have been raised against it by believers and unbelievers alike. The mind or soul or spirit *is not* the same thing as the brain and the effort to prove that it is has largely failed. And you know this yourself. You are capable of standing apart from your mental life, inspecting it, evaluating it, judging it. Your thoughts are not physical things. You know very well that you are more than the sum of your synapses firing away in your brain. The very existence of consciousness is itself proof that the soul exists!

Since Magnum has died, since we are about to bury his body, it is certainly worth our asking: what do we know of a believer's life in the intermediate state, the time between death and the resurrection of the body? Where is he now and what is he doing?

Well, the first thing we can say, and I admit it somewhat mysterious that this should be true, is that the life of the dead in Christ now in heaven is surpassingly wonderful. We can't say, because we don't know, precisely *how* it is so wonderful, but the Bible does make a point of comforting the bereaved and the dying with the fact that if anyone loved his life in this world, he will love it much more in heaven, *even as a soul without a body*. When the Lord told the thief on the cross that he would that day be

in Paradise – no matter his body being dumped in a common grave – he chose a word precisely for its connotations: beauty, peace, warmth, and pleasure. Paradise means precisely that: a place where beauty and pleasure combine to a degree they never can in this world.

When Paul, a man who accomplished as much in his life on this earth as any man who ever lived, said that to die is better by far, he was making the same point. Consider life at its very best in this world – and his was such a life of epoch-making accomplishment, of warm friendship, of adventure and excitement – the soul's life in heaven will be better than that *by far*, said Paul.

But that is hardly all. The saints in heaven – indeed any saint as soon as he or she dies – is finally done with sin. We will finally be rid of all of that selfishness and evil desire and small-mindedness toward others; all that has made us ashamed of ourselves; all that we have thought, said, and done, or failed to think, say, or do that has darkened our experience of life in this world. As we read in Hebrews 12, when Christians die they join the saints who have been made perfect in heaven. You may not think so now, but nothing will make your life happier than to be rid of your sin. Why you will scarcely recognize yourself! Your heart will be full of love and your words and your deeds finally all that they should be. It will be wonderful beyond words to finally be good, truly good, good all the way down to the bottom of yourself!

It hardly needs to be said that in this condition you will no longer experience the effects of evil or the spiritual and physical pain that is the result of evil. To be comforted at Abraham's side – as the Lord Jesus once described a man who had died and gone to heaven – is to be free of struggle and be happily at peace with God, with oneself, and with everyone else.

And, all of these features of life in Paradise supremely heightened by the immediate presence of the Lord. As Paul puts it here, to a great extent in this world we are *away from the Lord*; but in that world we will be *with him*. Indeed, John tell us that *we will become like him* – at least as much like him as mere creatures can become – because we shall see him as he is. As Ray Palmer admits in his fine hymn:

Jesus these eyes have never seen, that radiant form of thine;

The veil of sense hangs dark between, thy blessed face and mine.

But, as we have already sung, *when we are there*:

The King there in his beauty *without a veil* is seen;
If were a well-spent journey though seven deaths lay between.

If *that* is Magnum's life at this moment, as we believe it to be because of his confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the savior of sinners, then how happy all of us ought to be for him and how tempered our sorrows should be that we must now live apart from him.

Martin Luther poignantly and eloquently expressed the paradox of Christian grief and joy in the hour of the death of Christians when, holding in his arms the lifeless body of his 13 year old daughter Magdalena, he said, "You beloved little girl; you will rise and shine like the stars and the sun. How strange it is to know that she is at peace and all is well, and yet to be so sorrowful."

Now, I have no doubt that I have told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It would take me far too long to explain to you how I know that, with what arguments that conclusion may be demonstrated. Chief among them, of course, is the fact that the one who taught us what happens at death, what happens for believers and what happens for unbelievers, is the same one who himself rose from the dead on the third day after his resurrection. But I also know that however skeptical some of you may be about what I have said, it is a simple fact, easy to prove, that down-deep you believe it as well. And the reason I know that is that you live today, every day, all the time, thinking things, judging people, considering your own life in that way that suggests that you know that you are not a mere accident of nature; you know that your life is not meaningless; that the profoundly moral nature of your life and your conscience is not a fantasy, an illusion; that you know that what you do and how you live matters; and that, as the Scripture says, God has put eternity in your heart. Don't minimize the force of these arguments in your mind. In all of human history even the most powerful minds, the most influential philosophers have never been able to justify any of those convictions you have, that every human being has, if, in fact, our lives do not continue after death! As C.S. Lewis observed: "If I find in myself

desires which nothing in in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”

So let Magnum serve us all once more. Let him do us this last service. To set before us our future and to commend to us that future that awaits the dead in Christ, that happy interim where we live better than we have ever lived before while we await something still far better to be given us in due time.

You have, we have all lived our lives in this world as the homeless. We have been searching for and longing for home, the place where life as we know it ought to be is actually lived and enjoyed. So long as we are *at home* in the body, Paul reminds us, we cannot be finally *at home with the Lord*. That being so, for Christians, death is the greatest thing that ever happens or will happen to us. We say it boldly and without fear of contradiction. It must be so if to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Paul knew of what he was speaking. Believe him as Magnum did. I spoke of these things to him just hours before he died. I told him he was about to die, that he had nothing to fear, that he would soon be with the Lord, that he would soon be happier than he had ever been before. He couldn't speak but again and again he gave me *the thumbs up!*