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“We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord,” II Corinthians 5:8.

The Christian’s Hope at Death

Lesson Aim: To increase the believer’s assurance in the face of death.

L140. Date: May 1975. **Text:** II Corinthians 5:1-10.

Topic: Death: Of believers; Hope: In Christ.

“And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation,” Hebrews 9:27-28.

In a single sentence there is set forth the Bible doctrine of death. (1) Death is real: “it is appointed unto men once to die.” (2) Death is certain: “it is appointed.” (3) Death is universal: “unto men—mankind.” (4) Death is not the end of existence: “after this the judgment.” (5) Death is conquered: “Christ was once offered.” (6) Death will be overcome: “He shall appear the second time without sin unto salvation.” Thank God for showing the truth about the spectre of death!

Death was not inevitable in view of God's construction of the human body. With its amazing ability to replace dying cells with living ones, the body could potentially live forever. It was the entrance of sin into human experience which brought the curse of death (Genesis 3). The process of deterioration is faster than the process of recreation and permits death to come to the body. The human body, most intricate and amazing organism in the universe, is destined to death.

It is possible to have hope in the face of death. Such hope is bound up in the person of Jesus. “. . . **We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man . . . that through death he might destroy him that had the power of**

death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage,” Hebrews 9, 14, 15. Through His death, Jesus has taken the “sting” out of our death. Today's study aims to increase your assurance in the face of death. Thank God for what Jesus has done.

I. THE BELIEVER'S PRESENT CONDITION

Man's present condition is far less than ideal. He clings to it because he has no other alternative except to step through death to what is beyond. The Christian does not fear death because he knows what is on the other side. The non-Christian has no such hope; he draws back from death with terror of heart. Jesus makes believers able to say in truth, “. . . to depart, and to be with Christ . . . is far better,” Philippians 1:23.

The present body is a house which is perishing (verse 1). It is properly called an “earthly house” because it came from the dust of the earth and to the dust of earth it shall return (Genesis 3:19). It is a “fitted-for-earth” kind of body which can never enter heaven in its present constitution.

So temporary is the present body that it is called a “tabernacle” or “tent,” indicating that man inhabits it but briefly. Each man could say, “. . . **Shortly I must put off this my tabernacle . . .**” II Peter 1:14. All the Bible testimony agrees that man's days upon earth, even in his longest life span, are but few (Job 14:1). Since his sojourn here is but brief, men are given bodies which last only so long as they stay here.

The body he now has will be “dissolved.” Like a tent struck to the ground because the tenant is ready to move, so the body will fail and fall. It will one day be no more. A wise man takes precautions as to where he will live when the physical tent is no more.

The present body is a house of suffering (verse 2). The Christian's temporary home here will be replaced by a permanent home in heaven. With sighs of longing, he anticipates that heavenly inheritance. He is “earnestly desiring” to be clothed with the heavenly home. “. . . **Not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body,**” Romans 8:23. One's very sense of present incompleteness and temporariness upon earth creates a desire to “depart and be with the Lord, which is far better,” Philippians 1:23.

Physical suffering attends mental and spiritual pains in the present body. God promises that in the new home there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain: for the former things will be eternally

gone (Revelation 21:4). All that has caused anxiety, sorrow, or suffering here will be eternally absent there.

The present body is a house much inferior to that of the future body (verses 2-6). The Christian does not desire to die just to get rid of the present limited body. He does “get homesick for heaven” when he remembers how his mortality will be swallowed up and replaced by fullness of life. The present home of the Christian is inferior to the future home in several ways. (1) The present home is of the earth; the future home is in heaven. (2) The present home is temporary; the future home is eternal. (3) The present home is exposed to suffering; the future home is immune to suffering. (4) The present home is “absent from the Lord;” the future home is “present with the Lord.” Oh yes, the present home is much inferior to the future home for a believer!

How can one be sure the future is better than the present? Paul answered, “God has made us in such a way that our mortality may be swallowed up by spiritual life, and He has given us the indwelling Holy Spirit to guarantee that He will accomplish His intention concerning us.” Read verse 5!

II. THE BELIEVER'S ANTICIPATION

The heavenly body will be a perfect body (verse 1). It is described as “. . . a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” As the present body is a “fitted-for-earth body,” so the future body will be a “fitted-for-heaven” body.

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God because corruption cannot inherit incorruption. There shall come a day for Christians when the corruptible nature will be replaced by an incorruptible one—mortality will put on immortality—and then they will be able to enter fully into the Kingdom of God as the children of God.

The heavenly body will be an improved body (verse 2). Resurrection will come to the bodies of Christians who have died. Change will come to Christians who are living at the time Jesus returns. What change will there be in the body prepared for heaven? Incorruption will replace corruption. Glory will replace dishonor. Power will replace weakness. A spiritual body (a spirit-governed body) will replace the natural body (a soul-governed body). “. . . **As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly,**” I Corinthians 15:49. That will be an improvement beyond description.

The heavenly body will bask in the fullness of life (verse 4). The life

lived upon earth can be declared but “mortality”—that which is temporary and passing. The life to be lived in heaven will be life indeed! Comparing life here with life there, Paul declared that “mortality will be swallowed up of life” when believers get there. The saved have never really lived here in view of how they shall live there. Fullness of life is experienced only in the personal presence of God in heaven.

“. . . Whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord . . . We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord,” verses 6, 8. That will be real life, indeed!

The heavenly body will permit the saved to live in the personal presence of God (verses 6-8). What a privilege it will be to be “present with the Lord.” Imagine, at home with Him! That is what Jesus had in mind when he said, **“In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also,”** John 14:2, 3. That will be home!

A comparison of the tent with the house is very beautiful. . . . The tent is for pilgrimage. We can strike our tent and move away. . . . By and by it will not be a tent. It will be ‘an abiding place’ . . . at home with the Lord. It is a beautiful description of that life that lies beyond”—G. Campbell Morgan.

Heaven is beyond description. Revelation, chapters 21 and 22, describes it under such terms as “a beautiful city, a holy tabernacle, and a lovely garden.” Most important of all is the statement: **“. . . The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face . . . for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever,”** Revelation 22:3-5. Such is the heavenly home, waiting the Christian.

III. THE BELIEVER'S FIRM ASSURANCE

“I am as certain that I am going to heaven as if I were already there.” Does that sound like a rash statement? It is not. One may have absolute assurance about what follows death.

Assurance is based upon an understanding of the nature of death. Death is separation. Death of the body is separation of the spirit from the body. Death of the body does not mean death of the spirit. The body is the clothing which the spirit has worn while in the world. There is no more harm done to the spirit when the body is put off than is done to the body when its clothing is put off. For the Christian, death is a release and promotion not destruction.

Here is a man who has been working on his car. He is dressed in greasy clothing. He comes in from his work, removes his soiled clothing, washes himself, and puts on fresh, clean clothing to go out for a social occasion. He is the same man; he just changed clothing. In like manner, in death, the Christian just changes clothing (an earthly body for a heavenly body) without doing harm to himself.

Understand, too, that death is a doorway. The Christian passes through death. He does not abide in death. There is no sleeping of the spirit in unconscious existence until the resurrection. As a step carries one through a doorway from cold winds outside the house to warmth and love inside, so a step carries one through death from imperfect situations here to perfection there. That is why the Christian is confident and “willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord,” verse 8.

When the Christian dies, “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it,” Ecclesiastes 12:7. He does not go to the grave. Only the physical body can be buried. The believer's spirit—his real self—goes to the presence of God.

Assurance is based upon God's guarantee (verse 5). How can one be sure that is what happens? God has guaranteed it. How? God has guaranteed the Christian's safety beyond death in two ways: (1) by His infallible Word of explanation and promise and (2) by the “earnest” of the Spirit in believers. **“Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit,”** verse 5.

Two blessed truths are set forth for the believer's consolation. (1) God has made him in such a way that the spirit can be separated from the body without doing him harm. (2) God has put the Holy Spirit in believers as the “earnest” of His intention to complete eternal redemption in its fullest sense.

What is “the earnest of the Spirit”? “Earnest” means “down payment” or “guarantee.” In secular usage it refers to money paid down at the purchase of certain property to guarantee to the seller that the buyer intends to carry the purchase to its conclusion. The Bible speaks of the earnest, not of money but “of the Spirit.” That means the presence of the Holy Spirit, indwelling the believer, is God's guarantee that He will carry redemption to its final consummation.

There are three aspects of salvation. (1) In past tense, one was saved from the penalty of sin when he trusted Jesus as his personal Savior. The salvation of the soul is an eternally accomplished fact. (2) In the present tense, one is being saved from the power of sin as he is available to the Holy Spirit to give him victory in daily living. The salvation of the life is a daily reality. (3) In the future tense, he will be saved from the presence of sin

when the body is resurrected, glorified, and fitted for heaven. The salvation of the body is a blessed certainty. The presence of the Holy Spirit within is proof that the soul has been saved from the penalty of sin, the life is being saved from the power of sin, and the body will be saved from the presence of sin. Read II Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13, 14, and rejoice in the Christian's hope.

How will the Christian face death? He may “sorrow, even as others which have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13), but there is no reason for it. Concerning his departed loved ones who were saved, he can be sure that “. . . even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him,” I Thessalonians 4:14. Concerning his own hope, he can be sure “. . . the dead in Christ shall rise . . . caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air . . .” I Thessalonians 4:16, 17. What words of comfort concerning the resurrection! Between death and the resurrection the Christian dead are “absent from the body” and “present with the Lord,” II Corinthians 5:8. Blessed truth! That is the Christian's assurance at death.

“Wherefore comfort one another with these words,” I Thessalonians 4:18.

Questions

1. What is death?
2. What does Hebrews 9:27, 28 teach concerning death?
3. Why are men in bondage to the fear of death?
4. Why is the physical body called a tabernacle?
3. What indicates the temporariness of the physical body?
6. What kind of body does the Christian anticipate?
7. How can the body be put off without harm to the spirit?
8. How do we know a deceased Christian is in the conscious presence of God?
9. What is the “earnest” of the Spirit?
10. How can you share the blessing of this study to help someone else?