

BEYOND THE END

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the great questions which all of us has to face -- and all of us do face it even though it may be in the privacy of our own thoughts -- is, "What is waiting for me when I die?" There is a new interest in that subject today. Many books are coming out, explorations are being made, even scientific studies attempted in this field, though it is very difficult to see how science can probe in this area at all.

As you examine the answers that are being given, there are really three categories of them, and only three.

First, there are those who say that when you die nothing at all happens. You simply pass out of existence. Like a candle going out, your life gutters out into darkness; there is nothing left, no experience, no feeling, no reaction, no knowledge. Men, like animals, perish; they simply cease to exist, and that is the end of it.

Almost all who endorse an atheistic philosophy of life attempt to hold that view. The only trouble with it, of course, is its absolute despair. There is no hope for meaningful development or experience. Human personality with all its possibilities and wonders is ended, and there is no hope at the end. The result, of course, of a life with no hope is the spreading of existential despair throughout our present existence. We see this widely on every hand.

This view of life has never been described in more eloquent terms, perhaps, than these words from Lord Bertrand Russell:

One by one as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark.

Those words reflect the despair that always grips the heart when anyone with that point of view contemplates the end of his earthly existence. Everything is "now," and people are urged to live for the present because there is no other life to come.

Then there is another category of answers, one which virtually says that when you come to the end of your life anything can happen. In fact there is such a wide range of answers, the possibilities are so broad that you, in effect, can pay your money and take your choice. The trouble with that, of course, is that it is all based on wishful thinking, on, perhaps, demonic delusion, upon the uncertain and very controversial experiences of people who claim to have died and returned to earth, or even upon old wives' myths and fables that have been around for generations.

Much is being written in this area today, but it is all based upon a "grave" uncertainty. The answers are so contradictory that it is clear that nobody knows what he is talking about. In many cases, much of the so called evidence is based upon what the Scriptures would call "deceitful spirits," who deliberately deceive men and women into thinking there are experiences to come. But these are not real or genuine or based upon reality.

Sometimes, as I have suggested, these answers come from the evidence of people who claim to have died and then returned to life again. But how anyone could put any confidence in the testimony of somebody whose mind is hardly in touch with reality at all and whose body is rapidly disintegrating is difficult for me to see. That category of answer, therefore, always means there is no security no certainty about the life to come. There may be such a life, but no one really knows.

The third category, of course, is the Christian answer, the answer of the Word of God, based upon the teaching of the only man who, as far as history records, has ever clearly, openly, and definitely returned from death. This man taught again the very ones he had taught before he died. He not only conquered death in others but ultimately conquered it in himself, and he has given us a great word of security and surely to rest

upon. He sent his apostles to tell the good news that in Jesus Christ there is a certain future of glory and peace awaiting, but for those without him, a future of endless frustration, of pain and regret.

So in this passage from Second Corinthians, beginning with Verse 16 of Chapter 4 and running through the opening verses of Chapter 5, the Apostle Paul now lifts his eyes from the experience he is going through at the moment to the hope that lies beyond. He introduces it with that very characteristic word we have seen all through this letter, this great cry of encouragement and hope in Verse 16:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. {2 Cor 4:16-18 RSV}

Here is the great cry, "We do not lose hope." There is a reason for hope, not only coming from our present experience of the grace of God (as Paul has been describing it), but also as we look to the future we do not lose hope.

Then he gives three great reasons why he has such a hope in the hour of death. First, Verse 16,

**Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.
{2 Cor 4:16 RSV}**

That gives him hope. It is true, he says, that the outward man is perishing. Now we need to clearly understand that there is a difference between the "outward" man and the "old" man that you read about in Scripture:

The "old" man, of course, is what the Bible calls the "flesh," the evil moral nature we inherited from a fallen forefather, Adam, to which we died when we came into Christ. It is no longer us. It once was, but no longer. It is still present in us to tempt us, but as an alien to which we are no longer identified.

But the "outward" man that Paul speaks of here is the body and the mind, which he says are slowly falling apart. We can all give testimony to that. I have noticed that newspaper print gets smaller and smaller all the time. And I cannot tell what is going on around me unless somebody reads aloud to me -- which does not help much because they all talk in such a low voice. I have noticed too that people are younger than they used to be when I was their age, and people my own age are considerably older than I am. I ran into one of my college classmates the other day. He had changed so much he did not even recognize me!

We simply have to face the fact that the outward man is deteriorating, growing weak and feeble, and subject to much groaning and agony. "Well, that is what is happening to me too," Paul says, "but I don't get discouraged, because the inner man is being renewed day by day." The "inner" man, of course, is the "real" me. It is the human spirit inside that has its conscious expression in the soul, that unique character, that combination of soul and spirit that marks mankind as different from the animals. Paul says that his experience is that that is daily being renewed.

The word he uses is, "made new," "made over afresh." He is speaking of that kind of inner stimulation of mind and spirit that keeps him triumphant, rejoicing, optimistic, faithful, trusting, expectant, as he lives day by day, even though the outward things, his body and his mind, are gradually falling apart. That is the hope of the believer. Paul says the very fact of that is testimony to us that we are being inwardly prepared for something great to come.

In Romans 12 he describes this as being "aglow with the Spirit," {Rom 12:11b RSV}. It is great to meet people who are "aglow with the Spirit." Even though their physical man is undergoing great struggle and difficulty, their inner man is alive and encouraged, expectant of what God is doing. Do you meet the day that way? Have you learned to rise above the circumstances with that inner renewal of the spirit, by the Holy Spirit, that keeps you optimistic and rejoicing in the midst of the pressures and the problems of daily life?

Now what is the basis for this kind of renewal? Paul gives it to us in Verse 17: (This is also the second great reason for our hope for the future.)

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}

Every now and then you run into a verse of Scripture that is so full of possibilities, the language so suggestive that you can ponder it and contemplate it for hours at a time. This is such a verse to me.

What does "an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" mean? What could that be describing? The amazing thing is that Paul links it directly to the afflictions and the struggles of our present time. That has helped me a great deal, and I hope it helps you.

What it is really saying is, there is a direct tie between the affliction and the glory. The one is preparing for the other. We get this intimation in many parts of Scripture:

- In Romans 8:17 {RSV} Paul says, "we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."
- In Ephesians there are similar references to the fact that if our time here has included affliction and trouble and hardship, as it does for every believer, it will therefore make even more sure the fact that there is a marvelous glory yet to come, {cf, Eph 3:13-16}.

That means that no matter how great the trial may seem to us to be, two things are always true of it:

One, compared with what is coming, it is relatively slight. That is what Paul says: "This 'slight' momentary affliction." Now, if that was all you ever read of Paul, you would be tempted to say, "Obviously he didn't have to go through what I have to go through. This Paul must have had an easy time of it. I sure would like to have been an apostle if all they had to go through was a 'slight momentary affliction.' He ought to live with my mother-in-law!"

But, of course, that is not all we know of Paul. In Chapter 11 of this very letter, he goes through a long list of his afflictions and there is nothing like it in the annals of literature. Nobody has ever gone through more than Paul, other than our Lord himself. He speaks of being beaten five times, of being beaten with a rod three times, of being thrown into jail many times, of enduring hunger, thirstings and fastings, of hardship, shipwreck, dangers and perils on every side. All this was part of his experience, yet he sums it all up in that wonderful way, "this slight momentary affliction." In Romans 8:18 {RSV} he puts it, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us." Here again, this is that incomparable eternal weight of glory which is yet to come. It boggles the mind. It is something that is beyond description, Paul says.

C. S. Lewis has a great message, which I hope you will read in its entirety, based upon this very passage. It is called *The Weight of Glory*, and in it is a passage that has always intrigued me. He says:

We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already. You can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more -- something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words -- to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

And then he adds these words:

The door on which we have all been knocking all our lives will open at last.

Our present sufferings are preparing us for something so incomparable, so amazing, so marvelous that there

are no words to describe it. That means that no trial, no pain, no isolation, no heartache, no loneliness, no weakness or failure, no sense of being put aside is without significance. All of it is playing its part in accomplishing God's work in your life and the lives of others. It is building for us an incomparable weight of glory. I do not know what else to say about it.

How do we know that is true? The answer is in Verse 18, where we also have the third reason for our hope. Paul says,

... because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. {2 Cor 4:18 RSV}

It has always been difficult for men to believe that there are unseen realities, invisible to human eye and investigation, but, nevertheless, very real and very important. Yet perhaps no generation of man ought to understand this more easily and with such certainty than we do today, because science is saying the same thing.

Science agrees with the Bible in telling us that behind the visible, material things that we see and measure and taste and touch and feel, are invisible forces which no one can see or taste or touch or feel. That is what science itself tells us. Behind this visible piano here with its material appearance of wood, science says there is nothing but motion by infinitesimal particles traveling at such tremendous speed they give the impression of being solid. The piano is made mostly of space, and if we knew how to do it we could throw a chair through it. There is so much space there that neither would touch the other.

Our minds grasp that, but our emotions struggle with it -- because it seems to be contrary to our experience. Well, for heaven's sake, I hope by now we are learning not to trust experience. It is a very unsure guide, isn't it? The things we see are passing, changing; they are ephemeral. All the events that happen in our life today will tomorrow be as out-of-date as yesterday's newspaper, all of them changed. They are like a movie; they are shadowy reflections of real things.

What are the real things? Paul calls them, "the things that are unseen," the invisible forces at work, of which the world, by the way, is almost totally unaware. The Bible tells us what they are:

- There is the Word of God, that most unchangeable of all things, that divine utterance from the divine mouth that calls into existence everything that is. God spoke and it was, and that Word can never be altered. "Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away" {Matt 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33 KJV}, Jesus said. The Word is the one reliable thing in all the unreliable universe.
- We understand by the Word of God that all things are held together by him. He is the Creator and the supporter of all things. Our eyes, therefore, must look beyond the visible to the invisible things.
- We learn that there are angels, both good and bad, working both for and against human beings. We are caught up in a great invisible conflict in which we are both under attack and supported by invisible hands. We labor and live in the midst of that battle so that, as Paul could put it, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places," {Eph 6:12 KJV}. They are the invisible forces that produce the events that are recorded day by day in the headlines of our newspaper. We must learn to read the newspaper with that in mind and understand what is going on behind the scenes of world events.
- Ultimately, of course, there is God himself. Invisible to the human eye, the Lord Jesus, Lord of earth and heaven and all the created universe, and though we do not see him yet we love him and follow him. He is in control of history. As we approach the end of life these things will become more and more significant to us.

When D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, was dying, his last words were, "Earth is receding. Heaven is

approaching. This is my crowning day." That is the utterance of faith. That is looking at reality. Nothing is more encouraging to me than to realize that when I believe the Word of God, I am becoming more and more realistic. That is what life is all about.

Now, in the first five verses of Chapter 5, we have a further description of the nature of our hope. Here we learn a little more detail about this "weight of glory beyond all comparison." The apostle describes it this way:

For we know [Notice the word of certainty there. Not "we guess," "we hope," "we think," but we know] **that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. {2 Cor 5:1-4 RSV}**

What marvelous words! It is obvious that here is a description of the present body of flesh and bones we live in contrasted with the same body, risen and glorified by the activity of the Spirit of God. When you compare these words with those in First Corinthians 15, you can see that Paul is talking here about the resurrected body, that body we shall receive in which he says mortality will be "swallowed up" {1 Cor 15:54} in immortality.

He uses the same terminology here. It is the body, he says, that we shall enter "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, ... we shall be changed" {1 Cor 15:52}, and this new body will be given to us. Here he is describing, and contrasting, the two:

The present body, he says, is like a tent. We are living a temporary experience, as people do who live in a tent. I once visited a family who were living in a tent while they were waiting for their home to be finished. It was very temporary; they were uncomfortable; they could not wait for the real habitation to be completed so they could move in.

I sometimes feel like that in this tent of my earthly body. I am sure you do too. A tent is not very satisfying. The stakes being to loosen, the poles begin to sag, the tent itself sags in various spots, the cold penetrates, and it is not very comfortable. Some of us feel that way as we grow older. But we are looking forward to the resurrection body, the permanent building, that which God had in mind when he made us in the beginning, the permanent dwelling place, designed by God without any human help, "a house not made with hands." Nothing human produces it or adds to it; nothing that the undertaker does while our body is being prepared for the grave adds a single thing to what God will do that will produce the body of glory that is to come.

The point Paul makes is that it is already ours in eternity. "We have," he says. Notice the present tense: Not, "We will have," "we have a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens," already there, waiting for us to put on. "In this present one," he says, "we groan, we long" for something better.

Don't you feel that way? How many of you have had to say, when you wanted to do something, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," {cf, Matt 26:41}? We wish we could but we cannot, because our bodies will not let us. We long for something better.

Paul is very careful here. He says, "I don't want you to misunderstand. I don't want to simply die and float off to be with the Lord in a bodiless existence. I don't want to be disembodied. We don't want to be ghosts, spooks, haunting cemeteries to frighten people." That all arises from the deceitful spirits.

The phenomena that many people are investigating today that have to do with haunted houses and all these other things are really the activities of demons. People who deal with these matters ought to be aware of that fact.

But the apostle says that this new body, the resurrected body, is an experience of not being disembodied, but being further embodied. He changes the idiom from the building to the body and says it is like being further

clothed, so that it is more than we have at the moment. If you feel like you are clothed by being in a body, then in that body you will feel even more clothed, "further clothed." Then he uses this expression, "swallowed up by life," not by death. It is a further experience of fulfillment and satisfaction.

In the light of that, Verse 5 is very reassuring, for Paul goes on to say:

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, {2 Cor 5:5a RSV}

No one wants to float around in bodiless existence. The human spirit rejects and resists that idea. Paul says your actual experience will be this: "You will be further clothed upon at death as believers. You will have a new body. That is a weight of glory beyond all description and it will come instantly, for the One who has prepared us for this very thing is God."

People at this point ask, "How can this be? When our loved ones die we take them out and bury them or they are cremated. If you go out to the grave decades later you can dig it up and the body is still there. How could those people who died receive a resurrection body when their bodies are still lying unresurrected in the grave?"

Many explanations have been offered for this, but there are basically three of them:

- One says, "We really are disembodied. When we die we go to be with the Lord in spirit, but our bodies are buried in the grave so we have to wait incomplete until the body is raised. It may take centuries, but we are just waiting around in bodiless existence." In the light of this passage, that teaching cannot be accepted. Paul says he does not want to be disembodied, he does not expect to be, and he who has prepared him for the very opposite is God himself.
- Then there is another suggestion that what happens when we die is that both our soul and our spirit go to sleep within the body, and there is no sense of communication or experience. As often happens when we physically go to sleep, we wake up and we do not know how long we have been asleep. Time is eclipsed, and that this is what happens. We may sleep for centuries in the body and when we are wakened at the resurrection it is to us as though nothing has happened in the meantime.

But the problem with that suggestion is that it does not do justice to the expressions in scripture that speak of being with the Lord immediately. "While we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord," Paul says in the very next verse. But to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord. In Philippians he speaks of departing and "being with Christ; which is far better," {Phil 1:23 KJV}. Every suggestion is one of an immediate access to that.

- There are some who propose still a third alternative. They say that God gives us in the meantime an intermediate, a temporary body to use in eternity until our real one gets there -- a kind of heavenly bathrobe which we wait around in while our real one is getting back from the cleaners. But once again there is not a vestige of Scripture to support that. There is no reference to an intermediate body.

What Paul means, of course, is that when we leave this body we also leave time. Our problem comes because we do not do that in our thinking. We project time into eternity and say it is the same thing going on forever, but it is not. Anyone who studies carefully in this area has to distinguish sharply between the conditions of eternity and those of time. The characteristic of time is that we are all locked into the same rigid sequence of events. We all experience 24-hour days because on this earth it takes that long for the earth to rotate on its axis and nobody can speed it up. Some of you cannot by choice live 12 hour days while the rest of us have to make out with 24.

But in eternity there is no past or future, there is simply one great present moment. Therefore, the events we experience in eternity are never anything we have to wait for, they are always what we are ready for, what we are spiritually prepared for. This passage says that God has been spiritually preparing us for something, and that event is the coming of the Lord for his own, the return of Christ for his church, for each individual believer. Therefore, the Scriptures clearly teach that when a believer dies, what he experiences immediately is the coming of the Lord for his own. Paul describes that event in First Thessalonians 4, "the Lord himself shall

descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God," {1 Th 4:16a KJV}. With him will come all those who have been dead in Christ so that it will appear to those left on earth as though they had already been raised first when in actuality we are all raised together, "and so shall we ever be with the Lord," {1 Th 4:17b KJV}. This is the experience that awaits us immediately.

Verse 5 goes on to say that we have already tasted this in our spirit although not yet in the body, because the body is locked into time. It is unredeemed and unresurrected, but in the spirit, in the inner life, we have already tasted the conditions. That is why Paul says:

... who [God] has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. {2 Cor 5:5b RSV}

That very refreshing and renewing that we daily experience from the Spirit, of which Paul has spoken earlier, is that guarantee. There is something happening to us. The old life is deteriorating, the outward man is falling apart, but the inner man is getting richer and greater and warmer and more loving and anticipating the future with increased expectation. That is what Paul is talking about. That is a taste of glory.

I have always loved the writings of that dear old Scottish Covenanter, that great man of God, Samuel Rutherford, who lived in the 17th century. His writings come down to us in the form of letters he wrote to many while he was himself a prisoner for Christ's sake in Scotland. Some of those letters are very expressive of wonderful faith. Ann Cousins has gone back through all of them and culled out certain phrases and idioms that he used and put them together in a song that I have always loved. This was D.L. Moody's favorite song. It goes like this:

The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of heaven breaks,
The summer morn we've sighed for,
The fair sweet morn awakes.

Dark, dark has been the midnight,
But dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's land.

Oh Christ he is the fountain,
The deep sweet well of love,
The streams on earth I've tasted
More deep I'll drink above.

There to an ocean fullness,
His mercy does expand
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's land.

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear bridegroom's face,
I will not gaze at glory
But on my King of grace.

Not on the crown he giveth,
But on his pierced hands.
The Lamb is all the glory
of Immanuel's land.

It is a great hope, isn't it? It is a hope to nerve us in our present stress. If we have to go through struggle, we must remember always that the struggle, though it is God's choice for us now, is part of the immense privilege we have of sharing his sufferings, that we may also "reign with him" forever. What a hope.

Prayer

How we thank you, Lord, that it is true that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. Help us then to return to the afflictions, whatever they may be, with renewed thanksgiving that we are privileged to share them, to undergo them for his dear sake, for we are called to speak and live in this 20th century age for the sake of him who died for us, who loved us, who gave himself for us that he might live within us and manifest his presence and his life in this present day and age. We thank you, Lord, when that moment of glory breaks upon our startled hearts, we shall at last see him whom we have long loved and served. We pray in his name, Amen.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-5:5

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Title: Beyond the End

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Series: Studies in Second Corinthians

Scripture: 2 Cor 4:16 - 5:5

Message No: 9

Catalog No: 3684

Date: November, 1979

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