

Strength Through Weakness
v. Life After Death
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

A contemporary writer has described death as a “conspiracy of silence... the universal repression of our day muffled up in illusion”. Part of the problem is confusion. People are not sure what happens when we die, so in the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet “death doth make cowards of us all.”

In stark contrast to this, Paul moves life after death from the realm of conjecture and confusion to established fact. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of our resurrection to follow in time. For Paul this is no pious myth, escapist superstition, but historical fact attested to by hundreds of eye-witnesses including Paul himself. Granted the passage before us is a difficult one, its interpretation disputed: is Paul dealing with the ‘intermediate state’ of believers upon death or the “Parousia”, the great day when Christ returns? However, the difference is a matter of degree about which we can afford to be agnostic.

Woody Allen’s sardonic quip “I don’t mind dying, I just don’t want to be around when it happens” and the poet Dylan Thomas’ “rage, rage against the dying of the light”, is countered by Robert Browning’s “Grow old with me, the best is yet to be”. Moreover John Donne’s response to the Great Plague of London in the 17th C when thousands perished is to the point: “Death be not proud, though some have called Thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so. One short sleep past, we wake eternally. And death shall be no more, death thou shall die”. He was simply paraphrasing the apostle Paul, “Where O death is your victory. Where O death is your sting. Thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:55,57).

Paul uses three different metaphors to describe our experience of death in 2 Corinthians 5: a tent, a building and clothing. He tends to mix his metaphors, adding to the challenge of interpretation. Moreover the context in which he wrote is different from ours. So care is required in unpacking their meaning and implications. In short, a tent is temporary accommodation dismantled once no longer required. A building is a permanent place. However, clothing is a bit more nuanced, viz a physical body has to be re-clothed as a spiritual body. Paul does not subscribe to the Platonic view of mere immortality of the soul. He comes down squarely on the resurrection of the body. Nor does he promote ‘soul sleep’ as some suggest. The question remains: when does the believer receive a resurrection body like that of Christ. The traditional view, to which I subscribe, is at the Parousia, when Christ returns. However, no less than the thoroughly Evangelical scholar Murray Harris in his work “Raised Immortal” suggests otherwise viz, when the believer dies and enters the nearer presence of God.

In short: the bereaved do not mourn without hope, the old can die with peace, the young can live with purpose. Why? Because, “We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us” (2 Cor 4:14) and “We eagerly await a Saviour from [heaven] who will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (Philippians 3:20,21) There is no more revolutionary truth in the Bible than that!

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