

Body & Soul after Death: What Comfort!

1 Cor 15:35-58; LD 22 – Q & A 57 & 58

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 4 April 2021, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Introduction

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

In both questions of LD 22, the word “comfort” is used, “*How does ‘the resurrection of the body’ ... how do the words ‘life everlasting’ comfort you?*”

And, it’s true, when we’re dealing with death – death of a loved one or even the reality of our own death – we do need to be comforted.

You see, some 40 years ago, when my mother died, one godly neighbour remarked, “Pieter, death is something that should never have existed!”¹

And you & I *know* that!

And one commentator has described this pain well. Says he, “At death, body & soul are wrenched apart.”²

Well, in my lifetime, up until now, at least fifteen of my closest relatives have passed away: grandfathers & grandmothers, my mother & father, some uncles and aunts, and my brother.

And, looking back, it was the comfort, hope and assurance given to us by God through the fact of the resurrection, which strengthened us every time!

You see, the answers to Question 57 & 58 do not only explain what happens to my soul & body after death, but, based upon Scripture, it also makes the bold statement that *that dreaded situation* at my deathbed, when body & soul are torn apart, will one day be reversed! – Body & soul will be united again!! For this, we have the example and the power (!) of our resurrected Lord Jesus! (1 Cor 15:20).³

What comfort, believer! Both body and soul will live forever!

This sermon has two points:

- Soul after Death
- Body after Death

Soul After Death

Some Christian groups, among which our Seventh-Day-Adventist brothers/sisters, believe that when the believer dies, his soul sleeps until the coming of the Lord Jesus. In other words, the soul is aware of nothing around it.

Well, if these bothers & sisters were right, then the souls of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob would still be sleeping after all these nearly 4,000 years; ...

¹ Oom Pieter Jordaen: August 1980 when, at the age of 56, my mother died of motor neuron disease.

² cf. Kuyvenhoven (1988:146)

³ Also Phil 3:20-21 *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

And 1 Jn 3:2 *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*

.... then the souls of the apostles, including that of Paul who so *desired to depart & be with Christ*,⁴ would after 2,000 years still not be alert; yes, still not be with the Lord!⁵ Congregation, these brothers/sisters have built most of their argument/doctrine upon a literal interpretation of the Hebrew way of talking about death.

You see, the ancient Hebrews, had a *euphemistic* way of expressing the fact that someone has died. They used to say that so and so *has fallen asleep*.

In many cultures people use euphemisms – “nicer ways” of describing negative (or “bad”) things, e.g., when someone is drunk it would be said that “he looked too deep into the bottle” or that “he lifted the elbow too high.”

Well, the Hebrew idiom, “He/She has fallen asleep” simply means, “He/She died.”

It has nothing to do with “soul-sleeping.”

In fact, several Bible passages speak *against* the idea of soul-sleeping:

- our Lord Jesus confirmed the living of the soul after death, when He spoke to the Sadducees who had difficulties with this concept. This is what our Lord said: ***“But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ³² ‘I am (not “I was”) the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”***⁶

In other words, our Lord was saying to the Sadducees, “At this moment as I’m speaking to you, Abraham, Isaac & Jacob who died long ago, are alive & alert with the Father in heaven,” for, says Christ, ***“God is not the God of the dead but of the living!”***

- Another passage supporting the idea of an alert soul immediately after death, is our Lord’s words to the forgiven criminal on the cross next to Him, ***“I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise.”***⁷

Now, I realise that the original Geek manuscripts did not use commas & full stops, etc.

So, where should the comma come in this sentence of our Lord?

Did Christ put the comma *after* “today” or *before* “today?” Did He say, ***“I tell you the truth today, you will (eventually) be with Me in paradise”***?

Or did our Lord mean, ***“I tell you the truth, today (and no later) you will be with Me in paradise”***?

Well, it was certainly the latter.

You see, when you look at all the other “I-tell-you-the-truth” statements of Christ, He never added a time-indicator, e.g.,

- Christ never said to Nicodemus, ***“I tell you the truth today,⁸ no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”***⁹ No, instead, He said... (cf. footnote 9).
- Neither did our Lord say to Nathanael on that day that He called him, ***“I tell you the truth today, you shall see heaven open, and the angels***

⁴ cf. Phil 1:23

⁵ Also cf. Kuyvenhoven (1988:147)

⁶ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Mt 22:31-32 (Emphasis mine).

⁷ Lk 23:43, also cf. Reymond (1998:423) and Berkhof (1959:676-689). On the comma in this verse, there is the valid point made that in all our Lord’s “Truly, truly” sayings, He never gives a time indication so as if to say, “Truly, truly I say to you today, you will ...”

⁸ or “this evening”

⁹ John 3:3 ***In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”***⁹ (NIV 1984).

*of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*¹⁰ No, instead, He said... (cf. footnote 10).

- Nor did Christ say in the Sermon on the Mount, ***I tell you the truth today, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.***¹¹

My brother & sister, in none of our Lord's "I-tell-you-the-truth-sayings" did He use the word "today" (or any other time-indication for that matter). So, there on the cross, comforting the forgiven criminal next to Him, there was no reason for Christ to add the word "today" if He just wanted to say, "I tell you the truth *today*, after your soul-sleeping you will be with Me in heaven." Rather: it makes only sense that Christ meant, ***I tell you the truth, today*** (not later) ***you will be with Me in paradise.***¹²

So, here is the comforting news from God's word: all indications are that after death the believer's soul goes immediately & without delay to God in heaven.

Thus, the catechism is totally biblical when it says "... *my soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head ...*"¹³

An old Dutch commentator says it beautifully, "The minute we close the eyes of our loved ones ... their last cry goes over into their first psalm!"¹⁴ Look, did not this happen with Stephen, the first Christian Martyr, who died on his knees while already seeing his Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father! He died ... while seeing Christ!¹⁵

-----0000000-----

So, until the Lord returns, our souls (without our bodies – yes, our *disembodied souls*) will be with Him.

In a way, one could compare this mode of existence with the mode in which the angels are living – souls/spirits without anything touchable.

-----0000000-----

¹⁰ Jn 1:51 *He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man"* (NIV 1984).

¹¹ Mt 5:18–19 *I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

¹² A third Bible passage against soul-sleeping is in our Lord Jesus' account of Lazarus & the rich man. You see if soul-sleeping was correct, how could our Lord then have pictured Lazarus in the presence of Abraham, enjoying heaven with a full awareness of being glorified; and how could our Lord then have pictured the rich man making known his horrible position, in fully understandable terms?

¹³ Answer 57

¹⁴ " ... van stonden aan: zodra wij de oogen der onzen toedrukken, is hun ziel in de heerlijkheid, hun laatste snik gaat over in den eersten psalm ..." (Knap, 1915:223). J.J. Knap. 1915. *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus toepasselijk verklaard voor de gemeente des Heeren. Groningen : J.B. Wolters' U.M.*

¹⁵ " ... ja, wie op de knieën sterft, stijgt regelrecht naar den Hooge" (Knap, *ibid*:224).

My brother & sister, see why God's loved-ones can have peace in their deepest sorrow at the grave?

The world stares into the grave, but the believer looks upward. He seeks the living away from the dead. Our loved-ones, who died in Christ, are immediately with the Lord Jesus, & that is by far the best!

Which brings us to the second half of the sermon:

Body after Death

We have just seen that the believer who dies has his *soul* immediately in heaven (just as Christ's human soul was immediately in heaven when he died on the cross).

Yet, the Bible promises an even fuller afterlife – one in which not only the *soul* lives forever, but eventually also the *body*!

You see, various non-Christian religions rubbish the *body* and regard only the *soul* to be eternal.¹⁶

They see the soul as being kept captive in this life by a sinful body – a bit like a bird which is held captive in its cage.

So, they say, it's only when someone dies that the “cage” (i.e., the body) releases the soul. But the Bible has astonishing news – it says “No!” The *body, too*, will live eternally.

For that to happen, the dead body –yes even the destroyed, cremated or decayed body – will have to be brought back to life (resurrected),

Having said that, I know of a young man who, some forty years ago, disappeared in the sea. He has never been found. So, it is believed that he was taken by a shark.

Now, whatever happened to that man's body – that's not too difficult for the Lord to restore that body back to life!

And here's what our New-Testament passage says: Our bodies will be restored. However, they will not again be perishable but imperishable, i.e., glorified, like Christ's body is glorified!

After all, is it not so (does the Bible not tell us) that the believer's body and that of his Lord are tied up the one with the other?

In what way?

Well, in this way: if someone (e.g., my agnostic friend) denies that Jesus' body rose from the dead, then that person will also deny that the bodies of believers will be raised from the dead.

Similarly, if someone denies that our bodies will be raised from the dead, then he will also deny that Christ Jesus rose from the dead.

My brother & sister, on this our New-Testament passage is very clear: the believer's body will be raised & glorified just like Christ's.¹⁷

This means that your/my soul which was wrenched from the body when we died, will, when the Lord returns, be reunited with our body – only, this time it will be in a *glorified* body!

My brother & sister, this bodily resurrection on the pattern of that of our Lord Jesus, means several things:

¹⁶ cf. the ancient Greek & Roman religions and various other non-Christian religions. Also cf. Kuyvenhoven (1988:146)

¹⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 15:22-23 *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* ²³ *But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*

- That we will be recognisable, just as our risen Lord was recognisable by those who had known Him;¹⁸
- We will be able to defy the laws of nature: go through closed doors (like Jesus did), and go up or down without gravity interfering;
- We will be able to eat (like our risen Lord did), yet not be dependent on food all the time.
- We will never have any pain, ageing, sickness or hospitals;
- Our new bodies, like His,¹⁹ will never again die.

Mind-bending! Beautiful!

The suffering Christian – the one on life-support in hospital, or the frail elderly, cloistered to a chair/bed in a care home may well pray, “I know everything happens in Your time, Lord. But I wish I was with You already!”

And they will not be the first believers to pray that prayer.

Did not Job already pray it when he cried out: ***I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!***²⁰

But hang on! To everyone who longs to be in the state of the resurrected body, we must say: you only get to that state in one of two ways:

- either at Christ’s return when your body will be changed in an instant (as our New-Testament passage says),²¹
- or when you die.

After all, our NT passage does say, “... ***flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.***”²²

You see, dying, says the Apostle Paul, is like a seed falling into the ground where, hidden from the human eye, it is submitted to great changes, and finally comes up as a plant – new & glorious!²³

Two things from this picture are obvious:

- what comes out is quite different to what went in;
- and, before the seed can become a plant, it must die (cease to be a seed)

My brother & sister,

If our Lord Jesus does not return in your/my lifetime, you & I must die!

Now normally, before a person dies, he ages!

All of us do!

And I love how the Christian author describes it,

¹⁸ Cf. the disciples, the women, and John on the Island of Patmos (Rv 1:12ff).

¹⁹ cf. Rm 6:9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

²⁰ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Job 19:25-27

²¹ 1 Cor 15:51-53 *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* ⁵³ *For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.*

²² 1 Cor 15:50

²³ cf. 1 Cor 15:50 & 42b-44a

“Ageing is ... one of the ways by which God keeps us headed homeward.” (And I, too, am reminded of this, every time I look in the mirror).

We can’t change the process, but we can change our attitude.”

Says this author, “Here is a thought. What if we looked at the ageing body as we look at the growth of a tulip?”

You see, “Tulip lovers rejoice the minute the Tulip bulb weakens. ‘Watch that one,’ they say. ‘It’s about to blossom.’”²⁴

My brother & sister, could it be that the more our bodies weaken,²⁵ the more the angels can envisage our home-coming?

The message is clear: our bodies are weak and, in this state, very temporary!

But Answer 58 (LD 22) describes the comfort in the message of “life everlasting” in the following way:

Even as I already now experience in my heart the beginning of eternal joy,²⁶ so after this life I will have perfect blessedness such as no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has ever imagined; a blessedness in which to praise God eternally.²⁷

Congregation,

Do you love the risen Lord Jesus?

If you do, then you can rejoice in the last part of 1 Cor 15:54 “... ***Death has been swallowed up in victory.***”

AMEN (2,210 words excluding footnotes)

²⁴ cf. Lucado, Max. 2001. *Traveling light: releasing the burdens you were never intended to bear*. Nashville, TE : Thomas Nelson. ISBN-13: 978-0-8499-1345-7 p.155-156.

²⁵ Cf. 1 Cor 15:43, “...*it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.*”

²⁶ Rm 14:17 ***For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone.***

²⁷ Jn 17:3 ***Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent;*** 1 Cor 2:9 ***However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”***