

# The State of Man After Death

1 Cor 15:35-58 & WCF 32.1

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 21 April 2019, 16:30  
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due  
acknowledgement)<sup>1</sup>

## Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ

Today is Resurrection Sunday

This morning we were reminded of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead – that, on that day of His resurrection,

- Peter & John saw the evidence Jesus had left behind in his tomb, i.e. His grave cloths and headcloth left tidily, suggesting that He did not first unwrap the grave cloths, but that He rose through them.<sup>2</sup>
- Then, still that same morning, He appeared to Mary Magdalene in the tomb garden
- Again, still that same day – toward late afternoon – He appeared to the Emmaus travellers, and...
- Again, still on the same day – in the evening – He came through a locked door and appeared to the disciples and the Emmaus Travellers who were with them in the same room.
- Then, a week later, He appeared again to the disciples and Thomas who was now with them.
- Then, before His ascension back into heaven, He appeared to more than five-hundred people at once<sup>3</sup> – and often again to the disciples, even at His ascension, when they saw Him go up into heaven.
- Lastly, He also appeared to the Apostle Paul on Paul's way to Damascus where Paul wanted to go persecute the followers of Christ.

So, my brother & sister, the Bible gives us an ample number of facts upon which, by God's grace, we believe that our Lord Jesus really did rise from the dead!

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. III (chapters 23-33 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 281p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Burge, G. M. (2000). *John* (pp. 549–577). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House for, *"The scene, then, is not chaotic or confused. Rather, something purposeful has transpired here. If someone had simply stolen Jesus' body, surely the clothes would be missing, or at least strewn about the floor. But here is a scene in which the body is missing but the clothes appear undisturbed. Jesus' body has simply left them behind."*

For the same interpretation, also cf. RC Sproul's audio sermon *Resurrection* on Jn 20:1-18 at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/resurrection-john/>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 15:6

Well, now that we know and believe that, what does His resurrection from the dead mean for our own deaths?

Yes, in light of our Lord's resurrection from the dead, what will happen now to our own bodies after we have died – and what will happen to our souls?

Well, based upon God's Word, the WCF 32.1 gives us the answer – an answer which I will expound by four points.

Here's the first point...

### **Our Bodies after Death**

My brother & sister, in the nearly twelve years that I've been in the ministry, I have conducted twenty-one funerals. And, sad as funerals are, I have always experienced *Christian* funerals as uplifting and positive, because of the sure hope we, as believers, have in Jesus Christ!

But with a very few of these funerals, the families have asked me, "Please, Pieter, when we are at the graveside and you read out the words of the committal, will you then please skip those words that say, '*ashes to ashes, dust to dust,*' because we don't like them"?

Of course, I have always without hesitation granted such a wish, for it's after all the *family's* desire which the pastor has to take into consideration. But, you see, although most churchgoers know that, upon death, our bodies will all turn back to dust, the sheer thought of it, so fresh after the passing of their loved one, is more than they can bear. So, they don't want to have it rubbed in by having those words read out loudly & clearly!

However, in the vast majority of cases, when, in my pastoral visits before the funeral, I have alerted the family to the existence of those frank words in the committal, they all have said, "No, Pieter, don't skip those words!" "Read them, for that's the truth!"

And, of course, they're right, for look, here are the words God Himself spoke to Adam straight after the Fall (Gn 3:19), "***By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.***"<sup>4</sup>

And, we have seen this clearly at the tomb of Lazarus when his sister, Martha, said to Jesus, "***Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.***"<sup>5</sup>

So, you & I know that, when we die, our bodies will see corruption!

But, thankfully, *that's not the end of the story!*

Why?

Well, because of the One whose body God did not allow to see decay! Of course, I'm talking about our Lord Jesus Christ who was not just fully *God* but also fully *human*! Yet, between His hour of death and His glorious resurrection three days later, God spared His body from becoming corrupt! Thus, God fulfilled Ps 16:10 in a more blissful way than even King David who wrote that psalm could foresee, "***For you will not abandon my soul to the grave, or let your holy one see corruption.***"

So, that's the positive point of focus at a Christian funeral!

And I'm glad our committal builds up to that glorious point. Here is an excerpt from it: "*...we now commit person so & so's body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died, was buried, and rose again for us; and at whose coming in glorious majesty the earth and the sea shall give up their dead; and the bodies of those*

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine. Also cf. 2:7; Ps. 103:14; Job 34:15; Ps. 104:29; Eccles. 3:20; 12:7; Acts 13:36; Rom. 5:12

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jn 11:39). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

*who sleep in him shall be changed, and made like his glorious body, according to the working of his power.*<sup>6</sup>

Well, that's what happens to the believer's *body* after death.

What about the human soul after death?

That brings us to point 2...

### **The Human Soul after Death**

My brother & sister, the Bible is clear on this, i.e. that after death, there are two things that people's souls don't do: they don't die and they don't sleep!

How do we know that?

Well because in at least two places God's Word says it in a clear way...

- Yes, in Lk 23:43, we hear Jesus say to the criminal on the cross, "***Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.***"<sup>7</sup>
- And Eccl 12:7 says that, upon death, ***the dust (i.e. the body) returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.***<sup>8</sup>

So, it's clear! You see, if our souls are with God (in paradise) straight after we have died, then they can't have *died*. Neither could they have gone to *sleep*!

Those who still argue that our souls go to sleep when we die are simply misinterpreting Bible passages which talk about death as *sleep*, e.g. 1 Cor 15:51, "***We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.***"<sup>9</sup>

You see, what some people seem to not understand is that, when the Bible talks of death as *sleep*, it's simply using a euphemism! That was the custom of the people in those days and in that culture. And, in a way, we are no different, for don't we also use euphemisms to talk about death? I mean, even we modern westerners – yes, even we *Christians* – rather talk of someone's "passing away" or his/her "passing into glory," or that he/she "has been called home."

Well, that's *our* way of using euphemisms – yes, of softening our words about death!

Now look, the WCF 32.1 also says that human souls have an *immortal existence* – i.e. that the human soul can never die! Is that true?

Well, it *is* true, but it needs to be qualified, for, you see, man's soul is not immortal *in & of itself*; yes, it's not immortal *by its own power*!

No, the human soul is only immortal *insofar as God, its Maker, allows it to be immortal*!

You see, the Ancient Greeks also thought that man's soul is immortal, but they understood with that something totally different to what the Bible teaches. Yes, when the Ancient Greeks said man's soul is immortal, they understood that, since eternity past,

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis mine

<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis mine). Of course, I am aware of the importance of the placing of the comma in this verse. I'm convinced that it must come *before* the word "today" because nowhere in all Christ's "truly-I-say-to-you" sayings, has He included a time word (like "today" or "now" or "this morning/evening") into that phrase. Besides, that Christ's intention was to read, "...today you will be with Me in paradise" is endorsed by Eccl 12:7 and 2 Cor 12:2 & 4 (please cf. next footnote).

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis mine. Also cf. cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.1033) who refers to yet another Bible verse, i.e. 2 Cor 12:2 & 4 which makes clear that 'heaven' and 'paradise' are two words that indicate the same place. ***I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— <sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise.***

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis mine

every human being's soul has been living in & of its own power, and that it will continue into future eternity to live in & of its own power.<sup>10</sup>

But the way we understand the Bible on this is that every human being's soul had a starting point – that was when it was created by God. Thus, your & my souls have not been existing since eternity past! Rather, *God creates each soul afresh* when each person is born!

No wonder Eccl 11:5 says, “*As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.*”<sup>11</sup>

Well, there's something more! You see, if the human soul has not been existing in & of its own power from eternity past – but it was created by God when we were born – and the human soul has no power in & of itself, then the human soul's *future*, too, is not in its own hands, but in God's hands who can cause it to cease to exist if He so wishes.

Therefore, when we say that a human being's soul is immortal, we have to qualify that it's only immortal insofar as *God allows it to be immortal!*

So, these things happen then to the human soul at the point of death:

- It does not die (for it is immortal by God's power)
- It does not sleep
- And it returns to God who does with it according to His will.

You ask, “But what is God's will with the human souls which return to Him after death?”

Well, that brings us first to point 3 and then to point 4.

Here's point 3...

### **The Souls of the Righteous after Death**

My brother & sister, the WCF 32.1 (based upon the Bible)<sup>12</sup> says, “...*The souls of the righteous are then made perfect as to holiness and received into the highest heavens...*”

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<sup>10</sup> For an explanation of the Greek thought re the soul, please c. Sproul (ibid:175).

<sup>11</sup> Yes, I am aware that the ESV is the only one that renders this verse in this manner. However, gauging by the Hebrew text (the context and this verse by itself), I am persuaded that the ESV is correct. Even the text-critical apparatus in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia suggests that, with a multitude of ancient manuscripts (among which the Targum), we should read *ba`ātsāmîm* (בְּאִצְמִים) and not *ka`ātsāmîm* (כְּאִצְמִים). So, it's a matter of reading a “b” rather than a “k,” which, interestingly, is the second place in this verse where the text-critical apparatus makes this suggestion. And note: also the NIV84 and the NASB refer by way of footnotes to the possible alternative reading of this verse – i.e. to read with multiple ancient manuscripts, “Just as you do not know how the spirit enters the bones in the womb...”

For more on this, cf. e.g. the answer given by Dr. Joseph R. Nally, Jr. in Reformed Answers at

<http://reformedanswers.org/answer.asp/file/44401>

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Heb 12:23 *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,* <sup>23</sup> *and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...*

2 Cor 5:1,6,8 *For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens....*

<sup>6</sup> *So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord....* <sup>8</sup> *Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

Phil 1:23 *I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better...;* with Acts 3:19-21 (especially v.21), “*Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out,* <sup>20</sup> *that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus,* <sup>21</sup> *whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which*

So, as soon as we die, you & I are perfected! Yes, then our sanctification is completed! Why?

Well, as soon as, through death, we enter glory, then we enter into a sinless state! As RC Sproul says so well, Then, “we may miss our bodies, but we won’t miss our sin!”<sup>13</sup>

Yes, then we will not yet have our bodies, for we will be waiting for them until the Last Day! Indeed, when our Lord Jesus returns, we (i.e. our souls) will be reunited with our bodies.<sup>14</sup>

Well, the Bible does not tell us every detail of *how* we will be after death. You see, John says (in 1 Jn 3:2), “...*what we will be has not yet been made known.*” Yet, then John hastens to say, “*But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*”

My brother & sister, the highest hope of the Christian is to see God Triune! And John says, “...*we shall see Him as He is!*”

But *who* shall see Him?

Well, Jesus has given us the answer to that question! Remember what He says in the beatitudes? Mt 5:8, “*Blessed are the pure in heart (i.e. those who have humbly received Jesus as their Saviour), for they shall see God!*”<sup>15</sup>

What a blessing it will be!

Just think about it – is it not so that one of the hardest things about living the Christian life on earth, is that we serve a God whom we have never seen!?<sup>16</sup>

And the worldly culture even senses His absence – not His presence! Yet, although we as Christians cannot see Him, we see *evidence* of Him – yes, of the work of His hands in nature and in history!

And, yes, we have not seen Him, for is it not so that, since the Fall of our first parents, God has made it impossible for human beings to see Him!?

Yes, since that breach in our intimate fellowship with God, man has not been able to behold the glory of God directly!

Has God not once told Moses, “...*you cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live*”?<sup>17</sup>

So, we have not seen Him, because it is forbidden and impossible to see Him!

As RC Sproul says, “There is nothing wrong with our eyes. Rather, there is something wrong with our hearts!”

So, it makes total sense then that, once you & I have reached that state of glorification – yes, only once our hearts have been made perfectly pure – then, and then only, shall we see Him *as He is!*!

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**God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago,” and Eph 4:10 “He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.”**

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Sproul (ibid:177)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 1 Thess 4:14-17 (especially v.14b & 16b) **For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.** <sup>15</sup> **For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.** <sup>17</sup> **Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.**

<sup>15</sup> Mt 5:8 μακάριοι οι καθαροι τη καρδια, οτι αυτοι τον θεον οψονται.

<sup>16</sup> My adaptation of the well-said words by Sproul (ibid:178)

<sup>17</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ex 33:20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Yet, my brother & sister, here's a blessing: You see, right through the Old Testament, Israel heard the priestly blessing which says...

***The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord  
lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*** <sup>18</sup>

Indeed, although *God's people* could not see *His* face, His blessing over His loved ones was that *His face will shine upon them!*

My brother & sister, to the Jew, the ultimate blessing was not only to experience God's nearness, but to have God's countenance *shine upon him/her!*

And God's people did see something of that, e.g.

- When God's shekinah-presence was seen in a glowing cloud above them;
- and when the disciples saw Christ beaming out light on the Mt of Transfiguration!
- and when Saul/Paul was enveloped by an enormously bright light on his way to Damascus!

So, when the Jews, in their hardship, prayed, "Make His face shine upon you," they were craving to see the unveiled glory of God!

My brother & sister, he/she who has received Jesus (the Son of God's love), will in glory see God as He really is!<sup>19</sup>

Yes, in heaven – already before our souls will be reunited with our bodies – we will be able to see God, for we won't have bodily eyes which cannot handle seeing Him!<sup>20</sup>

And even once our bodies are reunited with our souls, then we will still be able to see Him, for our glorified bodies (being like Christ's glorified body) will be able to see Him and not die!

Well, so far regarding the souls of those who have received Jesus Christ, the expression of God's love for them!

What about the souls of those who have rejected Christ?

Well, that brings us to the last, small, point...

### **The Souls of the Wicked after Death**

My brother & sister, what does the cross-scene tell us?

Yes, what does *what happened with the two robbers crucified on either side of our Lord* tell us about the destinies of man?

Well, does that cross-scene not tell us that there are no more than two destinies for people's souls?

Yes, one thief, having turned to Christ in faith and repented of his crimes, heard that, *that very same day*, he would be in heaven with Christ (Lk 23:43).

The other thief, for all that the Bible tells us, did not reach heaven.

Again, Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus tells us that there are only two possible destinations a human being's soul can go after death – either heaven or hell (Lk 16:19-30)!

And, make no mistake, to whichever of the two places your soul goes, it will arrive there straight after your death! Is that not, again, clear from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus?

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<sup>18</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (Nu 6:24–26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>19</sup> See again 1 Jn 3:2 ***Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.***

<sup>20</sup> On this, cf. Jonathan Edwards (apud Sproul, *ibid*:180-181)

Yes, from their dying day, the souls of the unredeemed will remain there in hell where they will be awaiting the day when they will be taken before the Judge of heaven & earth to simply hear the declaration about their everlasting state!

And, so it seems, they will be like those whom Peter (in 1 Pt 3:19) described as *the spirits in prison*.

Yes, what Jude, the brother of our Lord, says about the rebellious angels seems to be true also for those who have died in their sins – i.e. they are *kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day* (Jude, verse 6).<sup>21</sup>

My brother & sister, none of us likes the idea of eternal punishment. And, yet, how could a most Holy God – yes, a sinless God – ever allow sin into heaven!

No wonder that, of all people, it was our Lord Jesus Himself who has talked more about hell than about heaven!<sup>22</sup> Surely, *He* will know what He is talking about!

So, for this reason, then, my question: “Is Jesus Christ, God’s love-gift, you Saviour and Lord?”

AMEN (2,711 words excluding footnotes)

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<sup>21</sup> And, gauging by Jude 7, it is clear that the wicked who have already died, are even now already in hell, Jude 6-7 (especially v.7), *And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—<sup>7</sup> just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.* “Undergoing” (ὑπέχουσαι) is a Present Active Participle Feminine Plural (for “cities” are feminine in gender), Nominative of ὑπέχω: to experience something to which a person is subjected—‘to be subjected to, to experience, to undergo, to suffer.’ πρόκεινται δεῖγμα πυρός αἰωνίου δίκην ὑπέχουσαι ‘they exist as an example by being subjected to the punishment of eternal fire’ Ju 7 (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 806). New York: United Bible Societies).

<sup>22</sup> On this, cf. e.g. Sproul (ibid:184)