

**WHAT TEACHING DO WE FIND IN PAUL'S LETTERS ABOUT LIFE AFTER
DEATH AND THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST?**

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1 Introduction

The letters of Paul together offer a detailed account of the nature of life after death and the return of Jesus, which develop themes expounded by Jesus himself. Texts of particular relevance, which are our main focus in this essay, are 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5. We note that Paul considers these issues of most crucial relevance, indeed he entitles his teaching on them “the gospel I preached to you” (1 Corinthians 15:1). He is very aware of the importance of these matters to his listeners (1 Thessalonians 4:13) “we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope”.

2 Bodily resurrection and life after death

To begin with life after death, Paul is clearly of a view that there is an afterlife for believers. This is seen as a logical corollary of Christ’s resurrection as stated in 1 Corinthians 15:12 “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” He notes in support of this that Christ’s resurrection is a proven fact witnessed by more than five hundred of the brethren, many of whom were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6). Furthermore “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17) – Christianity without Christ’s resurrection is empty. And there is the present presence of the Holy Spirit as a further proof of the afterlife: 2 Corinthians 5:5 “it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” Indeed all three of the Trinity are to be involved in our resurrection (Romans 8:11) “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you!”

The resurrection is to be a physical one (following the Jewish idea of resurrection of the body) rather than a purely disembodied one (the Greek idea of the eternal soul separate from the body). The glorious type of body we shall receive will be different from our earthly one, drawing an analogy with the difference between a seed and a plant that grows from it: 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” Note that this analogy of the seed also supports the

argument that resurrection from the dead is a reasonable belief in 1 Corinthians 15:36 “How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”

Paul states that we will become like Christ in the afterlife, with the “spiritual” body succeeding the natural body as Christ, the last, spiritual, Adam succeeded the first Adam of flesh, see 1 Corinthians 15:47-48 “The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.” And Philippians 3:21 is yet more explicit that Jesus “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”.

Besides the bodily resurrection, in life after death, we shall have vindication before judgement (Romans 5:9) “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!” We will also be morally and spiritually perfected (Colossians 1:22) “...to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him”. And we will fully understand what is now unclear to us (1 Corinthians 13:12) “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

In heaven our experience will surpass to an inconceivable degree that on earth (1 Corinthians 2:9-10) "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" Nature as well as our bodies will share in this renewal. Romans 8:21 says “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

3 Death to sin and rebirth in this life

This transformation after death is not however to be distinct from prior change following conversion, but rather a culmination of it. First, in this life we are seen as longing to be with God in heaven in our new bodies rather than in our earthly ones “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8)

Second we are already in a form of “life after death” once we accept Christ as our saviour as reborn Christians in 2 Corinthians 16 “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” This process is linked to baptism in Romans 6:4 “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised

from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” This rebirth transforms our behaviour as in Romans 6:6 “our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” As Paul says in Ephesians 2:5-6, this earthly rebirth from death in sin is directly linked to the eternal life in heaven as God “made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”

Third, in this life we are seen as in a process of sanctification that will have the consequence of being blameless before judgement, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

4 The Second Coming and the Last Judgement

The transformation of our bodies at resurrection is to happen at a single instant, at the last trumpet when Christ comes again (1 Corinthians 15:52) “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet and Christ’s return. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” Those still alive will be treated identically to those who have already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15) “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.” It can be seen from these points that there is a direct temporal link between the resurrection of the dead and Christ’s return – we now turn in detail to Paul’s teaching on the latter.

The return of Christ is certain and will be a single event, personal, visible and physical as Paul states in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command”. Following the same verse, it will be glorious “with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God”. It will happen at an unknown time (1 Thessalonians 5:2) “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night”

On the other hand, when it does come it will be very obvious to all and preceded by some clear signs (this is to counter those claiming it had already occurred in some mystical manner). One sign of the end will be that unbelievers’ behaviour will change for the worse (2 Timothy 3:1-4) “There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of

themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents....”. More specifically, 2 Thessalonians 2:3 says “that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction” and 2 Thessalonians 2:9 “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonder” When Jesus comes he will overcome this lawless one (2 Thessalonians 2:8) “the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming” (There is, of course, much more discussion of this topic in Revelation.)

Christ’s return means judgement for all by him personally; 2 Corinthians 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

For Christians, Jesus will be our protector from God’s punishment for our sins (1 Thessalonians 1:10) “Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” owing solely to his own sacrifice (Romans 5:9) “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” He will also distribute rewards for service, as for Paul himself who refers in 1 Thessalonians 2:19 to “the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes” But he will also test the work of Christians and the work of some will be found wanting, without threatening their salvation in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 “his work... will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work... If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” This passage could imply a different quality of life in heaven for those whose work survives the test, although this is disputed¹.

On the other hand, for unbelievers, Jesus will come with punishment, as stated in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” Hell is hence seen as both destruction and eternal separation from God. Punishment will occur for Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 2:12) “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law”. Note that this implies, as Paul states in Acts 24:15 that there will be a resurrection of the wicked as well as the righteous.

¹ Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 410-411

5 Conclusions

We have shown that Paul makes extensive reference life after death and the second coming in his letters. These are fully consistent with each other and the rest of the Bible, underlining the divine inspiration for the texts. We note however that a comprehensive coverage of these issues in Paul – including the Old Testament background and debatable doctrines such as purgatory and the rapture - would require much more space than is allotted for this essay.

References

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