

## **Learning to die**

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"Nobody wants to die," they say, and many of us do not even want to think about it. Happily belonging to the company of Christians whose beliefs and ways of living are counter-cultural to the West in the late modern era, I have always thought that it is wise to keep death not far from my mind. Being a pastor, I considered it a privilege and also an education to linger beside many deathbeds. I have tried to never forget that, unless I die abruptly in an accident or with a heart attack or stroke, sooner or later the subject of death will feel very personal to me when I learn that my own death is imminent.

The moment has arrived for me when death has become personal. Recently I was diagnosed with colo-rectal cancer that has metastasized in my liver. So then, in the time that remains for me I have one more thing to learn in life, which is to die. The Reformed theologian John H. Leith stated, "Death is the critically important event, in which the person who dies brings his or her own existence to a conclusion," and he warned, "Death can be the occasion of great sin, as seen in the frantic efforts to overcome it or to fortify ourselves against it." I had always hoped that I would be aware of the imminence of my death so that I could face it consciously, and I am grateful that I have the knowledge that I am going to die soon.

My beloved partner in life, Melba, was a friend of Father Thomas Hopko, the Orthodox theologian who served as Dean of St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary in New York. Melba says that after Tom was diagnosed with a terminal illness, he would say after entering a new phase of his illness, "This dying is very interesting." I think I share a similar attitude toward my own dying, but what I shall learn and how long I shall be vigorous enough and mentally alert enough to engage in this new learning remains unknown to me now. In the end, we shall all surrender to death which marks the conclusion of all our learning in this life.

I shall discuss the unwanted challenge of living with disease, my theological reflections on death, and my personal attitudes toward dying.

### **The challenge of living with disease**

The part of dying I wish I could avoid is dealing with the symptoms of disease and of treatment. I am quite grateful for the physicians, nurses and other healthcare providers who assist me, especially in hospice care. I am even grateful for modern medical technology that may enable me to die without as much physical misery than would otherwise be the case. I am not going to like this part, but I will draw upon all the inner resources I have developed throughout my life to do my best to cope.

I am grateful also for the intercessions of many. I am confident that the prayers of others offered on my behalf will play an essential role in preparing me for my exit from this life into what God wills for us.

As I cope I see other people with new eyes. I look at people in person or on TV who are healthy and energetic as they go about their everyday business, and it makes me smile.

### **My approach to a theological perspective on death**

One of Montaigne's essays is titled "That to philosophize is to learn to die." Because among all creatures we human beings are aware that death is our end, confronting death is our unique experience. The cicada's cry sounds to us like its death song, but the cicada doesn't know what a death song is; Matsuo Basho wrote: "The cry of the cicada/ Gives us no sign/ That presently it will die." If you are a thinking person, then the only thing besides personal relationships that will bring you meaning when you are dying is the task of reflecting upon death. I can reflect upon death only from a theological perspective because I am a Christian believer. I concur with Reinhold Niebuhr who said, "A genuine faith resolves the mystery of life by the mystery of God." I am convinced that reality is a mystery whose meaning cannot be grasped through reason alone. Miguel de Unamuno wrote, "All that is vital is irrational, and all that is rational is anti-vital, for reason is essentially skeptical." The Spanish philosopher saw the fundamental error of the modern worldview, but I would put it differently, saying, "All that is vital is supra-rational, and all that is merely rational is anti-vital, for, left to itself, reason is essentially skeptical." Contrary to popular misunderstanding, faith is not the opposite of knowing, but it is another way of knowing by perceiving and trusting in supra-rational divine revelation, and revelation opens up new horizons for reason to explore. In explaining my approach, I am committed to being as honest as I am able.

Death will be the end of the only existence I know, this life that I received when I was conceived in my mother Dorothy's womb and drew my first breath in Vicksburg Hospital on the afternoon of October 5, 1948. My older brother Clarence likes to remind me that on the day I was born he was more excited that our border collie Queen gave birth to a litter of pups. He informs me that when I came home from the hospital, my mother's mother Ruth came down to Mississippi from St. Louis with her youngest child Ronnie on an Illinois Central passenger train to help take care of me. From then on, I gradually developed my consciousness of the world around me, others, and myself. Later I discovered that I was not my mother's second child for I had been born following the stillbirth of twin daughters. The thought of these sisters has shadowed my consciousness, making me aware that I would not have been born if they had lived and that I owed a debt to them to live an honorable life. My consciousness is the only life I know, and it will vanish from the world when I die.

In the scriptures, the reality of death is not minimized or evaded: to Adam, who represents all of us, the Creator decrees, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). I am convinced that we live in God's world on God's terms, and if it is God's will that death be the end not only of my life on earth but also the extinguishing of my spirit, then I freely accept that. In almost all of the Old Testament, the people of God accepted death as their end. I will not live as long as Abraham, but I find the description of his death very comforting: "Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people" (Genesis 25:8). Why would I not accept death as the end of me since it is such a wonder to me that I was ever conceived and born, my life is a sheer gift, and when I die I shall enter death following in the footsteps of my late father and mother, all my deceased relatives from generation to generation, and all other human beings who have died? There is a surprising comfort in the thought of a common oblivion. Yet the deaths of children and youth and all those who died before they ever discovered who they really are or were able to bring children into the world or to fully make their own unique contribution to society are very disturbing. Only the suffering and deaths of people throughout human history prevent me from fully being at ease with the Old Testament way of thought.

Because I am a Christian believer who searches the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and confesses the creed of the church, I cannot feel that I have prepared myself for death until I have given due consideration to Christian hope attested in the New Testament. This hope has impressed itself upon my heart and mind so deeply that I find that I cannot rest easily in the thought of death as the end of me even if I might like to do so. The Christian hope challenges those of us who might prefer that death be the end of our spirit, summoning us to accept that Life does not let us off the hook so easily but carries us forward beyond death to new experiences and requires us to grow as persons. I am compelled to examine this hope and to see if I do indeed make it my own and also claim it for others. The distinctive Christian hope itself exists alongside a universal primordial belief in life beyond death and also rational arguments for human immortality.

### **Primordial belief in life beyond death**

As a Gentile Christian, I have much respect for the natural belief of humankind in an afterlife evident by graves of Neanderthals and members of Homo sapiens in the Stone Age who were covered with ocher and buried with things they would need to survive such as garments and hunting weapons, indicating that they believed that their death was a passage into another life and world. This primordial belief in an afterlife may be nothing more than a psychological defense against fear and grief necessary to enable those who were still alive to keep on struggling to survive and to propagate the race. Yet I still consider the apparent belief in an afterlife by the earliest known humans to be an extraordinary fact, and I wonder if it comes from a place deeper than the psyche--

that is, from the "spirit" that distinguishes the human person from other animals with whom he shares a bodily life, freedom of action, and emotions? By "spirit" I mean the mystery of personal being engendered by a relation between the Spirit of the Creator and each human being who is an ensouled body. I subscribe to Karl Barth's explanation that spirit is the basis of soul and body: "Man exists because he has spirit. That he has spirit means that he is grounded, constituted and maintained by God as the soul of his body." Barth explains that we have soul as well as body because we are "not only visible but also invisible, not only outward but also inward, not only earthly but also heavenly"--"heavenly" not in the sense of being divine but in the sense of participating in "the higher, upper, inapprehensible side of the whole created reality." Many modern people dismiss the concept of the soul, but it is as good a term as any to designate the fact of our inner life which constitutes the continuity of our personality. Barth adds that our spiritual life exists because the Spirit of God "acts on and in the body through the soul." If the first human beings believed in an afterlife because of spirit, then their belief would belong to an "original revelation" of the divine to all humankind. This primordial expectation of an afterlife is still within us, I think, even within some modern Westerners despite strong cultural conditioning to the contrary. When the writer Aldous Huxley's first wife Maria was dying of cancer in 1955, he placed his hand on her head and softly spoke, "Let go, let go...go forward into the light...." Nonetheless, I would never base hope upon the mere fact that a belief in the afterlife goes back to the beginning of our species as striking as that fact is.

### **Making rational arguments for belief in life beyond death**

Over the decades, I have read a good many essays and books by philosophers and theologians who build a rational case for a belief in life beyond death. To select only one of the better examples, the Scottish Reformed theologian John Baillie spent 343 pages answering "yes" to the question in the title of his book, *And the Life Everlasting?* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933). Mainly what I infer from books like this is that it is possible to make a rather intelligible and respectable case for believing the last line of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in...the life everlasting." Yet I am not going to base my hope on some fine reasoning in the face of the brute reality of death, such as the philosophical case for the distinction between the mind and the body by which the brain functions as the mind's "computer." However, unlike philosophers, theologians like Baillie are not merely generating arguments from human reason because much of their reasoning is also reflection upon core convictions posited by faith in divine revelation, and so then I, too, am led to seriously consider what I have received by faith in divine revelation concerning hope in the face of death. A Word of God from beyond ourselves is the only foundation upon which people with the best minds like Baillie can build their seemingly plausible rational arguments for belief in life beyond death.

### **Examining divine revelation concerning the resurrection of the dead**

I can honestly say that I have never doubted the reality nor the presence of God in, with, and through all things. I was reared in a great deciduous forest in the Walnut Hills north of Vicksburg drained with springs, limestone creeks, and Skillikalia Bayou that flow into the Yazoo River and on to the Mississippi River. I grew up outdoors, and even when I was no more than four or five years old I have memories of exploring Bobcat Hollow and walking by myself under oak, hickory, beech, ash, and hackberry trees hung with Spanish moss on the ridge that rose high above our house. I was awed by great magnolias in bloom and exquisite blossoms high on tall tulip trees. The fruits of the mulberries, persimmons, papaws, muscadine vines, blackberry bushes, and wild strawberry plants added to the delights of wandering through the forest. In the streams, I played with crawfish and fished for shiny sunfish in pools beneath waterfalls. I felt like a guest in Eden when I watched blue kingfishers dive into pools for their prey through rainbows in the mists of waterfalls or studied red-headed woodpeckers hiding in thick green river cane and then flying from tree to tree, their hammering on bark echoing throughout the woods. In the forest, I perceived energy pulsating in all things around me and through my body into my spirit--the energy whose ultimate source is uncreated Light. I have always perceived the presence of God in all things and near me because, as the apostle Paul stated, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20).

I grew up in Redwood Methodist Church where I learned the scriptures, heard preaching of the Word of God, recited the Apostles' Creed, prayed and sang hymns, was baptized and received Holy Communion in the Anglican ritual of Thomas Cranmer. Through the church I heard about Jesus and the apostles' proclamation of who he is. Because this was an evangelical church, I was properly instructed to know that being a Christian is not a cultural identity, but a matter of conscious personal choice. When I was an adolescent feeling an inner pressure to choose what kind of human being I would become, I recognized that I needed to make a decision about Jesus. While I never doubted God, I had to decide whether or not I believed in Jesus as the Son of God and trusted him to be the supreme revelation of God in history and the authoritative guide for how I should live. I was unsophisticated, of course, but I had grown very familiar with the main *Dialogues* of Plato in a paperback book I borrowed from my older brother, and I felt the tug of a philosophical life--that is, not to become a professional philosopher but to be thoughtful about truth and the good life without being bound to a particular community and its creed. I could choose to contemplate God by means of reason in the philosophical tradition--in other words, to follow Socrates rather than Jesus. I could always pick and choose from Jesus' teaching and example as a part of my philosophy of life. If Instead I believed the testimony to Jesus in the New Testament, I would be bound to a Lord and to a very distinctive way of thinking and living for the rest of my life. So much was at stake in this decision that I took my time paying more attention in church and especially reading over and over the four Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Through it all, I prayed for guidance since I knew that whatever decision I made would determine the rest of my life. Over

time as I read the Gospels it was as if the person of Jesus impressed himself upon me through the traditions transmitted by the four evangelists. There was no escape from this presence. Perceiving the presence of the living Jesus before me through the witness of the scriptures, I committed myself to Jesus Christ as the human Icon of the God in whom I had always believed (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15-20).

Jesus is not a living presence unless he was raised from the dead by God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit as the apostles' claimed. Without giving here a *precis* of my investigations, after a lifetime of serious study and critical consideration I can report that I have no doubt at all about the reality of Jesus' resurrection which reveals that he is the Messiah of Israel, the Lord of the world, and the Son of God (Romans 1:3-4). The resurrection of Jesus was not merely a spiritual survival of death, but nothing less than the overcoming of death itself. The resurrection was an event in nature and history that gives us a sign that God is the Creator "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Romans 4:17). Robert W. Jenson famously wrote, "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt."

The question is, Does the reality of Jesus' resurrection give *us* hope in the face of death? In his poem, "Address to the Lord," John Berryman writes, "I have no idea whether we live again. / It doesn't seem likely / from either the scientific or the philosophical point of view / but certainly all things are possible to you, / and I believe as fixedly in the Resurrection- appearances to Peter / and / to Paul / as I believe I sit in this blue chair. / Only that may have been a special case / to establish their initiatory faith." Was the resurrection of Jesus only something that happened to him to vindicate his vocation and to disclose that he alone is our Lord whose teaching and example we should follow, or does it also entail a promise to the rest of us about a future for us like his beyond death? Because our brother, the crucified Jesus, was raised from the dead and exalted in union with God the Father, has not God made a commitment to the rest of humankind that our destiny is to share in the risen life of Jesus Christ? The apostle Paul was very clear in explaining the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for us: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?...But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died..." (1 Corinthians 15:12-28). The apostolic witness is that the redemptive death of Jesus Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection from the dead occurred *for us* (Romans 5). On the basis of the apostolic interpretation of the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus, I do have hope that all of us will be raised from the dead as an integral dimension of the transfiguration of all creation by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11,18-25). The French diplomat and writer Paul Claudel wrote in *L'Epee Et Le Miroir*, "Hear, dust! Listen, ashes! God, who knows the

number of his stars and is mindful of each of his sparrows, has not forgotten you on the funeral slab!"

The apostle Paul coined the term "spiritual body" to identify our new mode of being in the life of the resurrection. The term "spiritual body" is the only depiction in the New Testament of personal embodiment of the spirit beyond death. Speaking of the transformation of our present body into a new spiritual body, the apostle Paul wrote, "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44 NRSV). The "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon*) in 1 Corinthians 15:44 refers primarily to a new kind of body created by the Holy Spirit, but it also describes the new mode of being of the human spirit which itself exists only by virtue of the relation of the divine Spirit to a human person.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is misleading when it translates Paul's term for our present body (*soma psychikon*) as "physical body," for this implies that the future spiritual body is less of a body than the material body we now have. A better translation is one that appears in several English Bibles, "natural body," describing our present ensouled body in contrast to our future spiritual body that will be engendered and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The translation, "animal body," is another way of saying "natural body." The Jerusalem Bible comes close to Paul's literal sense of the contrast between the natural body and the spiritual body when it translates 1 Corinthians 15:44: "When it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit." To avoid misunderstanding the spiritual body as something less than our present body, N.T. Wright coined the term *transphysical* to describe both the body of the risen Jesus and our own future body, emphasizing that the transphysical spiritual body is something far superior to our present natural body. In other words, the spiritual body belongs to a new Nature created by the Spirit of God whereas our present body is a part of the old Nature.

Notice that in 1 Corinthians 15 when Paul uses the metaphor of "sowing" the "natural body," he is thinking of our whole lives in this present world, beginning with conception and birth and continuing until death and burial (cf. Jesus' teaching in John 12:24). Moreover, while Paul strongly emphasizes the superiority of the raised body that replaces, as it were, the natural body or transforms it into a spiritual body, there is continuity in the identity of the person.

The general resurrection of the dead in the future, along with the final judgment of humankind, is one dimension of the transfiguration of all creation when all things become transparent to the glory of God and the divine purposes for God's creation are consummated. People "having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12) are probably flabbergasted by Christian belief in God's goal for all creation. If they think this belief is irrational, then they should reflect on the fact that so far the history of the universe consists of a trajectory of energy-matter-life-spirit. From a materialistic point of view the last thing to have expected from the Big Bang would have been the eventual

emergence of spirit from matter, but the Christian hope for the universe is that the trajectory toward spirit will be brought to a consummation by the wisdom and power of the Creator. The reality of what we call "spirit" is a sign that the origin and destiny of the universe come from beyond the universe itself. Walker Percy whimsically alluded to the mystery of spirit when he wrote, "Why is it possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula in Taurus, which is 6,000 light years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life?"

## **Examining divine revelation concerning a personal afterlife between death and resurrection**

### *No to entering the general resurrection upon dying*

I used to agree with theologians like Emil Brunner that because the future is present to the eternal God we shall enter into the future world of the general resurrection of the dead and of the new creation at the moment we die. Brunner thought that the right way to understand the paradox in the New Testament of personally departing to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23) and the raising of the dead when Christ comes again in the future (Philippians 3:20-21) is that they are two sides of the same coin: "I go to Him, and He comes to the world." I no longer embrace this interpretation of Christian hope except that it does affirm God's gift of life after death. While God is eternal, God has given that which is not-God, the creation, its own integrity and also time, and I am now convinced that the general resurrection of the dead belongs only to the ultimate future of all creation when everything God creates is transfigured by the Holy Spirit in a manner similar to the transformation of the body of the risen Jesus. In the last sentence of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed we confess, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." Ours will be an "everlasting life," as the Apostles' Creed affirms, because the life of the world to come will still have dimensions of temporality suitable for creation through its participation in the eternity of God by the energy of the Holy Spirit. So then, when I die I do not expect to be raised from the dead to be a part of the world to come because that world is still a part of God's plan for the future of creation.

Interpreting the apostle Paul's hope of departing to be with Christ when he dies as meaning that when we die we shall enter the future of the general resurrection of the dead and the new creation is an attempt to avoid what many theologians consider to be the "mythological" construct of an afterlife as an intermediate state between death and the general resurrection. Why this belief is "mythological" is never really explained but is brought forth as a shibboleth. The fundamental basis of a belief in an afterlife as an intermediate state is the doctrine of creation in which God gives time to God's creation so that the future of creation is not swallowed up by the eternity of God who is not the creation. Moreover, the intermediate state signifies that the economy of salvation is more complex than many theological constructions acknowledge. Because the general resurrection truly belongs to a future given to the creation, the afterlife constitutes a

state in which the union of love that exists between the living Christ and the members of his body is stronger than death--a union described by Paul as being "in Christ" and by John as receiving "eternal life" by believing in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God.

*No to an intermediate state of sleep*

The earliest Christians described the death of believers by using the Greek verb that means "to fall asleep," e.g. 1 Thessalonians 4:13,14,15. Karl Barth observed that the Greek verb (*koimasthai*) "does not mean to be asleep but to *fall* asleep." In other words, this way of speaking of death represents how the first Christians perceived the dying of their brothers and sisters: because they died with faith in Jesus Christ, they died in peace as if they were simply falling asleep even if they died in violence as in the case of Stephen (Acts 7:60). I think that a deduction that the dead are now in an interim state of sleep or suspended animation rather than in a conscious afterlife is not justified by the common euphemism for believers' dying in the New Testament, especially as the apostle Paul testified to his expectation that when he died he would be with Christ. The early Christians named their places of burial "cemeteries" or sleeping places not because deceased believers were in a state of sleep but because their bodies rested in their graves as if sleeping until their transformation in the future general resurrection of the dead.

*2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 as apostolic witness to divine revelation of the general resurrection and a personal afterlife*

I have concluded that in order to do justice to all the evidence in the New Testament we should conceive of God's plan for us beyond death as including both a personal afterlife and the general resurrection of the dead. I am paying attention to the afterlife because Protestant theology in the late 20th century and early 21st century often rejects or plays down the concept of an afterlife because of a bias against any degree of dualism between body and soul in Christian anthropology. I think that a valuable testimony to an afterlife between dying and the general resurrection of the dead is embedded in the apostle Paul's statements in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10. Certainly in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul presents the essence of what is of first importance in Paul's eschatological doctrine about God's plan to transform the world and raise the dead. What Paul says in another letter to the church in Corinth--2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10--is also a strong affirmation of Christian hope, but it is expressed in dense writing loaded with metaphors.

Paul is often deemed the "first theologian" of the church, but, if so, Paul was still first of all an apostle who had seen the glory of the risen Jesus and was filled with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 his reliance upon metaphors indicates that Paul speaks as an apostle who is bearing witness to the mystery of divine revelation disclosed in the resurrection of Jesus as illumined by the Holy Spirit in the

church rather than as a theologian who is offering rational examination and explanation of the meaning of divine revelation. Testifying to God's Word which comes from beyond ourselves relies upon paradox, analogy, and metaphor to be communicated in human words. An apostle testifies to God's Word revealed in history and in the mind of God's chosen witnesses; a theologian listens to God's Word and analyzes, makes distinctions, draws inferences, and seeks to discern order and meaning in the testimony of the apostles. Paul knows how to play both roles, but in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 he is testifying about his hope based upon God's revelation to him as one chosen by God to be his apostle.

There have been multiple theological interpretations of this passage in which the apostle Paul testifies to the hope we have in Christ. Interpretations range from the thought that it is only about the salvation of the soul freed from the body to the view that it is only about hope of the general resurrection of the dead in the future. The classical interpretation of the meaning of 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 is that Paul confesses both our hope of the resurrection of the body in the ultimate future and also our trust that when we die we are "away from the body and at home with the Lord." Modern critical scholars are often prejudiced against the idea that Paul could conceive of any degree of dualism between body and soul, but Paul's testimony about his extraordinary vision in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 shows that he was capable of conceiving a state of being "out of the body," and he also believed in "Paradise" as a dimension of heaven. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5 Paul speaks in metaphors--a "tent" and a "house," being "clothed" or being found "naked"--which contrast our natural body that dies and our spiritual body that is raised; but in 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 Paul also refers to an afterlife following the death of our natural body. The fundamental premise of the classical interpretation in that 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 should be read in light of both Paul's discussion of the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15 and his unambiguous affirmations in the Epistle to the Philippians (1:18b-26; 3:17-21) of both a personal afterlife after death and the general resurrection of the dead in the future.

At the beginning of 2 Corinthians, Paul reports on the danger he experienced in the Roman province of Asia [western Turkey] when he says, "we felt that we had received the sentence of death" (1:8-11). In 1 Corinthians 15:32 Paul mentions a very threatening situation he faced at Ephesus in Asia that was either a similar experience or the same one, but in 2 Corinthians he seems more personally affected by his experience than when he wrote 1 Corinthians. Just before he comments on Christian hope in 4:16-5:10, he describes the continual hardships and existential threats he and those in his apostolic mission endured throughout the Mediterranean world (4:1-15). Then he opens his comments about Christian hope testifying how all these struggles seem like a "slight momentary affliction" compared to "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" which is being prepared for them. When he begins to describe this hope he says, "For 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" (5:1). Paul is employing the metaphor of an "earthly tent" to describe our natural body as in Wisdom

of Solomon 9:15. It is interesting that he chooses to describe the death of the natural body as a tearing down or a destruction. Probably Paul selects this rather violent imagery because he has in his thoughts the memory of the recent experience in Asia when he and others thought that they might be killed. In other words, Paul is saying, "If we are killed, we have this sure and certain hope." This personal character of Paul's commentary on hope in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 also causes Paul to focus more on the possibility of his own death before the coming again of Christ and thus raises for the hearer or reader the question of a personal afterlife between one's death and the general resurrection of the dead. In his great essay in 1 Corinthians 15, he was focused only on doctrinal teaching of first importance concerning the divine plan for the general resurrection of the dead and the new creation at the coming again of Christ and the final outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 he expands the scope of the economy of salvation by including within the divine plan the provision for a state of being "at home with the Lord" for believers who die before the advent of the new creation.

Because our Christian heritage includes Athens as well as Jerusalem, we might think that in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5 the apostle is only speaking of an afterlife for the soul in which "we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (5:1), a kind of completion of a spiritual process that begins in our soul in this life when, "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day" (4:16). However, the hope that Paul is expressing in 4:16-5:5 is hope of the future resurrection of the dead. When Paul looks forward to "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" (4:17) surely he is thinking of the consummation of God's purposes for creation and the general resurrection of the dead that will occur when Christ comes again in glory (cf. Colossians 3:3). The Hebrew word in the Old Testament for glory means "weight" and "substance," and since he describes the glory that is coming with the superlatives of being both "eternal" and "beyond all measure" (4:17), he has to be thinking of the ultimate goal of God's work of redemption and re-creation whose glory far outweighs that of the present creation. Moreover, when he speaks of "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (5:1) and of "longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling" (5:2), he is speaking metaphorically about the superior spiritual body of the resurrection that he had discussed in 1 Corinthians 15:44. For Paul, what is of first importance in Christian hope is nothing less than the goal of God to bring to completion God's purposes for humankind and all creation.

Yet there is also a strong hope of a personal afterlife in verses 6-10 of 2 Corinthians 5. Even though Paul always places first emphasis upon the promise of being raised from the dead when Christ comes again in glory, he also expects to live in the presence of Christ when he himself dies. When Paul says, "Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (5:8), there seems to be a shift of emphasis concerning his confidence if he were to die. Many commentators argue that Paul is still only speaking of being with Christ when Christ comes again in glory to raise the dead, but it would be very awkward to describe being transformed

and raised from the dead by speaking of being "away from the body." The expression of being "away from the body" is a strong sign that Paul is speaking of the departure of his spirit to be with Christ when his natural body dies. While Paul's confidence is primarily in God's promise of the resurrection of the dead, Paul's absolute trust in God would not be disappointed even if he were to die before the risen Christ comes again to inaugurate the new future. John Wesley's comment on 2 Corinthians 5:8 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* expresses the classical view of the church: "This demonstrates that the happiness of the saints is not deferred till the resurrection." That Paul could have been thinking of his hope if he were to die before Christ comes again is warranted by what he later wrote to the church in Philippi, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain," meaning that when he dies he will "depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Philippians 1:21-24). Not only are Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 5:8 so strikingly reminiscent of what he says in Philippians 1:21-24, but also his personal testimony in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 about having been near death in Asia might lead him to refer to his hope for an afterlife if he were to die before Christ comes again. More than the similarity of Paul's speech in 2 Corinthians with that in Philippians and his own recent experience of having nearly died, there is Paul's doctrinal teaching about the present reign of Christ in heaven. When Paul speaks of the "home" of Jesus Christ he is confessing that the risen Jesus is exalted to the right hand of God the Father in heaven whence he will come again in the future to re-create all things and to raise the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit by the will of God the Father (Philippians 3:20-21; Colossians 3:1-4). Thomas F. Torrance perceived that "the ascension of the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus Christ inevitably transforms 'heaven': something quite new has been effected in the heavenlies which must alter its material content in our understanding of what heaven is." Because Christ ascended into heaven the dwelling place of God and of the angels and the source of all of the spiritual powers and authorities was revolutionized to accommodate human nature, for Christ, the incarnate Son, did not shed his human nature when he was exalted to God's right hand (on the cosmic scope of Jesus' resurrection and exaltation to God, cf. Philippians 2:9-11; Ephesians 1:8b-12). Hence there is now also room in heaven for human beings who belong to him. When Paul speaks of the "home" of Christ to which we who are united with him may depart, he is not talking about the future world to come but of the heavenly abode of Jesus Christ whence he will come again to inaugurate the new creation when God's will shall be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Of course, to speak of heaven as a "place" is not to practice geography but to refer to a dimension of reality beyond what we can know here and now which *is* because God's presence makes room for it, as it were, as God creates and governs the spiritual realities of the creation.

### *References and allusions to an afterlife in the New Testament*

While there is a clearer emphasis in the New Testament on hope of the future general resurrection of the dead than on a personal afterlife between death and resurrection, the references and allusions to a personal afterlife in the spirit--whether direct or

oblique--are unmistakable. In addition to 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10, see Philippians 1:23-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:14,16 (that those who have died will be brought with Christ at his coming may indicate that they are already with him); Romans 8:38-39; 2 Corinthians 12:1-4; Hebrews 12:1; Hebrews 12:23; Mark 9:2-8, Matthew 17:1-8, Luke 9:28-36 (Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus as living); Mark 12:18-27, Matthew 22:23-33, Luke 20:27-40 (the patriarchs "are alive" to God--Luke 20:38, 4 Maccabees 7:19); Luke 16:19-31; Luke 23:43; Luke 23:46 and Matthew 27:50 ("spirit" and "breath" linguistically synonymous); Acts 7:59; James 2:26; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Colossians 3:3; John 5:24; John 11:25-26; and John 14:2 (the Greek for "dwelling places" or "rooms" connotes both "heavenly" dwellings and "staying" or "tarrying" places); Revelation 6:9-11.

### *The afterlife as a going-on-to-resurrection*

The afterlife of being in the presence of Christ when we die cannot be either individualistic or separated from the whole movement toward the general resurrection since our personal participation in the power of the resurrection already begins with baptism into the body of Christ (Romans 6:1-11; Ephesians 2:4-7). The role of the afterlife in the divine economy of salvation entails an interval of going-on-to-resurrection after death as a necessary preparation for the final resurrection of the dead because it consists of purification and growth of our spirit by the judgment and grace of God. Growth in the afterlife as a going-on-to-resurrection requires being judged personally even as the court of final judgment will be held only at the general resurrection in the future (2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1-2; 1 Peter 4:5). In the afterlife, the experience of divine judgment would be to see ourselves as we really are in light of the beautiful persons we were created to be (1 Corinthians 13:12). Final judgment cannot be rendered until all of human history has run its course and then there will be absolute disclosure of the whole truth about the sin of humankind with all the complex interconnections and consequences, including our own personal part in the entire story. There is grace even in judgment in that he who is our Judge is the same one who is our Savior who lived our life, died our death, and was raised for our sake (John 3:16-21). There is sometimes glib talk among believers about what kinds of persons are going to heaven and what kinds are going to hell, the state of estrangement from God, but the gospel always entails a call to each of us to watch our own self, for "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

### *Embodiment of the human spirit in the afterlife*

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who was an associate of members of Paul's mission (Hebrews 13:23), spoke of "the spirits of the righteous made perfect" who dwell in the blessed life of "the city of the living God" (Hebrews 12:22-24). We usually presume that these blessed "spirits" are bodiless, but could it be that life in the spirit beyond death is already a putting on of a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44)?

Expressing traditional Christian teaching and drawing upon popular Orthodox traditions, theologian Sergius Bulgakov understood the afterlife as a mode of being in which the spirit is united with the person's soul but separated from his or her body. Yet if the spirit remains united with the soul that the person had in the previous bodily life, then would not the spirit also be *related* to the spiritual body of the future life of the general resurrection inasmuch as the afterlife is the bridge, as it were, between the two ages?

There is some justification for the interpretation that the spirit is related to the spiritual body when we depart to be with Christ both in the fact that one begins to participate in the power of Christ's resurrection by baptism with faith and in Paul's discussions concerning the "spiritual body" in 1 Corinthians 15. In 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, Paul's essay on the kind of body we shall have in the resurrection, it is notable that he uses the present tense when describing the process of sowing and raising, i.e. "is sown" and "*is* raised" rather than "is sown" and "*will be* raised" (for use of the present tense, see 15:35, 38, 42, 43, 44); this may indicate that Paul takes for granted a continuous process by which persons are being raised to receive spiritual bodies. Indeed, Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:36, "What you sow does not come to life unless it *dies*," may imply that the acquiring of a new spiritual body begins after we die. Yet Paul still frames his discussion of the spiritual body in the context of his eschatological doctrine concerning the general resurrection (for use of the future tense and meaning, see 15:22, 51, 52, 54-55); we might infer that this indicates that the general resurrection of the dead will consummate a process of going-on-to-resurrection that begins in this life with baptism and continues in the afterlife when we experience some form of spiritual embodiment which would be the beginning of life in a spiritual body.

In general, Jewish and Christian thought require some kind of embodiment of the distinctive identity and continuity of a person. Paul himself expresses this attitude when he says that he would not want to be bodiless or "naked" (2 Corinthians 5:3). The soul may be what physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne calls "the form, or information-bearing pattern, of the body" by which the continuity of a person is carried throughout one's ever-changing natural body in this world. If so, then in an afterlife would not the soul, which is separated from the natural body but united to the spirit, have to have some kind of appropriate body in order to preserve personal continuity? If this is God's plan then only in the future resurrection will we receive a complete life within the whole new cosmos which God will inaugurate at the final appearing of Christ and the final outpouring of the Holy Spirit. During the afterlife the human spirit would not yet possess the perfected spiritual body of the general resurrection that would be appropriate within the ecology of a new creation, but this does not necessarily mean that the spirit would not have a bodily mode of being suitable to its state like the body of a germinated seed which has both continuity with, and discontinuity from, the body of the plant which it will become (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:36-38). We should trust that God will provide whatever we shall need (1 Corinthians 15:38). Admittedly, when Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that "we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" it is natural for us to presume that being "at home with the Lord" is a state of

being without any embodiment, but this body which we are leaving behind is our natural body here and now, not another possible embodiment in the afterlife. It would be very foolish to underestimate what being "at home with the Lord" entails, especially since the incarnate Son enables us to participate in his new human nature.

Without making my claim that believers already put on a developing spiritual body after death, Sergius Bulgakov does acknowledge, "The life of the resurrection itself begins and is prepared over the entire course of an individual's life, both the life on earth and the afterlife, which are interconnected, not opposed." Bulgakov thought that the afterlife is as important in enabling God to fulfill his purposes for us as is our life on earth, the afterlife beginning as "a great *initiation*, a revelation of the spiritual world" and necessary "to attain the ripeness that makes [one] capable of receiving resurrection to eternal life in the fullness of true humanity." Bulgakov assumes that "symbols or equivalents" of "corporeal sensations" will be a part of "the state of disincarnation" in the afterlife; however he adds, "We do not know if these states are related to the future life of the bodily resurrection." He thinks that exploring further the relation of our existence in the afterlife to our future bodily resurrection might show "excessive curiosity" whereas I think it is a legitimate matter of theological reflection as long as we acknowledge the limits to our knowledge based upon what God has revealed to us and we acknowledge that the doctrinal tradition of the church is limited to affirming that our spirits return to God and are united with our souls when our souls are separated from our natural bodies at death.

The premise of my proposal of receiving a spiritual body after we die, at least in a form suitable to the state of the afterlife, is that we should require some kind of embodiment in the afterlife, and the only technical biblical term available to describe an embodiment following death is Paul's term, the "spiritual body." I have shown that there is some basis in exegesis for adopting the term "spiritual body" to describe our embodiment in the afterlife following our personal death insofar as Paul uses the present tense in referring to the raising of the spiritual body and also because Paul's discussion of different types of bodies shows that the Creator is able to provide any kind of body that is needed (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35-41). Yet I understand why many judge that the term "spiritual body" should be reserved only for describing our life in the general resurrection of the dead since Paul frames his discussion of the spiritual body in the context of his eschatological doctrine.

The church fathers of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, also thought that the soul requires embodiment in the afterlife as well as in the general resurrection of the dead. If any object to my own proposal, then I refer them to a somewhat alternative view in Mr. Wesley's thoughts. In a letter to a sister on April 17, 1776 in which he quotes from a funeral hymn by Charles Wesley. He wrote, "But what is the essential part of heaven? Undoubtedly it is to see God, to know God, to love God. We shall then know both His nature, and His works of creation and providence, and of redemption. Even in paradise, in the intermediate state between death and resurrection, we shall learn more

concerning these in an hour, than we could in an age, during our stay in the body. We cannot tell indeed how we shall then exist, or what kind of organs we shall have: The soul will not be encumbered with flesh and blood; but probably it will have some sort of ethereal body, even before God clothes us 'with our nobler house of empyrean light'." Mr. Wesley's embrace of the concept of "some sort of ethereal body" in the intermediate state seems coherent with Jesus' teaching that we shall be "like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). Angels are traditionally understood to be incorporeal, but all we can say is that they do not have flesh and blood, and they must have their own form with its own substance or being. In my own considered judgment Paul's concept of the "spiritual body" is also coherent with Jesus' teaching and applicable to both the afterlife and the general resurrection although there would be differences in environments and developments between a kind of spiritual body in the afterlife and the mature spiritual body in the general resurrection. I do not think my understanding of the term, "spiritual body," to speak of an embodiment in the afterlife is necessarily very different from Mr. Wesley's term, "some sort of ethereal body," because I am assuming that God provides a kind of spiritual body suitable to the afterlife which is a preparation for the general resurrection in the consummation of God's purposes for humankind and all of creation. While my proposal lacks an unambiguous statement of support from Paul, as a theological inference it does not seem at all incoherent with the apostle's whole testimony concerning divine revelation of Christian hope. If I were to make a conjecture about the nature of the spiritual body in the afterlife, I would describe it as consisting of a subtle substance that already has the teleological *form*, if not the fullness of being, of the spiritual body of the general resurrection in the future. This form would be the image of a person which is the perfect expression of one's spirit in continuity with one's natural body.

For several years I have had a recurring dream in which I am in a strange location for a meeting with hundreds of strangers, but after I have made a speech I am left by myself to find my way home. I always get disoriented and go in the wrong direction and miss my connection to be transported home. I am sure this dream collects anxieties from my past life. Just before I began oncology treatment, I had this dream again, but this time there was something different. At the moment I knew I was truly lost, I heard an inner voice that told me to approach a door and open it. The building I was in was grey and drab, and so was the door I approached. I opened the door and stepped forward, and standing before me were my father and my mother who had died 17 and 14 years earlier, respectively. Of course, they had been in other dreams fleetingly when they looked like they used to look in the last decades of their lives, and in previous dreams they had never directly manifested their presence to me or communicated any particular message to me; they were just there as memories. My father was in perfect bodily shape and dressed nattily with a full head of hair wearing some preppy glasses, and my mother was slim and modestly dressed in dark clothes as she stood closely beside my father. Both of them were smiling and almost *gleaming*, enveloped in a peace which instantly included me. We did not greet or embrace each other. The only thing necessary was to be in one another's presence. I said nothing but simply waited.

Only my father spoke or communicated with me. He assured me that everything would be well. As I received this assurance I glanced at my mother who smiled broadly and slightly nodded her head in agreement with what my father had said. Then my father told me it was time for me to go back through the door and to close it behind me. I did so, and when I returned to the drab room I felt fine and then I woke up. Now I am willing to concede this was only a dream, but it felt as if it were a *visitation* within a dream. I presume a spiritual manifestation is adapted to our sensibilities (the glasses!), but my perception of my parents in this dream perhaps provides me with a visual image of the kind of spiritual body that is given to us when we die and enter the blessedness of the afterlife.

*Both a personal afterlife and the general resurrection of the dead*

The term "afterlife" is not biblical but it aptly depicts departing this life to be with Christ after death, and the term is misleading if it is understood apart from the doctrine of resurrection. The blending together, so to speak, of the resurrection and the afterlife is simply taken for granted in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 without any effort to offer explanations about their relation to one another. The casualness in which Paul alludes to a personal afterlife when one dies suggests that the afterlife was not controversial and that Christians saw no contradiction between expecting the afterlife and hoping for the general resurrection of the dead. Both the afterlife and the future resurrection represent God's purposes of salvation "in Christ." Jesus' own teaching about life beyond death in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Luke, also manifests the same unexplained blending of the afterlife and the resurrection. Today the official rites of churches for the burial of the dead emphasize almost entirely the promise of the future resurrection of the dead, and they rarely speak directly of Paul's hope of departing to be with Christ when he dies or preferring to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. Yet believers who participate in these rites nearly always are trusting that the deceased loved one is now with the Lord and will also participate in God's ultimate plan for the creation. The hope of Christians is the same today as it was in the beginning of the church.

For Paul and other Christians the common, and also distinctive, factor in Christian hope for both the afterlife and the resurrection is the person of *Christ* with whom believers are already united in this life in a union that cannot be destroyed by death. Both Paul's discussions of the resurrection to the church in Corinth conclude with an exhortation to "please" Christ whether in this life or after death (2 Corinthians 5:9) and to excel "in the work of the Lord" because "in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). While the burial rites of churches do not emphasize the afterlife, I do think that the Christocentric sayings in the Gospel of John, such as John 11:25-26, read during the burial rites of churches serve to evoke both a hope of resurrection from the dead as the future fruit of Christ's own resurrection and a trust in being with Christ when we die. After Martha, the sister of Lazarus, tells Jesus that she believes in "the resurrection on the last day," Jesus tells her in John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

To reject indications and clear affirmations of an afterlife in the New Testament just because the afterlife sounds like a Hellenistic concept of the immortality of the soul is to make resurrection and immortality an either/or choice. The tendency of some twentieth century scholars like Oscar Cullman to draw a sharp contrast between "Greek" and "Hebrew" or "biblical" thought is far too purist. Historically there was much interchange between Hellenistic and Semitic cultures during Second Temple Judaism, and beliefs about life beyond death among Jews could be quite similar to those of Greeks as shown in Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-3 and Josephus' discussion of the beliefs of the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees in *The Jewish War*, II. 8 in which this first century priest describes their views about life beyond death in terms of their particular understanding of "immortality." Jewish Christians were capable of appropriating Hellenistic terms and concepts and converting them into fundamentally Jewish categories as in 1 Corinthians 15:53 and 2 Timothy 1:9b-10. The reason why there could be similarity between Jewish and Christian teaching about the afterlife and the Hellenistic concept of the immortality of the soul is because Jews and Christians needed to address the fundamental concern expressed by the idea of immortality, which is the destiny of the *individual* after death-- a concern that was secondary to the primary emphasis in Jewish and Christian faith on God's plan for the ultimate future of God's people and all of God's creation. Already among the earliest Christians, even when there was a lively expectation that the final future might arrive very soon, believers were dying and teachers were acknowledging that God's plan included provision of an afterlife for those who died before Christ comes again. Furthermore, we should also consider how the concept of immortality in the Platonic tradition may well be grounded in "original revelation" concomitant with our species' creation by which human beings receive an intuitive expectation of an afterlife that, of course, requires inspection in light of God's further special revelation to Israel and in the event of Jesus Christ. The affirmation that "our Savior Christ Jesus ...abolished death and brought life and immortality to light" in 2 Timothy 1:9b-10 seems to imply that Christ's resurrection was God's news to the world which confirmed a primordial intuition of life after death that later had become conceptualized as the idea of the immortality of the soul. Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper says that Plato's teaching on the immortality of the soul had its origin in the testimony of "ancients" who were close to a divine origin which Pieper identifies as "the divine logos that became man in Christ."

Beginning in the second century, the church fathers established the Christian tradition of a personal afterlife, teaching that the soul of a person continues separately from the natural body after death and will be united with a spiritual body in the general resurrection. While there are various opinions among them concerning the topic of the soul, the fathers were in agreement that the soul is the seat of continuity in one's personal identity and that it possesses a kind of conditional immortality, meaning that the preservation of the soul after death is based only upon the will and grace of God

and not upon the soul's own immortal nature. Moreover, the soul's immortality is also conditioned by the fact that the soul has no existence before it is created by God as the interior dimension of our natural bodily existence that carries our personal identity given to our spirit. In my assessment of the fathers' teaching, I assume that they emphasize the soul rather than the spirit because our soul is the place where the spirit is active in us and serves as the seat of our personal identity. As Karl Barth observed, "Scripture never says 'soul' only where 'spirit' can be meant. But it often says 'soul' where 'spirit' is meant [e.g. the parallelism in Luke 1:46]; and there is an inner reason for this in the fact that the constitution of man as soul and body cannot be fully and exactly described without thinking first and foremost of the spirit as its proper basis." It would be natural for the fathers to focus on the soul because of its importance in Hellenistic thought as well as the fact that the soul is the seat of the continuity of personal identity given by the spirit which comes from God, and the fathers never forgot that the human spirit exists and is not extinguished at death by virtue of the relation of God's Spirit to us as shown by their understanding that the immortality of the soul is conditioned by its creation by God's act and its preservation beyond death by God's will.

In the living tradition of the church, the experience of the saints only strengthens the church's expectation of a personal afterlife. I cherish the testimony of the martyrs and the saints that God has not only promised the future resurrection of the dead by raising his Son from the dead, but also made a place for our spirits with Christ between our death and our resurrection. To cite but one of many testimonies of the faith of the martyrs, the oldest account of martyrdom in North Africa, *The Acts of the Scillitan Saints*: When six Christian men and women were sentenced to be executed by the sword on July 17, 180, one of them exclaimed, "Today we are martyrs in heaven: thanks be to God!" The stories about the saints are filled with accounts of their departure to be with Christ when they died.

#### *The afterlife as the sabbath before the first day of the new creation*

What, then, is the place of the afterlife in the divine economy of salvation? The dismissal of the belief in an afterlife as being "mythological" is not convincing since divine revelation may be expressed in mythological language (if the separation of the natural body from the soul but united to the spirit is "mythological") to communicate transcendent truth while grounding the truth in the biblical story of God's work of creation, redemption, and consummation. The afterlife is posited on both the genuine future of the new creation which is based upon God's gift of time to that which is not the eternal God and also upon the advent of Jesus Christ in "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) with whom believers in all generations are united by faith in a union that cannot be broken by death. Hence the state of the afterlife seems to function within the economy of salvation as the great sabbath for spirits following the labors, pains, and enigmas of earthly existence in preparation for the coming of the first day of the new creation.

In Christian tradition, the afterlife is always associated with "rest." A common expression of the bereaved is, "She has gone to her rest." Psalm 116 was influential in the tradition since it celebrates the death of believers: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones" (116:15). It includes the affirmation, "Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you" (116:7), followed by the prayer, "For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the LORD in the land of the living" (116:8-9). The Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation that was used by the early church, divides Psalm 116 into two parts, Psalm 114 and 115, and its language may even be more felicitous when it is understood as a prophecy of the rest of believers after their death before the future resurrection. This concept of rest occurs in the Epistle to the Hebrews which, according to Ben Witherington, affirms "both a vibrant afterlife and a glorious otherworld as lying in the future of true believers," placing "different stresses on one or the other." The author of the epistle makes clear we already enter into this rest when we believe in Jesus Christ (4:2), and presumably he assumes that the promise of rest includes the afterlife when he writes, "So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs [the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness during the time of Moses] (4:9-11)."

We cannot know what the sabbath rest of the afterlife will be, and it is pointless to speculate. Perhaps we cannot help but think of our sabbath times and expect that the great sabbath for our spirits will be a state of communion with the triune God, greater comprehension of the meaning of the history in which we lived and played a part, contemplation of the spiritual world, intellectual reflection, examination of our past, repentance and growth toward perfection in love, reunions and visitations, and much more beyond our imagining.

Because of the influence of St. Augustine in the West the sabbath rest of spirits is also attributed to the life of the resurrection. At the conclusion of *The City of God*, XXII, St. Augustine discourses at length on the blessed sabbath rest which God has prepared for our spirits in which we shall be sanctified and made able to see God. Throughout his discussion he speaks of this sabbath as part of the new life of the general resurrection when we shall have our spiritual bodies, but then he briefly acknowledges that the end of our sabbath will be "the Lord's Day, an eighth day as it were, which is to last forever" in which there will be "the eternal rest not only of the spirit but of the body also" in "a kingdom which has no end." This distinction between the great sabbath and the coming of the Lord's new day of the consummated kingdom of God is an abrupt surprise since he had been describing the sabbath as part of the resurrection of the dead which is often called the "eighth day" of the new creation. Also, the abruptness is accented because his comments about the coming Lord's day are very brief and bring *The City of God* to its conclusion. Adding to the complexity of Augustine's view of the sabbath rest is that he also describes it as the last age of humankind, treating this spiritual sabbath

as a kind of millenium of Christ's reign in history; I infer that Augustine only means that the sabbath rest of humankind in the life of the resurrection is the final age of history in the sense that the hopes of human history will finally be realized beyond history. My proposal in concert with other Christian tradition is that the great sabbath rest is the state of the soul in the afterlife before the general resurrection, and I can only puzzle over Augustine's view that the great sabbath is both the life of the resurrection of the body but not yet the consummation of the creation as the everlasting kingdom of God. Apparently St. Augustine thinks of the new creation not as a whole new world in which there will be creative human activity in using all the good gifts of God for human flourishing without sinning, but he envisages it as only the perfection of the Beatific Vision in which "we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise." I myself understand the new creation as a perfection of all of the present creation and of human life in communion with God who will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28)-- all the presence and glory of the triune God in all of creation. Every theological construction is the use of reason to explore the meaning of divine revelation--an exercise in faith seeking understanding--and therefore there will be differences of views for the whole church to consider. Ascribing the sabbath rest to both the afterlife and the resurrection in tradition is not too surprising. In the testimony to divine revelation in the New Testament and in all subsequent theological reflection, our lack of ability to exactly discern the relation between a blessed rest of spirits and the coming new cosmos represents a limit in our ability to comprehend the mystery of divine revelation concerning the future God has prepared for us. As persons of faith, it is sufficient to trust what God has certainly revealed to us in the witness of the apostles as illumined in the tradition of the saints and to rejoice in hope of blessedness and the new world to come.

### *On not being able to imagine the afterlife*

I do not spend much time trying to envisage living an afterlife, but I simply entrust others and myself to God's purposes. I do not think we are supposed to divert our attention from this life here and now. Even focusing on learning to die is still an earthly task. While I do think more about life after death than before I received my cancer diagnosis, I continue to enjoy each day as the earth revolves around the sun through the seasons of the year. Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann used to say, "Don't peek!" God's purpose that we live only one life at a time may be understood as the reason why there is a measure of obscurity concerning the afterlife in the New Testament. Besides, what God has designed for us is simply beyond our capacity to imagine. The apostle Paul paraphrased the Greek translation of the Septuagint (LXX) in Isaiah 64:4, writing, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"... (1 Corinthians 2:9). Although our responsibility is to live before God here and now, it is no betrayal of that responsibility, when our hold on this life becomes ever more tenuous, to begin to feel the attraction to depart to be with Christ, for that is far better. As the light of this world

dims, on the far horizon we begin to glimpse the glow of the light of that country called Paradise which we cannot yet see but which draws us nearer and nearer.

### *Prayer as a glimpse into the kingdom of heaven*

Because of the limits of our ability to imagine life beyond death, anything we do say about it sounds trite and unreal. Yet I think there is one experience in our life here and now which is coherent with our trust that God has prepared something far better for us beyond death, and that is prayer. When any of us humbly prays and invokes the name of the one, true God--even those of us who are mere beginners in the way of prayer compared to the saints--by God's grace we enter into a spiritual dimension in which we are aware of an openness and a transcendence. I consider prayer, whether offered in our own room behind a shut door or in the house of God when the people of God celebrate the Eucharist, to be a window into the kingdom of heaven that we can now glimpse through the eyes of faith. If we never pray then the hope of life beyond death will appear to be pie-in-the-sky-when-I-die, but if we do pray then how can we not know--"with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26-27)--that there is a breadth, length, height, and depth to reality past what our reason can comprehend and what our methods can prove (Ephesians 3:14-20)?

### **Personal attitudes towards dying**

During my entire existence I have lived with a faith in God, and as an adult I have gradually developed a holistic theological perspective. The divine gift of faith has shaped me in every way, and it engenders my attitudes as I confront my own death. I reserve expressing my thoughts and feelings towards members of my family for personal conversations.

From the moment I received news that my body was full of cancer, my attitude has been one of gratitude for the gift of life. Welling up in my heart is the feeling of gratitude, gratitude, gratitude for my life. While some people pity me because they presume that we should expect to live longer than I shall live, I myself am grateful for the sheer gift of life I have received, for living long enough to know who I was created to be, and for living through all the stages of human life from childhood to old age. I am especially grateful for the beginning of my life when I grew up as a creature of the forest and for the conclusion of my life when I was free to spend my time in contemplation and in study. I am also grateful for the grace of God in my active life, which was my decades of service to the church as a pastor and superintendent; I dare not speak of my active life here, knowing that I am accountable to God for what I have done and left undone (1 Corinthians 3:10-17). Admittedly, my gratitude for the blessings of life I have received is intermingled with grief as I think of so many others who have died in miserable poverty, refugee camps, and prisons; were killed in foolish wars or were struck or shot on the street by criminals; suffered from domestic abuse or were murdered in rape; perished in vehicle accidents or from drug overdoses; or whose

precious lives were cut short, even in infancy and childhood, by the worst diseases or mishaps. Surveying the suffering in the world, why would I ever feel anything but gratitude even as I pray for all those others who have been deprived of so much, trusting the mercy and capacity of our Creator to restore them beyond death?

Getting cancer has not affected in any way my affirmation of the goodness of creation. The integrity of the body is under attack by progressive ideology in the late modern West, and by implication the goodness of creation itself is called into question. This depreciation of creation is strikingly reminiscent of the attitude of Gnostic Christian sects in the second century that also propagated a nonsensical worldview estranged from reality. We who believe in the goodness of God's work of creation accept that there is evil, disorder, disease, and randomness in creation because God has given to creation its own freedom, which is also the same reason that there is superabundant goodness and beauty and creativity in the world. God is a worker and an artist, and the creation is God's unfinished masterpiece. We also know that God will continue to create and redeem until this good creation is perfected not merely because this hope is in the scriptures (Isaiah 65:17; Romans 8; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21-22), but primarily because the event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit guarantee it (Philippians 3:20-21; 2 Corinthians 5:5).

I also look upon my death as a way of contributing to this world. I have always believed and taught "generational generosity." By that I mean being willing to step aside to allow persons in younger generations the opportunity to offer their contributions. This is why I believe in mandatory retirement and the decency of older persons getting off center stage. For example, I look at the elderly leaders in government in the 2020's who cling to their positions because they can and because they want the attention, power, and wealth it gives them, and I am appalled. Not only are they standing in the way of younger leaders, but also most of them have become out of touch with the concerns of the public and the nature of new challenges which now threaten our country and world. Countries, communities, and institutions need the energy and enthusiasm of younger leaders to inspire hope for the future and to regenerate society. Death is the ultimate guarantor of generational generosity, and accepting my own death feels consistent with the values by which I have sought to live. In spite of my inadequacies and failures as a father, I know that the most important contribution which Melba and I have made to the world is our two sons, and I trust that each of them, his spouse and our five grandchildren will continue to grow in spirit and to make a constructive contribution to others.

To be honest I also feel something I did not expect, which is a certain sense of freedom. I have never been someone who looked upon this life as "a vale of tears." Because I cherish being a part of God's good earth, I anticipated that news of imminent death would make me feel only regret. Instead, I am surprised by the lift I feel from anticipating freedom from responsibilities, cares, anxieties, weariness with physical ailments and limitations, disappointment with cultural ruination and ideological

noise, and disgust with trash in our cities and countryside. This sense of freedom does not come without an accompanying guilt knowing that I shall not be able to take care of things for others, particularly for Melba and the members of our family. Yet I also believe that the Creator gives me and every one of us permission without guilt to let go of everything in this life when we are completing our journey through this world. Hence insofar as I retain consciousness I expect to claim this freedom more and more as I approach my final breath. This freedom of letting go as we are dying is only the final act of the whole spiritual movement of our lives in which we learn to be followers of Jesus Christ who "deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow [him]" in order to "save" our self by "losing" it for his sake (Luke 9:23-25). If we practice the "little deaths" of daily self-denial throughout our life, then we should become free enough to let go of life itself when we die.

At the very center of my faith, I trust God in all things. I have acknowledged my conviction that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead in a transformed new mode of being and has overcome the power of death forever, and I have explained why the reality of his resurrection is a promise of our own resurrection in the future new creation and of departing to be with Christ after our death. At the same time, even though God has revealed that we have been given a destiny beyond death, death still remains for us now an epistemological barrier beyond which our human reason and imagination cannot go. Persons with another kind of temperament than mine may well feel differently than I do, but I care little if it is impossible now for me to *imagine* living an afterlife or the resurrection of the dead; the reality of God's gift of life beyond death does not depend upon my capacity to adequately conceptualize it or to imagine it. The ground of my hope is basic trust in the God of the gospel, which is all I need for living or learning to die. As Austin Farrer said, "God does not give us explanations; he gives up a Son." The apostle Paul spoke for all Christian believers in his Epistle to the Romans when he wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Amen.

Tim Whitaker  
Palm Sunday, 2023

### **A Prayer for God's Mortal Creatures**

May the entire Kingdom of Heaven:

The High God who dwells in inaccessible light  
with the incarnate Son who shines in the glory of his Father  
by the energy of the Holy Spirit;

The choirs of angels dancing before the throne and the ministering spirits  
sent into the world to resist the evil one and to preserve the Good;

The martyrs, the confessors, the saints, and the redeemed made righteous who  
intercede for the faithful and the lost;

Have mercy on all God's mortal creatures in their final days here below,  
and as they fall helplessly into the darkness, gently set them down upon a firm  
foundation  
in the light of eternal grace.

Amen