

Putting Some Color in Death's Cheeks!

2 Corinthians 5: 1-7

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 1, AD 2017
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

George was never short on opinions. Nor was he short on making those opinions known. He had ancestral family ties to our church in North Carolina. I had to endure some long rants, often given at an uncomfortably close personal proximity! That wasn't fun. But I also knew that in his gruff way, George truly cared about his church. George was not granted an easy ending. As his days drew near a close, he had considerable pain. He just couldn't get comfortable. When I visited with him in the hospital, he said, "I want to die and get it over with. Why can't I die?" I -gave him a fairly off the-shelf answer, "You know, George, the timing of these things is in God's hands, not ours." He found no comfort in stock phrases. "I want to die! Why can't I go ahead and die?" I didn't really know what to say. I assured him that Christ was with him. But that wasn't much comfort either. "Why can't I just die?!" he demanded. Finally, it came to me, "George, your soul believes in Jesus. But the body is an atheist. It hangs on for all the life it can get, no matter how painful it is. The body doesn't believe in the next life. So it won't let you go until it has to. The soul believes; the body is an atheist." That actually seemed to comfort him. It made some sense out of the dying process, and he settled down as he went through the labor of passing from this life to the next.

The soul believes. But the body is an atheist. The physical body believes this life is all there is. Faith knows more is to come. That's why faith has to train the body to hope. That's why we have to think about what Scripture teaches us about life after death. We require a base of knowledge by which we can speak to our bodies about what is to come. The apostle Paul certainly understood that. He had come near to death many times in his ministry. In lashings and stonings, trials and imprisonments, his body would have screamed out in fear. Paul required knowledge of the life to come in order to find peace in those moments. The apostle found out the power of faith to give hope in the direst of circumstances. So much so that he could call what he went through, suffering like very few have ever known, just "momentary, light afflictions" compared to the weight of glory that awaits us. I don't know about you, but I call a scrape on the arm a momentary, light affliction. Beatings, mockings, riots and rotting in jail, I call consider pretty bad stuff. But Paul could see beyond this world. He could see beyond this life. And he knew in the guts of his soul that more, much more, is on the way to those in Christ.

So Paul wrote “We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God.” When Paul lived and worked among the Corinthians, he supported himself by making tents. Now tents in those days could be considerably more elaborate than the Boy Scout pup tents we’ve slept in. Still, even a grand tent was but a temporary dwelling. Compared to a stone palace, a tent was transient. These earthly bodies of ours, Paul taught, are like tents. They are fine to dwell in. But they don’t last. We are looking forward to a permanent dwelling. We want to live an embodied life in a house not made by any human carpenter. We want to inhabit resurrection bodies prepared by God.

We’ve been noting all along in this series what colorful language Paul uses. He piles up the word pictures. So in our passage this morning, he switches quickly from the picture of the tent to the picture of stepping into new, splendid clothes. When we die, our souls step out of our bodies. That’s not a state we want to live. That’s like losing all your clothes and being naked. Our spirits want to be clothed in new bodies. Perhaps you’ve had the dream that psychologists tell us is quite common. You show up somewhere important, like to the first day of school, or a new job, or to make a presentation. Then you look down and realize you have no clothes. It’s a panicky moment. You feel exposed, humiliated, and inappropriate. We want to be properly attired. We don’t want to live a bloodless, disembodied, ghostly existence. We want real life. Robust life. Bodies outfitted for eternal life are the clothing we long to put on.

The Christian vision of the life to come is unique and thrilling. No other religion or philosophy approaches our hope. Every time we say the Apostles’ Creed we profess, “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” What do we mean by that? Let’s quickly say first what we *don’t* mean.

- We don’t mean *resuscitation*. That is, we’re not talking about zombies here. Some idea that our ragged flesh gets reanimated.
- We don’t mean *reincarnation*. That is, we’re not talking about coming back in another form according to what you’ve done in this life. No, we believe that you stay you into eternity.
- We don’t mean *reabsorption*. That is, we’re not talking about going back into the great Oneness of all being. You get to stay conscious as you.
- We don’t mean *remembrance*. That is, you live on through your relatives.

We mean *resurrection*. For Paul, the Christian hope of the life to come is coordinated with what happened to Jesus. Jesus went first. He passed through death into resurrected life. What he has, he will give to us. In an essential passage

Paul wrote, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:20-21). What has happened to Jesus? He was raised from the dead. Still in a body. Still himself. But glorified. Outfitted for everlasting life. Recreated for an embodied life in the heavenly realm. Not just a spirit. Not a guy stuck on earth waiting to die again. But a man who rose, in his body, never to die again. What he has, we will have. He will transform our frail, feeble flesh to be like his glorious resurrection body.

A great example from the natural world is that of the caterpillar and the butterfly. Now before we go further, I have to pass onto you a joke that Tim Smith, one of our great support staff team, told the other day. He said, “Yeah, I want to be like a butterfly. I want to eat all I possibly can for days, then go to sleep, and wake up beautiful.” That’s funny, but it’s also what happens.



The caterpillar stuffs itself before forming the chrysalis around itself. The crawling caterpillar petrifies on the outside and liquefies on the inside. Then, over the course of days or weeks, the butterfly takes form, cracks through the chrysalis and flies away. It’s the same creature but it’s a different creature. It went in a caterpillar and came out a butterfly. It has the same genetic information, so it’s really the same insect, but a new expression. One could only crawl. The other flies. I think the resurrection body is similar. We’re us, the same information that makes us what we look now will be the basis for what we become in resurrection. But the glory, the power, the vivid life will be so much more that we will seem completely new.

Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* debuted on the London stage in 1603. He was already famous for many great plays. But people knew from the beginning that *Hamlet* had raised the bar to new heights. The finest actor of the day, Richard Burbage, took the lead role. Through the centuries, powerful actors have wanted to test their mettle against what is arguably theatre’s greatest leading role. Just in our generation, famous actors from Kenneth Branagh to Mel Gibson to David

Tenant to Jude Law to Benedict Cumberbatch have prized this role.



One deep theme in the play is the exploration of the meaning of death. *Hamlet* asks the questions everyone everywhere has asked. Is this all there is? Do we just end by returning to the dust? Or is there more? And if there is more, is the undiscovered country a joy or a horror?

In one famous, shocking scene, Hamlet jumps into a grave and takes up a human skull. The gravedigger has just told him that the skeleton there is Yorick, formerly the king's jester. As a boy, Hamlet played with the merry Yorick and knew him as a beloved member of the royal court. Now he's just disconnected bone. "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." Hamlet looks at Yorick's skull and asks, "Where be your gibes now? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?" Then he turns to ask his companion if he thinks that Alexander the Great ever looked like this skull? Was even the great conqueror of nations reduced to a skinless, grinless bone before he became just part of the dirt of the earth? Hamlet traces the progress of death:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried,
Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of
earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he
was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel?
Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
Should patch a wall to expel the winter flaw! (*Hamlet*, Act 5, scene i.)

Holding the skull, Hamlet looks at death full in the face. He cries out the despair we feel that perhaps this is all there is. One moment you rule the world. But you turn back to earth and that very clod of earth might be used just to plug a beer barrel or a hole in a wall. Such is man.

Though he wrote four centuries ago, Shakespeare touched the soul of today. More people than ever think that this is it, this is all there is. Few, of course, follow

where that depressing trail leads: from glory to plugging a barrel. Is there any answer to such cynicism? Is there any reply to such despair that could match the eloquence of Shakespeare? Can our hope rise to the challenge of Hamlet's melancholy?

George Herbert was a boy when Hamlet burst onto the theatre scene. It was popular throughout his growing up years and no doubt Herbert saw the play in London or in Cambridge. I believe that Herbert had this scene from Hamlet in mind when he wrote his poem called "Death." In fact, I believe that God sent George Herbert to match Shakespeare in language, to answer Hamlet's despair with the hope of the gospel.

Holding up the same skull, we hear Herbert the poet address death. I'm going to paraphrase a bit of it for you.

Death, once you were a vulgar, hideous thing,
 Nothing but bones,
 The sad effect of sadder groans:
Your mouth was open, but you could not sing.

For we considered you as at some six
 Or ten years hence,
 After the loss of life and sense,
Flesh being turned to dust, and bones to sticks.

We looked on this side of you, shooting short;

Herbert tells death that most of us are too near sighted. We see only the decay that happens to the body. The skull that has an open mouth but from which no song can come. The once precious flesh now turned to dust, and strong bones to brittle sticks. We looked at death like Hamlet did. In the short term, near sighted, seeing only what happens to these bodies in the grave.

But that's not the whole story. With one brilliant line, Herbert turns Hamlet, and Death, on their heads:

But since our Savior's death did put some blood
 Into your face;
 You have grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for, as a good.

Our Savior's death put some blood back into death's cheeks. Matching the graphic words of Shakespeare's Hamlet with even more graphic language, Herbert begins to make sport of the grim reaper. He mocks Death. You're not scary anymore. You have grown fair and full of grace. Christ's death conquered you, Death. You grin at me with this skeleton of despair. But Christ in his rising has brought life back to life. He has put some blood back in your cheeks. You're not the end. You're the beginning. You're not be feared but welcomed when the time comes. For all your bones will be clothed with beauty. We shall not be found to be dirt, or merely naked souls. We shall be clothed with life.

So Paul could say triumphantly in our passage today that what is mortal has been "swallowed up by life." Through the centuries, death has been seen as the great devourer. It swallows up everyone. But Paul reveals a deeper reality. These mortal bodies will be swallowed up by life. Death is not the big fish. The resurrection is the bigger fish that has swallowed up even death. Everlasting, embodied life is our future. It is the future of all those who are united to Christ. Those who belong to Jesus, receive what Jesus has: resurrection bodies outfitted for embodied eternal life.

When we are lit up by this hope, everything changes. The stunning words of Paul no longer seem so crazy. These are but momentary, light afflictions when you realize that they have an end. They will not go on forever. They cannot separate us from Christ, nor from those we have lost to death. There is only so much the world, death and the devil can do to us. Those enemies cannot tarnish the glory that awaits those who have been joined to Jesus. We walk now by faith, not by sight. We look up. We don't look at death near term, but far term. The savior's death has put some blood into death's cheeks. Life, not death, is what awaits us.

Be of good cheer, beloved. Be of strong hope. Be sure you are in Christ. Cry out to him to give you his resurrection life. Surrender the body of death to him. Surrender your despair to him. Surrender your cynicism to him. Ask for faith in his vision of life. Surrender the hold you have on your life to his everlasting grip. And be of good cheer, as Jesus told us, he has overcome the world, the devil and even death.