

What Happens To Our Bodies When We Die?

2 Cor. 5:1-10

Bellevue

April 19, 2026

Please open your Bible with me, to 2 Corinthians 5.

Many weeks ago, I mentioned to Lynley, “It would be good for you and I to get away for a few days, after Easter, to rest and recharge,” and so we looked at the calendar and circled April 14-17 and planned for a few days at the Gulf, on the beach. We were hesitant to go because our brother Mark had been given just a few weeks to live, but Mardi encouraged us to keep the trip and to eat a piece of Key Lime pie in their honor. So we went.

On Tuesday afternoon, our feet were in sand when we received a shocking word that Mark’s health was declining rapidly and doctors were now saying that he had days, not weeks, remaining. And sure enough, as we sat down at LuLu’s restaurant on Wednesday afternoon, we ordered our fried okra, and my phone lit up with the message that Mark’s soul had left his body.

And for the next few hours, Lynley and I took turns shedding tears and lamenting this horrible thing called Death, which not only took our friend Bro. Steve just weeks ago, but now, Mark Blair also. We were on vacation, trying to be happy, but a cloud of sadness came over us. That’s what death does—it spoils everything, and whether we want to think about it, or not—we must, because the mortality rate for human beings is sitting right at 100% in this room. One day, should the Lord tarry, we will all face death. The question is: are we preparing for it? Are we thinking about it?

I am a person who thinks about death all the time. I think it’s because God has given me such a passion for life, and he’s called me to prepare people for death—that’s what preachers do—but the older I get, the more I cherish the sands that remain in my hourglass. Because I know they are far less than they were when I was in my 20s. Moses said, “Lord, teach me to number my days aright, that I may gain a heart of wisdom.” In this, Moses was not saying, “Lord teach me to count my days. No, he was saying, teach me to make my days count.”

In the book of 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul is writing to a group of people that were relatively new Christians. They had come to know Christ, but their friends were beginning to die, and doubts were entering their minds. They wondered: what happens to a believer in Jesus at the moment their soul leaves the body? What should we think as we put a person we love into their grave?

Because Paul was in tune with their struggles, he writes these comforting words in 2 Cor. 5:1, shedding light on these matters:

For we know that if our earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands. ² Indeed, we groan in this tent, desiring to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ since, when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴ Indeed, we groan while we are in this tent, burdened as we are, because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now the one who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave us the Spirit as a down payment.

⁶ So we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ In fact, we are confident, and we would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

--2 Cor 5:1-10 CSB

One of the questions I've always wanted people to ask is, "Ben, how on Earth, did you get such a heavenly body?" So far, it hasn't happened. Perhaps more than any other time in the history of human beings have we been this focused on building our bodies. Scripture calls our bodies the temple of the Holy Spirit and it's a good thing to eat well and exercise regularly, and yet, there is not a single passage in the New Testament that reads like this:

"And the disciples, stressed out from a full day of ministry, stopped by the gym in Capernaum, to sneak in a quick workout." –says no verse in the Bible

The first century Christians were not as focused on body building as we are today, but this doesn't mean they weren't aware of the effects of aging on their bodies. In fact, this text makes it clear that they had so many body questions that Paul felt he must address them. In the first five verses, he names two problems that we cannot ignore.

We have two problems:

- **Our bodies are showing wear-and-tear.**

The book of Acts says, "For David, after serving God's purpose in his own generation, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and decayed."

In other words, even the greatest king in the history of Israel, saw the finish line. His body wore out, and withered away, like a flower in the fall naturally disintegrates. Have you noticed any wear-and-tear on that tent you occupy? Are your wrinkles spreading like a crack in the windshield? Any aches and pains that have decided to stick around, like unwanted guests at the holidays? Paul says:

For we know that if our earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God...

As a professional tentmaker, Paul labored for hours on the cloth and the poles. He repaired his share of holes that happened to tents. If you have spent a lot of time camping, you know that the more times you set a tent up and tear it down, the more likely it is to get a hole. The only way to keep a tent perfect is to keep it in the bag. The same is true for our bodies—the more times your knees endure the pounding of the pavement as you run, the more likely you’ll need a knee replacement when you become a senior adult.

Your body is like an earthly tent in this way. Nobody thinks when they buy a tent that this will last forever. No, it’s temporary. In the Old Testament, when the people wandered in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, in the season before the Promised Land became theirs, they had no permanent temple to worship the Lord. No, they had a tabernacle—a traveling worship center that was made of cloth and held up by poles. They longed for a more permanent structure because that tent couldn’t hold up forever.

So it is with your hips. Your shoulders. Your neck. Your eyes. Your ears. Over time, they wear out and in this way—your body becomes an everyday reminder that you’d better get your heart right with God, because eternity is in your heart, but not in your bones.

I said there are two problems: the first is that...

We have two problems:

- **Our bodies are showing wear-and-tear.**
- **Our souls are longing for more permanent housing.**

Look with me, if you will, at V.2: Indeed, we groan in this tent, desiring to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ since, when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.

Notice that word groan: we groan in this tent. As we age, we grow increasingly frustrated as our bodies won’t behave like they used to behave. We can’t read a menu in a romantic, low-light restaurant. Even this week, at the beach, I was in the shower and put the conditioner on my hair because I couldn’t read the bottle without my glasses. I’m 49 and some of you are 69 and saying, “You just wait, it gets worse!” We groan when we lose the ability to do the things we used to do.

And yet, Paul says, there is not just the frustration of losing function, but also the fear of what will happen to me when my body one day gives out entirely, because it will. My soul will leave this tent and so it will become unclothed, unhoused. I do not want to be found naked. He’s raising a question we all raise at some point: what will be left of me when there is nothing left of me?

The loss of bodily function and the growing reality of death causes us to groan. And so, twice Paul uses that word “groan.” In v.2 as I mentioned, and then notice he used it

again in v.4.. ⁴ *Indeed, we groan while we are in this tent, burdened as we are, because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life*

The word groaning is a reference to what your stomach does if you attend the last service on Sunday morning, and the preacher gets long-winded. It starts to send signals, "It's time for him to wrap this up. Somebody tell him. If you won't speak up, I will!"

Our stomachs were designed by God to groan when a mealtime is approaching. And if you've ever been sitting near people when your stomach starts groaning, you have a problem on your hands.

So it is with our natural hunger for heaven, says Paul. God has so designed us that, as our bodies get older, we find ourselves hungering for heaven more and more, and this inner feeling intensifies until our time of departure comes.

To make this sensation even more intense, v.5 states that we have been given a deposit on the day we first believed, the Holy Spirit infiltrated our hearts and daily reminds us that we are children of God and destined for a better place. We are pilgrims passing through and shouldn't get too attached to this temporary existence.

So what should we do on those days when we are at the beach and we discover that a dear brother has gone home to be with the Lord? What encouragement can we find in the wake of death?

Paul gives us three thoughts, which I've turned into short prayers that we can use this week as we reflect on the passing of two men deeply loved here at Bellevue.

Three Prayers To Keep Your Heart Encouraged

- **Lord, remind me that the afterlife is better than this life. (v.6)**

I keep forgetting that!

So we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He's creating an either-or situation. Either we are here on Earth, or we are near to God in heaven. One of those is better than the other. What did Jesus say to the repentant thief on the cross next to him: "Today you will be with me in paradise." In other words, don't be afraid, for as soon as your soul leaves that body, you'll find yourself in a far better place.

There's something inside us that thinks it far better to stay on Earth than to join Jesus in heaven. It seems that goal of human beings most days is to try to extend life as long as possible rather than to live a full life in the short time allotted.

When our loved ones pass away, and they know the Lord, we can truly say that they are in a far better place, more alive than ever before. As Paul says, "we are always confident and know that absent from this body means present with the Lord."

A word of caution is in order here, as I've walked with many families through grief and loss. While it is true that a believer who has gone home to be with the Lord is now living their best life, it is not helpful to the family members to say such things. "Don't cry. He's in a better place." While the intentions are pure, and the words are true, a grieving soul needs to feel the full weight of a loss in order to heal and humans are not helped by such things. As one of my counselor friends explained, "We have to feel it to heal it." When someone you love is feeling a season of loss, let them sit under that cloud, and let them see your eyes of compassion, but avoid the temptation to explain.

A second prayer when death feels frightening:

- **Lord, remind me that my faith is more important than my muscle tone. (v.7)**

V. 7, "For we walk by faith, not by sight." Those 8 words capture the essence of obedience. We keep on going no matter what obstacles may come. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith, it is impossible to please God. That one quality—the inner drive to do what God says regardless of resistance, is the goldmine that grows within the godly.

This is God's greatest ongoing work in your life, expanding your faith. It is His deepest desire for you in this age. We live in a world obsessed with seeing things—checking off the bucket list items before we die, but what does Scripture say? We should focus on those things that can never be seen with our eyes and only seen by God's eyes.

And when He looks down at you, does he see a person that is walking by faith, not by sight.

How do I let God grow my faith? By cooperating when he makes you wait for things.

Years ago, I came across a book called *Thanks for the Feedback*. The subtitle caught my eye: *The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well, even when its off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you're not in the mood.*

This book is written by scientific researchers who explored why some people receive feedback from others like they receive gifts at Christmas and others take the smallest suggestion like a poke in the eye.

Here's what they found: human beings fall into two categories when they think about their lives. Category one are those who have what is called a fixed identity and category

two are those who have a growth identity. How a human sees himself affects how they receive feedback.

The unhealthy people look at their personality and assume that it is "fixed": They are either lovable or difficult, smart or dull, extroverted or introverted, and those things are not going to change—this is just the way I am, and people can deal with it. When people in this group receive criticism, they take criticism like a judge pounding a gavel, declaring who they are.

Those who handle feedback more fruitfully, as you may guess, operate with a different assumption at their core. These folks see themselves as ever evolving, ever growing. They have what is called a "growth" identity. How they are now is simply how they are now. The books says:

It's a pencil sketch of a moment in time, not a portrait in oil. Hard work matters; challenge and even failure are the best ways to learn and improve. Inside a growth identity, feedback is valuable information about where one stands now and what to work on next. It is welcomed input rather than an upsetting verdict.

And which one would you say that you are? And how do you think this impacts your relationship with God. This is why this first prayer matters so much—what is God doing in your life right now? He's growing your soul, which lasts forever, even as your body breaks down. But you have a part to play in that, in receiving feedback from the Holy Spirit and from loved ones who offer you helpful advice or constructive criticism. Keep a growth identity. Don't get fixed.

Now let's pick back up on the passage. V.7...

⁷ For we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ In fact, we are confident, and we would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him.

Here's the third prayer:

- **Lord, help me to keep my goal in life to be pleasing to You. (v.9)**

V.9: Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him.

While we live in these bodies, the Lord has given us an inner motivation to get some things done before we depart. We have inside us a thing called "ambition" and it can be the greatest gift or the most horrific curse, depending on how you handle it.

That phrase, in v9, make it our aim, is the word ambition. We make it our *ambition* to be pleasing to Him in all that we do. One commentator writes:

The English word “ambition” derives from the Latin word ambitio, which comes from a verb that literally means, “to go around.” The word was used by the Romans to refer to politicians who went around canvassing for votes to get themselves elected.

-MacArthur’s NT Commentary

In that case, ambition was a bad thing, describing a person who is always selling themselves. And as the old saying goes, “A man wrapped up in himself is a small package.” Small people seek after success without a servant’s heart. Jesus taught us a better way and showed us what to do when we find ourselves in a room where we are the most influential person. He picked up a basin and a towel and he washed dirty feet.

Ambition can turn even the best person into a me-monster. But there is a positive, sanctified form of ambition—when we feel a deep inner drive to live our lives in such a way that God is a proud father in heaven. This is why the book of Proverbs, a manual for practical living, begins by saying that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. There is no true success, no right result of ambition, without acknowledging at the start that the glory of God is the goal of my life. I want to take whatever years the Lord has chosen to give and serve His purpose in my generation. And when it’s done, I fall asleep.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God’s will. –Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The key word being “actively.” A Christian who thinks rightly about death uses the brevity of life reminder to make the most of their short days. The best way to dwell on death is to do God’s will while you still have time.

And notice how Paul finishes the thought, in v. 10:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

So there’s no time to waste. What you do in your body, in this slice of human history you’ve been assigned, matters greatly to God.

Now, with my time remaining, I’d like to raise some questions that may be living in this room—all three questions have to do with our earthly bodies, and how to think about our bodies from a biblical perspective. So here we go, three questions about the body...

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

What does it mean to be repaid for what we did in these bodies, whether good or evil? This sounds ominous?

This is a reasonable question because Romans says that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. We have no reason to be afraid, for Christ has already paid for all our sins—past, present, and future.

And fear is a poor motivator for people. We do not live good lives when we live in fear. This was the problem of the Medieval age and the corruption that took place in the Catholic Church, namely the idea of **purgatory**.

Jesus taught that every person who dies, goes to one of two places—for those who have been forgiven, heaven, but those who refused the handout of grace—hell. But the Catholic Church began to teach a third: purgatory. A place where souls go to be purged, before they can be set free to go to heaven.

If you've never done any study of this period in Church History, the era was marked by abuses of power, as the pope declared that he held the key to the prison where souls were being stored. According to this errant doctrine, a human being had to be “purged” for a certain length of time before they could enter heaven.

However, if loved ones gave large sums of money to the church, they could set their loved ones free so that they could fly to heaven. That donation was placed in a container called a “coffer” and the saying emerged, “When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” And as you can imagine, the Catholic Church had quite a capital funds campaign out of that deal, and built some beautiful buildings that are works of art to this day.

But the Bible says that the death of Jesus on the cross—his atoning sacrifice—was sufficient for human beings. When we give our lives to Christ, he cuts up the bill and we no longer live in fear of impending punishment.

So getting back to the question: what Paul is referring to in v.10, is the idea of heavenly rewards, that each of us will be rewarded according to the measure of faith we demonstrated while living in these tents. There is no punishment, and we have no reason to fear so long as we walk with Christ and show others the fruit of our salvation.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

Do you honestly believe that God will reassemble the bodies of all who have died?

Let me first say that I resonate with people who ask questions like these. Miracles are honestly hard to believe in. When someone says, “It was a miracle!” my brain always thinks: I doubt it. I am a skeptic, and it's just my personality.

I feel for poor ol' Doubting Thomas, who wanted to see, touch, and feel the open gashes on Jesus' body before he signed up for eternity. Who wouldn't want to do that? The guy gets a bad rap for wanting to see a house before buying it sight unseen. We

don't call Peter, Petrified Peter, because he was scared to say that he knew Jesus on the night he was arrested. Thomas was a believer who wrestled with doubts, and you can be the same.

Doubt is part of the Christian life, and we will never have clarity in all things.

I heard a story of a 38 year-old man who was suddenly burned out in his career. He could not understand why he no longer had passion for his craft. In a state of utter confusion, he had no idea what to do with the rest of his life, so he took a three month sabbatical and a portion of that was a mission trip to spend time with an older lady who he respected as a grandmother in the Faith. A missionary.

When he arrived, she said, "I am so glad you're here. What can I do for you?" He said, "Please pray for me."

She said, "I will, what can I pray for?"

And with all of the confusion swirling around in his head, he said: "Please pray that I have clarity."

And she said very firmly: "I most certainly will not. Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to, and you have got to let go of it.

And he pushed back saying: "But I need clarity when it comes to my vocation..."

She cut him off, and laughed, saying: "I have never had clarity. What I've always had is trust. My brother, I am going to pray that you learn in this season, to trust God."

Craving clarity is a natural human desire. We want clarity so that we can avoid the risk of trust. It's just the way we are. Jesus did not shame Thomas for wanting to touch him. He simply exalted those who did not need to touch him, "Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. But blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

You who say, if I could just see one dead person come back to life, I would forever be a Christian. Is it evidence you need, or is it trust? If you're going to follow Jesus you must take him at his word, and he was crystal clear when he said that he goes to prepare a place for us, and He has set a day He shall return. The dead will live again, with new bodies, just as He received the day he walked out of the tomb. This is the great hope of all those who take flowers to the grave of a loved one who knew Jesus.

You can have doubts and still believe.

A Student Asks:

Why do I feel so bad about my body?

As I mentioned before, we live in an age when people are hyper-focused on physical strength, and what is wild is the way that humans keep “re-deciding” what the model body looks like. In the Middle Ages, from 500 AD to 1500 AD, women were most stunning if their skin was pale and their bodies were plump—these were signs that they came from wealthy families, didn’t have to work the fields. If a woman was light-skinned and carried extra weight, this was called “attractive” because she was rich and good to marry. And by the way, it was considered best if they had small hands and small feet. I don’t know how they decided that.

Fast forward a few hundred years, In the 18th and 19th century, men who looked like body builders were labeled uncivilized, and not good marriage material. Intelligence and refinement were the things a woman most wanted, and all those muscles were an indicator that he didn’t read books. All braun and no brains, like Gaston, in *Beauty and the Beast*.

This is why being a teenager is hard. Teenagers always feel the pressure to measure up to whatever standard society has decided upon, and it keeps changing. This why Scripture says in 1 Tim 4:8: For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Keeping a model figure will wear you out, and not only that, it can give you a false sense of confidence that your body is not under the curse, that it will always be this strong, that you are immortal, and we must all wrestle with our immortality.

When I was a boy in elementary school, I rode my bike to a friend’s house. I lived in a tiny town with no stoplights, and I put a lot of miles on that bike every year. On this fateful day, as I was riding along, **I came upon a bird** that was lying on the ground, as if it had gone to sleep. There was no sign of violence, no signal it had suffered a disease. The good Lord decided, so it seemed, that this was its last day of life, and it landed, keeled over, and finished.

I remember stopping my bike, getting off and looking closely at the little bird, and deciding that it couldn’t stay right there, but a creature so beautiful required a proper burial. I turned around, returned to my house, got a bag, and went and retrieved the body of the bird.

And **I went to my backyard**, grabbed a shovel, and put him in the Earth. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. But that wasn’t enough. I also felt that it was a tragedy for the bird to die without having a name, and if anyone ever found the remains of the bird, they

should know “who” he was. So I made a card, wrote the word Robin, on it, and put it under a rock nearby.

This is my earliest memory of wrestling with my mortality, of being forced to accept that just as that bird be, so one day shall I be. I remember burying that bird and thinking, “Even though I’m little, the clock is ticking, and if I have to die, I want to die in such a way that there will be at least a few that will remember my name, remember that I made a difference.”

And for some of you youth in the room, you have now lost the pastor who led you to Christ—Bro. Steve, and as you saw if you attended his funeral—he lived in such a way that many people wanted be here to say goodbye to his body, even though his soul had left it. And now, you’ve lost Bro. Mark, who perhaps made you laugh many years as he cut up before Camp Outrageous or wore some funny suit. As we will see this afternoon, Mark Blair lived in such a way that people will want to gather around him to say goodbye, because he meant something to them.

My point is this—rather than focusing all your time on building a body that leaves an impression on people. It is far better to focus on building a life that serves and lifts up other people. That is the best way to beat death, and to live an abundant life.

There is no amount of physical transformation that can satisfy the soul, because the body is a depreciating asset. It’s just a tent, but it’s what’s inside there—is a soul—one that Christ died for. So do your best with your body, try to take good care of it, but there be one pure and holy passion—pleasing God with your life, by actively doing His will.