

## Overheard At Starbucks What Happens When We Die?

2 Corinthians 4:16--5:10

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Many interesting conversations happen over a cup of coffee--at Starbucks, Coffee Zone, MacDonald's, Hy-Vee or Dunn Bros. Here's one topic: what really happens when we die? A great deal of anxiety surrounds this question. As Woody Allen once said, "I have nothing against death; I just don't want to be there when it happens." A great deal of confusion also surrounds the topic. Contrary to what we see in cartoons, when we die, we do NOT become disembodied spirits or angels floating on clouds, strumming harps. Still, there are a lot of questions about death and dying. Will we know each other in heaven? When will the resurrection of the dead take place? Where are the dead in Christ now? And many more.

Our text for this morning may be one of the clearest teachings on what happens to us when we die, and yet it leaves many questions unanswered, and perhaps raises more questions than it answers! But look with me at the contrasts which Paul sets up. It's as if he also has been asked these questions about death. There is the contrast between OUTER and INNER (4:16), between LIGHT and WEIGHTY, between MOMENTARY and ETERNAL (4:17) and between SEEN and UNSEEN (4:18). If you've read *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, you remember that he makes much of the idea that redeemed sinners in the resurrection life have more substance, are more real than even our earthly bodies. But note how Paul reminds us that just because our bodies are failing us, our spiritual lives are still growing ("losing ground physically but gaining ground spiritually" is how Ray Summers put it). Wearing out physically does not end our existence, nor does it end our relationship with God!

Now, see some more of Paul's contrasts. TENT vs. BUILDING (5:1); NAKED vs. CLOTHED (5:3-4); AT HOME vs. AWAY FROM (5:6, 8), and he works a switch. At home in the body means away from the Lord and at home with the Lord means away from this body. We know a tent wears out. It becomes tattered and worn. What is the contrast to a tent? A building from God, eternal in the heavens! Note Paul uses a present tense verb: "We have a building from God..." Wow. Blessed assurance! Because of the resurrection, we may be confident. Eternal life does not begin when we die. The New Testament asserts that eternal life begins in this life, as we trust Christ. As a man once said to me, "Death is not a punishment; it's a promotion!" Death is just a change of address! Notice it is from God...a gift, grace. We don't earn it.

But look. Now comes this important but often overlooked part (5:2-4) about naked (disembodied soul) vs. clothed (an embodied soul). Many people think the Bible teaches the immortality of the soul. It does not. It teaches the resurrection of the body. You see, Christianity is one of the most materialistic, earthy, physical of all the world's religions. Now follow this. Paul elsewhere teaches that at the Second Coming of Christ, the dead in Christ will be raised, history as we know it will end and we will receive our resurrection bodies. But that

begs the question: What about the dead in Christ now? Where are they? And where will we be if we die before the return of the Lord? Paul's answer? With the Lord! Read 5:2-5.

And what about the resurrection body? We only get hints from scripture. First Corinthians 15 tells us some. And we get a few hints from Jesus' resurrection body, on that first Easter morning and the days that followed. I believe that Jesus' resurrection body was a prototype for ours. There was continuity and discontinuity. It was the same, but different. Here's an analogy that might help. Suppose you knew me when I was a senior in high school and you have not seen me since. I am the same but I am different. Experts tell us we shed cells in such a way that we are actually different every seven years. But I am the same "me"...personality, memory, being (soul). And the more often you have seen me since high school, the more likely you are to recognize me.

And Paul also hints at something more in 1 Cor. 15:50,53 ("...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...for this perishable body must put on imperishability and this mortal body must put on immortality..."). These earthly bodies are not equipped for that glory. Our resurrection bodies will be hardwired for eternity. Remember the first computer you ever saw or ever owned. Now think about trying to run all the apps and programs on that old thing that you can now run on your laptop, tablet or iPhone. It takes appropriate hardware to run software!

So what is this note about judgment in 5:10? I note carefully Paul's language. He does not point a bony finger of accusation and use "you" language. He says "we all must appear before the judgment..." Martin Luther once preached a sermon entitled, "On Preparation For Death." In it, he talked about how Christ descended into hell for us. Christ took on that judgment. The judgment here in 5:10 is to evaluate our life of service as Christ followers. Here is one of the clearest words on this subject, from Teresa of Avila: "Remember that you have only one soul; that you have only one death to die; that you have only one life, which is short and has to be lived by you alone..."

So here's the point. The follower of Jesus cannot lose. To be on this earth is to have the guaranteed down payment of God's Spirit within us (5:5). To be away from the earth is to be at home with the Lord. Either way, alive on this earth or living beyond, we are with the Lord. Being in a continuous relationship with the Lord will not stop, even in death. Someone once asked Harry Emerson Fosdick his view of death. Fosdick replied that he believed it would be much like when he was put to sleep for surgery recently. He said he knew little about what they would be doing and little of the outcome. Yet he entered it peacefully because he knew the surgeon! And he said if he could trust the surgeon that much, how much more did he trust God!