

**2 COR 5.1-10: WHAT HAPPENS AT DEATH? LOOKING FORWARD TO  
RESURRECTION** Chelmsford 20 April 2007

*I huddle warmly inside my corner bed  
Watching the other patients sipping tea  
I wonder why I am so long getting well  
And why it is that no one will talk to me.*

*The nurses are so kind, they brush my hair  
On the days I feel too ill to read or sew  
I smile and chat, try not to show my fear  
But they will not tell me what I want to know.*

*The visitors come, I see their eyes  
Become embarrassed as they pass my bed  
What lovely flowers, they say, then hurry on  
In case their faces show what can't be said.*

*The surgeon comes with student retinue  
Mutters to sister, deaf to my mute plea  
I want to tell them of this dread I feel inside  
But they are all too kind to talk to me.*

*The chaplain passes on his weekly round  
A friendly smile and untroubled brow  
He speaks with deep sincerity of life  
I'd like to speak of death, but don't know how.*

That poem, entitled somewhat cynically 'Terminal Care', appeared some years ago in *The Nursing Mirror*. Yes, it is a little dated – for we no longer have nursing sisters on the ward. But that apart, it could have been written yesterday. For people are still embarrassed to talk about death – death remains the 'universal repression'. Even although death is the one certainty in life, we still find death difficult to deal with.

Part of the difficulty is that we are not sure what happens when we die.  
Death, as Hamlet remarked, is:

*"The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of" (Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 1)*

What happens when we die? This is the question I want to address this morning, and I shall do so on the basis of Paul's teaching in 2 Cor 5.1-10.

## 1. DEATH LEADS TO SECURITY

v1: **"We know that when this tent we live in – our body here on earth – is torn down, God will have a house in heaven for us to live in, a house he himself has made, which will last for ever."**

**"We know"**, wrote Paul. Not *"we think/we hope/we're fairly certain that...."*

Paul had no doubts about the future. He was sure that that death would not be the end – he was certain that his life was secure in Christ – for he believed that at death a permanent home awaits those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I love the imagery Paul uses here. In the world to come we will have a proper **house** – we won't be living in a **tent** as we do now.

Currently we are camping, says Paul: we are living in a tent. Not that Paul had anything against tents – after all he was a tent maker by trade.

But tents are not permanent structures. They don't last.

When, for instance, there has been an earthquake in some part of the developing world and people's homes are destroyed, Western aid agencies rush in tents. But the tents which are erected are only temporary homes – ultimately the intention is always to build new homes for these people.

**"We know what when this tent we live in – our body here on earth – is torn down, God will have a house in heaven for us to live in"**.

What's more, says Paul, this house **"will last for ever"**. It will be permanent.

OK we are dealing with a metaphor – God is not going to provide us with an actual house of bricks and mortar. But through the imagery, Paul is conveying truth. And the truth is this: God will rebuild our lives in a totally secure and permanent fashion.

**"We know that ... God will have a house in heaven for us to live in"**.

In making such a statement, Paul wasn't stating anything new.

Jesus himself said to his disciples in the Upper Room: **"Do not be worried and upset. Believe in God, and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this, if it were not so"** (Jn 14.1,2).

How do we know that this is true?

1. In the previous chapter Paul had pointed to the resurrection of Jesus as the ground for our confidence: **"We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus to life, will also raise us up with Jesus"** (2 Cor 4.14). As we saw the other Sunday, our hope for the future rests on what God has already done in the past.
2. Here in 2 Cor 5 he brings in a second reason for confidence: **"God gave us his Spirit as the guarantee of all that he has in store for us"** (v5).  
Literally, the Spirit is God's downpayment (*arrabon*), his deposit.  
In modern Greek the word Paul uses here is used of a woman's engagement ring – it's a promise of more to come. As a result of God's gift we already know something of the "new life" to come. Peterson, *The Message*: *"The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less"*.

Paul clearly is talking of Christians. For only Christians have received God's Spirit.

Alas, for those who do not put their trust in Jesus, there is no such hope of security. But for those who do believe, the outlook is so very positive. As Paul wrote in Rom 8.11, **"If the Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from death lives in you, then he who raised Christ from death will also give life to your mortal bodies by the presence of his Spirit in you"**.

“So”, says Paul, **“we are always full of courage”**

We can look death in the face, for we know that God has something much better for us. God has a permanent home for us. Death leads to security.

## 2. DEATH LEADS TO WHOLENESS

One of the things we dread about death is that it seems to diminish us - it makes us less than we are.

Even the process that leads to death is often one of shrinkage: we lose weight - we become bent over - our skin & flesh seem to shrivel - our hair begins to drop out, and so too our teeth. Virtually every bodily function slackens off in its efficiency. It's a struggle in the face of such reduction to cling to full selfhood - our egos wane to the point where they scarcely cast a shadow. We are no longer what we were.

So does death put the final ki-bosh on us?

No! The Bible teaches that death leads not to dissolution, but to wholeness.

Listen to v4: **"While we live in this earthly tent, we groan with a feeling of oppression: ... we want to have the heavenly one (body) put on over us, so that what is mortal will be transformed by life"**.

Paul now uses another picture to describe what happens at death.

The imagery of housing is replaced by that of clothing.

To pass from this world to the next is like the putting off and putting on of clothes.

The new body that God has in store for us can be likened to a splendid new set of clothes.

As we watch our human tent begin to fray and ravel, and finally split at the seams, we feel that our personhood is seeping out and running away.

**"Nakedness"** (v3 NRSV) is what we fear - we are worried that we will be embarrassingly unclothed. I.e. we fear being incomplete, not whole, lacking in some essentials of personality.

But there is no need to have that fear. Death will lead to wholeness.

We shall not be **"naked"** - God will clothe us with a new body.

Christians don't believe that at death we become disembodied spirits.

Rather we become 're-embodied'.

And the body which God will give us will be more real & more glorious than ever before. NB 1 Cor 15.42-44 **"This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life.**

**When the body is buried it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal. When buried, it is ugly & weak; when raised it will be beautiful & strong. When buried it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body"**.

That's a great thought – especially if you don't like the shape of your nose or the size of your tummy.

OK - we are speaking in picture terms. We are not to be literalists.

- I read this week that it is not unusual for widows to place in their husband's coffin a packet of digestive biscuits, or the deceased's spare glasses and false teeth.
- Indeed, apparently one widow once put into her husband's coffin two cans of the spray adhesive that the dead man had used to paste on his toupee, causing an explosion that bent the furnace door.

But as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 15, this new body will not be a body of flesh & blood.

But it will be the same you and the same me.

“Just as a linguist can translate a word from one language to another yet retain the meaning; just a musician can transpose a sequence of notes from one key to another yet retain the melody; just as a chemist can transform a substance from one phase to another, yet retain its composition “ (Roy Clements), so we believe that God can transform our bodies, and yet retain our identity.

What's more, in the world to come life will be more real than life in the here and now. This surely is what is presupposed when Paul states: "**what is mortal**" will be "**transformed** (literally: swallowed up) **by life**" (v4).

The very term "**life**" is a pointer to the fact that the unseen reality which lies beyond death is not some shadowy existence, but life in a new dimension, life which makes our present state appear by comparison to be mere existence.

In terms of this imagery, it is not just the seriously ill who may lack quality of life - it is all of us. One day we shall really live.

Death does not mark the end - of if it does, then it simply is the end of the old incompleteness. At death we shall be made whole.

No wonder Paul says: "**So we are always full of courage**" (v8).

### 3. DEATH LEADS TO "HOME"

From housing and clothing Paul now turns to introduce a third image -the image of being "**at home with the Lord**".

vv6-8: "**We know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord's home....We would much prefer to leave our home in the body and be at home with the Lord**".

We look forward to one day being "**at home with the Lord**".

“**Home**” – there is something special about that term.

In the words of the song by the American librettist J.H. Payne

:

*Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,  
Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home...  
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!  
There's no place like home! There's no place like home!"*

Home is not just a place – it's a place made special by people.  
Home is where we can be ourselves  
Home is where we can be loved and accepted for what we are.  
And what is true of human homes and human families, is even more true of when we go home to the Lord.  
There we will be loved – there we will be accepted – there shall be with the Lord and with all who love him.  
To die is not go to unto the great unknown; rather it is to return home to God.  
And nothing can better that.

No wonder that Paul repeats himself and says “**We are full of courage**” (v8) – “**We do indeed have confidence**” (NRSV).

Eugene Peterson, The Message: *"That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? When the time comes, we'll be plenty ready to exchange exile for homecoming".*

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, once declared: *"No one can live in peace in a house that he knows is shortly to tumble about his ears"*. That may be true, if there is nothing else to replace it. Death is indeed a frightening prospect if death is the end.  
But the good news is that for those who love the Lord Jesus death leads to security, death leads to wholeness, death leads to home.

**“We know that God who raised the Lord Jesus to life, will also raise us up with Jesus” (4.14)**