

“Becoming Like Jesus the Heavenly Man, Together” | 1 Corinthians 15:42-58 (Becoming Like the Real Jesus, Together)

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(Discussion questions on page 9)

My friend Cameron lost his three-year old son about ten years ago—and suddenly. He processed some of his grief through writing. His recent book, *Heavenward*, is a fruit of this, where he invites readers to undergo a transformation that he underwent after his loss. The book opens:

On the day my oldest child died, I received a message from a friend that simply read, ‘How long, O Lord? How Long?’ This message encapsulates so much of the Christian life. We suffer in the fallen world. We wait for the return of Christ. We aim to move fruitfully toward glory. In the Christian life, all things begin, point to, and end in eternity.

For most of my life, I did not live with this awareness, but ... [o]n November 11, 2013, my perspective shifted *heavenward*. On that day, my precious, vibrant, curly-haired, little boy Cam went to live with God in heaven above.... He went to sleep in our home; he woke up above in the arms of Jesus.

Amidst the sorrow and grief of my child’s death, something radically new happened in my daily mindset. Heaven became an almost ever-present part of my perspective. This transformation made sense: this is where my firstborn child now lived.¹

Cameron’s mind and heart followed his son; his daily thinking, his underlying consciousness, underwent a transformation from *earthbound* to *heavenward*.

The circumstances that caused this transformation were tragic, but they point to a process we all must face. Each one of us must reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable facts of life and death. From the moment of our conception, the tension begins: *are we humans living, or are we dying?* Are our efforts at growth, society-building, planning and art cultivating life lasts, or living in denial of a death that takes everything away?

Does authentic humanness require accepting death as our ultimate end, or seeking victory in a life beyond it?

The Second Humanist Manifesto calls hope for life-beyond-death false and harmful:

Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices.... There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body.

¹ Cameron Cole, *Heavenward: How Eternity Can Change Your Life on Earth* (Crossway: 2024), 1-2.

We continue to exist in our progeny and in the way that our lives have influenced others in our culture.

The Bible is more logical. If there is no life after death, it's honest about what this implies for the present: "If the dead are not raised," Paul writes—if there is no life beyond death—"Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32). If all this living and striving ends ultimately in dead bodies, a dead sun, a dead planet, an eternal nothingness, let's not act like we do in the present has real meaning.

Jesus will not abandon life to death—he insists instead on life's victory over and through death:

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die (John 11:25-26).

In our sermon series this September, *Becoming Like the Real Jesus, Together*, we are considering how Jesus models authentic humanness. From his sonship, we learned that to be human is to come from and belong to God. Through his servanthood, we saw the essence of purpose and vocation in serving God. By his holiness, we saw that human character is about more than being good; it is about being godly.

Today, we add to sonship, servanthood and holiness—heavenliness. To be human is to be alive, not dead.

In 1 Corinthians 15—the Bible's longest treatment of the resurrection—Paul compares the first human, Adam, to the perfect human, Jesus, and in doing so describes Jesus as "the Heavenly Man."

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 1:47-49).

What might the "man of heaven" have to say to elite thinkers who ask us to accept the ultimacy of death? Or to a culture celebrating mantras like YOLO (You only live once)? I believe he would call us to a transformation similar to what my friend Cameron has experienced—from earthbound to heavenward living.

With the rest of our time, we will suggest that bearing the image of the man of heaven requires three types of transformations: (1) A transformation in our understanding of heaven; (2) a transformation of our body; (3) a transformation of our present.

I. Transforming Our Understanding about Heaven

Many people do believe in an afterlife, but their beliefs are vague, or wishful thinking. First Corinthians 15 invites us to more clarity about heaven. Heaven is both a place that is present now, but also something that will not be fully realized until several events happen in the future.

Heaven Is a Present Place:

God and Jesus are in heaven, now: We pray in the Lord's prayer, "Our Father, who art in *heaven*" (Matt 6:9). We are told to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1).

Christians who die now, go to be with God in heaven. Three times in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul speaks of those who "have fallen asleep" or "fallen asleep in Christ" (1 Cor 15:6, 18, 24). At present, every Christian who has died has gone to be with the Lord—"to be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8). They are having an experience that is "far better" than anything they have thus far known: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ," Paul says to the Philippians, "for that is far better" (Phil 1:23).

Christians alive in the present on earth, know foretastes of heaven in many ways, most notably through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the "first fruits" (Rom 8:23) and "guarantee" of eternal life to come:

when you believed the gospel, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Eph 1:13-14; see also 2 Cor 5:4-5)

The Spirit dwelling in Christians at present, is the Spirit that will raise them from the dead:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Rom 8:11).

Heaven, therefore, is a present reality where God and Christ dwell, where Christians who die go to be in the presence of Jesus in great bliss, and which Christians on earth experience foretastes of.

Heaven Is a Future Reality:

But heaven is also a future we await. "We *shall* bear the image of the man of heaven," Paul says—future tense (1 Cor 15:49).

Paul speaks of a time in the future when a trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised:

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed" (1 Cor 15: 52).

At that time “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:55)—meaning, a time when death has died.

Jesus speaks of the “last trumpet” as something that sounds at the time of his return (see Matt 24:30-31),² when there will be a resurrection of everyone, and a time of final judgement:

an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [the Son’s] voice²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:28-29).

All humans at that time will “stand before the judgement seat of Christ” (Rom 14:10), and be judged either as those whose sins have been paid for by Christ and who stand in Christ’s righteousness (see 2 Cor 5:21); or, as those who are judged based on their own merit.

After this judgement, heaven and earth are joined, and God’s perfect, eternal kingdom ensues where there is no sin, no pain, no death. And God will invite the righteous into eternal life with him.

Sum: Presence and Justice: So, heaven is not merely a place you go when you die. Heaven is the eventual *unmediated presence of the Holy God*, where the *scales of justice and righteousness* have finally been balanced. At that moment all cravings for justice will be satisfied, only the application of justice will pass through every soul.

This invites two types of questions.

First, to the individual: Have you reconciled your life with your death? Do you understand that your death is merely a passage into the presence of God? Do you know that eventually God will judge you—every minute and hour of your life brought into the light? Do you know that you can, at that moment, find all your wrongs forgiven by Christ? Do you know that at that moment, Christ can take your hand, and share his perfect righteousness with you?

Second, to the church: is our mission sufficiently heavenward? Are we laboring in prayer and ministry to prepare people for heaven? Paul always has this future in mind—death, the day of the Lord, heaven:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (Col 1:28)

² “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (Matt 24:30-31).

To be human, is to have *this* heaven in your future. But this heaven is about more than a future destination, it is also about a fundamental transformation that we must undergo—which brings us to our second point, the *transformation of our bodies*—and the question of what persists and what changes between the earthly and heavenly life.

II. Transforming Our Bodies

Continuity:

Paul's readers were not struggling with belief in an afterlife, but misunderstandings about it. "How are the dead raised?" They cynically asked (1 Cor 15:35). Their misunderstanding could take two forms.

First, they believed their future would be disembodied—their souls would escape the prison of their body and enjoy a celestial bliss. The body was at the root of our problems: weak, perishing, filled with passions and desires.

Second, they believed their future would involve a total disconnection with their past—their earthly lives completely forgotten. Some in Paul's day believed in reincarnation, where a soul, after death, underwent a process of forgetting everything before they took up existing as a new person or animal.

For the Corinthians, such beliefs led them to reckless licentiousness in how they stewarded their bodies in the present (see 1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

But a disembodied future is dehumanizing—we are not fully ourselves without bodies. And it disrespects God our Creator, who declared our bodies as "very good" when he made us. And a totally disconnected future, where everything in our past is forgotten, dishonors our present lives, treating all our current experiences as only worthy of being thrown in the trash.

Paul knows better; he has Jesus' resurrection in his mind. Recall what the resurrected Jesus told his followers who thought he was a ghost:

Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have (Luke 24:38-39).

There is continuity between our present and heaven. God's creation is being delivered from sin, transformed and perfected—not discarded. Even amid all the changes that heaven will entail, you will still be you, and remember experiences and people. Your body now will be connected to your body now—different, but the same life, just as an acorn and the tree that grows from it are different, but part of the same life.

Change:

But the Corinthians were raising a logical question: if heaven is eternal and perfect, how can these bodies—which are weak, perishing, and infected with all types of sinful desires—be a part of that perfect world?

They will be “transformed” (see Phil 3:21), Paul answers, and notes four ways in verses 42-44:

What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:42-44).

The heavenly body is transformed from perishable to imperishable: it is not subject to decay; it will not age or break down.

The heavenly body is transformed from dishonor to glory: meaning not luminosity, but that it is untouched by the shame and humiliation of sudden break down, of losing battles with sickness, and being vulnerable to disgraceful desires. The body marked by glory knows the dignity of never being susceptible to scourge of sickness or shame of sin.³

The heavenly body is transformed from weakness to power: This means the body has more of the power of God working in it. It has a great ability to understand; and its senses are expanded to enjoy a richer and more satisfying world. Like the return of taste after a sickness that stole it, the resurrected body will have sensory power unsullied by mortality and sin.

The body, fourthly, in the resurrection is “a spiritual body” versus a “natural body.” This phrase has caused much confusion, and it is really not a great translation. The word “natural” here is the same word often translated as “soul.” And Paul’s idea is not so much what the resurrection body is *composed of*, but what it is animated and controlled by.

Our bodies now are animated by *mere breath* and *natural impulses*. In heaven, they will be entirely and perfectly animated and guided by the Holy Spirit—God’s Spirit.

We might sum all this up by saying this: the new body is *fit* for God’s Kingdom.⁴ Meaning, it is fit for an eternal kingdom because it is imperishable; fit for a sinless kingdom because it is glorious and powerful; fit for a joyful kingdom, because animated entirely by the Holy Spirit, the whole man is now fit to drink for God’s river of delights.

That’s transformation in our understanding of heaven, and the transformation that will fit our bodies for heaven. Lastly, what type of transformation does the heavenly man call for in our present?

³ See Thistleton, *First Corinthians*, 1273.

⁴ Just as a **boat made of cardboard** is an unworthy vessel for sailing the seas; a body made of perishable, weak, corruptible matter; animated by a sin-stained soul, is ill fit for the high seas of heaven.

III. Transformation in Our Present

After telling his readers that one day “Death is swallowed up in victory and lost its sting” (1 Cor 15:54-55), he concludes with a charge for life the present: After telling his readers that “Death is swallowed up in victory and lost its sting” (1 Cor 15:54-55), he concludes with a charge for life the present:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (15:58)

So, Paul’s command in Colossians— “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Col 3:2)—is not a form of escapism. Balanced with his words in Corinthians, it tells us that a heavenly-mindset protects us from being deceived by an entirely earthly-, temporal-mindset. Here are four ways this is so:

Strength: The guarantee of your glorious and eternal future with God will strengthen you in the present. You will be freed to sacrifice more; you will be freed from seeing suffering as final and ultimate. With the resurrection before him, Paul says in the midst of his many sufferings:

we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor 4:16-18).

Be strengthened, Christian, the hardships you know because of Christlikeness, the indulgence in sin you forsake, the social or relational difficulties you know—these are not in vain. God is preparing for you an eternity of glory.

Hope: Second, our heavenly future gives us hope in the present: My friend who lost his son, notes in the book that because he knows his son is with Jesus, that he feels close to his son when he is close to Jesus. And has a sure hope of seeing his son one day, standing with Jesus. This takes the hopelessness out of earthly loss.

Fulfillment: Third, our heavenly future speaks to our longings for fulfillment. People who are only earthly-minded, expect earth can meet our deepest desires. But it never does.

The delight now experienced in music, or the intimacy of marriage, or the wonders of parenthood, or the thrill of learning, are like the prelude of a symphony—notes preparing us for the main thing. We need not reject earthly pleasures—just as long as we enjoy them in God-ordained ways. We need to see in them, however, foretastes of heaven. Lewis, in his analysis of heaven

concludes that [there] our natural ways of sensing, feeling, and knowing will be flooded and drawn into the higher life, raised up into the life of glory rather than canceled out.⁵

Victory: Fourth, a heavenly-minded person knows the joy of a **victorious** life. The word victory is used three times in verses 54-57:

Death is swallowed up in victory; death where is your victory; and “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We can feel defeated in this life. The causes we care for, the individual experiences we have, even in our sense of the faith we keep. But defeat is not the final word—victory is. And the real foundation beneath our hope in the future is not our victory, but Christ’s.

Jesus is pictured as a mighty warrior as Paul pictures our journey from death to eternal life-- Jesus destroys all foes:

Then comes the end, when Jesus delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:24-26).

The Creator God and His Son are as committed to your Redemption as they were to your Creation. And they will not allow death to have the final word over you or their Kingdom. Your present life, and your eternal future, are a matter of God’s honor—He fights for them.

I began this sermon series four weeks ago referring to a poster at Marymount University with the question, “What Does It Mean to Live a Fulfilling Life?”, with sticky notes provided for answer.

The question of what it means to be human and live a fulfilling, authentic human life looms large in our day. Christianity, as it presents Jesus as the perfect expression of humanness, offers us something so, so compelling: *belonging to God, serving God, being like God in character and holiness*. And today, a vision of human life not finally made pathetic by death; but brought triumphantly through it.

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 1:47-49). May it be so.

Amen.

⁵ Carol Zaleski, “Further Up and Further In!”: C. S. Lewis on Heaven,” in *Communio* 42 (Spring 2015), pp 26-35.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is heaven a part of your everyday thinking? Does heaven impact how you process suffering, or make decisions, or think about your ultimate happiness?
2. What ways might your life—practically and emotionally—be more earthbound than heavenward? Paul writes in Colossians, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-2). What are a few ways you might “set your mind upon” and “seek the things that are above, where Christ is?”
3. If there is no ultimate victory over death, what would this say about God and God’s kingdom?
4. Paul writes that “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God’” (Romans 14:10-11). How does this truth about heaven involving a judgement before God strike you? How might these words from Second Corinthians impact how you feel about that approaching judgement: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:20-21)?
5. How should the fact of heaven, God’s judgement, and eternal life impact the mission of a local church?