

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-9

WHERE ARE MY LOVED ONES WHO HAVE DIED IN THE LORD?

“We are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.”¹

Her name was Sally. She had asked me to drive her to Colma, just outside of Daly City. When we met Sally, she was elderly. She had never driven a car in her life, so she was dependent on municipal transportation or requesting rides from friends. Our family had adopted Sally, and she was a surrogate grandmother to our children.

I must explain that Colma is an unusual town. Known as the “City of Souls,” Colma is the smallest town in San Mateo County—the population is only 1,600 people. However, the city fathers claim there are 1.5 million souls. You see, within its two square mile boundary are sixteen cemeteries. All the burials for the San Francisco peninsula take place in Colma.

Sally had asked if I would drive her out to Colma. She directed me through what seemed an endless maze of quiet roadways through several cemeteries, until she quietly asked me to stop. She got out of the car, walked a short distance before stopping before a rather humble grave site. She stood quietly at the foot of that grave for an extended period. Finally, I walked over to assure myself that all was okay with Sally.

She had a little smile on her face, and what I can only say was the radiance of heaven. She quietly said, “My Johnny is buried here. I like to come and spend time when I am able to get out here. I like to think that one day while I am standing here, God will call all the saved out of the tomb, and I’ll be the first to see my Johnny rise from the grave.”

She really didn’t say much else. After she was in the car and we were again driving back to Daly City, she told me that Johnny was a green grocer. They ran a little store in Daly City for many years, and Johnny was so busy trying to make a living that he somehow never found time for the Lord. Sally began to attend Calvary Baptist Church. There, she found life in the Beloved Son of God. Though she prayed for Johnny, and often spoke to him of faith in Christ, he was always too busy, and put off doing anything about believing in the Lord.

He was stricken and diagnosed with serious illness. Sally continued to pray for Johnny, and she spoke to him about the love of God when she was with him. It was in his final days that Johnny came to faith. Lying in a bed of illness, he at last believed. God had graciously given the answer to her long unanswered prayers, and Johnny believed. Though it would have been so much better had he believed earlier, he was nevertheless saved—a brand plucked from the fire, as it were. Now, Sally maintained an intermittent vigil at the grave. She had the hope of the resurrection, and she believed with quiet confidence that when Christ came, He would bring Johnny with Him, numbered among the saints.

Sally’s parting words to me on that day were along this line: “I know that Johnny isn’t in that grave; that is just his body. I know he is in Heaven with the Lord. I am not just a silly old woman when I say that I want to be the first to see my Johnny in his new body when he rises from the dead. I want to greet him and tell him how handsome he is in his resurrection body.”

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CERTAINTIES FOR THE CHRISTIAN — “We know...” One of the marks of the life of a Christian is confidence. So very often the Apostle speaks with a boldness that is absent in our day. “We know,” is a constant refrain. After listing a dark catalog of wicked deeds in the opening chapter of Romans, the Apostle says, “We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things” [ROMANS 2:2].

The Mosaic Law declares all mankind accountable to God. Paul says, “We know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” [ROMANS 3:19].

We are confident that Christ, having died once, shall never die again; now, He is risen from the dead [ROMANS 6:9]. We know that the entire creation groans under the weight of sin [ROMANS 8:22]. In the same vein, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” [ROMANS 8:28].

We know that we have discernment concerning idols [1 CORINTHIANS 8:1], and “We know that an idol has no real existence” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:4].

We know that as the people of God, we share both sorrow and joy [2 CORINTHIANS 1:7]. In the same way, we know that God has prepared for each of us a heavenly body, just as Paul has said earlier in this portion of the letter to the saints in Corinth. “We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:1]. Now, the Apostle says, “We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:6].

We struggle because we enjoy the presence of our loved ones. We were created for fellowship, and we enjoy being with those who love us. We want to hear their voice, see their smile, enjoy their warm touch—and when they are gone, we miss their presence. At such times, our faith may be shaken. It is almost certain that a doubt will creep into our mind; after all, we can’t see our loved one. How can we be certain where they have gone?

Of course, I’m speaking of those of our loved ones who have died in the Lord. We are not the first people to wonder about death. The questions have challenged our forebears in the Faith. You will recall that the Thessalonian Christians raised this same question. Fortunately for us, Paul wrote them an answer—and what an answer it is. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18].

The Corinthian Christians struggled with similar concerns. Again, Paul answered them and thus comforts us. “If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

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All that Paul said to this point was academic. However, he became eminently practical when he made this application concerning loved ones who had died in the Lord. If there is no resurrection, “Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” However, the Apostle did not leave the issue at that point; he concluded on this high note, “In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-20].

Jesus will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died in the Faith. Indeed, the benedictions are true, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” and “Blessed indeed ... that they may rest from their labours” [REVELATION 14:13].

Thus, we believe that Jesus will bring our loved ones who have died in the Faith with Him. If they are coming with Him, we can rest assured that they are with Him. Do you not remember the words of the Master, spoken to comfort the disciples who were shaken by His statements that He would shortly be crucified? “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going” [JOHN 14:1-4].

It is that statement, “Where I am you may be also,” that comforts us. On another occasion, Jesus said, “If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will My servant be also” [JOHN 12:26]. Therefore, it becomes increasingly clear that Paul’s meaning when he says, “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” seizes on the promise of the Master that His servant will be with Him. His words are an anticipation of what he would write to the saints in Philippi. “To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” [PHILIPPIANS 1:21-23]. To depart and be with Christ is, indeed, far better.

I seek to comfort the people of God. Those who die in the Lord may be assured that they will immediately be with Christ. There is a cult that teaches we sleep in the tomb. How sad! This tent will be discarded; but I shall be with the Lord. This present body is wearing out; but I have received the Spirit of God as a guarantee, as a down payment [see 2 CORINTHIANS 5:5].

I am comforted by the promise of God, repeated throughout His Word. John speaks of that transformation in these terms. “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” [1 JOHN 3:1-3].

Paul says it another way when he writes, “Those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” [ROMANS 8:29, 30].

Few passages are more exciting to the saint than that which Paul wrote the Philippians. “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, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” [PHILIPPIANS 3:20, 21].

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FOCUS OF THE FAITH — “We make it our aim to please Him.” Regardless of whether we are transformed without seeing death, or whether we must experience death as did our Master, we who are His people are confident that we shall set aside this present body, destined as it is for dust, and we shall see Him as He is, for we shall be like Him. Until then, “we make it our aim to please Him.”

We want to honour Him by living for Him. We would not wish to be consumed with living for this present world, though the temptation is so great. The comforts of modern life conspire to turn us from pursuing the Master. Nevertheless, our ambition is to please Him. Shortly, each of us shall receive a call to appear in His presence.

Jim was dying when I met Him. He had lived a wicked life; now, he was dying of AIDS. His sister asked me to speak with him, and I was pleased to do so. When we met, the pallor of his skin told me how that dreadful disease had ravaged his body. He was weak; he was wasted. I believed I had little time, and so I immediately pointed out that he was dying because of his own sinful choices. His sister attempted to intervene, to tell me that I was too blunt. Jim stopped her, saying, “No, I need to hear this.”

I continued by telling him how Jesus had died because of his sin. I told him that though he had offended holy God, Jesus had taken upon Himself the sin—not only of Jim, but of the entire world. I told him that the sinless Son of God died because of Jim’s weakness and inability to satisfy God. I told Jim that freedom from condemnation was offered to any who would accept Jesus as Master over life. We prayed, and then I left.

Shortly after, Jim phoned to ask if I would visit him in his apartment. When I went to his home, he was obviously even sicker than when I had seen him only a couple of days earlier. As we talked, I asked Jim if he was ready to receive Jesus as Master. He said quite simply, “I am.” Together, we prayed, and Jim asked the Master to forgive him his sin and to accept Him as a sinner. When we finished praying, I asked if Christ had forgiven him. Jim responded, “Yes, He promised and He has kept His promise.”

In the few days that followed, we often read the Bible together and prayed together and talked about the transition that would shortly take place. Jim would set aside his tent and pass into the presence of Christ the Master. It wasn’t long until I had a phone call asking me to go to the hospital—Jim was in palliative care. His transition would not be long.

While visiting on that final day, Jim told me that he knew he would shortly die. “You know, Mike, I’m not afraid. I know that I’m going home; and there is one waiting to meet me.” Truer words were never spoken. Each Christian can know, not only that Christ the Lord awaits the transformation, but each Christian can be assured that those whom they loved and who died in the Lord are even now in the presence of the Master. What glory for the child of God who is able to say, with Stephen, the first martyr, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” [ACTS 7:56]. This is the Faith of the saints; this is the promise of God. Amen.