

God's Child in Health and Sickness

Talk #2

A Body Prepared

One of the more disturbing but ongoing heresies that the Church has had to reject is the idea that the real you is your soul and that your body should not matter too much to you since it matters very little to God. The Early Church had to battle against this teaching as it opposed heresies such as Gnosticism, but even today, there is the tendency to make an unhelpful distinction between the body and the soul, where the soul is the "real you", and the body little more than a container for your soul to live in for a period of time. That's not what the Bible teaches, however, and that's not the view expressed in our Heidelberg Catechism. In fact, it's striking how often our bodies are mentioned in the Catechism. We already see this in Lord's Day 1, where we confess that I am not my own but belong with body and soul to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. The same answer also speaks about God's care for my body, even to the point that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head. Lord's Day 9 teaches us that our heavenly Father "will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul", and Lord's 46 reminds us again that we are to expect from his almighty power "all things we need for body and soul".

So God cares about our bodies. He created them, and in Christ, he redeemed them. And now, through his Holy Spirit, he dwells in them.

But there's something else that the Bible, and so also the Catechism, speaks about, and that is the significance *Christ's* body, and the significance of his body for how we see *our* bodies. In the first place, consider his incarnation, the fact that he became man. It is a miracle that "the eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God, took upon himself true

human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, through the working of the Holy Spirit." (Lord's Day 14). Think about that for a moment! Think about the fact that the Son of God, who, unlike us, has existed from eternity, but who at a specific point in time became "flesh", an embodied human being. As the Athanasian Creed puts it,

"He is God from the Father's substance, begotten before time; and he is man from his mother's substance; born in time. Perfect God, perfect man composed of a human soul and human flesh . . ."

Christ did not simply *appear* to be a man; he *became* a man when he was born into this world. But not only did he become a man; he *remains* a man, a real flesh-and-blood person, to this very day. When the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, he rose with his own physical human body. It was, Lord's Day 22 says, a glorious body, but it was his own human body nonetheless. In fact, the Lord Jesus demonstrated that when he instructed Thomas to place his finger into the holes that the nails had put into his hands and for Thomas to put his hand in the spear hole in Jesus' side. And then, when the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, he didn't simply disappear, nor did he leave his body behind as if he was now done with the body. But rather, as Lord's Day 18, answer 46 says, "Christ, before the eyes of his disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven", so that, as answer 47 points out, "with respect to his human nature he is no longer on earth"; but rather, answer 49 says, "we have *our flesh* in heaven"! And not only that, but when our Lord returns on the Last Day, his return will be a bodily return, at which time, Lord's Day 22 says, "this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body." And so, from eternity past until the moment of his incarnation, the Son of God, being in his very nature God, had no physical body. But from the moment of his incarnation, through to eternity in the future, Jesus Christ has, and always will have, a physical body.

And that should teach us how important the human body really is. Just as the humanity of Christ consists of both body and soul, so you, too, are both body and soul. And you cannot separate them since, as the Athanasian Creed also points out, "the soul and flesh are one man." Admittedly, this is what makes sickness, aging and ultimately death so difficult, even traumatic, but what I want you to understand for now is that your body, your flesh-and-blood body, is of no less value than your soul. Christ died for your body, and he cares for your body as much as he does for your soul.

A second point I want to make here is that your present body, and life in this present body, is not all there is. Rather, along with all of creation, our bodies groan and long for what is still to come. But we do so in the firm confidence that the bodies we now have will be raised and made perfect, like Christ's glorious body.

And that, then, must change how we view not just our bodies, not just our health or sickness, but our very life and our reason for existence on this side of eternity.

We know that our bodies are wearing out. We all know that we are going to die. We might fight it, and we might deny it, but we cannot avoid it. The best diet, the healthiest lifestyle and the highest safety standards might prolong your life, but if Jesus doesn't return first, the grave is the destination for every person that is born.

And actually, that process of dying has already begun. We start off young and, for most of us, fit and healthy, but all too soon, that changes, and it's all downhill from there. It isn't long before we discover that we're not as young and fit as we used to be, that we've passed our peak, and that our bodies have started to wear out. We get sick, our joints get stiff and sore,

our teeth decay, we have an accident or break a bone, we get diagnosed with some sort of illness, and our minds become tired. As it says in Psalm 90:9-10,

"For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. ¹⁰

The days of our lives *are* seventy years; And if by reason of strength, *they are* eighty years, Yet their boast *is* only labour and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

And that's how we normally see our lives.

But that's not the only way to see our lives. Because when we are in Christ, redeemed and made new in him, we are a new creation; the old has passed away and the new has come. In Christ we have passed from death to life. And, just as the journey to our physical death has already begun, so our new life is already here! 1 John 5:12 says,

"He who has the Son has life!"

And John 5:24 where Jesus says,

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in Him who sent Me has eternal life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

And in that sense, "the life everlasting" isn't the life that is to come, but it is something we begin to experience already now! And we experience it as we grow in that new life in Christ - even as our bodies break down. That means that while physically we might weaken, spiritually, we who are in Christ Jesus will be strengthened! And in this way, we do not simply view our bodies as that which is breaking down to death, but we view them as that which God is restoring to life!

And that will then change how we view our bodies, and how we view our lives, already now. If we did not have this hope, then we might be tempted to eat, drink and be merry, living for ourselves, and living for the moment, and grasping at everything we might want to experience. Because "You Only Live Once!", they say. And if we did not have this hope, then we would look at others, at how they look and at what they've got, at their health, at their wellbeing, at their perfect houses and perfect families. And we'd wish that we could be them, we wish we could live like them. But that's not us, and that's not how we live our lives. Because we know that this life is not all there is. And we know that this present *body* is not all there is. As Sam Allberry put it so well in his book *What God has to say about our bodies*, "The grave might be our destination, but it's not our destiny."¹ It's not where we will ultimately be.

And an example of how this all changes the way we view both our bodies and our lives can be found in the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4. (And since I'll be spending some time going through 2 Corinthians 4 and 5, please open your Bibles in order to go through it with me). In Second Corinthians, the apostle Paul had to respond to criticism from others who mocked his ministry and his commitment to preaching the gospel. His response was that he was so committed to his ministry that he had given up his own *body* for the sake of the gospel. And the reason for that was because it was in his body and through his body that Paul could preach the gospel. Concerning the gospel, the message of salvation in Christ alone, he wrote in chapter 4:7,

¹ Sam Allberry, *What God has to say about our bodies*, 2021: Crossway Books, p185.

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, [or Jars of clay, as the ESV says, that is, his body] that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

And verse 8-10,

"*We are* hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."

And the reason for this, he wrote in verse 15 was

". . . for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God."

The apostle Paul, therefore, effectively gave up his own body, he sacrificed himself, for the sake of the gospel message and for the sake of those who might believe through his ministry. And his body carried the scars of his ministry in the gospel. But even though those scars caused pain, he did not give up on his service to God, nor did he lose heart. 2 Corinthians 4:16 to the first part of verse 18,

"Therefore, we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸ while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen."

Paul's body, his outer self, that Jar of Clay, was wasting away. He could not go on forever, nor would he live forever. But even as he suffered "this light affliction for a moment", he was being prepared, in both body and soul, for "an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (ESV). He was being prepared for the resurrection of the body, and for life everlasting.

That does not mean, however, that for Paul the body does not matter, that the body is expendable, that it is only your soul that counts. Nor does he mean to give us the impression that it's ok to run your body to the ground, not caring for your body and not treating it well as you live for God. At the same time, however, this present body is not all there is, nor do we idolise our bodies nor concern ourselves with diet, exercise and the like simply for the body's sake. Rather, we remember the purpose God gave us a body, and that was to use it to serve him. And what's more, as we serve him, and as our bodies break down, we do not grieve as those who have no future. For this present body is not all there is. Rather, whereas the present body is wasting away, God is preparing a new body that will never decay!

And so Paul goes on in chapter 5:1,

"For we know that if our earthly house, *this* tent, is destroyed (that is, when we die and leave this body) we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

That's what Paul looked forward to not so much the end of his body here on earth, but the receiving of a new body from God in heaven. Reading on in verse 2,

"For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven."

As our present bodies grow old and break down, we grow weary with them. But notice that we do not long for eternal youth, nor do we lament too loudly for the loss of our bodily abilities. But rather than look backwards, we look forwards, with longing, to a renewed body that God is preparing for us.

But then comes verse 3, and with it, the recognition that our bodies are of great importance:

"If indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked."

What Paul means by being found naked is to be a soul without a body. So what we learn from this verse is that Paul was not looking forward to *losing* his body. In fact, to be without a body made him somewhat nervous, as if he was naked, unclothed. Paul did not hate his physical body, not even what he described as his "outer self" which was wasting away. He did not have the idea that it was his spirit or his soul that counted, and not his body. Rather Paul knew that *we are* a body. You cannot separate your physical self from your soul, as if the real you, the inner you, is your spirit and that's all that counts. Not at all! You are your body, and your body is you. To be disembodied, therefore, was not something that sat well with Paul.

And yet, that's what we will be, in a sense, when we first die. Because when we die, our bodies will go to the grave and our souls will be with Christ in heaven. And at that point in time, we will be without a physical body, since our resurrected body will only be given to us on the Last Day. And so Paul is wrestling with this in 2 Corinthians 5. And he asks himself what does he really want? "While we are still in this tent", he wrote in verse 4, while we live in these earthly bodies, "we groan, being burdened." *But it's not that we want to be unclothed, without a body!* What we really want, verse 4, is to be "*further* clothed, so that what is mortal (this present body) might be swallowed up by life. And that's what Paul is really looking forward to here: to have his earthly body exchanged for the glorified body that would one day be his. But if he could not yet have that glorified body, then Paul would be ready to depart from his earthly body so that he might be with Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:8,

"We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."

Because even without a body, for that short time between our deaths and the resurrection of the dead, we will not be disembodied entirely. Rather, we will be with the Lord, at home with him.

And then one day, when the Lord returns, our bodies will be resurrected, and we will be complete once more, with body and with soul. As Lord's Day 22 puts it,

"this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body."

And what that will be like is what Paul had already described, as best he could, to the Corinthians in his first letter to them, in 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians 15:35 says,

"But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?"

What will we be like? How old will we be? How will we recognise one another, and how will we look? These are understandable questions, but they are also foolish. 1 Corinthians 15:36,

"Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies."

And from there, Paul went on to describe how God has made physical bodies for humans, animals, birds and fish. There are heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon and stars, and there are earthly bodies. The point is God is not limited in what he can create. He has done it before, he will do it again. Don't think that God cannot do this: what you will be, we do not fully know. But God knows. And he will do it.

But there is still more to say with respect to what the resurrected body will be like. For we will be like the resurrected Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:49,

"And as we have borne the image of the *man* of dust (Adam), we shall also bear the image of the heavenly *Man* (Jesus)."

And, as it also says in Philippians 3:21, Christ will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.

And that suggests to us that while some things will be the same with respect to our present bodies and the new bodies God will give us at the resurrection, some things will also change. And the changes will be as those described in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.

"So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption; it is raised in corruption. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonour; 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. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."

We know the limitations of our natural bodies. They are perishable, they break down, and the beauty of youth will fade. We get old, our hair turns grey, we get sick, and our bodies no longer function as they ought. In fact, we don't even have to wait until we are old: even when our bodies are in their prime, they are not perfect, nor are they glorious. Because our bodies are marked with dishonour, they are marked with sin. Our bodies suffer from our own sin, and from the sin of others.

But the body we wait for will not be like that. The body we wait for will be raised "a spiritual body." Not a spiritual body in the sense of being non-physical, but a spiritual body in that it will be perfect. Not perfect in the sense that it matches the world's perception of beauty and perfection, but perfect in the sense that through it, we will be able to perfectly serve and glorify God. Because that's what we were created to be, that's what we were created to do.

And that must change the way we view our bodies and we live our lives today. The life you now live and the body you now have is not the only life, nor the only body you will ever have. If you die before Christ returns, the grave will be your body's destination. Your body will be buried, and your soul will be taken up to be with Christ in heaven. But the grave will not be your body's destiny! Because one day the grave will give up the dead and you too will be raised. And then, to use the words of answer 58 of Lord's Day 22, you

"shall after this life possess perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived - a blessedness in which to praise God forever."

So don't look back. Do not try to cling to your youth or any particular time of your life, nor act as though your best days are behind you. Don't hold too tightly to your concept of good health and well-being, as if you can control what will happen to your body. Don't act as though you need to grab for yourself what you can from life since you only live once, nor rush here and there with a fear of missing out. But rather, "since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy" let us live from that joy, seeking God and his kingdom, offering our lives, yes even our bodies, as a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him. Do not be too anxious about growing old, getting sick, or even dying. But rather look to Jesus, honour him and live in the awareness of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Thank you.