

# TWO CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
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## Let's Begin

*The late Jerry Falwell once wrote, "Christians, like slaves and soldiers, ask no questions." This was Dr. Falwell's provocative way of affirming the significance of asking questions. Unfortunately, some people think questions inherently imply suspicion. While it may be true in some respects, many times questions imply not only an intense interest, but also an unquenchable thirst to know.*

*Of all people, Christians should possess healthy questions coupled with a godly pursuit to find answers, especially answers revealed in God's Word. 2 Corinthians 5 is the perfect example of the Apostle Paul's desire to answer crucial questions Christians might ask. Today's lesson focuses on two such questions Paul answers in chapter 5.*

*As we begin our study of this chapter, let's follow the outline below:*

- I. What Happens When Christians Die? (vv. 1-17)**
- II. How Can Unholy Sinners Relate to a Holy God? (vv. 18-22)**

## I. What Happens When Christians Die? (vv. 1-4)

The simple prayer children of another generation often prayed at bedtime speaks volumes, "If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Not only was the child praying for God's protection, but also expressing his or her future held certainty only with God. What would happen if death came before sleep ended?

The Corinthians had a more applicable question concerning the death of believers—not to mention all Christians throughout history. Paul opens chapter 5 this way, "For we know that if our earthly house of *this* tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven" (vv. 1-2). When we die, or in Paul's words, when our "earthly house" vanishes, we receive "a building of God."

The Apostle gives *four realities* which take place when Christians die. *First, death is a permanent exchange* (vv. 1-5). Upon death, the physical gives way to the spiritual. The reader should keep in mind that Paul is not so much concerned in these verses with chronology as he is with content. In other words, Paul focuses on *what* will happen, not *when* it happens; content not chronology.

Specifically, the Apostle notes the dissolving of "our earthly house of *this* tabernacle." Last week we recall Paul referred to our body as, "this treasure in earthen vessels" (4:7), likening the physical to clay jars. In the present text, however, Paul likens our bodies to a worn out tent. Indeed he is thoroughly comfortable with the image of the tent, being a tentmaker by profession.

The tent reminds us not only how temporary our life on earth is, but also how fragile it is. Tents are easily torn, leaky, and by nature of the material have a short span of usefulness. Furthermore, tents remind us of Israel's journeys in the wilderness, sojourning from place to place. This mobility was an advantage a more permanent structure did not afford. However, the wear and tear in assembling and disassembling took massive tolls on even the best tents. Similarly our physical bodies are but temporary vessels not fitted for the long haul of eternity.

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Paul further writes, “If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in *this* tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing *is* God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 5:3-5). Though death has come for the believer, the believer nevertheless lives! We will but make a permanent exchange—a physical exchange for the spiritual. And, Paul explicitly states this exchange will be “eternal in the heavens.”

In addition, the permanency of our exchange at death is a guaranteed promise from God. How do we know this? According to the Apostle, because we receive from the Father, “the earnest of the Spirit.”

The English term “earnest” comes from the Greek word *arrabōn* which originally stemmed from a Hebrew word basically meaning “down-payment.” Indeed the “earnest” was deposited by the purchaser and forfeited if the purchase was not completed. Paul’s point is clear: God’s down payment has been received by believers, received with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when rebirth takes place.

Once the earnest of the Spirit is received, our life then is led by the Spirit, for we “walk by faith” (v. 6). Hence, while we are in the flesh (that is, our physical bodies), we are “absent” from the Lord. But upon death, we shall be “present” with Him (v. 8). In the end, when the believer dies, he or she is ushered into God’s presence and will remain together with the Lord for all eternity.

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*Second, not only is death a permanent exchange, death is also a personal examination.* Note the words Paul writes, “Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things *done* in *his* body, according to that he hath done, whether *it be* good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:9-10). When death comes, Christians will have their lives reviewed by the Lord Himself; we will be intensely examined. This is not the judgment of unbelievers (see Rev. 20), but the examination of believers. Our *ambitions* will be examined, an examination focusing on whether we are “accepted of Him.” Will our “labor” reveal godly aims, or will there be exposed a godless, competitive spirit? We do not always please others. However, is our goal to always please God?

Moreover, we will be examined at our appearance—“we must all appear,” the Apostle maintains (v. 10). Remember, however, believers will be judged *as* believers not whether or not they believe. No Christian will be judged as to their salvation. When one is saved, one is saved for eternity. Our *personal experience* in trusting Christ while on earth determines our eternal destination—Heaven or hell. Nevertheless, believers will stand before God and their “labor” will be judged.



The Apostle Paul is particularly concerned to reveal how *fearful* our examination to be. He writes, “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences. For we commend not ourselves again unto you, but give you occasion to glory on our behalf, that ye may have somewhat to *answer* them which glory in appearance, and not in heart. For whether we be beside ourselves, *it is* to God: or whether we be sober, *it is* for your cause.” (2 Cor. 5:11-13).

For Paul, the very thought of one day standing before Jesus to give an account of one’s life produced an awe-filling reverence. Hence, the awe subsequently produced a *sincerity of heart* in the Apostle Paul, a sincerity which drove him to testify to the saving power of the Gospel. Paul’s life was on fire to “persuade men.”

Additionally, the awe-filling experience he anticipated at the judgment produced in him a *fervency in spirit*, so much so that he described it as being “beside ourselves” (v. 13). The term translated “be beside” comes from two Greek words, *ek* meaning “out of” and *histemi* meaning “to stand”; hence, “to stand out of.” The term was often used of those thought to be insane (that is, “out of” their mind). Paul used the term to suggest the intensity of his commitment to persuade men of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Consequently, Paul never viewed his call to preach Christ as an *unwanted drudgery*. To the contrary, he viewed his call as a *wonderful compulsion*. He writes, “For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And *that* he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.” (2 Cor. 5:14-15). The fact of Christ’s love enamored him, but the force of Christ’s love empowered him.

Finally, the Apostle could preach the Gospel so persuasively because he himself underwent a powerful transformation (vv. 16-17). When Paul was transformed, he gained not only a new vision (v. 16), but also morphed into a new creation, “Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (2 Cor. 5:17). The greatest Gospel motivator any Christian possesses is his or her own spiritual transformation.

Thus, we could place the question about what happens when Christians die on hold and inquire into a more fundamental question: what happens when persons are converted? Paul insists people who are converted are people who are so completely changed that we can refer to the change as a new creation! He refers to converts to Christ as “new creation” implying all old things are “passed away” while all things in a post-conversion state “become new.” He mentions three particular “new” things.

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### Reflection Connection

*Take a moment and reflect upon the time of judgment. What feelings grip you? Be prepared to share with the entire group.*



*First, believers have a brand new position.* Whereas before they were in sin, now they are “in Christ.” As dead sinners, they were “in Adam” (cp. 1 Cor. 15:22). But as living saints, they are “in Christ.” Spiritually, believers have a new status, a new position.

*Second, believers have a brand new personality.* As Christians, we not only are “in Christ,” we are also a “new creation.” And, as newly created, we possess new personalities. Understand: this does not mean a person ceases to be the human being he or she was prior to conversion. Instead, it means the believer has become a new *kind* of person with a new *kind* of personality. What was before empowered by the sinful flesh will now be operated by the Holy Spirit!

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*Third, believers have a brand new potential.* Paul insists believers be described as having “old things passed away.” A basic need every person possesses is to know his or her life has meaning, that life actually counts for something. Nothing in this world offers the vast potential for life’s satisfaction than being “in Christ” where old things “pass away” and “all things become new.”

## II. How Can Unholy Sinners Relate to a Holy God? (vv. 18-21)

Our first question dealt with what happens when Christians die. While death is the dread of the innumerable masses, death should not perplex the believer. Our second question rewinds the tape to a question which chronologically precedes our first question. While asking what happens to Christians’ physical bodies when they die is a good question, we must inquire how the person became a Christian in the first place. In other words, how can a relationship between wicked sinners and a holy God ever take place? Paul answers the question for us. He writes, “And all things *are* of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ... To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them... Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech *you* by us: we pray *you* in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

*First, notice the miracle of a relationship between unholy sinners and a holy God.* Salvation comes from God—“all things are of God” (v. 18). In other words, He is the *source* of it. God takes the initiative, each time, every time. He does the reconciling. He is the Reconciler. God is not hostile toward men; men are hostile toward God. Sin separates us from God. God restores us to Himself. Nothing less than a miracle can describe the transaction which takes place when a person comes to Christ.

Observe further the *scope* of the miracle. As God is the *source* of the miracle of a salvation relationship, so the *world* is the *scope* of the salvation relationship. Christ’s death dealt with the sins of the world (cp. 1 John 2:2). On the cross, He



was “reconciling the world unto himself.” Some attempt to read into the Apostle Paul an untenable position of universalism. Universalism teaches the eternal bottom line is that all people ever born will eventually be saved. Is this the Apostle’s teaching? It is not. Instead Paul is speaking of *potential* reconciliation, not *actual* reconciliation. While Paul does indicate God “reconciled the world” he also emphatically insists the world must be “reconciled to God” (v. 20).

Second, we must notice the meaning of a relationship between unholy sinners and a holy God (v. 21). In order to reconcile, the substance of estrangement must be removed. From the Divine side, Paul insists something was imputed to the Savior. And, just what was imputed to Jesus Christ? Paul writes, “To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (v. 19).

Note the Apostle does not yet state what was imputed to the Savior but what was not imputed to sinners—“their trespasses.” If sin was not imputed to sinners, what happened to sin? Listen carefully as Paul explains, “For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin...” (v. 21a). While Jesus had no knowledge of sin because He experienced no sin, He nevertheless was *made* sin (cp. 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5; Heb. 4:15). He was not made a sinner; instead He was made sin. On the cross, Christ took every punishment hell had to offer for every one of our sins!

Why? The consequences are stunning, “that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (v. 21b). What God did not impute to us, He imputed to Him—*our sin*. And, what Jesus alone deserved—*His righteousness*—God imputed to us!

Third, we must notice the ministry of a relationship between unholy sinners and a holy God. No people could hold such a marvelous truth within: *God reconciled the world Himself*. Thus the message—be reconciled to God! Hence, Paul solicits messengers for this Divine reconciliation, messengers who are “ambassadors for Christ” (v. 20a). In the ancient world, emperors employed representatives to speak in their stead. These were ambassadors. Ambassadors had to possess certain qualities. One vital quality was upholding the King’s honor at all costs. Another was the ability to attractively project both the King’s character as well as successfully arrange terms for peace.

Christians serve our Lord and King. We are His ambassadors, His representatives. Do we uphold His honor at all costs? Do we present His message persuasively and passionately? Do we mimic the King’s behavior and arrange with a lost world proper conditions for peace with God? Our ministry of reconciliation depends upon our willingness to be faithful ambassadors of Jesus Christ. And, our message is clear to the entire globe, “be ye reconciled to God.”

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### Reflection Connection

*If our sins were imputed to Jesus, why do we still sin? Explain. In addition, if we do still sin, are we held accountable at judgment? Why or why not?*



### Golden Greek Nugget

Paul insists on describing God's redemptive work in the world as "not imputing their trespasses unto them" (v. 19). The term translated as "imputing" is the Greek term *logizoma*,<sup>i</sup> which literally means "to reckon" or "to consider." It was used to describe occupying oneself with calculations. In God's redemptive grace, He calculated our sins and placed them on the Savior. Contrarily, He calculated the perfect righteousness of Christ and placed it upon us. How great is our God! How awesome is our salvation!

### Wrap Up

*Sincere questions are not bothersome to God. No question we may ask is going to cause Christianity to crumble. In fact most any question we may have, the probability is, someone has already asked it! Two questions Paul answered in chapter 5 concerned not only how a righteous God saves a sinful human, but also what happens to the person at death. God promises His children heavenly bliss. Paul's clarion call is applicable: be reconciled to God!*

