

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 86

Halifax, 2 August 2009

Q. 86 What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death?

A. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls. Whereas the souls of the wicked are at their death cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, and their bodies kept in their graves, as in their prisons, till the resurrection and judgement of the great day.

Introduction:

It has been several weeks that we have been away from our sermon series on the Larger Catechism.

- For quite some time now, we have been looking at the communion we have with Christ.
 - It is a marvellous thing to see all the benefits believers have because of their association with Jesus Christ.
 - We all know how much difference it can make to be associated with certain persons...
 - For example, if a woman marries a man who is wealthy, then she immediately becomes very wealthy because of her association with him.
 - If a man marries a gracious, industrious, and beautiful woman, he has the blessing of her companionship for the rest of his life...
 - If children are born into a godly home, they have communion in their parent's wisdom and instruction and faith—and the pleasure of living in a house where the aroma of Christ is present.
 - On the other hand, if they are born into a household of strife and selfishness, things are very different for them...
- We are brought into communion with Jesus Christ by covenant (as in marriage) and by birth (when we are born of God's Spirit—when He gives us new life).
- On our part, we come to our senses and see the beauty of Christ and the blessing of association with Him,
 - and we respond to the call of the gospel to repent and believe in Him for eternal life.

- As soon as we do, we are immediately benefited...
 - Right away, we obtain the benefit of the sacrifice He made on the cross for sin... we are completely forgiven...
 - And not only that, but by our association with Jesus Christ, it is as if we have already done all that God requires of us—we have communion in His perfect righteousness...
 - And because of our association with Him, we are brought into the family of God—adopted so that we live in God’s house forever...
 - And as His children, He begins to train us up in His ways so that we begin to live beautiful lives—we learn to love as He loves, to serve as He serves, to worship as He worships—our broken lives are made whole...
 - And we have the joy of fellowship with Him—his comfort, his promises, his continual giving of Himself to us—
 - it just goes on and on!
- And besides all this, we have, through our association with Him, a communion with Him in glory—in heaven...
 - He has gone to heaven to reign—and He promises that He will bring us through death so that death becomes a blessing for us instead of a curse...
 - And He promises to raise our bodies on the last day and to bring us into perfect communion with Him in glory forever and ever...
 - We have all this because of our association with Him...
 - When we turn from our wasted lives to obtain salvation from Him as the Saviour God sent into the world.
 - It is truly a blessed communion!
 - There is no logical reason why anyone would not immediately come into this communion.

If you have been with us in this sermon series,

- you know that of late we have been closely examining the communion we have with Christ in death...
 - We looked at the fact that everyone—both believer and unbeliever must die...
 - And that for the believer, death is a blessing—
 - Rev 14:13 says “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.”
 - It is because of Jesus Christ that the curse of death becomes a blessing...

Today we are focusing in on the blessed communion we have with Christ immediately after we die in Him—

- in that interval that theologians call *the intermediate state*...
 - from the time of our physical death until the day of the resurrection when our bodies will be raised from their graves...
 - the time during which our bodies and our spirits are separated,
 - when the spirit goes upward to be with God and the body returns to dust.

And I want to tell you from outset that we are not given a whole lot of detail about the intermediate state.

- The only way we can know about it is through God's revelation,
 - and He has not been pleased to reveal to us very many details.
 - But the LORD has revealed something about this period and what He has revealed is, of course, important for us to know...
 - in order that we might have comfort about what happens to us and to our loved ones who die in the Lord immediately after death...
 - and in order that we might be warned about what happens to those who die without Christ.

For our scripture reading, I have selected 2 Cor 5:1-11.

- This is a passage that informs us about the intermediate state,
 - and encourages us to be diligent to serve Christ now—while we are still in our bodies—because the final judgement will be based on what we do now.
- READ> 2 Cor 5:1-11

I. I want to begin with an overview of 2 Cor 5:1-11

A. Paul has just been writing about the importance of having an eternal perspective in chapter 4.

- He has been stressing the very important truth that we need to be more concerned about how our present actions will affect us in eternity than we are about how they affect us now.
 - He and his associates in the gospel are gladly undergoing much affliction in their service to Christ because they know that this world is only temporary.
- You can see how he expresses his attitude about this:
 - 1 Cor 4:16-18: Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

- This is the only reasonable way to live!
 - If the things we do in this life really do count for eternity,
 - it means two things...
 - First, it means that what I do now for Jesus Christ are much more important than most people think!
 - They will affect me for millions and millions of years—for all eternity!
 - Secondly, it means that my prosperity and comfort in this world are of very little importance.
 - If I am called to suffer for Christ now, it is a very little thing in comparison to eternity...
 - I have every reason to pour out my life now that I may obtain great riches in heaven.
 - What difference do 70 or 80 years make next to eternity?
 - How we need to be gripped by this eternal perspective!

TRANS> This is what Paul has been talking about when he gets to chapter 5...

- and you can see how he is still thinking about this in chapter 5:

B. He begins chapter 5 by expressing the assurance that God will give us an immortal body.

1. You see that he says:

- 2 Cor 5:1: For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.
 - The “earthly house” of which Paul speaks here is our body.
 - He calls it “this tent” because it is where we live—where our spirit lives in this world.
- You can see that he is talking about our bodies as our earthly house if you go on down to verse 6 where he speaks about being:
 - “at home in the body”
 - and again in verse 8 where he speaks about being:
 - “absent from the body.”
- And so in verse 1, when he says, “If our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed,”
 - he is speaking about our bodies...
 - But you might wonder why he says, “*If* our earthy house is destroyed...”

- Why the **if** here?
 - Do we not know that everyone's body is destroyed when they die?
 - Is it not true that everyone returns to dust...
 - As we have seen, this is the ultimate humiliation that we deserve for our pride.
 - God made us from the dust of the ground, but we act like we are gods...
 - so it is very fitting that we should return to dust again so that we will remember what we are apart from our creator.
 - It may be that Paul says *if* in the sense of *when*...
 - *When* our earthly house is destroyed.
 - That would be a legitimate way to interpret it...
 - But Paul may be saying *if our earthly house is destroyed*
 - because of the fact that those who are alive when Christ returns will not experience the destruction of their bodies,
 - but rather their immediate transformation.
 - This we are told in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thes. 4.
2. But Paul's main point here is that even though this present body will be destroyed, we do not need to be overly concerned about it because we will have a glorious resurrection body that will replace it.
- a. He calls it
- "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."
 - Of course the bodies we have now were also a building from God and they were not made with hands...
 - but because of the fall, they became subject to death...
 - And the bodies that we will have at the resurrection will be eternal...
 - They will never be destroyed.
- b. But be careful here...
- For there are some who over-interpret this verse and deny the resurrection.
 - Paul is not saying that the new eternal bodies will be something other than our present bodies raised up and glorified and made immortal.
 - Jesus Christ has already shown us what happens in the resurrection...
 - It is the same body,

- but it is new in that it is radically changed so that it is no longer subject to death or decay.
 - “This corruptible,” as Paul says in 1 Cor 15:52,
 - “must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”
 - Paul is not teaching reincarnation here—
 - reincarnation is when your spirit or soul goes into a different body and you obtain a new identity...
 - He is just emphasising in this passage the newness of our resurrected bodies...
 - That they will be entirely different in that they will be eternal and not capable of destruction.
- c. And in the context, he is saying,
- Don’t worry about what happens to you in this world—or to your body...
 - You will soon have a body that cannot be destroyed.
 - All the suffering you undergo in your body now is just for a moment compared to eternity, so don’t be overly concerned about this present body.
 - Paul does not mean, of course, that we are to abuse our bodies as those of pagan religion do...
 - with tattoos and piercings and cuttings and drugs and destructive habits...
 - He means that we don’t need to be worried if in our service to Christ we are beaten or tortured or killed...
 - of if we are sick or injured in our service to Him.
 - In verse 2 & 3, he says:
 - 2 Cor 5:2-3: For in this [this body] we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked.
 - We are to look forward to our resurrection bodies...
 - We do not look forward to being naked—to having no body—
 - but to being clothed again with our resurrection bodies.
- C. You see how Paul stresses the fact that our final goal is **not** to be rid of our bodies,
- but to be clothed with our resurrection bodies...
 - Look at Verse 4:

- 2 Cor 5:4: For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, **not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed**, that mortality may be swallowed up by life.
- That is our final goal that we to desire and look forward to when we suffer in our present bodies.
- This is important to emphasise because there are lot of people who think that our goal is to be free from the body.
 - that in heaven, the final state will be a bodiless existence—a purely spiritual existence.
 - But this is not the Christian hope.
 - The Christian hope is the resurrection.
 - We will look more at this next week when we focus on the resurrection.
 - But I might point out here that Jews and Christians who believe the resurrection show honour to the body by the practice of burial...
 - Even the Lord Himself, according to Deuteronomy 34, buried Moses.
 - And when the LORD Himself died, He also was buried and His body was shown proper honour instead of being burned as the pagans do.

II. But notice that Paul goes on to speak about an intermediate state...

- a time when we will neither be clothed with our present bodies nor our future resurrection bodies...
- A. This is described in verse 8 where Paul says:
 - 1 Cor 5:8: We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.
 - 1. You see the condition or state to which Paul refers...
 - a. It is a condition in which one is “absent from the body.”
 - This refers to the time when the spirit of a person or the soul is separated from their body at death.
 - James mentions this incidentally when he says:
 - Jas 2:26: For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.
 - James is talking about faith, but he illustrates it with what is true of the body and spirit—that when we die, the body and spirit are separated.

- We also saw the same thing in Ecclesiastes 3:20 where it says:
 - Ecc 3:20-21: All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?
 - And Ecclesiastes 12:7 tells us where the Spirit goes when it goes upward at death:
 - Ecc 12:7: Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.
 - So the body returns to the dust, and the Spirit returns to God.
- b. Because the spirit no longer has a body in the intermediate state,
- Paul refers to this bodiless state as being “naked” in verse 3 and as being “unclothed” in verse 4.”
 - This, as we have seen, is not the final state—the final state is to be clothed with an immortal body.
 - But we know that the resurrection does not come about until the last day...
 - So Paul is speaking about the period that extends from the time of death until the time of the resurrection when we are absent from our bodies.

TRANS> And I want you to notice what Paul says about this state as far as our relationship to God at that time...

- B. He says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord!
- This is the wonderful thing about the intermediate state!
 - Yes, we will be absent from the body,
 - but we will be present with the LORD in a way that we had not be present with Him before.
1. Even though the scripture does not say a whole lot about the intermediate state, this wonderful truth is confirmed several times...
- We can look forward to being present with the LORD as soon as we die.
 - This is denied by certain groups such as the seventh Day Adventists who teach the doctrine of soul sleep, but scripture says otherwise...
- a. First, of course, we have this statement in 2 Cor 5:8 that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

- The only time we will be absent from the body is between death and the resurrection,
 - so Paul is teaching that we will be present with Christ at that time.

- b. Second, we have in the Old Testament the fact that God frequently refers to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—
 - long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have departed from this world...
 - For example,
 - when God is identifying Himself to Moses, He says,
 - “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”
 - and Moses lived 400 years after Jacob was dead.
 - Our dear Lord Jesus tells us that this means that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still alive because God is not the God of the dead, but of the living!
 - When God claims to be their God, it means that they are still alive—and also that they will be resurrected.

- c. Third, we have the very wonderful statement of the Old Testament that is used of those who die in the Lord...
 - that they have been “gathered to their people.”
 - Here are a couple of examples:
 - Ge 25:8 Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.
 - Ge 35:29 So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.
 - When someone dies, we look at things from our perspective—
 - and we say that they have passed away or departed—and of course that is true—they have... they have been separated from us.
 - But the OT portrays them as being gathered to their people instead of separated from them...
 - They have come to those from whom they will never be separated.
 - And now that Jesus has become a man and has a human body and a human spirit,
 - and now that He has been gathered to His people,
 - the New Testament no longer speaks about us being gathered to our people because there is one person who overshadows them all!

- There is one person who is the king to whom all the people are gathered...
- And that is Christ!
- And so the focus now is that we depart to be with Christ!
- We depart to be with the LORD!
- Yes, we are still gathered to the saints who die in the Lord, but the gathering of us all is to Christ!

TRANS> The first one who was told that he would be with Christ in his death was the thief on the cross.

d. This is the fourth proof I show you that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord Jesus.

- In Luke 23:42, Luke tells us that the thief said to Jesus,
 - “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”
- And in verse 43, we read Jesus’ reply:
 - Luke 23:43: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’”
 - Jesus is telling this thief whose body will soon be dead upon the cross that he will be with Him in Paradise—that very same day!
 - This assures us that the very day we die, our spirit will indeed return to God (as we saw in Ecclesiastes)
 - and that we will be in Paradise with the Lord who redeemed us.
- Now of course the Seventh Day Adventist’s have an argument about this—they say that the comma is put in the wrong place and that it should read,
 - “I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise.”
 - but this is obviously special pleading when we consider it in the light of Paul’s clear teaching that
 - “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”
 - It is not at all natural for Jesus to say “today I say to you” as if the day he says it is the important point...
 - It is quite obvious that the important point is that that very day in which they were suffering together they will be in paradise together!

- That is the marvellous truth!
- That is the truth that brings comfort to us so that we can say “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord!”
- And of course you can also see that when Jesus says “you will be with me in paradise,”
 - he is not talking about the location of their bodies (his body and the thief’s body)
 - for we know that Jesus’ body was buried and the thief was not with him there,
 - and the tomb was certainly not paradise!
 - No, when Jesus died, he committed his spirit into the Father’s hands and went to be with the Father in paradise.
 - That is where the spirit of the thief went as well.
- e. Fifth, we have the statement of Paul in Philippians 1 that confirms that though our bodies go to the grave, our spirit goes to be with God...
 - In this epistle of encouragement, Paul, who was in prison and threatened with the possibility of execution,
 - expresses his assurance that whether he lives or dies, Christ will be magnified in his body...
 - He is going to bring glory to God if he lives on or if he dies...
 - and so in verse 21-26, he expressed his indifference about what happens to him...
 - He says:
 - Phil 1:21: For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.
 - He is saying that for him personally death would be a great gain, but for spreading the truth of Christ, it is better for him to live.
 - He goes on to explain this in verse 22-24:
 - Phil 1:22-26: But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labour; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. 24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.
 - You see his point—God still has work for him to do so he believes that he will be kept alive for a time...
 - But look at what he says about dying!

- He makes it clear that the reason it would be gain for him is because he will be with Christ as soon as he dies!
- His soul will not merely go into a deep sleep,
 - but he will depart and be with Christ!
 - That is the thing that is far better...
- As soon as his spirit is absent from the body, he will be present with the Lord.

TRANS> And so we have these five proofs that those who die in the LORD go immediately to be with the Lord.

2. Now it is right about here that we start to have some curious questions!

a. We wonder,

- “How can a spirit without a body be in the presence of the risen Lord Jesus?”
- And I will have to answer that I do not know because I have never experienced this before...
 - I have never been a spirit separated from a body...
 - and God has seen no benefit in providing us with some explanation of how such a spirit can be present with his resurrected Son.
 - He only tells us that we will.
- All we know is that we will be consciously present with the LORD in paradise where He is seated at the right hand of Father in glory!
 - And we know that this will be far better than what we have now.

TRANS> And leads us to a second question...

b. We wonder... “how will it be better?”

- And we do have some answers to that!
 - It is true that the LORD is present with us now and that we are able to abide in Him and that He abides in us and makes Himself known to us.
 - But now we see through a glass darkly...
 - We do not see Him as fully as we would desire...
 - We do not see His glory and majesty and beauty...
 - but when we go to be with Him at death—we will see Him as He is!
 - It will be far better!

- And not only that, but when we see Him, we will be made like Him.
 - You know how we struggle with our sin now—how we do not love God that we want and how we have these sinful appetites that we struggle with...
 - But we are told in 1 John 3:2 that as soon as He is revealed to us, that we will be like Him.
 - The sin that we have an appetite for now will disgust us and repulse us...
 - There is sin that repulses you now—so you know what it is like to be repulsed by sin...
 - Well all sin will be like that when you go to be with Christ—
 - and you will have a pure and holy desire to please the Lord...
 - and you will have a perfect understanding of how to please Him...
 - and you will have the ability to please Him.
 - All you will lack is your body—which you will long for as you await the resurrection...
 - For it will not be until your body is raised incorruptible that you will be able enter into the fullest joy and service to your LORD.
 - In Hebrews 12:23, the Scripture refers to the spirits of those who have died in the Lord as “the spirits of just men made perfect.”
 - They were those who had been declared righteous through Jesus Christ, and now that they are dead, their spirits have been made perfect—sinless and perfect—all corruption is gone!

3. And so my brothers and sisters,

- This is your comfort and assurance.
 - When you are by the bed of your dear Christian wife or husband or child or parent and they take that last breath...
 - You can be sure that they have gone into the presence of Jesus Christ!
 - And when you are on your own death bed and you are about to take your last breath,
 - you can know that as soon as that last breath comes, you will be with Jesus Christ in paradise!
 - It is a marvellous hope!

III. But there is one more thing I must say before I close.

A. Not everyone has this hope.

1. There are many for which death will not be a passage into paradise—into rich communion with the Lord...
 - but it will rather be the crushing of all that you are and all that you lived for...
 - We all have this huge problem of sin...
 - We have offended a holy God—we have not loved Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength...
 - And if you have ignored this huge problem...
 - If you have tried to avoid the fact that you are not reconciled to God...
 - or if you have tried to pretend that God does not care or that He does not exist or that it won't be that bad...
 - If you have tried to brush this cosmic problem aside and not come to God to plead His forgiveness and plead His mercy...
 - then you will be brought to face reality on the day that you die...
 - You will be absolutely terrified and desperate and helpless and ashamed.
 - How could you go through your whole life without ever bothering to be reconciled to your Creator?
 - How could you minimise this huge problem as if He does not matter?

TRANS> If are have avoided Jesus Christ,

2. Your spirit will not be brought to paradise but to torments!
 - These torments are described for us by our Lord Jesus in Luke 16 as a burning flame that produces anguish and desperate thirst...
 - It describes the experience of a righteous beggar and an unrighteous rich man who had it all...
 - His comforts are completely taken from him... Jesus says
 - Luke 16:22-24: So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

- And the most terrible thing about this is that the rich man's request is completely denied...
 - Cry as he will, there is no relief to be given to him...
 - It is too late—forever:
 - Luke 16:25-26: "'But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'"
- Now you will say to me,
 - "but the description of this anguish must be figurative. A spirit separated from a body does not have a tongue—so this must be figurative."
 - And I will give you the point, but there is no comfort in that for you...
 - When figurative language is used, it is used to point to what is real.
 - Our Lord chose to use these figures because they are suitable to express the deep anguish that every departed spirit who dies without the Lord will experience.
 - The figure is not literal, but it is appropriate to help us grasp the extreme anguish of those who die without the Lord.
 - Besides this, their bodies will be raised at the final resurrection...
 - and then they will have to face this same anguish in both body and soul!
 - This will be the certain end of those who die without the Lord.
 - They have no hope in the excellent things that God has promised to those who have come to Him for salvation.

B. How can you obtain this hope? How can you be sure of this hope?

1. If you go back to 2 Corinthians 5, you will notice that Paul twice expresses the confidence we have about our hope...
 - Listen for this as I read verse 6-8
 - 2 Cor 5:6-8: "So *we are* always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."
2. What gives us this confidence?
 - Look at verse 5...

- 2 Cor 5:5: “Now He who has prepared us for this very thing *is* God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.”
- God has given us the Spirit as a guarantee...
 - What does the Spirit do?
 - He brings us to Christ!
 - He changes us to that we come to Christ for salvation and begin to live in communion with Him!
 - He gives us a new heart so that we delight in His ways and want to be with Christ and so that we come to Him for pardon.
- The Holy Spirit is given to us in this world as a down payment.
 - He begins the very new life in us that will be brought to a much fuller expression at death and will be brought to complete expression at the resurrection.
 - If you have the beginning of this new life—
 - such that you have turned from your own way to come to Christ...
 - you can be certain that if you die,
 - your spirit will immediately depart to be with Christ.

Conclusion: My friends, this is the reality!

- Either you have the Holy Spirit and the new life He gives you and so are guaranteed that the moment you die you will be with Christ...
 - or you do not have the Holy Spirit and the new life He gives you in Jesus Christ and so are guaranteed that the moment you die, you will be in unspeakable anguish.
- I know it is not fashionable to appeal to you on this basis...
 - but the fashion of this world is passing away...
 - God’s word is reality—
 - You see right here how the Holy Apostle speaks of seeking to persuade men because of the terror of the Lord...
 - And you see how he himself is motivated by this to be sure that he is living the new life that the LORD Jesus gives to those who have come to Him for salvation
 - He says:
 - 2 Cor 5:9-11: “Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.”

- We all need to be serious about this because it is a serious matter...
- We all need to be sure that we have the Spirit and so are making it our earnest aim to be pleasing the Lord...
- And we all need to be earnest in pleading with those who do not have the Lord that we might persuade them to flee from the wrath to come...
 - This is reality!
 - This is the Word of the living God!
 - He is so gracious to offer us salvation,
 - but He will have no patience at last with those who refuse Him.