

The Church's Dead People

2 Corinthians 5:1-11

Halifax: 12 August 2018, 10:30 AM

Introduction:

Last week in our sermon series on *The Christian in Every Stage of Life*, we came to the church's seniors.

- We started this series with infants including even the unborn, and we have come through all the stages of the Christian life to seniors.
- Perhaps I surprised you last week when I told you that this would not be my last sermon in this series.

In fact, I have two sermons—this week and next week, Lord willing, because there are definitely two more stages of the Christian life.

- This week we are going to look at the stage that we enter into when we physically die and our bodies are separated from our spirit or our soul.
 - It is what is referred to in Ecclesiastes 12:7 as the time when **the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.**
 - It is the interval from the day of our death until the day of the resurrection of our bodies when Jesus returns and we enter into the final stage of our Christian life.
 - This intermediate state is the time during which our bodies are in the grave, waiting for the resurrection, and our spirits are with the Lord.
 - It is called the intermediate state because it occurs between the present state and the final state when Jesus returns and raises our bodies from their graves.

For our scripture reading, I have chosen a passage in Numbers which speaks of Aaron leaving this world to be joined or gathered to his people.

- It is Numbers 20:22-29.
- Please give me your attention as I read it to you now... Numbers 20:22-29.

Numbers 20:22-29: Then the children of Israel, the whole congregation, journeyed from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor. ²³ And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying: ²⁴ “Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against My word at the water of Meribah. ²⁵ Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor; ²⁶ and strip Aaron of his garments and put them

on Eleazar his son; for Aaron shall be gathered to his people and die there.” ²⁷ So Moses did just as the LORD commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. ²⁸ Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. ²⁹ Now when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron thirty days.

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy word.

I. The Bible consistently speaks of death as the time when we are gathered to our people.

A. You can see this in the passage that I just read in Numbers 20 about Aaron.

1. The LORD Himself says that Aaron will be gathered to his people and so will not enter the Promised Land with the congregation of His people on earth.
 - For the Lord to describe death in this way certainly elevates this beyond a mere superstition of the people and makes it clear that it is what actually happens to those who die.
 - It is clear that death is what is in view.
 - It is not simply referring to his body being buried with his people because the gathering to his people occurs as soon as he dies (not after he is carried to a common burial site).
 - The Bible everywhere indicates that physical death involves the separation of the body and the spirit or soul of a man.
 - James refers to this when he says simply (in James 2:26), “**the body without the spirit is dead.**”
 - When he says *spirit*, he is not talking about the Holy Spirit, but the human spirit.
 - Our human spirit is gathered to our people.
2. The death of Aaron is by no means the first time that death is referred in this way.
 - We could mention Isaac of whom it is said:
 - **Genesis 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.**
 - And of Abraham his father before that:
 - Genesis 25:8 says: **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.**
 - And speaking of Abraham—
 - As the father of the faithful, the Jews often referred to the place of gathering as the bosom of Abraham... those who died were said to be reclining at the table with Abraham as it were.
 - This expression is approved by our LORD Jesus when He speaks the parable about Lazarus and the rich man (Dives) and says that the rich man, **being in torments in Hades [the place of the dead], he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.**
 - The gathering was a gathering to Abraham because he was the principle person within the gathering.
3. This whole idea of being gathered indicates that they have reached a destiny that we have not yet reached.
 - We tend to think of those who die as being the ones who are absent, and of course they are absent from us, but in fact they are the ones who have actually arrived at the gathering to which we are all going.
 - We are the ones who are still not gathered.
 - If you are meeting people at a certain destination, you do not speak of those who arrive, typically, as being absent, but rather of yourself as the one who is absent and them as the ones who have arrived.

- B. This idea of death as blessed gathering becomes even more poignant in the New Testament.
1. There is a change in the way that it is spoken of that corresponds to the great change from the Old Testament to the New Testament.
 - Now, instead of being gathered to Abraham's bosom or being gathered to our people when we die,
 - we are said to be gathered unto Christ!
 - Before, Abraham was the principle figure, and it was to his table that we were gathered, but now a greater than Abraham is in glory...
 - Abraham gladly moves into the background and Christ becomes the central figure to whom we go!
 - Now of course the Lord was there before, but not in human flesh as our risen Mediator because He had neither become flesh nor gone to the cross.
 - What a grand thing it is to be gathered to Him!
 - Thus Paul, in Philippians 1:23, speaks of his death as **departing to be with the Lord**.
 - We often use the excellent expression that those who die in the faith have "gone to be with the Lord."
 - Perhaps foundational to this was the saying of Jesus on the cross to the malefactor who repented and called on Him for salvation...
 - **Lu 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."**
 - And you have Stephen of whom it is said: **Ac 7:59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."**
 - He knew that when he died, his spirit would be separated from his body and go to be with Christ... he would be gathered to Christ.
 2. What an excellent thing this is—think of it—to be gathered to Christ!
 - a. Here is our Saviour, our Redeemer, the Lord of glory, who left the glories of heaven to come here, to become flesh, to die for the remission of our sins.
 - Here is the One who loved us beyond all measure.
 - Here is the One who is our righteousness—the One who alone is able to restore us the Father.
 - Here is the One who is holy and pure, undefiled, a perfect model of what every person ought to be.
 - Here is the One who as our priest and our King has been exalted to sit at God's right hand—and we get to go to be with Him when we die!
 - Truly, as Psalm 16 says, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore!
 - That is where Christ is, and those who have died in faith are in His bosom!
 - b. No wonder when Paul speaks of departing from here to go there in Philippians 1, he speaks of it as something that he is most eager to do!

- In Philippians 1:21, he says: **For to me, to live [that is, to go on living here] is Christ, and to die is gain.** ²² **But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; 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.**
 - The strong language is certainly warranted—to be with Christ is *far better*.
 - Now of course, we are very much with Christ now by faith...we are members of His flesh and bones, we are spiritually and mystically united with Him—we abide in Him and He in us.
 - But when we die, it will be far better!
 - We will be see Him face to face—we will see His glory—we will understand Him.
 - The comparison between then and now is that now we see through a glass darkly—a reflection of Him—but then face to face.
3. This is a glorious thing indeed, but understand that it is not the final state.
- There are several things that are missing.
 - a. First of all, those who have departed are waiting for the rest of us to be gathered in.
 - Like us, they want to see all of the elect gathered in—that great multitude that no one can number.
 - They want to see it even more than we do now that they have seen how wonderful it is and how glorious Christ is...
 - They see what wretched sinners they were and what wretched sinners we are and what a glorious holy Saviour He is...
 - They can't wait for us to see that too and to be made perfect like they are!
 - And that relates very much to the next thing they are waiting for...
 - b. They are waiting to see Jesus vindicated before His enemies.
 - Until He returns to judge the world at the last day, His glory is still hidden, not only from we who are alive,
 - but even from those who are with Him at God's right hand.
 - Yes, they see His glory far more than we do, but they are yearning for the full manifestation of His glory when He returns.
 - His glory will be revealed in bringing His final judgment upon Satan and upon all of those who are in league with Satan.
 - It is hard for us to understand this glory now because we are just beginning to see how pure and holy He is and how worthy He is and how wrong it is for us to rebel against Him.
 - All that will be seen on the day that He returns!

- This is the reason that in the book Revelation, our brothers and sisters who are with Christ are portrayed as crying out to the LORD to take vengeance on their persecutors (Rev 6:10).
 - They want to see Christ glorified in this way!
 - And this is why later on in John's vision of the future in the book of Revelation, John sees the outburst of hallelujahs in heaven when Babylon (the world in opposition to Christ) is destroyed.
- And there is one more important way that our departed brothers and sisters are not yet complete...
- c. They are waiting for their bodies to be raised up and made immortal.
 - In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul speaks of their present condition as being absent from the body but present with the Lord.
 - That is not our final destination!
 - Our departed brothers and sisters are pleased to be that way for the time being, because, as we have seen, it is far better to be absent from the body and present with the Lord than still in the body...
 - But they do want their bodies to be raised up in immortality as God has promised!
 - Paul refers to this in 2 Cor 5:4 when he says: **4 For we who are in this tent groan [the body], being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life.**
 - In other words, they are waiting for the day of resurrection which Jesus describes as a day when all who are in the graves (their bodies that is) will hear His voice and come forth to resurrection.
 - In John 5:28-29, He says: **the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.**
 - Their bodies are asleep—resting in the graves as in their beds—waiting to be raised up by Christ—and they will be!
 - Resurrection must be distinguished from reincarnation...
 - With resurrection, these bodies are raised up with immortality... never to decay...
 - With reincarnation, a person is thought to move from one body to another body.
 - Our resurrected bodies will certainly be different, being immortal, but as it was with Jesus, it will be these same bodies that will be raised up.
 - We do not lose our identity, but remain who we have always been with our whole history—yet forgiven and perfected.
 - We will look at this more fully next week, Lord willing.

TRANS> So yes, those who are now gathered to Christ are far better off than we are...

- They have not yet attained to the final state, but they have been brought by Christ to a stage of the Christian life that is far better.
- But now we need to look at another subject...

II. How should we who are alive and remain relate to these who have been gathered to Christ in glory?

A. First of all, we should avoid that wicked practice of making idols of them.

1. This is a wicked custom that arose in ancient times when men gradually departed from the LORD. It is still with us today.
 - As I often remind you, because I think it is not said frequently enough, all idolatry and superstition was introduced (or reintroduced) after the great flood of Noah's day.
 - At the flood, the LORD purified the world so that only believing Noah and his family remained...
 - but it did not take long at all for idolatry and superstition to arise.
 - All you have to do is look at Israel's history and you can see how even with them, there was always a tendency to turn to idolatrous practices that God did not appoint for His worship.
 - And in the New Testament church, we see the same thing.
2. And one of the most persistent forms of idolatry has been the making of prayers to the dead and sometimes the making of images of the dead for such worship.
 - a. It grows out of something good—a desire to honour those who have served God before us and a desire to obtain their help as we did when they were alive.
 - We want to have Paul and Peter pray for us or guide us.
 - We want to remain in contact with our venerable grandfather who has departed to be with the Lord.
 - b. This custom was so prevalent, that even Rachel, Jacob's wife, stole her father's household idols (teraphim)—which were probably ancestors—
 - Jacob did not know that she had taken them, but he knew that among the members of his household (servants and all) there were those who had idols of various kinds so that when he built his altar at Bethel, he commanded them to put away their idols: **Gen 35:2 And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments."**
 - c. Calling upon the dead was possibly introduced into the New Testament church from as early as the second century...definitely by the third century.
 - And to this day, the practice is sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church.
 - Though they are careful to explain that they are not worshipping the saints with the same degree of veneration they bring to Christ,
 - the problem is that they are giving what belongs to the Lord alone to these saints—these fathers.

- It has been the persistent tendency of those who do this to neglect praying to the LORD in preference for praying to the saints—and to gradually come to think that the saints will be more willing to help them than the Lord is.
 - What a terrible thing it has been—even to the point of leading many away from saving faith in Christ.
 - But even if some argue that they can engage in prayers to the dead without such errors, it is still idolatry because the LORD has not appointed any such practice by any prophet or apostle speaking for Him, and we are not to worship him according to our own traditions and ideas.
 - The custom is pervasive, but it has no warrant from the LORD.
3. Not only should we avoid praying *to* the dead; but also praying *for* the dead.
- If a person is righteous, we have no need to pray for them... they are already made perfect (Heb 12:23) and our prayers are not needed.
 - When there is an ungodly person who dies, we certainly have a desire to pray for them—but we have to accept the fact that it is too late.
 - If they were not in Christ when they died, they will never be in Christ.
 - We cannot extend the time that God had appointed for them to repent.
 - The judgment will be based on what we do while still in our bodies, in this life (2 Cor 5:10).
 - This error not only brings in a form of unauthorised prayer, it also has a tendency to make sinners careless...
 - They are led into the false belief that they can get things right with God after they have departed this life—and they cannot.
 - It also makes those who are godly less urgent about evangelism when they suppose that they wicked will be given another chance to repent.
 - It is only superstition that believes this.
4. And one more thing that should be avoided is any effort to communicate with the dead.
- Some try to get advice from them, or to gain insight about the future in some way—often referred to as consulting the dead.
 - But this is strictly forbidden in scripture and warrants the censure of those who practice it—even their expulsion from the congregation.
5. The approved example of Josiah should be our model in dealing with all forms of idolatry concerning the dead.
- When King Josiah of Judah found a copy of the scriptures, he realised that the common practices of his day including those associated with the dead, were contrary to God's will and this is what he did.
 - 2 Kings 23:24 says: **Moreover Josiah put away those who consulted mediums and spiritists, the household gods and idols, all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might perform the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiyah the priest found in the house of the LORD.**
 - The Protestant Reformers did the same thing when they consulted the scriptures about how God is to be worshipped.

TRANS> But having seen how we ought *not* to relate to those gathered to Christ, now let us consider how we *should* relate to them.

- And let me say at the outset that we must guard against an overreaction to the persistent error of the idolatry I was just talking about.
 - Sometimes we wrongly believe that if we completely avoid something that has been a snare, we will protect ourselves.
 - But our desire should rather be to do the will of God and look to Him to preserve us.
 - If, for example, we avoid relating to the dead in the way we are supposed to do it, then we may actually contribute to the problem.
 - We set up future generations to react against our reaction.
 - They find us to be neglecting something that God requires, and then they embrace the idolatry as well as what is good.
 - Besides that, we deprive ourselves as well as those we influence of benefitting from the dead in the ways that we ought to benefit from them.

B. Take a look with me at Hebrews 11 and 12 where we are shown how to relate to the dead according to God's will.

1. Dead saints are the primary subject of these two chapters.

- In Heb 11:1-3, faith is described—basically as living as those who take God's promises as true....
 - We are told of those like Abraham and Moses who left things and suffered in this world because they believed that God had a city prepared for them after they died.
 - From Hebrews 11:4 to the end of the chapter we are given a great catalogue of saints who lived by faith in a future city of God.
 - Chapter 12 opens by referring to these saints as “so great a cloud of witnesses,” and then it points us to Jesus as the greatest of them all!
 - He suffered the cross because He believed what God had promised to Him if He went to the cross—that He would save the nations.
 - He lived on the basis not just of what is seen, but on the basis of what was promised to Him.
 - Then we are encouraged to patiently endure the way He did... to bear with hard things because we believe that we will be brought to the city of God above.
- In chapter 12, verse 22-24 we are told that we have come to these departed saints.
 - In coming to Christ, we have come to all of them along with Him.
 - It says... Hebrews 12:22-24: **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn *who are* registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than *that of* Abel.**

- They are a people united to Christ our mediator just as we are.
 - But unlike us, they are spirits of righteous men who have been made perfect.
 - In other words, they were justified like we are, but they are now spirits without bodies—and they are also without sin—they have been made perfect by the grace of God.
 - We are also told that this Mount Zion is one that cannot be touched—it is greater and more awesome than the one that awed the people and overwhelmed them when they came out of Egypt.
 - It is a heavenly city, a heavenly Jerusalem that cannot be touched with human hands.
 - It does not have a tabernacle made with hands or sacrifices of bulls and goats—but it has Jesus the mediator of the new covenant—His blood as the eternal Son of God that was shed.
 - This city is far greater than the ceremonies that represented it.
 - It calls for a greater commitment and devotion—
 - It is a kingdom that cannot be shaken—never ever—the way the city of Jerusalem was shaken in the Old Covenant.
 - With Christ as the mediator—the only one who can restore us to God, we should stand in grateful awe more than the people ever did at Sinai!
 - We see that our God is a consuming fire, and yet we have all these that have died before us who have been sanctified by the blood of His Son that He has provided!
 - They are now actually in His presence—proof of His full forgiveness of sin.
 - What a great cloud of witnesses they are to which we have come to when we come to Christ!
2. Hebrews 11 and 12 is telling us that we should consider this great assembly to which we have become a part!
- Far from ignoring them, we are to benefit from them.
 - a. Surely, we should give thanks for them—when we see them there with Christ our Mediator who has redeemed them.
 - Praise God for such a marvellous salvation when we think of them there in the presence of God who is a consuming fire—accepted, rejoicing, praising!
 - We think of them, now perfected.
 - We might think of our brother Wayne Sproule—the last funeral we had here.
 - Perhaps you have godly parents or grandparents who are there.
 - Just think of what they are experiencing!

- Remember how Paul thanked the LORD for the those like the Thessalonians who had believed—
 - He recognised what a marvellous thing it was that sinners and idolaters could be reconciled to God.
 - And if we thank God for those alive in the world who have been saved, should we not all the more thank Him for those who are now with Christ and whose spirits have been made perfect?
- b. Surely, we should also imitate their life of faith.
 - They lived for God in this world because they believed in the promises that He would establish a city of righteousness.
 - They were willing to make great sacrifices in His service and suffer many things because they believed that His promises were good.
 - And now we know where it got them... they are there with Christ their mediator in glory, sanctified by His blood, justified, and made perfect by His grace.
 - This should inspire us to live for God, as verse 28 says,
 - **“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.”**
 - What confidence and hope it gives us to think of the departed saints and of the glory they now enjoy with Christ.
 - God’s promise can be fully trusted.
 - God can be fully trusted.
 - We see what He has done to secure this blessing for them.
 - We are warned against coming short of the grace of God like Esau did...
 - A profane man who looked at the future promise of God as of no use to him—only looking at what was in it for him in this world.
 - Verse 15-17 spell out the warning with these words: **looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; ¹⁶ lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.**
 - What a powerful warning this is!
 - All through the Bible such warnings are given to the covenant people.
 - The great question is, “Do you have saving faith?”
 - There are always those among us who don’t.
 - How can I urge you enough to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?
 - It is not about works, it is about faith.
 - These saints lived the way they lived because they trusted His promises to save them and to bring them to glory.

- Now they are there in the presence of Christ, waiting for the last day when their bodies will be raised, their enemies destroyed, and their Lord vindicated.

Conclusion: What a splendid thing it is to see these ones who believed who have gone to glory ahead of us.

- This is where so many of our brothers and sisters are today.
 - How delightful it is to have them as our brothers and sisters and to know that they are gathered there where we will be.
- Yes, if you believe, you will be with them, rejoicing in the Lord.
 - This is something to lust for—our hearts were made to lust—and here is something to meditate on with eager anticipation.