



Popular culture is obsessed with the concept of immortality. We see it in movies and books and organizations. Maybe you heard of the book *Heaven is for Real*. Last I saw it was ranked no. 3 on Amazon's bestseller list. It's the story of Colton Burpo, a four-year-old boy who during emergency surgery went unconscious. He survived and began talking about looking down and seeing the doctor operating and his dad praying in the waiting room. The family didn't know what to believe but they couldn't deny the evidence. Colton said he met his miscarried sister, who no one had told him about, and his great grandfather who died 30 years before Colton was born. He shared impossible-to-know details about each. He described the horse that only Jesus could ride, about how "reaaally big" God and his chair are.

I don't know if this is for real or not, but what if all of this buzz and curiosity in our culture about immortality is a clue pointing to the reality that this is what we're made for? Is there any way we can really be sure? How would your life be different if you really knew you'd live forever?

In one of the Apostle Paul's letters he answers these questions in light of the person of Jesus. Paul wrote this letter to a little church in a Greek city called Corinth. The Corinthians were just like us—obsessed with immortality. After Paul made a visit there, they became followers of Jesus, but like us they had some strange ideas about immortality and so Paul tries to correct them.

In 1 Corinthians 15 he answers answers three questions about immortality or what we call life after death:

- Is it possible?
- What does it look like?
- How can I experience it?

Is immortality possible?

The first question is simple: Is immortality even possible? How do we know this can really happen? Paul's answer is to point to a historical event; something that took place in time and space; something even some of his own contemporaries had witnessed. Look what he says in verses 3–8.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of

whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Paul says "*this is of first importance.*" This isn't optional; it's not just extra credit. This is the core of what the Christian faith is about. Jesus died, he was buried, and then he rose again. All this happened "*according to the Scriptures.*" The Old Testament had predicted the Messiah was going to die. It said he would be led like a sheep to the slaughter. Jesus' death wasn't an accidental death of a martyr. It was the deliberate death of a person who offered his life as a sacrifice for our sins.

A woman wrote J. Vernon McGee: "Our pastor said Jesus just passed out on the cross and the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think?" He replied, "Dear Sister, whip your preacher 39 times with heavy strokes. Nail him to a cross. Hang him in the sun for six hours. Run a spear through his heart. Embalm him. Put him in an airless tomb for three days. Then see what happens."

Now don't get any ideas! But what's he saying? Jesus died and was buried. Three days later, the tomb was empty. The political and religious authorities didn't know how to explain it; they spread a rumor someone had stolen his body. But then he started showing up.

Paul says emphatically, "We know he's alive because we've seen him." Peter saw him. He even ate breakfast with him. The disciples saw him; one of them even touched the nail prints in his hands. He appeared to 500 people at once. Some of these people were still alive. It's like he's saying, "Go talk to them if you don't believe me." Then he appeared to James, Jesus' half-brother. He'd been a skeptic. But after he saw the risen Jesus he became so passionate in his faith he died a martyr's death. What changed James? The same thing that changed Paul. Paul hated Christians; he persecuted them, but Paul says, "Last of all, by an act of sheer grace, he appeared to me and my life was turned around, too."

We can't prove Jesus came back from the grave. We can't put our faith in a test tube to prove it. Jesus won't appear and speak from this platform. But there is good reason to believe. We have the eyewitness accounts in Scripture. We have the testimony of millions of people like Ron whose lives have been changed by Christ. You have the option to examine the evidence and believe

it or disbelieve it, but make no mistake, the resurrection of Jesus is still our best proof that immortality is possible.

What does immortality look like?

But not everyone in Corinth bought into what Paul was saying. In v. 12 he asks,

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Maybe they could believe Jesus was raised, but they didn't believe they themselves would be raised. This is a major problem. He says in v. 13,

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised;...

Then he says in v. 17,

... and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.

You may as well quit right now. The Christian faith stands or falls on this teaching of the resurrection.

Why was this an issue for the Corinthians? Because they were steeped in Greek philosophy. The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul but they had no place for the resurrection of the body. The body was like a prison they looked forward to being freed from. They believed in the afterlife we all just float around as disembodied souls. This is what most people today believe about immortality. They believe in the immortality of the soul but not of the body.

This leads to the second question: What does immortality look like? The answer is it looks for us just like it did for Jesus. In v. 20 he says,

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

"First fruits" means Christ was an example of that which is to come. You see, the Bible teaches there are two resurrections: the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of Jesus was past tense; the resurrection of the dead is future. The first resurrection was about one man, Jesus; the future resurrection is about the entire human race. The resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead fit together like hand in glove; they both have to do with real bodies.

If you want to know what it's like to die and live again, look what happened to Jesus. First, there was a separation from the body. Just before he died, he said, **"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."** His body was buried in a tomb, but his spirit went to be with the Father. He said to the thief on the cross, **"Today you'll be with me in paradise."** As believers, when we die, our spirits go immediately to be with God and our body goes to the grave. 2 Corinthians 5:8 says, **"To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."** We don't re-inhabit a number of other bodies

like reincarnation teaches. We don't go to purgatory or limbo. We go to be with God.

But that's not the end of it. There's still the resurrection of the body. After three days, Jesus' body was raised up. He left the grave clothes behind. He showed them the scars in his hands and feet. Here's the clincher: the same thing will happen to us. In John 5:28, Jesus said, **"The time is coming when all that are in the grave will hear his voice and come out."** If God had the power to make Adam out of the dust of the ground, he has the power to recreate our decomposed bodies. It doesn't matter how long your body is buried—it will be raised up. It doesn't matter if you're embalmed or cremated—God can put it back together and give it life.

Paul tells us in v. 23 this will happen **"at his coming."** In 1 Thess. 4:16–17 Paul says when the Lord returns he'll come down from heaven with a shout and the dead in Christ will rise first and then those who are alive will be caught up with him in the air.

Believers in the past often insisted on being buried facing east because they believed Jesus would return in the eastern sky. When they came up out of the grave, they wanted to be facing Jesus! Today we want an airtight crypt and a watertight casket. I want one with a flip-top box. I will want to get out of there fast!

Now you might be thinking, that's great, but I don't want **this** body! Baseball player Mickey Mantle's last press conference was July 11, 2002. It was standing-room-only. He'd been an alcoholic for years. His comic timing was still acute, but his great physique and youthful face were gone. His tracksuit hung on his desiccated frame and he looked like death. He said, "God gave me a great body and an ability to play baseball. God gave me everything, and I just ... pffft!" Then he said, "I'd like to say to the kids out there, if you're looking for a role model, this is a role model. Don't be like me." A reporter asked Mantle if he had signed a donor card. "Everything I've got is worn out," he said. "Although I've heard people say they'd like to have my heart ... it's never been used."

Mickey Mantle didn't want to take that old body with him. Neither do we. But Paul says our resurrected body will be a real body but it won't be exactly the same as the one we have now. In v. 35 he asks, **"With what kind of body will they come?"** He goes on and says it's like a farmer who plants wheat. You take a grain of wheat and put it in the ground. It decomposes, but soon a green shoot comes up. It becomes a stalk and then produces wheat. So you can take an old shriveled-up body and put it in the ground. It decays, but one day, by God's power, it's going to come up a glorified body; the same but different. Look at verses 42b–44.

...a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown

a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Now that's good news! If you're getting older and you have arthritis and a hearing aid, you don't want to pick up where you left off. If you're dealing with cancer or diabetes or chronic pain, you want a glorified body.

I saw Colton Burpo and his father interviewed by Matt Lauer. Matt asked Colton about his great-grandfather, who they called Pop, and some of the other people he met in heaven. He asked how old they were. Colton said they all looked like they were in their 20's! When Colton was shown a picture of Pop at age 61 he didn't recognize him. He said, "Dad, nobody's old in heaven, and nobody wears glasses." Now we're talking, right? I looked good in my 20's!

One more thing: our bodies will be recognizable. We'll know each other. Even though Jesus' body was changed, his disciples recognized him. When you see me you won't say, "Look at that ghost there!" You're going to say, "I know him. That's Mitchell. He looks great, like he 20!" When we're raised from the dead, we'll retain our personalities. We'll enjoy our loved ones with no threat of separation again.

How can we get immortality?

I don't know about you but this gets me excited! I want to get in on this. It's like Vance Havner said, "The hope of dying is the only thing that keeps me alive." So let me ask a third question: How do we get immortality?

Can we buy it? How much would you pay for it? Lynn and I are in the process of selling our home. Our plan is to downsize to another home in the area. This is a big thing; I grew up in this house. There are still people on our street who knew me when I was a baby. My kids grew up there, too. I've been asking myself, how much is that worth? How much would someone pay for that? How much will I have to pay to find it somewhere else? The fact is, it's priceless. You can't buy that.

In the same way, you can't buy eternal life. Heaven is God's home, a place of perfection, and we've forfeited our right to live there because of our sin. The only purchase price is the blood of a perfect person, and you and I don't qualify. We can't earn it; we don't deserve it. The good news is Jesus came to pay the debt for us. Look at verses 56–57.

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus Christ died on that cross, he paid our sin debt in full. You can't earn it, all you can do is receive it as a gift. Why would anyone refuse an offer like that? One reason is we love our sin. There's a sense in which eternal life doesn't cost you anything; there's another sense in which it costs you everything. You have to say, "I'm leaving my old life behind. I'm ready to live a new life with Christ." You may be so in love with the things and the activities of this world you can't give them up. You can make excuses, but the bottom line is you're too in love with this world to receive the hope of eternal life.

Another reason people reject the offer of Christ is personal pride. Maybe you're smart, but your greatest asset is your greatest liability. There's plenty of good evidence to verify the resurrection of Jesus, but it can't be proven; you just have to accept it like a child. Or maybe you've achieved a lot of status and money, and you know you have to come to Christ empty-handed. He's not impressed with anything you have.

Conclusion

Professional golfer Paul Azinger was diagnosed with cancer at age 33. He'd just won a PGA championship. He had 10 tournament victories. He wrote, "A genuine feeling of fear came over me. I could die from cancer. Then another reality hit me even harder. I'm going to die eventually anyway, whether from cancer or something else. It's just a question of when. Everything I had accomplished in golf became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live."

Then he remembered something a Christian friend had said to him. "Zinger, we're not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We're in the land of the dying trying to get to the land of the living." He recovered from chemotherapy and returned to golf. But cancer changed him. He wrote, "I've made a lot of money since I've been on the tour...but that happiness is always temporary. The only way you'll ever have true contentment is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I'm not saying nothing ever bothers me and I don't have problems, but I feel like I've found the answer to the six-foot hole. I know I'll spend eternity with God and I have a promise—that as a child of God he'll help me deal with anything. He promises to offer me contentment regardless of what life brings, even cancer."

If a man dies, can he live again? Yes. Jesus proved it. Jesus demonstrated it and what it looks like. He purchased it for you. It's up to you to receive it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1350-25FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, April 24, 2011 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcfc.org. Additional copies available on request.