

ORTHODOXY – *The Life Everlasting Life* – week 5

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Feb. 9, 2020

This week we're concluding our series on the Apostle's Creed. The Apostle's Creed is very much a summary of the beliefs Christians have always held. This morning we're going to look at "the resurrection of our bodies" and "the life everlasting" portions of the Apostle's Creed. This is something to consider, because popular culture, even some Christian culture, often emphasizes a spiritual life after death, rather than a physical life after death. We may think of life after death as *our souls floating off to a puffy cloud heaven with pearly gates*. While that sounds appealing, it's not exactly biblical.

But with that popular idea in our minds, when people read the Apostle's Creed, many people read or say "*the resurrection of the body*", but think of it as meaning something like the "*immortality of the soul*". We often think of souls going to heaven and then we may have little regard for what happens to the body. The *Dust to dust* phrase comes to mind.

So what happens to the body? It returns to dust. "*Dust to dust, ashes to ashes*" as we say at graveside committal services. On Ash Wednesday we will remember together that without Jesus, yes, we'll be dust again. Ashes. But can God resurrect dust? Or what if someone is cremated? Can God resurrect ashes? The answer is "Yes".

But what if there's some other state, like cryogenics or you're the first person to live and die on Mars? Can anything separate a Christian from Jesus after death? No. We may not think of a physical resurrection much. We commonly think of being spiritually reunited with loved ones in heaven. But the idea of a bodily resurrection is actually central to our Christian hope.

Let me read you our Scripture passage for this morning. Romans 8:23, **Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.**

What's unique here is we can expect a redemption of our bodies, not a replacement of our bodies, and not a leaving of our bodies, but a redemption of our bodies. So our bodies are part of our life in heaven.

What does the word "redemption" mean? You might think of the Oregon or California Redemption Value on aluminum cans. My grandparents thought of that and so for many years they drove their empty cans from Arizona to a recycling place in California, until they learned it was illegal to do that, because Arizonan's don't pay a 5 or 10 cent deposit on each can.

What is the deposit for? The deposit guarantees the value of the can when returned. You get your deposit back, which is actually more than the value of the can. It's a deposit to ensure it's value. Kind of like the Holy Spirit is in Christians, God's Holy Spirit in us is our Heavenly Redemption Value. Redemption means simply that we make something valuable that has lost its value to us.

Sometimes in life we have an illness or health problem with our bodies that makes us mad or frustrated. Sometimes we get so mad, that we kind of wish we could get rid of our bodies, or we just give up on them and stop taking care of them. Sometimes people with chronic illnesses feel betrayed by their bodies. Maybe we even start to abuse them, because we feel they've done us wrong.

But then why all this talk in the Bible about redemption? It's because there's something "good" about our bodies. Even, if we have difficulties with them now. Let me give you an analogy.

Hopefully, this helps. Christian theologian J. I. Packer writes of our bodies and then “the resurrection of our bodies”. He says, if you compare them to cars, “We’re born into jalopies, more than Rolls Royces.”

That makes sense, we’re learning how to live and we don’t always live in ways that are healthy for us. We eat sugar and not enough fiber. We don’t always live in ways that are good for our minds. We watch things that pollute our minds. We hold grudges and don’t forgive, so we get ulcers, stress and migraines.

So we’ve been given jalopies to learn how to live life, but then one day we’re given Rolls Royce bodies at the resurrection and all our mistakes have been redeemed. We trade these bodies in for something better: the old has gone, the new has arrived. That’s our resurrection hope with Jesus.

C. S. Lewis writes of a similar idea about learning to ride horses. He writes, “*They give you unimpressive horses to learn to ride on, and only when you are ready for it are you allowed an animal that will gallop and jump.*” (*Affirming the Apostle’s Creed*, J.I. Packer, p. 139)

I know that some of us are burdened by these bodies that are failing us. And I believe to leave the resurrection of the body out of the Gospel, we miss out on redemption hope for our bodies. I know Christians have often thought of being freed from our bodies and this earth with its troubles. Have you heard the spiritual song lyric, “*This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.*”

Well, that doesn’t really take God at His Word. Consider when God made this world and people in it. Each day of the creation week in Genesis, God finished the day, looked at what He had made and said, “It is good.” Each day, “It is good.” But then on the sixth day when God made man and woman, God looked at

the creation with us in it and said, “It is very good!” *Tov Meod* in Hebrew, meaning, “It is very good.”

When we consider the goodness of life and God’s creation, I think it makes sense why we get mad about death. When we lose a loved one, we don’t want them to be gone, because we think about the “very good” in them that we loved and miss.

But then we also think of the troubles we face in life and how death can be a release from them, so part of us is happy when a loved one can go to be with God in heaven. We renew our hope in the resurrection. We wait for the redemption of our lives and all creation, because we want the “very good”.

Now let me pose a question, if we’re waiting for full redemption at the resurrection, where are they after they die? We say people are in “heaven”, but what does that mean to us and more importantly, what does that mean in the Bible? The popular idea of heaven is our souls living with God for eternity, on puffy clouds, behind pearly gates.

But then why would Jesus and the Apostle Paul emphasize the resurrection of our bodies? If we’re going to heaven, why would we need our bodies? Because they’re part of God’s plan of redemption to make good what once went bad. Trading in jalopies for Rolls Royce’s. God caring for His masterpiece.

So where do we go when we die? I think what makes the most sense of the word “heaven” is to say it is “everywhere God is”. To go to heaven then means to be “with God.” Through faith in Jesus, we’re with God when we die, and then what? We’re waiting for the resurrection, the redemption of our bodies, as Romans 8:23 says. Through faith in Jesus, we’re promised “...*a new type of bodily existence, the ...redemption of our present bodily life.* ” (N.T. Wright)

Now before we continue on to the implications of redemption for all creation, I want to try to answer where the Bible says we are when we die, if we're waiting for the resurrection. It makes the most sense of the biblical account to say death is probably like a really good night's sleep, where we're not aware of the duration of time. Like we've fallen asleep and we're waiting for the resurrection. Like we might say after a wonderful night's sleep, "*It was heavenly.*" To be sure, at no point are we separated from God by death. Not at all. The Bible is clear that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God's love story isn't thwarted by death.

In Jesus day, "heaven" simply meant everywhere God is, so when Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, He's here and there and everywhere. And since God is everywhere, we are with God whether we are alive or in the grave. So then I think the Bible says when we die it's like sleeping and then in an instant we are resurrected to redeemed bodily eternal life with God.

Now if we're with God and waiting for the resurrection, let me ask another question, "Why do we even need our bodies?" To that I might say, "Don't critique the artist on how to perfect His masterpiece."

Consider an example: Vincent van Gogh doesn't need your suggestions for how he should have finished his painting *Irises*. You the same. You are God's masterpiece, if God wants to redeem your body from sin and death, great! It's going to be a redeemed and better you, because He loves you.

But to us it may still seem useless to renew our bodies, when we're expecting so much more than these bodies in heaven. We're planning to fly, not walk; to soar, not crawl. But then again, go tell a painter that their masterpiece, destroyed by a flood, could be redeemed and restored to them, and ask them if they'd like it back? They would. God wants the same.

Now if we still ask, “God, why do we need these bodies, they’ve sometimes been so much trouble?” Now ask God, who sees our sin, ask if He wants His children restored, His masterpiece restored, and I know He does. You’re worth that much. All of you: mind, body, and soul. Don’t critique the artist on how to perfect His masterpiece.

Ask what He thinks of you and all His Creation today and I’ll bet He still says, “*Tov Meod*”. “Very good,” just like He did in the beginning. He wants to redeem you, because you’re worth it. And God’s purpose in Jesus is indeed to redeem all His Creation, to not let it be destroyed and held down by sin any longer.

Romans 8:23 says, **Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.**

With this understanding, simply taking the Bible seriously, the classic spiritual “*This world is not my home*” might accurately be sung “This world IS my home, I’m just passing through a valley.” Or “This world IS my home, I’m just waiting for its redemption.”

If we sometimes think of heaven as going off to heaven, but I’m now saying that through faith in Jesus, we can expect the resurrection of our bodies, then what about the world? Does the Bible tell us God’s plan for the world?

Yes. But some people have believed the Bible is telling us about the earth’s destruction and so they’re waiting for Armageddon: a big battle to wipe everything out.

In 2 Peter 3, the Apostle Peter writes something that looks like this. It’s about the end of days: apocalyptic times. I’m sure many of you will have heard this verse and some may have it underlined in your Bible. Some may remember it when you watch the Evening News and talk of potential war.

2 Peter 3:9 and 10 says,

⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

How can we say the world will be redeemed when 2 Peter 3 appears to say the world will be destroyed by fire? That sounds like the end of everything. It sounds more laid bare by a nuclear war, than redemption. Well it does to us until we know the type of writing Peter wrote.

When we look at the books of the Bible there are different types of writing. Different genres: there's poetry in the Psalms, there's history in Chronicles and Kings. There are Gospel accounts, telling the story of Jesus, and there are letters. Within these books and letters there are also types of writing. Prophecy, wisdom sayings, quotes from hymns, and there is also apocalyptic literature: the writing about things to come. Revelation is one we think of. There is also apocalyptic literature in 2 Peter 3.

Peter is writing about things to come and get this, in apocalyptic literature, the meaning for fire is not a fire of destruction, but a refiner's fire. Like fire refines silver or gold by removing impurities. This fire is a way of cleaning away and refining the creation. A refiner's fire.

If it means a fire of destruction, then that doesn't fit well with Romans 8 and the redemption of creation. It doesn't fit well with the resurrection of our bodies, as we read also. It doesn't fit very well with the "very good" creation; God's masterpiece that He

loves. If you take 2 Peter 3 as a fire of destruction, then you start to go down a road that's not biblical.

I once read a commentary on 2 Peter 3 that went down that road. It started its section on these verses by talking about nuclear bombs and how we had enough of them to blow up the whole world multiple times. I think the commentary was written in the 1950's.

Then with that as the context, the author talked about these verses and how God was going to bring fire upon the earth, but he didn't talk about apocalyptic literature and a refiner's fire. He didn't talk about the fact that 2000 years ago they didn't have nuclear bombs either. Instead he interpreted these verses to say that Peter was saying nuclear bombs were going to obliterate the earth.

Well, I don't think that's what Peter was saying.

Sin has affected creation, we read of that in Genesis, and we see that on the Evening News everyday, but when God saw all that He had created, He said it was "very good" and He had a plan to refine it, to redeem it. The Bible says God wants to redeem His masterpiece, not destroy it. And He's placed His Holy Spirit in us as His Heavenly Redemption Value. His guarantee to rescue and redeem us.

Romans 8:23 says we're waiting for the redemption of our bodies, but the verse before it goes even further and says the whole creation is waiting for our redemption. Romans 8:22 says, ²² **We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.**

The whole creation is groaning for the finishing of God's rescue, God's love story. We're waiting for our resurrection, our

redemption. God's plan is the resurrection and then the redemption of our bodies and the redemption of all creation affected by sin. That's good news!

From the beginning in Genesis, God saw the creation was "very good" and had a plan to redeem creation through Jesus. So when the New Testament speaks of the redemption of creation, I think it's best we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Better not discard our jalopies, when we get to trade them in for Rolls Royces.

The world may be in a difficult place because of sin, but it doesn't mean God wants to get rid of the world. "The resurrection of the body" is then part of God's plan for our "life everlasting". The redemption of God's masterpiece is part of God's plan.

At the end of the day, the hope we have in "the resurrection of the body" and "the life everlasting" is the hope that God has a good purpose for us and His creation. God is finishing the greatest love story ever told by redeeming His masterpiece. The redemption of creation and the resurrection of our bodies is then finally about the fullness of that love story, fully enjoying the love of God. With the hope of the resurrection, we're holding onto the hope that life will get better.