

Life After Life After Death

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I would like to begin this morning by showing you a scene from a 2005 movie called *The Wendell Baker Story*. Wendell Baker is a good-hearted ex-con whose latest scam lands him in jail and alienates him from his longtime girlfriend Doreen, best friend Reyes and even his dog. Eternally optimistic, Wendell makes the most of his time behind bars and vows to turn his life around.¹ The book you will see Wendell reading is *Be My Guest* by hotel magnate Conrad Hilton.

In this morning's text, the apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, describes how the grace of God in Jesus Christ transforms the life of the believer, and how that transformation affects how the believer is to regard everyone else. Paul was no stranger to personal transformation, having experienced tremendous change in his own life resulting from a theophany in which he, while working as a persecutor of Christians, encountered the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. As a result of this dramatic conversion, after the scales fell from his eyes, Paul quickly learned that he was going to have to learn to see himself, God, Jesus, the church, and everyone else in the world in a whole new way.

Prior to his conversion, Paul was known as Saul. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles describes his conversion in the ninth chapter. It also describes how other people regarded him immediately after his conversion. Ananias, who God sends to minister to Saul is hesitant to go, because he knows this man's reputation. He says he has heard "many reports" of the harm Saul has done to the church in Jerusalem. After he baptizes Saul and Saul becomes Paul, Paul begins to preach in the synagogues, all all who heard him were "astonished," because they too knew his reputation. Considering that the distance from Jerusalem to Damascus was roughly 136 miles, and that this story takes place in days prior to modern communication, the extent to which Paul was known in Damascus says something about the kind of person he was.

¹ <http://www.screenvue.com/MovieDetails.aspx?idMovie=ad9a20c0-341c-4331-9eea-d3d8def4330e>

Yet his encounter with Christ enabled him to see himself, others, and God in a new way. The “therefore” in this morning’s text refers to what he says just prior in verses 14 and 15: [T]he love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. So much of the Christian life hangs upon that *therefore*. “From now on, therefore,” Paul says, these are the things that we, disciples of Jesus Christ, who died and rose for all people believe:

No one is to be regarded from a human point of view, which is the old, worldly thinking. Whoever is in Christ is a new creation [because] the old has passed away. Everything has become new. All of this is from our God, who is a reconciling God, and wants us to be God’s ambassadors of reconciliation. In his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, Christ suffered not so we could be condemned, but so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

Let’s examine each of these assertions:

First: No longer is anyone to be regarded from a human point of view: this may be the most difficult part to do. In a world where we are taught, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me,” God’s word asserts that it is possible for the power of God in Jesus Christ to make people into something more than we and they have ever been. If we believe that a person, including ourselves, can never be anything other than what they have been in the past, we are regarding that person, or regarding ourselves, from what Paul calls a “human point of view,” and to regard someone solely from a human point of view is a flat denial of the power of God.

Second: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation [for] the old has passed away. If the first assertion in this text is not the most difficult, this one is. It cuts to the very core of what it means to be a person of faith, because it is one thing to believe in God. It is quite another to believe in what God is doing in someone else’s life. It is also difficult to believe (the first part) “whoever is in Christ is a new creation” because of our difficulty in believing the second part, “for the old has passed away.” How easy it is to live in fear that the old creation really isn’t dead. How easy it is to imagine that the old creation, the old self, will rise again like a zombie and reinvade our lives. How often is it that we, fearing uncertainty and change, keep the old creation, the old self, on life support, because we doubt that God is with us when we step out into a new way to live as God’s new creation?

Third: our God, who is a reconciling God, and wants us to be God’s ambassadors of reconciliation. Paul writes, “everything has become new.” This means *everything*. To say that whoever is in Christ is a new creation does not simply refer to my being satisfied with what Christ has done in and for me, or you being satisfied with what Christ has done in and for you. It means that *as* people who have been reconciled to God, it is now *our* responsibility to be God’s agents of reconciliation, for Jesus has entrusted this task to us. In other words, it is not simply

enough for us to believe we are saved: you and I, by God's action and God's grace are saved for a *purpose*, and that purpose is so that we can be vessels of God's good news to others.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, "Christ suffered not so we could be condemned, but so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God." There are too many people who have a warped view of the Christian God because have heard too much bad preaching borne of bad theology borne of ignoring this simple fact as elucidated by Paul in this morning's text: if God wanted to condemn you and make you suffer for all of eternity, God could easily have done it without getting God's Son involved.

Yet, because our God is a God of love and grace, our God decided to take a different, much more painful route: God became incarnate in the person of God's Son, and then suffered scorn, doubt, rejection, condemnation, suffering, and death, because God would prefer to take our punishment for us than to dole it out. Our God is the king who suffers on behalf of God's unworthy servants. We deserve death, we get eternal life. We deserve never grow beyond the consequences of our actions, and God gives us the opportunity to become new creations. We feel condemned to the scorn of others, God tells them that doing so is regarding us from a human point of view, and that is not allowed. We fear a future that looks no different than the past, and God tells us that the old has passed away.

In this text, Paul describes a world where we do not get what we deserve, because our God is a God of astounding, persistent, unyielding, overflowing, consuming, passionate, stronger-than-death, abundawonderful grace. The good news that we receive in this morning's text is not about what we can do. It is not about what we have done. It is not about human potential, but it is about God's potential. This text, originally written by Paul to a Corinthian church that seemed to be doing every single thing wrong, is not about trying reallyreallyreallyreally hard to be good. Instead, it is about becoming the people we were made to be. It not about trying really hard to impress God, so that God will love you. Instead, it is about acknowledging that God loves you so much right now that God wants to liberate you from the bad, overtake you with the good, and give you, as a gift, the life you were meant to have, unencumbered by where you have been, and what you have done. And God wants to equip you, and those around you, to learn to see yourself and others with brand new eyes, as the scales fall away and we learn to see with the eyes of Christ.

It is not about self-help or human potential. It is about participating in the amazing grace and mercy that God *has already shown* in Jesus Christ. Wendell Baker did not simply receive freedom. He received the things he needed to remain free: work, home, income, and purpose. Is our God any different? God liberates us from sin and then empowers us with grace, so that we can live the life of God's new creation.

My mobile phone has a feature I just discovered. In the Settings menu, it has a button, that if I push it, will set in motion a series of events that will transform this device to the exact state it was in the day I bought it. It erases all of my mistakes, the junk software I've installed, all

my incorrect configurations and settings, and it makes it operate just like new. Now, this button will not clean my phone's outside. It will not erase the scratches that come from the times I dropped it, it won't take back things I said on this phone that I should not have, and it won't give it that refreshing "new phone smell."

This button will, however, change my phone on the inside, and one day, when nothing is working properly, when all I can see is the aggregate of the mistakes I have made, causing things to not operate as they were designed to operate. I'm going to push that button, and I am going to trust that whatever happens next is happening for the good.

The sweet release that comes only from God's profound grace is the closest you and I will ever come to having that button on our lives. It cannot undo all of the mistakes we have made, but it can change us from the inside out, change our trajectory, change those around us, recreate us, and affect how everything operates from this point forward. Eternal life does not begin after we die. Paul does not promise that in Christ we *will be* a new creation. He says that we already *are*. Life after death is available today. What comes after death is life after life after death.

Perhaps the time to push that button is today.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.