

Lord's Day 22

April 8, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

Rev. R.C. Janssen

Read: Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 22:1-5
Text: Lord's Day 22

Hymn 73:1,2,3,4,5 (all)
Amen-song: Hymn 68:2,3,4,5,6

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, last week we looked at the so-called intermediate state. What does the Bible tell us about existence between passing away and the bodily resurrection? While our bodies remain on earth to return to dust, the souls of those who entrusted their lives to the Lord and followed Christ will go to be with Christ, and the souls of those who did not will go to hell, the place of God-forsakenness, the place where Christ is not. We reflected on what our existence in that intermediate state would be like and what we would be doing. We heard that our own notions of that existence may need some alterations and fine-tuning, as they tend to be determined more by a Greek world-view than a Biblical one, as well as confusing what is true for the final state with what is true for the intermediate state. And we learned that we need have no qualms at a funeral about echoing a person's conviction of going to be with the Lord.

Today we will look at what yet remains in Lord's Day 22. That's the material of the second half of answer 57, the resurrection of the body, and that of answer 58, our convictions regarding life everlasting. Convictions that are shaped by what God has revealed to us in His holy Word.

We are instructed by God's Word with this theme: We have faith in God who grants us a glorious, everlasting life. We will consider (1) what we will be, (2) where we will be, and (3) what we will be doing following the resurrection of the body.

1. What we will be following the resurrection of the body

"I believe the resurrection of the body." It's an article of faith which, so is my impression, does not confront us with too many problems. We all know of the sorrow that a grave can bring. True, sometimes there is a sense of relief that, with someone passing away, there is an end to brokenness. But, deep down, we will long for a perfect world in which we all function as we should. How wonderful it is, then, to hear or sing those words by a graveside: "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." That which is sown into the grave will one day come from the grave again. The body will be reunited with the soul to which it belongs. That which was separated during the intermediate state will be brought together again. And this happens with the assurance that the two shall never part again. For the mortal will have put on immortality. Our bodies will no longer be subject to decay.

Scripture instructs us that not only believers, also unbelievers will undergo the resurrection of the body. I think of Daniel 12:2: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Revelation 20 reports that the sea and death and Hades all gave up the dead that were there, and that of the formerly dead but now resurrected people those whose names were not found written in the Book of Life were thrown into the lake of fire. The resurrection of the body is true for both those faithful to God and those who rebel against God. As the Athanasian Creed puts it: "(4) At Christ's coming all men will rise again with their bodies."

For believers this resurrection is a comfort: their bodies, too, will live eternally.

For unbelievers this resurrection should be frightening: when you die, that's not it. Horrors of horrors, even your body will come to life again, only to suffer eternally.

Now, we saw that, when it comes to the intermediate state, our existence may very well have a bodily form. But upon resurrecting, it's our own bodies that come to life. The Westminster Confession is very explicit on that: "All the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever."

What will our own bodies be like? It's a question that is, literally, asked in the Bible, too. 1 Corinthians 15:35: "But someone will ask: How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" Scripture gives quite a lengthy answer to that question. Passing away – the Bible refers to it as departing or falling asleep - and the resurrection are compared with a seed being sown and a plant growing. What grows will look very different from what is sown. What is earthly must become heavenly, the perishable imperishable, the dishonoured glorified, the weak powerful, the natural body spiritual. For, 1 Corinthians 15:50, flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.

That last line may make our ears prick up. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God? How does that rhyme with the "This my flesh" of answer 57? Those of us familiar with the Dutch version of the Apostles Creed will know that there the article of faith is "the resurrection of the flesh". That's true also for the German and Latin versions upon which the Heidelberg Catechism is based.¹ It's also interesting to note that the Nicene Creed here avoids the word flesh, speaking of the resurrection of the *dead* and that the Athanasian Creed speaks of all men rising again with their *bodies*. One can appreciate the fact that our English rendition of the Apostles' Creed avoids the term 'flesh' and simply has body. But not answer 57. So there appears to be a bit of tension here. Scripture says, flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.

What are we – Reformed people, faithful to Scripture above all else – to make of this tension? Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. Clearly Paul is speaking of the substance of our present existence. So too, is the Catechism. This my flesh, it's as if the Heidelberger is tugging at the body.

We have the advantage of having a description of the resurrection body in the Bible. Even more. There are people who have interacted with such a body. Our Lord Jesus Christ had a resurrection body following His resurrection from the grave. Now, we commonly understand that body to be somewhat abnormal. The disciples are together, the door locked, and suddenly Jesus is there. In Emmaus Jesus is eating with two other people, and suddenly He is gone. There's a tendency to draw the conclusion from this that Jesus body was somehow magic. It could go through walls and doors. It could appear and disappear.

However, that may well be reading too much into the text. When it comes to Emmaus, Jesus could have simply left the house without the two people noticing. Imagine, they recognize Jesus, they turn to each to talk excitedly with each other, they look back at Jesus, and Jesus is gone. The text can be read in that way. As to the disciples in the locked room, the disciples are distraught, don't have their eye on the door. The door becomes unlocked through divine intervention and Jesus slips through it without the disciples noticing. Just as Peter was once freed from prison in this way. I'm not saying that Jesus' resurrection body couldn't go through walls. But to claim it must have is to say more than what the text says. On the other hand, Jesus was able to walk on water even before His resurrection, yet that doesn't make his body any less natural than ours. Or think of the evangelist Philip who, one moment is with the Ethiopian eunuch, and suddenly is gone. Maybe a true human body is able to do more than we can get our bodies, after the curse of the Fall into Sin, to do today?

That said, there are many statements in the Bible to indicate that Jesus' body after His resurrection was real. When Jesus appeared to the disciples, He said: "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." (Luke 24:38b-39). "A ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." And to prove that He has a mouth and a stomach our Lord even at a piece of fish. The fact that we find this in the Gospel according to Luke is important. For Luke was, by profession, a medical doctor. His

¹Cf. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nderlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*.

gospel accounts are very specific when it comes to healing miracles. It's also very specific on the existence of Christ's resurrection body.

So, the Lord Jesus has a body with flesh and bones. He can eat. The scars of his crucifixion are still visible in his hands, his feet. And probably his head and back too – think of the crown of thorns and the whiplashes. “It is I myself!” said our Lord to His disciples, and they could see that.

Now, one of those who saw the Lord Jesus was the apostle John. In a letter we know as 1 John (1:1a) he wrote: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands.” In this letter, John's point is that the Lord Jesus Christ was truly flesh and blood. Yet this same John wrote in the same letter, “Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” (1John 3:2) We don't really know yet what it will be like.

This, our body, will resurrect to life. But what will that body be like? What is essential to our bodies and what not? I don't know. God hasn't revealed all of that. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. But Jesus had flesh and bones. There will be change, a change that can even be described as going from a natural body to a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44). Note: from a natural body to a spiritual *body*. Not from a natural body to a spirit. Our bodies, our flesh and blood as they are now, are subject to the curse over sin. *That* will be gone. But our DNA, to put it scientifically, will still be there. We will recognize each other, shake each other's hand, hug and embrace each other, even, even have a good meal together.

Mind you, this should not become our primary goal with respect to eternity. To see each other again. It's a fringe benefit, not the main purpose. The goal of life after our bodily resurrection is to be with God. Our focus will be on that.

So our bodies will be restored, to our souls, reunited with our souls. What a glorious thought! Praise be to God who redeems us to the extent that even our bodies will live forever.

2. Let us now look at, where will we be?

It is quite common for Christians to speaking about wanting to go to heaven. “Do you think you're going to heaven?” children will ask each other. We have seen that that's how you can put it when it comes to the intermediate state. To be with Christ is to go to heaven, for that is where Christ is. But ultimately, we are destined for new heavens and a new earth. That's not the same place as the present heaven.

Further, if you don't go to heaven after you die, you go to hell, your soul goes to hell. But when unbelievers resurrect again, where do they go then? Is it like, come out of hell, get your body back, and go back into the same hell?

There's a third question I want to raise yet. There are a number of terms in the Bible when it comes to locations for people after dying: Sheol, Abaddon, the Pit, the Grave, Heaven, Paradise, New Creation; and then, Hades, Gehenna, Hell, Tartarus, the Abyss, the Lake of Fire. What is all this about? How do these places relate to each other?

I want to begin with the third question, and as we go, the other two will be answered.

We begin with “Sheol”.² “Sheol” is a Hebrew word. It's an odd word, because it's only found in the Hebrew language. Other Semitic languages don't have it. This suggests that Sheol is very much a Biblical concept. Further, the Israelites did not have an extensive cult of the dead. Spirits and mediums were to have been expelled from the land. Spectacular funerals, such as those of Egypt, were not on in Israel. The priests, when on active duty, were not even allowed to mourn their dead!

The term is often translated with “the Grave” or “the Realm of the Dead”. The concept “the Pit” seems

² An excellent book on Sheol is: Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (2002).

to be the same. Because the word is never found with an article “*the* Sheol” Bible scholars understand it to be a proper name for a place. Scripture makes clear that the godless go down to Sheol (Psalm 9:17). It is a place where God is not praised (Psalm 30:9). It’s a place where believers don’t want to go: they pray God to set them free from Sheol, see Psalm 16:10.

A question is, do believers go to Sheol? The patriarch Jacob thought he would go to Sheol (Genesis 32:48). the author of Psalm 88 expected to go there (Psalm 88:3). Has Jesus been to Sheol? Peter has Psalm 16:10 refer to Jesus, which would suggest Jesus has been there. It is commonly thought that Sheol refers to the place where the body is. That’s why it is commonly translated with the word “grave”. And given that Jesus was buried in a grave, you could say He was in Sheol, without denying that as far as His soul was concerned, He was in Paradise. Thus also another name for Sheol is Abaddon, which means “Destruction”. Sheol is the place where the body decays, and hence those who are there cannot praise God.

However, God’s revelation has a history, over time truths unfold with more clarity. For example, the reality of there being three individuals within God, the truth that God is Triune, only becomes clear when the Son of God walked the earth in human flesh and when the Holy Spirit was poured out. Likewise, as one moves forward in history it becomes clear that the place Sheol is more than just a place where dead bodies are placed.

That’s clear from the New Testament. It has been written in Greek, not Hebrew. We don’t find the word Sheol there. Instead, we read of Hades, the word most often used by the Greek translation of the Old Testament to translate Sheol. This Greek translation existed well before Jesus was among us on earth, although it should never be considered inspired. The Greeks understood Hades to be the place where all dead people go, the good and bad. But the parable of the rich man and the Lazarus positions only the rich man in Hades. It’s also worth noting that according to Revelation 20, Hades will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. In the New Testament, Hades in the New Testament is the place where the souls of unbelievers are.

If Hades and Sheol are to be identified as the same place, then our conclusion regarding Sheol simply being the grave does not work. Identifying the two and seeing both Sheol and Hades as the opposite place to heaven, i.e. the place where God is not, makes more sense.

There are more terms we need to acquaint ourselves with.

There’s the Greek term “Gehenna”. In Hebrew “Gey Ben-Hinnom”. In plain English: the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom. This is the name of a valley by Jerusalem. Over time it gained a very bad reputation. For it was here that the most extreme form of idolatry – the sacrificing of children – took place (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). King Josiah declared it an unclean place, and so it became the rubbish dump, the waste disposal site, of Jerusalem. There were always fires there. There were always corpses there of dead animals which the worms, the maggots could eat. The Valley of Hinnom, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Isaiah 66:24; Mark 9:48) it became the Hebrew symbol for hell. The prophet Jeremiah used it as the place where God’s judgement is executed. Gehenna is very clearly the place of eternal death, where unbelievers are with soul and body. In Revelation, it is the Lake of Fire.

Finally, we come across the terms the Abyss and Tartarus. The Abyss (Revelation 20:3) is a very deep canyon, so deep you can’t see the bottom of it. And Tartarus (2Peter 2:4) is in the Greek scheme of things a place beneath Hades, where demi-gods were kept prisoner. In the Bible the Abyss and Tartarus are the place where fallen angels are held as they await their judgement. One might say that the Abyss and Tartarus are to devils what Hades is to people. A temporary place, for eventually the devils will end up in Gehenna as well.

The problem is that many of these different words: Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, Abyss, and Tartarus are all translated with the one English word “Hell”. That’s what makes it confusing for us.

To sum it up, the hell of today is not the hell of the eternal death. The difference is, in the hell of eternal

death, both body and soul suffer. Today's hell will be thrown into the hell of eternity. And it appears that there are two sorts of hell at this moment, one for people and one for devils.

As to what typifies hell: eternal torment, eternal darkness, loneliness, a lake of fire and brimstone that literally dissolves your body, brimstone is like battery acid. God forsakenness. It's so horrible you don't even want to think about it.

So, let's turn our thoughts to heaven.

The terms are not as many, but there is still some confusion.

For starters, the word heaven can be used in various ways. In Scripture it is used to refer to the space between the ground and atmosphere. It can also be used to refer to what we see when we look up: sun, moon, stars etc. All that is beyond our atmosphere. These two uses of heaven are similar to our word "sky". And finally, there is the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2), the place where God dwells. That third heaven is also referred to as Paradise. There is a thought out there that Paradise as in the garden of Eden was taken from this world by God and relocated to heaven. Heaven or Paradise is the place where Christ is now, and where believers go when they pass away.

It's a temporal place. It's not our final destination. After the resurrection of the body, our dwelling will be on earth. This earth, a renewed earth. Many people refer to it as heaven as well, I prefer a term such as the New Creation. It is the present heaven and earth united, as we read in Revelation 21. And, this is the most wonderful thing of all, God's dwelling will be with man.

3. This brings us to our last point, what will we be doing?

Prior to this sermon we paid attention to two key passages on the new creation: Isaiah 65 and the closing chapters of Revelation. The images we find there confront us with some difficulties. For example, Isaiah says "He who dies at a hundred, will be thought a mere youth" while Revelation says, "there will be no more death." Doesn't this contradict each other? It does, if you take it very literally. If it is seen as more figurative language, the message is clear. Isaiah 65 paints the picture of Paradise in Genesis 1&2, and what follows. Revelation expands that picture, bringing certain elements more into focus. This seems to be another of those issues in the Bible where what was revealed first is filled out and made more explicit by what is revealed later. While it should also be said that God has not revealed everything yet. There's a tendency to go into speculation on this topic. That, in turn, creates an aversion with Reformed people to even think about the matter. Now it's true, there is much we do not know. And we should be very careful not to assert speculation as Gospel truth. But there is a lot more that we know than we care to admit.

Let me illustrate our lack of as well as our precision of knowledge.

As he lay on his death-bed, a brother suffering from cancer had been pondering Revelation 21 and 22. When I visited with him he said, "Dominee, it says here in Revelation 22 that the leaves of the tree of life will be for the healing of the nations. What's the purpose of that? If you don't get sick, you don't need healing." The same question was raised during an Arabic Language catechism class, I once taught in Abbotsford, when we looked at the tree of life in Genesis and Revelation.

It's a good question. One response is that "healing" is not a good translation, the Greek word is more general and can simply mean "to make strong, to strengthen." Another option is that the healing is focused, not on individuals, but on the nations. Different ethnicities will exist in the new creation: your own body has its own DNA and thus human races will continue. But the leaves of the tree of life will bring the nations, the races, the ethnicities together. Understood in this way, "healing" has more of a figurative significance.

We don't really know what the new creation will be like. For example, we wonder: If there are no

oceans, will there be fish? Or should we understand that bit about oceans figuratively, as a reference of the chaos of the peoples of this earth? What is clear is that the thrust of the Bible is that the new creation will be this creation, totally renewed.

And that makes clear what we will be doing. We will be praising God in all we do. But eternal life is not one long worship service, like sitting in church all the time, singing songs all the time, listening to sermons all the time. We'll be busy with creation, exploring the wonderful world which God has made and now renewed. Technology will be as much part of our lives there as it is here. It will be a pure existence of exploring the infinite depth of God made visible in all creation. And as we have eternity to do that, there will always be something else for us to learn and do too.

And the most beautiful thing of it all is, I say it again, God's dwelling will be with us. To be with God is to live. Life in all its fullness. God will be everything to everyone, Paul says, all in all (1 Corinthians 15:21). Nothing can separate us from God now, from His love which we have in Christ Jesus. And in the future, this will be even more intensely evident to us. That is a glorious life, and everlasting life.

We have faith in God who grants us a glorious, everlasting life.

What an amazing confession in a world filled with strife, filled with sickness, filled with death and decay. A world filled with cemeteries and tears. Entrust your lives to God, He will have you live forever. It makes our lives worth living. And it makes us understand we don't have to get everything we can out of our lives today. For we have been given eternity. Believe it with your whole heart and act according to it.

God will have us live our lives forever. And like Jesus said to disciples, we will say to each other "It is I myself." My soul, my body. Safe and secure forever in the love of Christ.

Amen.