

My body forever

by E. Brink

"I absolutely believe there will be something after death. I just cannot believe that death is the end. Death will not be the finish of me. I'll still be there. Somehow life will go on. What will happen to me I do not know, but that life continues is a certainty." You hear people talk like this today, also people who have absolutely nothing to do with Christianity. They see 'near-death experiences' as a confirmation that death is not the end. Belief in re-incarnation is on the up again; again, because there is nothing new here. Through the ages people have stated that life goes on after death. The Athenians who spoke with Paul were also firmly convinced of this... until he started to talk about the resurrection of the body...! Then Paul was seen as a madman. That our spirit lives on after death, is a fairly common belief in all kinds of religions. But resurrection of the body...!?

Incredible

Resurrection of the body, resurrection of the flesh. Countless arguments could be brought forward which oppose this. The biologist will tell you that our body falls apart and dissolves into molecules and atoms, some of which might even turn up again in someone else's body. What remained of the dead of 100, 1000, 5000 years ago? And what of those people who have been dug up because of shortage of space? And what about all the organ transplants, the people who have drowned at sea, those torn apart by animals? And what about all those cremations? What has remained of a concentration camp, or after a nuclear disaster, in which people were so completely destroyed that nothing remained except the outline of their shadow? Can such a shadow be raised from the dead? Even if it were possible, would it be worth raising up such a mortal shell!?

Valuable

Glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:20)! That must have come as a shock to those who attached little value to the body, to the extent that the Corinthian Christians had no problems with sexual immorality. That only concerned the flesh, anyway, and it was the spirit, the inner man, that mattered. This idea was commonly accepted in those days. The body was seen as an earthly packaging for the spirit. A necessary evil, which you discard sooner or later. Death was even considered a way out! Paul argues fiercely against this. The body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body. In no way is it inferior! The Father, the Creator, values the human body so highly that He goes to the trouble of awakening it from the dead. The Son values the human body so highly that he bought it and paid the price for it. The Holy Spirit values the human body so much that He wants to live in it as in a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19). Not for nothing did God's Son become a man of flesh and blood. And He returned to heaven *in His body*.

I am my body

The misconception that the spirit is higher than the flesh has reared its head throughout history. Your soul as your inner being is alleged to be of more value than your body as your external being. But your soul, that is you yourself, your complete self. Our self, however, is right throughout our whole body. If this were not so we would not feel offended so quickly. The Biblical expression "my soul longs" means nothing more than "I long". "Bless the LORD, o my soul; and all that is within me" (Psalm 103:1). Your soul is you yourself. The separation of body and soul is in contrast with your day to day experience. You cannot imagine yourself away from your body. That which is done to your body, touches you personally. What happens to my body, happens to me! Man is personalised flesh. I do not *have* a body, I *am* my body!

Humiliating

Man is like a thinking reed. He knows much, he can do much, but ultimately he is as weak as a reed. Take the sicknesses which afflict man, terminal illnesses that slowly destroy a body. Humiliating for the human body! Nothing is more humiliating than sin. Sin turns the body into a derelict building, so that it is not used in the way it was intended. It is destroyed by sexual abuse; alcohol abuse tears it down; gluttony can kill it; nicotine invades it; an excessive workload can exhaust it. Sin shows itself in

various forms of addictions, which leave their trail of destruction. Sin has a most degrading effect upon a person's body. The external ravage is evident: it looks decrepit, worn out. But the body's internal organs (heart, liver, e.g.) suffer no less. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Death does certainly not belong, is an unwelcome imposter. Death is outright humiliating and disfiguring.

Mortal remains?

What actually remains of a person? A clear distinction is often made between the 'person' who dies and his 'mortal remains' that are placed in the grave. "The mortal remains have been laid to rest in..." What a horrible expression! I will never get used to it, nor do I want to, because it is profoundly unspiritual to speak in this way. Of course you can say that it is just a manner of speaking, but it comes from a heathen way of thinking, which can grab hold of us before we know it. The Bible speaks differently about this. Jacob says "...there I buried Leah" (Genesis 49:31). There is never any reference to *remains* or *a shell*. Nor does the apostle John say: "there they laid the body of Jesus", but "there they laid *Jesus*" (John 19:42). At the burial of His own Son, God says: there they laid Jesus. He cannot neglect those eyes, that mouth, and those hands. When we love someone, we love him as we have known him: with that face, with that bearing. How can we then, at his burial, suddenly banish his body out of our thoughts? A body that we have embraced can never become mortal remains, no matter how painful we experience that that body is no longer our loved one. And yet, a child that we have carried under our heart, remains our child until the moment of burial, yes, even while it is in the grave. What is laid to rest in the grave are not just the mortal remains of someone who was and is no more. For those who know Christ, that body has a future. It has absolutely not been declared a total loss. It is intended to be conformed to Christ's glorious body (Philippians 3:21). And despite the deep humiliation of its decomposition - what degradation! - it does not lose its identity. And Christ does not lose sight of it. Also my body has been dearly bought and paid for by Him.

Sowing

All this is also expressed in that beautiful imagery of sowing. We are 'foolish' enough to believe that a cemetery is like a field. Our grave is a ploughed *furrow* in the churchyard. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24). This is not limited to the imagery used to describe 'the dying of the old man'. Burial is sowing and not surrendering to destruction! It is no disaster that the seed decomposes. The grain *must* be completely broken down if an ear of corn is ever to grow out of it. A farmer sowing his seed does not even want to see the grain back in its old form.. Even though burial is sowing, it does not make it less painful. It is sowing in transiency, it is and remains sowing in dishonour. A funeral is never glorious and beautiful, but tarnishing for man. Only, the body is not relegated to oblivion, and burial is not destruction... for those who believe in Christ.

The cemetery

"What reason would I still have to visit the cemetery?" I would ask it differently: why would we avoid that place? "Yes, but he or she is not there anymore, anyway. Don't we believe that he or she is already in heaven?" I do not want to detract from that, but he or she is here as well! Here lie more than earthly remains. We cannot comprehend how someone can be both here and in heaven, but the one is no less true than the other. This is beyond reason, not unreasonable. That we believe in a temporary stay in heaven, may not detract from the concrete language of the Bible. It speaks about all who are in the graves and who will hear Christ's voice from As faithfully etched on William of Orange's tombstone e.g.: "*Resurrectionem expectat*" ("waiting here for the resurrection").

Soul without a body?

If soul and body form such a close unity, can you still say: my soul will be immediately taken up to Christ after this life (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22)? Some have clung so tightly to this unity that they could no longer endorse this. They assume that the dead sink into a bottomless anaesthetic, not to be woken till the Last Day. Immediately, Bible texts come to mind: Paul who longs to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23); Jesus telling the murderer on the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise"(Luke 23:43). Jesus tells the Sadducees: "For He is not the God of the dead but of the

living” (Luke 20:38)! No power of death or grave can ever separate me from Jesus. Moreover, the Lord Jesus Himself said clearly that God is able to do what we cannot do: separate the soul and the body. “Fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body” (Matthew 10:28). Jesus definitely differentiates between body and soul. God is able to separate them when we die, in order to reunite them later. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul also talks about it in this manner. By dying, we lose the roof over our heads as it were, we lose our earthly tent and receive another temporary shelter in heaven. But do we not then arrive at a division between body and soul again? No, it remains one human nature, but God spreads that one nature over two main sections of His creation: my body on earth, my soul in heaven. Unimaginable, but true.

The soul remains itself

But what is that soul then? A vague shadow? Surely, you can’t possibly imagine yourself without a body! Do I become a gossamer spirit, floating through the air like an angel? Don’t I stop being a human being in heaven? Who dares to make a sensible comment about this...? We do not know what souls look like, but the Bible speaks about them as though they have some kind of form. Your soul is you! Souls are recognisable: Abraham keeps his familiar name, Lazarus is carried by him (Luke 16:22). Moses and Elijah can make themselves visible and deliberate together (Luke 9:30). Souls, like people, are active despite having no body. But it appears that you do not have to have a body in order to be active. That also counts for the angels. When you read the biblical facts, it appears that souls without bodies rest from life’s battles, from the pain and suffering, and especially from sin. They can listen, they can hear what is said. Nor are they silent shadows, but they cry out passionately, or sing enthusiastically, accompanied by music. They work, by serving in the new functions they have been given. They rejoice, because every task gives satisfaction. That is entering into the joy of the Lord. They really live with Christ Who is at the centre of attention, and every soul consciously experiences this. In childlike faith, without curiosity, I heard the father of a dead boy pray: “If it is possible, pass on my love.”

Complete awareness

Your existence in heaven is different, therefore, from how it was before. The form of existence is changed. You live on outside your body. But that does not make it an empty life, and certainly not an unconscious one! Dying as a Christian is not dropping into an endless anaesthetic, it is a conscious ‘being’ with Christ. A soul does not fall asleep after death but remains wide awake. You do not sink into a grey, forgotten area. You are completely aware of what is happening. For God’s children, the glory does not begin on the Last Day, but as soon as their eyes shut for good on *earth*.

Temporary accommodation

We are not yet in heaven. Believers who find themselves in heaven after their death, have yet to reach the highest glory. You are still in an in-between phase. Although you can be genuinely happy, your joy is still incomplete. The fight against sin is certainly over, no temptations can enter heaven, your conscience is at peace, but there is more to come. You, too, are still incomplete. In heaven you receive a temporary resting place. We have not been created for heaven, but for the earth, and therefore we must learn to look beyond heaven to the day in which God reunites our soul and body! As human beings we are incomplete in heaven, because God’s work has yet to be finished. But it does not stay that way. God’s work will one day be completed. Heaven, too, still experiences the phases of history, although time will fly in that glorious place. But Christ is still busy preparing a place, history has not yet come to completion. And the souls of those under the altar are also aware of this (Revelation 6:9- 11)! Christ is busy with preparatory work in heaven in order to complete the construction of the new earth and the new man. We may look forward to that new creation with deep longing: first here, from earth, then from heaven, looking forward to the day when the last trumpet will sound, when all the graves will be opened...for the last roll-call.

Feeling of belonging

Why does God not just start afresh? Why does He not let the old pass away? Why does He bother to look for what has been lost? Because it concerns His own creation. God is a complete Redeemer

who is faithful to his own creation. He redeems completely, from top to toe. He even wants to redeem my flesh, to ensure that I will eternally have a feeling of physical well-being. God's Spirit gives growth to what has been sown. In whatever way my body will be changed - and that will be quite a lot! -, it remains my body, just as a stalk of rye grows from a seed, and a new ear of wheat grows from a grain. God has given every living being its own nature, its own qualities, its own character. Both body and soul keep their own identity, and are meant for each other, in order to be reunited with each other again. Everyone keeps his own identity. God will never view His people as mere numbers or mass-produced articles. As correctly confessed on the gravestones of *unknown* British soldiers: "*Known unto God*". The most characteristic, the most typical, the most intimate qualities of an identity is preserved. With everything that is *me*, as I am here on earth, but redeemed from all the rottenness that was in it! Everyone will keep his own identity. Being glorified does not mean everyone will all be the same! The body will be glorified: made suitable for life on the new earth. Everything will benefit the whole new mankind, designed and pieced together as one glorious whole, for the greater glory of God, to reveal his manifold wisdom.

Complete renewal

Belief in the resurrection of the body, however, does not mean that life in the hereafter will be a kind of extension of what we have now. Our body will undergo such a thorough change that we cannot imagine it. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul uses four contrasts to illustrate the differences:

- *Sown in corruption, raised in incorruption.* No longer subject to decay but indestructible, unbreakable, unreachable for sin, sickness or old age.
- *Sown in dishonour, raised in glory.* It is unthinkable that you could ever again live apart from God. You will shine as a star from now on. You will carry the image of a heavenly being.
- *Sown in weakness, raised in power.* A strong body, not one that fails, not weary, eyes that keep seeing clearly, ears that never lose their function, knees that never grow weak, glowing with health, bubbling with energy.
- *Sown a natural body, raised a spiritual body.* Governed by the Spirit of God, fixed on the Father and the Son, heartily ready to glorify God. An unimaginably beautiful body.

We have to detach ourselves from mainly 'fleshly' images: flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. On the one hand: the whole man, including his earthly body, will be saved. But on the other hand: take note that the new body will totally be ruled by the Spirit. Belief in the resurrection of the body does not mean that life here and now extends into the life hereafter. It will be a profound change that completely exceeds our imagination. Food digestion will be out of the question (1 Corinthians 6:13), the stomach will not have to break down food anymore. No longer shall there be married life as we know it (Mark 12:25). Not that people will become angels or sexless beings. That would be difficult to imagine coming from God's hand. Being male or female is part of your identity. But the focus on a man or woman will be surpassed by a complete concentration upon God, an attention which will not exclude our fellowman, because God will be all in all. If our body now already is a work of art from the Creator, how much more beautiful it will be when it is recreated in the likeness of Christ. I believe in the resurrection of the body, with gladness and eager longing.