



**Theologian in Residence Institute
Highland Park Presbyterian Church
“Living Wisdom: Forming Our Faith With the Mighty Dead”**

**Series One: “Living Hope: The Story of the Future Life”
Lecture 2: “Abyss or Embrace?: Life Between Death and Resurrection”**

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This morning we continue under the theme of *Living Wisdom: Forming Our Faith with the Mighty Dead*. The premise of this theme is that the tradition of the church — as lived and taught by the “mighty dead,” the saints of ages past — has much to teach us today.

In our first lecture I cited C.S. Lewis, who encouraged us to read “old books” as a way “to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.” Paying attention to history has many benefits, not the least of which is the fact that history can illumine the major blind spots of our own age and re-awaken us to significant truths about faith and life that we have discarded, sometimes unintentionally. Our goal is not to become antiquarians — interested in history merely for its own sake. Instead, we enter the drama of history seeking “Living Wisdom,” insight that is very much alive and that we ourselves would do well to live. Though as Protestants we believe that our faith and life must ultimately be founded on the teaching of Scripture, we also know that the Spirit has worked throughout history in helping the church to come to a better understanding of the Word of God.

In this first series on “The Story of the Future Life,” we are learning from the tradition about our biblical hope – what is our hope in Jesus Christ, and what is the hope for the future life?

In our first lecture we saw that we have much to learn about the future life from the early church’s struggle against Gnosticism. By looking at both the Gnostic heresies and their contemporary parallels in popular Christian literature, we talked about the perennial tendency to truncate our vision of the future life and forget the ultimate promise of the resurrection of the body and the establishment of a New Creation. We also saw that our views on the future life have a serious impact on how we view life in the present. Very often, those who envision our ultimate destiny as an immaterial existence in an immaterial heaven, often view life in the present as ultimately “empty and meaningless.”

And this stands to reason. How we view the future indicates what we think God really cares about — what is God’s ultimate plan for the world? What is the goal toward which everything is moving? When we envision God’s ultimate plan to be the destruction of this world and our bodies, while saving only our souls, then we tend to think all God really cares about is the spirit

(or “soul”) of human beings, and not the whole created order (including our bodies, human culture and the rest of creation). But if God cares about and is redeeming all of it, then the scope of our participation in God’s mission includes all of it, and this world is full of meaning and purpose.

We saw these points brilliantly made by Irenaeus of Lyons, the 2nd century bishop who battled against Gnosticism in the early church. Irenaeus reminded us that this world is God’s good creation and that history is not meaningless but is rather the story of God’s activity to restore this world — and us along with it — to the life we were intended to live with him. This story of salvation in history unfolds throughout the Old Testament, and it culminates in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Jesus accomplishes the ultimate victory for the Kingdom of God. In the incarnation, Jesus took into himself humanity and the present order of this world, and in his own life he set things right, in his death he defeated the Devil and sin, and in his resurrection he conquered death forever and became the first-fruits of the New Creation.

And a central theme in the New Testament is the astounding promise that when Jesus comes the second time, this victory that he has accomplished will be fully manifest in all things. He will establish the New Creation and renew all things. And he will give us resurrected bodies in which to live and “reign” with him forever, continuing to honor the Creator by living lives of worship and cultivating God’s gifts so that all things reflect the beauty, truth and goodness of God. Irenaeus reminded us that God is not going to destroy this world and the present course of history; rather, he is going to renew this world and fulfill our history.

Those who believe in Jesus Christ have an extraordinary calling and responsibility in this world. We are not to envision salvation as escaping this world. Instead, we have been given the Spirit of the resurrected Christ to engage this world to unveil the coming Kingdom of God. Irenaeus called the Spirit’s work in and through us the “commencement of incorruption” in this world that, when Christ returns, will be advanced to perfection in the New Heavens and New Earth.

So, we have begun to explore “Living Wisdom” with the end in mind. And we have seen that the “End” is the end in the sense of the “goal” of all things. The “End” is the fulfillment all things; it will really will be a new beginning for life free from sin and decay and sadness and full of righteousness and growth and joy. That’s the promise we have in Jesus Christ. We have a foretaste of it now as our lives are driven and ordered by the Spirit of God; and it’s a promise that will be fulfilled when Jesus returns.

Now, this morning, we’re going to continue in the story of the future life by taking up the question — a profoundly existential question — of what happens to us if we die before Christ returns to set up the New Creation and give us new bodies? What happens to us when we die? If our ultimate hope is the New Heavens and New Earth, is there also a nearer, individual hope that we have in the face of death before Jesus returns and consummates his Kingdom? Jesus Christ was resurrected and ascended into heaven nearly 2000 years ago. His promise to return awaits fulfillment. And yet many have died while living in hope for Christ’s return, and many if not all of us probably will, too. So what will happen when we die? What happens to those who *have* died in Christ? Is there a part of us — we often call it our “soul” — that continues to live beyond the death of the body and awaits the return of Christ when it will be re-united with our resurrected body? Theologians often refer to this as the question of the “intermediate state” — “intermediate” because it is *between* death and resurrection.

For all the concern I have expressed about separating the spiritual from the material and viewing eternal life as an immaterial existence away from our bodies and away from the earth — for all of that concern, you might expect me to say: “No, our hope is in the resurrection alone. Our hope does not include life as a disembodied soul. We cannot be separated from our bodies. Our bodies and our selves are inseparable, and so when we go into the grave our whole person goes into the grave, and we will be raised at the last day.” And if we were to take this approach and think it impossible for our souls to continue existing consciously after death, we would be in good company.

We are confronted here with the all-too-human tendency, when faced with just about any matter, to reduce our options to two polar opposite possibilities. We either hope only in the resurrection and not in the life of the soul after death. Or we hope only in the life of the soul after death and deny the resurrection. Unfortunately, in much contemporary discussion on the topic, these are the two alternatives presented.

But there is, of course, a third option: that our hope includes both the life of the soul after death *and* the resurrection of the body. And this presents us with an opportunity to find some living wisdom among the mighty dead. The aim of this lecture is to show that our hope in the resurrection of the body and the New Heavens and New Earth is not opposed to belief in the life of the soul between death and resurrection. Or to state it positively, some of the great theologians in the history of the church have understood our future hope to be two-fold: we hope in both the life of the soul in an “intermediate state” after death, *and* our ultimate destiny of life in the New Creation with resurrected bodies. The challenge for us as it has been for the history of the church, is to understand how these two realities relate to one another within the one, larger hope of the coming Kingdom of Christ.

First, I want us to see why maintaining this two-fold character of our hope for the future life has been such a challenge. The example I’ll use is the influence of Greek philosophy on early Christian theology, where sometimes belief in the immortality of the soul eclipsed belief in the resurrection of the body.

Second, we’ll look briefly at how the development of the doctrine of purgatory in the Middle Ages has made it tempting to set aside the life of the soul between death and resurrection.

And finally, we look at the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and the tensions within the Reformation over this question about the life of the soul after death. The reformer whose views on this subject I will lift up as “living wisdom,” are those of John Calvin.

So, first, let’s take a quick trip back to antiquity and the early growth of the Christian movement. Jesus was born into a world teeming with pagan cultic worship, mystery religions and a variety of competing philosophical systems, all of which sought to make sense of the world and to offer people meaning and hope for their own lives. And the theologians of the early church were often compelled to explain Christian doctrine in relation to these competing systems of belief and religious practice.

The development of early Christian doctrine in relationship to Greek philosophy is captivating for those interested in the relationship between Christianity and culture. There are many sides to this story. But for our purposes today, suffice it to say that certain strains of Greek philosophy presented both challenges *and* opportunities for the development of Christian theology. This was certainly the case for “Platonism” – the developed forms of the philosophy of Plato. And we’ll

see in a moment that some early Christian theologians got a little carried away in their use of Platonism, so much so that they tended to de-emphasize the resurrection of the body, in favor of the immortality of the soul. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

In the first centuries of the church, numerous challenges to Christian teaching came from the age's intelligentsia, which provoked responses from the church's able teachers. Some of these Christian teachers had themselves journeyed through the philosophies they now sought to refute, and they used every tool in the box for their defense of Christianity. They used Greek philosophy against Greek philosophy. But often they also explained Christian teachings by "taking up" philosophical learning and using it within the Christian theological enterprise. St. Augustine famously made the analogy with the Israelites "plundering the gold of the Egyptians" during the Exodus. God's people were supposed to take the resources of the pagans and put them to use in the service of God. In the same way, Augustine said, Christian teachers can use pagan philosophy in the service of Christian teaching.

And this did have a salutary impact on Christian theology in many cases. In the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, the early church fathers were able to borrow and modify concepts like "essence" and "person" to explain that God is "one essence existing in the three persons." Those are not biblical categories, strictly speaking, but used in this way they do communicate biblical truth.

Of course, the impact was not always positive. To go back to Augustine's analogy of the Exodus, after the Exodus, when Moses took too long up on Mt. Sinai, the Israelites quickly drifted into unfaithfulness and used some of that Egyptian gold to fashion a golden calf — an idol. In the same way, Greek philosophy's impact on the early church's understanding of Scripture was a mixed bag.

So what does all of this have to do with the life of the soul after death? Well, one of the most prominent forms of Greek philosophy was Platonism, that is, a development of the philosophy of the great philosopher Plato. And Platonism had some remarkable similarities to Christian teaching. For this reason, numerous Christian theologians not only defended Christianity against Platonism but also incorporated certain insights of Platonism into their way of understanding the Bible.

The early church fathers who were influenced by Platonism tried mightily to hold the line and not to go beyond what God had revealed and mix it with pagan philosophy. And most of the early church fathers did quite well in this regard. But some of them, it must be said, were led by their Platonism to hedge on the bodily resurrection and tended to dwell on the immortality of the soul. Two early church fathers from Alexandria are good examples: Clement and Origen.¹

Both Clement and Origen rejected Gnosticism and they also defended Christianity against the charge that it was a religion for ignorant people. Alexandria was a great center of learning in the ancient world, and they had been trained in philosophy and, to be sure, they used it in defense of Christianity. They also got a little carried away.

Regarding the resurrection, Clement seems to contradict himself at times. He could affirm the

¹ For brief discussions of these issues in the theology of Clement and Origen, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 46-49; and J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Edition (Harper, 1978), pp. 178-183.

bodily resurrection on the one hand. But on the other hand, he sometimes asserts something more like the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul, identifying the resurrection with the freedom of the soul when liberated from the body at death. (This is the view that, in the last lecture, I described myself as having in my early years as a Christian, though I did not hold this view with anything like the sophistication of Clement!) Clement also seems to have embraced the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of souls. And at times he can speak of the soul as immortal by its very nature, a teaching of many Platonists, which would mean that the soul is not constantly dependent upon God's activity for its continued existence.

Origen of Alexandria went further, and apparently believed that our souls not only existed before the creation of the world, but that our souls fell into sin before creation. Origen describes this "pre-cosmic fall" of souls in this way: "these [souls] had not sinned so grievously as to become demons, or so venially as to become angels. God therefore made the present world, binding the soul to the body as a punishment."² Origen did write two books on the resurrection, but neither of them have survived. From what we can piece together of his surviving works, however, he seems to have understood the resurrection in rather spiritualist terms, that is, that we will have "bodies" in the sense that our personal identities will remain intact, but our "resurrected" bodies will not be of real flesh and blood as we have now.

Reflecting on Clement and Origen, even if we discard ideas like the existence of souls before creation, we can see how it's easy to confuse the so-called "intermediate state" — the life of the soul between death and resurrection — with our ultimate destiny. They believed the Scriptures affirmed the ability of the soul to live apart from the body prior to the resurrection. And in a cultural environment that had all sorts of objections to the resurrection, and many resources to think about the independent existence of the soul, it was very easy to make the "intermediate state" into the "permanent state." In other words, it was easy to hedge on the resurrection of the body, while affirming the immortality of the soul.

It will not surprise you that this understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul was often coupled with a rigorously "ascetic spirituality" — that is, an understanding of the Christian life where holiness means a thoroughgoing rejection of physical pleasures in favor of bodily self-denial. The spiritual part of us is what is good, but the flesh-and-blood part of us is just a source of temptation. There is in Christian history a consistent strain of ascetic spirituality that is rooted in Platonism. The mystical tradition is the most obvious example, where sometimes the Christian's pursuit of union with God is understood to be enhanced by a radical denial of this world and the body, and sometimes even the intentional punishment of the flesh.

It must be said that there are many less severe examples of the integration of Platonism with Christian theology than we find in Clement and Origen. Nevertheless, these more extreme cases demonstrate a clear tendency. And because of this negative impact of Platonism on the development of Christian thought, there is a movement in some corners of the church today to rid Christian thinking of anything that even sounds like Plato, including the idea that the soul can exist apart from the body.

So, we've talked a little about antiquity. Now, a brief word about the Middle Ages is in order here before we arrive at the Reformation in the 16th Century.

From a Protestant perspective at least, things got worse in the Middle Ages when the

² Cited in J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 181.

“intermediate state” became the playground of the doctrine of purgatory. Purgatory refers to the purifying suffering of the soul after death, preparing the soul to be received into heaven. Purgatory was pictured as a place of cleansing fire whose pain was mitigated only by the certainty that one day the guilt of all your sins will have been “purged” and you will be able to enter heaven. Many practices related to the doctrine of purgatory belong to two of our future series, on the Story of Salvation and the Story of Holy Communion.

But it’s worth pointing out now that the doctrine of purgatory connected the dead with the living in a very real but often unhappy way. The church said that it was possible for those still living to shorten the time of suffering for their loved ones in purgatory. Those still living could, for instance, pay for Masses for the dead. There were many priests in the late Middle Ages who did nothing but say masses for the dead. Additionally, those still living could purchase “indulgences” — special pardons authorized by the pope that were thought to benefit the one for whom they were purchased. And they could be purchased for the dead.

At the dawn of the Protestant Reformation, a special indulgence had been authorized for sale by the pope, frankly in order to raise money to build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. And then, as providence would have it, a famous indulgence preacher was traveling in Germany near the town of Martin Luther. This preacher is said to have had a rhyming song: “As the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Luther became so incensed by the pope’s pretended power even over those in the after life, that he wrote his “95 Theses” against the practice of indulgences. Luther’s theses are often considered the spark that grew into the fire of the Protestant Reformation. So, the Reformation, of which we are heirs, began as an argument about death.

Now, you might be exasperated at this point. “Enough already. The Gnostics got it wrong by thinking of eternal life as a disembodied spirit. The Platonists weren’t quite as weird as the Gnostics but they still denied the resurrection and had an undo influence on the development of Christian doctrine. And what’s more, the whole idea of purgatory is based on the presumption that the soul can exist apart from the body. Why not, then, just reject the idea of the conscious existence of the soul between death and resurrection? Wouldn’t that undercut the influence of Platonism and help us focus on the resurrection? Wouldn’t that deliver the one-two punch and just knock out the whole unbiblical idea of purgatory?” If you have begun to feel this way, you’re in good company. A few of the reformers in the 16th century seem to have had sympathies for just such a view.

Martin Luther’s own views on these things were not entirely clear. He seems not to have thought very much of the “intermediate state” between death and resurrection. This might be because he was convinced that Christ would return very soon, in which case the resurrection would be very soon and the “intermediate state” would be irrelevant. When Luther does talk about it, he tends to speak of it as a state of sleep. There are, of course, passages in Scripture that appear to speak of life after death as a sleepy experience. We’ll come to those in a moment.

And there were others, notably the Anabaptists, who became known for their denial of a conscious intermediate state between death and resurrection. Some of them believed that biblical references to the soul of human beings simply meant the “life” of a person, and so when you die, you die. There is no “soul” we can speak of apart from the body. Others apparently believed that there was such a soul, but that apart from the body it could not be “awake” and sensing things. Therefore, the soul would “sleep” between death and resurrection.

It was in the midst of these debates that John Calvin began his career as a reformer. Actually, his first theological writing was a response to these teachings about “soul sleep” and the “death of the soul.” Calvin’s position was careful and nuanced. He confidently affirmed the resurrection of the body, but he also thought there was a great deal at stake in affirming the continuing life of the soul between death and resurrection. And it is in Calvin’s work on this issue that I think we can find some real “living wisdom.” So let’s take a look at Calvin’s first little book, entitled *Psychopannychia*, which means “wakefulness of the soul.”³ What I want us to see is that Calvin sets out the classical Christian teaching of our two-fold hope – both in life between death and resurrection, as well as the ultimate hope of the resurrection and the New Creation – and he does so based on the teaching of Scripture.

First, Calvin lets you know up front what he thinks about the wisdom of “the philosophers.” He puts it this way:

“Here let human wisdom give place; for though it thinks much about the soul it perceives no certainty with regard to it. Here, too, let Philosophers give place, since on almost all subjects their regular practice is to put neither end nor measure to their dissensions, while on this subject in particular they quarrel, so that you will scarcely find two of them agreed on any single point! Plato, in some passages, talks nobly of the faculties of the soul; and Aristotle, in discoursing of it, has surpassed all in acuteness. But what the soul is, and whence it is, it is vain to ask at them, or indeed at the whole body of Sages, though they certainly thought more purely and wisely on the subject than some amongst ourselves, who boast that they are the disciples of Christ.”

There you get a little taste of 16th-century rhetoric in his criticism of the Anabaptists who are teaching soul sleep. But more importantly, you can see that Calvin admires the philosophers but his explicit desire is to make his case not on the basis of their teachings, but rather from the revealed Word of God in Scripture. He has read the philosophers: Calvin was a Renaissance humanist and had a thorough liberal arts education. But having seen what they have to offer, he charts a different course and seeks firmer ground for the life of the soul after death.

So, we should note a few of the passages of Scripture where Calvin finds the life of the soul between death and resurrection explicitly confirmed. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says he “would rather be absent from the body and present with the Lord.” In Philippians 1:21-23, Paul says: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

In Revelation chapter 6 we have a glimpse of John’s vision of the throne room of God, where he sees the souls of the martyred saints crying out to God. There is the mysterious passage in 1 Peter 3, where Jesus is said to have preached to “the spirits who are in prison.” Furthermore, Jesus and Stephen, as they are dying, call upon God and say “into thy hands I commit my spirit.” And to cite one final passage, though there are more, we can look to Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23. The criminal said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

³ If you’d like to read Calvin’s *Psychopannychia*, I put the full text of the (19th century) English translation in a PDF file and it’s available on my website at: http://www.michaelryanwalker.com/files/Psychopannychia_Text.pdf.

These passages alone would seem enough to confirm that we can continue to live beyond the death of our bodies, and that this “intermediate” existence between death and resurrection is one where those who are in Christ will be with him, as Paul says, and we can even call it “paradise,” as Jesus does. And they were enough for Calvin. But he realizes, of course, that his opponents have their own passages of Scripture that they use to support the doctrine of “soul sleep.”

For instance, what are we to do with those passages of Scripture that seem to speak of those who have died as “sleeping”? To give but one example, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:14: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” What does this phrase mean, that they have “fallen asleep” in him? It is passages just such as this that have been used to support the doctrine of “soul sleep.” But Calvin notes that when the Scriptures speak of “sleep” in this way, it was a common way of referring to rest from labors. This rest or peace in the Lord, begins when we trust in Jesus now, but we can truly rest in him after death. Calvin says:

“Believers have this peace on receiving the gospel, when they see that God, whom they dreaded as their Judge, has become their Father; themselves, instead of children of wrath, children of grace; and the bowels of the divine mercy poured out toward them, so that now they expect from God nothing but goodness and mildness. But since human life on earth is a warfare (Job 7:1), those who feel both the stings of sin and the remains of the flesh, feel overwhelmed in the world, though with consolation in God - such consolation, however, as does not leave the mind perfectly calm and undisturbed. But when they shall be divested of flesh and the desires of the flesh, (which, like domestic enemies, break their peace), then at length will they rest and recline with God.”

I should note that, when Calvin uses the word “flesh” like this, he is not referring to the body as such, but rather referring to the sinful and corruptible condition in which we find ourselves. This is true for the way that the Apostle Paul typically uses the word “flesh” as well, though he is often misinterpreted in this regard.

In any case, Calvin is picking up on the fact that the quest for rest and peace in God is a long story in Scripture, beginning with the Garden of Eden, then in the Sabbath in the Promised Land, now by faith in Christ and in the future in the New Heavens and New Earth. The souls of the faithful departed, who die in Christ before he returns, enter into this rest. And this is what we mean, for instance, when we say “rest in peace,” following Psalm 4. What awaits us after death is not an abyss of nothingness, but rather the peaceful embrace of God.

So, that’s one example of how Calvin responds to those teaching “soul sleep.” And Calvin takes a similar approach to those who taught the “death of the soul.” This group would cite passages of Scripture like Ezekiel 17:4, where God says: “For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.” In these cases, when Scripture sounds like it’s speaking of the “death” of the soul, Calvin explains that “life” and “death” are not just categories of “existence” and “non-existence.” On the contrary, to experience real death is to experience the judgment of God, and the death or destruction of the soul does not mean it ceases to exist, but rather that it exists in enmity with God. Likewise, to say that the soul is “alive” is not just to say that it exists. Rather, it is to say that it experiences the benevolence of God. Incidentally, some of the best modern interpreters of the Bible have confirmed Calvin’s interpretation on this matter, noting that “life” and “death” in Scripture are

often spiritual – or we might even say “psychological” – categories of existence. Scripture can speak of “spiritual death” for those in opposition to God, or true “spiritual life” for those in fellowship with God.

This all may sound very technical, but questions of life and death are important wrestle with carefully. Indeed, for Calvin the question of whether or not the soul lives after death was an intensely personal one, for at the time he wrote this little book on the soul, his life was threatened by lethal persecution and some of his dearest friends had been killed by the crackdown by French authorities on the reform movement in France. One passage seems to have been especially dear to him: Matthew 10:28, where Jesus says: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

It may seem odd to say that a passage about God being able to destroy your soul in hell is comforting. But what this saying of Jesus affirms is that only God has power over the soul. For those who are alive in Christ, nothing could give us greater assurance. Another human being may be able to kill my body, but they cannot touch my soul. Calvin responds to these words of Jesus with deep gratitude:

“Graciously, therefore, has the Lord acted towards us, in not leaving our souls to the disposal of those who make no scruple of butchering them, or at least attempt it, but without the ability to do so. Tyrants torture, maim, burn, scourge, and hang, but it is only the body! It is God alone who has power over the soul, and can send it into hell fire. Either, therefore, the soul survives the body, or it is false to say that tyrants have no power over the soul!”

So, our life with God rests only in the hands of God. Our life with God cannot be interrupted by any other force, not even the death of the body. This is a tremendous comfort, because it means that we can face anything in this life without fearing that it could separate us from him.

Additionally, to remember that our souls rest in the hands of God also helps us avoid the error of Platonism that we saw a moment ago – the idea that our souls are immortal by their very nature. Our souls are not indestructible, so our hope rests not in the nature of the soul. Rather our hope is in the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Our lives rest in the sovereign hands of God.

So, we’ve seen some key passages of Scripture that Calvin points to for the life of the soul after death, and we’ve seen how he addresses some of the key objections of those who deny that the soul can truly live after death. But on top of all these things, we might even say that Calvin puts the most weight on another argument for the continuing life of the soul. And this is the believer’s *union with Christ* by faith, which is an *unbreakable* union.

Throughout the New Testament, and especially in the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John, it is clear that we have been bound to Christ so that his life becomes our life. Indeed, our entrance into “eternal life” begins now, by faith in Christ. And because by faith we are united to the one who is resurrected and has conquered death forever, even the death of the body cannot separate us from Christ. Calvin writes:

‘[W]e have the additional security of his Resurrection, by which he constituted himself the

Lord of death, and raised all of us who have any part in him above death, so that Paul did not hesitate to say, that "our life is hid with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3) Elsewhere he says, "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) What remains for our opponents but to cry with open mouth that Christ sleeps in sleeping souls? For if Christ lives in them he also dies in them. If, therefore, the life of Christ is ours, let him who insists that our life is ended by death, pull Christ down from the right hand of the Father and consign him to the second death. If He can die, our death is certain; if he has no end of life, neither can our souls engrafted in him be ended by any death!"

And Calvin cites numerous other passages about eternal life, including John 6, where Jesus says we have passed from death into life. Or in John 11:25-26, Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

The truth that Calvin wants to drive home is the fact that, by the Spirit, we have been given the life of the resurrected Christ. And our union with Christ has the strength of Christ's resurrection, which conquered death forever. As he says later in this little book, about Christ who is our life: "It is absurd to say we perish, while our life is living" – that is, as long as Christ lives, we shall live. And Christ can never die.

Jesus has then irrevocably set us on the path of life that will culminate in our own resurrection. Therefore, when we affirm the promise of our resurrection on the strength of Christ's resurrection, we also affirm that we can never be separated from him. At the beginning of this lecture, we mentioned that in much contemporary thought these two things are opposed: resurrection of the body, or the continuing life of the soul after the body's death. But Calvin helps us to see that these two realities are far from opposed to each other. Rather, they hang together, both of them founded upon the strength of our union with the resurrected Christ. The Apostle Paul sums it up in a famous passage in Romans 8: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing can separate us.

Finally, it remains for us to see that Calvin was clear that the life of the soul after death should not to be understood as the final or "completed" state of our future life. Rather, Calvin understands the nature of this "intermediate state" of the soul to be a blissful, but incomplete experience. It is paradise compared to this life, as Jesus said to the thief on the cross. But it is not our eternal home, for which we await the return of Jesus, when comes the final judgment, the resurrection of the body and the establishment of the New Creation. Calvin describes the longing of the souls of those who have died in Christ:

"Now, when they wait for something which they see not, and desire what they have not, it is evident that their peace is imperfect. On the other hand, while they confidently expect what they do expect, and in faith desire what they desire, it is clear that their desire is tranquil. This peace is increased and advanced by death, which, freeing, and as it were discharging them from the warfare of this world, leads them into the place of peace, where, while wholly intent on beholding God, they have nothing better to which they can turn

their eyes or direct their desire. Still, something is wanting which they desire to see, namely, the complete and perfect glory of God, to which they always aspire. Though there is no impatience in their desire, their rest is not yet full and perfect, since he is said to rest who is where he desires to be; and the measure of desire has no end till it has arrived where it was tending. But if the eyes of the elect look to the supreme glory of God as their final good, their desire is always moving onward till the glory of God is complete, and this completion awaits the judgment day.”

Calvin thus affirms that the “intermediate state” – what we often call “heaven” – will be wonderful freedom from the present warfare against sin in this life. But it will still be characterized by a future hope – a hope for Christ’s return, when the glory of God will fill all things.

To sum up, we can see that, in the midst of a variety of opinions in the 16th century, where it might have been tempting to discard the idea that the soul can exist consciously after death, Calvin re-affirms the classical Christian teaching. He confidently affirms the life of the soul after death without compromising the promise of the resurrection. And he sets aside the baggage that has often been attached this intermediate state: he bases his teaching not on Greek philosophy but rather on some clear teachings of Scripture and the unbreakable union we have with the resurrected Christ. There is no pre-existence of the soul as in Platonism. He is clear that the soul is not immortal by nature but rather is sustained in life by the will of God. And purgatory is set aside entirely.

In our own day, in the midst of similar competing options of “immortality of the soul” *or* “resurrection of the body,” Calvin helps us see those as false alternatives: the truth is not one or the other, but rather the two-fold hope in both, secured for us by the strength of Christ’s resurrection.

God’s desire for us is that we are “always moving onward,” as Calvin put it. First, we receive the gift of eternal life by faith in Christ, and we move onward in this life as the Spirit sanctifies us in Christ. Then, at death we are free from the battle with sin and enjoy peace with God. But we still await the time when “the glory of God is complete,” when Jesus returns to establish the New Creation and give us resurrected bodies to live with him in the New Creation forever.

And this is not just Calvin’s private interpretation of Scripture. It represents the mainstream teaching of the church fathers, as well as the clear witness of the Reformed confessions – from the Heidelberg Catechism to the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

What all this means is that, if you believe on the Lord Jesus, you can rest confidently in these promises of God, knowing that nothing can separate you from his love, not even death. What more can we say about the life of the soul after death? Calvin puts it this way: “To inquire beyond this is to plunge into the abyss of the Divine mysteries. It is enough to have learned what the Spirit, our best Teacher, deemed it sufficient to have taught.”

I hope you’ll continue with me next week, as take up the topic of the return of Christ.