***The Power of My Story***

**Summer 2022, Acts 24-26 September 4, 2022**

***“But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify   
to great and small alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses   
said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.*Acts 26:22-23**

**Paul tells his story again, and again, and again . . . .**

*10 When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: “I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. 11 You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12 My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. 13 And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. 14 However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, 15 and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. 16 So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*

*17 “After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. 18 I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. 19 But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. 20 Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin— 21 unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: ‘It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’ ”*

Acts 24, Pauls’ trial before Felix

*Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.”*

*So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: 2 “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.*

*4 “The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. 5 They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. 6 And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. 7 This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. 8 Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?*

Acts 26, Paul before Agrippa

1. Paul finds himself in places where he is asked (forced?!?) to share his testimony (see Acts 23:11)

2. In both these defenses, Paul argues that he has been serving God as an obedient Hebrew

**Governors and high priests and lawyers, O my!**

*Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. 2 When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: “We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. 3 Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. 4 But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly.*

*5 “We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect 6 and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. 8 By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him.”*

*9 The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.*

*10 When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: “I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense . . . .*

Acts 24

1. Tertullus is a very sleazy lawyer, ingratiating himself to Felix

2. Paul begins with the facts (twelve days isn’t enough time to “stir up a riot”) and then turns quickly to the part of his story that will get everyone’s attention: resurrection (see Acts 14:25)

3. Paul knows that the heart of his argument is that “the “Way” is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (see Acts 13:32)

**Paul lived out the spiritual discipline of waiting (Acts 24:27)**

13 *I am still confident of this:*

*I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*

14 *Wait for the Lord;*

*be strong and take heart*

*and wait for the Lord.*

Psalm 27 (see Isaiah 25; Acts 23:11; 24:27)

1. The two year wait mentioned in Acts 24:27 reveals both Felix’s character and Paul’s confidence in God’s promise

2. Doug’s assumption: Luke is with Paul because at the end of these two years events happen quickly to get Luke on the boat with Paul (see Acts 27:1-28:1)

3. Doug’s hypothesis: God is using this time to prepare the Judean church for the destruction of Jerusalem in just ten years

**What I learned from Paul’s story**

1. Don’t be afraid of resurrection

*10 When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: “I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. 11 You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12 My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. 13 And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. 14 However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, 15 and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. 16 So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*

Acts 24:10-16 (see Spurgeon’s sermon and Acts 26:8)

2. Make God the hero

*19 “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. 21 That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22 But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— 23 that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”*

Acts 26:19-23 (see also 24:14-16; 26:4-8)

3. Have the “how Jesus met me” story ready

*12 “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 14 We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’*

*15 “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’*

*“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. 16 ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’”*

Acts 26:12-18

**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has several sermons on texts in Acts which are available at [*https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/act.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/act.htm) His resurrection sermon on this text is at: <https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0066.htm>  
He also has interesting sermons at:  
Acts 13: <https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/3191.htm>  
and especially this sermon from Acts 2: [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2102.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2102.htm)Spurgeon has 45 more sermons on the resurrection. One of the best is from Philippians 3:10,   
[*https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-power-of-his-resurrection/#flipbook/*](https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-power-of-his-resurrection/%23flipbook/)

Tim Keller has a wonderful article at Christianity Today (April, 2021) on hope and resurrection at [*https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/timothy-keller-hope-times-fear-resurrection-better-world.html*](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/timothy-keller-hope-times-fear-resurrection-better-world.html) Keller also addresses the impact of the resurrection on his own diagnosis of pancreatic cancer in *The Atlantic* at [*https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/tim-keller-growing-my-faith-face-death/618219/*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/tim-keller-growing-my-faith-face-death/618219/)

For a resurrection primer check out Michael Horton’s “Risen Indeed” at [*https://whitehorseinn.org/resource-library/articles/risen-indeed-2/*](https://whitehorseinn.org/resource-library/articles/risen-indeed-2/)and “Can We Still Believe in Resurrection” at [*https://www.monergism.com/can-we-still-believe-resurrection*](https://www.monergism.com/can-we-still-believe-resurrection)

[*Biblecharts.org*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwivtPjcuvf5AhWkIzQIHY-9DaA4ChAWegQIBBAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.biblecharts.org%2Fapostlepaulcharts%2F10%2520-%2520Pauls%2520Two-Year%2520Imprisonment%2520in%2520Caesarea.pdf&usg=AOvVaw30ej5o2u5x3Nj1v31vp7Vu)has a good outline of Paul’s two years in Caesarea.

This Gospel Coalition “Why the Resurrection Changes Everything” article includes a survey of many of the key resurrection texts: [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-the-resurrection-changes-everything/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-the-resurrection-changes-everything/)

I found Persis Lorenti’s “The Resurrection and the Life” article on the Apostles’ Creed interesting at [*https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-apostles-creed-the-resurrection-the-life*](https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-apostles-creed-the-resurrection-the-life)

Keith Mathison has a good resurrection theology summary at [*https://www.ligonier.org/posts/resurrection-dead-unfolding-biblical-eschatology*](https://www.ligonier.org/posts/resurrection-dead-unfolding-biblical-eschatology)

D. A. Carson has a wonderful essay from Acts 17 on “Worldview Evangelism” at [*https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson*](https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson)

Deffinbaugh’s Acts messages are at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts) His sermon on Acts 23 is at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335*](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335)

Allistair Begg has a sermon in this text which focuses on the how God works through the circumstances of Paul’s life at [*https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/all-things-god-works/*](https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/all-things-god-works/)

For those who want to dig deeper into the worldview clash at Mars Hill, I recommend Andrew Klavan’s challenging “Speaking Truth into Modern Culture” at [*https://youtu.be/Cckiti7as44*](https://youtu.be/Cckiti7as44)

John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

Harry Boer, *That My House May Be Filled* (Eerdmans, 1957)



Table

Description automatically generated

# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

# Table Description automatically generated

# Who Was Herod? Wait… There Were How Many Herods?! - OverviewBible

**The Resurrection of the Dead**

February 17, 1856 by C. H. SPURGEON (1834-1892)  
at [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0066.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0066.htm)

"There shall be a resurrection of the dead, both the of the just and unjust."—Acts 24:15.

Reflecting the other day upon the sad state of the churches at the present moment, I was led to look back to apostolic times, and to consider wherein the preaching of the present day differed from the preaching of the apostles. I remarked the vast difference in their style from the set and formal oratory of the present age. I remarked that the apostles did not take a text when they preached, nor did they confine themselves to one subject, much less to any place of worship, but I find that they stood up in any place and declared from the fulness of their heart what they knew of Jesus Christ. But the main difference I observed was in the *subjects* of their preaching. Surprised I was when I discovered that the very staple of the preaching of the apostles was the resurrection of the dead. I found myself to have been preaching the doctrine of the grace of God, to have been upholding free election, to have been leading the people of God as well as I was enabled into the deep things of his word; but I was surprised to find that I had not been copying the apostolic fashion half as nearly as I might have done. The apostles when they preached always testified concerning the resurrection of Jesus, and the consequent resurrection of the dead. It appears that the Alpha and the Omega of their gospel was the testimony that Jesus Christ died and rose again from the dead according to the Scriptures. When they chose another apostle in the room of Judas, who had become apostate, Acts I.22, they said, "One must be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection;" so that the very office of an apostle was to be a witness of the resurrection. And well did they fulfil their office. When Peter stood up before the multitude, he declared unto them that "David spoke of the resurrection of Christ." When Peter and John were taken before the council, the great cause of their arrest was that the rulers were grieved :because they taught the people and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead." Acts iv. 2. When they were set free, after having been examined, it is said, "With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all." Acts iv. 33. It was this which stirred the curiosity of the Athenians when Paul preached among them, "They said, he seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods, because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection of the dead." And this moved the laughter of the Areopagites, for when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead, "Some mocked, and others said, we will hear thee again of this matter." Truly did Paul say, when he stood before the council of the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am called in question." And equally truly did he constantly assert, "IF Christ be not risen from the dead, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is vain, and ye are yet in your sins." The resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the righteous is a doctrine which we believe, but which we too seldom preach or care to read about. Though I have inquired of several booksellers for a book specially upon the subject of the resurrection, I have not yet been able to purchase one of any sort whatever; and when I turned to Dr. Owen's works, which are a most invaluable storehouse of divine knowledge, containing much that is valuable on almost every subject; I could find, even there, scarcely more than the slightest mention of the resurrection. It has been set down as a well known truth, and therefore has never been discussed. Heresies have not risen up respecting it; it would almost have been a mercy if there had been, for whenever a truth is contested by heretics, the orthodox fight strongly for it, and the pulpit resounds with it every day. I am persuaded, however, that there is much power in this doctrine; and if I preach it this morning you will see that God will own the apostolic preaching, and there will be conversions. I intend putting it to the test now, to see whether there be not something which we cannot perceive at present in the resurrection of the dead, which is capable of moving the hearts of men and bringing them into subjection to the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

There are very few Christians who believe the resurrection of the dead. You may be surprised to hear that, but I should not wonder if I discovered that you yourself have doubts on the subject. By the resurrection of the dead is meant something very different from the immortality of the soul: that, every Christian believes, and therein is only on a level with the heathen, who believes it too. The light of nature is sufficient to tell us that the soul is immortal, so that the infidel who doubts it is a worse fool even than a heathen, for he, before Revelation was given, had discovered it—there are some faint glimmerings in men of reason which teach that the soul is something so wonderful that it must endure forever. But the resurrection of the dead is quite another doctrine, dealing not with the soul, but with the body. The doctrine is that this actual body in which I now exist is to live with my soul; that not only is the "vital spark of heavenly flame" to burn in heaven, but the very censer in which the incense of my life doth smoke is holy unto the Lord, and is to be preserved for ever. The spirit, every one confesses, is eternal; but how many there are who deny that the bodies of men will actually start up from their graves at the great day? Many of you believe you will have a body in heaven, but you think it will be an airy fantastic body, instead of believing that it will be a body like to this—flesh and blood (although not the same kind of flesh, for all flesh is not the same flesh), a solid, substantial body, even such as we have here. And there are yet fewer of you who believe that the wicked will have bodies in hell; for it is gaining ground everywhere that there are to be no positive torments for the damned in hell to affect their bodies, but that it is to be metaphorical fire, metaphorical brimstone, metaphorical chains, metaphorical torture. But if ye were Christians as ye profess to be, ye would believe that every mortal man who ever existed shall not only live by the immortality of his soul, but his *body* shall live again, that the very flesh in which he now walks the earth is as eternal as the soul, and shall exist for ever. That is the peculiar doctrine of Christianity. The heathens never guessed or imagined such a thing; and consequently when Paul spoke of the resurrection of the dead, "Some mocked," which proves that they understood him to speak of the resurrection of the body, for they would not have mocked had he only spoken of the immortality of the soul, that having been already proclaimed by Plato and Socrates, and received with reverence.

We are now about to preach that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. We shall consider first *the resurrection of the just*; and secondly, *the resurrection of the unjust*.

I. There shall be A RESURRECTION OF THE JUST.

The first proof I will offer of this, is, that it has been the *constant and unvarying faith of the saints from the earliest periods of time*. Abraham believed the resurrection of the dead, for it is said in the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 11 verse 19, that he "accounted that God was able to raise up Isaac even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure." I have no doubt that Joseph believed in the resurrection, for he gave commandment concerning his bones; and surely he would not have been so careful of his body if he had not believed that it should be raised from the dead. The Patriarch Job was a firm believer in it, for he said in that oft repeated text, Job. xix. 25, 26: "For I know that my Redeemer liveth; and that he shall stand at the latter-day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." David believed it beyond the shadow of a doubt, for he sang of Christ, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption." Daniel believed it, for he said, that "Many who sleep in the dust shall rise, some to everlasting life, and some to everlasting contempt." Souls do not sleep in the dust; bodies do. It will do you good to turn to one or two passages and see what these holy men thought. For instance, in Isaiah, ch. xxvi. 19, you read: "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake, and sing, ye that dwell in the dust; for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead." We will offer no explanation. The text is positive and sure. Let another prophet speak—Hosea, ch. vi. verses 1 and 2: "Come and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight." Although this does not declare the resurrection, yet it uses it as a figure which it would not do were it not regarded as a settled truth. It is declared by Paul, also, in Hebrews xi. 35, that such was the constant faith of the martyrs; for he says, "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection." All those holy men and women, who, during the time of the Maccabees, stood fast by their faith, and endured the fire and sword, and tortures unutterable, believed in the resurrection, and that resurrection stimulated them to give their bodies to the flames, not caring even for death, but believing that thereby they should attain to a blessed resurrection. But our Saviour brought the resurrection to light in the most excellent manner, for he explicitly and frequently declared it. "Marvel not," said he, "at what I have said unto you. Behold the hour cometh when they that are in their graves shall hear the voice of God." "The hour is coming when he will call the dead to judgment, and they shall stand before his throne." Indeed, throughout his preaching, there was one continued flow of firm belief, and a public and positive declaration of the resurrection of the dead. I will not trouble you with any passages from the writings of the Apostles; they abound therewith. In fact, Holy Scripture is so full of this doctrine that I marvel, brethren, that we should so soon have departed from the stedfastness of our faith, and that it should be believed in many churches that the actual bodies of the saints will not live again, and especially that the bodies of the wicked will not have a future existence. We maintain as our text doth, that "there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust."

A second proof, we think, we find in the *translation of Enoch and Elijah to heaven*. We read of two men who went to heaven in their bodies. Enoch "was not; for God took him;" and Elijah was carried to heaven in a chariot of fire. Neither of these men left his ashes in the grave: neither left his body to be consumed by the worm, but both of them in their mortal frames (changed and glorified doubtless) ascended up on high. Now, those two were the pledge to us that all of us shall rise in the same manner. Would it be likely that two bright spirits would sit in heaven clothed in flesh, while the rest of us were unclothed? Would it be at all reasonable that Enoch and Elijah should be the only saints who should have their bodies in heaven, and that we should be there only in our souls—poor souls! longing to have our bodies again. No; our faith tells us that these two men having safely gone to heaven, as John Bunyan hath it, by a bridge that no one else trod, by which they were not under the necessity to wade the river, we shall also rise from the flood, and our flesh shall not for ever dwell with corruption.

There is a remarkable passage in Jude, where it speaks of Michael the Archangel contending with the devil about the body of Moses, and using no "railing accusation." Now, this refers to the great doctrine of *angels watching over the bones of the saints*. Certainly, it tells us that the body of Moses was watched over by a great archangel; the devil thought to disturb that body, but Michael contended with him about it. Now would there be a contention about that body if it had been of no value? Would Michael contend for that which was only to be the food of worms? Would he wrestle with the enemy for that which was to be scattered to the four winds of heaven, never to be united again into a new and goodlier fabric? No; assuredly not. From this we learn that an angel watches over every tomb. It is no fiction, when on the marble we carve the cherubs with their wings. There are cherubs with outstretched wings over the head of the grave-stones of all the righteous; ay, and where "the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep," in some nook o'ergrown by nettles, there an angel standeth night and day to watch each bone and guard each atom, that at the resurrection those bodies, with more glory than they had on earth, may start up to dwell for ever with the Lord. The guardianship of the bodies of the saints by angels proves that they shall rise again from the dead.

Yet, further, the *resurrections that have already taken place* give us hope and confidence that there shall be a resurrection of all saints. Do you not remember that it is written, when Jesus rose from the dead many of the saints that were in their graves arose, and came into the city, and appeared unto many? Have ye not heard that Lazarus, though he had been dead three days, came from the grave at the word of Jesus? Have you never read how the daughter of Jarius awoke from the sleep of death when he said, "*Talitha cumi*?" Have you never seen him at the gates of Nain, bidding that widow's son rise from the bier? Have you forgotten that Dorcas who made garments for the poor, sat up and saw Peter after she had been dead? And do you not remember Eutychus who fell from the third loft and was taken up dead, but who, at the prayer of Paul, was raised again? Or, does not your memory roll back to the time when hoary Elijah stretched himself upon the dead child, and the child breathed, and sneezed seven times, and his soul came to him? Or have you not read that when they buried a man, as soon as he touched the prophet's bones he rose again to life? These are pledges of the resurrection; a few specimens, a few chance gems flung into the world to tell us how full God's hand is of resurrection jewels. He hath given us proof that he is able to raise the dead by the resurrection of a few, who afterwards were seen on earth by infallible witnesses.

We must now, however, leave these things, and refer you once more to the Holy Spirit by way of confirming the doctrine that the saints' bodies shall rise again. The chapter in which you will find one great proof is in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, vi. 13: "Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body." *The body, then, is the Lord's*. Christ died not only to save my soul, but to save my body. It is said he "came to seek and to save that which was lost." When Adam sinned he lost his body, and he lost his soul too; he was a lost man, lost altogether. And when Christ came to save his people, he came to save their bodies and their souls. "Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord." Is this body for the Lord, and shall death devour it? Is this body for the Lord, and shall winds scatter its particles far away where they never shall discover their fellows? No! the body is for the Lord, and the Lord shall have it. "And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise us by his own power." Now look at the next verse: "Know ye not that *your bodies are the members of Christ*." Not merely is the soul a part of Christ—united to Christ, but the body is also. These hands, these feet, these eyes, are members of Christ, if I be a child of God. I am one with him, not merely as to my mind, but one with him as to this outward frame. The very body is taken into union. The golden chain which binds Christ to his people goes round the body and soul too. Did not the apostle say "they two shall be *one flesh*. This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church?"—Ephesians v. 31, 32. "They are one flesh;" and Christ's people are not only one with him in spirit, but they are "one flesh" too. The flesh of man is united with the flesh of the God-man; and our bodies are members of Jesus Christ. Well, while the head lives the body cannot die; and while Jesus lives the members cannot perish. Further the Apostle says, in the 19th verse, "Know yet not that your *body is the temple of the Holy Ghost* which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price." This body he says, is the temple of the Holy Ghost; and where the Holy Ghost dwells in a body, he not only sanctifies it, but renders it eternal. The temple of the Holy Ghost is as eternal as the Holy Ghost. You may demolish other temples and their gods too, but the Holy Ghost cannot die, nor "can his temple perish." Shall this body which has once had the Holy Ghost in it be always food for worms? Shall it never be seen more, but be like the dry bones of the valley? No; the dry bones shall live, and the temple of the Holy Ghost shall be built up again. Though the legs, the pillars, of that temple fall—though the eyes, the windows of it be darkened, and those that look out of them see no more, yet God shall re-build this fabric, re-light the eyes, and restore its pillars and regild it with beauty, yea, "this mortal shall put on immortality, and this corruptible put on incorruption.

But the master argument with which we close our proof is that *Christ rose from the dead*, and verily his people shall. The chapter which we read at the commencement of the service is proof to a demonstration that if Christ rose from the dead all his people must; that if there be no resurrection, then is Christ not risen. But I will not long dwell on this proof, because I know you all feel its power, and there is no need for me to bring it out clearly. As Christ actually rose from the dead—flesh and blood, so shall we. Christ was not a spirit when he rose from the dead; his body could be touched. Did not Thomas put his hand into his side? and did not Christ say, "Handle me, and see. A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have." And if we are to rise as Christ did—and we are taught so—then we shall rise in our bodies—not spirits, not fine aerial things, made of I know not what—some very refined and elastic substance; but "as the Lord our Saviour rose, so all his followers must." We shall rise in our flesh, "though all flesh is not the same flesh;" we shall rise in our bodies, though all bodies are not the same bodies; and we shall rise in glory, though all glories are not the same glories. "There is one flesh of man and another of beasts;" and there is one flesh of this body, and another flesh of the heavenly body. There is one body for the soul here, and another body for the spirit up there; and yet it shall be the same body that will rise again from the grave—the same I say in identity, though not in glory or in adaptation.

I come now to some practical thoughts from this doctrine before I go to the other. My brethren, what thoughts of comfort there are in this doctrine, that the dead shall rise again. Some of us have this week been standing by the grave; and one of our brethren, who long served his Master in our midst, was placed in the tomb. He was a man valiant for truth, indefatigable in labour, self-denying in duty, and always prepared to follow his Lord (Mr. Turner, of Lamb and Flag School), and to the utmost of his ability, serviceable to the church. Now, there were tears shed there: do you know what they were about? There was not a solitary tear shed about his soul. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was not required to give us comfort, for we knew it well, we were perfectly assured that he had ascended to heaven. The burial service used in the Church of England most wisely offers us no comfort concerning the soul of the departed believer, since that is in bliss, but it cheers us by reminding us of the promised resurrection for the body; and when I speak concerning the dead, it is not to give comfort as to the soul, but as to the body. And this doctrine of the resurrection has comfort for the mourners in regard to the buried mortality. You do not weep because your father, brother, wife, husband, has ascended to heaven—you would be cruel to weep about that. None of you weep because your dear mother is before the throne; but you weep because her body is in the grave, because those eyes can no more smile on you, because those hands cannot caress you, because those sweet lips cannot speak melodious notes of affection. You weep because the body is cold, and dead, and clay-like; for the soul you do not weep. But I have comfort for you. That very body will rise again; that eye will flash with genius again; that hand will be held out in affection once more. Believe me, I am speaking no fiction. That very hand, that positive hand, those cold, clay-like arms that hung down by the side and fell when you uplifted them, shall hold a harp one day; and those poor fingers, now icy and hard, shall be swept along the living strings of golden harps in heaven. Yea, you shall see that body once more.

"Their inbred sins require  
Their flesh to see the dust,  
But as the Lord their Saviour rose,  
So all his followers must."

Will not that remove your tears. "He is not dead, but sleepeth." He is not lost, he is "seed sown against harvest time to ripen." His body is resting a little while, bathing itself in spices, that it may be fit for the embraces of its Lord.

And here is comfort for you too, you poor sufferers, who suffer in your bodies. Some of you are almost martyrs with aches of one kind and another—lumbagoes, gouts, rheumatisms, and all sorts of sad afflictions that flesh is heir to. Scarcely a day passes but you are tormented with some suffering or other; and if you were silly enough to be always doctoring yourselves, you might always be having the doctor in your home. Here is comfort for you. That poor old rickety body of yours will live again without its pains, without its agonies; that poor shaky frame will be repaid all it has suffered. Ah! poor negro slave, every scar upon your back shall have a stripe of honor in heaven. Ah! poor martyr, the crackling of thy bones in the fire shall earn thee sonnets in glory; all thy sufferings shall be well repaid by the happiness thou shalt experience there. Don't fear to suffer in your frame, because your frame will one day share in your delights. Every nerve will thrill with delight, every muscle move with bliss; your eyes will flash with the fire of eternity; your heart will beat and pulsate with immortal blessedness; your frame shall be the channel of beatitude; the body which is now often a cup of wormwood will be a vessel of honey; this body which is often a comb out of which gall distilleth, shall be a honeycomb of blessedness to you. Comfort yourselves then, ye sufferers, weary languishers upon the bed: fear not, your bodies shall live.

But I want to draw a word of *instruction* from the text, concerning the doctrine of recognition. Many have puzzled themselves a to whether they will know their friends in heaven. Well now, if the bodies are to rise from the dead, I see no reason why we should not know them. I think I should know some of my brethren, even by their spirits, for I know their character so well, having talked with them of the things of Jesus, and being well acquainted with the most prominent parts of their character. But I shall see their bodies too. I always thought that a quietus to the question, which the wife of old John Ryland asked. "Do you think," she said, "you will know me in heaven?" "Why," said he, "I know you here; and do you think I shall be a bigger fool in heaven than I am on earth?" The question is beyond dispute. We shall live in heaven with bodies, and that decides the matter. We shall know each other in heaven; you may take that as a positive fact, and not mere fancy.

But now a word of *warning*, and then I have done with this part of the subject. If your bodies are to dwell in heaven, I beseech you take care of them. I do not mean, take care of what you eat and rink, and wherewithal you shall be clothed; but I mean, take care that you do not let your bodies be polluted by sin. If this throat is to warble for ever with songs of glory, let not words of lust defile it. If these eyes are to see the king in his beauty, even let this be your prayer, "Turn off my eyes from beholding vanities." If these hands are to hold a palm branch, oh, let them never take a bribe, let them never seek after evil. If these feet are to walk the golden streets, let them not be swift after mischief. If this tongue is for ever to talk of all he said and did, ah! let it not utter light and frothy things. And if this heart is to pulsate for ever with bliss, I beseech you give it not unto strangers; neither let it wander after evil. If this body is to live for ever, what care we ought to take of it; for our bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost, and they are members of the Lord Jesus.

Now, will you believe this doctrine or not? If you will not, you are excommunicate from the faith. This is the faith of the Gospel; and if you do not believe it you have not yet received the Gospel. "For if the dead rise not, then your faith is vain, and ye are yet in your sins." The dead in Christ *shall* rise, and they shall rise *first*.

II. But now we come to the RESURRECTION OF THE WICKED. Will the wicked rise too? Here is a point of controversy. I shall have some hard things to say now: I may detain you long, but I beg you, nevertheless, hearken to me. Yea, the wicked shall rise.

The first proof is given in the 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians, ch. v. 10. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." Now, since we are all to appear, the wicked must appear, and they will receive the deeds done in the body. Since the body sins, it is only natural that the body should be punished. It would be unjust to punish the soul and not the body, for the body has had as much to do with sin as ever the soul has had. But wherever I go now, I hear it said, "The ministers in old times were wont to say there was fire in hell for our bodies, but it is not so; it is metaphorical fire, fancied fire." Ah! it is not so. Ye shall receive the things done in your body. Though your souls shall be punished, your bodies will be punished as well. Ye who are sensual and devilish, do not care about your souls being punished, because you never think about your souls; but if I tell you of bodily punishment you will think of it far more. Christ may have said that the soul should be punished; but he far more frequently described the body in misery in order to impress his hearers, for he knew that they were sensual and devilish, and that nothing that did not affect the body would touch them in the least. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to receive the things done in the body according to what we have done, whether it be good or evil."

But this is not the only text to prove the doctrine, I will give you a better one—Matt. v. 29. "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."—not "thy whole *soul*," but "thy whole *body*." Man, this does not say that thy soul shall be in hell—that is affirmed many times—but it positively declares that *thy body* shall. That same body which is now standing in the aisle, or sitting in the pew, if thou diest without Christ, shall burn for ever in the flames of hell. It is not a fancy of man, but a truth that thy actual flesh and blood, and those very bones shall suffer: "thy whole body shall be cast into hell."

But lest that one proof should not suffice thee, hear another out of the same gospel—chapter 10:28. "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and *body* in hell." Hell will be the place for bodies as well as for souls. As I have remarked, wherever Christ speaks of hell and of the lost state of the wicked, he always speaks of their bodies; you scarcely find him saying anything about their souls. He says, "Where their worm dieth not," which is a figure of physical suffering—the worm torturing for ever the inmost heart, like a cancer within the very soul. He speaks of the "fire that never shall be quenched." Now, do not begin telling me that this is metaphorical fire: who cares for that? If a man were to threaten to give me a metaphorical blow on the head, I should care very little about it; he would be welcome to give me as many as he pleased. And what say the wicked? "We do not care about metaphorical fires." But they are *real*, sir—yes, as real as yourself. There is a real fire in hell, as truly as you have now a real body—a fire exactly like that which we have on earth in everything except this—that it will not consume, though it will torture you. You have seen the asbestos lying in the fire red hot, but when you take it out it is unconsumed. So your body will be prepared by God in such a way that it will burn for ever without being consumed; it will lie, not as you consider, in a metaphorical fire, but in actual flame. Did our Saviour mean fictions when he said he would cast body and soul into hell? What should there be a pit for if there were no bodies? Why fire, why chains, if there were to be no bodies? Can fire touch the soul? Can pits shut in spirits? Can chains fetter souls? No; pits and fire and chains are for bodies, and bodies shall be there. Thou wilt sleep in the dust a little while. When thou diest thy soul will be tormented alone—that will be a hell for it—but at the day of judgment thy body will join thy soul, and then thou wilt have twin hells, body and soul shall be together, each brimfull of pain, thy soul sweating in its inmost pore drops of blood, and thy body from head to foot suffused with agony; conscience, judgment, memory, all tortured, but more—thy head tormented with racking pains, thine eyes starting from their sockets with sights of blood and woe; thine ears tormented with

"Sullen moans and hollow groans.  
And shrieks of tortured ghosts."

Thine heart beating high with fever; thy pulse rattling at an enormous rate in agony; thy limbs crackling like the martyrs in the fire, and yet unburnt; thyself, put in a vessel of hot oil, pained, yet coming out undestroyed; all thy veins becoming a road for the hot feet of pain to travel on; every nerve a string on which the devil shall ever play his diabolical tune of Hell's Unutterable Lament; thy soul for ever and ever aching, and thy body palpitating in unison with thy soul. Fictions, sir! Again, I say, they are no fictions, and as God liveth, but solid, stern truth. If God be true, and this Bible be true, what I have said is the truth, and you will find it one day to be so.

But now I must have a little reasoning with the ungodly on one or two points. First, I will reason with such of you as are very proud of your comely bodies, and array yourselves in goodly ornaments, and make yourselves glorious in your apparel. There are some of you who have no time for prayer, but you have time enough for your toilet; you have no time for the prayer-meeting, but you have time enough to be brushing your hair to all eternity; you have no time to bend your knee, but plenty of time to make yourselves look smart and grand. Ah! fine lady, thou who takest care of thy goodly fashioned face, remember what was said by one of old when he held up the skull:

"Tell her, though she paint herself an inch thick,  
To this complexion she must come at last."

And something more than that: that fair face shall be scarred with the claws of fiends, and that fine body shall be only the medium for torment. Ah! dress thyself proud gentleman for the worm; anoint thyself for the crawling creatures of the grave; and worse, come thou to hell with powdered hair—a gentleman in hell; come thou down to the pit in goodly apparel; my lord, come there, to find yourself no higher than others, except it be higher in torture, and plunged deeper in flames. Ay, it ill becomes us to waste so much time upon the trifling things here, when there is so much to be done, and so little time for doing it, in the saving of men's souls. O God, our God, deliver men from feasting and pampering their bodies when they are only fattening them for the slaughter, and feeding them to be devoured in the flame.

Again, hear me when I say to you who are gratifying your lusts-do you know that those bodies, the lusts of which you gratify here, will be in hell, and that you will have the same lusts in hell that you have here? The debauchee hastes to indulge his body in what he desires—can he do that in hell? Can he find a place there where he shall gratify his lust and find indulgence for his foul desire? The drunkard here can pour down his throat the intoxicating and deadly draught; but where will he find the liquor to drink in hell, when his drunkenness will be as hot upon him as it is here! Ay, where will he find so much as a drop of water to cool his parched tongue? The man who loves gluttony here will be a glutton there; but where will be the food to satisfy him, when he may hold his finger up and see the loaves go away from him, and the fruits refuse his grasp. Oh! to have your passions and yet not to satisfy them! To shut a drunkard up in his cell, and give him nothing to drink! He would dash himself against the wall to get the liquor, but there is none for him. What wilt thou do in hell, O drunkard, with that thirst in thy throat, and having nought but flames to swallow, which increase thy woe? And what wilt thou do, O rake, when still thou wouldst be seducing others, but there are none with whom thou canst sin? Do I speak plainly? Did not Christ do so? If men will sin, they shall find men who are not ashamed to reprove them. Ah! to have a body in hell, with all its lusts, but not the power to satisfy them! How horrible that hell will be!

But hear me yet again. Oh! poor sinner, if I saw thee going into the inquisitor's den to be tormented, would I not beg of thee to stop ere thou shouldst put thy foot upon the threshold? And now I am talking to you of things that are real. If I were standing on a stage this morning, and were acting these things as fancies, I would make you weep: I would make the godly weep to think that so many should be damned, and I would make the ungodly weep to think that they should be damned. But when I speak of realities, they do not move you half as much as fictions would, and ye sit just as ye did ere the service had commenced. But hear me while I again affirm God's truth. I tell thee sinner, that those eyes that now look on lust shall look on miseries that shall vex and torment thee. Those ears which now thou lendest to hear the song of blasphemy, shall hear moans, and groans, and horrid sounds, such as only the damned know. That very throat down which thou pourest drink shall be filled with fire. Those very lips and arms of thine will be tortured all at once. Why, if thou hast a headache thou wilt run to thy physician; but what wilt thou do when thy head, and heart, and hands, and feet ache all at once? If thou hast but a pain in thy reins, thou wilt search out medicines to heal thee; but what wilt thou do when gout, and rheum, and vertigo, and all else that is vile attack thy body at once? How wilt thou bear thyself when thou shalt be loathsome with every kind of disease, leprous, palsied, black, rotten, thy bones aching, thy marrow quivering, every limb thou hast filled with pain; thy body a temple of demons, and a channel of miseries. And will ye march blindly on? As the ox goeth to the slaughter, and the sheep licketh the butcher's knife, so is it with many of you. Sirs, you are living without Christ, many of you; you are self-righteous and ungodly. One of you is going out this afternoon to take his day's pleasure; another is a fornicator in secret; another can cheat his neighbour; another can now and then curse God; another comes to this chapel, but in secret he is a drunkard; another prates about godliness, and God wots he is a wretched hypocrite. What will ye do in that day when ye stand before your Maker? It is a little thing to have your minister upbraid you know; it is a small thing to be judged of man's judgment; what will ye do when God shall thunder out not your accusation, but your condemnation, "Depart ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels?" Ah! sensual ones, I knew I should never move you will I spoke about torments for your souls. Do I move you now? Ah no! Many of you will go away and laugh, and call me, as I remember once being called before, "a hell-fire parson." Well, go; but you will see the hell-fire preacher one day in heaven, perhaps, and you yourselves will be cast out; and looking down thence with reproving glance, it may be, I shall remind you that you heard the word, and listened not to it. Ah! men, it is a light thing to hear it; it will be hard enough to bear it. You listen to me now unmoved; it will be harder work when death gets hold of you and you lie roasting in the fire. Now you despise Christ; you will not despise him them. Now ye can waste your Sabbaths; then ye would give a thousand worlds for a Sabbath if ye could but have it in hell. Now ye can scoff and jeer; there will be no scoffing or jeering then: you will be shrieking, howling, wailing for mercy; but—

"There are no acts of pardon passed  
In the cold grave to which we haste;  
But darkness, death, and long despair,  
Reign in eternal silence there."

O my hearers! the wrath to come! the wrath to come! the wrath to come. Who among you can dwell with devouring fire? Who among you can dwell with everlasting burnings? Can you, sir? can you? Can you abide the flame for ever? "Oh, no," sayest thou, "what can I do to be saved?" Hear thou what Christ hath to say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou *shalt* be saved." "He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned." "Come, now let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Provided by: Tony Capoccia  
Bible Bulletin Board  
Box 314 Columbus, New Jersey, USA, 08022  
Website: [www.biblebb.com](http://www.biblebb.com/)  
Email: [tony@biblebb.com](mailto:tony@biblebb.com)  
Online since 1986

# Growing My Faith in the Face of Death

I spent a lifetime counseling others before my diagnosis. Will I be able to take my own advice?

By [Timothy Keller](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/timothy-keller/) at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/tim-keller-growing-my-faith-face-death/618219/>

March 7, 2021

About the author: [Timothy Keller](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/timothy-keller/) is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, chairman of Redeemer City to City, and author of the forthcoming book [Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780525560791).

I have spent a good part of my life talking with people about the role of faith in the face of imminent death. Since I became an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1975, I have sat at countless bedsides, and occasionally even watched someone take their final breath. I recently wrote a small book, [On Death](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780143135371), relating a lot of what I say to people in such times. But when, a little more than a month after that book was published, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, I was still caught unprepared.

On the way home from a conference of Asian Christians in Kuala Lumpur in February 2020, I developed an intestinal infection. A scan at the hospital showed what looked like enlarged lymph nodes in my abdomen: No cause for concern, but come back in three months just to check. My book was published. And then, while all of us in New York City were trying to protect ourselves from COVID-19, I learned that I already had an agent of death growing inside me.

I spent a few harrowing minutes looking online at the dire survival statistics for pancreatic cancer, and caught a glimpse of On Death on a table nearby. I didn’t dare open it to read what I’d written.

My wife, Kathy, and I spent much time in tears and disbelief. We were both turning 70, but felt strong, clear-minded, and capable of nearly all the things we have done for the past 50 years. “I thought we’d feel a lot older when we got to this age,” Kathy said. We had plenty of plans and lots of comforts, especially our children and grandchildren. We expected some illness to come and take us when we felt really old. But not now, not yet. This couldn’t be; what was God doing to us? The Bible, and especially the Psalms, gave voice to our feelings: “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?” “Wake up, O Lord. Why are you sleeping?” “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

A significant number of believers in God find their faith shaken or destroyed when they learn that they will die at a time and in a way that seems unfair to them. Before my diagnosis, I had seen this in people of many faiths. One woman with cancer told me years ago, “I’m not a believer anymore—that doesn’t work for me. I can’t believe in a personal God who would do something like this to me.” Cancer killed her God.

What would happen to me? I felt like a surgeon who was suddenly on the operating table. Would I be able to take my own advice?

One of the first things I learned was that religious faith does not automatically provide solace in times of crisis. A belief in God and an afterlife does not become spontaneously comforting and existentially strengthening. Despite my rational, conscious acknowledgment that I would die someday, the shattering reality of a fatal diagnosis provoked a remarkably strong psychological denial of mortality. Instead of acting on Dylan Thomas’s advice to “rage, rage against the dying of the light,” I found myself thinking, What? No! I can’t die. That happens to others, but not to me. When I said these outrageous words out loud, I realized that this delusion had been the actual operating principle of my heart.

The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker argued that the denial of death dominates our culture, but even if he was right that modern life has heightened this denial, it has always been with us. As the 16th-century Protestant theologian John Calvin wrote, “We undertake all things as if we were establishing immortality for ourselves on earth. If we see a dead body, we may philosophize briefly about the fleeting nature of life, but the moment we turn away from the sight the thought of our own perpetuity remains fixed in our minds.” Death is an abstraction to us, something technically true but unimaginable as a personal reality.

For the same reason, our beliefs about God and an afterlife, if we have them, are often abstractions as well. If we don’t accept the reality of death, we don’t need these beliefs to be anything other than mental assents. A feigned battle in a play or a movie requires only stage props. But as death, the last enemy, became real to my heart, I realized that my beliefs would have to become just as real to my heart, or I wouldn’t be able to get through the day. Theoretical ideas about God’s love and the future resurrection had to become life-gripping truths, or be discarded as useless.

I’ve watched many others partake of this denial of death and then struggle when their convictions evaporate, and not just among the religious. I spent time as a pastor with sick and dying people whose religious faith was nominal or nonexistent. Many had a set of beliefs about the universe, even if they went largely unacknowledged—that the material world came into being on its own and that there is no supernatural world we go to after death. Death, in this view, is simply nonexistence, and therefore, as the writer Julian Barnes has argued, nothing to be frightened of. These ideas are items of faith that can’t be proved, and people use them as Barnes does, to stave off fear of death. But I’ve found that nonreligious people who think such secular beliefs will be comforting often find that they crumple when confronted by the real thing.

So when the certainty of your mortality and death finally breaks through, is there a way to face it without debilitating fear? Is there a way to spend the time you have left growing into greater grace, love, and wisdom? I believe there is, but it requires both intellectual and emotional engagement: head work and heart work.

I use the terms head and heart to mean reasoning and feeling, adapting to the modern view that these two things are independent faculties. The Hebrew scriptures, however, see the heart as the seat of the mind, will, and emotions. Proverbs says, “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” In other words, rational conviction and experience might change my mind, but the shift would not be complete until it took root in my heart. And so I set out to reexamine my convictions and to strengthen my faith, so that it might prove more than a match for death.

Paul Brand, an orthopedic surgeon, spent the first part of his medical career in India and the last part of his career in the U.S. “In the United States … I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs,” he wrote in his recent [memoir](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Gift_of_Pain/BF3sDwAAQBAJ). “Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it.”

Why is it that people in prosperous, modern societies seem to struggle so much with the existence of evil, suffering, and death? In his book [A Secular Age](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780674986916), the philosopher Charles Taylor wrote that while humans have always struggled with the ways and justice of God, until quite recently no one had concluded that suffering made the existence of God implausible. For millennia, people held a strong belief in their own inadequacy or sinfulness, and did not hold the modern assumption that we all deserve a comfortable life. Moreover, Taylor has argued, we have become so confident in our powers of logic that if we cannot imagine any good reason that suffering exists, we assume there can’t be one.

But if there is a God great enough to merit your anger over the suffering you witness or endure, then there is a God great enough to have reasons for allowing it that you can’t detect. It is not logical to believe in an infinite God and still be convinced that you can tally the sums of good and evil as he does, or to grow angry that he doesn’t always see things your way. Taylor’s point is that people say their suffering makes faith in God impossible—but it is in fact their overconfidence in themselves and their abilities that sets them up for anger, fear, and confusion.

When I got my cancer diagnosis, I had to look not only at my professed beliefs, which align with historical Protestant orthodoxy, but also at my actual understanding of God. Had it been shaped by my culture? Had I been slipping unconsciously into the supposition that God lived for me rather than I for him, that life should go well for me, that I knew better than God does how things should go? The answer was yes—to some degree. I found that to embrace God’s greatness, to say “Thy will be done,” was painful at first and then, perhaps counterintuitively, profoundly liberating. To assume that God is as small and finite as we are may feel freeing—but it offers no remedy for anger.

Another area of head work for me had to do with Jesus’s resurrection. Ironically, I had already begun working on a book about Easter. Before cancer, the resurrection had been a mostly theoretical issue for me—but not now. I’m familiar with the common charge that any belief in an afterlife is mere wish fulfillment without grounding in fact—and that belief in Jesus is in the same category as faith in the Flying Spaghetti Monster. But over the past 20 years, I’ve been drawn to the work of the British biblical scholar N. T. Wright, who mounts a historical case for Jesus’s bodily resurrection.

I returned to his material now, with greater skepticism than I had previously applied. I didn’t want to be taken in. But as I reread his arguments, they seemed even more formidable and fair to me than they had in the past. They gave me a place to get my footing. Still, I needed more than mental assent to believe in the resurrection.

The heart work came in as I struggled to bridge the gap between an abstract belief and one that touches the imagination. As the early American philosopher Jonathan Edwards argued, it is one thing to believe with certainty that honey is sweet, perhaps through the universal testimony of trusted people, but it is another to actually taste the sweetness of honey. The sense of the honey’s sweetness on the tongue brings a fuller knowledge of honey than any rational deduction. In the same way, it is one thing to believe in a God who has attributes such as love, power, and wisdom; it is another to sense the reality of that God in your heart. The Bible is filled with sensory language. We are not only to believe that God is good but also to “taste” his goodness, the psalmist tells us; not just to believe that God is glorious and powerful but also to “see” it with “the eyes of the heart,” it says in Ephesians.

On December 6, 1273, Thomas Aquinas stopped writing his monumental [Summa Theologiae](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780870612107). When asked why by his friend Reginald, he replied that he had had a beatific experience of God that made all his theology “seem like straw” by comparison. That was no repudiation of his theology, but Thomas had seen the difference between the map of God and God himself, and a very great difference it was. While I cannot claim that any of my experiences of God in the past several months have been “beatific,” they have been deeper and sweeter than I have known before.

My path to this has involved three disciplines.

The first was to immerse myself in the Psalms to be sure that I wasn’t encountering a God I had made up myself. Any God I make up will be less troubling and offensive, to be sure, but then how can such a God contradict me when my heart says that there’s no hope, or that I’m worthless? The Psalms show me a God maddening in his complexity, but this difficult deity comes across as a real being, not one any human would have conjured. Through the Psalms, I grew in confidence that I was before “him with whom we have to do.”

The second discipline was something that earlier writers like Edwards called spiritual “soliloquy.” You see it in Psalms 42 and 103, where the psalmist says, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” and “Bless the Lord, O my soul. And forget not all his benefits.” The authors are addressing neither God nor their readers but their own souls, their selves. They are not so much listening to their hearts as talking to them. They are interrogating them and reminding them about God. They are taking truths about God and pressing them down deep into their hearts until they catch fire there.

I had to look hard at my deepest trusts, my strongest loves and fears, and bring them into contact with God. Sometimes—not always, or even usually—this leads, as the poet George Herbert wrote, to “a kind of tune … softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss, exalted manna … heaven in the ordinary.” But even though most days’ hour of Bible reading, meditation, soliloquy, and prayer doesn’t yield this kind of music, the reality of God and his promises grew on me. My imagination became more able to visualize the resurrection and rest my heart in it.

Most particularly for me as a Christian, Jesus’s costly love, death, and resurrection had become not just something I believed and filed away, but a hope that sustained me all day. I pray this prayer daily. Occasionally it electrifies, but ultimately it always calms:

And as I lay down in sleep and rose this morning only by your grace, keep me in the joyful, lively remembrance that whatever happens, I will someday know my final rising, because Jesus Christ lay down in death for me, and rose for my justification.

As this spiritual reality grows, what are the effects on how I live? One of the most difficult results to explain is what happened to my joys and fears. Since my diagnosis, Kathy and I have come to see that the more we tried to make a heaven out of this world—the more we grounded our comfort and security in it—the less we were able to enjoy it.

Kathy finds deep consolation and rest in the familiar, comforting places where we vacation. Some of them are shacks with bare light bulbs on wires, but they are her Sehnsucht locations—the spaces for which she longs. My pseudo-salvations are professional goals and accomplishments—another book, a new ministry project, another milestone at the church. For these reasons we found that when we got to the end of a vacation at the beach, our responses were both opposite and yet strangely the same.

Kathy would begin to mourn the need to depart almost as soon as she arrived, which made it impossible for her to fully enjoy herself. She would fantasize about handcuffing herself to the porch railing and refusing to budge. I, however, would always chafe and be eager to get back to work. I spent much of the time at the beach brainstorming and writing out plans. Neither of us learned to savor the moment, and so we never came home refreshed.

A short, green Jedi Master’s words applied to me perfectly: “All his life has he looked away to the future, the horizon. Never his mind on where he was.” Kathy and I should have known better. We did know better. When we turn good things into ultimate things, when we make them our greatest consolations and loves, they will necessarily disappoint us bitterly. “Thou hast made us for thyself,” Augustine said in his most famous sentence, “and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” The 18th-century hymn writer John Newton depicted God as saying to the human soul, “These inward trials I employ from pride and self to set thee free, and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou would find thine all in me.”

To our surprise and encouragement, Kathy and I have discovered that the less we attempt to make this world into a heaven, the more we are able to enjoy it.

No longer are we burdening it with demands impossible for it to fulfill. We have found that the simplest things—from sun on the water and flowers in the vase to our own embraces, sex, and conversation—bring more joy than ever. This has taken us by surprise.

This change was not an overnight revolution. As God’s reality dawns more on my heart, slowly and painfully and through many tears, the simplest pleasures of this world have become sources of daily happiness. It is only as I have become, for lack of a better term, more heavenly minded that I can see the material world for the astonishingly good divine gift that it is.

I can sincerely say, without any sentimentality or exaggeration, that I’ve never been happier in my life, that I’ve never had more days filled with comfort. But it is equally true that I’ve never had so many days of grief. One of our dearest friends lost her husband to cancer six years ago. Even now, she says, she might seem fine, and then out of nowhere some reminder or thought will sideswipe her and cripple her with sorrow.

Yes. But I have come to be grateful for those sideswipes, because they remind me to reorient myself to the convictions of my head and the processes of my heart. When I take time to remember how to deal with my fears and savor my joys, the consolations are stronger and sweeter than ever.