

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.1

Opening Comments

Welcome to Term Three of the 2026 Mercy Seminar! The theme for this year is the meaning of life in light of death. In Term One, we looked at the way this question is addressed in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In Term Two, we examined the way death and life are understood in the Jewish and Muslim traditions. This term, we are looking at the question of death and life in the Christian and Spiritualist traditions, beginning with the writings of the apostle Paul, and then proceeding to the Gospel of John, Athanasius of Alexandria, and John Calvin. We will then look at the great Spiritualist writer Emanuel Swedenborg, and conclude with the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo, in a chapter in which he addresses the unexpected death of a dearly beloved friend.

Paul was born around 4 CE in the city of Tarsus, in present-day Turkey. He tells us quite a bit about his background in the passage in our readings from his letter to the Philippians. He tells us he was “⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” This echoes what he wrote to the Galatians in an earlier epistle: “¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” As a Pharisee, Paul accepted the development of the Jewish understanding of resurrection that arose around 167 BCE, during the persecution of the Jews under the Greek Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes, which is recorded in the book of Daniel. “² Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” The Sadducees, on the other hand, rejected this teaching, as it is not found in the teaching of Moses. In the first two passages for tonight, we see that both Jesus and Paul agree with the teaching of the Pharisees on the resurrection of the dead, over against the objections of the Sadducees. The rabbis follow the Pharisees in upholding the hope of resurrection, and the medieval theologian Maimonides makes it one of the articles of faith for the Jewish community, which it remains to this day.

Paul does not tell us why he was a zealous persecutor of the church. He tells us that he once knew Christ from a human point of view, which may mean that he saw him as a failed Messianic pretender who was justly crucified. All of this changed, however, when, as he tells us, God was pleased to reveal his Son to or in him, so that he might preach him to the Gentiles. We learn what this revelation entails in the passage from 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul tells us that the risen Christ appeared to him: “⁷ Then he

appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.” Paul bases his claim to be an apostle on this fact, even though he was not one of the apostles who followed Jesus from his baptism by John until his death and resurrection. “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). In this encounter with the risen Christ, Paul comes to see Jesus from a divine point of view, for if God raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus was the righteous one even when he was crucified as a sinner, meaning that he was crucified as an expiating sacrifice for our sins. More importantly, by raising Jesus from the dead, God reveals that Jesus is the one in whom God will defeat death, to which all human beings have been subjected since Adam. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:21-22).

This means that the resurrection of the dead spoken of by Daniel actually began when God raised Jesus, which is why Paul thought that the general resurrection of the dead would arrive before he died. We can now understand why the Thessalonians were so distressed when some believers in their community died before Jesus returned, for they thought it meant that they would not share in the resurrection. Hence Paul assures them:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died (1 Thess. 4:13-15).

It is clear in his letter to the Corinthians that Paul still expected to be alive when Christ returned to bestow imperishability and immortality on those destined to die. As we heard in our lectio divina tonight:

⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’ (1 Cor. 15:51-54).

Paul also tells us that we can only hope to be raised with Christ if we belong to him, which means that we must suffer and die with him. As Paul says of himself: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10-11). Or as he tells the Corinthians: “For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11). Moreover, fellowship with Christ is made possible by the Spirit by which God raised Jesus from the dead. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). This is why Paul calls the Spirit the “down payment” that God gives us to assure us of our own resurrection (2 Cor. 5:5).

Many of the Gentiles to whom Paul preached this message had great difficulty accepting his claim that God would raise the dead. Indeed, some among the Corinthians denied that there would be a resurrection of the body, most likely because they were influenced by the Greek teaching of the immortality of the soul. If the soul is immortal, then why would it want the body back after the body dies? After all, the body is the source of great suffering in this life, and Greek philosophers like Plato described the body as a “prison house” that keeps the soul from being fully united to God. Paul is familiar with the Greek understanding of the immortal soul, as it had made inroads into the Jewish community during the Hellenistic period, and continues to be upheld through the rabbinic period, and we shall see echoes of it in Paul’s letters. It would have made his gospel much more palatable to his Gentile audience if Paul had just dropped the claim that the body would be raised and insisted instead on the victory over death in the human soul and spirit. However, Paul would not and could not do so, since the risen Christ had appeared to him in a glorified embodied form, revealing to him the future state of all who belong to Christ. “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil 3:21). Most importantly, God’s very identity came to be defined by this event, so that the God who had been known as the one who delivered Israel from the house of bondage in Egypt is now represented as being the God who raised Jesus from the dead. If the dead are not raised, then this is not true.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised (1 Cor. 15:12-15).

However, the resurrection of the body is not simply the resuscitation of a corpse, as in the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. Paul insists on the radical discontinuity of the resurrection with embodied existence as we know it. He says very straightforwardly, “What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:50). The discontinuity of the resurrection is made emphatically clear in the death of the body. “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (1 Cor. 15:35-36). Because of the reality of death, the resurrection body is qualitatively different from the body that dies. “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42-44). On the other hand, the resurrection of the dead is meaningless if it is not this perishable body that puts on imperishability, and this mortal body that puts on immortality, as Paul saw in his encounter with the risen Christ. “For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’” (1 Cor. 15:53-54).

Finally, Paul thinks that it is possible to know Christ, and to be with Christ, before the resurrection of those who are in Christ. When he writes to the Philippians, he is not sure whether he will be alive to see them again. But he does not speak of hoping to see Jesus when he returns, but rather speaks of the desirability of departing to be with Christ. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (Phil. 1:21-24). In his letter to the Corinthians, he makes it clear that our present embodied existence keeps us from being present with Christ. “So we are always confident, even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6-8). However, in the same passage, he reiterates his sincere expectation that both he and the Corinthians will soon be raised with Christ. “But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—‘I believed, and so I spoke’—we also believe, and therefore we also speak, because we know that the one who raised Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us with you in his presence” (2 Cor. 4:13-14). So Paul’s desire to depart the body to be with Christ does not mean that he does not expect to be raised with Christ when he comes again in the very near future. Both expectations must be held together for him.