

Uninterrupted Union with Christ: John Gill's Hope at his Daughter's Funeral

JOHN GILL

John Gill is Associate Professor of Christian Studies at California Baptist University, Riverside, California. He earned his MDiv from Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary and his PhD in Church History from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. His publications include "Wang Ming-Dao (1900-1991): Faithful amid Political Coercion" (*12 Faithful Men: Portraits of Courageous Endurance in Pastoral Ministry* [Baker, 2018]), "Calling, Caring, and Connecting: Burnout in Christian Ministry," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 23 no. 2 (2020), and "Stumbling on the Path of the Apostles" (*Christianity Today*, 2020). Dr. Gill also serves as one of the pastors at Redeemer Baptist Church in Riverside, California. He is married to Jin, and they have three children: Ethan, Ezra, and Elias.

INTRODUCTION

The reality of death, especially for a loved one, demands the intersection of theology and pastoral care in the life of the church. John Gill (1697-1771), the renowned English Baptist, was no stranger to preaching funeral sermons or to their pastoral significance. This was especially true of Gill's funeral sermon, given on June 4, 1738, for his teenage daughter, Elizabeth (March 14, 1725/26–May 30, 1738), which was understandably of much personal import: "You must permit me, this afternoon, to preach rather to myself and family than to you."¹ His sermon was on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus,

will God bring with him.” From this passage, Gill shared with believers the hope that Christian union with Christ was a union that was uninterrupted by even death. He sought to establish this thesis by presenting a biblical understanding of death regarding the human body and soul, a Christocentric hope for all true disciples, and how these theological truths should shape human sorrow and grief when loved ones die.

TO BE ASLEEP IN CHRIST

“The representation the Apostle gives of the state and condition of the pious dead, that they are *asleep*; and *asleep in Jesus*.”² Gill focuses on the metaphor of sleep as a vehicle for conveying a biblical understanding of human death in the passage. He notes its use in a variety of cultural contexts (among the “*Hebrews, Chaldeans, and Syrians*”) and, more importantly, its regular use throughout the Scriptures.³ Therefore, Paul’s use is not an innovation in a geographical or biblical sense. Yet, the seeming ubiquity of the metaphor does not detract from the significance of how it is used in the Scriptures and what the Scriptures have to say about death as it relates to the human body and soul. Gill’s description of how this metaphor is used in Scripture includes a discussion of how the human body relates to the soul upon death, what sleep implies and does not imply about death, which aspect of human nature sleep describes upon human death, and death as a temporary state.

Gill finds sleep to be an apt metaphor of death for multiple reasons. First, sleep and death both similarly render the person senseless.⁴ Second, just as all people require sleep, the expectation of death is universally shared. Death as the curse of original sin for all humanity is in mind here.⁵ Yet, while Gill recognizes that death applies to all of humanity, both believers and unbelievers, his interpretation of how sleep is analogous to death is different for believers and unbelievers. He cites Daniel 12:2 (“And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt”), which describes death for both “good and bad” as sleep and distinguishes what each party will awaken to.⁶ The sleep that Christians experience is different, more fitting to the metaphor, the greater focus in Scripture.

Third, how Christians sleep differently from unbelievers begins with an emphasis on how sleep is *rest*. Just as the sleeping person is resting, “the grave is also a resting place for the saints.”⁷ What are the Christian dead resting

from? They find rest from the effects of sin in the world and within themselves. Examples of the former could be injustice, oppression, violence, and offences, whereas the latter might include personal ailments and struggles (e.g., physical, emotional). Who are the Christian dead are resting in? "The pious dead are not only asleep, but asleep in Jesus."⁸

Gill also addresses how Christian sleep defies the seeming finality of death, examining the immortality of the soul, the state of the human body and soul in the intermediate state, and how Christian death is only temporary. He defends ongoing human existence after death: "We may be assured that they *are*, that they are in being, that they do exist; for, though they are gone from us, they are somewhere else. We are not to consider them as non-entities, as annihilated, as reduced to nothing, because they are departed from us."⁹ This is what Scripture means when it describes the dead as *not being* in passages such as Jeremiah 31:15 (*they were not*) and Genesis 5:24 (*he was not*).¹⁰ Rather than suggesting a type of annihilation, the biblical text is merely describing their absence on earth. The physical body dies, is buried, and breaks down, but "there's a wide difference between returning to the dust and being reduced to nothing."¹¹ Gill's main rationale for disregarding an annihilation of the physical body is resurrection of the body at Jesus Christ's second coming. The resurrected body is not created from nothing but truly resurrects the old body, even from dust, into "a better frame" that is an "everlasting habitation."¹² Therefore, in a sense, even the physical body continues to exist beyond death.

Unlike the body, the human soul, which is separated from the body at death, does not die but continues in active existence. Unlike the body, which remains in the earth, the soul of the believer is "lodged in the embraces of Christ, and continue with him in the heavenly paradise, till the last trumpet sounds, and the dead arise."¹³ Therefore, the body experiences *sleep*, as it is temporarily senseless in the ground, while the Christian's soul resides with Christ. Regarding the soul's state after death, Gill takes issue with any notion of "soul sleep," or that the soul does not have continued active existence when parted from the body. First, the immaterial soul neither dies nor sleeps. Gill holds that actual sleep only characterizes material bodies. Even in life, one is given glimpses of the soul's continual consciousness in dreams while the person sleeps. Not only is the soul not senseless in the intermediate state, but it becomes "more active in spiritual services" when separated from

the body, which is “often an hindrance to it in the present state of things.”¹⁴ Rather than implying a gnostic diminishing of the material body’s worth, Gill is taking into account the corruption of original sin in “the present state” of living Christians. He also likens the intermediate state of the Christian’s soul to angels who give worship to the Lord without ceasing.¹⁵ The most compelling evidence is argued directly from Scripture, namely in the tension between the apostle Paul’s desire to live in fruitful labor for Christ and to be in Christ’s presence upon death: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better” (Phil 1:23). To be “with Christ” is not a joining into a senseless state. Gill also contends that a transition from active labor for Christ in this present life into a senseless state of soul sleep would not be “far better,” as Paul declares in the biblical text. In this case, the use of sleep to signify death requires qualification, because sleep can only describe the state of the believer’s body and not his or her soul.¹⁶

A final way that sleep is analogous to death is that both are temporary, the basis for this being the resurrection of the body at Jesus Christ’s second coming. “[S]uch as are asleep, they don’t sleep always, they awake again out of sleep: So they that *sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake*. Particularly those that sleep in Jesus, when he shall call unto them, they shall hear his voice, ... they shall then rise immediately with the utmost pleasure, in perfect conformity to the image of Christ.”¹⁷ Gill’s treatment of the resurrection does not attempt to be comprehensive, but he disagrees with a particular translation of 1 Thessalonians 3:14 (“them also which sleep *through* Jesus”) chosen by some, such as Henry Hammond (1605–1650), indicating that this passage only included those who had been martyred on behalf of the Gospel instead of all Christians.¹⁸ If this is the case, only Christians who have been martyred would join in this “first resurrection” from 1 Thessalonians 4:16, “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and *the dead in Christ shall rise first*.” In contrast, Gill argues for the expression in 3:14 to be “them also which sleep *in* Jesus,” which would include all who have died in Christ, including Christian martyrs and Christians who died peacefully.¹⁹ The theological significance for Gill is made evident: to be asleep *in* Christ or to live *in* Christ means no less than to be *united with* Christ, and it is this union with Christ that is the basis for the Christocentric hope that all true disciples have, even in death.

CHRISTOCENTRIC HOPE FOR ALL TRUE DISCIPLES

Immortality of the soul or mere resurrection of the body are not the sufficient to instill the kind of hope that Christians should have when faced with the inevitability of death. It is union with Christ that Christian hope is built upon. Gill's treatment of this begins with addressing union as God's work done in love. He distinguishes between a secret union with Christ and an open union with Christ, secret union being eternal election ("chosen us in him before the foundation of the world," Eph. 1:4) and open union referring to conversion or the manifestation of one's secret union.²⁰ The former is accomplished outside of time, while the latter appears within time, and both are accomplished by God. Gill writes, "Those whom Christ betroths to himself, takes into a near conjugal union and relation to himself, he betroths forever."²¹ People live in time and experience birth, conversion, and death at certain points in time, but the elect are united with Christ outside of time, because of God's love for them: "Love is the bond of this union."²²

Union with Christ as a loving work of God is especially significant in establishing the permanence of a union that cannot be defeated by death, which is the occasion of this sermon. Appealing to the binding power of God's love for his people described in Romans 8:35–39, Gill argues that God's love prevails even against death. "Now this union is not dissolved by death; such as are once in Christ, are always so; they that are in him while living, are in him when they die; and will be found in him in the resurrection morn, and day of judgment."²³ The body is separated from the body when one dies, with the body in a senseless state and the soul consciously in Christ's presence. While the union between body and soul are broken at death, death cannot break the union between the Christian, both body and soul, and Christ.

When describing the body's continued union with Christ, Gill points to how the Christian's body, as well as the soul, are purchased by Christ's blood, are incorporated as members of Christ's body (the Church), and are "the temples of the Holy Ghost."²⁴ These redemptive realities exist for the living and the dead, for both the body and the soul. Union with Christ is not dependent upon the activity of the person's body, but upon Christ's "care, and guardianship" over it.²⁵ As such, "Christ won't lose his purchase nor any part of his fulness; nor will the Spirit of God lose his dwelling place."²⁶ This assurance of being kept by God is why the Christian dead are truly at

rest. This clearly opposes any inclination toward a gnostic view of human nature in which the material body is diminished in worth. Gill also maintains a holistic sense of humanity as the *imago dei*, with both the body and soul having worth and being redeemed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Though the state of the person changes from life to death to resurrection, there is constancy in one's union with Christ. This is the reassurance Gill seeks to give to both himself and others. If one is in Christ, "nothing is more certain than this, that to whom God gives grace he also gives glory."²⁷

Having already noted Gill's rejection of soul sleep, and his conviction of the Christian soul's increase in "spiritual services" in the intermediate state, the soul's position is bound to one's union with Christ. Their "souls are in a state of happiness," for they are with the souls of other believers, are surrounded by angels, and most importantly, "they are in the presence of, and enjoy uninterrupted communion with God, Father, Son, and Spirit, in whose presence is fulness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures for evermore."²⁸ Just as the resting body of the believer is assured continued union with Christ, the Christian's soul is also assured to be in the presence of the triune God. Again, if one is in Christ, "nothing is more certain than this, that to whom God gives grace he also gives glory."²⁹ Therefore, there is no such thing as salvation in Christ that will only be partially fulfilled, which leads to Gill's treatment of the resurrection.

The certainty of the resurrection is based upon Jesus Christ's resurrection and the believer's union with Christ. Working from Romans 11:15–16, Gill emphasizes the effect Christ has on those who are united with him.³⁰ Jesus is the "first fruits" and "root" who is holy and who makes whoever is part of him holy, because they are united with Christ. Gill puts the accomplishing of this transforming work completely upon Christ, who "represents, sanctifies, and endures" those who are united with him.³¹ Thus, because Christ resurrected from the dead, those who are in Christ will also resurrect from the dead. Pointing to Revelation 20:6, union with Christ even shapes when one is resurrected when Christ returns.³² It is true that both believers and unbelievers will be resurrected, but Gill's premillennial views surface in seeing the resurrection of the just preceding the resurrection of the unjust by one thousand years.³³ Union with Christ also determines what the dead are resurrected to. For example, Gill cites Psalm 49:14 with clear references to 1 Corinthians 6:2 and Revelation 2:26: "the righteous one, who are found in

Christ, and his righteousness, shall have the dominion over the morning,"³⁴ God's salvific work is assured to be completed in Christ's second coming and the resurrection of the body. This assurance naturally leads Gill to conclude that all Christians, the living and the dead, will be joined together at Christ's return.

GRIEVING WITH HOPE

In seeking to convey a biblical understanding of death regarding the human body and soul and a Christocentric hope for all true disciples throughout his funeral sermon, Gill naturally emphasized how these theological truths should shape the sorrow and grief he and others were experiencing at the loss of his daughter. More specifically, he wanted to show how these theological truths could and should comfort believers in the midst of mourning the dead. First, Gill bases hope on our union with Christ. Second, he explains how Christians can possibly find assurance in the dead's standing before God. Third, it is human to grieve. Finally, Christian grief must not conform to worldly grief.

"[Death] is the wages of sin," and, therefore, death is a universally shared reality, "yet to them that die in the Lord it is a blessing; the curse is removed from their death, the sting is taken out of it by Christ; so he gives his beloved sheep in a different manner from the rest of men."³⁵ In Christ, Christians experience death differently, just as they experience life, beforehand, and resurrection, afterward, differently. Though death seems final, Christians should be hopeful because their union with Christ is not threatened by anything including death. Another reason union with Christ gives Christians a basis for hope even in death is because the dead are not suffering but are at rest. "Such a view of the state of the dead serves to render death very easy and familiar to us, and to take off the horror, and those frightful apprehensions which are often entertained concerning it."³⁶ Their sleep is rest, and their souls are in "the embraces of Christ, and continue with him in the heavenly paradise," in undiminished communion with the Lord.³⁷ Finally, union with Christ leads to certainty in the resurrection of the body just as Jesus Christ was resurrected. The knowledge that death is temporary and that there is a reunion to look forward to should bring extra comfort for those who miss the dead. "Our friends are gone but a little before us; we are hastening after

them as fast as the wings of time can carry us.”³⁸

While one might have assurance in one’s own union with Christ, how can one have any confidence in another’s union with Christ? How can one know if a loved one now *sleeps* in Christ? Gill response is, “Did they live in Christ?”³⁹ The answer to this question is pivotal in the kind of comfort that can be afforded of those the dead had left behind. Paul’s words in Romans 14:7–8 are instructive, according to Gill, “For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” The life lived in Christ has continuity from life to death. As such, conversion (i.e. open election) and its fruit bring a sense of assurance in a person’s union with Christ to fellow believers. This life lived for Christ also bring assurance when death comes, because the Christian life has continuity from life to death through union with Christ.⁴⁰ It was common to share details of the dead’s life to assuage the fears and sorrows of grieving loved ones. One example of the pastoral significance of this effort is found in Gill’s funeral sermon for Benjamin Seward in 1753. Even though Gill was merely acquainted with him, he strived to highlight reasons to hope for his union with Christ: “I am not so well qualified to give him his true portrait, as a gentleman and a Christian; however, what from my own observation, and the information of others, I’ll give you the best account of him I can.”⁴¹ While Gill’s grief kept him from including details of Elizabeth’s life, an account of her life was added to the published sermon.

Alongside the previous points establishing hope and assurance, Gill reassures that grief and sorrow are not only naturally human responses to losing loved ones, but that there is also biblical warrant for such grief. He warns against any notion that would deny human grief, “establish a stoical apathy, a stupid indolence, and brutal insensibility” as unbiblical.⁴² He proceeds to pull examples of grief from Scripture that appear to stand as models of grief. Such examples include when Abraham’s mourning and weeping after Sarah died, when Joseph mourning for seven days after Jacob died, when Israel wept for Moses for thirty days, when David mourned for Saul and Jonathan who died during the battle against the Philistines, and also when he mourned for Abner whom Joab murdered.⁴³ The NT also gives us examples of this when Christians buried the martyred Stephen, and Paul’s expectation of intense sorrow should Epaphroditus have died from illness.⁴⁴ The most

significant and likely most reassuring model is when Jesus Christ wept for Lazarus.⁴⁵ While even a righteous person is not guaranteed to be a model of righteousness, Jesus was without sin. These proof texts of grieving serve mainly to guard against a misunderstanding of Scripture to demand a type of stoicism when faced with grief.

On one hand, Gill defended Christian freedom to grieve when loved ones died. On the other hand, he also warns Christians against mourning “even as others which have no hope,” the *others* being unbelievers.⁴⁶ The Scriptures set the standard for appropriate ways to mourn, as seen above, and for inappropriate ways to mourn. The OT includes the following restriction, “Ye *are* the children of the LORD your God: ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead.”⁴⁷ Gill also notes common transcultural mourning practices, such as “mourning women” as mentioned in Jeremiah 9:17, as an example of excessive mourning.⁴⁸ Other characteristics of excessive mourning that Christians should avoid would be “covering themselves with mud, dirt, and filth, smiting their heads, breasts, and thighs,” that even some unbelievers would reject.⁴⁹ The underlying cause for this type of mourning is that their mourning is without the knowledge and hope of the resurrection. This is why Christians should avoid excessive mourning, for it seems to contradict the knowledge and hope they have in the resurrection. Therefore, they “should not sorrow as they did, and mourn over our friends as though they were lost, and never to be enjoyed more; this is to act contrary to our character as Christians, to the doctrine of Christianity, to the Gospel of Christ, in which life and immortality are brought to light, and set in the clearest view before us.”⁵⁰ Gill’s warning is not simply against excessive emotionality but against behavior that at least appears to deny one’s union with Christ. In fact, Gill’s own emotions kept him from continuing his sermon as planned: “My affections will not permit me to give you an account of the ground and reason of this hope, this faith, this confidence [in Elizabeth’s life].”⁵¹

CONCLUSION

Gill explores Paul’s use of *sleep* as a metaphor for death, building upon the conviction that the elect are united with Christ holistically, both body and soul. It is this union with Christ that gives true Christians hope in light of

the apparent finality of death: “that in a little time we shall meet together again, and never part.”⁵² The pastoral thrust of the sermon fully surfaces at this point. It is because Christians, both living and *asleep*, share the same hope in Christ, that the grief of the living can and must be shaped by the knowledge that the dead are in an “uninterrupted union” with the triune God and will return with Christ.

-
1. John Gill, *A Sermon occasioned by the death of Elizabeth Gill, who departed this life May 30, 1738, having entered the 13th year of her age. Preached June 4th. To which is added, an account of some of her choice experiences*, London: Aaron Ward (1738), 3.
 2. *Ibid.*, 5.
 3. *Ibid.*, 6.
 4. *Ibid.*, 8.
 5. *Ibid.*, 10–11. Gill cites Job 30:23 (“For I know *that* thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living”) and Rom 6:23 (“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”).
 6. *Ibid.*, 6.
 7. *Ibid.*, 9.
 8. *Ibid.*, 11.
 9. *Ibid.*, 16. Gill’s brief denial of annihilationism is likely in reference to Socinianism, drawing from Abraham Calov’s work *Socinismus Profligatus: Hoc est, Errorum Socinianorum Luculenta Confutatio* (Wittenberg, 1652) as cited in Gill, *The Doctrine of the Resurrection, stated and defended; in two sermons preached at a lecture in Lime-Street* 2nd ed., London: G. Keith (1750): 56n.
 10. *Ibid.* “Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not” (Jer 31:15, emphasis added). “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (Gen 5:24).
 11. *Ibid.*, 17.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *Ibid.*, 7.
 15. *Ibid.* See Rev 4:8, “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”
 16. *Ibid.*, 8. Gill’s arguments against soul sleep and for the ongoing activity of the Christian soul are presented in more detail in *The Doctrine of the Resurrection, stated and defended; in two sermons preached at a lecture in Lime-Street* 2nd ed., London: G. Keith (1750): 49–55.
 17. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
 18. *Ibid.*, 11. Hammond writes, “that the men here peculiarly spoken of are those that die in the cause, or for the faith of Christ ... those that sleep through Jesus, that is, by occasion of him, or for Christianity sake.” Henry Hammond, *A paraphrase and annotations upon all the books of the New Testament briefly explaining all the difficult places thereof*, London: Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Davis (1659): 671–72.
 19. *Ibid.*, 12.
 20. *Ibid.*, 14.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. *Ibid.*, 17.
 25. *Ibid.*, 15.
 26. *Ibid.*, 17.

27. Ibid., 23.
28. Ibid., 22.
29. Ibid., 23.
30. "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? For if the first fruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches" (Rom 11:15-16).
31. Gill, *Death of Elizabeth Gill*, 15.
32. "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Rev 20:6).
33. Gill, *Death of Elizabeth Gill*, 20.
34. Ibid., 21. "Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling" (Ps 49:14); "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?" (1 Cor 6:2); "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations" (Rev 2:26).
35. Ibid., 11.
36. Ibid., 18.
37. Ibid., 17.
38. Ibid., 23.
39. Ibid., 20.
40. Ibid.
41. John Gill, *A Sermon occasioned by the death of Benjamin Seward, Esq; Who departed this life March 30th, having enter'd the forty-ninth year of his age. Preached, April 8th, 1753*, London: G. Keith (1753): 32-33.
42. Gill, *Death of Elizabeth Gill*, 24.
43. Gen 23:2; 50:10; Deut 4:8; 2 Sam 1:17; 3:32.
44. Acts 8:2; Phil 2:27.
45. John 11:35.
46. Gill, *Death of Elizabeth Gill*, 24. 1 Thess 4:13.
47. Ibid., 25. Deut 14:1.
48. Ibid. Gill notes Roman, Greek, and Israelite examples.
49. Ibid., 26. Gill notes Cicero and Seneca as examples of "wiser sort of the heathens."
50. Ibid., 27.
51. Ibid., 32.
52. Ibid., 23.