

Dying in the Face of Life

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

A man died without leaving a will. The attorney asked his wife, “What were his last words to you?” She was reluctant to answer. He explained that without a will, they were at a loss to determine her husband’s last wishes, but the widow kept insisting that it was just between the two of them. The persistent attorney kept on and on, almost pleading, “I implore you to answer. What was the last thing your husband said to you before he died?”

She finally broke and said, “Okay, I’ll tell you. The last thing he ever said to me was, ‘You don’t scare me. You couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn with that old gun.’”

Whether driven by a great cause or just stupidity, people who face death courageously captivate us. “*Living in the face of death*” is a phrase I run across from time to time, typically referring to seminars sponsored by well-meaning health professionals or advocates for the aging. The title almost implies that people tend not to consider death much until they have no other choice. I do not believe that Christians should be morbidly preoccupied with death, but it seems that there is a significant emphasis in the Bible on the brevity of life and on the wisdom of living with eternity in sight. God does not seem to want our eternal sense of accountability to be a last-minute thing.

Far from a morbid theme, one of the sweetest blessings God gives us is that small glimpse of what lies beyond death’s door. In view of what lies ahead, we are called at every stage of our Christian experience to prepare for eternity by “laying up treasure in heaven” (Matthew 6:20), by setting our “minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2) and by “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

Rather than a good attitude about “living in the face of death”, it seems to that the proper take for a people of faith is a good attitude about “dying in the face of life.” This morning, we look to one of the most comforting of all such teachings about what lies ahead as Paul expresses his hope in a glorified and perfect resurrection body, which will replace this present body that is subject to the wearing down that is typical of everything in this beautiful, but fallen creation. Unlike the various notions of afterlife presented by Hollywood, wishful thinkers or world religions, what we await is a matter of divine revelation that is intended to encourage us. It begins with ...

I. The Promise of God (1-3)

¹Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ²Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, ³because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.

A. Paul Voices a New Perspective on an Old Hope

Paul had written about bodily resurrection before. 1 Thessalonians was penned about six years before 2 Corinthians. Paul wrote that letter to encourage believers who were beginning to fret over the destiny of loved ones that had preceded them in death. For the first few years after Jesus promised to return for His people, believers always thought in terms of seeing His return in their own lifetimes. But as the years passed, saints were dying and Jesus had not come back.

About seventeen years after Jesus ascended, Paul wrote to answer the questions of the Thessalonian church regarding their dead loved ones. Would they see Jesus, or would they miss out on the establishment of Christ's kingdom? We cannot miss the comfort in Paul's words:

¹⁵According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. – 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

Lovely thoughts, but did you hear all that "we" talk? Paul's words comforted his readers, but as for himself, he was still planning to hang around for the Second Coming. 1 Corinthians was written only about a year before 2 Corinthians, but even then, he was still planning on hanging around. Regarding his own resurrection body, he wrote: "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed ..." (1 Corinthians 15:51). You may think that's a slogan from a sign on the door of the church nursery, but what it really means is that while we will not all die physically, we will all be transformed and given new and immortal bodies.

Something happened. 2 Corinthians marks the earliest point that Paul began to reflect on the likelihood that he would not be alive when Jesus returned. Perhaps, a "deadly peril" he wrote about in chapter one had affected his outlook. Of course, that was not the first time he had been in danger, but something had caused him to begin numbering himself with the other group of "we": "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed ...".

So, how badly shaken was Paul by this new perspective that he might not be alive at the return of Jesus? All that had changed was the vantage point. "So what? I might not be among those who are "alive and remain". It doesn't matter. If I die, I enter the presence of God. And, when it comes time for old bodies to be clothed with immortal new ones, my group gets to go first!"

B. Every Detail of Paul's Hope Encourages Us

Paul speaks of this body as a "tent", which is by its very nature a temporary shelter. The word "destroyed" was the typical word for dismantling a tent. But, the body we shall receive at the resurrection of the dead is described as a "house", a conspicuous way of describing its permanence. It is not subject to the limitations and decay of the human body. It will be immortal.

Paul speaks of our groaning, which implies a longing for the final fulfillment of God's purposes. But, to long for what lies ahead is not to despise the present. This life is a remarkable gift. The human body is an amazing creation. From a prison cell, Paul wrote: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). He judged that while life in the presence of Christ was the best of all things, this life still provided joyous opportunities to touch others on behalf of Christ.

Mysteries abound regarding the end of the age, but the Bible is quite clear that it will involve resurrected bodies. Some professed believers in Corinth interpreted Jesus' promise of resurrection and new life to be a metaphor for embracing the Christian philosophy, but such life did not transcend physical death. They still held to their old pagan notions that eternity would be occupied by disembodied spirits. Paul did speak of resurrection and new life at baptism, *but* he meant more than just a new outlook followed by an ethereal after-life. To Paul, eternal life began when one came to Christ, ultimately requiring an eternal body when the earthly one wore out.

Paul wrote to this error in 1 *Corinthians* 15. He explained that a blanket denial of bodily resurrection discounts even Jesus' Resurrection, when, in fact, it is Jesus' Resurrection that assures us that God will raise us. In our text, Paul still had in his sights this false notion about disembodied spirits floating about in eternity when he added, "...because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked." If being clothed means having a body, then obviously, being naked means not having one. We will not be naked in death. We will be clothed in a new body.

All this speaks to the fact that proper Christian doctrine about afterlife runs head-on into this age's notion that all religions lead to God. Not only is Jesus the only road to eternal life, but most religions do not even agree with Christians as to what eternal life looks like. Some look for Nirvana, an absorption of the soul into the divine after all one's reincarnation cycles have run their course. In Nirvana, pain is gone. Desire is gone. Even individual consciousness is gone.

Some people may still look forward to a disembodied state which to them is a kind of freedom. I suppose some people's lives are so miserable that their idea of heaven means to cease to exist at all. But, the Christian hope of eternal life is life in the eternal kingdom of God marked by a consciousness that we are alive, that we are known and that we dwell in a resurrected body.

II. The Pledge of the Holy Spirit (4, 5)

...⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.⁵ Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

A. God Created Us to Enjoy Eternal Life

Three friends arrived at the Pearly Gates at the same time. As part of their orientation to heaven, Saint Peter asked what kind of eulogies they would most like to hear at their funerals.

"I would like to hear them say I was a great doctor and a good family man," said one.

"I would like to hear that as a schoolteacher I made a difference in many lives," chimed in the second.

Replied the third, "I'd just like to hear them say, 'Hey, look! He's moving!'"

The world's take on death finds us fighting it even from Heaven's gates. Paul describes us as groaning in this world for the next. We know in part, but there is much more to be known. We know much about the character of God, but we do not know Him as we will one day know Him. We are forgiven the guilt of our sins because of the atoning work of Jesus, but we still struggle with the practice of sin. We were created to walk with God as freely as Adam walked with God in Eden. Jesus has broken the curse, but we still wait for the final reclamation of all things.

B. The Holy Spirit Is God's Down-Payment on Our Renovation

In His sovereign grace, God sent a Savior who took our sins to the cross. In His sovereign wisdom, He knew that our faith could never hold out without some sort of encouragement from above. In His sovereign kindness, He sent a Comforter in the third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, Who is called a deposit that guarantees what is to come. As a guarantee, the Holy Spirit is an assurance of a divine nature with us. There is a new strength that fills out our meager strength. He brings us comfort, encouragement and direction through the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit is God's deposit of Himself by which His work of transforming us has already begun. He is working in us now, so we can trust that He will finish the job. He awakens new affections in us. He gives us nobler desires than we ever had before. He teaches us things that are contrary to our fallen natures such as how to forgive, how to edify others and how to love them selflessly. He produces fruit in our lives that reflect Jesus' character - "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." We do not possess any of these virtues perfectly, but each new evidence of them assures us that God is making us new in all ways.

III. The Presence of Christ (6-10)

A. Paul Faces the Future with Unabashed Good Cheer verses 6-9

⁶Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷We live by faith, not by sight. ⁸We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

"Confident" inadequately communicates a word that appears in verses 6 and 8. Confidence in an outcome can be stoic or ecstatic. No one word quite communicates the idea that this confidence about the future manifests itself in an upbeat spirit in the present. This is a "cheerful confidence". Waiting for our blessed hope cannot mean joylessness in the now. Paul contrasts being "home in the body" with "being home with the Lord." Neither is an awful thing. Being with the Lord is the best place we can be, but God also fills our lives with joy when we are at home in the body.

"Away from the Lord" sounds unpleasant, but Paul clarifies himself in the next sentence, "We live by faith, not by sight." We live before the face of God now, but that is nothing like seeing Him face to face one day. What is living by faith and not sight? There was a time when I yearned for more phenomenal experiences with God than I do today. Was that because of great faith? I probably thought so then, but today I know that it was precisely the opposite. It was my immaturity and faithlessness that demanded the big experiences from God - that He manifest Himself to me - a demand that sight makes, but that faith would never make.

Once a person is sure of what he's hoping for and certain of what he does not see, he will find himself being much more content to just try to "please the Lord", and that was exactly Paul's goal. Faith seizes hold of heaven, and that is the only state of heart and mind that will ever give us any real degree of rest in this world. We know that this world is not the last word on anything, so we can be truly content in this world. We can settle down and simply live to please God.

When heaven is no longer central to our thinking, values break down quickly. If talk of being pilgrims on the way to heaven begins to sound hokey to modern believers, values capsize. Money becomes god. Preparing for eternity seems less urgent than preparing for retirement. Christians will profess to serve God, but their allegiance will clearly be toward Mammon. We need to keep the promise of heaven before us. That alone keeps earth in proper perspective.

B. But First, There is that Troublesome (??) Issue of Judgment *verse 10*

...¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

On the heels of all this pleasant language about the future, rhetoric of judgment abruptly appears. Whether this is one final judgment of everyone or one judgment out of two or three is debated among Christians. I can make an argument for as many as four judgments, but I can also see Christ tying everything up in one judgment. I can also see how too much preoccupation with end-time speculation tends to distract Christians from other endeavors that are more urgent.

The fact that this judgment addresses works complicates matters. Why does God look at works when it is faith that saves? We know that real faith produces some works, but is there a scale of good works that God follows for passing out rewards and prizes? I don't mean to belittle anyone's deeply-held ideas about the end-time, but I must point out that whatever it looks like, Paul did not fear it. He welcomed it. To him, judgment was simply the first phase of the presence of Jesus. So, it seems to me that the thing to do is to look at Paul and figure out what he knew so that we too can face the end of time, and even the judgment, with Paul's cheerful confidence.

There were "judgment seats" all over the world. Some were occupied by Roman magistrates, others by local leaders. Paul had stood before such judgment seats and would stand before many more. The judges he faced were sinful, bigoted and agenda-driven men. Given the clueless judgments to which Paul had been subjected, far from being troubled at the thought of standing before Christ, I suspect Paul was exhilarated. What did he have to fear after all? He believed that a glorified body awaited him. He believed that he was created for God's fellowship, so, in cheerful confidence, he had made pleasing Jesus his life's goal.

Make pleasing Jesus your chief desire, and thoughts of judgment will not frighten you either. Love God with all you are. Love others as yourself, and the presence of Christ will hold no terror. Let's close with the words of the Apostle John regarding this same moment in time:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.¹⁷ In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. – 1 John 4:16-18

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