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 2 Corinthians 5:1-10  
 Eighth Message  
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# THE NEW COVENANT: HOW TO SUSTAIN SUFFERING SAINTS

Our offertory song, *It Is Not Death to Die*,<sup>1</sup> is a very appropriate introduction to our study this morning. Here are a couple of stanzas from the original hymn, written in the 1800s:

It is not death to die,  
 To leave this weary road,  
 And midst the brotherhood on high  
 To be at home with God.  
 Jesus, Thou Prince of life,  
 Thy chosen cannot die;  
 Like Thee, they conquer in the strife  
 To reign with Thee on high.

Society today is insulated and isolated from death and dying. The subject seems so unpleasant that we don't want to think about it or talk about. We do everything in our power to stay young, look young and avoid death. But death is a reality of our human existence and, as we have seen in the past two weeks, an essential ingredient in understanding the new covenant. In these studies we have been learning that in the new covenant, everything comes from God and nothing comes from us. But this does not mean that life will be easy or that we will avoid suffering and death.

Several truths have emerged in our studies in the past two weeks:

We have the treasure of Christ in an "earthen vessel," i.e., a body that is subject to decay, fear, anxiety, pain, suffering and aging. We are distressed, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. When the clay pot of our body is cracked open and shattered because of suffering, however, the power of God is released. God's strength is perfected in our weakness. We always carry around the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might be manifest in our mortal flesh. In God's economy, life—resurrection life—comes out of death. Resurrection power always works best in a graveyard. As with Jesus, so with us.

We also have seen that even though our outer man is decaying, our inner man is made new day by day. Despite the circumstances that break and batter us, God is at work, transforming us into the likeness of his Son. And not only that, suffering produces an eternal weight of glory. In comparison to this future glory, the sufferings of this age are nothing—hardly more than a scratch. It is hard to imagine that this is true, because the pressures and stresses we face seem to be such a heavy weight. But Paul understands them to be light and momentary compared to the future glory.

What this means is that suffering and affliction, the things that burden and break us, are not obstacles or impediments or barriers to our life in Christ and the advancement of the kingdom of God. Rather, they are the means through which God accomplishes his eternal purposes and works for good in and through our life. Life is not a problem to be solved; it is the process through which God transforms all of our struggles into a glorious work of art. Paul's afflictions did not invalidate his ministry, as many claimed, but were the vehicle to a greater end. And so it is with us.

This means that in order for the inner man to grow and for afflictions to produce an eternal weight of glory, we must believe that God is sovereign and that he orchestrates the difficulties we face. If we do not believe this, then we are in no man's land. We are lost. We have no confidence or foundation. We look only at the things that are seen. We must accept the fact that all the struggles we face come through the hands of a loving Father, who promises to be with us and to finish what he has begun in our lives. Then we are looking at the things that are not seen.

Therefore, we can live with a great sense of hope, despite what is happening to the outer man, even in the face of death. The hope of the new covenant sustains suffering and weary saints. This morning we want to look more closely at the object of our hope and how that affects our life today.

## I. The Object of Hope: A Heavenly Home

**For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. (2 Cor 5:1-5)**

Three principles emerge from these verses. First, no matter what happens on earth, we have a sure and certain future, we have a heavenly dwelling. Paul is referring to two different bodies, our current body and our future body. Our current body is an earthly tent: it is temporary and destructible. This is the outer man of 4:16 that decays. No matter what we try to do, the earthly body is vulnerable to accidental or intentional

death, to sickness and the process of aging. I understand this very well, having just turned 60. I have had numerous surgeries on my knees and shoulder. It seems as if I am at the doctor's office every other week. My eyesight is declining and I can't hear—and it isn't going to get better.

The destruction of the earthly tent is no problem to Paul because he knows that what awaits him is a heavenly home. He is referring to our resurrected bodies, to our future home as a building or house. The resurrected body is not a temporary dwelling, like a tent. It is not made with human hands and earthly resources. Rather, it is a permanent building made by God that lasts forever.

Paul also refers to the resurrected body as clothing. It is like a garment that we put on. All of us are careful with how we dress and how we appear. We have our favorite outfits. The idea of putting on new clothing is a very apt image for us when we contemplate our eternal dwelling. We don't want to be unclothed but clothed.

The idea of nakedness, of being unclothed, refers to the time after death, before the general resurrection, when we don't have a body, when we are a disembodied soul or spirit for a period of time. There was a great deal of concern in the early church about what would happen if people died before the Lord returned and what would happen when he came again. Paul wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 15 and also 1 Thessalonians. He makes it clear in the next verses that when we die, we will go to be with the Lord, but we won't receive our resurrected body until Jesus appears.

The main point is that we do not have to worry about the destruction of our earthly tent. The object of our hope is a heavenly home, a new body that is totally redeemed, imperishable and indestructible. With the new body there is no need for a warranty, no doctors' appointments, remedies to physical and emotional disorders, no more one-a-day vitamins, no need to brush our teeth twice a day, no need to shave, no need for any organ transplants, no more death or sorrow.

As a young woman, Joni Earackson broke her neck in a diving accident. She prayed for healing but it didn't come. Finally, she accepted the fact that God could use her the way she was and manifest his glory through her weakness. She learned to paint, holding the paintbrush between her teeth. One of her sketches depicts a wheelchair that is empty except for a little sign that says "For Sale." She has put her hope on a new, resurrected body.

The second principle is that while we are in this earthly tent, our present experience is "groaning." In verse 2, the word is qualified and defined by the word "longing." Groaning is an inner craving, an anticipation of what lies ahead. Groaning is a hopeful longing, like that of a woman in childbirth. Despite the pain, she anticipates the joy of seeing her child. In verse 4, groaning is qualified by the word "being burdened" or "weighed down." This is the experience of suffering. Paul too felt this, as he points out in chapter 1, speaking of affliction:

"we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life" (1:8).

Not only do we groan, the apostle says in Romans 8 that the whole creation groans:

**For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. (Rom 8:22-23).**

All of creation, including us, is waiting in eager anticipation for the new heavens and new earth. Heaven isn't "up there" someplace. When we die, we don't go up to heaven and float around on a cloud, playing a harp. Rather, when Jesus comes, Jerusalem will descend from heaven, the earth will be transformed and we will be resurrected with a new, redeemed and imperishable body.

The third principle is that our deepest desire, heaven, is given to us by God. The reason we are groaning is because we want to be swallowed up by life. We want to be engulfed by immortality. And the one who has given us this longing is God himself, who has given us the Spirit as a foretaste of our future inheritance.

Most of us have a deep desire for home, a permanent home where all our relationships are healthy and all our holidays are joyous. We want a home where we express love freely and feel acceptance completely. This is why we spend so much time trying to connect with mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. The pain of our earthly home and the burden of suffering and death heighten our desire for heaven. Our struggles awaken the longing and desire we have for home and at the same time help us see that this longing will not be satisfied by our earthly home. We are longing for heaven.

Why do we feel these things? God has set eternity in our hearts; it is in our DNA. Every human being, believer and unbeliever alike, has a desire for immortality, for something more. Tennyson put this so beautifully in his classic poem *In Memoriam*, written for a dear friend who had died:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust  
Thou madest man, he knows not why  
He thinks he was not made to die  
And Thou hast made him: Thou art just.

We know deep within that we were created for something special, something permanent. While we are on earth, we have a foretaste of our future glory because God has poured out the Holy Spirit into our hearts. The Spirit is a pledge or down payment on our heavenly home. The Spirit is what gives us comfort and assurance. The Spirit allows us to connect with God through prayer, and when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit groans for us. The Spirit allows us to hear God's voice calling us his beloved sons and daughters. The Spirit gives us

a taste of what it will be like to dwell in our heavenly home with the Father.

This quote from C.S. Lewis is very insightful:

Most of us find it very difficult to want Heaven at all—except insofar as “Heaven” means meeting again our friends who have died. One reason for this difficulty is that we have not been trained: our whole education tends to fix our minds on this world. Another reason is that when the real want for Heaven is present in us, we do not recognize it. Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us.<sup>2</sup>

What is the object of your hope? What are you hoping for that will satisfy and fulfill your deepest longings? Marriage, children, retirement, a bigger house, good health, a fresh start in a new job, a new city or a new church? From an early age we are always striving for something that will be the solution. We want to make the all-star team, go to the college of our choice, get a great job, get married, have children, want the children to leave home, plan our retirement. We are always looking for the next thing to satisfy our longing. But I would propose that if your hope is on anything other than heaven, you will be tragically disappointed, because God has created you for something so much more. C.S. Lewis put it this way: “Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.”

## II. The Results of Hope: Confidence and Obedience

What do these truths mean for us in the present? Does a certain future mean that the present doesn't matter? Does it mean that we can drop out of school, quit our job or give ourselves over to sin? No, far from it. The apostle gives two results that affect the present.

**Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (2:6-8)**

The first result is to always be of good courage. Paul repeats the word twice for emphasis. Being of good courage is

the positive antithesis of “not losing heart” that he referred to twice in chapter 4, verses 1 and 16. To be a good courage means to take heart, to be confident and bold.

Paul knows that while he is on earth, in an earthly tent, he is absent from the Lord. He would rather be absent from the body and at home with the Lord. He talks about this in Philippians: “to die is gain ... having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (1:21, 23). But while he is here on earth he will be confident and not walk by sight but by faith. He will look at the things that are unseen, not the things he can see. The implication here is that if we die before the Lord returns, we will still be with him even though we do not yet have our resurrected bodies.

If our hope is firmly fixed on the eternal things, then we can live with confidence despite the tensions, pressures and discomforts of this life. We believe that God is using our afflictions to produce an eternal weight of glory, that he has an eternal home prepared for us in heaven, and that our inner man is being renewed day by day. Our moods and attitudes are not based on what we see. Our confidence comes from what we cannot see. Our lives are consistent and stable, not fluctuating according to our circumstances. Our groans don't have to lead to fear and passivity and loss of hope. We can live boldly by faith.

Secondly, we strive to please God.

**Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2:9-10)**

We make it our goal to please God whether we are home with the Lord or absent from the Lord. The word for “have as our ambition” or “make it our goal” literally means to “love honor.” Our goal is an honorable life, a life well lived. The motivation for this is appearing before the judgment seat of Christ. The judgment seat, or bema, was the place where the Roman governor sat and judged cases brought before him. This would take place in public. In Corinth, one can still see among the ruins the bema seat that was located there. In fact, Paul stood before this judgment seat when he appeared before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18).

Paul is saying that there is a judgment day coming when we all must appear before Christ and give an account of what we have done. He says that we receive back in our body in proportion to that. We don't know what that will look like, but that is what will happen. Salvation is by faith in Christ, completely. However, judgment is by works. Paul isn't saying that we should seek to please the Lord in order to acquire merits or favors. And he isn't saying that we are justified by faith but secure the outcome of our salvation through works. Nothing can add to what Christ has done. Rather, he sees this future judgment as a time of evaluation, when we evaluate the good works that God has prepared for us to walk in.

A time of judgment is consistent with the character of God. God is a forgiving God, but he is not morally indifferent. He is a loving God, but he will not tolerate evil in the new creation. Paul is saying that what we do in this present life is important and we are responsible for our behavior. The circumstances of our life can never justify evil and sin. We don't live aimless and indifferent lives. Our desire should be to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." We have already entered into the kingdom of God and we are to live now as is fitting for that kingdom. We sell out to living for eternal things now. We strive to please God and trust in the Spirit to provide the needed resources.

What if you knew as a young boy that one day you would be a major league baseball player? You would probably be very diligent as to how you practiced and worked on your game. What if you knew as a young woman that you would be a doctor? You would probably work hard in your classes and be motivated to learn.

What if the new creation and our resurrected bodies were glorious beyond our imagination? What if heaven was really that good? How would that affect the way we live right now?

One of my favorite stories is told by Henri Nouwen about twins, a girl and boy, having a conversation in the womb:

The sister said to the brother, 'I believe there is life after birth.' Her brother protested vehemently, 'No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us.' The little girl insisted, 'There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.' Still she could not convince her twin brother.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, 'I have something else to say, and I'm afraid you won't believe that, either, but I think there is a mother.' Her brother became furious. 'A mother!' he shouted. 'What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have. Why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place, after all. We have all we need, so let's be content.'

The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while didn't dare say anything more. But she couldn't let go of her thoughts, and since she had only her twin brother to speak to, she finally said, 'Don't you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.' 'Yes,' he answered. 'What's special about that?' 'Well,' the sister said, 'I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don't you think that's exciting?'

The brother didn't answer. He was fed up with the foolish talk of his sister and felt that the best thing would be simply to ignore her and hope that she would leave him alone.

There is life after birth and there is life after death. There is an earthly mother and there is a heavenly Father. The sufferings and afflictions of this life are just squeezes that awaken our longings and get us ready for our heavenly home. It is not death to die. Rather it is glory.<sup>3</sup>

"We can live as if this life were all we had, as if death were absurd and we had better not talk about it; or we can choose to claim our divine childhood, and trust that death is the painful but blessed passage that will bring us face-to-face with our God."<sup>4</sup>

We can live in light of the end full of hope in the glory that awaits us. Can you imagine?

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word. (2 Thess 2:16-17)*

1. *It Is Not Death to Die*, by H. A. Cesar Malan, 1787-1864. Translated by George W. Bethune, 1805-1862. Translated into German by Albert Knapp, 1798-1864.

2. C.S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 138-139.

3. Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift* (Harper San Francisco, 1994), 19-20.

4. Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift*, 20-21.