



HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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2 Corinthians 5:1-10
Mark Mitchell
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Joe Bayly tells the story of a flight he took from Chicago to Los Angeles. A woman was seated next to him. She looked a little over forty, and was well-dressed and articulate. Joe asked her where she was from and she told him Palm Springs. He had heard that this was a city of the rich and famous, and so he asked her what it was like to live there. She replied, "Palm Springs is a beautiful place filled with unhappy people." He decided to press her a bit. "Are you unhappy?" he asked her. She told him she was. He asked her why. She said, "I can answer that in one word, and that is mortality. Until I was forty, I had perfect eyesight. Shortly after, I went to the doctor because I couldn't see as well as before. Ever since that time these glasses have reminded me that not only are my eyes wearing out, but I'm wearing out. I haven't been happy since."

These words summarize the feelings of millions of Americans today. We don't want to be reminded that the only certainty of life is death. We have put a man on the moon, our technology grows at an almost miraculous rate, but we are still helpless in the face of death.

Mankind has found various ways of coping with this reality. Some, of course, ignore death, viewing it, in the words of H.L. Mencken, as a "universal conspiracy not to be mentioned." Others simply choose to view death as the ultimate conclusion to existence. Like a candle going out, when we die, life ceases to exist: six feet under, no feeling, no consciousness, nothing. For people who believe this, life becomes an exercise in futility. Either they give way to despair or they try to cram into their present existence all that they possibly can, because, after all, this is all there is. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

More popular these days is the idea that death is not the ultimate conclusion but simply a welcome entrance into the "oneness of the cosmos." According to this notion, when we die we are released from the prison of this body and absorbed into a type of ultimate and impersonal form of consciousness. In essence, this is what the New Age movement would tell us. Others look for hope in reincarnation. And then there are those who claim to have died and returned to life with a comforting message of what lies beyond.

The problem with all of these theories is that though they may be comforting, and they may help us deal with the reality of death, none of them is founded upon objective reality. And for the follower of Christ, none of them is built upon the rock-solid certainties of the Word of God. Fortunately, Christians do not have to read someone's account of their near-death experience to know what lies beyond the grave. We don't have to fall into existential despair. We have the objective reality of the resurrection of Christ, and we have the testimony of Scripture as well. And though these two things do not tell us everything—

there is still an element of mystery—they do tell us something that is far more helpful and far more glorious than anything man has come up with since.

Second Corinthians 5:1-10 is one of the great New Testament passages that deal with what followers of Christ can expect when life on earth ceases. In earlier chapters of his letter, Paul has described and defended his ministry as one which displayed both the death of Jesus and the life of Jesus; and he has chronicled some of the ways in which God delivered him from the jaws of death. But Paul had come to grips with the fact that there might come a day when he would not be delivered and he would die. Yet he remained confident and hopeful, because he was certain that even in death, the life of Jesus would be manifest.

As Paul describes what death would mean for him, he starts with three very important words in chapter 5: "For we know...", says the apostle. How comforting. We can know something about what is going to happen. We can be certain. We don't have to decipher the message of a Ouija board. We can know something. And again, our certainty is based on one objective reality, and that is that Jesus Christ has already passed through death. He died a real death, and then he came back to life. He was not resuscitated. His was not a near-death experience. Jesus was resurrected. He conquered death for us. And he showed us in his own resurrected body what we could look forward to. He brought the future right into the present.

In this passage, the first thing Paul says is that Christians will receive new, resurrected bodies from God. At times it is hard for us to grasp things that are great and eternal; we need images to help us understand. To assist us, Paul, the wise teacher, gives three concrete images of what it will be like to receive our resurrection bodies.

First, the apostle says that when this earthly tent is torn down we will have a building from God. Look at verse 1:

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. (2 Cor 5:1, NASB)

Paul calls our present, physical body an "earthly tent." He is saying that our bodies are like earthly tents. I have done my share of camping, and I have noticed some things about tents. (Some call camping a vacation; others prefer to call it purgatory!) For one thing, it takes half the night just to get the tent raised. And tents are hard to sleep in. The ground beneath is uneven. The ceiling above sags. If the wind blows, the stakes begin to loosen. If it rains hard, the water seeps through. Tents are not designed to be lived in permanently.

This is the way it is with our bodies. Have you noticed that your tent has begun to sag? The mental stakes so firm—

ly placed in your minds are loosening. You can't remember where you put your keys or what someone's name is. And have you noticed that the older you get, the less comfortable you are in your earthly tent?

I like the way one writer describes this process:

Everything is farther than it used to be. It's twice as far from my house to the station now, and they've made a hill which I've just noticed. The trains leave sooner, but I've given up running for them because they go faster than they used to. Seems to be they're making staircases steeper these days. And have you noticed the small print they're using lately? Now it's ridiculous that someone my age would need glasses, but it's the only way I can find out what's going on without someone reading aloud to me. But that doesn't help much, because everyone seems to speak in such low tones, I can scarcely hear them. Times are changing. The material in my clothes shrinks in certain places. Shoelaces are so short, they're impossible to reach. People are changing, too. For one thing, they're younger than they used to be when I was their age. And people my age are so much older than I am. I ran into my old roommate the other night and he had changed so much he didn't even recognize me. I was thinking about him as I was shaving this morning. Stopping for a moment, I looked at my own reflection in the mirror. You know, they don't use the same kind of glass anymore.

Does this sound familiar? That is life in this earthly tent.

But Paul says that when our earthly tents are torn down, they will be replaced with what he calls a "building from God." Not a tent, but a building—stable, permanent and meant to last, not like any building we have ever known. And it is "not made with hands," Paul says. The apostle was a tentmaker by trade. He knew all about man-made tents. But this building is "from God," meaning that God made it; and he made it to last: "eternal in the heavens." This building will never wear out. It is made to suit heaven rather than earth.

That is the first image: death will be like replacing an old ragged tent with a permanent building from God.

The second image is that of a new set of clothes. Look at vv. 2-4:

For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall 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, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Paul says, "we long to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven...we don't want to be found naked ... unclothed, but to be clothed." When he says we don't want to be found naked or unclothed, he is saying that he doesn't want to be a disembodied soul, a bodiless, floating spirit. What he wants to be clothed with is his dwelling from heaven: a new set of clothes—a new body.

Paul uses an unusual word here to convey the putting on of one set of clothes over another. Our new bodies will not be such that there is no connection at all with our present bodies. When Jesus was raised up he was for the most part recognizable: he still had the scars on his hands

and in his side. And yet, there was a difference, too. His new body would never get old—and it was able to pass through walls. So our new body won't completely eradicate the old one; it will resurrect it and renew it. It will be like a new set of clothes to put over the old ones. The mortal will be "swallowed up by the immortal."

By the way, notice Paul says twice that we "groan." Are you groaning these days? I groan all the time. From now on, if anyone tells me to stop groaning, I'll say it's scriptural to groan! We groan because this old body makes us groan. But we also groan because we're looking forward to something we want very much. My children start groaning about December 1. They want Christmas to come so bad, it hurts. In the same way, we groan for our new set of clothes, our new body. We want it so bad, it hurts.

Now in vv 6-8, Paul gives us one more image of what this transition from death to life will be like:

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.

The image Paul gives here is of being at home. He says that as long as we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. Though we are wearing out, most of us feel pretty much at home in our bodies. It feels natural to us. This is where we belong; this is what we know. I've gotten used to this body, and I feel at home here. I have a scar over my left eye following a fall against a coffee table when I was learning to walk. This is home. The problem is, while I am at home here, I'm absent from the Lord. Oh, he is with me. His Spirit dwells in me. But I can't see him face to face. I can't climb up into his lap and lean my head upon his chest and ask him a question. As good as it can be here on earth, as much as I can sense the Lord's presence in my life at times, I long for more. And because of that I have to walk by faith and not by sight. I have to negotiate my way spiritually by believing in unseen realities.

But a day is coming, Paul says, when he would be "absent from the body and at home with the Lord." Some believe that Paul was entertaining the thought that he would die before the Lord returned; and since it isn't until the Lord returns that we are raised up to receive our new bodies, he was contemplating what it would be like up there in the meantime. The apostle says that even if he has to go through a time when he is a disembodied soul waiting for his resurrection body, he still knew that he would be at home with the Lord—and that was still better than what he had now. He preferred that. That home was better than this home.

I live in the house where I was born and raised. I love my home. I have a story for every room, every square inch of that house. It is a comfortable place for me. That is what death will be like—going home to be with Jesus, going to a place where we will be absolutely comfortable and relaxed because Jesus is there. Isn't that a beautiful picture of heaven?

So these are the three images of death which Paul gives for the believer. Death is like the transition from living in an old tattered man-made tent to a stable, permanent, God-made building. Death is like getting a new overcoat

that fits us for heaven. Death is like coming home to a place where we feel completely natural, a place we belong.

What a wonderful description of what will happen when life on earth is over for us! C.S. Lewis was a master at describing this. He said that things in heaven will be more real, more concrete than here on earth. The colors will be brighter; the smells will be stronger; the flavors will be more savory; our bodies will be more solid than they are now. He said that if you were to try to pick a heavenly flower with your earthly hand, it would slice right through your flesh. Aren't you glad we have something real and concrete to look forward to? I will still be me and you will still be you. The loved ones you have lost and long to see will still be themselves. But, oh, how different we will be as well! If I were to see you now the way you will be then, why, I would be tempted to fall down and worship you! That is how glorious you and I will be.

That is our hope. That is what happens when the believer dies.

But, you may ask, how do I know this is true? How can I be sure this is my destiny? What kind of guarantee do I have? Paul answers that question in v 5:

Now He who has prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

Notice the emphasis here is on what God has done. *God* prepared us. *God* gave us his Spirit. Our hope is not secure because of what we have done but because of what God has done for us and in us. Notice also Paul uses the past tense: "He prepared us...He gave us..." The apostle is referring to a point in time in the past when we came to faith in Jesus Christ. Then, two things happened. First, we were fitted, prepared, made ready for this by God. When we came to Christ we were made righteous and thus prepared for heaven. But there is a second thing: the Holy Spirit was deposited in our lives. It is he who keeps this hope alive in our hearts. He is called a "pledge" or a "deposit." The idea here is that the Spirit is God's down payment to us. He guarantees that God will pay in full; that he will deliver on his promise to glorify us.

My wife and I received a gift certificate for Christmas that guaranteed us dinner at a restaurant we both like. We thought we'd save it for a special occasion. We put it in a safe place so we wouldn't lose it. Every few days we'd take it out and look at it, and when we did, we got more excited. Last Friday night, we couldn't wait any longer. We used it. We cashed in on it.

The Holy Spirit is like a gift certificate: we don't have to worry about losing him. He has been given to us and he is a guarantee of what is to come. Some day we will cash in on it. But in the meantime, he reminds us of what is to come; he makes us excited about it.

This leads to another question. How does this hope affect us now? That's all fine and good, you say, but give me something I can take with me to the office tomorrow. Give me something that will help me deal with my whining child or my workaholic husband. Paul tells us this hope for the future helps us in two ways.

First, it comforts the afflicted. It allows us to have courage amidst affliction. It keeps us going. Notice that twice, once in v 6 and once in v 8, Paul says, "we are of good courage." Our hope allows us to be of good courage. It allows

us to have a kind of confidence and boldness amidst the shattering blows of life. This isn't denial. This is banking on reality—unseen reality. It is the same reality that Jesus banked on when "for the joy set before him, he endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). It was this reality that allowed Paul a few verses earlier to refer to our suffering as "momentary and light affliction."

You ask, how could he call what I am going through "momentary and light"? Well, have you considered what Paul had been through? This is the man who had been flogged, imprisoned, and shipwrecked. This is the man who described himself as depressed at times and despairing of life. But it is only "light and momentary" compared to what is coming. That is what we have to keep our eyes on—the unseen realities, rather than the seen circumstances. Do you want a recipe for a life of despair? Then look only at what is seen. Sooner or later, if you keep your eyes open, you will end up in despair. But hope and joy feed on the unseen.

I don't know what you are going through right now, but I know that many of you are suffering. Some of you have lost children; others have lost jobs; others are going through a painful divorce. I don't want to minimize your suffering, but I want you to know that compared to what is to come, it *is* momentary and it *is* light! Let that comfort you.

So this hope for the future comforts the afflicted.

The second thing it does is, afflict the comfortable. It provides motivation to prepare for eternity. We see this in vv 9-10:

Therefore also we 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, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Because of this hope, our ambition in life is to do what? To achieve success? To find happiness? To raise a family? Is that what it says? No! Our ambition, that for which we exert ourselves, is to be pleasing to God. This is not the desire to please that fears reprisal. It is the desire to please that springs from love. It is the nature of love to bring pleasure to the one we love.

The other day I was watching something on television and I had to ask myself only one question to decide whether to turn it off: Is this pleasing to God? Such a simple but sharp way to cut through my rationalizations. Is this pleasing to him? Does this delight the heart of my Father? Would I be embarrassed to have him here with me in the room?

And this question has even more significance when we consider what Paul says in v 10: "We all..." He is referring to believers. This is not the same judgment as what is called the "Great White Throne" in the book of Revelation, where the eternal destiny of believers and unbelievers is settled once and for all. The judgment seat (*bema*) of Christ is a judgment only for believers.

You ask, "How can we be judged? I thought we were secure in our hope of heaven based on the shed blood of Christ." But, the issue at stake in this judgment is not our eternal destiny; that is a settled matter. The issue is what is commonly called "rewards." Other Scripture helps us

here. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul says, "Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work...remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire." Some will be rewarded; others will suffer loss, yet still will be saved.

Make no mistake, the judgment is based upon our works, whether good or bad. We wonder how this God who loves us and forgives us and sent his Son for us will still judge us for every thought, word and deed. But this needs to be understood in light of the basic relationship we have with God as our Father. Like a good Father, he loves his children and remains committed to us, but he still holds us accountable for our actions. And we have the same kind of fear for him that a child has for his father—a fear which is born of love and respect and a desire to please.

There will be many surprises in this judgment. That is why we ought to withhold our own judgments until that day. First Corinthians 4 says at that time "the Lord will both bring to light the things hidden in darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts." What we have been beneath the surface of our life will be revealed at that time. Some of the things that looked good will not stand up under his scrutiny, while some things that we didn't think meant anything at all will turn out to be the cause for praise from our Heavenly Father.

Jim Elliot put it this way in a poem: "I spoke, words fell, aimlessly on ears. Later, one said, 'Your word, it helped that day.' I turned, wondering; forgot I said that word. Let me speak those words often; helpful words, that I forget."

I believe some day we will appear before the judgment seat of Christ and he will say, "Your word, it helped that day." And we will say, "What word? Forgot I said that word." We think of this judgment and it sounds harsh and scary. But have you considered that this could be a time of great encouragement when the Lord will bring to light things you did that you had forgotten? I sometimes think those are the best things.

Let me draw all this together by asking three questions.

Is your view of death and what comes afterwards rooted in the certainty of Scripture or the wishful thinking of man? Purgatory? Reincarnation? Near-death reports? Absorption into universal consciousness? Sorry. You won't find any of these within the bindings of this Book. Wouldn't you rather say with Paul, "We know..."

Are you letting what you can't see cheer you up or are you letting what you can see get you down? Are you walking by

faith or by sight? Your tent is sagging. You groan. Life is hard. But are you looking at those unseen realities which can encourage you and even make your affliction seem light and momentary?

Are you seeing this life as a place of ultimate fulfillment or temporary preparation? Don't get me wrong. This life is important. It is important because what you do now counts for eternity. Opportunities lost now will never be recaptured in heaven. But, you will never find here on earth what only heaven was meant to provide. Earth is about preparation; heaven is about completion.

John Todd was a pastor in the 1800's. When he was six years old, both of his parents died, and a kind-hearted aunt raised him until he left home to study for the ministry. Some time later, his aunt became very ill. In distress she wrote Todd a letter. She asked him if death would mean the end of everything or if she could hope for something beyond. Todd wrote her a letter in response:

"It is now thirty-five years since I, as a boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me. I have never forgotten the day I made the long journey to your house. I can still recall my disappointment when, instead of coming for me yourself, you sent your servant, Caesar, to fetch me. I remember my tears and anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging to Caesar, I rode off to my new home. Night fell before we finished the journey, and I became lonely and afraid. 'Do you think she'll go to bed before we get there?' I asked Caesar. 'Oh no!' he said reassuringly. 'She'll stay up for you. When we get out o' these here woods, you'll see her candle shinin' in the window.' Presently we did ride out into the clearing, and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember you were waiting at the door, that you put your arms close about me—a tired and bewildered little boy. You had a fire burning on the hearth, a hot supper waiting on the stove. After supper you took me to my new room, heard me say my prayers, and then sat beside me till I fell asleep. Some day soon God will send for you, to take you to a new home. Don't fear the summons, the strange journey, or the messenger of death. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you were kind enough to do for me so many years ago. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome awaiting, and you will be safe in God's care."

That is true. Some day soon God will send for us. Unless Christ comes first, we will die. But we do not have to fear the summons; nor do we have to fall into despair over our mortality; nor do we have to minimize death by concocting a theory which makes us feel better. We can simply trust God who sent his Son to conquer death for us and show us what lies beyond.