

I'm sure many of us have seen the sign in front of many homes these days with a variety of slogans: "Love is love. Kindness is everything. Woman's rights are human rights." One of the statements says, "Science is real." I think most of us would agree with that. Science is real, and we appreciate all that science has done to improve our lives. But science also has its limits. Listen to how Neil Postman put it,

But in the end, science does not provide the answers most of us require. Its story of our origins and our end is, to say the least, unsatisfactory. To the question, "How did it all begin?", science answers, "Probably by an accident." To the question, "How will it all end?", science answers, "Probably by an accident." And to many people, the accidental life is not worth living. Moreover, the science-god has no answer to the question, "Why are we here?" and, to the question, "What moral instructions do you give us?", the science-god maintains silence. It places itself at the service of both the beneficent and the cruel, and its grand moral impartiality, if not indifference, makes it, in the end, no god at all.

That's why we need the Word of God. It answers these great questions that really define human existence. This morning as we continue our study of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we come to a passage that answers one of the most important questions humanity has been asking since the beginning of time. What happens when we die? Is there something beyond this earthly existence, or does all just end here? As much as we appreciate the accomplishments of science, it can't really help us here.

Humans have found various ways of coping with the reality of death. Some ignore it, like HL Mencken, who viewed death as a "universal conspiracy not to be mentioned." Others view death as just the end of existence, like a candle going out; when you die, life ceases to exist. More popular these days is the idea that death is a welcoming entrance into the oneness of the universe. When we die, we're released from the prison of this body and absorbed into a mass of collective consciousness. Others, as in the Hindu tradition, look for hope in reincarnation and Karma.

The problem with these theories is though they may be comforting, none of them are founded on any objective reality. Fortunately, we don't have to read someone's account of their near-death experience to know what lies beyond the grave. Nor must we fall into some kind of existential despair. We have the objective reality of the resurrection of Christ to tell us about this.

We also have the testimony of Scripture. And what they tell us is far more helpful than anything science has come up with.

As we come to our text, Paul had been defending his ministry as one which displayed both the death and the life of Jesus. He's described some of the ways God delivered him from the jaws of death. But Paul also knew there'd come a day when he wouldn't be delivered, and he'd die. But he remained hopeful because he was certain that, even in death, the life of Jesus would be manifest. And so, starting in 2 Corinthians 4:16 and continuing through to chapter 5:10, he turns from a discussion of his present experience to that of his hope of what lies beyond.

A Cry of Hope

He starts with a great cry of hope.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

See what Paul says? We don't lose heart. We persevere with hope. We don't give up. Our hope allows us not to be overcome with discouragement. Why? The answer comes through a series of contrasts. The first is between the outer and inner person. While the outer person is decaying, the inner person is being renewed. I love how realistic Paul is. The outer man (our physical body) is decaying. As hard as we try to eat less and exercise more, it just keeps getting worse as we get older. The mid-section gets bigger; the hair gets grey and falls out; the shoulders droop; the eyes grow dim. I mean, I have arthritis in my hands. I can barely put my socks on in the morning! It's terrible!

But the difference knowing Christ makes is that while this is happening, the inner man (our unseen personality; our soul) is being renewed. It's renewed because of the second contrast, which is between momentary, light afflictions, and eternal weight of glory. Somehow our present suffering contributes to this "eternal weight (tonnage) of glory." He calls our afflictions momentary and light. You say, "How could you call what I've been through momentary and light?" Well, I didn't say it; Paul did.

Have you considered what Paul had been through? He was beaten, shipwrecked, and imprisoned. But he says all that's insignificant compared to what's coming. These afflictions are *"achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."*

Notice there's a direct tie between affliction and glory. The one prepares us for and somehow achieves the other. Our present sufferings prepare us for something so amazing, so marvelous; there are no words to describe it. That means no trial, pain, isolation, heartache, weakness, failure, no sense of being put aside without significance. All of it contributes to this eternal weight of glory we look forward to.

The question is, what are we focusing on? This brings us to the third contrast. We fix our eyes not on what's seen but on what's unseen. The former is temporary, while the latter is eternal. If you look only at what's seen in life, you'll be depressed! You see, our perspective will shape our response. If your perspective sees only what is seen, you will lose heart and give up. But if it's on the unseen reality of what God is accomplishing in you, you'll persevere with confidence and joy.

What Is Our Hope?

In chapter 5, Paul offers a deep dive into the nature of our hope. Here we learn more details about this eternal glory that outweighs all our afflictions. Don't you sometimes wonder, "What will it really be like?" Paul begins to describe it in this way,

For 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. Meanwhile, we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. vv. 5:1-4

Notice he starts with three very important words: "For we know..." Isn't that great? We can know something about what's going to happen. We don't have to decipher what those who've had near-death experiences tell us. Our certainty is based on one objective reality—Jesus already passed through it. Jesus died a real death, and then he came back to life. He conquered death, and he showed us in his own resurrected body what we can look forward to. In fact, Paul gives us three concrete images of what it'll be like to receive our resurrection body.

First, he says when this earthly tent is torn down, we'll have a "building from God." Notice he calls our present, physical body an earthly tent. What a great image. Our bodies are earthly tents. I've done my share of camping, and I've noticed some things about tents. First of all, if you're like me, it takes you half the night just to get the tent raised. And once it's raised, it's hard

to get a good night's sleep inside. The ground beneath it is uneven. The ceiling above sags. If the wind blows much, the stakes begin to loosen. If it rains hard, the water seeps through. Tents really aren't very fun to stay in for long; they're not made to live in permanently. Some call it a vacation; I call it purgatory. This is the way it is with our bodies. Have you noticed how your tent begins to sag? How the mental stakes so firmly placed in your minds, loosen and you can't remember where you put those keys a moment ago? The older we get, the less comfortable we are in this earthly tent.

But Paul says that when our earthly tents are torn down, they'll be replaced with a "building from God." See the contrast? Not a tent; a building—stable, permanent, and meant to last. And not like any building we've ever known. "Not made with hands," Paul says. Paul was a tentmaker by trade. He knew all about human-made tents. But this building is from God, meaning God made it, and He made it to last; it's an eternal house in heaven. It'll never wear out; it's made to suit for heaven rather than for earth. That's the first image—death will be like replacing an old ragged tent with a permanent building from God.

The second image we're given is of a new set of clothes. When Paul says we don't want to be found naked or unclothed, he means he doesn't want to be a disembodied soul, a bodiless spirit floating around. Instead, he wants to be clothed with his dwelling from heaven. He wants a new set of clothes, a new body.

Paul uses a very unusual word here that conveys the idea of putting on one set of clothes over another. Our new bodies won't be such that there's 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 side. But there was a difference too. His new body would never get old. Our new body won't completely eradicate the old one, but it will resurrect it and renew it. It'll 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, did you notice how he says we "groan?" Are you groaning these days? I groan all the time! From now on, if anyone tells you to stop groaning, just tell them it's scriptural to groan! We groan because this old body makes us groan. We groan because in this world there's so much pain and suffering. COVID is making us all groan. But we also groan because we're looking forward to something we ache for. Have you noticed right after Thanksgiving, children start to groan? What do they groan for? They groan for Christmas and all that goes with it. That's why C.S. Lewis wrote the worst thing is for it to be "always winter but never Christmas."

Paul gives us a third image of what this transition from death to life will be like.

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. vv. 6-8

The image Paul gives us here is of being at home. As long as we're at home in the body we're absent from the Lord. Though we're 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 where I fell against a coffee table as I was learning to walk. It doesn't bother me. I'm used to it. This is my home.

The problem is that while I'm at home here, I'm absent from the Lord. Oh, he's 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 on 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 still long for more. And because of that, I have to walk by faith and not by sight. I have to navigate my way spiritually by believing in unseen realities.

But a day is coming; Paul says when we'll be absent from the body and at home with the Lord. I don't know about you, but I love my home. When I think about my home, I think about my chair. I have a big leather chair; it's my chair if you know what I mean. My grandchildren love it because it spins. Heaven will be like that. I don't know if I'll have my spinning chair, but it'll feel like home. That's what death means; going home to be with Jesus, going to a place where we'll be absolutely comfortable and relaxed because Jesus is there. Isn't that a beautiful picture of heaven?

Three images of death for the believer: Death is like the transition from living in an old tattered human-made tent to a stable, permanent, God-made building. It's like getting a new overcoat that fits us for heaven. It's like going home—entering a place where we feel completely natural.

How Do We Know This is True?

That's what our hope is; that's what happens when the follower of Jesus 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 answered that question in verse 5. *"Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."* Notice the emphasis here is on what God has done.

God fashioned us or prepared us for this. God gave us his Spirit. Our hope isn't secure because of what we do but because of what God has done for us and in us. He uses the past tense "he fashioned us... he has given us." There was a point in time in the past

when we came to faith in Christ. Two things happened. First, we were fitted, prepared, and made ready for this by God. When we came to Christ, our sins were forgiven; we were made right with Him and thus prepared for heaven. Second, the Holy Spirit was deposited in our life. He's the One who keeps this hope alive in our hearts. He's called a pledge or deposit.

The Spirit is God's down payment to us. He guarantees God will deliver on his promise. It's like when you're given a gift certificate for Christmas to a five-star restaurant. It guarantees your dinner there. You get excited about it; you save it for a special occasion. You put it in a special place so you won't lose it. Every few days, you pull it out and look at it, and when you do, you get more excited.

The Holy Spirit is like a gift certificate; only you don't have to worry about losing it. He's been given to us, and He's a guarantee of what's to come. Someday we'll cash in on it. But in the meantime, He reminds us of what is to come. He makes us excited about it.

How Does This Hope Affect Me Now?

This leads to another question; how does this hope affect me now? You say, "That's all fine and good but give me something I can take with me to work tomorrow. Give me something that will help me deal with my whiny kids, my workaholic husband, or my unpredictable boss." Paul tells us this hope for the future helps us in two ways.

First, it gives us courage amidst affliction. It keeps us going. Notice twice, once in verse 6, and again in verse 8, Paul says, "we are confident." Another translation says, "We're of good courage." Our hope allows us to be of good courage. It gives us confidence amidst the shattering blows of life. This isn't denial; this is banking on reality—unseen reality! That's why he says, "We live by faith, not by sight." We chose to believe what God has revealed to be true in his Word, even though we can't see it. I don't know exactly what you're going through right now, but I know many of you are suffering. Some of you have lost loved ones, others have lost jobs, and others are walking through a painful divorce. I don't want to minimize your suffering, but I want you to know that it is momentary compared to what's to come, and it is light! Let that comfort you.

The second thing this hope for the future does is it provides motivation to prepare for eternity.

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. vv. 9-10

Because of this hope, our ambition in life is to do what? To achieve success? To find happiness? To complete our bucket list? No! Our

ambition is to be pleasing to him. This is a desire to please which springs from love; we want to please the One we love.

The other day, I clicked on an online ad, and I only had to ask myself one question to move on from it. Is this pleasing to Him? Such a simple but sharp way to cut through my rationalizations. Is this pleasing to him? 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 verse 10. Paul says, "We all..." referring to believers. "*We all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ.*" This isn't the same thing as what's called the "Great White Throne" in the book of Revelation, where the eternal destiny of believers and unbelievers is settled. The judgment seat (*bema*) of Christ is a judgment only for believers. You say, "How can we be judged? I thought we're secure in our hope of heaven based on the shed blood of Christ." But, the issue at stake in this judgment isn't our eternal destiny; that's a settled matter. The issue at stake is reward or commendation. In 1 Cor. 3:13-15, Paul says each person's,

work will be shown for what it is; because the Day will bring it to light, it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what is built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved...

Some will be rewarded; others will suffer loss yet still be saved.

Make no mistake; the judgment is based on our works, whether good or bad. Do we wonder how this God who loves us and forgives us will still judge us? 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 us as his children and stays committed to us, but He still holds us accountable for our actions. And we have a kind of fear for Him as a child fears his father; a fear born of love and respect and a desire to please.

I think there will be lots of surprises in this judgment. That's why we ought to withhold our own judgments until that day. 1 Cor. 4:5 says at that time, "*the Lord will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will disclose the motives of the heart.*" What we've been beneath the surface of our life will be revealed. Some of the things that looked good won't stand up under His scrutiny. Some of the things we hadn't thought 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 before he died:

I spoke, words fell, aimlessly on ears.

Later, one said, "Your word, it helped that day."

I turned, wondering; I forgot I said that word.

Let me speak those words often, helpful words that I forget.

Someday we'll come before the judgment seat of Christ, and He'll say, "Your word, it helped that day." And we'll say, "What word? Forgot I said that word." We think of this judgment as harsh and scary, but have you considered this could be a time of great encouragement? That the Lord will bring to light things you did that you forgot? I sometimes think those are the best things.

Three Questions

Let me pull this all together by asking you a few questions. Is your view of death and what comes after rooted in the certainty of Scripture or the wishful thinking of man? Purgatory? Reincarnation? Near-death reports? Karma? Absorption into universal consciousness? Sorry, you won't find any of these in this book. Wouldn't you rather say with Paul, "We know..."

Are you letting what you can't see give you courage, 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 fixing your eyes on those unseen realities, which can encourage you and even make your affliction seem light and momentary?

Do you see this life as a place of ultimate fulfillment or temporary preparation? Don't get me wrong; this life is important. It's important because what you do now counts for eternity. Opportunities lost now will never be recaptured in heaven. But you'll never find here on earth what only heaven will provide. Earth is about preparation; heaven is about completion. It's about hearing those words in Matt. 25:21(ESV): "*Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your master.*"

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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