

Hope Eternal

2 Corinthians 4:16—5:10

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Chapter 5

¹ For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling—³ if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

⁶ So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at

home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Theme Statement

We see Paul, when facing death, manifest hope in God's eternal promise. In our own lives and faith communities, this helps us grow in trusting God's promise of eternal life through faith and live with confident hope.

Exploring the Word

If you had a choice, would you want to live forever? Most people would probably answer no. And as they age, even more would say they have become more open to the end of this life and wonder about what's next. Paul spent the first portion of this epistle reminding the Corinthians of what he taught before and dealing with some internal matters from the past. With questions about the legitimacy of his claim to be an apostle, he lifts up the integrity of what he's been doing. Then he talks about the transforming power of the gospel, even when we are little more than jars of clay (4:7). In today's passage, Paul goes deeper into this reality and engages the eternal hope we have, even as our earthly bodies are temporary.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Seeing the unseen

Just as Jesus told his disciples that what defines a person comes from within (Matthew 15:11), Paul brings the focus of what is important to the inner person (v. 16). He talks about renewal from the inside. This inner renewal is not only for the Corinthians; Paul also wrote to the church at Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

Paul refers to his temporal troubles in 2 Corinthians 4:17. Earlier in the epistle, he reflected on an incident that left him and his friends despairing of life itself. Even in this he knew that he must rely upon God and not himself (1:8-10). The troubles experienced in this life lead us to an eternal glory—becoming more and more transformed into the image of Christ. That transformation helps believers see, through eyes of faith, the unseen—that which is eternal.

2 Corinthians 5:1-5 Just camping here

In the verses leading up to this point, Paul has acknowledged that there is a good chance his preaching will bring about his death. Now Paul employs two images in this section, tents and buildings, to contrast life in the flesh and life eternal. Tents are temporary lodgings, where we live in this life. Buildings are permanent. The building God has made is waiting for the believer when they leave their earthly tent. The believer will never have to worry about their heavenly “dwelling,” because the one who prepared it is God, and the promise is guaranteed by the Spirit. In the meantime, what we experience can often lead to “groaning.” Yet, Paul makes it clear that he doesn’t want to leave this body, but rather to be “clothed” in a body not riddled with sin.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 We aim to please the Lord

Filled with confidence that God has their eternal life covered, it is possible for believers to be “away from the Lord” (v. 6). They set their expectations on the growth brought about by the Spirit. When Paul says, “They walk by faith, not by sight” (v. 7), he is saying they have made it a habit to prioritize their trust in God when faced with struggles, challenge, and opposition. Recognizing the desire to be with the Lord, his goal and intention until that becomes his reality is to please Christ in how he lives and carries out his mission, realizing that he must give an account of

his life before the judgment seat of Christ. This judgment is not about salvation, be assured. For Paul, that question was settled much earlier on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22).

The Word Today

What does it look like to live when you know you are dying? That’s a question we all must answer. None of us escapes this inevitable part of life. Of course, our quintessential example is Jesus, who knew his mission would be possible only by his death on the cross. His absolute trust in God and hope for humankind’s salvation kept his face set on Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). And in 2 Corinthians 4–5 Paul acknowledges that his proclamation of the gospel will probably lead to his own death (2 Corinthians 4:7-14). Yet, trusting in God and hoping to be with Christ, he stays on the path.

These are two dramatic examples that most of us will not have to duplicate, although there are martyrs for the Christian faith today. Some experience estrangement from friends and family because of their faith, but having hope in God’s eternal promise, they continue to trust in Jesus Christ.

Persistence in trust is fortified by hope. When we hope, we wait for the realization of that hope. Hebrews 11 is the hall of fame for our ancestors in the faith who hoped for that which was yet unseen. In today’s scripture Paul says that what is seen is temporary, and what is unseen is eternal. Paul admonishes the Corinthians to remain vigilant since the things they are enduring are only temporary. Instead, they should remain focused on their eternal destiny with Christ in glory. For us, that which we experience now is merely preparing us for the eternal.

The many things we have done to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have a basis in hope. The temporary social distancing has required trust in the scientific community and hope that this will protect the vulnerable in our midst. For many, it has required us to face our mortality and find ways to continue to do what is best for the greater community.

Centering our lives on the hope of resurrection does not excuse us from doing what must be done to maintain community. The old expression “They’re so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good” convicts us when we neglect caring for others. In the rhythms of everyday life, God is preparing our hearts and minds to receive the blessings of eternity.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. How long do you want to live?

- Until I accomplish my goals
- As long as I’m in good health
- Until my family is secure
- Forever
- Other: _____

2. What do you think pleases God most?

Exploring the Word

1. What drove Paul to suffer so much for Christ?
2. What does Paul mean by “our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (4:16)?

3. Discuss what Paul might mean by “the weight of glory” in verse 4:17.
4. Reread 2 Corinthians 5:1 and identify the verbs. What does Paul tell the readers by using verbs in the present tense?
5. What other scriptures can you identify to explain “the judgment seat of Christ” (5:10)?

The Word Today

1. How should Christians live if we are convinced that after we die, we will be resurrected to eternal life?
2. What struggles do you experience in making God visible in your life, including your actions, words, relationships, and choices?
3. What gives you hope at this point in your life?

Closing Prayer

*But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love. . . .
We wait in hope for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love be with us, LORD,
even as we put our hope in you.
Psalm 33:18, 20-22, New International Version*

Further Study

Romans 15:4-13

Daily Readings

M. 1 Corinthians 15:16-23

T. Ephesians 3:14-21

W. Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

T. Romans 2:4b-11

F. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

S. 2 Corinthians 4:7-15

S. 2 Corinthians 4:16—5:10

Memorization

2 Corinthians 5:1

If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.