

“A Liberating Future”
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10
April 4, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

I remember reading years ago about a Communist leader named Bukharin who was given the task by the Soviet Union of reeducating the citizens of that nation into a materialist worldview and away from a Christian worldview. On a particular attempt at doing so, he spoke to a huge assembly in the city of Kiev, doing all he could to undermine and ridicule Christianity. When he finished, he was confident that the faith of the people in his audience was now lying in ruins. “Are there any questions?” he asked at the conclusion of his diatribe. A solitary man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the Communist, surveying the crowd from the left to the right. He then shouted the ancient Orthodox greeting, “Christ is Risen!” The vast assembly arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of an avalanche, “He is Risen Indeed!”

In our passage this morning, Paul is in a somewhat similar situation to that crowd, holding on to the resurrection with his faith being challenged. At the time he writes these words, he is in a difficult situation. He writes in chapter 1 of something that happened in the city of Ephesus that led to enormous suffering in his life. He doesn’t give details of the precise nature of the suffering, but gives a general description that sounds pretty serious. **“We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death”** (1:8-9). The New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says that this language by which Paul internalizes a death-sentence “sounds close to what we might call a nervous breakdown, and certainly indicates severe depression.” As bad as this must have been, Paul was encountering an even more difficult situation at this time of his life. The Corinthians were turning against Paul’s leadership. He had invested 18 months of his life in planting this church and discipling the believers there. After Paul left, some new leaders came into the church who convinced the Corinthians that Paul was just a weak leader, and he should be abandoned. It seemed to Paul that the wheels were coming off his ministry. He had given himself to these people, and it seemed that all his efforts were now coming to naught. Most of us have been in a similar situation. What do you do when it feels like the wheels are coming off your life? We do what Paul did and remember the resurrection. Let’s do that today as we consider the future life after death, and the application of that future.

I. The Future Described

It seems that whenever talk of the future comes up, most people have difficulty pressing beyond retirement. A great deal of attention is given to the decade or two between the end of our working life and death, but precious little attention to the eternity that follows. I think one of the reasons for this imbalance of attention is the existence of doubts about eternity. How do we know that the secularists are wrong? They teach that when you die, there is no “you” left, since you are nothing more than a material being. Further, they are confident that the notion of life after death is nothing more than a coping mechanism that societies have developed to help people get through difficulties in this life. We know that they are wrong because of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus claimed divinity for himself. As our Creator, he is in a position to know about life after death. He is the one who created us with immortal souls. Most of what the Bible teaches of life after death comes from the lips of Jesus. Then, to authenticate it all, Jesus predicted both his death and resurrection, and it happened just as he said it would.

Paul teaches in our passage that there are two stages in life after death. Stage one he describes in verse 3 as being “found naked.” It is naked because the soul is not clothed with a physical body. Theologians have called this the intermediate state because it stands between the death of our bodies in this life and the final resurrection where new resurrection bodies are received. It is the stage of the disembodied soul. The biggest disagreement about the intermediate state is whether the disembodied soul is in a state of soul sleep or conscious during this period. There are several verses that lead us away from the idea of soul sleep during the intermediate state, one of which is right here in our passage. Paul says in verse 8, **“We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”** He is saying that the intermediate state, even though the soul is without a physical body, is still preferable to our current state because it means that we are at home with the Lord. Our souls are not packed away in some heavenly warehouse awaiting the resurrection, but in the presence of the Lord. Philippians 1:23 says something similar. Speaking of his death Paul says, **“My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”** To depart from this life is to be present with the Lord in a state that is far preferable to our current state.

Our confession of faith confirms this view. Listen to its summary of the Bible’s teaching about the intermediate state.

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none. (Chap. 32)

The second stage of life after death is the eternal state that begins at the return of Jesus. It is the day when he gives us new resurrection bodies like his own resurrection body. These new bodies are immortal and material, and they can be touched and handled. Let's see how this view is supported in our passage. We need first to define some of the images used by Paul. When he speaks of the *tent* he means the bodies in which we currently live. Like a tent, they are temporary and will wear out before long. The **“building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,”** refers to our resurrection bodies. Being *naked* is to be between these two, without either our temporary bodies or our resurrection bodies.

With those definitions, here's what Paul is saying in these verses. He begins by saying *if* our current bodies are destroyed in death, God will give us new resurrection bodies. He says *if* rather than *when* because Paul taught that those who are alive when Jesus returns will not have to undergo death, and it was his personal hope that Jesus would return during his lifetime. Paul had not been told anything more of precisely when Jesus would return than we have been told, but believed that it could occur at any time. Paul then goes on to say that his ultimate fulfillment will be found only when he has been given his immortal body. He says in verse 5 that God has created him for such immortality. He groans in longing for that state, His desire is that he not be found naked, but that Jesus will return prior to Paul's death so that he will not have to undergo this intermediate state. But if he does, then he is confident that being in a state of nakedness will be better than this life because he will be with the Lord.

II. The Future Applied

The Bible tells us these things about life after death not to satisfy our curiosity, but to encourage and change our lives. Notice three ways that happens.

First, a knowledge of this future changes the way we view suffering in this life. Remember that the background of this passage is Paul's intense suffering. He thought he was going to die in Ephesus, and now he has found out that this church in Corinth, to which he has given himself, is rejecting his leadership. If he thought this was all there is in life, he would lose heart and fall into despair. That's why he says in 4:16, **“We do not lose heart”** and in 5:6, 8, **“we are of good courage.”** If you were suffering extreme physical pain, and you felt like your life's work may be coming to nothing, what would it take for you not to lose heart? Nothing short of the resurrection of Jesus and the future secured for us by his death and resurrection, is enough to keep us from depression at such times.

There were two things about the future that encouraged Paul in the midst of his extreme suffering. First, it is a future of such significant glory, that the suffering of the current life, no matter how great it may be, is only light and momentary by comparison. Paul says it like this. **“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”** (4:16). Think about that last phrase, “beyond all comparison.” There is no comparison that would do justice between suffering in the present life and glory in the next. Take the difference between the smallest thing you can think of, the smallest part of an atom, for example, and compare it with the biggest thing you can think, the universe. Such a comparison doesn’t do justice to the degree to which future glories are so much greater than present suffering. Paul thought about these things, and urges us to do the same. He says that we are to **“look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal”** (4:18). For just a moment, let’s do what Paul says we are to do and look to eternal things rather than transient. Let’s run the clock ahead just a little in our imagination. Let’s advance it about ten trillion years. How will you evaluate the 70 or 80 years of your life ten trillion years from now? Do you think you will care about a new iPad at that time?

There is a second thing that encouraged Paul as he considered his future. Not only was he encouraged by the incomparable glory of the future, but he was also encouraged by the thought that his present sufferings had meaning. They weren’t just some unpleasantness to be endured. Twice he uses the word “prepare” to describe the purpose of our sufferings. **“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.”** And then in 5:5, speaking of our future immortality, he says **“He who has prepared us for this very thing is God.”** God uses our suffering in this present life to shape us for eternity.

Let’s apply this before moving forward. Taking to heart Paul’s words here will prepare us for old age. Paul says we don’t lose heart, because **“though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day”** (4:16). How do you think about aging? Does it frighten you? Someone has said, “the most frightening thing about middle age is the knowledge that you will outgrow it.” Most of us believe the Centrum Silver myth—that our mature years will be spent on cruise ships or jogging on the beach with our spouses. We will die in our sleep at the age of 95 without ever being afflicted with the chronic diseases of old age. The truth is a little different, closer to what Paul says here, that the outer self is wasting away. But we don’t lose heart because we know that our sufferings in this life prepare us for the far greater glory of heaven.

The second application of these words about the future is that our hearts are filled with hope in knowing that the best is yet to come. Remember again the three stages Paul outlines here. Our present lives are like living in a tent, a temporary abode that quickly wears out. The second stage begins at death,

when the body is separated from the soul, a stage Paul says is like being unclothed. Though this is not the ideal, Paul says that since we are with the Lord in this intermediate state, it is far better than this life. The third stage, after we receive our new resurrection bodies, is referred to as a building from God. It is the best of all, when we are both with the Lord and living as God has designed us, with material bodies, but bodies that will not die or waste away. I simply want to point out what to me is very encouraging. It doesn't get any worse than our current life. Years ago, there was some beer commercial that featured a group of men camping out, drinking beer and enjoying one another's company. One of them says, "It doesn't get any better than this." The Christian believes just the opposite. No matter how good things may be in your life right now, it doesn't get any worse than this. Our future is a bright one.

The third application of this view of the future is the one Paul mentions in 5:9-10. As a result of our confidence in a bright future, we make it our aim to please God, knowing that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil"** (5:10). Note just a few things about that verse. First, it teaches that all Christians will stand before Christ at this judgment ("we must all appear"). Second, it will be an individual judgment, for he says "*each one* may receive what is due." Third, it will be a visible judgment, because Paul says that we must *appear* before the judgment seat of Christ. This word means not just to appear, but to be laid bare and openly revealed. Fourth, it will be impartial, according to what we have done in the body. Does this teach that salvation is by works after all? Not at all. We are saved completely by God's grace apart from works. But the certain result of receiving that grace is that your central motivation will begin to change to a desire to please the Lord.

By Jesus' death and resurrection, even Judgment Day is transformed to something positive. For the one who will be the Judge on that Day is the Savior who has died for us. Let me illustrate. A little boy and his father were driving down a country road one day when a bumblebee flew into the car through the open window. Since the little boy was deathly allergic to bee stings, he became petrified. But the father quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand, and then released it. The boy's terror returned as the bee buzzed near the boy again. His father saw the panic on the boy's face and opened his hand to show where the bee had stung the father. "Do you see this?" he said. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting for you." This is God's good news to us. We no longer need to fear death or the judgment to come, because Jesus has taken the sting for us. By his death he has paid for our sins in full, and by his resurrection, he has fully conquered death on our behalf. Easter leads to the mockery of death, as Paul asks elsewhere, **"O death, where is your sting?"** (1 Cor. 15:55).