

Written: 2 Corinthians 5:1-9 “Biblical Perspective on Death & Dying”

3rd Sunday @ Pentecost-Proper 6

Sunday, June 13th, 2021

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:1-9

¹ For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home 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 put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened---not that we would be unclothed, but that we would 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 of good courage. 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 are of good courage, 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.

The text's intent

Paul explains the reason for hope that all Christians should have as we face temporal death. It is not the end, but the destruction of this sinful fallen existence that will be replaced with the eternal existence in the new heavens and new earth in our glorified bodies that are the gift Christ earned for us in His death and resurrection. While we wait for this day, we zealously serve Him as Gospel Ambassadors so that the lost around us might be given the gift of this eternal existence too.

Focus Statement:

Christ went to the cross and rose again to earn for us our grand and glorious eternal existence. It is ours now by faith and is safe with Christ awaiting the Last Day. We need not fear death but realize that it will be the seamless transition from this life into eternal life. Our bodies may die, but we as redeemed people of God will never die. We have been given the Holy Spirit as our down payment assurance of this future glory. The Spirit has begun this transition within our hearts by making us that new creation in Christ, which will be fully realized in eternity.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We naturally fear the unknown. We fear death because what happens next is unknown, we can't see it with our eyes from where we are. We know this life and even though its filled with affliction without and within that caused us groaning (since we know deep down this is not how things should be), we hold on too it tightly. So tightly that we can threaten our eternal existence and our Gospel witnesses.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Not despise our current existence but make the most of it. But not by living for self, but instead living to be Gospel Ambassadors of the hope we have in Jesus, living as those who have life now, and our looking forward to eternal life to come. We are to live to serve Him zealously by showing love for God and love for others, even at the expense of our own life now in this world.

Subject Sentence: Eternal Glory to come guaranteed by the Spirit.

Introduction:

Many of you will initially be uncomfortable with the topic that this sermon is concerned with. How many of you were really comfortable singing the first two stanzas of our Opening Hymn #742 "For Me to Live is Jesus" which reads: "For me to live is Jesus, to die is gain for me; so when my Savior pleases. I meet death willingly. For Christ my Lord, my brother, I leave this world so dim. And gladly seek another, where I shall be with Him." Now it's one thing to sing about this in the abstract. It's one thing to sing this at a funeral when it's not you in the coffin. But take a moment and ponder these words and make them personal. Are you really in a place right now where you can honestly say you would meet death willingly? Even if it was later this week, or tomorrow, or even today? Not someone else's death, but yours. Are you comfortable if today was the day Christ called home someone you love?

Dale Norrington shared with me a "calling home" story that touched his life recently. It had to do with Tyler, the son of a friend of his from work. Tyler was stopped at a light when he was violently rear ended by truck coming up from behind that did not even apply its breaks. It caused the rear end of his car, including the backseat, to be pushed up into the space where the front seat of the car should be. Tyler was injured so badly that his heart had stopped, and he had to be revived at the scene. He was transported to the hospital where he remained in a coma, a vegetative state that the doctors said, due to all the internal injuries he sustained, he would never recover from. And so the family decided to end life support on Thursday evening. At that point Tyler's body officially passed from this world. To add to this tragedy, the gentlemen driving the truck that plowed into him was not drunk, or high, or on his phone. He had a heart attack while driving. We don't know what his current condition is, but it is possible that he has left this world in death too.

I know this is an uncomfortable subject to dwell on. I've sensed that it is for us as we have dealt with daily fear over our possible demise from COVID-19 over the past year. I know it is an uncomfortable subject from some of the comments I've heard concerning what was shared about our mortality at our congregational meeting two Sundays ago, when I asked for people's input on unmasking and ending social distancing. A portion of Jesus address to Martha when He arrived a Lazarus' tomb was quoted. It is Jesus' response to Martha's accusation that Jesus arrived too late to save her brother from death. **John 11:25-26** ²⁵ **Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"**

So my question today for each of you is “Do **YOU** believe this?” There are times in each of our lives when we might struggle with death. If not right now, then when it is you, or me, or someone you love approaching death. Jesus knows this. Paul knows this. And in our Epistle Lesson today Paul aims to help us deal with it. He doesn’t use empty vacuous platitudes we might hear in culture such as “He lived a good long life.” Or “He’s in a better place”. Paul uses words from God Himself given to Paul by the Holy Spirit from Jesus Christ, who has actually been on the other side of death and come back again.

When Our Earthly Tent Is Destroyed

Paul begins by discussing what Jesus’ references in v25: “though He die”. Paul says **in 2 Corinthians 5:1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.**

Unless Jesus returns beforehand, death is inevitable for each one of us. “The tent that is our earthly home” is Paul’s poetic way of referring to not just our temporal bodies, but our lives lived out on this earth. Notice Paul refers to our earthly lives as “tents”, temporary dwelling places. We often consider our lives upon this earth with a permanence that is not how God sees them. It’s natural for us to do so because it’s all we know. But for you and for me our life lived out on this earth will one day come to an end. That end is our death, or if we are still alive when Jesus returns it will be the destruction of this heaven and earth and all that is upon it, including whatever is left of your home, your car, your business, and whatever else that you’ve gathered unto yourself as part of your life. One day, one way or another, it will all be gone, either in your death or on the Last Day.

And that for us is scary. It’s disheartening, because this is all we know, and all these things are how we usually define our lives. But let’s go back to what Jesus is saying in **John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.** For you and I as Christians, what should our identity be? We find our identity in Jesus Christ, who is for us the resurrection and life. We should define ourselves as those who through baptism have been born again to a new life of faith that gives us new hope. We believe that everything He did in His life, in His death, and in His rising again was for us. I believe it was for me. And by the power of the faith that we share you are believing that His resurrection is for you. Therefore, you who believe in Jesus know that even though you die in this world, even though the existence you have now will come to end, you will still live.

Paul, following Jesus' lead here is looking at our life from a temporal and physical standpoint. We have a physical life now on a physical earth where we have things to do in our bodies. Guess what? Even though that will end here in your death that is not the complete and final end! You have something mysterious yet glorious awaiting you: a house not made with hands. Paul is talking about your eternal existence in everlasting life that will begin on the Last Day. It is the building from God not made with our hands but made through the work of Jesus Christ. **John 14:1-3** ¹"**Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.** ²**In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?** ³**And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.** Jesus built this eternal existence for you through His death and resurrection. And as He promises He will return one day and open the door for you to live with Him and all who call Jesus their Lord and Savior forever.

Jesus says you will "live". Paul calls it the permanent dwelling; both refer to more than just a disembodied spirit floating around on clouds and playing harps. It refers to a real physical life that can best be described as a return to the Garden of Eden, where everything is perfect once again. Nature no longer works against us with storms and drought. There are no more diseases and Pandemics. And since all the people are perfect there are no more crime, looting, shooting, suffering. There is no more dying. And as a side note, which many of you may appreciate, no more need for politicians. Rather than fear death we can embrace it as the inevitable that leads to something more glorious.

2 Corinthians 5:2 ²**For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling,** ³**if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.** We certainly do groan under the weight of our sin and the sinful disfunction that surrounds us in the world. But we also groan and fear that since death may come suddenly and unexpectedly, as it did for Tyler, we groan in fear that it may find us unprepared. But the Christian never need worry about this. Unlike the Catholic Church we do not have the Sacrament of Last Rites. Now if ever any of you were on your death bed I would certainly come, give you the Lord Supper one final time if you could take it, and pray with you. But all this should be seen as the assurance of what you already have, that heavenly dwelling which is the gift of faith from Jesus. The Spirit given in your baptism is what keeps you ever ready for this inevitable date. The Spirit who keeps you confessing in your heart as well as in your mind that, yes, you are a poor miserable sinner. But you are one that is constantly redeemed and washed clean by the blood of Jesus. The Spirit keeps you ever ready so that there will never be a time when you are found naked, found unready, found without the robe of righteousness that welcomes you into Jesus' presence.

If You Believe in Jesus, You Will Never Die

But what about Jesus' words in **John 11:26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?** Isn't this a contradiction to what Jesus just said in V25 about **"though he die, yet shall he live?"** Jesus is not crazy or talking in circles. In V25 He spoke of death from the earthly tent point of view. Now He speaks of death from the point of view of the eternal spirit each of us has been given. Even though our bodies grow old, get sick, succumb to death, that cannot affect our spirits. The breath of life that God gave to you at your birth is immortal. When your body dies your spirit continues to live on. As Solomon describes death in Ecclesiastes chapter 12 he speaks of these two realities of death that are interconnected. **Ecclesiastes 12:7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.** At death your spirit never stops existing. It doesn't stay and hang around the place where you passed or hang around to watch over your family members. God and His angels take care of that. As a believer in Christ your spirit goes to be with He who gave you life at birth, He who redeemed that life on the cross, He who gave you your new life in Christ at baptism.

Paul is referencing this fact in **2 Corinthians 5:4-5** **⁴For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened---not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.** Death is not the non-existence of us, not even for a moment. Paul says what happens is that we are not stripped naked but become further clothed. We are freed from this body of sin and groaning and prepared for eternity in the new heaven and new earth. Our life doesn't end but our mortal existence is swallowed up by eternal life.

Now what this will be like is hard to understand from our point of view in this material world that is bound in the constraints of time. When we die our spirit goes to be with Jesus until He returns on the Last Day. Here on earth, those who go on living in the world of time continue to mark off the days, years, and centuries until they die or until Jesus returns. But when our soul goes to be with Jesus, we leave the world of time behind. We enter the eternal timelessness that God exists in. Unlike those left on earth our souls will not be counting off the days, months, years, and centuries. We still exist in bliss with our Savior patiently waiting with Him the day of His return. And since time no longer means anything, who's to say if that doesn't just pass by in the blink of an eye?

The point being that, as far as our soul is concerned, death is not any kind of end. As Jesus says in **John 11:26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?** Spiritually speaking, you will never die! Do you believe this? The only way you can is by the faith that comes from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

How Should Our Eternal Existence Reflect in Our Lives Now?

How should our faith in our eternal existence impact our lives lived out now in these earthly tents in the midst of the groaning that surrounds us? Paul addresses this in **2 Corinthians 5:6-7** ⁶ **So we are always of good courage. 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.** We live out our lives with good courage. This does not mean in reckless abandon. Our life now on this earth is a precious gift from the Lord, and the way we live it should reflect that. But we should not live in fear of the inevitable. We should not live in fear of death. We live according to our faith in all that Jesus has promised us in the Gospel. We live believing that Jesus' death and resurrection forgives all our trespasses: both those known and unknown. His Spirit keeps us always ready for our death, or Christ's return, or both.

We live not according to the love that the world has for this life. Instead as Paul tells us **in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15** ¹⁴ **For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;** ¹⁵ **and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.** We have already died to our life that was the love affair we had with the world and all things in it. Instead we live according to the love of Christ that controls our new heart. As Paul goes on to say in **2 Corinthians 5:17** **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.** You are a new creation, born again by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You have not been left to groan in your earthly tent by yourself but to work together with your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ that is His Church. We are called to live out our faith in the face of the world, proclaiming the resurrection hope that we have in Him. We are called to be ambassadors of Christ who share the Good News of Jesus.

Conclusion

You and I may still find we fear death at times. Perhaps you are dealing with that fear right now in your life or in the life of a loved one. Maybe you are not dealing with it so much right now but wait until it's you in the hospital with days left to live. Death is not natural. It was not part of God's original plan, but instead it is the result of sin, which causes our souls to be ripped out of our bodies at death. That is because even though sin ravages our bodies Christ has protected and redeemed your soul. Tyler's soul was ripped out of his body, either at the point of impact in that crash, or when life support was ended. But if Tyler has faith in Jesus, then his bodily death is not the last word, just as your bodily death is not the last word. Jesus Christ came to give you true life now and eternal life to come. In your baptism He has given you His Spirit through which He speaks these words to you right now **(John 11:25-26) ²⁵"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?** My prayer for you this day, and every day going forward that your answer will be, "Yes Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Strengthen in me my faith in the promise of everlasting life." As our sermon hymn extols "Life eternal! Heaven rejoices; Jesus lives who once was dead. Shout with joy, O deathless voices! Child of God lift up your head! Life eternal! O what wonders crowd on faith; what joy unknown. When amid earth's closing thunders, Saints shall stand before the throne." Amen.