

Family Matters

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:27 ESV)*

*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.
(Proverbs 22:6 ESV)*

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,
and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.
(Matthew 10:37 ESV)*

*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household,
he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.
(1 Timothy 5:8 ESV)*

Death And The Life Hereafter

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2 Corinthians 5:1-10

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. We went through this passage a little less than 2 years ago as part of our Life Together series when we were looking at Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. On that Sunday we went through it quite systematically and I don't intend to do that again today. Today I want to look at this passage only in terms of what it says about death and the life hereafter. This is the final message in our Family Matters series and so it is appropriate that we end here – because death is still the final enemy of the family. Death has been defeated by Christ on the cross – but it has not yet been destroyed. It is still something that every family must go through – it is something that our church family went through again this past week. And so we need to talk about it – we need to understand it and we need to understand what comes after it, so that, as the Apostle Paul says in this text we may be of good courage. Death is still a challenge to be faced, but the Bible gives us the resources to face that challenge with courage, boldness and faith. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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. 10 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. (2 Corinthians 5:1–10 ESV)

As I mentioned I want to glean rather specifically from this passage; I want to look at it narrowly in terms of what the Apostle Paul says about death and the life hereafter.

About Death And The Life Hereafter:

The first thing we notice is this:

1. Our present bodies are impermanent

Look at the first two verses; Paul says:

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 (2 Corinthians 5:1–2 ESV)

In the Bible the word “tent” is generally associated with travel and impermanence. A person doesn’t “LIVE” in a tent, they TRAVEL in a tent. A tent is what you live in while you are transitioning from one place to another. Once you get there you live in A HOUSE. That’s the idea for example in Hebrews 11 where the Apostle talks about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as picturing the life of faith. He says:

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9–10 ESV)

The life of faith is rather like the journey that Abraham and the patriarchs went on. Abraham left the land he lived in – the land where he had a nice big home – and he went to the promised land LIVING IN TENTS. Abraham was always ON THE WAY. He never owned the land, he never finally settled – he was ALWAYS A MAN ON A JOURNEY. He was a man looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is the Lord God. Therefore, Abraham was a man who lived in tents.

And so are we, Paul says. The body that you have is just a tent. It is a temporary dwelling place while you make your way to the City that has foundations – whose architect and builder is the Lord God. And when you get there you will be given something far more permanent than a tent. Paul says that in verse 1. He says, Don't worry too much about the state of your earthly tent. It doesn't really matter because:

we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (ESV)

Is your body beginning to let you down? No matter, it means only that you are getting closer to the gates of the city inside which you have a house made by God. You have a much better body coming. A body free from the corruption of sin. A body in which you will enjoy the Lord and his blessings forever.

Thanks be to God!

The second thing he says is that:

2. The death of a believer leads to a blessed, though intermediate state

This is the part we find a little bit confusing. Look at verses 3-4. Paul says:

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. (2 Corinthians 5:3–4 ESV)

Paul says that we look forward, ultimately to our permanent home – our eternal body – because we don't want to be naked. By “naked” Paul means that we don't want to be a disembodied spirit – our real hope is to exchange an impermanent body for a permanent body – it is not to “shed the body” altogether. Now Paul said this because in the Greco-Roman world that was the ultimate hope. In Greek and Roman religion the body was seen as a cage for the soul and as an anchor to be gotten rid of. Disembodied existence was the goal for the Roman believer – but not for the Christian. Christians do not look at bodies as intrinsically evil – we look at them as temporarily corrupted. That's a huge difference. By the way, this is why Christians didn't cremate. In Eastern

religions cremation was common, again because the body was seen as something to be escaped and cremation was thought to assist the soul in escaping the body. Christians buried their dead because they understood that their heavenly bodies would be related to their earthly bodies as a tree is related to its seed. Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 15:

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42–44 ESV)

Putting a body in the ground is like sowing a seed Paul says. What comes out at the resurrection will be related to what is put in but it will also be very different. What is put in is perishable, what comes out is imperishable. What is put in is in dishonour, what comes out will be glorious. What is put in is weak, what comes out is powerful and so on.

Believers understand that there is a future for our bodies and so they bury them carefully. Paul is saying here that there is something even better than life as a spirit – and that is life back in your raised and glorified body.

That’s why Christians refer to the state of the soul after death as “the intermediate state”. It is better than life in a ripped and faded tent – but it isn’t our ultimate hope. When a Christian dies, his or her spirit goes immediately to be with the Lord – absent from the body, present with the Lord – as Paul says in verse 8 of our passage – BUT Paul says, while that is BETTER – it is not our ultimate BEST. God has something even better than that in store for us.

That leads us to our third observation from this passage. We see here that:

3. Our ultimate hope is an eternal body and an everlasting inheritance in the New Heavens and the New Earth

That has been Paul’s main point all along. In verse 1 he said:

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 Corinthians 5:1 ESV)

We aren’t worried about the decay of our earthly bodies because we have a permanent body,

made by God, eternal in the heavens. God has a permanent replacement WAITING FOR US, Paul says, so the sooner we finish the journey and leave this ragged old tent behind, the better.

Paul said this to his other churches as well, for their encouragement. He said to the Thessalonians:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 ESV)

Here Paul uses the metaphor of being asleep – because death is not forever! For the believer it is an intermediate state! If you die you will go to be with the Lord, but when the Lord returns, you will come with him! You will come back to the earth! Your body will arise from the grave gloriously and marvellously changed and transformed. You will be united again to your body – you will not spend eternity naked – you will spend it in your glorious BODY – on the earth, with the Lord, enjoying his goodness forever.

Those of us who are alive at the time of Christ’s return are “caught up” to the Lord – but that isn’t so that we can go to heaven to live as spirits – it is so that we can be lifted off the earth while it is purified and cleansed while we receive our glorified bodies. You want to be OFF the surface of the earth at the moment of Christ’s return – the Apostle Peter says:

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (2 Peter 3:7 ESV)

The Return of Christ will be a time of purification and fire by which the heavens and the earth are renewed. You want to be standing in the air between heaven and earth when that happens! But the purpose of you being there is not to stay there, it is to return to the earth, with Jesus to shine like the sun in the Kingdom of your father forever. Jesus said that in Matthew 13. He said:

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun

in the kingdom of their Father. (Matthew 13:40–43 ESV)

At his return Jesus will cleanse the earth of all causes of sin and all sinners and THEN the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father FOREVER. The Apostle John describes the same final hope. He says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1–4 ESV)

Do you see that? At the end, you don’t go UP TO HEAVEN, heaven COMES DOWN TO THE EARTH! The earth is cleansed and heaven comes down and BEHOLD! The dwelling place of God is with man! He will dwell WITH US! We will be HIS PEOPLE! And death and mourning and crying and pain shall be no more, for the former things will have passed away.

We will have our bodies – and we will have OUR LORD! On this earth, with one another FOREVER!

Thanks be to God!

But first, Paul says, we must all pass through final judgment. That is the last thing he says in this passage.

4. But first we must pass through Final Judgment

Look at verse 10:

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. (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

Now remember, Paul isn’t sharing this information to frighten Christians but to encourage them. Final Judgment is nothing to fear if you are a real believer. The Bible says:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1 ESV)

A believer does not go to Final Judgment to be condemned but to be rewarded. The Bible consistently teaches that there are “degrees of blessedness” in the eternal state. This teaching goes all the way back to the Old Testament. In Daniel 12 for example it says:

But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:1–3 ESV)

So in that passage Daniel is told that everyone whose name shall be found written in the Book shall be raised again to eternal life, but then he goes on to say that those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. We see in this passage “degrees of brightness”. Everyone is shining – but some are shining brighter than others.

Jesus taught the same in his parable of the talents – Paul taught the same in 1 Corinthians 3 where he said:

each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and **the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.** 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:13–15 ESV)

So Paul says that every believer’s WORK will be tested on that day. The work of some will be determined to have been worthless – such a person will still enter eternity but he will enter like a naked man escaping from a fire.

Obviously there are degrees of glory in eternity. The scale seems to go all the way from “naked guy escaping from a fire” to “shining like the stars in the heavens”. That’s quite a continuum and quite a motivation for urgency and excellence in our serve. The Apostle Paul understood that urgency well. He says in 2 Corinthians 5:11 – the very next verse:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Corinthians 5:11 ESV)

Yeah! I guess so! Paul is saying, “I’ve read Daniel 12. I noticed where it said: “and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever”, therefore, knowing that,

contemplating that, I persuade others.” I would suggest that we follow his example. I don’t want to be the naked guy in heaven. Glorified body or not, that prospect does not appeal to me.

I want to hear from the Lord what the wise servant heard from the Lord in the parable of the talents:

‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ (Matthew 25:21 ESV)

Summary And Application:

Now we’ve covered a lot of ground this morning and we’ve moved fairly quickly through a rather complicated text so in the few minutes that we have remaining I just want bring this down to street level with some very basic summary and application. I want to ask and answer two very important questions.

1. What happens to believers when they die?

Let me begin with the answer given in our Children’s Catechism. The question is stated there in this way:

What becomes of the righteous after death?

The answer given is:

Their body returns to the dust and their spirit goes to be with the Lord.

As we said a few minutes ago, theologians refer to this as “the intermediate state”. When a Christian dies, IMMEDIATELY their spirit goes to be with the Lord. Absent from the body, present with the Lord. This is not their forever state, but it is BETTER than life here on this earth. They are WITH GOD and they are FREE from sin and corruption but they are looking forward to something more. There is a picture of this in the Book of Revelation. John says:

9 I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Revelation 6:9–11 ESV)

John is the last living Apostle – he has seen so many of his friends and brothers killed for their faith in Christ. Where are they, he wonders? And then in a vision he sees them and many others under the altar of God – near to the presence of the Lord –with one another and waiting for the final judgment and the restoration of all things. They are not completely naked – they are given a white robe – but they are encouraged to look forward to the end of all things upon the earth.

That is the intermediate state and if you die today and the Lord does not return, that is where you will go. You will stand with other believers in the presence of God, wearing a white robe and waiting for the consummation of all things here on earth in accordance with the will and purpose of God.

Then, at a time of the Lord’s choosing, he will return and you will come with him. The earth will be renewed by fire and judgment. All causes of sin and all sinners will be forever removed. You will be given a new and glorious body and you will be with the Lord, and with each other, enjoying the goodness and favour of the Lord, forever.

That is what happens to believers in death and in the life hereafter.

The second question we need to ask is this:

2. How can I make sure that I will go to heaven when I die?

Obviously, we don’t want to miss a single step in this process. We want to go to heaven when we die and we want to come back to the earth with our friends and family in our eternal bodies so as to enjoy the Lord forever – we want that! We want every piece of that – so how can we make sure that we will have that? How can we know that we will go to heaven when we die?

Thankfully Jesus answered that question very clearly. He said in John 14:6:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 ESV)

If you want to go to heaven and you want to live with Jesus and your saved loved ones in the new heavens and the new earth forever then you must trust in the life and death and resurrection and present intercession of Jesus Christ for your salvation. You must confess your sin and your need for his forgiveness. You must repent of your sins and ask God to put them on the body of Christ on the cross. You must receive his righteousness and his Spirit as a gift of pure and undeserved grace. And you must follow Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord – you must accept his Word as the Word of God and FOLLOW HIM – his teaching and his example – all the way through life and through the valley and shadow of death and up into heaven and beyond.

You must hold to him – and he will hold to you. He will keep you safe in the palm of his hand no matter what may come. Jesus said that he would do this. He said:

this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:39–40 ESV)

That is the Gospel! That is our final and ultimate hope and this IS THE WORD OF THE LORD. Thanks be to God – let’s pray together.

(Jody and Levi, I will likely lead in a prayer of confession and faith followed by an invitation to prayer with the elders at the front)