

## **“Living Now for the Future”**

### **2 Corinthians 5:1-10**

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**Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

After some weeks' hiatus, we return now to our studies in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Remember, we are in a section in which Paul is describing and defending his ministry, a defense made necessary by the attacks upon it made by jealous and grasping false teachers who have come to Corinth and exalt themselves by diminishing Paul. Paul has just said, in the closing verses of chapter 4, that his had been a difficult ministry, he had suffered severely getting out the news of salvation in Jesus Christ, and, what is more, there were features of his personal ministry that he knew very well were unimpressive. He wasn't a great public speaker, as some never tired of pointing out. Nevertheless, he found encouragement in the facts that he was on the winning side, that God would vindicate him in the great day, and that enduring hardships for the Lord's sake would ensure an eternal glory that would make him forget all about the hardships. The prospect of future glory strengthened him to endure present troubles. While the false teachers boasted about themselves, Paul took his encouragement and pride from what Christ had done for him.

Now Paul elaborates this point he just made about the hope that sustains him in the face of the troubles of his life and, indeed, its soon coming end. He has referred to his death in 4:10-12. He knows that death is working in him, as he puts it. His life in this world is temporary. In 4:16 he ended with the distinction between what is temporary and what is eternal.

- v.1 Now, the “if...” may be only a manner of speaking, but it may also refer to the possibility, that Paul is keeping open, that he would still be living in the world when Christ came again and would never see death, but would be immediately transformed and transported into eternal life. Ever since, Christians have been keeping open that same possibility. Here, in v. 1 he is applying the temporary/eternal distinction to the individual Christian's life. The contrast between “earthly tent” and “eternal house” is a contrast between two kinds of *bodies*. The body we have in this world is temporary, will soon be worn out. A tent after all is not permanent, it has no foundations, it wears out. It is very like Paul's statement in Phil. 3:21: “...the Lord will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorified body.” If we lose this body, we shall have another and far better body. That is Paul's thought. It continues his thought about the body that he gave in 1 Cor. 15.
- v.2 Remember how in Romans 8:19-23 Paul says that the whole creation groans in anticipation of the redemption of our bodies. In this world we long for the perfect life, of soul and body, but that will not be ours until Christ comes again. Typically, Paul mixes his metaphors. Now the body is something that one “puts on” as a garment. He used that imagery in 1 Cor. 15 when he spoke of the corruptible needing to *put on* the incorruptible.
- v.4 “Being naked” refers to being without a body, the condition of the soul between death and the resurrection, a point Paul will elaborate somewhat in vv. 6-9. It was a way of

speaking common in Paul's day, but, of course, it also naturally picks up Paul's metaphor of the body as a piece of clothing that one puts on. In those days it was widely felt that the body was a burden, a prison even, and that the soul, once freed from the body, could soar upwards until it was reunited with the supreme soul of the world. [Hughes, 170] That was not Paul's doctrine, of course. The body was God's creation and a part of man as God made him to be. Our bodies too were redeemed by Jesus Christ and will be perfected. Human beings were made to be psycho-physical beings and so believers in Christ will be made perfect and live forever in the perfect unity of body and soul. That is what makes the intermediate state – the time between death and the resurrection – unnatural and imperfect. The body is missing. Without a body man ceases to be truly and properly man. To be sure, for the Christian to die is gain, as Paul told the Philippians, for we will be with Christ. But, it is not the fullness of life until body and soul together are made perfect which will not happen until the resurrection. Only then will our whole selves be "swallowed up by life."

So, while death is gain for the believer, there is still something unnatural and repulsive about it and that lies in the separation of body and soul.

- v.5 This total fulfillment of life – body and soul together – is God's purpose and so it *will* come to pass and believers have the Holy Spirit as the guarantee that it will. It was the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, Paul says in Rom. 8:11, and he will raise you too. And he who will raise your body to glorious and eternal life is already with you. That is the thought.
- v.8 That death means the separation of soul and body, however, does not mean that Christians live in fear of it; not at all. Paul does not mean that the Lord is not present with his people in this life, of course. He means only, as v. 7 indicates, that we know the Lord only by faith in this world, but will know him by sight when we die and go to heaven, even if without our bodies. I'd rather have the resurrection body and the fullness of life, Paul says, but if the choice is between knowing the Lord only by faith and knowing him immediately in heaven, well, I'll take knowing the Lord by sight. That is why he called dying "gain" in Phil. 1:21, because, as he said there, to depart is to be "with Christ." That is, with him in a far more immediate way than one can be with him in this world.
- v.9 If one desires to be with the Lord, to enjoy more immediate fellowship with him, then certainly he will desire to please the Lord with his life while he lives in this world.
- v.10 But there is a further consideration, the evaluation of our lives at the end of time. We will return to this thought next Lord's Day morning, God willing.

Now, in this somewhat difficult but highly important and interesting text, Paul teaches the Christian view of death. Indeed, I'm not sure there is another text in all the Bible that gives us so complete a view of death as Paul gives us here. Now, that may, honestly, not interest many of you, or, at least, you may not think it does. "What have I to do with death?" you ask, "I've got too much living still to do." After all, most of us in this sanctuary this morning may expect to

live many more years yet. Do we really need to ponder the inevitability, the nature, and the meaning of death? Can't we wait for that until we are older, perhaps until we get sick?

Well, no, the Bible says. We must think about death now, and always; we must incorporate death into our outlook on life. For the meaning of life lies in our understanding of death. That is surely Paul's point here. What is more, we *are* going to die, and an honest life, which ought to be the hallmark of a Christian life, should be a life lived in the artless and frank acknowledgement of that fact. Christ has surely made a great difference in regard to the matter of death, having vanquished death and all its powers. Therefore, Christians should be folk who live obviously and cheerfully with a very different and more positive view of death. Otherwise, it might be asked, what difference has Christ made to us?

We Christians should be the last people who give appearance of living in the fear of death all our lives long. Freud, astute observer of human life that he was, used to say that no one believes in his own death. Every one is convinced of his immortality. He wrote,

“As for the death of others, a cultured man will carefully avoid speaking of this possibility if the person fated to die can hear him. Only children ignore this rule.... We regularly emphasize the accidental cause of death, the mishap, the disease, the infection, the advanced age, and thus betray our eagerness to demote death from a necessity to a mere accident.” [Cited in Zacharias, *Can Man Live without God?* 160]

Well, that was not Paul's view. He looked death straight in the eye and lived with an active expectation of it. And, far from making him morbid or depressed, it stimulated and galvanized him to the most fruitful and useful living. And, according to Paul, it ought to have the same effect on every believer. Take note of what Paul says about death.

*I. First, take note of his realistic view.*

Paul has made much in the previous chapter of the burdens of life, of the way death is already in us and being carried around by us. The older we get the more aware of this we are. People we have known all our lives are dying around us. My father and my sister have both died; so did my brother-in-law. A childhood friend of mine, a year or so younger than I, died some months ago; dropped over dead while sitting at the dining room table of some friends. A college classmate, a PCA pastor, died the other week of liver cancer. Death is around us and it is in us also. We can tell we are getting older, the aches and pains accumulate, the years pass: it is all the onset of death. Paul was nothing if he was not a realist.

But he is realistic in another way. He is willing to say that there are things about death that repel him. No doubt, had we the opportunity to talk to him about this, he would have said there are many things. The separation from loved ones still living in the world, the experience of dying itself, with its pain and weakness, the way in which death cuts off our opportunities in this life, the way it brings a final end to all hope for the unbeliever, and so on. But here he speaks of the nature of death as a separation of soul and body and of his discomfort at that prospect. We *are* our bodies. There is something abnormal, aberrant, about a human soul without a body. We can hardly imagine what life would be like in such a state. It is not what we know, it is not what we are longing for. Paul candidly admits this. He would rather go straight from his bodily life in

this world to his bodily life in the world to come, after the resurrection. But it is not to be. Death must be faced.

Do you see how unsentimental Paul is! We are often so sentimental about death. We treat it as we wish it were, rather than as it actually is. We have all been to funerals in which a good bit of nonsense has been spoken and people listened cheerfully. But not Paul. He knows what death is, there are aspects of it he does not like at all, but it is a looming reality and only the foolish and those who are not serious about life will ignore it. It is, as the Bible says, as Paul himself says in 1 Cor. 15:26, “the last enemy.” Its infliction on the human race, on account of sin, was a catastrophe. When the soul is torn from the body, when all precious associations in this world are broken in a moment, even the godly cannot look forward to this without a strange and haunted feeling.

Some of you young people before me this morning have had the experience, I’m sure you have, of lying in bed at night, before you fall asleep, and for some reason or another, the truth that you must die simply overwhelms you. You cannot escape it, that someday all your vitality, all your energy, all your hopes and dreams for this world will be swallowed up in death. The thought of this is so painful that you try your best to thrust it away from you, but you cannot and it gnaws away at your mind and heart until you lose it in sleep. Well, says Paul, there is something entirely right about that. There is nothing wrong with the feeling that death is an intruder, that it tears your life apart, that it is unwelcome in that it introduces you into an unnatural state; for that is what it does. There is a groaning in the prospect of death that is entirely understandable.

Tennyson put it this way:

Whatever crazy sorrow saith,  
No life that breathes with human breath  
Hath ever truly longed for death;  
‘Tis life, not death, for which we pant,  
More life, and fuller, that I want.

Paul would have agreed with that and precisely because the fullness of life is not what we get at death, even believers in Christ. They get a kind of half-life, the soul without the body, which is not what we were made for. The fullness of life awaits the resurrection and the end of the age. Both Scripture and our God-given instinct for life teaches us to regret the thought that our souls would be in another place while our bodies are being lowered into the ground. Christianity is *life-affirming* not *death-affirming*. I love the Apostle’s realism. And I love it still more because he goes on to have, in the second place,

*II. A view of death that is finally, positive, notwithstanding its unnaturalness.*

Of course it must be positive, in the final analysis, even accepting the wrenching apart of two things that were designed to be always together: the soul and the body, notwithstanding the rending of our very nature as human beings. How much like our Christian faith; the same thing that is very difficult ends up being full of blessing. The trouble of death as the troubles of life are means to our blessing. They are troubles, but God uses them to do us good.

The Bible is not very forthcoming as to the nature of human life in the intermediate state, the condition of the soul without the body. But it is careful to tell us that, imperfect and unnatural as that situation must be, it is still “better by far” than life in this world. That is the language Paul himself uses in Phil. 1: “better by far.” And why? Because we are *with the Lord*. Now, we are already with the Lord, to be sure, we who believe in him and walk with him in this world. But there, after death, believers will be so much more *with him* that there in Phil. 1 Paul can say that to depart, to die in other words, is to be “with Christ” as if we weren’t with Christ before. And, here, in very arresting language, he says that so long as we are living here in this world, “we are away from the Lord.” Death brings us to him, it brings us home where he is. Even if we have to be away from the body, it is better to be home with the Lord.

That is a very powerful image, isn’t it: coming home? If you were at Ken Anderson’s funeral a few months ago, you heard me quote from Sheldon Vanauken’s wonderful book, *A Severe Mercy*. There is a scene, early in that marvelous book, in which Vanauken, now an older man, remembers his father’s house, the home of his youth.

“Glenmerle, he thought, had been a place to come home to, home from Kentucky or Florida or England, home from schools and home from college. He pictured coming home from boarding school, perhaps for the Christmas holidays, perhaps with snow all about – the woods full of snow. It would be a winter dusk with the big blue spruce a-twinkle with tiny white lights like stars, the big car sweeping up the hill to the house. Then his mother’s cries of welcome and her kiss, his father’s handshake, and his brother grinning in the background. And of course, as always, the cheery fire in the drawing-room, and through the french doors the dining room alight with preparations. Upstairs, waiting, would be his own room, just as he had left it. Heaven itself, he thought, would be – *must* be – a coming home.” [19]

Well, I’m sure that is the very image that Paul was after when he likened death for a Christian to *going home*. We can’t imagine what life will be like without a body, we don’t know how we will experience the presence of the Lord, but Paul and the rest of the Bible tell us that his presence will make even the unnatural condition of a soul apart from its body a kind of coming home! When we are among the “spirits of righteous men made perfect”, as the author of Hebrews has it, when there is no more sin in our hearts or our thoughts, when we find ourselves among the heavenly hosts, all morally and spiritually perfect like ourselves, and when we are present with the Lord Jesus and he with us, and we bask in his divine glory, life is going to be wonderfully, surpassingly different and altogether better.

In this sense, death is no punishment and it is no loss for the believer. It really has lost its sting. Remember what Jesus said to the thief on the cross who gained heaven at the very last moment of his life, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Now both his body and the Lord’s were laid in tombs that day, but their souls were in Paradise. Whatever Paradise is, and we have only a whisper of teaching in the NT, it is wonderful beyond words. That’s what Paradise means! The word comes from the Persian for garden or park. In the Jewish literature of the period it is used sometimes for the Garden of Eden. It is that place where everything is beautiful and where

God's people dwell in unfettered fellowship with him. So there are both negative and very positive aspects of death. But there is one thing more.

*III. Finally, in Paul's view death and the prospect of death, far from being stultifying or demoralizing or paralyzing, is in fact stimulating, invigorating, and bracing.*

We will talk more about this next Lord's Day, but now simply note Paul's conclusion: in prospect of the advancing day of our death we are to make it our goal to please the Lord. The time is short, life is quickly passing by, and our time for serving him while we are at home in the body will soon be at an end. How precisely we will please him when we are away from the body, Paul does not say. But we know very well how to please him now, in this world. And when we are away from the body, nothing will be more important to us than that we pleased him when we were in the body. You see, Paul is in the midst of talking about his ministry, his life's work and now he's talking about death. That is how practical, relevant death is for daily life. You'll do better at what you do now if as a Christian, you keep your onrushing death in view.

The shortness of time is not depressing to Paul but energizing. The approach of death is not something to mourn so much as it is an argument to do all that we can while the time remains. Death, for the Christian, has its hard aspects and unwelcome features and, at the same time, it has its wonderfully consoling and attractive features. The soul is wrenched from the body but, at the same time, it is brought near to the Lord Jesus, nearer than it has ever been. That biblical realism now must be matched with this: death brings an end to our life and work in this world. Therefore, it is a great impetus to the stewardship of our lives, an ever-present spur to get on with what we ought to be doing as servants of the Lord Jesus.

That, in a nutshell is Paul's view of death for a Christian. It is honest and realistic, there are elements of both aversion and attraction in it, but it is thoroughly and distinctively Christian and so hopeful and positive at the last.

Now, what does that mean for us? Well if we are Christian believers, it means that we should think and then we should talk about death as Paul does – openly, honestly, and faithfully. I love it when Christians speak with matter-of-fact artlessness about death, are so obviously adjusted to its reality, fearless in the face of it, that it may appear to others that they are actually looking forward to it. No one can believe in Jesus Christ, can believe that he has conquered death for us, can believe that death introduces us immediately into his presence, can believe that we will eventually rise to perfect bodily life and that forever, and then claim to be true to Christ who is unwilling to face the fact of death, is unwilling to speak about it, who does not view it very differently than those who have no faith in Jesus.

Death! Thou wast once an uncouth, a hideous thing;  
 But since my Saviour's death  
 Has put some blood into thy face,  
 Thou hast grown, sure, a thing to be desired,  
 And full of grace.  
 [George Herbert]

Give glory to God and to Christ your Savior. Think and then, still more, speak about death as Paul does here. Say what John Quincy Adams said when, in his old age, he was accosted by a friend on a Boston street, who asked, "And how is John Quincy Adams today?" To which the former president replied: "Thank you, John Quincy Adams is well, sir, quite well, I thank you. But the house in which he lives at present is becoming dilapidated. It is tottering upon the foundations. Time and the seasons have nearly destroyed it. Its roof is pretty well worn out, its walls are shattered, and it trembles with every wind. The old tenement is becoming almost uninhabitable, and I think John Quincy Adams will have to move out of it soon; but he himself is quite well, sir, quite well." [Cited in Boettner, *Immortality*, 29]

How much help all Christians would receive in facing death with Christian aplomb if only they were always hearing other believers speak so willingly, even cheerfully about it!

And, then, take Paul to heart until you can give a like answer to that John Wesley gave to someone who asked him, "If you knew that you would die at twelve o'clock tomorrow night, how would you spend the intervening time?" "Why," Wesley replied, "just as I intend to spend it. I would preach tonight at Gloucester and again tomorrow morning. After that I would ride to Tewkesbury, preach in the afternoon and meet the society in the evening. I should then repair to friend Martin's house, as he expects me; converse, pray with the family, retire to my room at ten o'clock, commend myself to my heavenly Father, lie down to sleep and wake up in glory." Don't tell me that there is anything depressing or morose about the Christian's frank acknowledgement of death, even its gloomier aspects. It is simple realism, but a realism sanctified and purified and lightened and gladdened by what Christ has done to death for those who trust in him. Let's talk more about it, not less; think more about it, not less. But speak and think always as Christians.

We'll live better for it, do more with our lives as a result, and we'll be a great help to others. Even unbelievers who, no matter what they say, are afraid of death all their lives. What better witness to them, what better recommendation of Christ to them than a Christian's cheerful, honest, and bracing acceptance of its reality.

You want to know what difference Jesus Christ makes in a human life? Well here is the first and the greatest difference: he makes it a good thing to die! And that, my friends, is no small thing!