

Sermon: Our eternal hope

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

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We are fragile people; life is full of potential pitfalls and we all know for sure, we will one day die.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in 2 Corinthians 4:11, "we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake." Paul speaks of his specific problems for being an apostle, but the same is true for all of us in a more general sense.

One sure thing, we all die. It's a rule, trust me.

The legs become weaker, your back starts to hurt, you get problems with your eyes, your memory begins to become less trustworthy.

The construction, the building of our body and our soul that was strong when we were young, begins to give way.

1 Our heavenly dwelling

Paul compared the problems he faced - physical problems included - as the destruction of his earthly home. Our body is like a tent to us for our earthly life.

Paul speaks about our whole being - our weak tent - collapsing slowly. But we hope for a heavenly building that God has ready for us.

An earthly tent and a heavenly building. The language that Paul uses, clarifies that our eternal home is stronger and more permanent than our present life.

But this does not mean that as Christians we look down on our present life in this body.

Greek and Roman thinkers in the days of Paul despised the body. One philosopher, Epictetus, said of himself. "Thou art a poor soul burdened with a corpse."

Seneca wrote, "I am a higher being and born for higher things than to be the slave of my body which I look upon as only a shackle put upon my freedom.... In so detestable a habitation dwells the free soul."

Paul does not use negative language about the body. The biblical view of humankind is not dualistic. It is not as if what is tangible - our skin - is less important than our mind, our soul, our spirit.

As Christians we do not look forward to losing our body - but to the renewal of our physical and psychological existence. Paul writes, "We do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what mortal is may be swallowed up by life."

In other words, "We don't want to float off to some disembodied existence. We don't want to be ghosts and spooks, haunting cemeteries to frighten people. We want to have bodies - real, substantial, eternal, immortal bodies."

"While we are still in this tent", Paul says, "we groan, being burdened". That is because of the many problems that he faces. And we can sometimes groan about all sorts of problems we face. The solution, however, is not an end to existence, and Christians do not expect to become bodiless spirits.

"Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, when we will be totally renewed. And this total makeover does not mean that our earlier existence will be destroyed, but that it will be renewed.

This renewal is not something bad to desire. It is our great hope. Not to escape from life, or to escape from ourselves. We will always carry the person that we are with us. But God will make all things new. And this includes you and I.

In the midst of the problems and the hassle of life, this is very encouraging. Your problems will never have the last word. God has the last word - and he is waiting to renew your life.

2 Invisible but guaranteed

As long as we are here, in our bodies, we have much to groan and complain about - because as Paul says, in this body we are 'away from the Lord.'

This does not mean that God is far from you; he is very near. But it can be so much better - and it will be much much better.

Today, we still live by faith - we do not see what we hope for. But one day we will see it, experience it, with our own eyes.

In the verses that we have read, we come across words like "We know", and "We are confident" and, "We are of good courage". For Paul there is no doubt; for us, there needs to be no doubt.

This certainty of the Great Makeover that is coming, is in God. "What is mortal will be swallowed up by life", says Paul. "He who has prepared us for this very thing is God."

God has prepared us for the renewal. Paul speaks about it in the past tense. God has already prepared us for it. He gave his Son for us, so that whoever believes in him has eternal life.

Well, if God prepared us for it, then nothing can change our hope. If He has already done it, who in the world can undo it. We look forward to something that is very sure. "God who has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, with raise us also with Jesus."

God has prepared us, and he "has given us the Spirit as guarantee."

God gave his Spirit to us as the guarantee of the coming makeover. The Holy Spirit lives in your fragile jar, in the feeble tent. He is part of your life, and He carries you through life, even through death, into eternal life with God.

It is as if you are going to renew your bathroom. And the engineer who will do it, has already delivered all the building materials - the tiles, the cement, the new shower, the taps, the basin. You already have it and you already rejoice in the renovation that will soon take place.

This expectation of better things to come does not make us despise today. Yes, today our life is fragile, but today's life is... with God. He is part of our life. So we live between tent and building with God who carries us through.

We are citizens of two worlds; and the result is, not that we despise this world, but that we see it enlightened with the rays of glory that are the reflection of the greater glory to come.

3 So we make it our goal to please him

We look forward with certainty and joy to that great moment when God asks us to hand in our tent in order to receive our perfect and permanent building from God.

But Paul comes also with a note of sternness. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ."

What does this mean? Is our eternal building not that secure after all?

Paul uses a metaphor that all people in Corinth knew very well. In the middle of the market in Corinth was a large stone elevation, called the bema, the judgment seat, where the pro-consul

of the city would sometimes judge between people. Visit Corinth today and in the ruins of the ancient city you can still see this judgment seat.

Paul himself had to appear before proconsul Lucius Julius Gallo on his judgment seat in that city of Corinth. In Acts 18 we read about this; Lucius heard complaints against Paul, but he dismissed the case.

The Corinthian bema, in the middle of the market, was also used for crowning the victorious athletes of the regular Corinthian games. The olympic judge at the bema bestowed rewards to the victors in the games - he did not punish the losers.

Likewise, this judgment seat of Christ is the reward ceremony for us who have finished running the Christian race of life. We have arrived. Will we now get a medal? Or two? Will we get flowers? Will we get praise from the Judge? Some will enter eternity to be with God with praise, others with some shame.

This judgment seat is not about heaven or hell; that has been settled at Golgotha for those who trust in him and who follow him. This judgment seat of Christ is more like a personal evaluation given to each individual by the Lord, regarding what we have done with our life.

But even though we know that through faith we are safe in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must not underestimate the gravity of this event.

Paul speaks in this regard about the fear of the Lord. This fear of the Lord is not the fear of a dog that fears a harsh whipping, but rather, the fear of a person who does not want to stand ashamed for his actions in front of the one who loves him so much.

That solemn moment, and the reward of getting wide access into life with God, must make us prioritize carefully. 'We make it our aim to please him', says Paul, 'for the fear of the Lord.'

To please God should be our goal, our true ambition. It is so easy to fill our lives with trivial pursuits - but all human pursuits must be submitted to this one primary goal - to please Him.

We will have to give account of how we served God, and how we treated other people. Have we shown love? Or were our relationships full of venom?

So we make it your goal to please him. Aim to please God today!

We must please God today. Today, in our earthly tent. As fragile jars of clay. This shows how important our life in this temporary tent is. The fact that it is temporary and feeble does not mean that we must not here and today build up our life.

Instead, we must do all to make our life and this world more into the place God wants it to be. Because it is this world that he will renew. It is your body that he will make better. It is your life that he will pick up and restore to perfection. So respect your life, Respect your body.

This for me also underlines that we must be careful not to spiritualize our view of the Christian life so much, that prayer becomes more important than planting a tree. Or that reading bible is more important than keeping your physical tent in good order. And singing hymns is not more important than enjoying a football match.

Conclusion

It pleases God that we live our life in anticipation of the perfect life to come. Our Christian morality, our lifestyle, is nothing but an anticipation of the perfect life to come. We live today as if the renewal of all things has already happened.

And God has created you, and saved you, and he perfects you, not for becoming a ghostly angel - but for being someone with a better, a perfect, a lasting body.

Jesus enjoyed meals with friends and enemies; he enjoyed being a carpenter; he knew about agricultural life; he lived a very full life. And God desires us to live our life to the fullest. With joy, and peace, with friends.

And with God at the heart of it, as the main guest in our tent.

Amen