

## **“STARING DEATH IN THE FACE”** **(2 Corinthians 5:1-8)**

I don't remember a lot of jokes I hear, but there are a handful of ones that have stuck with me. One is about the man who received a phone call from his doctor. The doctor said, "I have some bad news and some very bad news. Which do you want first?" "Well, I guess I'll take the bad news first," the man said. The doctor said, "You have 24 hours to live." "That's the bad news? What's the very bad news?" The doctor said, "I tried calling yesterday but you weren't home." I hope you never get a call like that, but in a humorous way it reminds us that we are all terminal. As Benjamin Franklin said, "The only sure things in life are death and taxes." Whether you live another 24 hours or another 50 years, we all have an appointment with death.

It's amazing, given how common death is, how rarely people talk about it. It's become more and more a trend to not even have a funeral service when someone dies. We seem to do whatever we can to avoid the subject of death. It's understandable because the Bible says that death is our ultimate enemy. Death always wins – we come up with all kinds of new ways to live longer and extend life, but in the end, death always gets us. Last year the world's oldest person – a lady in Japan – died at the age of 119. I don't know what her secret to longevity was, but it wasn't enough to stave off death.

In contrast to the world, the Bible speaks openly about death and encourages us to think about death and prepare for it. The irony is that it is only by facing the reality of death that we are able to live more fully. Or put another way, it's not until we're prepared to die that we're prepared to live. Today we come to another remarkable passage in 2 Corinthians 5 that has offered comfort and hope to countless Christians facing death.

We're looking at verses 1-8 of chapter five today, and they flow right out of what the Apostle Paul has been talking about in chapter four, where he describes his suffering as an apostle. When he first began his ministry, he knew it would not be easy, but he had no idea how difficult and challenging it would actually be. He didn't know that he would be shipwrecked, that he would be beaten with a whip five different times, that he would be stoned by an angry mob and left to die, that he would be imprisoned, and that forty men vowed not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

Things became so bad at one point that in chapter one he said his affliction beyond what he could bear – it was so intense that he thought he was going to die. In chapter 4 Paul said that he carried in his body the death of Jesus. He knew that any day could be his last day on earth.

How did Paul do it? What kept him going? Normally, when you're under threat of death you do everything possible to avoid it – you tone down your message, you blend in so as not to gain attention, you don't ruffle feathers. But the threat of death only seemed to make Paul stronger, bolder, and more confident. What was his secret?

His secret was that he lived every day with an eternal perspective. In 4:14 Paul took comfort in knowing that whatever happened to him in this life, God would one day raise him from the dead. Therefore he had nothing to lose – he could lay his life on the line for Christ knowing that no matter when he died or how he died, he would go be with the Lord.

With this perspective, Paul focused not so much on what was happening to his outer being, but what was happening in his inner being. In 4:16 he says, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” “My outer body might be falling apart, but my inner spirit is growing stronger every day.” He ends the chapter in 4:18 by saying, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Paul was willing to serve God fearlessly because his eyes were fixed on what was eternal.

This leads us now to chapter 5 where Paul continues talking about having an eternal perspective, and in verses 1-8 and talks specifically about death, and gives three reasons we can face death with confidence.

The first reason is the **assurance of eternal life**. In verse one Paul writes... “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.” Paul loves to use metaphors, and here he talks about our bodies being like a tent. He was a tentmaker by trade and many people in the first century used tents as they traveled or while they were waiting for their permanent homes to be built.

A tent is meant to be temporary – you stay in a tent when you’re camping and then you come home and live in your house. Tents are not meant to be lived in fulltime – they’re flimsy and fragile – they tear, they leak, the fabric gets worn down, and eventually they need to be replaced. Kind of sounds like the human body, doesn’t it? How many of you have tents that are wearing out? How many of you feel your tent sagging and drooping and falling apart? We can do things to keep our tent intact and functional – we can exercise and take medication and get surgeries to repair and replace what doesn’t work – we can live to be 119 – but eventually our tent will collapse.

The world tries to soften the blow of death by saying death is natural part of life – kind of like the circle of life in the Lion King. But death is not normal or natural – it was not part of God’s original design for creation – He created Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Life and live forever. When they sinned, Romans 5:12 says, sin entered the world, and the consequence of sin is death – and because every person sins, every person will die.

As believers we don’t deny the sting and reality of death, but we know that once our temporary tent on earth is destroyed, we will have an eternal house in heaven. One day our life on earth will end and our body will be laid in the ground or our ashes are placed in an urn, but when Christ returns, we will be given a new, eternal bodies. Paul describes it like this in 1 Corinthians 15:51b-52: “We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

There is much we don’t know about our eternal, heavenly body, but we get a glimpse at what it will be like by seeing what Jesus was like in His resurrection body...

- We know, first of all, that Jesus – after His resurrection – was recognizable – one time He was seen by over 500 people. They saw Him in a human body, still bearing the scars of nails in His hand. Likewise, in eternity we will know and recognize each other.
- We know that Jesus did not have the normal, human limitations He had before His resurrection – He was able to move quickly from place to place, and even walk through locked doors. In our earthly bodies we are able to travel only so far into space and so far underwater, but in our eternal bodies we are going to be free to explore and do all the things we can’t even dream about doing, all without limitation or restriction.

- We know that Jesus ate food, meaning there is continuity as we go from one life to another. Our resurrection bodies will be similar to our earthly bodies, but very different in that they will not be subject to decay or aging or disease. They will not fall apart like a tent.

How can Paul be so certain we will have a new, glorious body? Only one reason – because Jesus rose from the dead. Because Jesus conquered death – our greatest enemy – we know that we too will be raised from the dead, and our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like His glorious body. Our hope is not based on wishful thinking, but on Jesus’ resurrection. Because He rose from the dead, so will we.

The second reason we can face death confidently is the **anticipation of a better life**. There’s something about knowing where we’re going in the future that gives us a spring in our step – that gives us energy and vitality. Instead of dwelling on all the problems and difficulties of this life, we eagerly look forward to all that awaits us in the future. Verse 2-4 says... “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”

Paul switches metaphors a bit from tents and buildings to being clothed and unclothed. There’s a lot of debate as to what this metaphor means, but in the overall flow of what Paul is saying, it makes sense that being unclothed refers our temporary state on earth, and being clothed refers to our eternal state in heaven. It’s another way of saying we go from tent to a home.

Paul uses the word picture of clothing in 1 Corinthians 15:53 where he talks about our future resurrection, “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” Our earthly bodies are perishable – like perishable groceries, our bodies decay and perish. But when Christ returns, in the twinkling of an eye our perishable body will be made imperishable, and our mortal bodies will be raised to immortality.

Paul means the same thing here in 2 Corinthians 5, where the word picture is used of going from unclothed in our earthly bodies – which in our fallen state speaks of shame and humiliation and vulnerability – to being clothed in the splendor and glory of our heavenly body. Think of Adam and Eve in the garden. God created them to be clothed in glory, but when they sinned, they fell short of God’s glory. When they heard the sound of the Lord walking toward them, they did not want God to see them naked so they clothed themselves with fig leaves.

God graciously made garments of skin and clothed them, which taught them and all of their descendants that in order to dwell in God’s glory, we must be clothed in righteousness – and the good news of the gospel is that we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ – and we look forward to the day when Christ returns and we receive our eternal heavenly wardrobe – clothed in the glory and splendor of Christ.

But, Paul says, while we wait to be clothed in our heavenly bodies, we groan. Do you groan? The word “groan” can mean a painful cry of despair as you live with endure the aches and pains and sorrows of this life... Or, it can mean a longing or desire for something better. Paul may have both meanings in mind.

He talks about earthly groaning in Romans 8:22... “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” All creation is under the curse of sin and longs to be released the pain and suffering of the curse. Even unbelievers know that something is wrong with the world, and that it’s not working the way it was designed to work. As believers we long for that future glorious day when everything will be made right and we are free of pain and suffering.

Jesus likened our earthly groaning to that of a mother who is about to give birth to her baby. I hear that what she goes through is intense, and having witnessed it, I believe it. The pain is intense, but the moment her baby arrives, she forgets all her anguish and feels only joy and delight in holding her baby. As hard and painful as this life is, the moment we are with the Lord all our earthly troubles will be forgotten as we rejoice and celebrate our new, glorious life.

At the end of verse 4 Paul adds one more word picture... *“So what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.”* He uses a similar phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:54 when he says, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” Swallowing up has the idea of being totally consumed and destroyed, like in Numbers 16 when the earth opened up and swallowed the rebellious sons of Korah. On resurrection day, death will be completely swallowed up – completely destroyed – no more funerals, no more obituaries, no more cemeteries – for what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.

One of the marks that a person is truly born again is an eager anticipation of heaven – we look for, and long for, the soon return of the Lord – and this desire is placed within us by God Himself. Verse 5 says... “Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

This verse reminds us that God did not design us to just live 70 or 80 years here on earth and then die – He purposed for us to live with Him forever in heaven. The end goal of why God saved us is to completely transform us to look like Christ, and right now He is using the pain and adversity of life accomplish that. The completion of God’s purpose will be fulfilled on the day of our resurrection, when we stand before God complete in Christ.

To assure us that this will happen, and to create within us a desire for heaven, God has “given us the Holy Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” When life is hard, which it often is, the Spirit of God within us assures us that things will be okay in the end – that no matter what happens to us on earth, we know a better day is coming in glory.

The hope we have in the Holy Spirit is given to us as a “deposit.” The Greek word for “deposit” – *arabon* – was used in the first century to describe an engagement ring. When the girl you love says “yes” to marrying you, you give her a ring that declares your pledge to marry her. Until the day you actually walk down the aisle and say “I do,” the ring is a deposit or guarantee that you will keep your promise. In the same way, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives guarantees that Christ will keep His promise to fully redeem us.

We can face death confidently, first, because we have assurance of eternal life – that one day we will trade in our tent for a permanent home. Secondly, we can face death confidently because we have a God-given anticipation of a better life to come – a life where we will be forever clothed in glory. In verses 6-8 we see a third reason we can face death confidently – and that is the **joy of being with the Lord forever.**

Paul writes... “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

The Greek word for “confident” means to be of good cheer, to be happy and joyful – to approach life optimistically. Paul says in verse 6 that we can be joyful and confident even though we are presently in our earthly bodies and away from the Lord. “Away from the Lord” he means that we are not yet resurrected and with the Lord in heaven. That’s what we long for and anticipate.

Until then, verse 7 says, we walk by faith, not by sight – which means that right now we can’t see the Lord and all the glory of heaven. Right now live by faith and hope in God’s promises. We enjoy wonderful fellowship with the Lord, but it’s not the same as actually being in His presence – that is what we long for. At the moment we die, our faith will become sight, as we see the Lord in His glory and are finally with Him, enjoying the level of intimacy we have always longed for.

Until then we must not focus our eyes on what can be seen and experienced here on earth, but on all that is promised us in heaven. Faith is what kept men like Abraham and Moses and David going – God made promises to them, but they did not live to see these promises fulfilled. They simply believed what God told them, and kept their eyes fixed on eternity.

Living by faith is not always easy. At one time or another, every Christian has bouts with doubt. When we can’t see something, we can wonder if it’s really real. This was doubting Thomas’ problem... “Jesus, show me your nail scarred hands, then I will believe.” Jesus graciously showed Thomas His hands, but then He said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Paul knew that if he focused on the hardships and suffering of this life, he would live in constant despair, but by keeping his focus on the future glory of heaven, he was able to live with a sense of peace and joy.

Verse 8 is a verse I quote at almost every funeral service. Paul says, “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Paul had a great perspective: Whether I live or I die, I’m good with either. I actually prefer to die because that means I’ll be with the Lord – but if I continue to live another 20 or 30 years here on earth, that’s good too because I can tell more people about Jesus.” He puts it like this in Philippians 1:21... “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” This perspective takes the fear out of death. We may not like the process of dying, but the end result of dying is to be with the Lord.

Verse 8 brings up a topic we’ve not yet talked about, but you may have been thinking about – and that is: What happens to us the moment we die? We know that our bodies will be resurrected when Christ returns, but what happens between the time of death and the future resurrection?

To start with, verse 8 assures us that when we die, we go to be with the Lord. Our body is buried or cremated, but our soul – the inner part of us – goes directly into to the presence of the Lord – while our body awaits it’s future resurrection. The question then is: If we don’t have a body until the future resurrection, what kind of existence do we have in heaven until the resurrection? Are we just spirits that float around waiting for a body?

Theologians refer to this as the intermediate state – the state between death and the future resurrection. It’s a really fascinating subject, and we don’t have all the answers we’d like, but what we do know is that when we die our soul – our spirit – will go *directly* into the presence of the Lord. This eliminates the popular notion that there is some kind of purgatory where Christians who need a little more refining are sent to purge their sins – like some kind of remedial school to get them ready for heaven.

If anyone needed purgatory, it was the thief on the cross who was saved seconds before his death. Jesus told him, “Today you will be with me in paradise” – not three months from now, or three years from now – today. What makes us fit for heaven is not our righteousness, but being clothed in Christ’s righteousness.

We also know that in the intermediate state we will be fully conscience and fully aware. In Revelation 6 we see martyred saints in heaven, in the intermediate state, crying out to God to bring them justice. They are very much alive, fully conscience, fully aware, talking and communicating.

This eliminates another errant teaching known as “soul sleep.” The idea of soul sleep is that in the intermediate state our souls exist in a state of unconsciousness. When we die, we enter a sleep-state, unaware of anything until our bodies are resurrected. People who teach this point to verses that describe people who have died as “fallen asleep.” But this “falling asleep” is not talking about the soul, but the body. The body when dead looks asleep. At death the soul, the inner person, goes immediately to be with the Lord. The body, the outer person, sleeps and decays until it is resurrected into a glorified form at the coming of the Lord.

If our soul goes directly to be with the Lord, what kind of existence will we have in the intermediate state without a body? Are we just going to float around like ghosts? Let me offer two trains of thought to consider. One is that that heaven doesn’t run on a clock like we do on earth. We think of someone like Abraham waiting around 4000 years to get a new body, but it may be that the time between going to heaven and the final resurrection is almost instantaneous. It happens just like that. That’s one thing to consider.

Another thing to consider is the idea that we may have an intermediate body to serve as a bridge to our final resurrected body. Moses and Elijah appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration in bodily form, even though they didn’t yet have their permanent resurrection body. In Luke 16 Jesus talked about the rich man who died and went to hades – the counterpart to paradise – and he showed all the characteristics of having a body – he was able to talk and he wanted water to cool his tongue – he had eyes to see and ears to hear – and his body, of whatever kind, was sensitive to pain. There are some other examples we don’t have time to get into, but it’s possible that we will have some kind of intermediate body or that our souls will in some way have the function of a body.

There are tons of questions we have about the afterlife, but God has given us the information He wants us to know, and He’s given us enough promises about our future life to radically change the way we view our present life. It’s like the old hymn says, “Who can mind the journey when the road leads home?” A message like this hits all of us in different ways. Some of you may be near the end of your journey, and the time of your transition is near, and you need hope. Some of you may have lost loved ones in the Lord recently, and need assurance. Others of you may be going through a really rough time right now – you’re not getting physically beat up like Paul – but the circumstances of life are beating on your pretty good, and you need motivation to keep going. We have it all right here in this passage.

In the end, this message is for all of us because all of us are terminal. It’s only a matter of time, unless the Lord returns, that you will face death. God’s Word to you today is that you can face death with confidence, with anticipation, and with joy – knowing that the moment your earthly tent collapses, you are with the Lord – and one day your tent will be replaced with a permanent, eternal, glorified body. When you focus on all that awaits you in the future, you can stare death straight in the face and live life fully until the Lord returns.