

From Mortality to Eternity
II Corinthians 4:16-5:10

Time marches on, in spite of our best efforts. Today, we Americans conduct our century-old, semi-annual ritual of clock setting, thinking we are doing some real good by depriving ourselves of an hour of sleep. A wise old native American is said to have made this comment about Daylight Saving Time: "Only a white man would believe that you could cut a foot off the top of a blanket and sew it to the bottom of a blanket and have a longer blanket." And in fact, science shows that even such minor alterations in sleep patterns can result in everything from lost productivity to an increase in the number of heart attacks.

But we don't just fiddle with clocks to try to stop the march of time, do we? Ladies buy cosmetics to cover up wrinkles, and guys get hair-plug treatments to get a little thicker on top. We hit the gym in quest of flatter stomachs and lace up our running shoes to get our hearts in shape. And yet the days and years tick by, marked by class reunions and anniversaries and birthday parties. When we look in the mirror, many of us can't deny that, as Paul says in 4:16, our outer man is decaying.

So, how do we respond to this unmistakable reality? If we do what the culture encourages, if we continue to think that youth and strength and physical vitality are all that really matters, we'll be increasingly discouraged as the days go by. Indeed, as the aches and pains of our ailments increase, and as our friends and loved ones pass on before us, we may come to wonder why, if God loves us so much, He has left us in this world to suffer.

Or we can listen to what Paul is saying in the first part of chapter 5. Instead of trying to find some mythical fountain of youth, we can face the reality that our earthly houses, our physical bodies simply aren't permanent, at least in this world. The fact is, as he says in verse 4, our bodies are mortal, a fact obvious to everyone who attended the Whispers in the Cedars tour of Wintergreen Cemetery here in Port Gibson this weekend. All those stones stand in mute reminder that the bodies of the people they commemorate lie beneath them. Or as Paul puts it in verse 1, all their earthly houses have been dissolved, torn down.

But this fact doesn't lead Paul into despair, because he knows that death is not the end of our story. Far from regretting the decay and eventual loss of his earthly body, in verses 6 and 8 Paul says that he is actually looking forward to being at home with the Lord.

And this is true for all Christians when our spirits are separated from our bodies. The spirits of all those who love and trust the Lord Jesus do go to be with Him at that very moment. And how do we know this? Well, when the thief who was dying on the cross next to Jesus professed faith in Him and in His coming kingdom, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." When this life is over, all Christians will in fact be at home with the Lord in a spiritual way.

But Paul has an even greater blessing in mind. For in verse 4, he talks about death as meaning that our spirits are somehow "unclothed." The presence of our disembodied spirits in Heaven is thus not God's final plan for us – instead He desires that we be clothed yet again, not this time with mortal bodies, but with immortal ones. Or as Paul puts it in verse 1, our spirits were meant to live in a building from God, eternal in the heavens.

So, when will that happen? When will all those people in Wintergreen Cemetery be reunited with their spirits? That's what Paul explains in more detail in our responsive reading from I Thessalonians 4. On the day when Christ returns to earth, the dead in Christ will rise from their graves. Then all of God's people will rise into the heavens to accompany Jesus as He returns triumphantly to rule and reign over all the earth. In short, all God's people will be with Jesus forever, not floating around on the clouds, but in transformed physical bodies on a transformed earth.

But how do we know all that is true? How can we be so hopeful today, in the face of the death and decay that we see all around us? Well, what did Paul tell the Thessalonians? "We believe that Jesus died and rose again; so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have died believing in Him." It is the unshakable fact of the resurrection of Christ that is the ground of our hope, and the reason that Paul could look forward to the Day of Resurrection.

So, if we know we will one day live in eternal, intimate fellowship with God, if we know our bodies are destined to be transformed and renewed, we should not lose heart, as Paul says in 4:16, regardless of the pain and disease that plague us and our loved ones today. In their current form aren't going to last forever, so maybe preserving their condition shouldn't be our top priority.

Instead, in the light of Christ's immanent return, Paul says we should be more concerned with what we are doing with our bodies. For chapter 5 verse 10 reminds us that when Jesus returns to the earth in triumph, He will do what all kings do – bring justice to the world. And Paul says that He will judge all of us based on what we have done in our bodies, whether good or bad.

Now wait a minute, preacher. I thought we Presbyterians believed in salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. I thought that, by His cross, Jesus has paid the penalty for all the sins of all His people throughout all time. I thought that we Christians didn't have to worry about condemnation anymore, and that the judgment seat of Christ was only for those who denied and rejected Him.

Well, all that is in fact true. Christ has not only suffered the death penalty for all who trust in Him. He has also perfectly kept the law on behalf of all His people. When we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, all His people will be clothed in His righteousness alone – the only hope anyone can have of salvation.

But none of that removes our obligation to live for Christ in this world, after the point of our salvation. After all, Jesus taught the Parable of the Talents, didn't He? You remember that story from Matthew 25. A master left three of his servants with some money to invest for him. When he returned, he praised two of the servants who had labored diligently on his behalf. But he condemned the wicked and lazy servant who refused to work for him.

But that's not all. Later in the same chapter, Jesus said that when He comes again, He will divide up all the nations of the world as sheep are separated from goats. On that day, He said He will praise the faithful because they welcomed and fed and clothed and visited those who are His brothers and sisters. He also said that those who refuse to help their Christian brothers and sisters will have to depart from Him forever.

This sort of Kingdom work is what Paul has in mind when he says in 5:9 that he wants to be pleasing to the Lord, whether in this life or in the life to come. It is this sort of consistent living for Christ that is

involved with his warning to the Thessalonians to live in the light of day, instead of in the darkness of sin, living only for ourselves. In short, after we have been saved, we are to live in this world with the next world always in mind, knowing that Jesus could return at any moment.

Now, we have to admit that, according to the world's standards, none of this makes any sense. According to everything we can perceive with our senses, the inexorable decay of our bodies should lead us not to hope, but to discouragement. The apparent finality of death should lead us not to joy, but to despair.

But that's why Paul says what he does in 5:7 – we walk by faith, not by sight. It is our faith in Christ's resurrection that gives us hope that death is not the end for us or for our loved ones. It is our faith in Christ's return that leads us to live every day for His glory and the good of others. And it is our certainty of eternal life that puts all the pleasures and the problems of this world into the proper perspective. It is knowing that all our afflictions in this world are but for a moment that gives us strength not to lose heart. For in the light of the eternal weight of glory in the presence of God, the passing troubles of this world simply to fade into insignificance.

But the best news of all is that we don't have to muster up all this faith and courage on our own. No, in 5:5 Paul says that God Himself is preparing us in this life for our eternal transformation. And He does this by living within all who trust in Him in the Person of His Holy Spirit. In spite of our troubles, and sometimes because of them, God's Spirit is even now burning away from within us all those things that are displeasing to Him, all that sin and selfishness that leads to so much misery in this world. Yes, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is what Paul calls an earnest, a pledge, a down-payment on the even more obvious presence of God that we will enjoy in the life to come.

So, yes, sometimes while we walk this pilgrim pathway, clouds may overspread the sky. Yes, we may groan under the burdens of life in this sinful world. But as we walk by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, as we live for the One Who died for us, we can be sure that we will see Jesus on that day when He comes again. And that will make it all worthwhile.