

May 30, 2021

HOPE, THE JUDGMENT, AND COURAGEOUS OBEDIENCE

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

*(11 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)*

It's odd what sticks in your mind when you are a kid. I grew up with my parents taking me to Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Arlington, Kentucky. My dad had promised the Lord that if he gave him a son, he'd make sure his son was in church every Sunday, and, well, I came along, and Dad kept his word. If I wasn't sick, I was at church. There are many things that I remember from being there. I remember the men smoking out front between Sunday school and the service. I honestly grew up thinking that's what the fifteen minute break between the two was for—and maybe it was! I remember that the Sunday morning choir was just made up of some people deciding they would go sing in the choir loft, and if you were near my Aunt Dorothy as the service was about to start, there was a good chance she was going to grab you by the arm and march you right up to the choir loft with her. And, amazingly, one thing that stuck in my mind was a sermon that I never got to hear.

After we moved to eastern Kentucky, my family would take weekend trips back to the western side of the state every once in a while. This was because both sets of grandparents still lived there. And those trips would always consist of us leaving on a Friday after we got out of school and Dad got off of work and then us coming back Sunday afternoon after church. Well, on one of these weekend trips, our family gathered at the church only to see that they had an evangelist preaching that Sunday. Now, in my youth the traveling evangelist was like a rock star. No little boy aspired to be a pastor, but if you could be a traveling evangelist, that seemed like a glorious path down which to travel. You'd live a life of going from one town to the next, preaching a few times, being more impressive than the local pastor who was preaching all the time because you got to bring a handful of only your best messages, gathering an offering from the church, and then heading out of town to go somewhere else and do it again. So, I was pretty excited there was an evangelist there that day. I even remember his name. It was Don Short, which is ironic because he was quite tall. I now feel certain that was a joke everyone made to him as he traveled church to church in those days. And I remember that he had a mustache, which only added to your coolness in the eighties.

What I don't remember is his sermon that morning. But I do remember what he said at the end of the service. It was after all the end of service stuff we did in those days. He was trying to get as many of us as he could to come back that night. And if you grew up like I did, you know why he would attempt to persuade people to come. Notoriously the Sunday night crowd was about a third of what had been there on Sunday morning—at best. We used to say that if you wanted to see who was serious about the Lord as you looked over the congregation on a Sunday morning, just come back and see who came that night. And so, in his pitch to get us to come back he said, "Tonight I'm going to answer a question that many of you may have wondered: 'What happens to a Christian at the moment we die?'" And with that, he had me. I remember being so gripped that I asked my dad if we could alter our traveling schedule. But we couldn't.

So I never heard that sermon. I don't know what he said. I don't know what text he used to try to answer that question. But over the years as I grew in my understanding of the Bible, I've often wondered if he used the text that we're looking at this morning. The reason I say that is because this text answers that question and so many others that are crucial for us to understand as believers. It answers what our ultimate hope as believers is, why we need a resurrected body, what happens to us when we die, how we know the resurrection is coming, and what we do until then. And that's how I want to frame our outline of this text—in a question/answer format. We'll start with that first question I noted: what is our ultimate hope as believers?

### **What is our ultimate hope as believers? The resurrection of our bodies**

Prior to our text, Paul has been talking about the reality that our bodies are like “jars of clay” (4:7) and are “wasting away” (4:16). And all of that raises the question, what then if our bodies are destroyed? I mean, Paul seems to be saying that everything he's doing in obedience to Jesus is worth it, but he's survived to this point. Is he actually contemplating if one of these beatings actually kills him or one of these shipwrecks leads to his drowning? What happens if our bodies are destroyed? Paul answers in verse 1, writing, “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.”

Now, what may be confusing about this is that I just talked a lot about our bodies, and yet Paul doesn't seem to be talking about that at all. Instead, he's talking about tents, earthly homes, buildings, and houses in the heavens. What's going on? Well, it's much easier to understand what Paul is saying if we recognize that he's using a metaphor. Since our earthly bodies are temporary (destroyed at death), Paul compares them to a tent. However, since the bodies we will receive at the return of Christ (our resurrection bodies) are permanent, Paul compares them to a building—much like the tabernacle and temple (see Mark 14:57 and John 2:19-21).

And if you understand that, then you can see that he's saying in verse 1 that even if our bodies are destroyed so that we die, we have a hope beyond this mortal body. God will give us a resurrection body at the return of Christ. This is the believer's ultimate hope. Our ultimate longing isn't to get away from a body but to get a better, immortal body. That's what Paul talks about at the end of verse 4 when he says, “Not that we would be unclothed [without a body], but that we would be further clothed [get our resurrection body], so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (v. 4).

So let me spell this out clearly for us. Sometimes as believers we can talk as if our greatest hope is to be away from our bodies and with the Lord in a body-less existence. And I'll say something about the good of this in a second. But that is not our ultimate hope. As believers, our ultimate hope is that one day Jesus will return, and when he returns, all believers—whether they are alive at his coming or have died prior to this coming—will receive resurrection bodies that are not tainted by pain, sin, death, or decay. And the whole creation itself will be made new at that time, set free from the curse of Genesis 3, and we will dwell with God in a perfect world, in our

glorified bodies forever. That's the ultimate hope for the believer, and that's why we pray for the return of Christ.

But this raises another question someone could ask, namely, why do we need resurrected bodies? And the answer is that our present bodies are frail and decaying

### **Why do we need resurrected bodies? Our present bodies are frail and decaying**

The reality is you're probably only asking this question if you're under thirty. The rest of us know exactly why we need resurrected bodies. Ours are wasting away. Paul writes about our experience in these decaying bodies ("tents") when he writes, "For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. 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" (vv. 2-4).

You may have noticed that Paul changes his metaphor here. He started off with the metaphor of a housing structure. This decaying body is like a tent, but the body we'll get at the resurrection is a building. Now, he switches to picturing the body in terms of clothing. Being in this body is being clothed, being without this body is like being naked or unclothed, and getting our resurrection bodies would be being further clothed. So Paul isn't leaving the topic he began in verse 1, he's just changing his metaphors.

Thus, if we understand his metaphors, the argument is clear. Paul tells us why we need resurrected bodies. It's because as long as we're in this decaying body, we groan, longing to have a body that's not impacted by sin, death, and decay. We groan, being burdened to have a resurrection body that is unaffected by death. Our bodies in this age are wasting away. It's been said that you'd have to fall out of a tree in your twenties to re-create the kinds of ways you injure yourself just sleeping in your sixties. Solomon described aging in terms of losing stability in your legs, starting to hunch forward, losing teeth, your sight going on you, your hearing disappearing, losing sexual desire, being afraid of heights, and losing the ability to sleep well. If you want to know why we need resurrected bodies, just talk to those who were listening to that list and nodding. We long for resurrected bodies because we know we were made for something more than we're witnessing in the decaying of our bodies, and we're right. As believers, we're waiting for the resurrection. And this brings us to another question our text answers. How can we be sure we'll get a resurrected body? And the answer is that we already have the Spirit as a down payment.

### **How can we be sure we'll get a resurrected body? We already have the Spirit**

Paul *knows* the resurrection is coming. He writes in verse 1, "For we *know* that if our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." But how does Paul *know* this? He tells us in verse 5, "He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee."

We shouldn't read this "guarantee" simply as God telling it'll happen—though he's done that. He's actually given us the firstfruits (a down payment) of what is to come in the Spirit. In other words, the "'guarantee' is not a verbal pledge but the actual beginning of the thing promised. . . . The Spirit is *the beginning experience here and now of the life of the age to come.*"<sup>1</sup> Everything that the resurrection promises is already being experienced in part in our lives now because we have the Holy Spirit. He is a down payment of what is to come.

This means that every time you see the effect of the Holy Spirit indwelling you, you can say, "This is a reminder to me that the resurrection is coming, and I'll be raised to life." What a blessing! But all this talk of resurrection raises another question as well, namely, what happens if we die before the resurrection. If death marks the destruction of this body, but we don't get our resurrection bodies until the return of Christ, what happens if we die before the resurrection? And the short answer is that we'll be with the Lord.

### **What if we die before the resurrection? We'll be with the Lord**

This is the question I was so eager to know sitting in that pew as a child. If our ultimate hope is the resurrection body, and the resurrection body won't be ours until Jesus returns, what happens if I die before Jesus returns? Paul answers in verses 6-8, writing, "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

Paul has spoken about being in this tent and one day having a building. He's used the metaphor of being clothed and being further clothed. But now he notes that we can be "at home with the Lord" while being "away from the body." What's is this body-less existence he's talking about? It's what theologians have called the intermediate state. And the reason it's called the intermediate state is because it refers to a temporary state for the believer that is between this decaying body and our resurrected body.

This text teaches us that when you and I die we will be absent from our bodies. And we won't have our resurrected bodies until the return of Christ. But in that time we will be at home with the Lord. This means that when you and I die our soul goes to be in the presence of the Lord immediately. And that will continue until Christ returns, we receive resurrection bodies, and the earth itself will be made new.

And notice that Paul says this is preferable to our present state. He says in verse 8 that we would *rather* be away from the body and at home with the Lord. To be in God's presence, even bodiless, is better than what we know now. But it's not ultimate. Remember back in verse 4 Paul says that it's not that we want to be "unclothed" [i.e. bodiless] but "further clothed" [i.e. given our resurrected bodies]. So there's a progression. At death we will indeed be (at we often

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<sup>1</sup> Dane Ortlund, *2 Corinthians*, ESV Expository Commentary, 467.

say) in a better place. We will leave this body behind and our souls will be in the Lord's presence. That will be glorious. But we'll wait for something even more glorious when the Lord raises our bodies in glory, makes the heavens and earth new, and we will live forever in a new creation in new resurrected bodies forever. That means that everything that lies on the other side of death for us—if we're in Christ—is only better.

And this raises one final question. What do we do until that day that we're with the Lord?

### **What do we do until that day? We courageously walk by faith, aiming to please God**

In answer to the question about what we do until the day we die and go to be with the Lord or Christ returns and we receive our resurrection bodies, Paul gives a number of answers. I want to note two of them briefly and then dwell for a bit on the third. First, Paul reminds us that we walk courageously. Twice Paul mentions courage, writing in verse 6, "So we are always of good courage" and again in verse 8, "Yes, we are of good courage." This is simply a positive way of repeating what he's said throughout these chapters as he's noted against and again that we shouldn't lose heart. The opposite of losing heart is having good courage and pressing on. So, first, Paul reminds us of what we've seen repeatedly. Since the resurrection is coming, courageously obey the Lord in this life.

Second, he reminds us that we obey, walking by faith, not by sight. He says in verse 7, "We walk by faith, not by sight." In other words, as we walk with our hope in the resurrection, we're hoping in something we don't see. What we see is wasting away, and what we hope for—that is eternal—we won't lay our eyes on until Christ's return. So, Paul acknowledges that the obedience of a believer is grounded in our faith that what God has said is true and trustworthy. We walk by faith.

Finally, though, Paul tells us that we must be those who "make it our aim to please" the Lord (v. 9). He writes, "So whether we are home or away [i.e. with the Lord or still here], we make it our aim to please him" (v. 9). Then, he gives us the reason why, writing, "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" (v. 10).

Now this verse can be problematic for us because it suggests that believers are standing before the Lord in judgment and receiving what is due for our works. How does this work? Well, some have suggested that it's not referencing a final judgment scene but a scene of judgment where believers are given rewards. In other words, we all get heaven, but some will get greater rewards than others, and this is referring to a judgment where that is sorted out. But I don't think that works here. And the main reason I don't think that works is because of the mention of doing evil. In the Bible, believers aren't categorized as doing evil. That's a designation that is given to unbelievers. For example, in John 5:28-29 we read, "An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." Clearly those who have done good are believers, while those who have done evil are unbelievers. Also, we read in 3

John 11, “Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” Again, we can see the clear and sharp division. Those who do evil are unbelievers. Therefore, the mention of good or evil deeds here makes me believe this is referring to the judgment where all men—believers and unbelievers—will gather before the Lord in judgment.

But if this is the final judgment, then why are works being mentioned here? After all, we’re saved by faith alone and not by works, right? Yes, that is right. But in every judgment scene we have in the Bible our works are brought up as evidence of our judgment. Think, for example, of Matthew 25 where the sheep are told to enter the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. And then, after pronouncing their judgment, the Lord mentions their works. He says that they fed him when he was hungry, visited him when he was in prison, clothed him when he was naked, etc. Why mention those works, because they’re vindicating evidence that the sheep really do belong to him. We’re saved by faith alone, but saving faith never comes alone. It always produces obedience in the lives of God’s people. Remember, the prophets foretold that God would give us his Spirit so that he might cause us to walk in his ways. If we’re not being caused to walk in obedience, then we have no reason to believe we have the Spirit. And if we don’t have the Spirit, we don’t belong to Christ.

So what Paul is telling us is that in light of the reality that our deeds will be brought up on the day of judgment, we should strive to obey God in all things. Aim to please him. Repent of sin, pursue obedience, and live a life in which you make it your aim to please God in all things. If that doesn’t characterize you, you may well be among the many to whom the Lord says, “Depart from me; I never knew you” on that day.

When Jesus Christ, after his dying on the cross for our sins, walked out of the tomb in a resurrection body, there was more going on than we may have realized. Aside from doing everything necessary for our forgiveness and so that we might have eternal life, he was picturing the body that we would have at our own resurrection. So, in light of that, let’s courageously obey, walking by faith, and aiming to please God as that great day approaches. Amen.