

2 Corinthians 4:7 – 5:10

Introduction

Following the teaching on Paul's method, subject and experience in Christian service, he adopts a more sombre mood as he describes the cost of Christian service on his body and soul. He looks forward to the future – death, which has been hastened by all he has gone through in service – and then he comes back into the sunlight, all the glory yet to be revealed.

He sees everything done in due proportion, as he thinks of it as temporary adversity in the light of eternity. He considers the course which nature takes, the changes death brings and the courage faith shows. This is very practical teaching as we look at life, project ourselves forward a few years, and we ask “and then what?”

The course which nature takes

Our outward man is perishing; **outwardly we are wasting away** (2 Corinthians 4:16). This stark statement is true of all. Nothing makes us conscious of this as much as the burdens we bear and the battles which seem to be beyond our strength. Our exertions are taking their toll.

We have this treasure in jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7) – cheap bits of pottery, easily broken and not repairable. We are frail, vulnerable and feeble people, hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. Christian service takes its toll on our body, soul and spirit.

Paul reminds us of how weak, limited and often close to death he was. What was true for Paul is true today. There are many pastoral problems in churches, and Paul could not bear it forever. His service made great demands spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Such demands can lead to permanent disability and can shorten life.

The physical body completely renews itself every seven years, but there comes a time when we run out of spare parts. C.f. Jethro's advice to Moses to get assistance to sort out the problems with the people, or else Moses would be worn down from such a heavy burden (Exodus 18:17ff).

But there is another side to the story. While outwardly we are perishing, inwardly we have new life in Christ, spiritual power from Christ's resurrection life, which is being renewed day by day. Physically getting weaker; spiritually getting stronger. This is why Paul was not crushed when he was in adversity and despair. He knew he had not been abandoned, and would not be destroyed. The life of the risen Christ was seen at work in his body, strengthening and sustaining him in his weakness. He might have been knocked down, but not knocked out.

This is what happens when the life of God is in the soul of man. God is the only explanation of what Paul did, said and lived. He carried on because he was a Christian, growing spiritually, experiencing more and more of God's ways, knowing

His word better, becoming more like His Son, being increasingly useful in His service, conforming more and more to His will. **They that wait upon the Lord renew their strength** (Isaiah 40:31). For the Christian there is always progress and development – unlike the non-Christian, for whom advancing years just brings restriction. They are able to do less; they have no inner life in touch with God, and no bright prospect beyond. As their eyes close on the light of this world, they will not open on the light of heaven. All they worked for and valued will slip from their grasp. They will discover that the world has nothing to offer in the face of death, except blank despair. “The decay of the outward man in the godless is a melancholy spectacle for it is decay of everything” (J.Denney).

On the other hand, for the Christian, advancing years cannot touch the life which is hidden with Christ in God. All is so worthwhile. He sees the trials of life, but they are a light affliction, only momentary, leading to an eternal glory, which far outweighs them all.

*“Only one life, Twill soon be past
Only what’s done for Jesus will last”*

*“We are building day by day..
Little builders all are we
Building for eternity.”*

Is the Christian a fool? Wait till old age comes. Wait till death is knocking at the door. Wait till he is face to face with eternity. Then you will see who the fool is. The unbeliever has nothing; the Christian has everything.

The change which death brings

Now Paul turns to the fact of death, and deals with it with Christian realism and truthfulness. Our earthly tent is going to be taken down (2 Corinthians 5:1); life in this world will end. “Death is the ultimate statistic. One in one die” (G.B.Shaw). Yet so often we find the subject is taboo – people don’t want to talk about it for they don’t know how to handle it. Someone has commented that whereas death used to be openly discussed in society, and the subject of sex was considered obscene, now the position is reversed.

Paul’s use of the word “tent” σκηνος is a very suitable term because the Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage. We have no fixed city on earth. Our present body is only for our earthly journey, but not suitable for our permanent heavenly home. The camper on holiday “roughs it” in his tent. So the Christian is roughing it in his temporary dwelling of the present body while on earth. This is going to be exchanged for a new resurrection body – **a building from God, not built by human hands**. The fabric will be different from our present body, and all weakness and suffering will be gone. It will be suited to heaven and eternity.

Paul already spoke of the resurrection body in an earlier letter (1 Corinthians 15:35ff), explaining that it is connected with, yet different from, the present body, in the way that a seed is connected with, yet different from, the resulting flower. It will be a

spiritual body, not a natural one. It will be incorruptible, immortal, powerful and glorified, as opposed to our present corruptible, mortal, weak and dishonourable one.

If the Second Coming takes place before we die, we shall at once change one body for the other. Otherwise, for a temporary period we shall be unclothed as disembodied spirits. The dead in Christ are in that intermediate state now, awaiting the resurrection morning. They are “with Christ in Paradise”, as Jesus told the dying thief (Luke 23:43). They are in a conscious and blissful but not final state. They are awaiting the goal of bodily redemption at the Resurrection, when Christ returns (Romans 8:23). The glorious future awaiting us is not for disembodied spirits, but for the whole person. We will need bodies to preserve our individuality and enable us to recognise each other in glory.

Paul eagerly awaits and anticipates the new body; therefore he yearns for the second coming when this will take place.

Can we be sure of all this? Paul grounds his case on two things: (1) The resurrection of Christ Himself, **The one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus** (2 Corinthians 4:14), and (2) The gift of the Holy Spirit is a **deposit, guaranteeing what is to come** (2 Corinthians 5:5). He is the down payment, the promise that all the rest will follow. A similar Greek word in modern Greek is used for an engagement ring – the promise of future marriage and complete union.

What a glorious prospect to be in Christ. What comfort when we mourn the Christian dead. What hope for our own future?

The courage which faith shows

Whether we like it or not, the years are going by. Youth – middle age – old age – the life beyond, like a conveyor belt that is not going to stop, and we cannot get off.

*“Each night we pitch our moving tent
A day’s march nearer home.”*

In the present life we have the presence of the Lord. He is present to our faith but not to our sight. As far as sight is concerned, we are absent from the Lord. And there is that eager longing to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord, seeing Him face to face (2 Corinthians 5:8). And one day in God’s good time we shall indeed be present with the Lord and absent from this present body. So how do we face the rest of our time here?

We can face the future with courage and confidence, walking by faith, with confidence that we shall see Him. There is no need to despair. Go a step at a time each day putting confidence in His grace and power though we do not actually see Him. Face all that life brings because our ultimate destiny is secure. When we have problems and struggles, we can have confidence we are in God’s hands and He knows the future. “He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (Jim Elliot). It is good to walk with someone we love in the darkness, but even better when we break through into the noonday sunshine.

We should be careful as well as confident. **Make it our goal to please Him** (2 Corinthians 5:9), because we are going to appear before the judgement seat of Christ. Not that our salvation is at risk, but our service and stewardship is going to be assessed and commended and rewarded, or exposed and laid bare. That includes our motives, desires, intentions, efforts and achievements. We need to see our lives and make our decisions in the light of eternity. What will please Him? What will serve His interests? How will this all look when face to face with Him in eternity?

So we look at the future with courage. There is no need for the Christian to go quietly downhill, but to go triumphantly up to glory. On his deathbed Brownlow North spoke to a young army officer: “You are young and in good health, and have the prospect of rising in the army. I am a dying man. But if the Bible is true, I would not change places with you for the whole world. I used to have great terror of death, but that has quite gone from me. I have no fear now. I am resting on Christ. I am dying on this text – ‘The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin’.”