

Heaven

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[0 : 00] Beginning of the year, still for us, isn't it? We look forward to the year ahead. And I'll begin with an observation as we think about the year ahead.

That one of the great challenges faced by all people, at all times, everywhere, is looking to the future positively.

Looking towards the future with hope. One of the greatest challenges that all people face. As time goes by, often as age increases, many people find that disappointment and disillusionment creeps in.

Again, experience in this world can bring so much difficulty, so much loss, so much struggle, that bitterness or resignation or resentment, that can become the default mode.

Often it can be the case among older people, but it's not confined to them. It can be true as well of Christian people. Because of hard circumstances, maybe the things that have happened to them that are outside of their control, or perhaps as a result of their own sins.

[1 : 35] But not necessarily. Sometimes through no fault of their own, the burden weighs down. And leaving aside the godless, my observation would be, you can see whether or not you agree with me, my observation would be that quite often Christian people too operate with a manner of mild depression or anxiety.

And although there are lots of exceptions, perhaps those confer the rule. Now, the only satisfactory response as followers of Christ, as children of a heavenly father, is to recognize that our lives are all ahead of us.

Whatever has happened in the past, whatever is happening now, whatever we face at the moment, for believers in Christ, the future is bright.

And we need not doubt that the path that has been appointed to us, including all the details of our lives, is God's allowance and its confidence in God's overriding intention, God's overriding good intention towards each of us personally as individuals.

With respect to all the difficulties and all the challenges that may come our way on life's journey, that secures us in peace and joy.

[3 : 14] Now, that doesn't mean that everything will be plain sailing. And if we look, when we come to look at 2 Corinthians chapter 5, we'll see that there's an enormous tension running through the passage.

It's the tension between our present experience and our ultimate future, our ultimate destiny. It's the contrast between the conditions in which we now live and the improvements that are coming.

The apostle speaks, verse 1, of the tent. The tent that is our earthly home. So the Bible is a collection of writings that are very realistic.

And here he's speaking about our mortality, facing us head on with the fact that we will die. Our earthly home, he says, is but a tent.

Our bodies, indeed, the whole environment is transitory. It's temporary. As the tent gets older, so it becomes worn and the canvas tears.

[4 : 37] Tent poles get damaged and break. We may make repairs, but sooner or later it'll have to be dismantled and replaced. Our bodies will stop working.

They'll die. The tent will be destroyed. We'll have to up sticks and leave. And so, in the face of death, life is like one vast refugee camp.

Things are the way they are just for the time being. So our current accommodation is temporary. But, the arrangements for permanent accommodation are already in place.

First, new housing. Instead of a mere tent, when that's dismantled, we will have verse 1, second part of verse 1, we will have a building from God, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

So a new, long-term place to live of a much higher quality, that is coming. And that brings a proper perspective on the present.

[5 : 50] See, verse 2, in this tent he says, we groan. Not only do we groan, but we're burdened. See, that comes twice, in verse 2 and in verse 4.

We're burdened. In chapter 4, Paul has set out some of the challenges that face Christian people.

They're afflicted, they're puzzled, they're perplexed, they're persecuted, they're struck down, they're surrounded by hostility, violence, death, bereavement.

And then in chapter 6, he sets out some of the hardships that he has faced, hardship of beatings, imprisonment, sleeplessness, hunger, imprisonment, dishonor, punishment, poverty.

Now, even if this morning those experiences aren't necessarily true of all of us here, they are true of many believers, many brothers and sisters around the world, and they can't wait for their release from these sorts of circumstances.

[7 : 06] But even if here this morning we're not there, we will be sooner or later at one point in our lives, at some stage as sure as eggs are eggs, in the future we will be groaning, we will be burdened.

This year there will be points when we do feel that way ourselves, burdened by the weight of life, groaning.

Now, at this point the imagery begins to change. You notice from new housing to new clothing. Paul says we long to put on our heavenly dwelling.

Verse 3, not to be found naked, or verse 4, that we would not be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed. If you're naked, then you're vulnerable.

I think that's the idea. You're fragile. To be truly relieved of the troubles of this life is a matter of being clothed so that you're able to cope with the conditions in which you find yourself.

[8 : 28] Now, there are many beliefs which shun the body. Paul is saying that the solution to being fragile and vulnerable, being mortal, in this condition, the solution to that is not to get rid of the body, but to get a better body.

We need a more suitable body, a stronger body. body. It's part of what he's talking about in the end of verse 4. He says this wonderful phrase.

Look at the end of verse 4. What is mortal, our mortality, is going to be swallowed up by life. Now, we tend to think of it the other way around, that our life in the present is going to be swallowed up by death.

death. But then Paul turns it on its head, said no. Our mortality, our death, the decay, the difficulty, that's going to be swallowed up by life.

There was an atheist philosopher called Bertrand Russell, who wrote much in the 20th century, the early middle part of the 20th century.

- [9 : 44] Towards the end of his life, autobiography, he said, no dungeon was ever constructed so dark and narrow as that in which the shadow physics of our time imprison us.
- Every prisoner believed that outside his walls a free world existed. But now the prison has become the whole universe. There's darkness without, and when I die there'll be darkness within.
- There's no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing. But for men and women who trust the Lord Jesus Christ, rather than our life being swallowed up by death, it's actually our death which is going to be swallowed up by life.
- So the reality that lies beyond death is not shadow and emptiness, but life life in a new dimension, life of a far better quality, life that makes our present state your and mine.
- Your experience in the last week is going to look like mere existence by comparison with what is coming. We'll be more alive then than we are now.
- [11 : 08] now we talk of people, don't we, who lack quality of life. Those who are ill maybe, or those who are struggling with disabilities.
- Currently, Paul, he's suggesting that all of us, for the time being, lack quality of life. One day, Paul says, one day we will really live.
- God's decision is to bring this about. New bodies, new clothes, new building, new house, new home life, with the Lord, verse 8, you see?
- Verse 8, with the Lord. A whole new environment in which to live. one of the most wonderful writers, Christian writers on heaven is Jonathan Edwards.
- He produced a series of thoughts about heaven. They're known as his miscellanies, miscellaneous thoughts and notes.
- [12 : 25] And there are whole sections on heaven. Here's one of them. He says, by virtue of the believer's union with Christ, he really does possess all things.
- All the universe is his, only he hasn't the trouble of managing it. But Christ, to whom it is no trouble to manage it, manages it for him a thousand times as much to his advantage as he could himself if he had the managing of all the atoms in the universe.
- Listen to this. Everything is managed by Christ so as to be of most advantage to the Christian. Every particle of air, every ray of the sun, so that he, when he comes to stand in the other world, when he comes to see it, shall sit and enjoy all this vast inheritance with surprising, amazing joy.
- Verse 5. This very thing, Paul says, is what God has prepared for us. He's given us his spirit as a guarantee.
- The older version, the King James version, used to speak about this as the earnest of the spirit. And the idea is of a solemn pledge.
- [13 : 53] Earlier in 2 Corinthians, in chapter 1, Paul speaks about the seal of the spirit. The seal of the spirit by which God guarantees.
- The spirit is also a guarantee. You know, in modern Greek, that word, aerobona, is still used to speak of an engagement ring.
- God's love. So it's about a rock-solid commitment that is fulfilled in the future, but it's paid in the present. So we haven't got there yet, but we definitely will because of what we possess now.
- God's spirit who's given us trust in Christ. Christ, the very fact that we trust Christ, that we've given our lives to him, is evidence that God's spirit is at work with us and in us.
- God himself has been given to us. And because of that, the down payment, if you like, it's going to, it makes the completion, it makes the fuller payment, is inevitable.

[15 : 17] So, if you're trusting Christ, if you've given your life to Christ, nothing is more certain than that you yourself will stand kitted out with a new body for life with God on a renewed earth.

That is your destiny in Christ. It's coming. It's coming fast. It's going to happen. What about in the meantime?

In the meantime, here we are, we have this tension between the present and the future. And we can face the future positively, we can face the future confidently, we can even be full of expectancy and excitement about what is coming.

What about the meantime? Well, let me try and summarize what Paul's thinking on this. Verses six to nine, in two words, absolute determination.

In the present, absolute determination. And the determination that Paul describes has two parts. First, is courage. And second, is pleasing God.

[16 : 39] So the way we express our determination is by courage and pleasing him. Verse six, Paul says, we are always of good courage.

And then again in verse eight, yes, we're of good courage. Speaking of courage, he's building on earlier statements, where in chapter three, for instance, since he writes, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

And then verse one of chapter four, in view of God's mercy, we don't lose heart. So what is courage? Confidence.

Confidence. Paul is saying, in light of what we will become, of light of what we will be, our whole attitude as Christian believers is fundamentally positive, can be fundamentally positive.

No matter how discouraging of circumstances, we can take things on, we can take it on, we can be truly strong, we groan, that's one side of our experience, we groan, we're burdened, we may hurt, but despite all of that, despite pain, despite difficulty, we needn't be faint hearted, we needn't be despondent, we needn't be overcome by worry, by anxiety, we needn't despair.

[18 : 06] I saw a movie a long time ago, I'm not particularly recommending it, with Kevin Costner, it was based on the, it was called The Guardian, and it was based on the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina in the States, back in 2005, and the film itself is fairly formulaic, but there's a great scene at the end, towards the end, where Costner has resigned, the senior chief, he plays the senior chief, the helicopter, he's part of the helicopter units that go out into the sea and rescue those people who are caught in boats during the storm, and Costner resigns, it's all very dramatic, and he has to go out on one last mission to make a rescue, he probably, you know, his life is going to be in danger, he probably won't come back alive, and as this last scene unfolds, the camera pans in, and on the wall behind him, it says these words, courage is the mastery of fear, courage is the mastery of fear, and I think that's quite a good definition, it's not the absence of fear,

I think it captures Paul's thinking here, it's not the absence of fear, but it's bravery, it's determination in spite of fear, it's bravery in the face of fear, it's confronting fear, what used to be called fortitude, confronting fear, and overcome it, that's courage, part of what it means, verse 7, to walk by faith, faith is believing in things that are invisible and acting on the basis of what is unseen, so Jesus is with us now, spoken about the spirit, remember, as a guarantee, Christ is with us now, but relatively speaking, verse 8, we're still away from him, you see that?

so he's with us, he's given us the spirit as a guarantee, but relatively, we're not in his direct presence, although he is with us.

Verse 9, Paul says, whether we are at home or away, as courageous Christian believers, we make it our aim to please him.

so that's the second part of determination, pleasing Christ. At all times, in all circumstances, our overriding intention is to please God.

[21 : 04] In light of what's coming, our future, our eternal future, we settle our minds that we will live in such a way as to bring pleasure to Jesus Christ.

Now, pleasing Christ is not a matter of earning anything. It's not a matter of earning his acceptance. Pleasing him flows from being convinced and grateful for what is coming already.

so we're not trying to achieve the future by pleasing him. What we're doing is responding to our destiny. We're not trying to achieve the destiny in Christ.

We're responding to it. All of these things are what we must do. Pleasing him. Pleasing him.

If there was time, I could fill out a picture of what Paul has in mind when he speaks about pleasing God. But the time is running on. So let me just say this. Anything that you do in Christ's name for his fame and for the good of his people is pleasing to God and brings pleasure to Christ.

[22 : 31] We just say that again. It's very important. Anything that you do for Christ, for his name, for his fame, for the good of his people, that is pleasing to Christ.

Now, are you at the point where you can honestly say this? I'm living for one thing, for one thing alone, for one thing only, to be like Christ, to do his work, to live among his people and serve them and him in the world.

My life now, my life now is to bless others for Christ in the name of God. My life is to bless others and therefore to please God.

Well, we come to the bottom line. Look at verse 10. 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 for good or evil.

So as it's our destiny to be at home with the Lord, so it is our destiny to be examined by the Lord Jesus. So this verse teaches that our lives will be evaluated by Christ.

[24 : 07] What we do, what we've done, that will be assessed. We will be judged. Jesus is Lord, Jesus is judge, and we will all appear before Christ's throne in the kingdom of glory, and when we show up, everything that we've done will be laid bare.

Now, we need to be clear that this judgment in this verse, what Paul speaks of here, is not a matter of whether those who love the Lord Jesus, who trust him for everything, who've given their lives to him, who are following him, it's not about whether they make it to heaven or not.

At least not primarily. That's not what he's talking about. Now, the Bible speaks about heaven and hell, or heaven or hell. Some of us may not like thinking about that.

We can talk about that. But heaven or hell is not what Paul's speaking about here, at least not primarily. In verse 10, he's speaking about those on whom the ultimate verdict has already been passed.

They belong to Christ. They're forgiven, past, present, and future. What he's talking about, the judgment he's talking about here, is assessing evaluating, measuring, examining the quality of our lives, the quality of our service, to decide what's valuable, and what will last, or to decide what is useless, and what will fall away.

[25 : 41] Just in line with what he says elsewhere, if anyone, this is 1 Corinthians 3, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it, and it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work one each has done.

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, Paul says, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

So Christians whose service, Christians whose work turns out to be valuable, they will receive serious rewards, loss. But if they've done evil, if they've built their lives with poor materials, though they escape with their lives, they suffer real loss.

So there is lasting significance for the way we live now, and the kind of attitude that Paul recommends is one of a holy fear.

Knowing we're accepted, knowing we're forgiven, knowing the destiny is certain, if we're following Christ, if we've given ourselves to him, if we trust him, it's certain.

[26 : 56] But for reward or loss, for reward or loss at the judgment seat of Christ, depending on whether what we've done, how we've lived, is pleasing to him.

The quality of our service, the quality of our discipleship, is going to be taken with extreme seriousness. So there, if you like, is both a warning and a promise.

Being at home with the Lord, where every particle of air, every ray of the sun is going to be managed to our advantage by Christ, and yet, of course, the warning that if we have done evil, we will suffer loss.

just in closing, let me read some words from one of the oldest of the Christian reformed confessions.

The Belgic Confession, 1561, speaks about the judgment of believers. In the paragraph on the judgment of believers, the Belgic Confession says this, with good reason, the thought of this judgment is terrible and dreadful to wicked and evil people, but it is very pleasant.

[28 : 17] It is a great comfort to the righteous and elect, since there, their full deliverance shall be perfected. There, they will receive the fruit of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered.

Their innocence will be openly recognized by all. There, the faithful shall be crowned with glory and honor. The Son of God will himself confess their names before God the Father and the elect angels.

Every tear will be wiped from their eyes, and their cause, which at the present is condemned, will be known to be the cause of the Son of God himself, and as a gracious reward, the Lord will make them possess a glory such as human heart could never imagine.

So, we look forward to that great day with longing in order to fully enjoy the promises of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In the name of the Father, Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.