



## How To Face Death

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Grace Church | 1.5.19

Morning Church, great to see some of you back from vacation, and I hope your Christmas was full of joy as you celebrated, and your new year has been full of renewal of trust in the promises of God. Can we take just one moment to stop and recognize the blessing of God to gather with the people of God? Last year, if you missed just a few Sundays due to sickness or travel, you heard almost fifty sermons. You sang together, with fellow brothers and sisters, more than 250 songs of praise to our king. You took communion every time, eating and drinking the kindness of God. This is all blessing. Just this week a prominent pastor in China was arrested and sentenced to nine years in prison, as well as over 100 members of his congregation. Knowing the danger of their gathering, this church kept growing and pushing. They savored every moment together, every sermon, every song. Why? Because it might cost them everything, and it is all worth it. My prayer is that in 2020 we can do the same church. That we can count it a blessing to gather and worship with the people of God.

If you are new to our gathering, you should know that since September we have been preaching from the book of 2 Corinthians. We take a portion of the Scripture every week and teach it in a way where Jesus is made known. We took a short break for Advent, but now we are back in 2 Corinthians, and the subtitle of our series in 2 Corinthians is *Paradox of Weakness*. Because we've been gone from the book for a few weeks, let me give you a quick run-down of what we have covered so far. In the first chapter we examined the culture of the Corinthian church: the Corinthians were a proud people, a self-made people. They loved to boast in their accomplishments. We also saw the apostle Paul, the author of the letter, put forward his own suffering as his boast, showing us that Christians suffer and experience weakness for the sake of others. The Corinthians also blamed Paul and counted him weak because he was unable to fulfill his travel plans, so we find Paul in defend himself by pointing to God's faithfulness in all things. Then he goes on to teach the Corinthians how to deal with their own weakness in their church: with both conviction and grace, discipline and love. Finally he begins a section in chapters 2-4 where he outlines how his ministry, although appearing outwardly weak, is actually full of glory. Paul has been conquered by Christ, and now as he shares in his sufferings he shares in his glory that is being revealed. As we closed chapter four, Paul gave us an image to further explain this paradox of weakness: that we receive power in the midst of our weakness. He said that we are like clay jars: fragile, forgettable, unimpressive. But God has given to us, clay jars though we are, the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to show us that he is powerful when we are not. Not only that, but God is preparing us through and in our weakness to one day be swallowed up by an eternal



weight of glory. When we trust Christ, Paul says, we may appear weak on the outside, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

So now we come to our text in chapter 5, and on the heels of his metaphor about clay jars, Paul presents the Corinthians with another image. Look quickly at **verse 1**. The “For” that begins the sentence there is showing its connection to the preceding verses in chapter 4. It’s part of the same argument. We can combine it with 4:18; “The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal; *since* 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.” The metaphor is building on the previous statement. The “transient” and “seen” thing is our earthly home, which Paul previously compared to a clay jar and now compares to a tent. The “eternal” or “unseen” thing is a building from God, which Paul previously compared to a weight of glory and now defines as a “house”.

So we will see in our passage Paul continues the theme of comparing these two realities: the seen and transient, and the unseen and eternal. This is the first Sunday we are gathered together in 2020. Think quickly of your plans for the New Year. Many of us have made resolutions or set goals for ourselves. More exercise, more reading, more time with God, more time for friends or for family. All of these things can be worthy and worthwhile goals, and rightfully the new year is a time of refreshing where we remember what we *long* for. Our goals have purpose: we want more time with family so that we can love them more, and be happier. We wish to be healthier because it will make us feel better and be more productive and carry ourselves with more self-esteem. We long for these things, and to put Paul’s language that we will see in our text today, I would say we *groan* for them.

But remember the instruction we received in Chapter four? Since we are clay jars, fragile and unforgettable in this life, we should look not to things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. The trouble, ultimately, with all our New Years promises is not that we long with hope for things to be different. The problem is that we tend to long for the seen without any thought for the unseen. We spend so much energy on the transient that we forget the eternal. Here is a New Years resolution I would bet is not on anyone's list: in 2020, I long to make it to Heaven with Jesus. In 2020, I want to think more about death. As we use the new year to think about the future, part of the problem is that we are too short-sighted. Instead of longing for the eternal future, we long for a more immediate future. Instead of groaning for an eternal body, we groan for a better toned body. So how do we think more future-oriented?

The truth is, we don’t think about death enough. We don’t want to. It shakes us up a bit, it scares us, we are afraid it might prevent us from living in the present. But that is not what the Scripture says. In light of our problem of focusing on the seen and transient and forgetting the unseen and eternal, our text provides us with three ways to confront the seeming weakness of death How do you face death? First, know your future; second, groan to be clothed in eternity; and third, aim to please God.



## Know Your Future

How do we face death and pull our hearts and mind towards the things that are eternal? First, we must know our future. Let's consider the image and illustration built right into this text. So now we come to our text in chapter 5, and on the heels of his metaphor about clay jars, Paul presents the Corinthians with another image. **Verse 1**, Paul compares our "earthly homes" to a "tent". What is he speaking of here? I believe that its pretty clear Paul is talking about our physical body. The context he is personal, not universal, as it relates to the clay jars and also to another personal image he used earlier, the image of him being paraded as a conquered captive. We will also see next week later on in verse 16-17, Paul will make the argument that all those in Christ are part of a *personal* re-creation. While it may seem like "our earthly home" could refer to this earth that we live in, I believe the primary focus is on a personal home, or a personal body. So when Paul says that his earthly home is a tent, he means his own body. The body that has limitations, that has weakness, that experiences sufferings and burdens and eventually, death.

The image of a tent is a familiar one for Paul. After all, his secondary vocation, besides being a teacher and evangelist and church planter, is a tent-maker. Its how he often fuels his missionary work and provides for himself as needed. So Paul knows more than most the nature of a tent: it's temporary, vulnerable. Growing up, I didn't do much camping. Every once and a while we would get out and sleep in a tent, but it wasn't a super regular thing. But in college, I went on a five day backpacking trip, and after that got into backpacking, taking a few trips a year. Backpacking, if you are not aware, is when you pack everything you need on your back and take it with you on the trail. So you're not at a campground, you're not in some huge multi-room tent with loads of headroom. You have to have a light, small tent that you can fit in your pack and not weigh you down, that you can carry for several nights. So I really love backpacking, I love the views and the isolation and the ability to unplug, but I have to admit one thing. Tents are hard for me. I never sleep great. I'm too tall, I don't fit on those thin blow up mattresses very well. When you are sleeping in a tent, you go to bed at like 8 when the sun goes down, and you wake up when the sun comes up, and you think "wow, I will be so rested after 11 hours of sleep", but you still feel exhausted, like you five. And after like one night, I'm usually already thinking about the nice comfy bed at home. After two nights, I dream about it a bit. After three, I give up a bit and embrace my new reality, but after four nights, I'm hiking out *so that* I can get home to a real bed and a real house where I don't have to sit down or bend over in order to change clothes. Not to mention the times where I have had a tent leak, or a tent not be able to keep out the wind and the cold, or blows in the wind so much that the sides of the tent slap you in the face when you are trying to sleep.

You get the picture: Paul says this is us. Our bodies are tents. Temporary. Not meant to last. A little leaky. Uncomfortable. In fact, Paul probably has in mind the image of the Tabernacle of the Israelites, where God dwelt for forty years in the desert. Every few days, they packed it up and set off again, never staying in one place too long, wandering around the wilderness. They were nomadic, and even their most holy and sacred place was just a tent. But a temple was coming.



So, we come to the New Year, and so many of us feel the serious weight and burden of our bodies. We are slowly realizing we are not immortal. Or you are past that point and wondering when the decay will ever slow down. Death is coming, we just aren't sure when. And so what is our response? Rather than working for the futility of immortality in this body, Paul does something different. He acknowledges that the future of his body is destruction, but in that destruction there is something else coming.

If my tent is destroyed, if I slowly waste away, he says, I will have something better: a home. And the problems with my tent will not exist in this new home. My tent body is fragile and temporary, I have to work to repair it with human hands. But this new body is supernatural, not made by human hands, eternal and everlasting and never weak. A new body is coming, an eternal body, a body that I will finally feel at home in, that won't be fighting against me.

Here is the truth that Paul is holding onto, and the truth that will help you face death: if you are in Christ, you are headed for home. You are headed for a new body. Paul is speaking here of Christ's return, which is clear to us when we compare this passage to his previous letter to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 15.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

In other words, when you die you will be with Christ, awaiting a future where in an instant he will gather up all his children and give them new bodies forever in a final resurrection. What is this passage telling us? You see, your body now is so unlike your body to come. One is perishable, one is not. One is driven apart by storms and pain and suffering and sin, the other is impenetrable and immortal.

There are some in here this morning, even those of us who are young, who feel the pain and sting of your bodies limitation. Maybe you've asked the question before: "why God? Why this body?" Maybe it's your hips, or your back, or your brain, or your genes, or just your emotions. But there are so many for us who are broken and tired. So here is the best news you can get in 2020. A new body is coming for you, and it doesn't require a gym membership or a fancy doctor. This body will come at the return of Jesus Christ, and in an instant you will be changed. When Christ comes back, you will be raised with him, raised like him. He bled and died so that you the body you currently inhabit would not be your last. Heaven is a place where you will be recognized. Think of the risen Jesus: after he defeated death, he still took on flesh. But it was different: his body was not a temporary tent, it was a forever home. And that is what due you, if you have repented of your sin and put your trust in Christ. How can you begin to see and rejoice in the big picture? How can you embrace the paradox of weakness that you feel everytime you are sick, stressed, in pain, or



limited? Remember your future: you won't be blasted into oblivion when Jesus comes back. You will be yourself, but remade into a body that is perfect and imperishable. Your future is indescribably bright and beautiful.

## Groan For Eternity

Its not just enough, however, to know the future that is coming for all those in Christ. We have to let ourselves be shaped by the future. We see this example of Paul in **verses 2-5**. See Paul's first point in verses 2-3. While we are here in this world, we aren't obvious to the future. No, the future of our glorious resurrection is so secure that it influences our thoughts and our emotions and our feelings and our entire life. Christians think about death rightly. Not with doom and gloom, with a real longing, a real groaning. This kind of groaning is hopeful. You might compare it to the anxiousness of waiting for a child to be born. For the mother, as I have learned, this can be one of the hardest parts of pregnancy. My wife was so expectant to meet our new baby that there were days where it seemed like she could think of nothing else. She groaned for it. Some days, she wanted it more badly, but there was always this anxiousness, this preparation, knowing yes the pain of childbirth, but also anticipating the joy of our son coming into the world. She anticipated it so much that right around her due date she tried everything she could to induce that baby. We climbing Jacob's ladder in Cameron Park more than once, let me tell you. And as those of you who are parents know, the joy of seeing your first baby, their features, later their smile, soon, their voice. All of it is full of so much more joy than you could ever imagine.

This is the kind of groaning that Paul is talking about. Its not as if he longs for escape, like many long for death. Death is not an end. No matter his suffering and pain, he doesn't long for death so that he can escape. Look at **verse 4**. He isn't longing to be unclothed, he doesn't wish that he would just cease existing or that he would disappear. He is not depressed or in a cloud of darkness. No, he is thinking more clearer than normal. He longs for his new body, not to be unclothed, but to be further clothed. Not to escape this world, but to inherit the next.

And what happens when we are further clothed, when we inherit that eternal body? Verse 4: what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. In other words, this new life is so powerful and so bright that its as if everything that is mortal, everything that is earthly, everything that is passing away, is engulfed by this new life. Its like a great earthquake ripping open a whole in the ground and swallowing up the old into it. There will be no traces of past weakness when the resurrection of God's people comes.

The difference between your existence now and your existence when Christ comes again to get his Church is like the difference between a cheap walmart tent and a hand-hewn stone castle. Pastor Kevin DeYoung, in preaching this passage, provides us an image. He says imagine if you were told you have inherited a castle and a huge estate in Alaska, the farthest place you can walk from here. And you were told that to inherit it, you would have to walk there, and you were given a



pair of shoes and a single tent. Well, how would you treat this tent? You would take care of it, sure. Its got to last you a while. But you know its not your goal.

And if we never realize that, if we never remember that for the Christian, death is good news, a pathway to life, the end of a long journey, than we will never risk anything in this world. We will spend up all our new years resolutions trying to make our tent more comfortable: but its never meant to be comfortable! It's only meant to get you to your glorious future. May we never be a church who lives only for the present.

So Church, if we want to be a people who stare the apparent weakness of death right in the eye and see power through that weakness, we must be a people who live lives with a healthy groaning for eternity. We long to swallowed by life. We pray that Christ would come again, we pray that he would make things right. This is the best thing that could ever happen to us. The best thing that could happen to you today, this week, this year, is if the meal of communion you take in a few minutes is your last, because Christ returns for his bride and the next meal you partake in is the marriage supper of the lamb with him. And if ever you doubt that this house and this meal is prepared for you, look at **verse 5**. God himself has given us his Holy Spirit as a guarantee, a down payment. That same spirit is the spirit of GOd which we learned in chapter 4 is transforming us into the very likeness of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. We will make it to the end by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Do you groan for that day, do you long to be clothed with his righteousness? Would someone be able to look at your life: how you spend your time, your money, your resources, what you worry about and don't worry about, and say with confidence: they groan for eternity with Jesus? They sacrifice for him, knowing he is coming back and they can't take this world with them? They take up their cross to follow him, because the risk to their physical bodies and the suffering they might endure and the discomfort they might encounter is worth what is coming to them? Would anyone say that about you?

We have a long list of faithful brothers and sisters to look too who longed for eternity so much that even death did not stop them. I want to share with you a brief picture of one of them. His name is Adoniram Judson. Judson was one of the first missionaries to Burma, and spearheaded a long line of baptist missionaries.

This man was well acquainted with death. HIs first wife, Ann, who married Judson on February 5, 1812 left with him on the boat on February 19 at age 23. She bore three children to Adoniram. All of them died. The first baby, nameless, was born dead just as they sailed from India to Burma. The second child, Roger Williams Judson, lived 17 months and died. In 1826, his first wife Ann died in Burma. His last child, Maria Elizabeth Butterworth Judson, lived to be two, and outlived her mother by six months and then died. Later he remarried, and had eight children with his second wife, but three did not survive to adulthood and also died. After 11 years, his second wife Sarah became sick and they were forced to return to America to try to see her recover. She too died on the journey over.



All in all, Judson's decision to live well in his tent cost him two wives and six children. About two years after his first wife's death, he hit the lowest point of his life. It was October, 1828, and he built a hut in the jungle to live in total isolation and moved in on the second anniversary of his wife's death. There we wrote in one letter home to Ann's relatives: "My tears flow at the same time over the forsaken grave of my dear love and over the loathsome sepulcher of my own heart". He dug a grave beside the hut and would sit for hours beside it contemplating his death. In another letter, he wrote: "God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not."

But God was not done with Judson. His most influential work of translating the Bible into Burmese. He had years left in his tent. He recovered from his deep darkness. Today there are close to about 3,700 congregations of Baptists in Myanmar or modern day Burma, which can trace themselves back to Judson's work.

Why do I tell you this story? Because there are plenty of ways to deal with death. You can dismiss it. You can let it terrify you into darkness and despair. You can reason it away as fatalism. Or you can see it a necessary means to an end. You can use it to increase your groaning for your heavenly home. And like Judson, you can continue fighting and with courage and faith aim to please God with the life you have.

## Aim to Please God

So we come to our last way to face death. Like Judson, we aim to please God. **Read again verse 6-10.** Paul wants us to know that even though we live in this tent and our lives might be marked by death and suffering, because we know the future and because we have the spirit as a guarantee, we are always of good courage. The word courage here can also be translated as confidence. We are not people who shrink back when death comes or as the body decays. When we see the weakness of our own bodies, we respond with courage.

This idea is further strengthened by what Paul says next in verse 6. "We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not by sight." The grammar here is a bit confusing, but I think you might say it like this: while we acknowledge that since we are still in this body, we are not quite home with God yet, we are of courage, because we walk by faith, not by sight. In other words, Paul is recognizing the nature of our life. We would rather be at home with the Lord. The best thing that could happen is Christ coming back. When he comes back, faith will be sight. The second best thing is death, since in death, while we still await the resurrection of our new bodies, we are with the Lord. This is what he means in verse 8. He is of good courage, because if he can't see Christ yet in his return, well the second best thing will happen someday: death will come and usher him into the presence of God. He would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. He would rather be bodiless and awaiting for his new body with Jesus than without him. Even if he does not receive his new body yet, in death he would see Jesus. His faith would be sight.



And yet through all of this, he does not lose courage even if Christ doesn't come back or call him home in death. To remain in the body is not to see, but to have faith. And faith, although it is not as good as Christ coming back, and although it is not as good as death, faith is a good thing. No, faith is not sight. But for all of us today who have faith in Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that faith is a gift from God. Why is it good? Because faith pleases God. Hebrews 11 says it so: And without faith it is impossible to please [God]."

Are you tracking with me? I once was asked the question: if all things are being made new, and we will get a new body, and we will be resurrected, well then why live in the first place? Why do anything good in the world, if it will just be made new? Why work hard for God, when death will get me in the end and God will accomplish his work with or without me? In other words: if eternity is real, what is the purpose of life as a Christian?

Well, here church we find our answer. Look in verse 9. You see, the aim of the Christian is the same, whether they are in their tent or in their castle. Their aim is to please God. In pleasing God, the Christian finds purpose, joy, and meaning in this life. And in heaven, they will please God forever. But until we get home, while we are away, while we are traveling in our tent, the way we please God is by faith in Jesus Christ.

Let me be very clear here. I want you not to miss the last verse of our text, **verse 10**. Judgement is coming: God will see all we have done in the body. And there are two ways to live out your time in your earthly tent: faith that pleases God, and faithlessness that is evil before God. The reality of death brings to every man and woman a point of decision. How will you live your life? And I want to tell you this morning that a life of faith is simple, and yet so deeply beautiful. The gospel of Jesus Christ is this: because of your sin which you inherited from your father Adam, you will die. And in your sin you will be judged as evil in God's sight and your earthly tent will be destroyed and you won't get a home with God. But there is hope. God loved you so much that he sent his son Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, to overcome and defeat death by his perfect life and perfect death on a Roman cross. He pleased God perfectly on your behalf. When he rose from the dead, he makes a promise. He says: I'm coming back to judge the living and the dead. And when I do, there is hope for you. All you must do is have faith. Have faith in me, he says. Trust me. Trust that I love you. Trust that I came to earth for you. Trust that I lived without sin for you. Trust that I died in your place, the death you deserved. Trust that I rose from the grave to defeat death forever. Trust that I'm coming back to give you a resurrection. I know you cannot see, but trust. Have faith in me. Turn from your faith in sin and the world, and have faith in me.

If you have faith in Jesus, you please God. He smiles at you. He isn't mad. He was no wrath coming for you, instead he has a good judgement. He will judge your faith in Christ, however weak it may seem, according to the object of your faith and not according to the strength of your faith. And on that day of judgement you will get a new body and you will finally be home. So stop making it your aim to please man, Christian. Stop worrying about your weakness. Stop being fearful of death.





At work, don't work to please your boss Don't do it to make yourself feel better, to please your wife or your co-workers. Work in faith to please God. At home, don't parent to please your neighbors. Don't do it to please your kids. Please God, faithful parent. In your relationships, look at all the freedom you have. Please God, not man.

Friends, I do not preach this way to minimize your suffering in this life. You are weak, your body will fail, death will haunt you in so many various ways. But can I ask one thing of you today? Believe that you can face death. The good news of Jesus Christ has made it so. The gospel says that because of Jesus you know your future is bright, and you can groan with expectancy to put it on, and you can make it your sole aim to please God. And with these tools, you can face death by faith, because death has already been defeated. Not by you, but by the one you put your faith in, Jesus Christ the righteous.

