

## 2 Corinthians 5

### **Context:**

A major theme of 2 Cor. is Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry, which gives us invaluable insight into *motives of godly Christian leadership and ministry and what it looks like*.

All of us are in ministry of one sort or another because 'every member is a minister' and all of life for the Christian is in service to Christ (cf. Col. 3:17, 23). So 2 Cor. applies to all of us to one degree or another in terms of serving our Lord by serving others in the gospel. It is a book that teaches us how to do this with godly motives and practices.

Our world has always had (and always will have) leaders and ideas on what makes for successful or good leadership. The Bible is often countercultural to the wisdom of the world in this area. You may remember how Jesus taught his disciples that though Gentile rulers 'lord it over' those they rule, it is not so in the kingdom of God. Whoever wants to be greatest must be servant of all, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Paul, as always, follows closely in the footsteps of his Master and teaches the same principles of leadership and ministry. He is not a 'super apostle' as some who visited Corinth appeared to be – a leader who relies primarily on his own human skill and effort. On the contrary, Paul is a humble and plain minister of Jesus Christ's gospel, relying not on human wisdom or power, but on the wisdom and power of God's Spirit at work in the preaching of the cross. This is the consistent picture of godly ministry in both 1 and 2 Corinthians. Our chapter today will show us some central insights into ministering this way.

Ch. 5 comes on the back of the famous 'treasures in jars of clay' section of ch. 4. That section ended with Paul's declaration that there is a 'weight' of (for now) unseen and eternal glory that is to come that outweighs all suffering and decay that we presently experience. Because of the knowledge of this reality, we do not lose heart in living for Jesus and making his gospel known. 4:14 connects this heartening hope of glory directly to Jesus' resurrection, which guarantees our own resurrection.

In the first section of ch. 5 Paul unpacks this resurrection glory further for our further encouragement.

### 5:1-9

Here this with your imagination. (An important but often neglected principle of accurate interpretation of Scripture is to let the images Scripture uses play on your imagination and emotions. The Holy Spirit inspired his word to be written this way – he could have inspired systematic theology, remember. So we need to honour his wisdom in communicating to us in this artistic way by hearing it with our whole person, not just our analytical intellect – which of course must also be in play eventually.)

[Read 5:1-5.]

‘For we know’ – this is *knowledge* that the Christian possesses, not mere speculation or wishful thinking. (Sometimes faith is thought of as the opposite of a thing like knowledge, but in fact it is a reliable source of knowledge because the Christ we have put our faith in is a trustworthy and all-knowing Person, the truth-teller. The value is not in generic ‘faith’ of course, but on faith’s object – the One trusted. ‘Faith is only as good as the object upon which it rests.’)

This is typical Pauline writing style. (I have to admit I love it!) He just piles up the imagery and freely mixes metaphors. It’s makes a sort of concentrated impression on us that we have to pause and unpack and consider. He here contrasts on the one hand a ‘tent’ and an ‘earthly home’ that are destructible with on the other hand a ‘building’ and a ‘house not made with hands’ that are ‘eternal in the heavens’ (i.e. divinely supernatural and thus indestructible).

Got that? Tent vs. building. Earthly home vs. heavenly house. Destructible vs. eternal. Paul is trying to get a very particular contrast into our thinking. He wants us to associate the temporary and impermanent with our present bodily life and to associate the eternal and permanent with our future bodily life. (I will return to the thought of an eternal ‘bodily’ life.)

How often do we reverse this? Right now with all its concerns and values and goals seems all-consuming, the final word, what is concrete and real, the most important and lasting reality. Eternity seems misty, ephemeral, vague,

immaterial, distant, hazy, unreal and (frankly) unimportant, having no real effect on us now.

I know I often rate things this way. I'm regularly tempted to think of what I can get accomplished in this life and this life only as being the last word, without thought of how this affects or is affected by eternity. I sometimes think and act as if *this life is all I've got*. What a tragedy and travesty for a Christian! (Pause a moment and think of the things that consume you. Are you pursuing them in the light of eternity?)

Paul is showing us where our deepest aspirations and yearnings should really be if we want to be true to who we are in Christ, if we want to really seek first his kingdom and his righteousness as Jesus teaches us in Matt. 6. This should be a natural outcome of knowing Christ and growing in him, of being indwelt by his Spirit and bearing the fruit of his Spirit.

We groan about many things in this life, but there is one groaning that is very true to our new natures as Christians. It is the groaning that comes from a longing for eternity.

And the key is that eternity is not vague and insubstantial but is more solid and real than the life we are presently experiencing! That's why Paul starts mixing in a new metaphor and image. In longing for eternity we're not longing to take something off, to disrobe and become less concrete than we now are. We're longing *to be more real* than anything we've ever known. We want to *put on* something bigger and greater and permanent and palpable.

Do you see that here? Eternity with God through faith in Christ is not 'naked' compared to life now. Quite the opposite! Our desire is not to be unclothed like stripped refugees (or some such thing) but 'further clothed'.

This present bodily life tainted by sin is undoubtedly a burden to us. But our burden is not for our souls to escape the 'prison' of the body (as Greek philosophers taught – which is why Paul was mocked at Athens when he spoke of something as 'absurd' and 'disgusting' and undesirable as bodily resurrection). We're not looking to just shed our bodies and be immaterial souls floating like spiritual jellies forever – no!

We want real and lasting bodies that are permanently healed of their ‘sin disease’, no longer in conflict with the glorious rule of God’s Holy Spirit. We’re groaning with longing for our resurrection clothes! Mere ‘mortality’ yearns to be swallowed up whole and entire by *real* life, eternal life in Christ.

Why is this true for us? Paul does not leave us in doubt. He emphasizes his consistent ‘theocentricity’; his letters are always ‘theocentric’ (and ‘Christocentric’). God is the centre; not man or any other created thing. And when God is central, all else is in its proper orbit and thrives as he created it to thrive, especially men and women made in his image. He is our joy and pleasure and satisfaction. To know and worship and love and adore and praise and enjoy him is our design plan and when we run according to design we are supremely fulfilled.

Who has prepared us for this resurrection future? God himself. Who is present with us even now to assure our hearts that this future awaits us? The Spirit of God whom he has given us as his most precious gift, the Spirit of his own Son dwelling in our hearts and crying out ‘Abba, Father.’ When you experience being a child of God, when your heart calls out to God as your Father, when you know his Fatherly care for you and delight to be his obedient child, Paul is here telling us that these are signs for you that bodily resurrection is your guaranteed future.

[Read 5:6-9.]

When we put the emphasis on God’s promise and power to do this, then we see how sure it is. We are prompted to rely on him, not ourselves for this weighty hope of glory. Cf. **1:9**.

This knowledge of resurrection and eternal life is not a luxury to titillate those Christians who have time for it. Knowing this *affects how we live* day to day! It shouldn’t be said of us that ‘you’re so heavenly minded you’re no earthly good’ but ‘you’re so heavenly minded that you *are* earthly good’. (Because Revelation 21 shows us not that we ‘fly away’ to heaven but that heaven comes *down* to earth!)

What’s the result of this knowledge? ‘Good courage’. How often? ‘Always’. There is *consistent confidence*. Not a mustered up courage of self-effort, but confidence in God, reliance on him.

Paul goes on with the *knowledge* resurrection faith provides. We know that if we're still in this 'earthly home' then we haven't yet put on our 'heavenly dwelling' – we're not yet 'with the Lord' in undiluted communion and worship. He is undoubtedly with us by the deposit of his Holy Spirit in our hearts. But we have not yet arrived into the fullness of his presence at the right hand of God the Father in eternal glory.

We trust that we will one day be with him in that way, though now we don't see him that way. Cf. **1 Pet. 1:8**. To walk by faith and not by sight this way means that we put more stock in God's promises to us in Christ, in what he has revealed to us in Scripture about what is coming in eternity, than we do in the temporary situation of sin and decay and destruction and death that we see all around us in this present age.

'But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3:13).

God's promise is *more real* to us than the current situation of a fallen world. We live our lives by faith in him, not by merely human sight.

Paul repeats that we are of 'good courage' or 'confident'. (Don't lose heart! 4:16.) This eternal perspective overcomes our natural fears and discouragements and fortifies us with confidence in God to live our lives day to day as we wait for him to usher in the fullness of his kingdom in his perfect timing.

So, we have a temporary home here and now and a permanent home with the Lord in eternity. Which do you prefer? (Honestly?) Cf. Phil. 1:23.

Again, does this preference for resurrection make us neglect our life here and now? Not at all. It makes this fallen life all it can be. Why? As Paul says, we have a simple aim. To please our Lord, whether now in this sin-tainted body or in eternity with our glorified bodies. We are 'infected' by future glory. It 'taints' our motives now.

When knowing and being with the Lord himself is our truest and deepest pleasure and joy, we become *preoccupied* with that. If we're longing to be eternally in his undiluted presence where we will always delight to please him, then that preoccupation begins to colour everything we do now. Think

of it: we often tend to do everything today in light of some future goal or aim. If the future we dream and long for is total surrender to Christ in glory, that future glory starts seeping into the present. We are aiming to please our Lord even now because that's our heart's true desire.

### **5:10-21**

Another aspect of this same motivation from future glory is remembering that Christ is also our Judge, even as believers. For more on 'believer's judgment, see 1 Cor. 3 – the quality of our work for the Lord will be 'tested by fire' before we can pass fitly into glory. Not just any old shabby life can enter the resurrected state, the full kingdom of God. To go in at all is to have all impurity burned away.

This future state too is utterly real to Paul. He lives his life in light of this judgment by his Lord. He has complete assurance of the joy of being directly in his Lord's presence from the moment he dies. But he also knows without doubt of a final assessment by that same Lord in which he longs to be told: 'Well done good and faithful servant. Enter your master's joy.'

He knows he has eternal life because of the blood of Jesus shed for him, but he knows that even the blood-bought must pass through the fire of the Perfect One to enter fully into glory. This is not about 'losing your salvation' at the last moment. Paul knows he is 100% saved by grace and that part of that grace is to bring us fully in despite our continued failings as Christians – and apparently that is going to be a very sober moment before the commencement of eternal glory.

And do you see how the Lord values our *bodily* life here and now? We are repeatedly assured God will raise this body to glory just as he raised Jesus' body to glory and that he therefore values our bodily life even now (cf. 1 Cor. 6 – your body even now is a blood-bought temple of the Holy Spirit and thus is 'for the Lord', not for sin). (See also col. 3:25, Eph. 6:8.) God is will redeem this body and therefore values it eternally. *How can we do less?*

*Vs. 11* – and this knowledge not only affects our personal holiness but our relationships with others. It is a natural outcome of longing for future glory in Christ that we seek to persuade others that this is true and that they too must face him as judge and can by his grace face him as loving Lord, heavenly Father. The 'fear of the Lord' is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom Proverbs tells us. This 'fear' is awesome reverence and respect and

loyalty and even love for our Creator and Saviour and Lord. We know that he loves good and hates evil and will conclusively and permanently separate the two in eternity and that he offers us the gift of being on the right side of that divide. This knowledge motivates us to try to convince others of this reality.