

## **CONFRONTING DEATH**

### **2 Corinthians 5:1–10**

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Our passage today talks to us about confronting death. 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 is a passage of Scripture that I very frequently read at memorial services. I'm always amazed at the unique way Scripture has of finding us. Little did I know that when I began this series on 2 Corinthians, in the moment of the Corinthian letter when we come to the phrase, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:6), it would be the week my father went into the Lord's presence. In fact, when the call came from the hospital that Dad had taken a turn for the worse, he had been doing real well. He had his things all packed and they were taking him out of Intensive. Just suddenly, about fifteen minutes after my sister had had a very ordinary visit with him, he began to take a turn for the worse and, within an hour, was in the Lord's presence. When the call came through to come immediately to the hospital, I had just written in my notes, as I was working on this message, a quote from a commentator talking about being burdened as we are in this tent. He had said, "Death, though no longer feared, is still repulsive to the Christian." We'd rather not have to face it at all. We no longer fear it, but we wish we didn't have to face it. We have lived with the prospect of Dad's going to be with the Lord for the last several weeks. In fact, he continually said during this time, "I'm not going to make it." But we'd heard him say that several times in his life, so we kept telling him, "This is just one more of those times and you really are going to make it." I can remember the very first occasion in my life when my Dad was seriously ill, when I was twelve or thirteen years of age. The family had looked over the prospects of pioneering a church in Jeffersonville, Indiana, which is right across the river from Louisville, Kentucky. Dad wanted to check out the situation in Indianapolis of pioneering a

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church there before he made his decision. They got in the car after sunset, one evening, and were going to drive straight through to Indianapolis, because they really didn't have money to stay in a motel. They were going to drive. Dad became very ill, stopping the car every few miles or so to throw up. They thought I was asleep in the back seat. Dad was giving instructions—in the event that he died, what mom should do. Mom, of course, didn't know how to drive. I laid there in the back, absolutely terrified. Finally, Dad decided that he was sick enough that maybe they should get a motel. But everything in our family was always done strictly by budget and economy class. That meant sending mother up to the motel offices, asking what the price was for the evening. At about the third or fourth stop, they finally found a price that was within their budget, which I think was around four dollars a night.

There have been many occasions when Dad thought he was going to pass away. He was ill a good part of the time; he had a very serious illness at times. I remember walking into his room Wednesday afternoon when all the machines were away from him. My first reaction when I saw my dad was, "Dad, I just can't hardly believe it. It has happened."

We all must die. The critical question is, are we prepared to face death? I know my Dad was prepared.

What happens to us when we die? Some people say that nothing happens to us. It's the end.

Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, said, "We are an accidental collocation of atoms." And just like the universe will one day be extinguished, so also when we die will we be extinguished. A contemporary restaurateur of Newport Beach area has said, "Life is a 60-yard dash with a brick wall for a finish line." He lives life that way.

Other people disagree with the view that after death there is nothing. Some people say there are limitless possibilities. Any number of things could happen. Many of those hold to the possibility

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of some kind of reincarnation of the soul. Some, to a sort of a migratory travel or journey of the spirit. Anyone who has ever lived in the country, as we did, of Tibet that believes in reincarnation knows what a hideous lying doctrine of demons it is. It's the most repressive, degrading kind of belief that a person could have. Just living life in the gutter. The Tibetans wouldn't kill their own lice, because it might be an ancestor.

What happens when we die? The Christian answer says, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Paul begins this passage in 2 Corinthians 5 with, "Now we know."

Underline "know." There are a lot of things I don't know. There are a lot of things you don't know. We don't know the hour of our going to be with the Lord. We're not totally sure of what we're going to do this week. But some things we know. Paul does not say, "We guess." He does not say, "We hope." He does not say, "We've got our fingers crossed." He does not say, "We think so." We know!

What does the Christian know as the he or she confronts death? Seven things we know, coming out of these ten verses:

#### **I. We know that we have an earthly tent.**

We know that there's an earthly tent we live in. That's how our body is described. A tent is transitory. It is without foundations. My mind thinks of the tents, the black tents of Tibet; pegged to the ground by ropes and a stake. The stakes are easily pulled, the tent is easily folded. A tent, the outlook carries with it the connotation of one living in it is a pilgrim and a sojourner. There is a lack of permanence, there's portability. The striking of a tent. The words of the gospel song writer, "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue." The life of a tent-dweller is never settled.

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Paul, a tent maker himself, fittingly describes the metaphor of a tent and applies it to the human existence. We are in an earthly tent. Let no one have any illusion that it is any different than that.

#### **II. The earthly tent may be destroyed.**

Paul says, “If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed” (2 Corinthians 5:1, NIV). Why does he say “if”? Why doesn’t he just say “when”? Because, as Paul writes this letter, he is not sure which is going to come first: the Lord’s return or his dying and going to be with the Lord. So he is clearly hoping that the Lord will return, so that it will not necessitate the destruction of the tent.

In fact, the word “destroy” is a very strong word here. It is a word the Lord employs in Matthew 24:2, when speaking of the temple, He says “Not one stone will be left upon another. Every one will be thrown down,” or every one will be destroyed. What could keep the tent from being destroyed? The coming of the Lord. The coming of the Lord—when we are clothed with our new body. The word which Paul uses for “clothed,” was, as the Greeks used it, “to put on a garment as an outer garment, on top of the clothes one already has on.” Paul is thinking about the return of the Lord, where we go to be with Him, we’ll simply step into our new body, in the translation that occurs when the Lord returns. Otherwise, what happens is that our earthly body goes to the grave and it is destroyed. If we’re alive when the Lord comes, we’re simply clothed. We step into the new body without the process of death.

Facing the prospect of the earthly tent being destroyed brings groaning. Verse 4 says, “We groan and are burdened” (NIV). In Romans 8, Paul also—in dealing with this theme of mortality—picks up on that word “groaning” and says that the whole creation is groaning, and we ourselves are groaning, until we attain to the glorious liberty that God has promised us.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, describing the aging process, lets us know why we groan. In poetic terms, “When the keepers of the house tremble [that is, the support we get from our legs], and

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the strong men stoop [to “bent-overness], when the grinders cease because they are few [that is, the teeth], and those looking through the windows grow dim [that is, the eyes]; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades [the ears]” (Ecclesiastes 12:3, NIV). It sees us—as we live out our life, gradually losing our full control of our faculties—groaning.

The coming of the Lord is such a bright prospect because it will exempt us from this destruction process. We will be out of harm’s way. So Paul says that his second way of facing death is that the earthly tent may be destroyed.

For my dad, the coming of the Lord will now need to be for him, “The dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). But it may well be that, for those of us who remain, the whole process of going through death will be avoided.

### **III. The third great thing that Paul tells us about confronting death is that we have a building from God.**

“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Corinthians 5:1, NIV). Here he deliberately contrasts what God has for us in the future with the transitory and temporal nature of the tent. We live in a tent now. We have a building then. We live in the created house now. We have an eternal house, not created with human hands, that is made by God, in the heavens. The building is eternal. It is of divine construction.

Whenever I think of eternity, I am drawn to the great illustration the missionary to the Arab world gives when he talks about coming along the beach of the Mediterranean one day and seeing an old Arab man kneeling at the beach, running the sand through his fingers. The missionary went up to him and said, “What are you doing?” The old man replied, “I am thinking about eternity. I am thinking that if a bird came and got a grain of this sand and carried it away,

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across the ocean, and came back the next year and got another grain of sand; and did so every year—one grain of sand a year—when the bird was done transferring this beach to a different shore, eternity would have only begun.”

We stagger. Our mental concepts simply cannot handle the idea of the length of eternity. But in that eternal home, we have a house made of divine construction. God has a body prepared for us. And a place for us. I love Jesus’ statement in John 14:2, “Behold I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also.” He’s preparing a place. Somehow, I have always linked that phrase with the fact that in His earthly life, before He began His preaching ministry, Jesus served as a carpenter. I see Him as the master carpenter, preparing a place for us. I heard someone say, “If God created the world in six literal days [We all recognize that, even among believers, there’s a difference as to whether the Genesis days are twenty-four-hour periods] and made it so beautiful, just imagine what heaven is going to be like, when Jesus has been working on it for two thousand years.”

We have a building from God.

What do we know about facing death? That we have an earthly tent. The earthly tent may be destroyed. That we have a building from God, and...

**IV. We already have the guarantee of our future. We’ve already received the guarantee of that future that is coming.**

“Now it is God who has made for us this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 5:5, NIV). In John 3:5, Jesus says that the person who is born of water—that is, natural birth—and of the Spirit—that is, spiritual birth—that person will have the kingdom of God, they will see the kingdom of God. When we become a

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believer, the Spirit of God takes up his dwelling in us. Paul says this statement, “When the Spirit enters our life, when we confess Jesus, it’s God’s guarantee, God’s deposit on the future.”

The word in the Greek has a technical meaning to it. It’s a real estate word. If I can draw the analogy for just a moment, it would be equivalent to going into escrow on a piece of property.

When you go into escrow, there is a down payment. We handle estate transactions a little bit differently, because when we come out of escrow, we’re stuck with a twenty-five-year mortgage.

But in those days, you bought with cash. So when a person went into escrow, they already had all the assets that were needed to complete the arrangement. And the down payment was a security deposit that all the rest would be coming. What we’re being told about death is that, when we become Christ’s, He puts the Spirit in our heart as a guarantee of all that is coming for us.

The modern use of that word in the Greek language is to describe an engagement ring—a sign that the wedding is coming.

The fifth thing that we know from this passage of how we confront death is...

#### **V. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.**

“Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6–8, NIV). With all due respect, Paul is not facing the prospect of purgatory. He is not facing the prospect of soul sleep. He says simply, “When I die, I go to be with the Lord.” While our spirit may be separated from our body at death, our spirit is never separated from Christ. We are never absent from Him, not one second.

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This creates a spatial probability for us, because we want to know how it is that at death we can go be with the Lord and yet, when the Lord returns, our bodies will be raised up from the ground. Does that mean that in the interim, between our going to be with the Lord and the resurrection of the dead, that we are floating around as disembodied spirits? How do we account for that? We don't have a lot of clues in Scripture as to that nature between death and the resurrection. We do know that Moses appeared (with Elijah) to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. And, as far as we know, Moses did not have a bodily resurrection, yet he was in a body on the Mount of Transfiguration.

We also know, from 1 Thessalonians 4:14, that when Jesus returns, He will bring with Him all those who have fallen asleep and, while He is yet bringing them with Him, simultaneous to that, the dead in Christ will rise first. This creates an intellectual problem. How can He bring them with Him and yet they're coming out of the grave?

I think, perhaps, the problem is—as we ponder this—that we're pondering the problem within time and within the geometrical dimensions of the created order. Whereas, the departed in Christ are now outside time and space and are in eternity. And what for us may seem future may, for them, already be past. From the ground zero of eternity, the whole ellipsis of time can be seen. God has something prepared for us, and it is not to exist in a disembodied state between our death and the resurrection. But to be in a form that will later even be embellished by the physical resurrection of our body. For sure, Paul sees the time between the Christian's death and the return of Christ as a far superior condition than the present. To be with Christ is far better. Which brings us to the sixth point in confronting death:

**VI. It is preferable to be with the Lord. It's actually preferable.**

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I think that sometimes, as Christians, we fear and fight death too much. Scripture never encourages us, by the way, to be fatalists or walk in suicidal paths. But at the same time, the Scriptures do tell us there is a time to die. I pray, as did my father, that when that time comes, it will not be with a great protest against God for any perceived injustice. If we have preached, if we have lived, if we have talked about heaven and being with the Lord, then when it's time, it's not a defeat for us. It is instead victory.

A country preacher was preaching on the subject of heaven and said to his small congregation, "How many of you want to go to heaven?" Everybody raised their hand, except one little boy. The preacher looked at the little boy and said, "Don't you want to go to heaven?" The little boy said, "Yes, pastor. But I thought you were getting up a load for tonight." That's sometimes how we think of it. "I want to go to heaven, just not now, Lord."

The great American preacher, Peter Marshall, told the story of a family he knew. There was a little boy who was ill with an incurable disease. Month by month, the mother nursed him. This disease played out its finality in the little boy's life. He began to understand, as he watched other boys playing outside his window, that he would not evidently have that opportunity. He came to know that he too was going to die. One day, his mother was reading to him the stirring tale of *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*. And about the last glorious battle, where so many knights met their death. As she closed the book, her little son fell silent and she could tell he was deeply stirred. Then he asked the question that was weighing on his child's heart, "Momma, what is it like to die? Does it hurt?" Quick tears sprang to her eyes, and she fled to the kitchen to try to compose herself and prayed to the Lord that He would give her some answer that would bring some solace to her little boy. The Lord gave her that answer. She came back and said to him, "Do you remember when you were a little boy and you played hard all day, and

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at the end of the day, you'd come in and curl up on Mom's bed with all of your clothes on and you'd fall asleep? When you woke up in the morning, you'd find yourself with your pajamas on and in your own bed. What happened during the night was that your Daddy came along and he took you with his strong arms and he lifted you from Mommy's bed to your own bed. He carried you. And death is just like that. We just wake up one morning to find ourselves in another room. It's a room where we belong—a room that the Lord gave us, because He loved us and died for us and rose again." Peter Marshall said, "The little boy, with a shining face, told his mother that he understood. His father's big strong arms would carry him to another room."

### **VII. The seventh thing we learn, as we confront this passage, is that we must all give an account.**

"We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:9–10, NIV). This judgment seat called the *bema* still stands in the ruins of Corinth. It's one of the few things still standing at Corinth. I think it's about 8 or 9 feet high. It sort of looks like when you walk into a courtroom today—there's the elevated dais of the judge. So that, when you appear before the judge, you must look up. The Roman proconsul Gallio sat behind that *bema*, that judgment, when Paul was brought there by religious opponents and was brought on trial. Basically, two things happen at the *bema*. One is judgment of cases, such as Paul's. The other was, if somebody ran in the games—the athletic event—and won, at the *bema*, they were given a laurel wreath, the crown of the winner.

Paul says, as he's writing to the Corinthians, knowing that they recognize where the *bema* is down in the marketplace, he says, "There's coming a day when we're all going to appear at the

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*bema* of Jesus.” We recognize from Scripture that there are at least eight judgments. There’s the judgment which Christ experiences for us on the cross, where He says, in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life.” On the cross, Jesus took our judgment.

We’re no longer judged as sinners in God’s eyes, if we have Christ in our lives. That judgment is past. The second judgment that the Scriptures talk about is self-judgment. 1 Corinthians 11:31 says, “But if we have judged ourselves, we will not need to come under judgment.” If we let the Holy Spirit convict us and we’ll straighten up, then we won’t have to face God judging us. Third, here is a kind of judgment which is a discipline from God: Hebrews 12:6 says, “Endure hardship as discipline—God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” Fourth, there is the judgment of the works of the believer, which is here in 2 Corinthians 5. Fifth, the judgment of the nation of Israel. Sixth, the judgment of Gentile nations. Seventh, the judgment of fallen angels. “Do you not know,” Paul says, “that one day you will judge the angels?” (1 Corinthians 6:3). That will be our task. And eighth, there is the Great White Throne judgment, spoken of in Revelation, where those dead who have not known Christ will appear before Him to have the final verdict read, “Depart from Me” (Revelation 20:11).

The judgment of believers, here in 2 Corinthians 5, is not to be confused with the issue of salvation. If we are in Christ, that judgment has already passed. Rather, the judgment here is like the one spoken of in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, where, in that day, the works we have built upon our life will be seen, whether we build upon our life the things that are precious like gold, silver, precious stones; or upon transitory things—like wood, hay and stubble. Paul faces the prospect that some will be saved on the Day of Judgment, because they have confessed Christ. But because in their Christian life they have never been accountable or disciplined or obedient to

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God, on that day, they will be saved though as by fire. Their works will be burned up and will prove that their whole Christian life was counted for nothing. What the grace of God did for them, they did nothing with. They'll be saved—but nothing more.

Here is a Scripture which is holding us accountable as Christians for our stewardship, for our disciplines, for our priorities, for our relationships, for the giving of our time to the kingdom of God, for the giving of our finances to the kingdom of God, for the service of our life for the glory of God and the cause of Jesus Christ. We'll all give an account.

At the *bema*, it was the winners who were crowned, but the losers were not whipped. So we're not facing a kind of judgment seat for persons on the basis of their lack of works; here they are chastised or simply not going to have the same rewards as those who have been faithful.

Paul tells us about this judgment that's facing us as Christians. He tells us six things about it—he says it is necessary. “We must appear.” It is for all of us—we must all appear. It is before Jesus. It is individual, one by one—each one gives an account. It is a judgment of our works. And the life of the believer lays open. We must all appear. That word carries with it the idea of becoming manifest. The things that will be open on that day in eternity will not be the things that have been sealed on earth. Those things which are under the blood, because they are forgiven, are sealed and they are removed from us, as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). But those things for which we have not sought God's forgiveness, that measurement of our life in terms of our giving of ourselves to the work of God—to the call upon which God puts upon us, and our faithfulness to Him—all of that is called open for assessment. Someone has said, “Your life is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift to God.”

Confronting death. What do you know? One, that we have an earthly tent. Two, that the earthly tent may be destroyed. Three, that we have a building from God. Four, that we've already

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received a guarantee of our future. Five, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Six, that it is preferable to be with the Lord. Seven, that we must give an account.

#### **Closing Prayer**

Our gracious Father, we thank you for this day You've given us in Your Word, and Your Word finds us, challenges us, and changes us. My mind today goes back to those times in the Orient when I have seen those without You face death with great weeping and wailing, because they did not know for certain what happened after death. In a week like this, on a day like today, how graced we have been by what You do for us. You loved us so much that You died for us, so that we might be forgiven, no longer standing under God's judgment and that eternal life might be ours. I thank You this morning that Dad is in Your presence. I thank You for the hope that is ours. That we too shall one day be with You. I pray for those that are in this auditorium today who do not know You, who have not yet faced their own death. It is appointed for each of us, unless You come first, to die. O Lord, open the heart of anyone here who does not know You and let them give you entrance this day, that they might pass from death unto life. We thank You that Your resurrection is so powerful, that ultimately we're swallowed up by life. I pray for others who have come to this service and have been challenged by the prospect of standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ. It causes us to seriously evaluate what we're doing with our life, our faithfulness to You, the commitment of our disciplines. And Lord, should there be those here who are building their life upon things that don't count—upon surface things, things in the material realm—and are not prizing that which is eternal, grant this day a change of direction in their hearts. For we must all appear before You. Bless and heal those who are here with heavy needs in their life—physical, spiritual, emotional—as we come to this time of prayer. We know

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You, the risen Lord, will be present among us. So we look to You with faith. In the name of the Lord, we ask. Amen.