

Assurance of an Eternal Dwelling

2 Corinthians 5:1–11
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With all the trials Paul endured for the ministry, the threat of death was always present. Tradition tells us that he eventually died for the faith. Historians debate what actually happened to him, but he probably died by decapitation. Romans executed citizens by removing their heads.

As Paul reflected on this in our text, he provided us with an extremely helpful theology of death. What is death? What's its purpose? Do our bodies and souls lie dormant in the grave until the resurrection? How do we know?

Of course, the Bible mentions death on just about every page of its sixty-six books. Sometimes it connects death with human sin. Sometimes it mentions that this person or that person (and occasionally many people) died. And it also explains the meaning of our Savior's death. But today's text is helpful and, I believe, encouraging because it says so much about death in one place.

So, let's see what Paul had to say.

What is Death?

The first question to consider today is, What is death? Whatever it is, it's inevitable for the vast majority of human beings, including Christians.

Even so, verse 1 seems to give a little leeway. Paul said, *If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved or destroyed.* He didn't assume we would die. Nor did he assume we wouldn't. He spoke of death only as a possibility. Why? I believe he had two reasons for this. One is that believers who will be alive when Jesus returns won't die. First Thessalonians 4:17 says, *Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.* The other reason is that two men in the Old Testament never died — Enoch, who walked with God and was taken to be with him, and Elijah, who went to the Lord in a whirlwind.

But you shouldn't plan on escaping death. Ezekiel 18:4 says, *Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.* The *earthly house of this tabernacle* will be dissolved. And when this happens, it'll put us in an unnatural condition. The Lord didn't create us to be bodiless souls. Paul described this condition in verses 3 and 4 as

nakedness. He may have been thinking about Adam and Eve in the garden. After they sinned, they hid themselves when they heard the sound of God walking about. Why did they hide? Because they were naked. Their sin had placed them in an unnatural relationship to their creator. Before sinning, they loved him and walked with him in the cool of the day. But afterward, they avoided him and hid themselves, fearing his wrath instead of embracing his love. Death is simply another manifestation of this unnatural condition.

We cannot and should not be comfortable with death. In our text Paul wrote, *In this we groan* (v. 2). Verse 4 adds that we groan because we're burdened. We know death isn't natural. It not only separates the soul from the body, but also the one who dies from his community of family and friends. This results in pain, which is often made worse by the circumstances of death. The violent murder of a young person is a lot harder to deal with than the quiet death of an aging grandparent.

Even Jesus groaned at death. He knew he would raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, yet John 11:33 says, *When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.* A few verses later, we read, *Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave* (v. 38).

But at the same time, there's a sense in which death, even though it provokes intense groaning in those who face it, is still the better choice. In the first chapter of Philippians Paul wrote, *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.... For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you* (Phil. 1:21–24). And our text says that *to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord*. What believer doesn't want to be with the Lord? Could anything be better than this?

My wife and I watch our granddaughter Scottie four to five days each month. We believe it's important to tell her about her mother — what she was like growing up, what things she liked to do, and how clever and funny she was. But as soon as we mention her mother, Scottie always responds, “My mommy's with Jesus.”

We sometimes say that we want to see this person or that person when we get to heaven. Every time I visited Wayne Pearson after Nancy's death, he told me how much he wanted to be with her. I have a long list of people I want to see. But more than anything else, our greatest desire should be to see Jesus, to behold the wounds in his hands and feet that gave us our salvation, and to hear his welcoming voice. In John 12, the Greeks wanted to see Jesus while he was still on the earth. We can't see him now. Verse 16 of our current chapter says, *Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.* Today we see him only by faith, but when we die we'll see him in person. This means, as verse 7 says, *we walk by faith, not by sight.*

Death is preferable to life in a sinful world for another reason, viz., it reminds us that the unnatural separation of body and soul won't last forever. Look again in verse 1. Paul wrote, *For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* Our present bodies are *tabernacles* or tents. No one makes a tent thinking it will last forever. But our resurrection bodies will be *buildings*, permanent structures made by God to last all eternity. They'll never wear out or grow weary. Even after millions and millions of years, they'll be as strong as they were when Jesus first raised us from the dead. This is what Paul meant at the end of verse 4 when he wrote that *mortality might be swallowed up of life.*

Now, to avoid misunderstandings, I want to be very explicit about what the resurrection is. The resurrection will occur when our Lord Jesus Christ reunites the same body and the same soul that death separated. Our souls will have already been made perfect after his image when this happens. But then he will raise our bodies from the dust and transform them in ways we can barely imagine. They'll be more glorious and more powerful. Yet, somehow they'll still be the same bodies. Listen to what Paul told the Corinthians in his first epistle: *So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body* (1 Cor. 15:42–44).

The Spirit as Our Earnest

Death is not only a better choice than our present life, but it also comes with a guarantee that's already ours. Verse 5 says, *Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit.*

The Holy Spirit is an earnest, a down payment, a promise of good things to come. He gives us confidence, according to verse 6, to live in the present world despite all its difficulties, challenges and frustrations. He also gives us confidence, according to verse 8, to surrender this life when the Lord summons us to himself. The longer we're in the faith, the stronger our desire grows to be free of this world and to be with the Lord.

The earnest of God's Spirit means we can be content whether we live or die because in both we know we serve our crucified and risen Savior. As the first question and answer of our catechism reminds us, we belong to our faithful Savior, body and soul, both in life and in death. Verse 9 says, *Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.*

This verse was the motto of the seminary I attended. One of its professors, Dr. George Handy Wailes, translated it like this: "We are ambitious to be well-pleasing unto Him." Few people have been as ambitious to please Jesus as he was. He was ordained in the Presbyterian Church, which I

believe he served until his death in 1967 at one hundred years of age. Early in his life, he taught English Bible and Greek at Ursinus College for eleven years before accepting a call to serve as Professor of Exegetical Theology at Reformed Episcopal Seminary. While teaching a full load at RES, he simultaneously taught Biblical Languages and English Bible at Temple University for over twenty years and Hebrew at Princeton Seminary for about ten years. He taught in Philadelphia every morning and then took the train to New Jersey every afternoon.

Dr. Rudolph once told us a story about Dr. Wailes. When Dr. Wailes was in his late 90s, the Lord visited him with a horrible cold that confined him to bed for several days with a high fever and severe coughing spells. But when Dr. Rudolph went to visit this old and very sick man, he found him sitting up in bed, translating the minor prophets from the original Hebrew.

Although I never knew Dr. Wailes, his example inspired one of my professors, who, when his wife was in labor about to deliver their last child, was busy translating the book of Isaiah in the waiting room.

“We are ambitious to be well-pleasing unto Him” meant something to the old guard at the seminary. They took their faith and work seriously. And their example testifies to us, even after all these years, of the power of God’s grace in them.

Because the Spirit is our earnest, we should also be able to see the results of his work in our lives. And we can. Paul mentioned two of them in our text. The first is that the Spirit gives us confidence concerning the final judgment, and the second is that he makes us faithful in our Savior’s service.

Paul spoke about his confidence before the judgment seat of Christ in verse 10. He wrote, *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.* There’s no exception here: every believer will stand before the Lord. We know that our persons have already been justified and, therefore, we have nothing to worry about. But this verse isn’t about our persons; it’s about our works. How will our works fare in that day? What will Jesus say about the things we’ve done? Will our works survive his scrutiny? The Holy Spirit gives us confidence that they will.

According to this verse, Jesus will dispense varying degrees of rewards — some will receive more and others less. But perhaps the words most worthy of our attention are *according to*. Our rewards will be according to what we’ve done, but not because of what we’ve done. The only *because* here is the finished work of Jesus Christ. Everything we receive comes by grace.

The second result of the Holy Spirit being our earnest is faithfulness and service. Verse 11 says, *Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences.*

Here's a story to illustrate this point. When I was in college, Dr. Gordon Clark, who was in his mid-80s, became deathly ill. A lot of us didn't think he'd make it and offered to take him to the doctor. He refused and eventually recovered. But sometime later, he developed an eye problem that interfered with his vision. He thought he might lose his sight. This time he insisted on going to the doctor. We all knew what happened. Dr. Clark didn't care that he might die because death would only transport him to Jesus. He wanted this. But he didn't want to lose his sight because that meant he couldn't work. He would have been useless in Jesus' service. To him, that was worse than death!

Has the Spirit worked in us the same longing to serve our Savior? Has he taught us the terror of the Lord to move us with greater zeal and conviction to persuade men to put their trust in Jesus?

We know that death is a conquered enemy. Death and the grave will both be swallowed up in victory in the general resurrection. But what about now? First Corinthians 15:56–57 says, *The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* We share in our Savior's victory now. Today's text confirms this. The assurance of the resurrection sustains us, helping us hold on and patiently wait. It inspires us to a greater confidence and increasingly faithful service. The passage in 1 Corinthians continues: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.* Amen.