

## ‘BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT’ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-10

**[St Mark’s Online Services- Sunday, June 7, 2020- 9:30am/5:00pm]**

### 1. Ways of Looking at Life.

There are lots of ways different people look at life, aren’t there?

Some people love life and think it’s just wonderful. They know it has troubles but they see those harder moments just as little speed-bumps on the highway of life’s rich experiences. People who think life’s wonderful but who aren’t religious might say: ‘when you’re dead, you’re dead- so you better make the most of every living day’. People who think life’s wonderful but are religious might say: ‘I believe there’s a heaven to come when we die, but I sure hope this life lasts as long as it possibly can’. They might even confess to being a bit unsure what the attraction is when it comes to heaven.

But then there are other people who think life is terrible. They’re more likely to see life’s happier moments as rare interruptions to the normal course of events. These people would describe life as being full of sadness and difficulty. They’d say that there really aren’t many days when the sun pokes its head through the clouds. For people who look at life like this and who have no hope beyond the grave, their only option is often despair. They can’t even really see how life is worth living. But for those who think life is terrible but who do believe there’s a new and better world to come, we might hear them saying: ‘Life sucks. Bring on heaven. The sooner the better.’

But then there are other people who look at life with a mixture of both those perspectives. And I guess everyone fits somewhere on the spectrum from thinking life is wonderful to thinking life is terrible. I reckon I’m probably close to the middle of that spectrum somewhere. Some days I think life here is really great and I’d be happy for God to give me many more years. Other days I see so much brokenness and grief that I’m quick to say: ‘Come Lord Jesus’.

What about you? How do you look at life? Well, wherever you are on that spectrum, I want to suggest this morning/evening that our instincts are often a product of living by sight. That is, our attitude to life is consistent with what we see. We see goodness and happiness and we want it to last. Or we see evil and sadness and we want it to end. I reckon even on those days when I’m praying most earnestly for Jesus to return, it’s usually not because I long to be with Jesus as much as I long for the sorrow to be over. I think even this is a kind of living by sight.

But Paul wants us to live not by sight, but by faith. And living by faith involves seeing things from God’s perspective. Looking upon our world and our lives with his eyes as it were- with his promises for the future uppermost in our minds. And this is what Paul’s talking

about in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. And this is what I want to explore with you today/tonight. Let's pray God would help us, then let's read these verses.

[Pray]

[Read 2 Cor 5:1-10]

Today/tonight I want to point out five things from this passage. Two future certainties. Two mistaken thoughts. And one clear goal. So let me start by pointing out the two things Paul says here are absolutely certain about the future.

## 2. Two Future Certainties.

### - being with Christ in heaven

Number 1- all God's people will one day be with Christ in heaven. Paul talks a lot about this in these verses. Remember, he's writing as someone who trusts in Christ and he's writing to a church. So he's talking here about the hope Christians have. The Bible's very clear about the fact that not everyone will be in heaven with Christ one day. Many will be in hell where access to all of Christ's blessings is denied. But here Paul's talking about the sure future every Christian has.

And he uses three different images. First he says that the difference between life on earth and life in heaven is like the difference between living in a tent and living in a house built by God<sup>1</sup>. He uses this language in verse 1 and in verse 4. And he could be suggesting, I think, that it's like the difference in the Old Testament between the tabernacle and the temple. The tabernacle was the temporary and portable structure in which the Israelites worshipped while they wandered in the desert. But once they entered the Promised Land they built a temple to last. The experience of Christians is like that. Now we live in a flimsy and temporary body- a tabernacle. One day we'll live in the eternal and unshakeable temple of God- his house. That's his first image.

With his second image Paul says that the difference between life on earth and life in heaven is like the difference between being unclothed and being clothed. We find this comparison in verses 2-4.

Now, as someone in one of our Home Groups pointed out this week, if you put these two images together then you'd have to conclude that being a Christian in this world is like being a naked camper! And as someone who's not a huge fan of camping at the best of times, I'd have to say that the idea of naked camping is a whole other level of uncomfortable. Of course, any sensible naked camper is very much looking forward to getting home and putting some clothes on. And that's Paul's point you see. Because most of the time we'd all prefer to be clothed than to be naked. And after living in a tent for a while, even the keenest camper can see the advantages of a well provisioned house.

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, verses 1, it is not 'hand made'.

What's to come is far better than what we have now. This is what's saying. The future is better than the present. Like a house is better than a tent, and like clothes are better than no clothes.

But there's a third image here as well. Because in verses 6-9 Paul says that going from life on earth to life in heaven is like moving to a new house to live with someone you really love. He talks about the home we have in our bodies. And its biggest deficit is that we don't share it with the Lord- at least not physically, face to face. But it would be preferable, he says in verse 8, to be away from the body and to be at home with the Lord instead. And as you read the New Testament, you find Paul saying this repeatedly. Perhaps most famously in Philippians 1 he compares life and death and concludes that dying and going to be with Christ is 'better by far'<sup>2</sup>. And the primary difference between the two, according to Paul, is the presence of Christ. You notice that he's not primarily expressing here a longing to be in a better place or a longing to become a better person. Primarily, his desire is for better company! His longing is to be with Jesus. This is living by faith, not by sight.

These are Paul's three images- tent versus house, nakedness versus clothed, and home here versus a new home in heaven with Jesus. But all three pictures are offered us to make a single point. One day we will be with Christ in heaven. And living with Christ in heaven will be better than life on earth by far. And, it's a sure thing. There can be no doubt that this is where Christians are headed. Notice in verse 5 that Paul again uses the word he used back in chapter 1 when he spoke about God's dependable faithfulness in keeping his promises. It's guaranteed. We have the Holy Spirit living within us, guaranteeing what's to come. And that's why in verse 6 and again in verse 8 Paul uses the word 'confident'. Because he's not in doubt about this, and he doesn't think we should be either. We can be absolutely confident that this is our future. God has promised it. Jesus has secured it. The presence of the Spirit guarantees it. It's a certainty!

### **- appearing before Christ's judgement seat**

But there's a second certainty about the future Paul speaks of here too. It's in verse 10.

[Read 5:10]

You notice now that Paul is not just talking about Christians, but everyone. But he certainly is talking about Christians. This second certainty is not one that the first certainty enables you to avoid. Just because we have the promise of eternal life in the gospel, doesn't mean we skip the day of judgement. Of course, Christians have no need to fear that being with Christ in heaven is anything less than completely certain, no matter what their sins or failings might be. But nevertheless, there will still be a day when our sins, and our sanctification, will be seen for what they are.

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 1:23. See also Philippians 3:20-21. It's also interesting to notice the parallels between this passage and 1 Corinthians 15. Notice especially the links between the two passages in terms of 'clothing' language (1 Cor 15:53-54) and the phrase 'swallowed up' (1 Cor 15:54 and 2 Cor 5:4).

God will consider every human life. He will do so impartially. And he will evaluate them<sup>3</sup>. And he will express his pleasure in the good things people have done<sup>4</sup>. He will praise people for all their righteous choices. But he will also express his disappointment in our unrighteousness- every deed, word, and thought. What a sobering thing that is. And none will escape. The verse says ‘all’ and ‘each one’. This too is a certainty.

### 3. Two Mistaken Thoughts.

But what I want to make sure you’ve seen here, is that if these two things are certainties, then certain things follow. There are implications. And one of those implications is that are some thoughts which people commonly have which can’t possibly be true. I want to mention two such thoughts.

#### - heaven is the “after life”

The first is this. That heaven is the “after life”. And the reason this is a mistaken thought is found in verse 4. Let me read it to you again.

[Read 5:4]

Did you catch that last phrase? When we leave this tent behind and come instead into our heavenly home, when we leave our unclothed existence behind and clothe ourselves with our heavenly dwelling, then what is mortal will be ‘swallowed up by life’!

But when we speak of heaven as where we spend our “after life” we imply that life is here. And we imply that what follows “life” is something different. But do you notice that that’s the exact opposite of what Paul’s saying. He says that this life is something other than real life. He calls it mortality. But what is to come- that’s life! That will be life like we’ve never known it before. True life. Now we’re alive. We’re mortal. We breathe. But then, we’ll live. Then we’ll enjoy the life we were made for. And all that went before will be swallowed up by it!

Now of course, this won’t be a whole new life that we don’t currently know. This will be the resurrection life that’s already in us, as it were, coming out of hiding<sup>5</sup>. But when it does, we will be far, far better off than we are now. This is why Paul says he groans now<sup>6</sup>. This is why he’s burdened now. Because he longs for the life to come. He can’t wait to be with Jesus and to really come alive. He’s impatient for it. But are we?

My sense is that we’re often quite confused about this point. The idea of heaven being an “after life” makes sense to us because our present experience seems like life to us. Often it seems like a really wonderful experience too. But when we think like that we’re living by

<sup>3</sup> What Paul ‘fears’ in this (see v.11) is “evaluation” not “condemnation”.

<sup>4</sup> See verse 9 for this thought. See also 1 Corinthians 4:5.

<sup>5</sup> I owe this thought and language to Roy Clements in his commentary- p.102.

<sup>6</sup> See verse 2 as well as verse 4.

sight more than by faith. Our way of looking at life is out of step with God's perspective. Our thoughts are mistaken.

As one writer says: 'To our minds this present existence is solid and real, whereas our coming existence seems shadowy and insubstantial. Paul teaches us that the reverse is true'<sup>7</sup>. What a revolutionary reality this is! We often think of heaven as clouds and air and wisps of angelic light. We think of life here as the things we can touch and feel- things we can depend upon. But we're wrong. This is the tent! Heaven is the house. This is us walking around without any clothes on. Heaven is us fully dressed. This is a life where the best thing we know is the invisible spiritual presence of Jesus within us. In heaven we'll be with him face to face. This is mortality. That is life. And it's what God made us for. Verse 5. God fashioned us for this very purpose.

So why is it that my heart often loves the world more than I love heaven? Why is it that on the days when life seems fairly rosy I inwardly wish that Jesus wouldn't come back too soon? Why is it that I seem to only want what heaven offers when I can't wait to be rid of the terrible things I see all around me? Because I'm so often living by sight, not by faith. But Paul invites us to live by faith, to look at life with God's eyes. He invites us to listen to the words of God's promises. And to believe them.

Brothers and sisters, life still awaits. Nothing this earth has to offer us is remotely comparable with the pleasure and joy of being with Jesus. I hope you believe that. And until you do, you'll be mistaken. But if you will believe it, then you'll learn to sit loosely to the shiny things the world offers<sup>8</sup>. If you will believe it your happiness and sorrow won't go up and down as if your life depended on your circumstances. And if you will believe it you'll be able to look death in the face with a 'steady eye' and when the moment of death comes you'll know that you're 'simply moving house'<sup>9</sup>. And if you believe what God says here, then next time someone asks you if you believe in an afterlife, you'll respectfully say "no, I don't- I believe in life, and I believe that something lesser precedes it".

### **- there is only one choice that matters**

But there's a second implication of these two great certainties that I also want to make sure you don't miss today/tonight. A second mistaken thought that we can fall into. And this one is a thought unique to Christians. It's a theological error. And it's this. There is only one choice that matters.

What I'm talking about here is when Christians think or say that the only decision that ultimately effects the outcome of your life is whether you choose to follow Jesus or not. The thinking goes that once you've become a Christian, your one significant choice is made. After that, you can be righteous or you can be unrighteous and it doesn't ultimately matter- at least not to God. But Paul says here that that's just patently untrue.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Barnett in his BST commentary- p.98.

<sup>8</sup> See C S Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, for his discussion of our how our God-given appetite for glory is so often attached to unsatisfying worldly desires. Especially pp. 29-31.

<sup>9</sup> Once again, I've borrowed this language from Roy Clements' commentary- p.104.

Of course, it's one of those thoughts that's really close to being right. We know that because of Christ's death and resurrection, none of our sins are held against us. All of them are washed away- past, present, future. Our entrance into heaven is assured. Because Jesus paid the price for us. That's all true. So it's a very short step from there to the conclusion that our sins don't matter to God, or that living to please God makes no real impact on him. And that's what Paul is rejecting here.

He teaches us that every person who trusts in Jesus for forgiveness will find the door of heaven opened to them. And they will go to be with Jesus forever in his heavenly home. That's a certainty. But he also teaches that every person must first pass through the day of judgement- the day of evaluation and accountability- when it will be clearer than clear that our sins do matter to God, even the ones he's forgiven, and that our efforts to live in a way that pleases him- they matter to him too- deeply. And on that day we will all experience the sad look in his eyes when we recall with him that there have been times when we have forgotten him, or failed him, or flagrantly ignored him. And it will break us and cause us to weep. But on that day we will also experience the joy that lights his face when we recall with him that there have been times when our thoughts and words and deeds have brought him pleasure. And if a child whose earthly father praises them finds warmth surging through their body when they hear it, how much more will our hearts burst with joy to know that our father in heaven wants to praise us.

No doubt, there is one choice that matters above all other choices. The Scriptures affirm that time and time again. But 2 Corinthians 5:10 reminds us that there are a lot of other choices that matter too- choices we make every day, big and small. They should matter to us. Because they matter to God.

#### 4. One Clear Goal.

Which is why Paul says what he says in verse 9. And this is the final point of today's/tonight's sermon. One clear goal. I'll read you verse 9 again.

[Read 5:9]

Paul says that he aims to please the Lord. Whether now or then. Whether here on earth or one day in heaven. And it's the simplicity of this that really strikes me.

I've never been one for new year's resolutions. But I do value goal setting. And for many years now I've tried to take some time at the start of every year to write down some personal goals for the year ahead. I generally write at least one goal for each key area of responsibility I have. I find it a helpful exercise to clarify what I'm on about, and then for the rest of the year I keep praying through them. This year when I'd finished my list there were 35 goals.

Paul has one. One crystal clear vision for his life. One key aim. It's incredibly clarifying isn't it? If you want to know what God says life is about- here's a verse for you. If you

want to know what God expects of you in one sentence you can remember- here it is. If you want to live a life marked by contentment and joy because you're doing what you were made to do- here's what you need to do. Please the Lord. Please the Lord. Let that be your goal.

Of course, it's fine to have other goals, but only as long as they're informed in some way by this one. And this one will naturally lead to other ones too. For example, the person who wants to know what pleases the Lord will spend as much time as they possibly can reading his word. And, to be honest, I can't think of a better way of thinking about why reading the Bible is important. If someone were to ask me, Simon- why do you read the Bible every day, and often many times in a day? Verse 9 has a ready answer. Because I've made it my goal to please the Lord. And I know no better way to learn and to remind myself of what that involves.

And once again, this is a verse for everyone- not just for Christians. Because if you've tuned in today/tonight and you're not yet committed to following Christ, or you're not sure you want to be, then this verse is for you too. This is what God expects of you. To please him. And nothing would please him more than you making the choice that really does matter more than all other choices- the choice to entrust your life to Jesus who lived, died, and rose again for you. I hope you'll do that. If not today, then some day soon. Because none of us know when life will end. And when it does, we will all appear before the judgement seat of Christ. And then, only those who have been washed in Jesus' blood will enter heaven to be with Christ forever. And I want you to be among that number.

But to my fellow believers today, I say this. Here's the goal. Pleasing the Lord. Because this is what God is doing in the world. He's transforming us into the image of Christ with every increasing glory<sup>10</sup>. He's renewing us inwardly day by day<sup>11</sup>. He cares about the choices we make- all of them. And he hasn't left us to live on the earth without a clear vision. Please the Lord. You can, you know. You really can bring pleasure to his heart. And one day, when we're before the judgement seat, we'll see it in his eyes!

And then, how good will it be, to hand in our tent and be given a home? How good will it be to finally be clothed with our heavenly dwelling? How good will it be to be with Jesus- the one who gave us everything, the one for whose pleasure we lived?

[Read 5:7-9a]

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<sup>10</sup> 3:18

<sup>11</sup> 4:18