

HOW CAN WE AVOID BEING DISCOURAGED?

SERIES: FREE AT LAST! THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Ron R. Ritchie

Many times we find ourselves asking “eternal” questions such as, “Where did I come from?” “Why am I here?” and, “What will happen to me when I die?” Life is a mystery. It is a challenge to all of us. Our time on earth brings many seasons of joy, laughter and happiness as we seek fulfillment of our hopes, our dreams and our ambitions. Yet we also experience seasons of faded hopes, broken dreams and unrealized ambitions. So how can we avoid being discouraged?

Discouragement immobilizes us. It takes away our inner joy, our peace, and a sense of wholeness. Recently a leader of the “human potential” movement claimed to have developed a philosophy to avoid being discouraged. He wrote, “I am bigger than anything that can happen to me. All these things, sorrow, misfortune, and suffering, are outside my door. I am in the house and I have the key.” Now that may sound good to many of us, but the folly of that kind of thinking leaves many adrift on a sea of uncertainty. A philosophy that says “I am the captain of my fate” is unrealistic, false, and totally unacceptable to the Christian. The Christian seeks reality in the Word of God. Scripture is the rock on which we take refuge. In this series from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians we are discovering some of the spiritual principles for living in this day and age.

Paul has already shared many of the secrets of his life and ministry, such as how he keeps from losing heart. First, he depends on the indwelling Holy Spirit as he shares the gospel while living in the sight of God and trusting him to break through the veils of pride and self-sufficiency of his hearers. Last week I had the privilege of speaking to 120 people (most of whom were not believers) at a funeral service for a woman who had become a Christian recently and died shortly thereafter. Before I got up to speak, several others had read poems and made statements about where (in their minds) she had departed to. As I was listening I began to feel discouraged, but I stood up anyway and said, “I’d like to give you some good news: Jesus loves you and died for your sins and mine.” Immediately, I heard two people in the front row say, “Oh no!”

Why would they respond this way? Perhaps they were angry because I had made mention of the deceased’s salvation. Then I remembered the apostle Paul, who had often faced this type of situation, and that really encouraged me to speak truth to these people. I noticed, however, that as soon as I said “Amen,” most of those 120 people shot right out of the door! I didn’t have a rush of people telling me the good news that they had heard the words and had decided to give their lives over to Christ. However, I was no longer discouraged for I knew God would somehow use his word to make light shine of darkness.

Another reason Paul says he doesn’t lose heart is because “we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5). Also, Paul realized he was a “jar of clay” like everyone else, yet he contained the “treasure” of Christ and his word, and his life was being used to the honor and glory of God. Finally, Paul lived by faith, believing that God was using his afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and traumas to lead many to Christ.

Paul now reveals three more insights which helped him as he sought to avoid discouragement. First, we should fix our eyes on the unseen; second, we should fix our minds on our eternal home; and third, we should fix our hearts on pleasing the Lord.

Fixing our eyes on the unseen

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Paul was a realist. When he wrote this letter he was probably in his mid-50's. His step was not as quick as it had once been when he was younger, he didn't see as well as before, his hair wasn't as thick as it used to be. He would have agreed with the words of Job, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to an end without hope" (Job 7:6). Again, we are but jars of clay, dust designed to contain God himself. Yet these containers are wasting away, just as rust eats into iron, and as moths eat into cloth. But Paul proclaims the good news that despite the fact that along with the rest of humanity his physical body is wasting away, when he came to Christ he was "born again" spiritually. He became a new creature, a new man. The inner man became an eternal-life being. And this new life is not wasting away. On the contrary, the Christian is being "renewed day by day," by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 40:28-31 says,

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
 The Everlasting God, the LORD,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth
 does not become weary or tired.
 His understanding is inscrutable.
 He gives strength to the weary,
 And to him who lacks might He increases power.
 Though youths grow weary and tired,
 and vigorous young men stumble badly,
 yet those who wait for the LORD
 will gain new strength;
 They will mount up with wings like eagles,
 they will run and not get tired,
 they will walk and not become weary.

When I meet old friends from my past (before I became a Christian) they always remember me for who I was then and assume I'm still the same now. But it's odd to me because I don't know who they're talking to. There's a new me now, and I'm being renewed day by day." As a young man I liked to play baseball. One day this dear old lady, who was close to 80 years old, was watching the game as she sat in her rocking chair on her front porch. Sometimes between innings a few of us would sit and chat with her. One day I asked her, "How do you like the game?" "I love it," she said. "What are you thinking about while we're playing?" I asked. She said, "I was thinking if it wasn't for this body I'd be on second base!" We are wasting away, aren't we?

Last night I watched a television show on models. They all seemed to agree that their greatest fear was aging, particularly getting wrinkles and their hair turning gray. However, one woman who is no longer a model said she had stopped thinking that her body was all she was. She said she had gained wisdom about life. Although she wasn't a Christian she had learned one of the secrets of her humanity.

Paul goes on to say, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” On an imaginary scale, Paul is weighing his afflictions on one side and the glory to come on the other. He seeks to understand life from God’s point of view, to look over God’s shoulder if you will, and view the spiritual realities behind his present circumstances. The apostle and his companions had experienced afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, trauma, hardship, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, shipwrecks, and to Paul was added a thorn in the flesh, but all of these were achieving an eternal glory that far outweighs all of that. These “light afflictions” somehow fit in with our maturing process.

Notice how Paul contrasts the terms “eternal and momentary,” “weight and light,” “glory and troubles.” In the original language, “weight” had the idea of authority, influence and responsibility. The Jerusalem Bible translates this verse: “Yes, the troubles which are soon over, though they weigh little, train us for the carrying of a weight of eternal glory which is out of all proportion to them.” Again, God is using all of this to train us for something better.

Jesus spoke of “his coming kingdom” to his disciples in the upper room: “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging [governing] the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). Paul used that same theme of judging in 1 Corinthians 6:3-4, when he told the Corinthians that one day they would judge angels as well as the world. That word should encourage our hearts as we experience fear and discouragement.

Again, the trials and perplexities we are subject to now prepare us for “an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.” In Philippians, Paul tells us we must first follow in the steps of Jesus:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

In 2 Timothy 2:11-12 he says, “It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us.” C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Eternal Weight of Glory*, wrote: “The promises of Scripture may very roughly be reduced to five heads. It has promised, firstly, that we shall be with Christ; secondly, that we shall be like him; thirdly, that we shall have glory; fourthly, that we shall, in some sense, be fed or feasted or entertained; and finally, that we shall have some sort of official position in the universe—ruling cities, judging angels, being pillars of God’s temple.” Basically, everything that happens in this life is adding up, and the best is yet to come. First there’s suffering, then there will be glory.

In light of all this, Paul says, “we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (NIV). The key to understanding life is to live by faith in Christ, for the very meaning of faith is trusting in the unseen realities. First John 2:15-17 says, “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” Everything we see and become involved in while we are on this

earth is temporary in light of what is coming.

The writer of Hebrews says this about the unseen: "...let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:1-3). In the story "The Little Prince," the fox, who the prince had trained, shared his secret about life: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Fixing our minds on our eternal home

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. (2 Corinthians 5:1-5)

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand three basic truths which would help them not lose heart and become discouraged in their immediate stressful and troubled circumstances. First he says, "For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands..." First-century Greek and Roman philosophers regarded their bodies in a much different light. Epictetus (65-120 AD), the Greek Stoic philosopher, said of himself, "Thou art a poor soul, burdened with a corpse." Seneca (65-? AD), a Roman philosopher and writer of tragedies, wrote, "I am a higher being and born for higher things than to be the slave of my body, which I look upon as a shackle put upon my freedom...in so detestable a habitation dwells the free soul."

Paul says our bodies are "jars of clay" and "earthly tents." They are fragile and temporary; they are wasting away. The apostle says in 2 Corinthians 5:8 when we are "absent from the body [we are] at home with the Lord." Of our physical death—for that is our fate "as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12)—our bodies go back into the ground. That's because our bodies are "tents," and as such they are designed only for "camping out." When our tent is destroyed (in physical death) our inner man will receive an eternal home, formed by the hand of God, a house designed for eternity to house our eternal soul and spirit for a body of some kind is essential to our personality (1 Corinthians 15:50-53). We use our tent for a season of camping, but we don't want to live in a tent forever. Anyone who has spent a week camping out knows that.

Helmut Thielicke in *The Mystery of Death* writes:

"...Death acquires...a different quality. It ceases to be a hostile barrier let down between time and eternity...Now death becomes a bridge, a transition...death is no longer a judgment that compels us to leave all; then it becomes the joy of going back home. For now the Lord awaits me on the other side of the dark grave and he heads me from faith to sight, from this world where we see in a dim mirror to the table of the Father."

Death is simply breaking camp and going home to dinner with the Father.

“For indeed in this house we groan....” Paul is now introducing the second truth which will encourage the Corinthians in these troubled times. “...longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.”

The living will groan for their eternal house, which will be given to those who are alive when Christ returns, as well as to those who have died in Christ. And it will be given immediately because we do not want to be “found naked”—disembodied spirits. We long for our covering, for identity, to be clothed with a resurrection body. During the Depression era, out of necessity, my family and I had to leave our home and live in a tent. The tent was our only home until a tree fell on it during a storm. I remember my mother, sitting in the rain, groaning for her home. But our eternal home is like a great gown that will cover us better than our present tent. Then we will be swallowed up in eternal life—life with God—as it was intended to be lived.

The third basic truth Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand was that “He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.” We owe our existence to God, who grants to us our resurrected body so that we may reign with Christ forever. And God, in Christ, has given his church, his bride, an engagement ring—the presence and witness of his Holy Spirit. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that when we believed we were “were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:13-14).

Fixing our hearts on pleasing Christ

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2Corinthians 5:6-10)

The resurrected Christ is now present and reigning in our hearts. The Holy Spirit lives within us, and though we sense that our body is wasting away, in this time of “tenting” we live by faith, not by sight. Faith is the key to Christianity. All the saints of the past had to live in their tents as we are doing now. Hebrews 11:9-10 says, “By faith [Abraham] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Jesus promised his disciples, and us as well, that although we have to live in a tent on earth for a season, and thus be away from his visible presence, by faith we will one day see him face to face. That is why Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Paul continues, “Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord.” Who wouldn't love to leave the afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and trauma of this fallen and evil world, with all its sorrow, grief, pain and

disappointments, but we're not in control of our lives or the duration of our season of "tenting" on this earth. Psalm 90 says, "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years... So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (verses 10 and 12). In other words, buy up the time because this life isn't all there is. Use God's wisdom, love and knowledge. Don't waste your life on things that are passing away. In Psalm 139 we read, "In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me when as yet there was not one of them." God knew when you were going to be born and how long you are going to live. Job 14:5 says, "[man's] days are determined, the number of his months is with thee, and his limits you have set so he cannot pass."

Paul goes on to say, "We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it." In other words, our body is not who we are. Our inner man is who we are. We are a new creation in Christ. As such we have been given power to choose. That means to be Christ-like, drawing on his power moment by moment. Jesus said, "I am here only to do the will of my Father. I only do, say and go where the Father leads" (See Matthew 26:39; John 5:30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10), and that's how we, too, please God. Make it your ambition to be like Christ.

Pleasing God also has to do with our relationship to Jesus: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). As Augustine said, "Love God and do what you please." Obviously if you love God you'll do exactly what he wants you to do. It has been said of Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers who died in 1892, "In his heart Jesus stood unapproached, unrivaled. He worshiped Him. He adored Him. He was our Lord's delighted captive. Whatever Spurgeon did he did for Christ, and it was the controlling aim of all his life and work." A delighted captive of Jesus! Make it your aim to be likewise.

Paul now tells us the motivation behind his ambition to please the Lord with his gifts, his life and his time: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed [rewarded] for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." In Corinth there was what was called a "bema seat," a judgment seat where justice was dispensed and official business was carried out. According to Acts 18, Paul himself had been taken there to face the magistrates once.

Many people are confused about the "judgment seat." Here is just one example I found in a Saudi Arabian newspaper that I receive on a regular basis. The question was asked: "What is the suffering in the grave? I will be grateful for a detailed account of what happens to a Muslim after he is buried until the time when he is resurrected on the Day of Resurrection." The answer given: "*We are told by the Prophet that when a person is buried two angels come to him and question him about his beliefs. He is also asked about how far he translated his beliefs into actions. A good person who has conducted himself well in this life, and has observed the teachings of Islam with diligence, will find good reward in the grave, while a person who has failed to observe the proper teachings given by Allah and the Prophets will receive punishment in the grave before he is resurrected on the Day of Judgment. The prophet describes the grave as either a garden of Heaven or a pit of Hell.*"

But Paul says he is motivated by "the judgment seat of Christ." He will not appear for his sins because they're all forgiven. When he appears, rather, he will be judged based on his works, whether he did them in the flesh or in the Spirit. The true issue lies behind our motives for our good works. If they are done in the flesh they are wood, hay and stubble; but, if they are done in the Spirit they are gold, silver and precious stones (see 1 Corinthians 3:12-15). As Paul went through life, drawing on the life and power of Christ, he discovered that there were times when he slipped back into the flesh. When he became aware of this by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, he would judge them and then go on depending on the Lord for godly motives in his words and actions.

So in a real sense he realized that “the judgment seat of Christ” was already open for business. At the same time, he knew that on occasion he could not be sure of what was correct (1 Corinthians 4:3-5), so he would wait to do a final walk-through of his life in eternity with the Lord. As it was with Paul, so it is with us. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...” It will be a time of judgment as well as a time of encouragement. It will be a time of “official business” for the judgment is also necessary for the appointment of places of rulership and authority with Christ in his role as King of kings and Lord of lords at his revelation in power and glory.

In summary, how can we avoid being discouraged? First, we must fix our eyes on the unseen; then, we must fix our minds on our eternal home; and finally, we must fix our hearts on pleasing Christ. Was Paul discouraged at the end of his “tenting” season? Here are his words to Timothy, written just before his death in Rome: “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing”(2 Timothy 4:6-8).

The tent we are wearing is not who we really are. It has been designed to get us through this earthly existence and that’s all. All of the afflictions, struggles and stressful circumstances we face on a daily basis are training us for our eternal weight of glory, which God Himself will award to us on that great day.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”). Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Where indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (“NIV”). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Catalog No. 535
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10
5th Message
Ron R. Ritchie
March 31, 1985

[Back to the Index](#)

Copyright © 1996 [Discovery Publishing](#), the publications ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306-3695