

SWALLOWED UP BY LIFE

By Steve Zeisler

Commenting on the anger and resentment that we have seen expressed throughout the past week at the International Conference on AIDS, held in San Francisco, the chief psychologist of the Center for AIDS Prevention at the University of California Medical School said, "I contend that a large part of the anger of AIDS activism, that loud screaming and yelling outside, is grief. I further suggest that the cold resentment felt by many scientists and doctors against the activists is repressed grief, unexpressed grief, withheld grief."

First Thessalonians 4:13 gives an important perspective on grief for Christians. Paul writes, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep, or to grieve like the rest of mankind which has no hope." Christians should not grieve over death in the same way as people who have no hope, those who have only this life and what it can offer as the center of their experience. We, too, will experience grief, but it must be a grief undergirded by hope.

Failed idols

The anger of the AIDS activists in San Francisco is expressed against the gods of this age. Medical science has failed them. The promise of materialist science is that the answers to all human problems can be discovered by brilliant people diligently applying scientific principles. Because it has been held up as a god, science comes under the angry rejection of those who say it has not done enough. Government is another modern god, and government, too, has been decried for its failure to expend enough money, effort, or concern in the fight against AIDS. Death has overtaken tens of thousands of AIDS sufferers, and now the grieving process has risen to a crescendo.

The disease, AIDS, offers an important reminder about human nature. When AIDS strikes, a virus kills the immune system, making the body vulnerable to all kinds of terrible diseases. The body deteriorates, often covered with disfiguring sores, and vital organs fail. The HIV virus does quickly what the aging process accomplishes in a much longer time frame. Eventually, every human body grows vulnerable to disease; tissue deteriorates; parts wear out and stop functioning.

This collection of cells that we have been given is not meant to last forever. Because of the fall of Adam, we are all destined to die. We grieve at the fact of death, but as Christians we grieve with hope. It is important to remind ourselves regularly that God has planned something greater for us. This is the subject of our study this morning.

One of our elders, Don Gruelle, told me yesterday that following the death of his mother-in-law in April, a letter came in the mail urging her to take out a new credit card. The sales pitch went something like this, "We know how much planning and hard work went into the acquiring of your new home, therefore we thought that a person such as you ought to carry our credit card." The Gruelles smiled, realizing that the "planning and hard work" was the work of Jesus, as their mother had gone to her eternal home, which was nothing like the home the advertiser had in mind. They missed her and had grieved over her loss, but their grief was filled with hope. She had acquired a new home, not built with human hands, one that would last forever.

We will begin our studies in Paul's 2 Corinthian letter today by reading the closing verses of chapter 4. Verse 16:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what

is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is seen is eternal.

Seeing the unseen

Paul has been commenting on the fact that the power of God is released in Christians in the new covenant, which is everything coming from God and nothing coming from us. We have a marvelous, transcendent experience of being ministers for the Lord's sake, of being newly free and unmasked, the light of the face of Christ discovered within us. For the first time we are free people. We speak for God, declaring the truth of God plainly and boldly, appealing to the conscience of our generation that they might know God.

Last week, we highlighted the fact that even when heavy blows descend, even when we are buffeted with pain, difficulty and misunderstanding, "we are knocked down, but not destroyed, perplexed, but not despairing, restricted, but we don't give up." Yet the apostle twice says that our mortal bodies are given life "so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (verse 10), and, "so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal body" (verse 11). This life is exciting and vital as a result. We are a pot, he is the treasure displayed in us. Every day is filled with opportunity. This life is worth living because of the presence of Jesus Christ in us.

But, as C.S. Lewis has written, this life is only the "title page." The story has not even begun to be told yet. This is but the beginning. Paul is saying that there is something unseen inside of us, something yet future that is crowding us all the time. We can fix our gaze upon it-in fact we must do so-fix our gaze on what is unseen rather than what is seen. We have a sense that the future is just a moment away. We can know the presence of God. We are being prepared for something. This life is not all there is. It is merely spring training; the season hasn't started yet. This life is preparing us for eternity with God. We choose to be more certain of that than the things we can see every day.

What makes the cries of anguish we hear around us more terrible-the AIDS activists, homelessness in this country, and now the homelessness resulting from the devastating earthquake in Iran-is that this life is all that many of these people have. We can understand why someone who is HIV positive is furious at the government for not doing something more to make vaccines available. There is so little time left, and there is nothing else to hope for. The possibility for spiritual conversion was suggested to one AIDS victim in San Francisco last week, and he dismissed it immediately. "I don't want to hear about conversion," he said. "Don't take away my anger, because if I lose my anger, I will lose my life." His experience is bounded by the years he has left upon this earth. But the Christian, says Paul, fixes his eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

Inward renewal

There are three statements of contrast which the apostle makes in these verses. This is how we need to see life, not by concentrating on what is apparent. The first is in verse 16: "...outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." When we are young, we acquire life more and more as we grow into maturity, but eventually we hit a peak, and from then on we are on a gradual, downhill course. We forget what we used to know; we are a step slower than before; we creak a little more and sag a little more. The outer man begins to waste away. This is a universal principle; it happens to everybody. But what the Christian must focus on is that the inner life can become fuller every day, because it is being renewed day by day. There is more joy, more depth, more character being built by God. Some people who claim to know the Lord deteriorate inwardly at about the same rate as the outer man. They are content to sit before their televisions; without hunger for righteousness; they are no longer curious or hopeful about anything. Then, on the other hand, there are people who take on new adventures at advanced age. They can't wait to learn what more the scripture has to say; they want to learn new songs; they are leading people to Christ; their prayers are deeper than they have ever been.

Caleb and Joshua were the only two people born before the Exodus who lived to enter the Promised Land. Caleb, one of the spies who first entered Canaan, had seen Hebron and the giants who dwelt there, and he asked Joshua to give him Hebron to conquer when the time came to cross the Jordan. Although he was eighty years old he wanted Hebron, in spite of the giants who lived there. This is what Paul is saying here. If we fix

our gaze on what is unseen we will discover that we have life, potential, opportunity-prayers to pray, lessons to teach, truth to learn-growth and renewal day after day.

Eternally valuable

Secondly, says Paul, "...our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." Paul had a difficult life. He was beaten up a lot, and left for dead at least once. He was misunderstood by his friends, thrown in jail, shipwrecked, etc. Yet he describes his troubles as "light and momentary." This is because he was comparing them with the eternal glory that was awaiting him. Light versus heavy; momentary versus eternal. The character that God is building within us through suffering is so worthwhile that we will not complain about the trials that befall us; they are not to be compared. The island of Manhattan was once purchased for twenty-four dollars worth of merchandise. Today, it is worth billions of dollars. At the time it was sold it did not seem so valuable because no one could predict the future. Esau also made a bad bargain when he sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. In his hunger, he gave up to Jacob his right to first place in the line of Abraham's descendants. He did not value enough what was yet in the future to be willing to suffer hunger pangs a little longer. For the Christian, it is worth it to let God do his work in our lives through suffering because of what we are going to receive as a result.

Thirdly, in verse 18, Paul contrasts the temporary and the eternal. The things which have only a temporary usefulness should not be preferred over those that last forever. As a parent of teenage children, one of the things I try to help them with is resisting immediate gratification to gain benefits that last a lifetime. I urge them to not destroy their minds for the pleasure of taking drugs; to not allow their sexuality to become shallow and hard by choosing fleeting pleasure rather than reserving it for a lifetime of tender expression in marriage. Do not favor the temporary over the long-term. And here Paul is comparing temporary things with eternal things, well beyond what lasts even a lifetime.

Heavenly dwelling

It is necessary for Christians to have answers for the longing in human hearts that life should exist beyond this life. We know Christ now, and that is wonderful, but beyond this life we will also know him. There is an honest recognition in the gospel that things are wearing down, that this body we have been given cannot stand the test of time. Chapter 5:

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. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. 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. So 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.

Paul begins this chapter by using a mixture of metaphors. He first speaks of a tent, which is clearly meant to stand for our bodies. Then he contrasts the tent with a building in heaven, a home that God has made, not built by human hands. Later, he talks about being clothed by this tent. It seems the metaphor changes from a dwelling to a suit of clothing, and again, there is a kind of a heavenly counterpart: real clothing versus temporary clothing, a lasting versus a temporary dwelling.

We can understand why Paul might have used these metaphors. He was a leather worker and a tentmaker before he became the apostle to the Gentiles. Tents were made out of animal skins. They were temporary dwellings, erected with the help of poles, and made to be easily moved. Clothing could also be made from leather. As he was writing this letter, Paul may have recalled a time when someone brought him a tent in need

of repair. It had begun to tear and leak; it was cracked and weather-beaten. Or perhaps he was recalling an occasion when someone brought an item of outer clothing that had become worn and tattered. Paul's job was to repair or replace such items.

Now, as he contemplates his own body wearing down, just like worn-out tents and clothes, the frame that he had been given for his lifetime was wearing out. The person on the inside has a lot more to live for, while the person on the outside has a lot less responsiveness. Having made this observation, Paul rejoices because God is making for us a suit of clothing that will swallow us up in life; or, if you prefer the building metaphor, he is creating a home for us that is secure, lasting, and eternal. There is an antipathy to being naked. Verses 2 and 4 both mention groaning. We are frustrated because we know something better is coming, like children who sigh awaiting Christmas. Something better is coming, says Paul, but we have to wait for it.

Longing for the future

But we sigh and groan, says the apostle, because we are looking at heaven in anticipation (v.2), and because we are burdened with our aging bodies (v.4)-and that causes groaning too at times. Despite occasional temporary improvements, examination of our bodies is not ultimately encouraging.

I do not think Paul is speaking of nakedness here in the sense of Genesis 3. There, Adam and Eve were ashamed and guilty and they covered themselves. This passage sees our physical frame as shelter. The body that used to protect me grows more vulnerable to illness. It becomes more difficult to keep warm, and harder to get out of bed in the morning. Paul is equating nakedness with vulnerability. Just as an AIDS sufferer becomes wasted and devastated as he nears the end of his illness, the same thing happens to us when we grow older. We can't fight off disease anymore so we groan because what we see is loss and vulnerability. Thus we find ourselves anxious for the new shelter, "so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." Jesus said he would prepare a home for us and come back to take us to be with him. A transformation is coming.

Responsibilities in the meantime

We have to live this life although we would rather be with the Lord; there's no getting around it, says Paul. We live by faith, not by sight. As long as we are on this earth, in these bodies, we don't see him the way we will see him one day. In the meantime we have some choices to make, recognizing two important motivations.

Here is the first one: "So we make it our goal to please him," says Paul, "whether we are at home in the body or away from it." And secondly, we recognize that "we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Christ matters to us. His heart can be encouraged or grieved by what we choose. If we love him, we will want to please him. This present time is a little like the engagement period before marriage, a time of anticipation of all that is yet to come in the marriage itself. If you love your intended, don't you want to please him, to find ways to express your appreciation?

Also, a day is coming when our Lord will review our lives with us. The judgment seat mentioned here is not the great white throne judgment, when some will be banished to outer darkness and some welcomed into the embrace of the Lord. The apostle is writing to those who are saved. Paul is talking about the time when Jesus will put his arm around each one of us and take us back through our lives. Perhaps he will give us a short vision of what we were like before we became Christians. Then, beginning with the day of our salvation, he will show us why we did what we did. He will evaluate our thoughts, in other words. We may have done certain things which seemed great to us, but we will discover we did them for all the wrong motives. There will be times when we had no idea we were trusting him, when we were scared and uncertain, and he will say, "You were acting in faith there."

Paul says this coming judgment motivates him. He wants to please the living Christ who is his companion, and he lives with awareness of the evaluation to come. Therefore, even though we would rather be at home with the Lord, this life is filled with opportunity and challenge. What is tragic about many AIDS activists, the anger of the homeless, and those who are fighting to keep this life because for them that is all there is, is that they expend all this energy because they are afraid and they are overwhelmed by grief. But we can be engaged in the battle as soldiers on assignment, sure of victory, carrying our tents, knowing that the day is coming

when we will be going home. We can be a thousand times more engaged, energetic and positive precisely because we are not afraid to lose, because we fix our gaze on what is unseen. Having looked at what is unseen, therefore, Paul says, "We're not done yet. We're on our way home, but let's be about our Father's business right now."

Hebrews 11:8 says this about Abraham:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Abraham, the believer, cast his shadow across all of history to follow. By the Spirit, this is how we should live. Abraham never built a permanent dwelling for himself. He always carried his tent and his altar with him, trusting God despite great difficulty, believing against all the visible evidence. He refused to allow this life to own him.

Paul is making the same point here in 2 Corinthians. Do not let this life own you. Do not live for its values, or be seduced by its promises. The future is already being created inside us. We were made to live in a city that has foundations, not made by human hands, whose builder and maker is God. What a magnificent way to live!

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