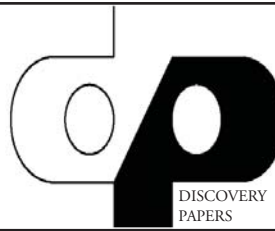


A TENT

***SERIES: IDENTITY CHECK:
LESSONS IN AUTHENTIC FAITH***



Catalog No. 4946
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10
5th Message
Steve Zeisler
November 27, 2005

"I'm not as young as I used to be." That thought is often expressed at an anniversary or a birthday, when you observe that time has passed. Sometimes it's a moment when you realize you're behind the times—your cell phone is suddenly three generations behind the current technology, or the most newly minted celebrities are people you've never heard of. It's obvious that time relentlessly marches forward, bringing changes.

In this series, we are studying 2 Corinthians 2-5 and observing a series of metaphors in this text. The metaphor we'll look at in this message is a tent, which the apostle Paul mentioned in chapter 5. He described the body as a tent, a temporary dwelling that is going to be replaced by a home that will last forever.

In the first few messages of this series, we focused mostly on our lives in the here and now. In the most recent message (Discovery Paper 4945) we noted that God himself, in all his power and beauty, resides in ordinary "jars of clay." And it would be enough for us, more than we ever could imagine deserving, just to know the gifts of God's love for the years of this life.

But in fact, the insight of Scripture is this: "we ain't seen nothin' yet!" As good as God has been to us in this life, it is the barest preliminary of the glory, beauty, and love that he has planned for us.

Let's take up the next text in our series, 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10.

Not made for this world

2 Corinthians 4:16:

16Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

Observe the tension that is created by these words. What is physical or exterior about us, is certain to fade, decay, and diminish. But at the same time, the person God is making on the inside is growing greater, more beautiful, fuller, freer, and wiser all the time. For a while the tension can be managed. When we're very young, neither body nor soul is fully developed. But over time, as we walk with Christ, learn to love him, and grow more alert to the ways of God, we mature inwardly. As the inner person is being developed for a greater future, the outer person begins to decay.

For a time the inner person who is becoming more mature can make up for some of the deficiencies of a body that's deteriorating. We see something similar in sports. A wily old veteran can draw on experience to defeat a young hotshot. Parents of teenagers may not have the physical stamina of their kids, but they can outmaneuver them, at least for a time.

Eventually, however, the divergence becomes too great, and you have to make a choice. You can say, effectively, "I'm not made for this world. I am a new creation being formed for a new way of life." The limits of the exterior person are growing, and you conclude of yourself that you were intended for something better—something fresh, something real, and something that lasts. You begin to long more and more for the world to come.

The other alternative when the tension grows too great is to do everything you can to hold on to this world. Many of our contemporaries will make this choice. They'll invest in exotic anti-wrinkle creams, or choose a series of cosmetic surgeries. If they're rich enough, they'll marry a trophy spouse. Attempting to deny bodily deterioration, they'll hold on longer and longer ... until they can't hold on any longer.

Paul's perspective, of course, which he presents as the text unfolds, was that we weren't meant just for this place. This is not our lasting home. God intends us for

something better.

The things that are not seen

We shouldn't expect to completely understand these verses. I think they are more than Paul himself understood. There are truths written here that are mysterious and breathtaking.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18:

¹⁷For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸while 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.

Let's consider three ideas presented here. First Paul spoke of affliction as light and momentary. Some of us have lived very hard lives, enduring heartache, rejection, physical pain, financial distress, and a great many other things. Others have lived with fewer difficulties. As we know from the rest of this letter, especially chapter 11, Paul himself lived a life of extraordinary hardship—such things as great loneliness, violent beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks, and worse were his experience. Even so, he says such affliction was light and momentary—compared to what is being prepared for us. Wherever our own experience is on the scale of suffering, it remains the perspective of the New Testament that the hardest things in this life are but the merest momentary thing compared to what is being prepared for us in the world where we're headed.

Next he spoke of the weight of glory, which itself is a mysterious, poetic phrase. Glory is authority, depth, beauty, and illumination. The Hebrew word translated "glory" means weightiness. Paul (steeped in the teaching of the Hebrew Bible) was in a sense doubling the idea—the weight of heaviness. Then he wrote a phrase that is translated "far beyond all comparison," which in Greek is the almost absurd-sounding construction "excessively unto excessiveness." Language seems inadequate to the task. Suffering in the present establishes the extraordinary glory of the life to come.

Remember the parable of Jesus in which the master said to his slave at the end, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27). Our Lord will say something like that to us in a way that the whole universe will hear. It will reverberate forever. We will always live with that glorious approval of the Lord himself. It's hard to talk about, and it's supposed to be. C. S. Lewis wrote one of his most famous essays, *The Weight of Glory*¹, in regard to this passage. I recommend it.

The third phrase I want to consider in this section is "look ... at the things which are not seen," which, on the face of it, sounds like nonsense. How do you look at something that can't be seen? This, too, is a mystery. What we can't see in this case is not the invisible realm of the spirit presently surrounding us, but things that are invisible because they are still in the future. We fix our gaze on realities in the distance.

I've had a couple of occasions recently to see pictures of myself. In both cases I had exactly the same reaction: "That can't possibly be me—the camera's lying! I've known how I look for a long time, and it's not that old!" In one sense the point is accurate. I really don't look like that, if I could see the person God is making of me. It's not the body on the outside. There is a "real me" that is renewed, vital, and intended for eternity, and that's how I think of myself, even though the evidence of the camera is increasingly distressing.

Having asserted these things, in chapter 5 Paul begins a series of points telling us what difference this should make to us.

Knowing and anticipating

2 Corinthians 5:1-4:

¹For 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. ²For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, ³inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴For 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 big ideas in this section are clear, but parts of it are a bit confusing and it describes concepts that are unfamiliar. Let me make some observations. First, Paul talked about the desire not to be naked or unclothed. He said we have a tent that is going to give way to a permanent house and then later morphs the imagery into threadbare clothing that will be over coated by something substantial and lasting. In both cases the temporary gives way to the lasting.

In this aversion to being naked, or perhaps homeless, Paul was countering the ideas of ancient Gnostics as well as modern mystical notions of disembodied spiritual union, merging into infinite nothingness, being blended into the divine consciousness as a drop of water is blended into the ocean, etc. The Gnostics of the first century viewed bodies as abhorrent, and sought “spirituality” free of all connection to the physical world. The Jews never believed such things. The Christian gospel also has no such notions. We are always going to have a physical presence by which we relate to others and glorify God. We will never dissipate into nothingness. We will be ourselves, because what God has made, he intends to last forever. Our individual, unique view of his glory, our voice in the choir of his praise, is required; we shouldn’t be lost. The person whom God has made real will last forever as a separate individual, and will always have a physical body—in the future a resurrection body—that gives him or her a unique identity.

In this discussion Paul was also probably remembering Israel’s history. We know that the Jews first worshiped in a tabernacle, or a tent. It was large and elaborate, but it was still just a tent that traveled around in the wilderness with them. Eventually it gave way to a permanent dwelling, the temple in Jerusalem.

Paul himself was a tentmaker. He made a living fashioning temporary homes for people and probably also leather clothing (perhaps the reason he sees the two metaphors as related). Again, his passion was to make the point that the temporary thing that was wearing out was going to give way to something permanent, beautiful, eternal, lasting, and glorious.

What application can we make? I want to look at two verbs Paul used. Consider first the verb “know.” We know

these things because they are true, because they are the firm and unchanging words of Scripture, because God has said them. In the Christian life, what we know is always the immutable foundation that helps us with the varying things we feel. Aging, loss, roads not taken that we can never get back to, having a history that can’t change—there will always be regrets, worries, and wishes that some things were not so. We will always be tempted to feel fears, uncertainties, and resentments that go with the process of our external decaying. But we know the permanent home for which we are bound and so we address our fears with that certainty. “It’s not true that I’m less than I used to be. In fact, I’m more than I used to be. It’s not true that having fewer options makes me less than I would have been otherwise. It’s not true that because I’m weaker physically, I’m weaker as a person.” We can speak to ourselves of what we know is before us, the eternal weight of glory prepared for us, the remarkable new existence we’re destined for.

The second verb to consider as application is “groan,” which is used twice in this passage. This is not, as we might think, the groaning of an old person. “Oh, my arthritis,” and “Oh, the miserable young people today,” and so on. The word can be translated “sigh,” or even “pray inaudibly.” It’s a reference to an expression that doesn’t have words. I think what Paul was saying was that we sigh, longing for the day to come. Our passion is for what is before us, for the end of the story, for more of God. This sighing is like lovers who are anticipating their wedding day, perhaps murmuring barely audible words of love to one another. Or like children humming happy little tunes because they know Christmas is coming. It’s the sighing of anticipation. We sigh because our values are not in the payoffs of this world.

An ambition to please Christ

2 Corinthians 5-10:

⁵Now he who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

⁶Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight—⁸we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. ⁹Therefore, we also have as our ambition,

whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to him. ¹⁰For 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.

Our text began with a determination: “We do not lose heart” (4:16). We are told here that we are of good courage. There’s an old saying that some people are so heavenly-minded, they’re no earthly good. Clearly, what we’re being told here is that the more certain we are of what is before us in eternity, the more likely we are to be engaged with this life. We are of good courage! We don’t drop out, we don’t quit, we don’t feel sorry for ourselves. We have work to do, a life to lead, and there is only a short time left before the great Day is coming—let’s make the most of it! Our ambition is to please him now, because what we’re headed for is to live for God’s pleasure and with his approval, forever.

There is going to be a judgment someday. Our Lord will sit down and tell us about our life from his perspective. This judgment is not the eternal distinction between heaven and hell, but a review of life for those who are his children. He will find things to commend you for, actions of beauty and faith that you never realized. He will also, in a voice filled with love, not condemnation, observe what is sinful and sorrowful.

We might think of this as the ultimate accountability group. If you want to stop smoking, you join a group and friends agree to ask you regularly, “Have you smoked or not?” Or if you join Weight Watchers, you weigh in every week. We want to please God. There is nothing in the world that is more important than that. Our Lord will review our lives with regard to matters more important than nicotine and extra desserts. This awareness can serve as motivation to make choices today and tomorrow to care about what’s important, to sing for joy, and to bring honor to Christ.

This last Thanksgiving we had four generations present

at our house: my parents, who were eighty-four years old, my sisters and myself with our spouses in the second generation, a group of cousins, including my sister’s daughter in the third generation, and then her daughter, who was seven months old. Infancy to old age was represented. If we are permitted to live long, our bodies will follow an inevitable pattern of growth and deterioration. It is not inevitable, however, that the inner person will be renewed and prepared for an eternal home in God’s presence—that certainty exists for those who are children of God. It is those who are sure of a glorious future who will have the most to live for in this life.

NOTES

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Simon & Schuster, New York, © 1949, 1962, 1965, 1975, 1980).

Copyright © 2005 Discovery Publishing the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely 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.

Unless otherwise noted, all other Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.