

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

4:13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture--"I believed, and so I spoke" --we also believe, and so we speak,

4:14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

4:15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

4:16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

4:17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,

4:18 because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

5:1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens

Proclamation of the Word

As a pastor, I deal with life and death all the time. In fact, I get sick of death sometimes. Wonderful people I love suffer the deterioration of disease whether it's cancer, or Alzheimer's, or mental illness. I get sick of death.

So when I read the passage for this Sunday, I was ready to ditch it for a good Bible story- something that shows us how to live abundantly, a story where we can identify with characters or point fingers at our own sin or be inspired to the better angels of our nature. But Paul's letter to the Corinthians did not do that for me. He writes:

...we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (2 Corinthians 4:18-5:1)

I don't want to hear about our vulnerabilities. I like focusing on strengths: growing, moving, improving. But our passage today begs us to consider the big question of life and death.

Yesterday, we celebrated the 50th wedding anniversary for Chuck's parents, Charles and Linda. As we thought many months ago about this event it was clear, they really just wanted to see the people they loved. So that is what we did. And as they requested, no gifts were given, just donations to their church there in Greenville. When you take the long view, it is that eternal gift of love whether of

friends or family that matters more than any other possession. It's a good perspective- the long view. We are satisfied (and quite tired) that they feel blessed by God to have one another, a wonderful church family, friends and family because in the end everything is temporary, is it not?

Paul faced life threatening circumstances for the faith: imprisonment, soldiers, shipwreck. That will put life in perspective. Losing his fear as he trusted God with his life, he courageously spoke about the faith, openly and publically. That kind of faithful witness was only possible because the early Christians and Paul had trust in the unfailing promises of God.

Why? Paul writes:

...because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:18-5:1)

People of faith, we do not need to be afraid of death for God will raise us with Jesus. We will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Paul reminds us that as God's grace extends to more and more people, our thanksgiving will increase.

I confess to you most of my days are not spent meditating on that good news, but Paul is asking us to take the long view to remember that life is fleeting. God's eternal presence will be a gift that those who trust in him will enjoy. Having that gift now though does increase our thanksgiving. And when we are grateful, we are joyful despite our circumstances. This is the paradox of faith.

"We have . . . a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Following the tragedy at the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, a good deal of discussion was centered around what to do with the property. Should they build another government facility, or should they designate the property as a memorial site to those who were murdered? A writer noted that the site should be marked as a reminder of the transient nature of earthly things. "Earthly buildings explode or decay," he wrote. "The only safe and permanent dwelling is the house not made with hands." He made a point.ⁱ

Even though we protect ourselves from the realities of death much of the time, we will not live forever. But that knowledge is a gift in many ways. For one, when you know time is short, you live each day with a thankful heart, living it to the fullest, taking it all in. I was in a restaurant this week with a poster of James Dean with the quote: "Dream as if you'll live forever. Live as if you'll die today." The good news for Christians, is that you and I may die today, but we will also live forever.

On the other hand, we endure the pain and the struggles of life also knowing that they are also temporary. What a relief that is when you are struck with a burden too heavy to carry, a sorrow too difficult to bear, a wound too deep to heal, we know that God will even raise us to new life in his time

from that situation. God is a God who brings new life, on earth as it is in heaven. That is something for which to be thankful.

Today we celebrate communion. The supper is rich with meaning for our lives. But today's scripture connects to the sacrament. For one, the table is place where we experience the grace of God. "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" writes the psalmist. We can be grateful for God's grace poured out in Jesus who gives us new life. Through forgiveness of sins, we are made whole and renewed in mind, body, and spirit.

DO THIS: In your mind's eye picture those you would love to sit down at table enjoying forgiveness and peace. Picture even the person whom you have a hard time extending forgiveness.

So we come with thankful hearts for healing and reconciliation that is ours. The Table is wide. God's grace is deep. That grace extends to more and more people, so we can be grateful, to the glory of God.

Another way our Scripture connects to communion. When we gather around this table not only with those we see in this room, but with all the saints throughout time who rest from their labors in heaven. For this is the heavenly feast of the people of God. We are lifted up into the presence of God, and all whom God has gathered there. So each time we take bread and cup we are united in the heavenly presence with God and all the saints.

DO THIS: As you take communion today, picture in your mind's eye those who have nurtured you in faith and life. Visualize that they are here with us at this table of grace that extends farther and farther to include all whom God loves and calls according to his purposes.

The table is wide. God's grace is deep. That grace extends to more and more people. Communion is a foretaste of heaven.

We have "a house not made with hands," Paul wrote. Jesus said much the same thing: "In my Father's house are many rooms" (John 14:2 NIV).

In both cases, heaven is described as a Homecoming to the warm embrace of a loving Parent. We receive an unconditional welcome like no other by a Father who foolishly runs out to meet his son and place a ring upon his finger. Finally, heaven is our true home.

This Thursday some of us were able to be with Nancy and Dusty Oates at Dusty's father's memorial service in Due West, SC. In the last days of his life, Dusty, Sr. somewhere on the bridge from life to death would be coaching a football in his mind's eye as memory mingled with his body shutting down. Dusty, Sr. had been a High School Athletic Director and coach at Dixie High School. To settle him down and to bring him peace, Dusty's brother said, "Coach, Good game. The game is over. Let's shut off

these lights. It's time to go home." And he did. He peacefully shut his eyes that night and died the next morning. Heaven is our home. And dying is our homecoming. "We have... a house made not with hands, eternal in the heavens."

*As Scottish evangelist Jim Small said: "It is like coming home after dark. There is a brief passage through dark woods, but then you step into the opening. There you see a house. A light burns in the window. The front door is open. The table is set. The covers on your bed are pulled back. Your mother greets you with a smile and says, 'I'm glad you're home, and you answer, 'So am I.'"*ⁱⁱ

Friends, hear and believe, This is the good news of the gospel! Thanks be to God.

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ⁱ Michael Brown in "Sermon Options: June 7, 2015" at ministrymatters.com

ⁱⁱ IBID.