

# “We Walk By Faith”

## The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

*Texts: 2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10; Psalm 116: 1-19*

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Face it, not one of us here is getting any younger. As Paul puts it, we are wasting away. In speaking as he does, the Apostle doesn't mean to say that we are starving to death as a consequence of some fad diet, or as a result of a serious illness. Rather, Paul says we are wasting away because of the fall of the human race into sin. Because of the curse brought upon us by Adam, we are all dying. We are wasting away—some of us faster than others. Yet, this fact does not cause Paul to despair, or to give up on the Corinthians. Instead, Paul looks ahead to the glories of the age to come. That jar of clay, that “tent” which is our body, will not last forever. But our resurrection bodies will. In light of our human frailty, says Paul, we must walk by faith, and not by sight.

We are continuing our series on 2 Corinthians, and we now take up Paul's discussion of the frailty of sinful human nature in light of the glories of the age to come—the focus of 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:10. Recall that in the opening chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul defines and defends the nature of his apostolic office in the light of the stinging criticism raised against him by certain men in the Corinthian church. These men identify themselves as “apostles,” and who in doing so, seek to undercut Paul's apostolic authority to make room for their own. Paul, however, sees these men as “false apostles” (chapter 11), men who count upon their impressive rhetorical skills and their popularity among the Corinthians as the basis for their self-proclaimed apostolic status.

Because these men have charismatic personalities and are eloquent speakers, they are able to rely upon their own natural abilities and achieve some degree of success. But Paul knows his own weakness and frailty. This is why he relies upon the power of God, not flowery speech, or lofty rhetoric. Paul understands that God's power is revealed in the scandalous proclamation of a crucified Savior. But the false apostles do not understand this. They avoid saying anything which might offend their hearers.

Furthermore, flowery rhetoric doesn't help much in times of trial. So Paul reminds the Corinthians that God is the source of all comfort. Even when Paul faced such severe affliction, and underwent trials so difficult that he (as an apostle) despaired even of life itself, nevertheless God opened a door for Paul to go and preach the gospel in Troas and Macedonia. In light of this remarkable and unexpected turn of events, Paul describes how the preaching of the gospel amounts to a triumphal procession of Jesus Christ. This triumph is a fragrant offering unto God, a point in light of the Old Testament background of sin and thanksgiving offerings which are described as an aroma which pleases God. Paul points out that God is pleased with the proclamation of the sacrificial death of Jesus, that once for all sacrifice for sin, through which sinners are saved, and made forever right before God.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the fading glory of the Old Covenant—made by God with Israel at Mount Sinai, of which Moses was mediator, and which came in the form of types and shadow—with the far greater glory of the New Covenant, ratified in the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul has argued that the law—first written upon stone tablets, and then in the Torah—pales in comparison with the glories of the New Covenant, in which the law is now written upon the human heart in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. When Paul contrasts the law with the Spirit, he is not saying that the Old Covenant (external authority) is torn up and thrown away so that New Covenant believers rely solely upon the Holy Spirit living in the human heart for revelation from God (internal authority).

Rather, Paul is saying that the Old Covenant has been fulfilled. It has been superceded. Jesus Christ has accomplished everything promised to God's people under the Old Covenant. So, Paul appeals to the example of Moses, who reflected the glory of God after being with YHWH up on the Mount Sinai with God. Moses had to cover his face with a veil because the sinful Israelites could not bear to look at him. Yet, Moses' glory was fading—the sign that the Sinaitic covenant was destined to pass away. Paul even speaks of that Old Covenant as being brought to an end. The nation of Israel has fulfilled its national purpose. Christ has come and brought a greater glory with him—a glory found in the transformation of sinners which begins with regeneration, and culminates in the resurrection of our bodies.

As for Paul's beloved people, the Jews, their minds remain hardened, and when the Old Covenant is read to this day, it remains veiled to them—the fading glory of a temporary covenant is all that there is, and all that they seek. But when Jesus Christ lifts the veil from our hearts, God's people turn to the Lord, and we are free to participate in that far greater and permanent glory of the New Covenant. As Paul puts it, where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. There is freedom from guilt, freedom from condemnation, freedom from sin's power. This is the greater glory of the New and better Covenant.

And so as we make our way into chapters 4-5 of 2 Corinthians, Paul is continuing to explain the glories of the better covenant, this time in terms of how our physical weakness should point us ahead to that which is eternal and does not waste away (i.e, the benefits of the New Covenant). And so we begin by briefly looking at Paul's discussion of the light of the gospel (verses 1-6), the weakness of our bodies (in verses 7-18), and then finally, the hope of heaven (in 5:1-10).

**B**efore we turn to our primary text this morning (2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10), we briefly take up Paul's discussion of the light of the gospel, in verses 1-6. Having demonstrated the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old (in chapter 3), Paul now speaks of how this superiority impacts the way in which he preaches the gospel. In chapter 4:1, Paul writes, *"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."* It is God who has called Paul to his New Covenant ministry of preaching the crucified Christ. Paul is not self-appointed like those seeking to undermine him. God has been merciful to Paul despite his weaknesses and struggles. And because this is the case, Paul does not lose heart, even when preaching the gospel to those whose hearts and minds are veiled. Paul knows that through the preaching of the gospel, the Holy Spirit removes the veil of human sinfulness and reveals the glories of Christ.

In fact, it is this confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit which characterizes the New Covenant era. This is why Paul need not count upon his own speaking skills and charismatic personality. In verse 2, he writes, *"But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."* As he said earlier, Paul is not a gospel peddler. As he says here, he need not try and adapt the message Jesus Christ revealed to him to please a Greco-Roman audience which loves flowery speech, and which is steeped in Greek philosophy. Even to Greeks, Paul preaches Christ and him crucified—a public statement of a fact (a truth claim). Paul need not point to himself. His message speaks for him. There is nothing hidden or secret about the gospel.

In verses 3-4, Paul addresses the nature of unbelief. *"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* As a public message and truth claim, if the gospel remains veiled to unbelievers, the fault lies in the hearer not the message. Here, Paul attributes to Satan ("the god of this world") the ability to blind people's minds to the truth. Satan attempts to keep people focused upon anything but the glories of Christ, who is, as Paul

points out, the very image of God, that one in whom God's glory is supremely revealed.

In saying that Satan blinds people to the truth, Paul is not adopting a "devil made me reject Christ" doctrine. But he is saying that Satan blinds unbelievers to the truth of the gospel. The devil does not gouge out our spiritual eyes—unbelievers are already blinded by sin. But the devil does exploit our blindness through false religion, and by playing upon the fact that people are already enslaved to their own sinful natures. In other words, Satan offers false religion as a guide to the blind. Only instead of leading them to the glory of God, he leads them to a spiritual Bakersfield or Barstow.

Again, in verse 5, Paul defends his ministry. "*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.*" Preaching the gospel is preaching Christ. Those who are truly God's servants (ministers) preach Christ (however unpopular and difficult that message might be to hear), because it is through this message that God's glory is truly revealed. To demonstrate the power of the gospel, Paul alludes to the creation account in verse 6, when he writes, "*For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*" Just as God spoke at creation, and darkness was filled with light, so too the light of the gospel has shone in our hearts. This light—in contrast to the blindness and darkness associated with Satan's deception and false religion—gives us a true knowledge of God, reveals to us God's glory, and points us to the face of Jesus Christ (as he is revealed in that gospel).

As he did in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul returns to a key element of his theology—the resurrection of our bodies at the end of the age. As Paul made plain in Corinthians 15, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the first-fruits of that great harvest which will come in at the end of the age—the resurrection of our bodies (the general resurrection). As surely as Jesus rose from the dead the first Easter, so too, all those will be raised who are united to Jesus through faith. As someone familiar with human weakness and frailty, Paul can address from personal experience how God's people should understand such weakness and infirmity in light of the resurrection.

In verse 7, Paul speaks of fallen human weakness in vivid terms. "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*" Clay jars were widely used in the first century for storage of dry goods. But they easily shattered. It was common to identify something fragile as a "clay jar." But what is in those clay jars—the knowledge of the glory of Christ—is what matters to Paul. We may be fragile—subject to sin, weakness, illness, and death—but we possess a treasure, the truth of the gospel. Paul applies this image to our daily lives as Christians in verses 8-10. "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*" Like everyone else, the Christian too is buffeted by the daily grind and the ups and downs of life in a fallen world. Yet, in the end, it is Jesus' life and death which will deliver us (as clay jars) when we are raised imperishable at the end of the age.

Paul makes this plain in verses 11-12, only this time he does not speak in generalities, but specifically of his own recent experiences. "*For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.*" Paul lives every day knowing that he may die at the hands of those who hate Jesus and his gospel. It is through this weakness (i.e., "mortal flesh") that Jesus is made manifest. Although Paul's life may end in a violent death because of his allegiance to Christ, this did not deter him. In fact, Nero had Paul put to death in Rome in the mid-sixties just a few years after he wrote this letter. Death (the weakness of his body, and perhaps, the constant threat of violence) was constantly with Paul. But through his preaching of Christ crucified in Corinth and in places like Troas and Macedonia, life (regeneration and

eventual bodily resurrection) was the possession of those who heard him and embraced his message.

Once again, Paul turns to the Old Testament for an illustration of his present circumstances. This time he appeals to David's account of the sufferings of the righteous mentioned in Psalm 116 (specifically verse 10, part of our Old Testament lesson this morning). As we read in verses 13-14 of 2 Corinthians 4, "*Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.*" Paul believes the same gospel promises as he proclaims to his hearers (the same spirit of faith). He cites David's words about trusting in God during the midst of trial, proclaiming the glories of God, in the face of present and difficult circumstances. In fact, it is in verse 15 of Psalm 116, that we read these wonderful words of comfort which must have been in Paul's mind as he writes this, "*precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.*" Paul preaches a gospel which is grounded in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead, and who will bring Paul, and all those who embrace the same gospel, into the presence of God when they die.

And this is why Paul does not rely upon his eloquence or personality. These things are meaningless when it comes to solving the human predicament—sin's guilt and power, and the curse (death) which chases us until it catches us. As the Apostle points out to the Corinthians in verse 15, "*For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*" Paul will continue to preach Christ. And as he does so, more and more people will receive grace and God's people will, in turn, offer thanksgiving to God for what he has done for them in Jesus Christ. And all of this to the glory of God and for the sake (well-being) of his people!

Despite his own frailty and weakness (and in light of our own), Paul's faith is firm, anchored in hope. As he puts it in verse 16, "*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*" Here in a nutshell is Paul's doctrine of sanctification. As we grow older we begin to "waste away" as Paul put it. From birth we grow and mature until we reach that point in life where, from then on, things begin to go downhill. This is a consequence of Adam's fall into sin. Death is not natural to us. Death is the consequence of the curse.

But even as we waste away (get older), God is continuing to sanctify us and our inner self is continually renewed, and slowly but surely we are molded and conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Our old sinful nature (the habit of sin) is continuously mortified (weakened) and we (as regenerate) are being strengthened through Word and Sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because this difficult process is the normal Christian life (something every Christian, even apostles will experience), we should not despair as we waste away, and as we are strengthened within. We do not lose heart even as we lose our hair, our eyesight, our hearing, and the vitality of our youth. This is the consequence of sin. Yet, at the same time, Christ is inwardly renewing us, preparing us for eternity.

If viewed from the perspective of the sinner undergoing the process of sanctification, this can be a pretty miserable experience. We like doing what we want, when we want, free from God's dealing our sinfulness. But when viewed from the big picture perspective of eternity—which Paul exhorts us to take—we will not lose heart. As he states in verses 17-18, "*for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*" Paul is not downplaying the struggles of sanctification, or the afflictions we face, or the suffering we must endure, when he speaks of this process as a momentary affliction. Paul's point is that when viewed from the perspective of the age to come (an eternal perspective), a long life of seventy or even eighty years of trial and difficulty is pretty short when compared with eternity.

Indeed, Paul says, our sufferings and struggles serve an extremely important purpose. They prepare us for eternity, and for something so wonderful we can hardly conceive of it, much less grasp it. Paul calls this the “weight of glory.” This is but another way of saying this is something too heavy for us to get our arms around—like a squirrel who finds an acorn so big that he cannot carry it. When Paul speaks of things unseen, he’s not saying that heaven is a realm of things invisible. Rather, Paul is only saying these are unseen in the sense that we are not there yet and that sin bars our access to it, and we won’t be able to fully understand all of this until we finally die, or Christ comes back first. Time will give way to eternity. The temporal (which will pass away), will give way to the eternal, which will not pass away.

Indeed, the contrast between our present existence in this fallen world and that of the redeemed world of the age to come now comes into view. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:1, “*For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*” A tent is a temporary, and often flimsy structure easily destroyed by wind, rain and the elements. Tents quickly wear out. This analogy is but Paul’s nice way of saying that we are all going to die. Our tents (bodies) will wear out. But as members of the New Covenant, ratified by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is the down payment assuring the resurrection of our bodies, we can expect, as Paul puts it, a dwelling which is from God, not made with human hands. This, of course, is a reference to the resurrection of our bodies at the end of the age. As Paul had reminded the Corinthians in chapter 15 of his prior letter, we are sown perishable (buried), but raised imperishable at the resurrection. Paul speaks of the same thing, only this time in terms of the contrast between a tent and an eternal building made by God.

In verses 2-4, Paul continues with this contrast. “*For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*” All too aware of his weaknesses and with the ever-present danger of death, Paul longs for the resurrection at the end of the age. When he speaks of being naked, he is, perhaps speaking metaphorically of the intermediate state between the time we die (our tent is destroyed) and the resurrection at the end of the age (when we receive our resurrection bodies).

There is indeed an indefinite period of time between our own death and the resurrection of Christ in which our souls are in the presence of God, as we await the time of the end, when Jesus returns and the dead are clothed with imperishable resurrection bodies. In Revelation 6, John sees the martyrs before the throne (a group which includes Paul, by the way). “*They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’*” Those who have died in Christ, and who have preceded us in death, are themselves eagerly awaiting the resurrection at the end of the age, just as we are here on earth.

Again, God has a purpose in this as our bodies waste away and death inevitably claims us all—barring the return of Christ. In verse 5, Paul writes, “*He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.*” This passage is a summation of what Paul says in Ephesians 1:13-14 (to which we’ve already alluded), “*in him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*” Our present struggles are the means by which God prepares us for eternity. The present possession of the Holy Spirit, as a benefit of this new and better covenant, secures the ultimate blessing for us (eternal life in resurrected bodies).

This is why Paul does not live in despair despite his present circumstances. As he puts it in the first part of verse 6, “*So we are always of good courage.*” What is the worst thing that can happen to Paul? If he

dies, he goes to be with the Lord. If he lives, he preaches Christ crucified and participates in Christ's triumph as he watches the pleasing aroma of the gospel spread, as more and more people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus. For Paul seeing the big picture gives him perspective on our present struggles. As he says at the end of verse 6 through verse 8, *"We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."* If we look at ourselves (walk by sight) we see our bodily tent wearing out, and our jar of clay cracking and falling apart. But when we walk by faith, we see things from God's perspective. As we live our lives and struggle with sin, sickness, affliction and experience persecution, we know that this is not all there is. The eternal glory of God awaits.

Not only do these things have a purpose and are part of our sanctification, we know that when we die, we go to be with our maker and redeemer. Yes, Paul would rather be with the Lord than wage war against sin and live with the threat of death. Who wouldn't? But he also knows that God's present purpose is for him to preach the gospel. In light of the big picture, in verses 9-10 Paul can write, *"So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."* While we strive to please God in this life, we face a final judgment in the next. For those who know not the power of God, and who reject the glories of the New Covenant and cling to the old, with its fading glory, the very thought of judgment day should bring fear and terror.

Yet for those who are Christ's, judgment day should not bring such dread. Although we cannot stand in the judgment in our own righteousness, Paul will go on to explain in the next section of 2 Corinthians (our subject for next time), that the death of Jesus reconciles us to God (v. 18), and that Jesus became sin for us (v. 21—the guilt of our sin our sin has been imputed to Jesus, and his death upon the cross takes it away from us). Therefore, like Paul, Christ's people likewise long to be with Christ as they endure the struggles of life. This is what he means, when Paul says "we walk by faith." We look beyond our weakness and sin, to the salvation that is ours in Christ and to the glories of the age to come.

Well, what then, do we take with us in terms of application?

**W** Since we are tents and jars of clay (fragile vessels), we are wearing out. We must face the inevitable consequences of the curse—which is death. Thankfully, the veil of sin over our hearts and minds has been taken away through the message of Christ crucified, through which we have the knowledge of God and the hope of the eternal glory in resurrected bodies yet to come—the greater glory of the New Covenant.

Because we are beneficiaries of the New Covenant ratified by the blood of Christ, our failing bodies will one day be transformed because we have been given life (regeneration), we are being sanctified, and one day we will be raised from the dead. However much we don't like it, we need not fear the decay of our bodies, or the inevitable day of judgment yet to come. For we will be raised as an eternal dwelling (in resurrection bodies) and we live forever in the presence of God. Although we can't yet see this with our eyes—because it is still over the horizon—we grasp this promise through faith. All of this has been accomplished for us by Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection. And hanging on the gospel promises is what Paul means when he says that we must walk by faith, not by sight.