

2 Corinthians 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians chapter 5 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.

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.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. 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, 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.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance, and not about what is in the heart.

[1 : 24] For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.

For though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[2 : 35] 2 Corinthians chapter 5 continues on from Paul's discussion of the treasures in jars of clay in chapter 4. There Paul spoke about the inner and the outer self, juxtaposing the two in a series of strong contrasts.

Here he elaborates upon the contrast between earthly and heavenly dwelling. Our current home is like a tent, a temporary dwelling for people passing through, but we await a building from God, a glorious edifice not made with human hands, prepared for us as an eternal dwelling.

Our current existence is one of groaning, of longing for the more enduring dwelling that we anticipate, at first glance some might think that what Paul is saying here is similar to what they might imagine a Gnostic saying.

We need to be freed from the prison of the body. However, that isn't what Paul is saying at all. Paul elsewhere identifies persons very closely with their bodies, so although his analogy here might suggest a dissociation, that dissociation cannot be sustained.

More importantly though, Paul describes the same thing elsewhere, in Romans chapter 8 verses 22 to 23 for instance, for we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

[4 : 20] The redemption of the body, the resurrection, is what Paul is awaiting here. Some have debated whether Paul is envisioning here the reception of the resurrection body immediately after death.

I don't believe that he is. However, the way that he phrases things might suggest that we do receive the building from God in some sense, upon the death of our current fleshly bodies. I don't believe Paul's primary concern here is to address or settle questions of the intermediate state.

In 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, the resurrection of the body seems to await the return of Christ. Rather, Paul's point here is that our current groaning in our bodies awaits not deliverance from embodiment, but a much greater and more glorious embodiment.

Discussion of the intermediate state might distract from Paul's immediate point at this juncture. Nevertheless, death itself, prior to our receiving our resurrection bodies, already involves some degree of entry into the new state.

We already are being prepared for this by God. God's transformation of his people is already underway through the Holy Spirit's work within us, by whom we have both a foretaste and a down payment of the fuller redemption that we await.

[5 : 31] The condition of being in the body is one in which we are away from Christ's immediate presence. For this reason, we must walk by faith rather than by sight. Paul explores this in terms of the juxtaposition between being at home in the body and being at home with the Lord.

Paul's personal preference would be being at home with the Lord. However, the greater concern is pleasing the Lord, recognising that we must all one day give an account of what we have done in the body.

Paul describes the same preference in Philippians 1, verses 19-26. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two.

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

[6 : 52] The suggestion in 2 Corinthians 5, as in Philippians, I think, is that death removes us from embodied existence, but brings us into a more direct enjoyment of Christ's presence. It frees us from our current jars of clay and the death that is at work within them.

However, it still awaits the superior housing of the resurrection. After death, we still haven't fully entered into the age to come, but we are not as grounded in this present age and enjoy to a much greater measure the anticipatory blessings of the spirit of resurrection and the life of the inner self of which Paul has already spoken.

Nevertheless, as our priority with Paul should be pleasing God over everything else, we are content courageously to accept the afflictions and difficulties of life in our fleshly bodies for his sake.

Aware of how serious a matter it is to give account of the deeds performed in our bodies to God, Paul seeks to persuade others. The fear of the Lord is a powerful motivation for Paul.

Living by faith, he appreciates the gravity of divine judgment and the consuming fire of God's presence and speaks to others in a manner fitted to convey this. Pleasing the Lord is of paramount importance.

[8 : 03] God is well aware of how Paul's heart stands in relation to him and Paul trusts that the Corinthians too are able to perceive his sincerity and the reality of his mission, despite the jars of clay in which it is carried out.

If they truly perceive the character of Paul, they would have reason to boast of the work that God was accomplishing through him for their upbuilding. Paul makes an enigmatic statement at this point, for if we are beside ourselves, it is for God.

If we are in our right mind, it is for you. This might refer to the contrast between the way in which Paul is caught up in the things of God to the point of being considered a religious fanatic by some, and the rational and the sober-minded counsel that characterises much of his teaching.

Paul is a man of remarkable visions, intense zeal and religious passions, but also a man of profound and careful thought and a gifted rhetorician. Whichever he is characterised as, however, he is not engaged in self-promotion, but acts for the sake of God and the people to whom he is ministering.

Paul's practice is entirely driven and bound by the surpassing love of Christ. Christ died for all of humanity. Every human being is somehow implicated in Christ's death, in the death of the representative man.

[9 : 17] Even though not everyone enters into the newness of life in Christ, everyone has been claimed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who live are a subset of the entirety of humanity to which Paul has just referred.

These are the ones who have entered into the newness of life in Christ. Such persons, those who are being saved, must henceforth live for Christ rather than for themselves. Like Paul, they should be characterised by a certain selflessness in their orientation, living for the sake of Christ and for others.

After appreciating the significance of Christ's death, nothing is seen in the same way again. A new era has dawned and everything must be viewed differently. Paul used to view everything and everyone according to the flesh, but now he does so no longer.

Differences between Jews and Gentiles, between slave and free, between rich and poor, etc., may once have loomed very large in Paul's thinking, but now he views everyone differently in terms of Christ.

Prior to his conversion, Paul also viewed Christ from such a worldly perspective, perhaps seeing him as a heretic decisively condemned by being put to death. However, now the way that Paul sees Christ has been utterly transformed.

[10 : 29] If anyone is in Christ then, he is a new creation. Union with Christ is a central truth in this passage. The riches that we enjoy as Christians are enjoyed by virtue of our participation in Christ.

As we are united to Christ by his Spirit, that which belongs to Christ becomes ours. The expected renewal of all things awaited at the end is already at work in the Christian.

As a new creation, the Christian is born again, brought from death to life. They are in anticipation of the long-expected new heavens and new earth already in effect. The Christian is like a stone being fashioned in the stonemason's yard, ready to become part of a glorious edifice that will one day be unveiled.

Paul is still speaking about the nature of his ministry in this chapter, although his ministry is so completely entangled with his message that one cannot easily separate the one from the other. The new creation, accomplished by Christ, is from God.

Through Christ, God has reconciled Paul and his companions to himself and has also given them a part in the reconciliation by which they themselves were reconciled. God shows his grace to us so that we might communicate it to others, both in the ways that we reflect it and in the ways that we declare it.

[11 : 44] God forgives us and calls us both to forgive others and to communicate his message of forgiveness to them. Paul doesn't live for himself, but has become identified with the message of grace that he bears.

It is as if God himself is appealing to people through Paul and his companions as his ambassadors. Paul isn't a passive recipient of God's salvation in Christ, but one who is actively and completely caught up in its work.

The final verse of this chapter condenses the movement of God's grace in Christ into a short and powerful statement. For the sake of Paul and those associated with him, God made the sinless Christ to be a sin offering for us.

This, I believe, is what Paul means by becoming sin. And he does this in order that they might become the righteousness of God in him. Behind this statement are probably the words of Isaiah chapter 53 verses 9 to 11.

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

[12 : 49] He has put him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied.

By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. What does Paul mean by becoming the righteousness of God here?

There is a sort of logic of exchange at work in this verse. Christ becomes sin, we become the righteousness of God in him. In this exchange, sin and the righteousness of God are elements standing in directly contrastive juxtaposition.

For many, this idea of becoming the righteousness of God refers to the righteousness of Christ being imputed to our account. I think this does capture some important dimension of the picture.

We have a new standing with God and account of Christ, and his righteousness becomes ours. However, I don't think this goes far enough, and it also fails to give satisfactory answers to certain questions.

[13 : 53] For instance, why refer to the righteousness of God rather than the righteousness of Christ? Why not rather say, he put the guilt of our sin to the account of him who knew no sin, so that in him we might have his righteousness put to our account?

Paul seems to be saying something more than merely that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to our account. We have become God's righteousness. N.T. Wright has suggested that the righteousness of God here refers to the covenant faithfulness of God, observing, for instance, that we consistently see God describing his saving covenant faithfulness in such a manner in the prophets.

This explanation is very promising on some levels. It fits in very nicely with the wider surrounding context, where Paul has become a manifestation of God's message of reconciliation as God makes his appeal through him.

However, it narrows the meaning of righteousness in a way that dulls the allusion to Isaiah 53, verse 11, that seems to be present. It also dulls the contrast with sin, which doesn't seem narrowly to refer to covenant unfaithfulness.

I think that we might move towards the solution by thinking of righteousness less as a sort of thing that we might have in our account or as an abstract moral quality, and more as a positive relational standing and relational activity.

[15 : 15] Thinking in terms of righteousness as if it were a sort of thing, we can think of it as inert and inactive. Alternatively, some think of it in terms of an assessment relative to an absolute moral standard.

Yet scripture routinely speaks of God's righteousness, not as if the merit in his moral account or as his absolute moral standard, his morally perfect being by which all things are measured, but rather as his powerful saving and judging activity in the world.

God's righteousness is dynamic and active. God's righteousness sets things to rights. It is this righteousness that Israel seeks when it calls God to act according to his covenant and promises.

It is this righteousness that is most fully seen in Christ, a righteousness by which God sets humanity to rights in his Son. Jesus talks about the need for the righteousness of his disciples to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

However, I don't believe that he is merely referring to doing the sort of thing that the scribes and Pharisees were doing, but just more scrupulously. Rather, he refers to a radically different sort of righteousness.

[16 : 22] The righteousness in question is not one of mere sin avoidance, but a righteousness that is actively involved in setting the world to rights, participating in God's own saving work, joining in God's own work of restoration.

It is seen in forgiving others, as we have been forgiven in Christ. It is seen in pursuing reconciliation, rather than merely avoiding vengeance. As we are in Christ, the riches of his standing with the Father are enjoyed by us as his bride.

However, even beyond this, we are also being transformed into new creatures in him by his Spirit. When we act, we now act as those who are becoming Christ-like.

The righteousness of God that set things right in Christ is now setting things right through us and in us. Christ entered fully into our condition, identifying with us in our sin, so that in him we might become conduits of God's saving righteousness.

This is why Paul will directly proceed to speaking of himself as a fellow worker with God. God's righteousness is not just enacted for us, but enacted in us and through us.

[17 : 32] A question to consider. Looking back at chapters 2 and 3, how does Paul further elaborate the true sufficiency of the new covenant minister that he affirmed in those earlier chapters?