

Hope in the Face of Death

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 25th of July 2004. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

His sermon is entitled Hope in the Face of Death and is based on 2 Corinthians 4.16-5.10 It's entitled Terminal Care.

I huddle warmly inside my corner bed, watching the other patients sipping tea. I wonder why I'm so long getting well and why it is that no one will talk to me.

The nurses are so kind they brush my hair. On the days I feel too ill to read or sew, I smile and chat, try not to show my fear.

But they will not tell me what I want to know. The visitors come, I see their eyes, become embarrassed as they pass my bed. What lovely flowers, they say, then hurry on, in case their faces show what cannot be said.

[1 : 22] The surgeon comes with student written new, mutters to sister, deaf to my mute plea. I want to tell them of this dread I feel inside, but they are all too kind to talk to me.

The chaplain passes on his weekly round, a friendly smile and calm, untroubled brow. He speaks with deep sincerity of life. I'd like to speak of death, but don't know how.

I think the poem is a very moving poem.

I think it expresses quite adequately the inadequacy of our times, that in spite of great medical advances and technology, we find it hard to cope with the cold statistical fact that 100% of us are going to die sooner or later.

The word death itself is something we find even hard to utter. We dare not face it. We dare not think about it. There's a sense in which we don't even want to start thinking about the questions.

[2 : 40] We're not sure what will happen. If we knew, I guess we'd be less embarrassed. We don't want to ask the questions or talk to people about it.

It was interesting this week in CRE, my little scripture class, I talked about the wonder of our creation and the wonder of how we're made. I said, if you can ask any question in light of these things, what would you ask?

One little boy's hand went up and said, what happens after death? What is it like inside a coffin? Another asked.

One of them asked, what was hell like? What was heaven like? I guess when we're young, we're quite prepared to ask these questions. But as we get older, we want to shy away from it.

There is no shying away with Paul the Apostle. Paul wants to speak very clearly and boldly about it. He's not embarrassed. There's no Paul the Apostle shying away from it, being upset by it.

[3 : 50] For Paul knows that something has happened in history, a tremendous moment. Paul knows that life after death is no longer conjecture or superstition, but life after death is a reality.

It is an established fact. For he knows that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. It's no pious myth. No, it's a historical event for Paul. Hundreds of eyewitnesses saw the resurrected Christ.

Paul himself included. But Paul understood that this wasn't just an isolated event or some strange anomaly. He understood that this was a precursor to an equally great event, the general resurrection of all those in God, of all people.

It would be helpful to have your Bibles open. Paul actually made a little comment to that effect last week, in last week's sermon. Have a look there on page 939, 2 Corinthians 4, verse 14.

Paul says this, Because we know that one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence.

[5 : 11] Paul knows that all will rise. And so he speaks on it in today's passage, further about this.

Let's just take a moment and let's pray that at the end of this time together we may be people who feel great confidence in life after death, that we are a people who have great hope, a people who have something to look forward to.

So, why don't we pray that now? Let me pray. Father, we thank you for our Lord Jesus Christ who rose from the dead and who guarantees our resurrection at some point in the future.

Father, we do indeed thank you for this. We pray that you will help us to have open ears and hearts to your word, that we may be encouraged by it, that we may live lives that please you, that we may live lives full of hope.

We pray this in your Son's name. Amen. Well, our passage that we're looking at today, chapter 4, verse 16 through to 5, verse 10, is really broken up into two parts.

[6 : 21] Verses 16 through to 18 of chapter 4, Paul brings some conclusions on all that he has been speaking about, in particular the last passage that we looked at last week, that is chapter 4, verse 7 through to verse 15.

Paul has been speaking, you have to keep in mind when we're looking at this passage, Paul has been speaking about his apostolic ministry. He's been defending his ministry against those in the Corinthian church who say, no, Paul is not a true apostle.

Look at his weaknesses. God's not with him. God's not a part of his ministry. Look how frail he is. If he was a man of God, he would be a powerful man.

But Paul is in the midst of saying no. He has a great treasure in a clay jar, one that is cracked. But he also speaks of the fact that it's so that God will be glorified that he won't be glorified.

He also spoke last week, we saw about this resurrection as we've just read, that that undergirds his preaching. And his message. And so Paul says in verse 16, so we do not lose heart.

[7 : 37] Paul doesn't lose heart, he doesn't give up. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. Paul recognises that as Christians there are two dimensions to our life.

At one level, outwardly, we live in this world. It is a living that is vulnerable. To pain, trouble, sickness and bills. I guess it picks up what Paul has been speaking about in the verses above us.

Talking about the clay jars. Talking about our weaknesses. Of being perplexed and struck down and persecuted. That's this outer nature that Paul speaks about.

It's how we live in this world. It's how we see each other now. But Paul also speaks about this inner nature. That on another level, inwardly, we participate in God's kingdom now.

That is, that God's kingdom as Christians has broken into our lives. Those who trust in Jesus, a great miracle has happened. That God has poured His Spirit into our lives and so our inner nature is this nature that when God looks upon you as Christians, He sees this inner nature, this person who has been transformed, who is a person who is a part of the kingdom to come, the world to come.

[9 : 01] We need to be careful here that we don't get it mixed up and see it as the Greek philosophers do. That is, we don't see it as a dualistic view of body versus soul.

The Greeks thought that there was this great separation, that our body, our earthly clothing, it was terrible. That's not where it's at. For the Greeks and the philosophers, they were looking forward to be out of the body and into the soul.

Well, Paul's not talking about here the inner and outer being physical and non-physical, of being soul and body. He's talking about the way that God sees us, the way that we participate as Christians now in the kingdom, although we are not fully a part of it.

We look for the... when Jesus returns. Don't you hate it when the word just leaves you? I guess that in some ways our outer nature is affected by the first Adam.

That is, we share Adam's frailty, broken by sin, but our inner nature is affected by the last Adam, Christ. So, let me ask you a question as we reflect on this inner and outer nature.

[10 : 15] How does it feel that your outer nature is fading away? How does it feel getting old?

Many people are paranoid about this ageing process. Of course, I'm perhaps not that paranoid about it. Everyone wants to have a long life and it's not difficult to understand why.

Our eyes grow dim, our ears deaf, our limbs become stiff, our memory lets us down. Grey cells don't work as fast.

Even our bladder becomes an embarrassment. We become disfigured. We grow shapeless and bent, wrinkles and creaking joints. Our lovely hair grows grey or falls out.

Cosmetic remedies for this process of uglification become more and more expensive and less and less effective. How does it feel getting old?

[11 : 24] It's not a particularly nice feeling. It's not something that we feel particularly warm about, really. Look how Paul felt in verse 16.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature has been renewed day by day. Paul explains why this inner nature has been renewed day by day as he writes in verses 17 and 18.

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure 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. Paul focuses on what is unseen. Paul focuses on the heavenly perspective, on what God will do.

That's where Paul's focus is. He's not worried about this outer nature that is fading away. He is looking at his inner nature. He is looking at what God will do and that fills him with great hope.

[12 : 32] He realises that all the slings and arrows that fly at him in his troubles and afflictions are nothing but trivial flea bites. He realises that the tons of glory that is to come, that outweighs the dust on the scales of weighing scales.

He also realises that the vast millennia of eternity is nothing, is so much more compared to the fleeting shadows of the clouds on a sunny day.

Paul recognises that this is his perspective. He keeps on thinking of the things of God, not on the outer nature.

And because of this, this gives him great courage. He does not lose heart. In chapter 5, Paul begins the next section where he starts reflecting on the final transformation, that is, life after death.

But he starts by saying that he gives a further reason why he does not give up. That is, that there is life after death. Now, this passage we're about to look at is probably one of the most studied passages in 2 Corinthians.

[13 : 50] There is so much written on these 10 verses, so much so that I sat up at 2 o'clock last night trying to get this sermon, trying to understand the bits and pieces and who should I follow because every commentator had a different point of view.

So, as we work through it, this is the fruit of my labour of working through these verses. Let me share you what I have to say. Paul starts by looking at the metaphor of an earthly tent and a heavenly dwelling.

He says, therefore, 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. My wife and I have a lovely tent.

It's a beautiful tent. We spent a lot of money on it some time ago. It was top of the range. It was a Mac pack tent. And the first time that Michelle and I used it, Michelle knows very clearly what this passage is talking about, the difference between living in a tent and living in a house.

We went for a six-day hike. This is her first introduction to bushwalking, a six-day hike over the Victorian Alps. That was her first introduction to walking.

[15 : 00] Halfway through, her quote to me was, I wished I'd had broken my leg that a CareFlight helicopter would take me home. She recognised that living in a tent was something that was temporary and it wasn't something that she really wanted to do anymore.

She was looking forward to a home, something with permanent walls, something that was much more stable, something that wouldn't burn when you held your kennel too close to the actual sides or when you failed to remove that rock and left a little hole in the bottom of the tent that now when the water seeps in the next time I go camping, it sort of seeps in there.

Paul's using these two illustrations of a tent and the building to help us understand Paul's knowledge of what will happen in life after death.

He says this tent, this earthly body that we have, that we live in is but a tent. It is not permanent. It is frail and weak.

But he knows that if the tent is pulled down, that is the landlord of death comes along and says, look, I'm sorry, you need to move along from this tent. It's no longer able to be here. You need to move along.

[16 : 18] Paul knows that if that landlord comes along, he has a new accommodation that he's going to move into, accommodation that is spectacular, that is far more permanent, that is in a far more beautiful neighbourhood.

He realises that he has an eternal house, an eternal house that God prepares. Well, there's some debate as to whether that's what Paul has in mind here, this heavenly body, when he talks about this building.

Is Paul here reflecting on the heavenly body or is he reflecting on some other body, perhaps being in the temple of God in heaven? But it seems clear from this passage that Paul is talking about this heavenly building is actually our resurrected bodies that we will enjoy on that day when Christ returns.

So, for Paul, he recognises that he has this body waiting for him. There is no fear of death because he knows he goes from a tent to a building.

Well, in verses 2-4, Paul says there, well, quite frankly, I'd actually like to move into this new building right here and now. I groan and long to be there. And we see that in verses 2-4.

[17 : 40] For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. If indeed when we have taken off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent we groan under the burden because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Paul mixes his metaphor here. He groans to be clothed. That is, his tent doesn't get removed completely. He wants the tent to be clothed in a building.

Mixing his metaphors here. And he groans and longs for that. The difficulty comes in trying to understand what does it mean then to be unclothed that Paul talks about here.

Because he talks about not wanting to be naked, to be left naked, not wanting to be unclothed here in the passage. Now, I need to be careful in oversimplifying the many views that people hold.

But let me just bring them down to three views. Many think that this being unclothed, this nakedness that Paul talks about here that he doesn't want to be a part of.

[18 : 50] He'd rather go from the tent to the heavenly body and not be a part of this unclothedness, this nakedness. The first option is to see that this nakedness or this unclothedness is the intermediate state.

That is, it's that disembodied state where we enjoy bliss with God until Christ returns. That is, so that when we die, we then go disembodied up into heaven and we float around like little angels, I guess, in the clouds and we wait until Christ returns, until we get our resurrected body.

And some think this is what Paul is talking about. That Paul doesn't actually want to be a part of that. Paul would rather just go straight from the tent straight to the resurrected body. He'd rather Christ return in his life.

That's what he's saying. The problem is with this intermediate state, it puts a great burden on the text that I'm not sure that this text can actually hold. So, Calvin suggested that perhaps that it's talking in a moral sense.

That is, that Paul doesn't want to be found unclothed from Christ. He doesn't want to be found in his sinful state, as many will be on that last day, naked, shameful, in a sinful state.

[20 : 15] Calvin says that's what it means to be naked and unclothed, not to be clothed in Christ's righteousness. Again, I'm not sure that the text can actually hold that as well.

It seems to me in life that Paul is talking about weaknesses in the body and talking about his body and weaknesses in light of his ministry. It seems to me in many modern commentators that Paul is actually reflecting here this nakedness, this unclothedness is death itself.

That is, Paul doesn't want to be left dead, conquered by death, left in that state of brokenness completely.

Paul doesn't want that. He wants to go straight from the tent to the resurrected body. It makes sense, I think, even when looking at verse 1. There Paul says, we know that if this earthly tent we lived in is destroyed, we have a building from God.

So sure is Paul that we are going to have this building, that we won't be left naked, that death isn't the final answer. So sure is it, he talks about that we have, he talks in the present tense.

[21 : 31] We have this building, God will bring it about. We will have a resurrected body, such as the confidence that Paul has. In verse 5, Paul affirms that it is God who has prepared us for this.

It is God who has given us his spirit as a guarantee. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God who has given us the spirit as a guarantee.

God guarantees it. He puts his stamp on you. He puts down the deposit. He says, I've got, they're mine. They're heading for the resurrected body.

So Paul's actually not here picking up the idea of trying to work out what happens in between death and resurrection. Paul's not interested in that. What he's trying to drive home in this text is that we will have a resurrected body.

That it will happen and it will be a glorious body. In verses 6 to 8, Paul then starts drawing some conclusions about his great confidence that he has but also his great desire to be with the Lord.

[22 : 50] Look there in verses 6 to 8. We're always confident even though we are, we know that while we're at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Paul in these verses here talks about that he has great confidence but that he has such a desire to be with the Lord and out of this broken body and in the resurrected body.

I guess at this point it makes us ask the question, how do you feel about death? For all the sophistication that we have, I think deep down our world is petrified of death.

It scares us and not just to the elderly. I think if you look around in our youth and our young people, the curtain, this black curtain of death just hangs above us all and we're scared of it.

We're scared of what it may bring. But for Paul, that's not the case. For Paul, death is not this impenetrable shadow of meaningless that casts its shadow over our lives.

[24 : 10] For Paul, it's not the end of existence. It's not pointless, our lives, that our tender memories and our greatness and our actions and all these come to an end. But Paul says, no, it doesn't come to an end.

Paul says, he longs to be with the Lord. He'd rather be with the Lord than in the body. But Paul says, oh, I know we can't see it yet.

I know that we can't see this resurrection glory with our physical eyes here and now. Yet, we walk by faith. This is not wishful thinking.

This is not pious superstition. The empty tomb is on our side. Jesus' resurrection is our guarantee. The witnesses are on our side who saw the resurrected Jesus.

The Holy Spirit in our lives set down as a guarantee is on our side. Therefore, we don't lose heart.

[25 : 12] These clay pots, our battered lives, our outer nature, it's fading away. But that doesn't matter because our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

Jesus' resurrection life has been planted deep within us, renewing us, our hearts and our minds. Michelle's grandfather died a couple of years ago.

He was a man full of faith, a godly, godly man. He died in a frail body that just let him down in the end.

He didn't die a particularly pleasant way, but he died full of faith. He was a man that prayed for us twice a day, a man who longed to be with the Lord.

He died well. He knew that one day he will have a resurrected body. He was a man of great hope.

[26 : 20] Paul concludes this section in verses 9 and 10. So, whether we're at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

For all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. Paul starts talking about the fact that we need to please God.

Whether we're here or whether we're away, we need to be people who please God in all that we do. Why? Because we must all face the judgment seat of Christ.

I've never been to Corinth, but I've been told that even now there, as you walk through the town, you see all the different sights, you come to a point where the judgment seat is.

There's this platform, a rock platform, where the Roman governor would hand out his judgments for the day and people would line up waiting to hear their verdict.

[27 : 29] In fact, Paul himself stood before that judgment seat. Paul says, all of us will have to stand before the great judge and receive recompense for what is done in the body.

What we do in our bodies does count. It does matter how we live our lives. Paul's not saying here something different from Galatians and Romans that you are saved by faith because we are.

We are saved, we are made righteous by what Jesus has done, not by what we do. The actions done in our body doesn't justify us, but Paul makes it clear we're going to have to give an account of them and that we may receive our recompense for what we've done.

The body does matter. It does matter how we live our lives. Are we people living lives that are pleasing God in all that we do? This is a great text, a great text filling us with great hope.

May we be people who understand this resurrected body that comes when Christ returns. We don't know when it's going to return, when he will return. It could be today, it could be in thousands of years' time.

[28 : 55] Let us not give up hope. Let us keep on living lives that bring honour and glory to our great God and Master. Amen.