

Heavenly Minded

Paul ended 2 Corinthians 4 by saying that the bodies of flesh are wasting away, but our inner being is undergoing preparation for heaven. Our text for today continues his thinking as he shows he had heaven on his mind, and shares that we all should have heaven on our minds, and that our hope should make a difference in the way we think and live. Follow as I read:

2 Corinthians 4:16- 5:10

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our slight, momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, 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.

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 For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— ³ if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

⁶ So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For all of us 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.

One of the criticisms of evangelical Christians down through the years is that we're so heavenly minded we're of no earthly good. I like the way C. S. Lewis responded to this, saying the reverse is true. In his opinion, it has been those who most believed in heaven who did the most good on earth. Those who do not believe in a life beyond tend to be self-centered, knowing this is all there is, so they had better get all they can for themselves. Those who believe in an eternal destiny and final accountability will venture to live for others, and will make the greatest contribution on earth. They think of themselves as mere visitors/sojourners, and so will make their days count for eternity, as they travel toward the City of God. They also value other human beings, realizing there are no mere mortals, but everyone has an eternal destiny, and how we treat/relate to them could affect their everlasting well-being.

Biblical hope is never wishful thinking, the way we often use the word hope, like "I hope tomorrow will be sunshiny, and my favorite team will win the World Series." Biblical hope is confidence about the promises of God. Paul uses the word for know that is knowledge ("oida") based on absolute truth, in contradistinction to the word he uses for human knowledge ("gnosis"), based on our intellectual discovery (v.1). Our hope for

heaven, Paul says, is based on knowledge God gives us from his perfect Word, imparted by the Holy Spirit. John the Apostle adds that “*these things have been written that we might know (for certain) that we have eternal life*” (1Jn. 5:13). Such crucial matters as eternal life and our promised home in heaven, should not be left to conjecture and speculation.

Paul describes the believer’s longing and groaning for heaven, which will happen if we have heaven on our minds (vv1-5). We hope for the day when we can stop this earthly bivouac in the tent of this flesh, and be at home finally in our permanent residence.

My friends Bruce and Martha Schmidt, who served as missionaries in northern Uganda, to the unreached Karamajong people, had to live in a tent until Bruce finished their house. Believe me, living in a tent in hot, desolate, and dangerous Karamoja is not like a few days in an Air Stream camper in a national park! If you know Martha, you can appreciate how she longed to be out of that tent, and into her more permanent, and certainly more comfortable and safe house.

Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* paraphrases these verses as “Sometimes we can hardly wait to move-----and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what’s coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we’re tired of it!”

John Calvin notes that Christians aren’t the only ones who are groaning in the flesh. All of us are mortal and our flesh is wasting away. Calvin says the unregenerate world is groaning against the inevitability of death, and is trying desperately to prolong mortal life. Several decades ago I read about a cult in Arizona that was trying to convince each other they could overcome the ageing process and thus live indefinitely in their mortal bodies. Back then they were all 30-somethings. Now that they’re in their late 70’s, I wonder how they’re doing.

The children of God are groaning under the burden of life’s trials that are unique to the faithful. Paul gives several catalogues of his sufferings, and it’s an impressive list (2 Cor. 6 and 11). If we had to suffer like that, we’d groan too. The truth is, most Christians in our culture are too at home in this world, and consequently, we don’t have heaven on our minds. We forget we’re just bivouac people, temporarily in this world.

In my travels to mission fields in places like Romania and Africa, I was privileged to participate in funeral services, which were exuberant services of worship. A missionary friend explained that African Christians rejoice in their hope for others and themselves because they have so little to celebrate in this life. We fail to see how vastly inferior this life is to the life to come.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the groaning of the believer, along with all of God’s creation, saying we groan inwardly, awaiting our final redemption. He compares this with the “pains of childbirth,” saying we, along with the entire creation, await our final redemption, which will take place at the consummation, and with the new heaven and

the new earth (Rom. 8: 22-23). We men may claim to experience pain like that of childbirth, but you women who have delivered children will beg to differ with us! Paul says that when we have heaven on our minds, we long for the eternal, and groan over the undelivered “child” of our final deliverance to heaven.

Some scholars say Paul in this passage is expressing a desire to avoid the intermediate state between his mortal body and the final resurrection body at the parousia, the return of Christ, describing the intermediate state as being “unclothed.” I agree with Calvin and Charles Hodge, that Paul views the intermediate state as a step toward the final glory, and as an entry into the “building of God.” Obviously, there will be a glorious existence in paradise, even though the nature of this disembodied existence is unclear. There will be a “dwelling” for our spirits in paradise, or heaven, which is where our Lord Jesus is and the glory of God in his fullness. People know one another there, just as they know Jesus, and have become like him, for they have seen him as he is, and face to face (1 Jn. 3:2-3; 1 Cor. 13:12).

Paul was caught up into this third heaven, which is a reference to paradise (2 Cor. 12). He was so overwhelmed by this secret experience he was unable to and restrained from speaking about it. He knew it was to remain in the realm of mystery and hope, and was perhaps fearful that a fuller disclosure would not be essential for faith, but rather would become a subject for idle speculation (Deut. 29:29). In fact, so great was this experience God gave him his thorn in the flesh to keep him from becoming conceited because of these “surpassingly great revelations.” (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

As great as paradise is, it’s not as great as the day when Jesus comes to earth, and we receive our glorified, resurrection bodies, as Paul sets forth (1 Thess. 4: 13-18 and 1 Cor. 15: 50-57). Paul reminds us of our hope for the transformation of our lowly bodies into the likeness of His glorious body (Phil. 3:21). How glorious that must be, for Paul to wish he could by-pass the intermediate state in paradise, and to be living on earth when Jesus returns to transform us as he draws us to himself. Paul saw the glorified body of Jesus on the Damascus Road, and so he always longed to share that blinding glory.

The Holy Spirit is God’s guarantee of heaven to come (v. 5). This guarantee is like a down-payment, like earnest money for a house we purchase. Another analogy is an engagement ring. The modern Greek word for engagement ring is based on this Koine Greek word for “deposit” (W Wiersbe). You give a girl an engagement ring to assure her of marriage to come. God gives us the Holy Spirit to assure us of a glorious eternity to come.

The Holy Spirit is within us to remind us, assure us, and give us a longing for heaven. The Bible becomes a guidebook for heaven, and gives us preliminary glimpses of glory, even if with highly symbolic language. I often wonder about the pleasures of heaven. But we’re kids playing with mud in an alley, who’ve never imagined the pleasures of building castles in the sand by the sea (Lewis).

There is just so much of the glory of God we can experience in this mortal life (vv. 6-7). Even though we're redeemed, and have the presence of the Holy Spirit, we're nevertheless away from the glorious physical presence and body of our Lord Jesus, whom we can adore by sight when we go to be with him in paradise. Our destiny is to be with him in glory, whether he comes to earth in his triumphal return, or we experience mortal death and the intermediate state, our goal or ambition must be to please him (9).

Scripture warns against the destructive, divisive power of selfish ambition, when we're ambitious for our own self-aggrandizement (Jas. 3:14-16). But if we're ambitious to please God, we'll live for others, as he would have us do. When we have this heavenly hope of seeing Jesus and becoming like him, this hope purifies us. I realize that each day, as I submit to the Spirit's work of transforming my character, I'm doing the work of preparing for heaven (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

Paul connects the thought of pleasing God with the judgment by saying "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him, for the things done while in the body, whether good or evil" (10). I'm "banking on" God's mercy and grace as being greater than all my sin!

Paul says there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). So we don't fear God's exclusion since we've been joined with Christ for eternity. But we will be accountable for squandering opportunities for kingdom living and serving. This is the "*bema*," the judgment seat of Christ, where believers must give an account of our stewardship of life and faithfulness. Here we'll receive or lose our rewards (as we see also in 1 Cor. 3:15 and Rom. 14:10-12). We know, as John says (1 Jn. 2:28), that there's the possibility of our being saved, yet also ashamed before the Lord on the Day of Judgment. This is the shame of being found unfaithful and perhaps out of fellowship with the Lord. It's the idea of being saved only to escape eternal separation from God, and forfeiting the full blessings of the Lord that could have been ours for eternity.

Some discredit the idea of rewards for the believer, saying it's unworthy for a believer to be motivated by rewards, or by anything other than the love we should have for God. C. S. Lewis says that rewards are a proper motivation for the believer, because the rewards God promises are the appropriate consummation and outcome of a life of faithful service. It is not venal or mercenary, says Lewis, for a young man to strive for the hand of a young lady, and that marriage would be the proper reward for his love. If, on the other hand, his desire is her inheritance from her wealthy parents, then his so-called love is mercenary. A medal of honor is appropriate, and even a promotion in rank is an appropriate reward for valor in battle. I read of a war veteran who was caught in a lie of exaggeration about his service and fabricated acts of heroism, in order to receive a medal of commendation that would have earned him an increase in his military pension. Heavenly rewards will not be meted out to the most "successful" in God's service, but rather, to the most faithful, as in the parables of Jesus, and likely the ones least conscious of rewards (e.g. Lk. 19, the Parable of the Talents).

Lately, I've thought a lot about heaven, and about how brief is my mortal life. But thinking about heaven doesn't necessarily mean I'm heavenly minded, if I still fail to see everyone as a candidate for either life with God or life apart from him, forever. I'm not heavenly minded if I don't see eternal consequences for my failure to love others, to care for the sick, needed and imprisoned and victims of injustice (Mat. 25:31-46). I'm not heavenly minded if I think and act and decide based on temporal values rather than eternal ones. I'm not heavenly minded if I fail to see every individual I meet is a candidate for heaven or hell, and how I treat them could affect their everlasting destiny.

I'm not heavenly minded if I act as though I do not have in my life already this "down payment" of heaven, the Holy Spirit in me. To be heavenly minded is to have the awareness that Christ is in me, and is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). This hope is not wishful thinking about eternity that has little or no impact on my present life. My work now is to somehow reflect the hope of glory, Christ in me. I want to be so heavenly minded that my life will count the most for Christ and his kingdom.

Being heavenly minded doesn't mean we live without some doubts and even fears of the unknown, but we can be sure that on earth or in glory we are with Jesus and he's with us. Timothy Keller told how a chaplain comforted a frightened soldier before battle (the recent D-Day memorials heightened my deep gratitude for the thousands of our soldiers approaching the beaches of Normandy, realizing their chances of survival were minimal). The chaplain told the soldier, "If you live, Jesus will be with you, but if you die, you will be with him. Either way he has you."