

EPISTLE READING FOR JUNE 14, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

OBSERVE:

There is an old saying among Bible students: When you see a *therefore* in the text, you need to ask yourself, *what is it there for?*

In this case, the text picks up the previous discussion in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 concerning the hope of eternal life. Paul first boldly states the promise that physical destruction means merely that the Christian will receive a permanent home in heaven. He uses metaphorical language from his trade as a tentmaker, recognizing that tents are created for pilgrims and travelers; but God will create *an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands (2 Corinthians 5:1)*.

Furthermore, he wrestles with the Christian dilemma – longing to be home in the *heavenly dwelling*, the believer groans and wishes to be home with the Lord. But the Spirit has been given *as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come*. That is, the Christian has a sense of assurance, a credit or down payment in this life as a promissory note for the future hope.

Therefore, Paul is saying as our passage picks up, the Christian has confidence because of the guarantee that the Spirit has given. He also returns to his perennial theme of faith, recognizing that there is a difference between the *now* and the *not yet* of the heavenly dwelling: *For we live by faith, not by sight*. The believer's assurance of heaven is grounded in faith alone.

Interestingly, Paul seems to present a kind of dualism between the body and spirit: the believer *would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord*.

This is fascinating because we are told by most Biblical scholars today that the Bible knows nothing of immortality separated from the resurrected body. The normal understanding of eternal life, they tell us, is always *embodied*, beginning on the day of resurrection when all shall be raised: *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thessalonians 4:16)*

Is Paul here suggesting a disembodied life after death? We should note that he says very clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:4, *while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life*.

In other words, the dead may be away from their physical body, but they will have a heavenly body.

In any event, he uses this opportunity to remind the Corinthians that there is still a moral demand on their lives in this life: *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it*. He reminds them that there will be a day in court for all people *before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad*.

APPLY:

Obviously I have merely touched on a debate going on today concerning the New Testament view of eternal life, immortality and heaven.

On the one hand, I'm tempted to simply say, "We'll know bye and bye." But that would be a little cowardly.

The issues are a little too complicated to explore here. One group believes that at death even believers experience a kind of "soul sleep" until the day of judgment and the general resurrection. Others believe just the opposite, that the day of judgment happens for each of us personally when we die, and we are immediately received by Christ through his grace.

Perhaps there is a "middle way" here that is supported by scripture. Why must it be either/or? Why not both/and?

Paul declares in Philippians 1:21-22 *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* His expectation of immediate union with Christ suggests that he will experience eternal life upon his death.

Moreover, Jesus tells Martha *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die(John 11:25-26)."*

Perhaps the answer to this paradox, between the immediacy of eternal life and the promised resurrection and embodiment at the end of the age lies in a third way.

Paul himself makes it clear *that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:50).* Moreover, earlier in the same passage, he points out that the resurrection body will be a body, but a transformed body: *The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).*

The body that we will have in the resurrection will be a transformed, glorified body — perhaps not unlike the body in which Jesus appeared after his own resurrection? He was obviously not merely a ghost — he could be touched, he could eat, he still bore the scars of his torture — and yet his body seemed also to transcend time and space, appearing and disappearing at will!

In any event, whatever our speculation, Paul makes it clear what our primary business is: *we make it our goal to please [the Lord], whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* And that is the same conclusion he comes to in his own journey — that though he might prefer to be home with the Lord, the Lord has a mission for him to accomplish. And so do we!

RESPOND:

I find speculations about heaven and the afterlife and judgment day fascinating — up to a point. It's when we Christians begin to insist that we know *exactly* what it will all be like, when the end will come, and all the events leading up to that day, that I begin to get impatient.

How can any of us *know* what lies ahead? The scriptures have been given us to remind us of our assurance, the Spirit's *deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.* *We live by faith, not by sight.* And in the meantime, we are to live lives that are pleasing to God in the here and now.

Perhaps we all do well to take to heart the words of the Psalmist:

*My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.*

Lord, I thank you for all the benefits that you have given us, including the promise of eternal life. I long to be united with you forever, but I know that you have a purpose for me here in this life. And so for now, as your Word says, 'I walk by faith, not by sight.' Amen.

BY TOM LETCHWORTH

<https://soarlectionarybiblestudy.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/epistle-for-june-14-2015/>