

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: Is Your Earth Suit Wearing Out?
SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 4:13-5:10
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DATE: November 13, 2005

In case you have any doubt in your mind, the answer to the question in my sermon title this morning is, "Yes." Our bodies begin to deteriorate the moment we're born, and the rate of deterioration speeds up considerably as time goes on. Children and teens don't notice it, of course, but the 30- and 40-something's are already getting a taste of it, those in their fifties and sixties understand it quite well, and the geezers among us are all saying, "Amen," if they can hear me, that is.

I was reading the other day about a group of Florida senior citizens who were sitting around talking about their ailments (what I call "an organ recital").

"My arms are so weak I can hardly hold this cup of coffee," said one. "Yes, I know," replied another, "My cataracts are so bad I can't even see my coffee." A third responded, "I can't even turn my head because of the arthritis in my neck," to which several nodded weakly in agreement. "My blood pressure pills make me dizzy," another went on. And an old man winced as he shook his head, "I guess that's the price we pay for getting old." After a short moment of silence one woman said cheerfully, "Well, it's not that bad! Thank God we all still have our driver's licenses!"

Aging, of course, has some positive aspects, too. Like, for example:

In a hostage situation you are likely to be released first.

You can throw a party and the neighbors don't even realize it.

Your investment in health insurance is finally beginning to pay off.

And your secrets are safe with your friends because they can't remember them either.

In our Scripture passage today the Apostle Paul talks about his earth suit wearing out and what he expects to happen when it finally goes *kaput*. Interestingly, though death is prominent in his thoughts, this is not really the somber passage we might expect. It is actually a wonderfully encouraging preview of what we all have to look forward to, at least *if* we know Christ as Paul knew Him. This morning I am going to read our Scripture in sections as we go through the text, and the first paragraph we want to examine is 2 Cor. 4:13-15.

Confidence in our own resurrection is based on faith in Christ's resurrection. (13-15)

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Paul quotes here the 116th Psalm, which is a Psalm of thanksgiving to God for deliverance. Just as the Psalmist was so confident in God's deliverance that he couldn't keep his mouth shut, so Paul finds himself in the same situation. He knows the truth and feels compelled to preach it,

even if his critics take him to task. You know, those who lack conviction in their hearts about the character of God or the truth of His Word often seek the peace and popularity that come from mealy-mouthed preaching, making sure they don't ruffle any feathers. But those who genuinely believe the truth cannot help but speak it *as* the truth, even if it challenges the conventional wisdom and stirs up opposition.

In the previous paragraph Paul has acknowledged that death is at work in his body, meaning not only that is he aging but even more that he is suffering and being persecuted for his faith. But Paul does not view his own inevitable death as a tragedy "because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus." Now that's a truth worth proclaiming! Of course, the resurrection of the believer's body is not a new topic for the Apostle. In his first letter to the Corinthian church he delivered the most detailed teaching on the resurrection in the entire Bible, and here he is just summarizing and repeating his conclusion. I think it would be helpful to turn back just two or three pages to 1 Cor. 15 and briefly walk through his earlier argument.

In 1 Cor. 15:12 Paul asks, "How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" Some in the Corinthian church were apparently teaching that at death the spirit goes to heaven, the body to the grave, and that's how it all ends. They were influenced, no doubt, by Greek philosophy, which often showed disdain for the body while elevating the spirit. But Paul would have none of that sort of dualism. The human being is body, soul, and spirit, and God has a future for both the material and the immaterial part of us.

The Apostle responds to this dualistic view in verse 13 and repeats the same point in verse 16: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." This is a powerful argument, because even those who doubted whether their own bodies had any future after death certainly did not question the resurrection of Jesus, for that was the cornerstone of the Christian faith. They accepted that He was a unique case. But, Paul says to them, you can't have it both ways; if dead bodies don't rise, then dead bodies don't rise, *including* Christ's. If dualism is going to be accepted, we must be consistent and reject even the resurrection of Christ.

Then he takes the argument one step further and draws out the logical deductions that follow necessarily if Christ Himself didn't rise. It is his hope that they will recoil in horror from these deductions and therefore reject the premise upon which they are based, namely that there is no future resurrection for believers. If Christ did not rise, Paul continues, then our preaching is useless, your faith is useless, we are found to be false witnesses about God, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins, dead believers are lost forever, and we Christians are to be pitied more than all men.

Now let's go back to 2 Cor. 4: "With the same spirit of faith the Psalmist displayed, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence." If Jesus was raised from the dead, then so will we! These simple jars of clay, these cracked pots, have a phenomenal future!

“All this,” Paul continues in verse 15 “is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.” When he says, “all this is for your benefit,” I think he is referring to everything he has been talking about since verse 7, namely that as a mere clay pot, he is weak, broken, suffering, and inevitably dying. Yet this pot is filled with a great treasure—the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Because of the treasure placed in him he is able to introduce others to new life in Christ. Not only that, the pot will eventually be resurrected and reach its full potential as a creation of God.

And what is the end result? “More and more people will cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.” That is Paul’s greatest goal in life (or death)—for more and more voices to be added to the hallelujah chorus of praise and worship that Rev. 5:12, 13 records: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise. . . . To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

So far Paul has talked about the confidence we can have in the resurrection of our bodies, but that is future. What about between now and then? What about those who are suffering? What about those who want to die but can’t, like some of the shut-in’s I know?

Perseverance is possible despite the paradoxes we face. (16-18)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

This short paragraph contains three paradoxes, facts that seem inconsistent and unlikely on the surface but which are nevertheless profoundly true.

Outward/inward. “Outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Is that true of you? I know the first part is, i.e. I know you are wasting away outwardly. But sadly the second part is not always obvious. Many Christians seem to get harder and more bitter as they get older. But I also know many who become “Sweeter as the Years Go By.” Randall Rice is an example. Randall has been quite ill for the past month. I visited him many times at the hospital, and every time I came away encouraged. I’ve known him for over 25 years, and he seems to exude the love of Christ more every time I see him; the fruit of the Spirit is growing in his life. He is wasting away outwardly but being renewed inwardly. Isn’t this what the prophet Isaiah promised God would do for us?

The everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth . . . gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Light/weighty. “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” There’s only one way Paul could refer to his incredibly difficult trials and troubles as either light or momentary, and that’s by way of contrast with something else. It’s as though he puts all his physical suffering and mental anguish on one side of a scale. Then on the other side he stacks up the eternal glory that is being accumulated through that suffering. There is no comparison; the scales tip dramatically in favor of the eternal benefits.

Of course, we have to realize that *all* suffering does not produce future glory. When we suffer because of our own sin, there is no glory in that (1 Peter 2:20). But when we endure life’s normal trials with a humble, grateful, God-honoring attitude, I believe that adds to the eternal weight of glory. And certainly when we suffer because of our faith in Christ we can be *sure* that eternal glory is being accumulated to our account. John Piper writes of Paul, “When he is hurting, he fixes his eyes not on how heavy the hurt is, but on how heavy the glory will be because of the hurt.”¹

Seen/unseen. “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.” We naturally prefer the seen. Offer someone cash or an IOU for a larger amount, and most are going to take the green stuff. We have a well-known proverb we often quote: “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” But Paul says that when it comes to spiritual issues, the world we cannot see is just as real as and infinitely more important than the world we inhabit at present. Our problem is that too often we define reality as “the material, the touchable, the seeable, the scientific.” But the Bible makes it clear again and again that there is an unseen world that intersects our world, and we ignore it to our own detriment.

The paradigm example is when Elisha’s servant went out for the paper one morning and found his whole town surrounded with horses and chariots sent to capture his master, the prophet. “Oh, my lord, what shall we do?” he asked. “Don’t be afraid,” Elisha answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” The servant looked around but he couldn’t see any reinforcements. Elisha couldn’t see them either, but he knew they were there because he knew God. He then prayed and asked God to open the spiritual eyes of the servant, and as a result “he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” I assume this brought a certain sense of peace and confidence to the servant. And I also assume that if we could see the angels God has assigned to protect us in given situations, we would likewise have peace and confidence in the ways of the Lord. For the most part, however, God asks us to trust Him and to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

And Paul tells us specifically why we should do this—because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. The Apostle John says, “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John :17). Stop and think about that for a moment. Everything we can see other than human beings—our homes, our furniture, our businesses, our cars, our libraries, our family picture albums, our toys—it’s all temporary.

Someday it's all going to be left behind, and eventually it's going to go up in smoke. But the spiritual realities are lasting and eternal—love, worship, faithful ministry, lives touched, kindnesses done, generosity expressed.

Now in the third paragraph of our Scripture text today Paul returns to the topic of the resurrection.

Knowledge of God's plan for our future helps us face death without fear. (5:1-5)

Look at chapter 5, verses 1-5:

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Please notice how Paul starts this discussion of the future for our bodies: “Now we know. . .” He is not offering us an opinion or a speculation or an unfounded hope. Instead he is sharing four great truths about the future that we can sink our teeth into.

1. The next body is permanent. Our present body is temporary, but it will be replaced with one that lasts forever. Paul was a tentmaker, so he speaks of our present body as an earthly tent, and it's a very apt illustration. Tents are by their very nature temporary housing. After a while the stakes begin to loosen, the poles begin to bend, the canvas sags in various spots, the cold penetrates, and it is not very comfortable.ⁱⁱ

When Paul says “*if* the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,” he doesn't mean to imply there is any doubt about that happening. It's not a hypothetical “if”; it's a chronological “if.” It means “when” the tent is destroyed it's going to be replaced with a house. Now almost anyone would prefer a house to a tent, especially the kind of house Paul is talking about. First, its nature is eternal. Second, its location is heaven. Third, it is not built with human hands (the implication being that it is a divine production). No wonder he's looking forward to the next body! John MacArthur speaks truth when he says,

For all, death comes like an utterly unsympathetic landlord waving an eviction notice. But that eviction merely releases believers from a wretched earthly neighborhood to an infinitely grand and glorious dwelling in a heavenly neighborhood

2. The next life is far superior. Paul mentions one thing that characterizes this life, and that is groaning. It isn't constant, but it is inevitable, and there are many things that produce it. We groan because of pain, because of broken relationships, because of dashed hopes and dreams, because of the incredible amount of evil all around us. We groan when people act irresponsibly and harm themselves and others around them, when people call good evil and evil good, when

innocent children are aborted, when someone who even questions evolution is considered a neanderthal.

But there is still another cause of groaning, and this is one Paul mentions specifically:

“Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.” Then two verses later he says essentially the same thing again: “For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.” Paul is expressing here a deep inner desire for the resurrection body God has promised. Anyone whose earth suit is wearing out, or anyone who has endured long-term suffering, can empathize. The more we suffer and the closer we get to death, the more we long for that body as described in 1 Cor. 15:42-44:

*The body that is sown (buried) 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 (supernatural) body.*

But what is his point in twice mentioning the desire to be clothed rather than unclothed? Clearly he isn't speaking of physical nakedness or physical clothing, because in both verse 2 and in verse 4 he makes it clear that the clothing we seek is our heavenly dwelling, our resurrection body.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus the nakedness he abhors must be soul nakedness, the prospect of being a disembodied spirit. Yet that is exactly what Greek philosophers in Paul's day looked forward to, as do Hindus and many others today. But Paul rejects such a philosophy and makes it clear that he is not looking for Nirvana with the peace of extinction; he is not looking for absorption into the Divine; he is not looking for the freedom of a disembodied spirit. He is waiting, even groaning, for the day when God will give him a new body, in which he will still be able, even in heaven, to serve and enjoy His marvelous creation.^{iv}

By the way, Paul indicates in Romans 8 that we are not alone in our groaning; the physical world around us groans too, including, I presume, the animal kingdom.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:22, 23).

I personally think the hurricanes and earthquakes and tsunamis and tornadoes that we see so much of today are evidence of this cosmic groaning. The bird flu and mad cow disease and the ebola virus may be evidences of groaning in the animal kingdom. And just as the groaning of believers ends when they receive their resurrection bodies, so the physical universe “will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

In other words, there's a great day coming not only for us but for the whole universe. God is going to take our present bodies and recreate them; they will be the same bodies but supernaturally different—a return to Eden-like conditions, maybe even better. The same is true

for this world in which we live. God is going to take it and recreate it as well; it will be the same world but supernaturally different—a return to Eden-like conditions, maybe even better. Believe me, the next life is far superior.

3. The next existence is guaranteed. That’s what Paul says in verse 5: “Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” Do you realize that God’s purpose was not just to create us, not just to redeem us, not just to sanctify us, but to glorify us, and this was His intention from eternity past. Romans 8:28-30:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

It’s so certain, he can speak of it in the past tense as though it has already happened. The reason is that we have a guarantee, a down payment, a first installment. Back in chapter 1 we were told that God has “set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor. 1:22).

4. The next home is with the Lord. Verse 6-8: “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. (We live by faith, not by sight). We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Paul doesn’t worry himself here about where heaven is, nor with its topography, nor with its physical features. It’s enough for him that heaven is “home with the Lord.” In that great passage of comfort in John 14 where Jesus tells His disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled”, He actually gives them very little information about heaven—just that it’s a place. But He does tell that “I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” Paul wants to be where Jesus is.

How then should we live? If we really believe that God has prepared a resurrection body for us, and if we really desire to be at home with the Lord, how should that affect our daily living now? Paul gives his answer in verses 9 and 10:

Our goal is to please Him, for judgment is coming. (5:9-10)

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 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 bad.

Pleasing Him should be our full-time occupation. Even when we get to heaven, pleasing the Savior will consume our time and effort. But while here on earth this is especially important, because judgment day is coming. There is a lot of confusion among Christians about the coming judgment, so I have decided to preach a whole sermon on the topic next Lord’s Day. I’m going

to leave verse 10 for next Sunday. But we don't need to wait until next Sunday to start living in such a way that we please the Savior.

Conclusion: In conclusion this morning I would like to challenge us in respect to our own personal attitude toward the future. I fear that retirement has superceded heaven as the ultimate and highest goal for many western Christians. We are simply too happy with this world to think seriously about the world to come, at least until we hear the diagnosis of some incurable disease. Glutted on the second-rate happiness of this world, we are too full to hunger after God. David Van Biema wrote in *Time* magazine's 1997 Easter essay, "Does Heaven Exist?", that for most people "the current generic heaven still delivers when people need it most . . . at the death of a loved one. Why bother with it any other time?" When is the last time anyone wrote a heartfelt and thoughtful song about heaven? When was the last time we even sang one?

It's time, friends, for us to say with Paul, and not only to say but to believe, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." May God give us all that eternal perspective.

i. John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, 360.

ii. Ray C. Stedman, *Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians: Power out of Weakness*, 93.

iii. There may be, however, a connection to physical nakedness that is not immediately apparent. When God created Adam and Eve, they were the most beautiful specimens He could dream up. Their bodies were perfectly suited to their environment, perfectly functional, they could eat without gaining weight, could work without getting tired, and could accomplish whatever their minds dreamed up to do. But when they sinned everything changed. Deterioration set in, exhaustion occurred, sags and wrinkles appeared, aches and pains developed, *and* they began to experience a certain shame of their bodies. They put on clothes so as to hide themselves, but they could only *partially* hide their shame; they still remained naked spiritually, emotionally, psychologically. In fact, even today a great deal of our time and effort is spent trying to cover up the things we don't like about ourselves. But when we receive our resurrection bodies we will return to Eden in the sense that we will feel complete, unashamed, with nothing to hide. Our heavenly suit will provide the full covering we have longed for.

iv. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 204-5.