
2 Corinthians

Lesson 6

“2 Corinthians 5”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

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 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

Paul, having introduced new thoughts in chapter 4 now begins at 5:1 with a reflection upon those new thoughts. Paul contrasts that which is “earthly” (ἐπίγειος) with that which is “heavenly,” “eternal” (αἰώνιον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) building from God. Here Paul is speaking of the very real possibility that he and his partners in the faith might be killed because of their ministry for Jesus Christ. In this contemplation he contrasts the body that he has now with the belief that God has something better, more permanent waiting for them. In this contrast notice how he compares the present body with a tent, a fragile, temporary, structure, while comparing what God has prepared for them with a “building” (οἰκοδομήν) a real, substantive, permanent, structure. This is a building made by God, not with hands, eternal and heavenly. In other words it will be far better than what he has now. If they lose their life, the reward from God far outweighs the temporary dwelling, body, that they currently have. There is no real comparison.

At verse 2 Paul indicates that even now there is a “longing” that is so powerful that they currently groan in anticipation and hope of this better dwelling place, this better clothing, as he will

make the analogy in verse 3. So often, we as human beings, are so powerfully and deeply controlled by concern for our current life in the body now. Paul is powerfully indicating that living life now should have a very different focus. If our focus is on this body and this life we are actually focusing on that which is temporary and transient. Such focus will mean that we will be concerned about things, and issues that will not allow us to live life in the way we are called to live by Christ. Our calling to live our lives like Jesus will be hampered and shackled because of your fears and concerns. Paul is setting up this foundational teaching among his audience. He is reorienting their compass to point toward that which is eternal and lasting rather than toward that which is temporary and will fade away, or die.

At verse 3 Paul touches on the honor/shame culture of his day that is not nearly so prominent in our current climate and culture. To be found naked in such a culture was something that was not desirable to say the least. It was to be vulnerable to be exposed, to be shamed. Here Paul seems to make some form of comparison between this concept of being naked and being exposed when we die. Perhaps it is important here to speak al

little regarding the concept within Judaism in particular, that meant to be without the body was to be somehow incomplete and lacking what is necessary to be a whole and complete being. Unlike the perspective of Plato, and many of the other Greeks and Romans, the Jewish concept was that God created human beings to have a body and without a body they were not complete. To be without the body, in a sense, leaves the spirit exposed, vulnerable, and incomplete; not the way that God intended. To be clothed, whole, and complete is to have a body and a Spirit and to be what God created in the beginning, a living soul (Genesis 2:7). This contrast is important in Paul's reasoning.

With this Paul sets up what he will begin discussing at verse 4. Here Paul writes about the tension that exists between the present state and the burden created by their (he and his companions) expectations and hope of something far better and far more permanent. In their current state, Paul and his companions groan for that which is better, that which is heavenly as opposed to that which is earthly. The desire of Paul is not to be released from his body and therefore from the burden of flesh as is desirable among some Greeks. At least some among the

Corinthians will have likely found this to be something very much desirable. They will have seen being stripped of the flesh that hinders and burdens as something to be pursued. Instead, Paul has a great desire for that which is mortal to be swallowed up by that which is immortal. Paul and his companions long for life as they believe it will be when creation is renewed by God. This will be a life where injustice, suffering and pain will be no more.¹

N. T. Wright writes extensively regarding the matter of resurrection from the dead in antiquity, and he particularly writes regarding understandings about death in the first century A.D. In the first century there is a unanimous understanding that resurrection from the dead did not happen and that it was in fact an impossibility. There were a lot of things that people believed in pagan antiquity, but there was absolutely no room at all for any concept of true resurrection of the dead. That is when we understand the word “resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) as it would have been understood in this time. “Resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) in its meaning in antiquity would by necessity require a body and not just be some form of spiritual revival. It is neither good

¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), pp. 95-96.

scholarship nor good practice to assume the meaning of an ancient concept because of a modern perspective.² The concept of resurrection is one that is deeply misunderstood and given a host of absolutely spurious perceptions today. Very often, even in Christian understandings today, people believe something that is more akin to pagan beliefs than that which Paul is powerfully and clearly teaching to the Corinthians.

In the ancient world, two or three hundred years either side of the time of Jesus there were a number of variations regarding the what happened to the dead. Let us begin with the two Homeric narratives that left deep imprints on the greco-roman imagination. The first is the scene from the Homeric tale of the *Iliad* where Achilles is confronted with the shade of his recently killed friend Patroclus (*Iliad* 16.805-63). Patroclus was killed in battle by Euphorbus and Hector. There is a struggle over the corpse which is eventually recovered and brought back to the camp of the Greeks. Achilles and his comrades clean the body, but do not immediately bury it. Instead Achilles goes off to fight, driven by a frantic grief (*Iliad* 18.22-125) and finally kills Hector

² N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God series, Vol. 3 (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 28-38.

(*Iliad* 22.247-366). Only after he has avenged the death of Patroclus does Achilles return to the task of mourning his lost friend. Achilles then addresses the dead man as now being a resident of Hades (*Iliad* 23.19) telling Patroclus of his vengeance, he then makes preparation for the funeral on the next day.³

However, that night as Achilles slept:

There came to him the spirit of unhappy
Patroclus, in all things like his very self, in
stature and fair eyes and in voice, and like
were his clothes that he wore about his
body; and he stood above Achilles' head
and spoke to him, saying: 'You sleep, and
have proved forgetful of me, Achilles. Not
while I lived were you unmindful of me,
but now that I am dead! Bury me with all
speed, let me pass inside the gates of
Hades. Far do the spirits keep me away,
the phantoms of men that have done with
toils, and they do not allow me to mingle

³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 38-39

with them beyond the river, but vainly I
wander through the wide-gated house of
Hades. And give me your hand, I beg you,
for never more again will I return out of
Hades, when once you have given me my
share of fire ...⁴

In response Achilles seeks to embrace his old friend, but this effort was in vain as the spirit vanished like a wisp of smoke and went gibbering underground. Achilles then states that something of a man does indeed continue after death, but it has no real mind or intellect, only the ghostly form of the former man (*Iliad* 23.99-107). He then rises up and completes the elaborate funeral (*Iliad* 23.108-261).

This passage is very interesting with regard to what Paul writes to his audience in Corinth. For us this may not seem nearly as remarkable as it did to this first audience. It appears, from our passage in the *Iliad* that Achilles harbored doubts regarding the dead having any existence at all. For him the ghostly apparition has settled this matter for him. Patroclus is a ghostly figure that is

⁴ A. T. Murray, trans., William F. Wyatt, rev., *Homer, Iliad Books 13-24*, in the Loeb Classical Library series, vol. 171 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 23.65-76.

witless and wandering. In order to help relive him from this situation what is the solution? There is none. Patroclus can be helped on his way to Hades, but even there he will not find a full, or in any way enriching existence, and there is absolutely no hope of him returning. In the midst of all this drama regarding Patroclus, Achilles has also left the body of Hector unburied as well.⁵ This acts as a continuation of his vengeance against him for having killed his friend. In refusing him burial he is unable to enter Hades. As you can easily see all of this is very different from what Paul is conveying to the Corinthian Christians regarding the hope they have in Jesus Christ.

The second Homeric tale of the underworld is found on the lips of Odysseus, as he relates the account of how he and his companions escaped from Circe's island. Circe allows Odysseus to go home, but first he must make a journey to the house of Hades and Persephone in the underworld. There he must summon the ghost of the blind Theban seer, Teiresias; Circe says he alone can still think clearly, while all the other ghosts simply "flit around like shadows" (*Odyssey* 10.487-495). After the offering of sacrifices of

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 39-40.

blood and the summoning of spirits he finally has a conversation with Teiresias who asks then, “Why have you left the light of the sun and come here to behold the dead and the place where there is no joy?”⁶ Odysseus allows Teiresias to drink the sacrificial blood and then he (Odysseus), in time, is even able to converse with his dead mother’s spirit and the spirit of others who have died. He tries to embrace his mother, but to no avail as she simply flits from his arms like a shadow, or a dream (*Odyssey* 11.206-208). He has numerous other conversations all of which indicate that Hades is a place not fit for human habitation.⁷

For Homer, and those who in subsequent centuries read him devoutly, the dead are “shades,” “ghosts,” and “phantoms.” They are in no way fully human beings, even though at times they may look like them. They have no real physicality, when someone seeks to grasp them they evaporate. They are sorry to be where they are and sad at their subhuman state. In some cases, they are even tormented for the crimes they committed during their lifetime. Even for the great and the good, Hades is a place that


⁶ A. T. Murray, trans., George E. Dimock, rev., *Homer, Odyssey Books 1-12*, in the Loeb Classical Library series, vol. 104 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.93-94.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 40-42.

holds no comfort, no prospects, simply a profound sense of loss. With only one exception, Teiresias, they have all lost their wits and much else that made them human besides. “They remain essentially subhuman and without hope.”⁸ Only the imbibing of blood allowed Odysseus to speak to them in any form of reasonable manner.

The perspective given by Homer would have very likely been the view that was the predominate view of those that Paul addresses in Corinth before they heard the Gospel message. The one exception to this view among the ancients is among the Egyptians, but they are not really very relevant to the situation in Corinth. They believed in some form of continuation of life, but not in any way that could truly be called resurrection. There were indeed a variety of other beliefs among the pagans of the ancient world, but none supposed anything at all like what was being proclaimed in the Gospel account regarding Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Christ’s resurrection was unique and different from anything else the ancients will have ever heard before. There were a great many things that the ancients believed happened to

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 42-43.



the dead, but resurrection was not one of those things. In the pagan world this was seen as an impossibility. The Jewish world believed it would eventually happen, but were confident that it had not already happened.⁹ They were certain that Jesus was not the Messiah.

What Paul and the other apostles were proclaiming was something amazing, something that most considered impossible and even those who did not consider it completely impossible were fully assured that it had not happened and that Jesus was not the Messiah. Paul in 5:5 uses the fact that the Spirit had been given as clear and powerful evidence to the contrary. The Spirit was a powerful assurance that what Paul, and the Scriptures, proclaimed (1 Corinthians 15:4) was in fact true. God had prepared those in Paul's audience for this very thing, this swallowing up that which was mortal with real "life." In these verses, Paul lays the foundation for what he will talk about in the following section. He lays out the basis for his confidence, his faith, and his hope.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 43-84.

Despite the fact that Paul sets up what is to follow it is likely still the case that what he has to say will surprise his audience. He describes his life in the body as in some way being “away from the Lord...” (verse 6). What he seems to be expressing to his audience is not that in this life he is in some way far from God (cf. Romans 8:9-10), but that as long as he is in this body, he is somehow not a full participant in the life that is promised by God through Jesus Christ. His confidence though comes not from something that he sees, but through “faith” (πίστεως). What Paul says here has been used by some to indicate that Paul is here advocating “blind faith,” that someone must not question any doctrine, any teaching, any church plans, etc. However, this is clearly not what Paul is advocating. He is clearly not an advocate of such “blind” faith. Instead Paul calls upon people to consider (cf. Galatians 3:1-2¹⁰), to judge for themselves (1 Corinthians 10:15; to “see things in front of your face!” 2 Corinthians 10:7).¹¹

Paul wanted people to see that Jesus is “Lord” and not Caesar. He wanted people to see that though Rome has great

¹⁰ **You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!** ² **The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?** NRSV.

¹¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 97.

power, economic might, military glory they were no match for the power of God. Jesus had raised this Nazarene that they had killed to life and it was in reality the case that the might of Rome was not a match for the power of God. The reality was that every person must appear before the “judgment seat” (τοῦ βήματος) of Christ (verse 10). Once again Paul indicates powerfully, and boldly that the perception that people (the Corinthians) have of the world has been wrong. He proclaims a new reality that is not seen with eyes, but is seen through faith, a faith that Paul confidently and boldly proclaims not simply based on something that has no real evidence, but something that is based on the evidence that he is laying out before the Corinthians. This evidence is based powerfully upon the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead and the fact that God has sent his Spirit as a guarantee of what is being proclaimed as true.

Paul also lays out the importance of what is done in the body. He will use this as a powerful prelude to what he is going say next. At verse 11, Paul builds upon what he has just said introducing this section with “therefore” (οὖν), that is his confidence that everyone will make an appearance before the

judgment seat of Jesus. Because of this he knows “the fear of the Lord.” This stands as a motivator for Paul and his companions, not merely that they fear punishment for themselves as if somehow they do what they do out of the fear of punishment for themselves. If this was their motivation this would indeed be paltry and petty. We must remember in all of this Paul is seeking to explain to his audience his motivation and his authority for his ministry. In all of this explanation Paul has expressed a great humility and concern for others. Here this humility and concern for others is no different. Paul and his companions are spurred on because they know that everyone will have to appear before Christ and so they proclaim to them the way of salvation so they are vindicated by God in this moment. He seeks the welfare of others and not his own.

Paul indicates in verse 11 that they are “well known to God,” while at the same time expressing that he has the desire to be well known to the consciences of his audience. In verse 12 he begins a fuller explanation of what he is trying to do here. He wants to remind his audience in a humble way of their ministry. Some appear to have boasted in their outward appearance and not upon

what was in their heart. Paul wants to focus on the heart. He wants them to understand what stands behind his behavior. If they (Paul and his companions) seem out of their minds this is due to God (verse 13). This may refer to ecstatic experiences, perhaps the expression of spiritual gifts. If that is the case then it makes perfect sense here. It seeks to explain what otherwise might appear to be some form of behavior that the Corinthians found to be unusual and even perhaps inappropriate.¹²

On the other hand, Paul says that if they are of “sound mind” it is for the sake of the Corinthians. At verse 14 Paul leaps into the motivation that in truth is above all others. “The love (ἀγάπη) of Christ urges” them on. This could be taken to be speaking of Paul’s love for Christ, or it could be speaking of Christ’s love for Paul. It is most likely the case that Paul here primarily means for his audience to understand Christ’s love for him. It is however likely the case that his love for Christ is also not far from his mind. There surely must be a link between the two in the heart of everyone who has truly experienced the love from Christ. The words of Paul here are surely words that call to everyone hearing

¹² Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 107-109.

them to turn from self-centeredness and to join themselves powerfully and wholeheartedly to what God is doing in the world through Christ. People have an inbuilt desire to be a part of something larger than themselves. As we look at the specific context in which Paul writes these words, he indicates his commitment to the service for which Christ called him, and not to “showing off” his great spirituality for self-serving reasons.¹³

At verse 14, it is almost as if Paul can contain his exuberance and excitement no longer as his words simply vibrate. He and his companions are absolutely convinced that Christ has died for all and therefore all have died. What does Paul mean by that? Those that are familiar with Romans know that Paul speaks there of those having been baptized into Christ as having been baptized into his death (Romans 6:3-8). In the passage here in 2 Corinthians, he writes it in terms of all having died. The next phrase, “the ones living no longer live for themselves” also lines up very well with the same text in Romans (“if we died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him” (Romans 6:8)).¹⁴ So often we have taken this phrase in Romans to an indicator of the life to

¹³ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁴ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 110-111.

come after this one, but that is certainly not the totality, or even Paul's primary meaning. For Paul there is the clear understanding that this new life has already begun for the Christian even now. It is neither meant to be taken as some form of abstraction, or simply as some future hope, or expectation. It is meant to be a pressing present reality that changes the way a person lives and breathes even now.

This new life is meant to be lived as if Christ is living in each person. At least one of the things that this means is that they will no longer live for themselves, but that life will now be lived for Christ. Christ lived his life for others, for their benefit, and for their welfare, and this is now the true calling of God's people as it has been the nature of God from the beginning. In each person accepting Jesus Christ as Lord, the essence of their life is to be like Christ, to lay down their life in obedience to God, and on behalf of those who never will deserve it as is the case with all of us. This reflects the mercy and love of God as the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was indeed the greatest, fullest, expression of the love of God. We as Christians are called to become participants in this great act of creating a new world with God. It is interesting that Paul links not

only the death of Jesus as being for others, but also his being “raised.” The perspective of God is to focus on the other, and as an image-bearer of God this is the call of Christ to those who would truly be his disciples.

Paul then at verse 16 moves on indicating that he has made his point and since he has made that point, it means there is a consequence. That consequence is that from now on no one is to be regarded from “a human point of view.” Once they even knew Christ from a human perspective. Paul now has a life that is shaped by this new perspective and nothing that he does and no one is seen from that old perspective. His entire value system has been transformed, his focus is no longer on that which was of value to himself, but what is of kingdom value, the kingdom of God. What would Christ value? In verse 17, Paul presses his point emphasizing that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Here we see this perspective that Paul has which sees the world very differently and recognizes that, in Christ, God has begun his transformation of the realm of this world into the heavenly realm. Paul can use the past completed tense here because if God says

something it is already a reality; because nothing, and no one can resist the power of God.

At verse 18, Paul links all of this back to the situation he is addressing indicating that all of this is done by God who has reconciled Christians to himself and has given Paul and his companions a part in this “ministry of reconciliation.” He points all of this toward Christ who was the means through which God was reconciling the world to himself. He did this not in a way that would necessarily be understood as what we would see as the way it should be done. We are in so many ways Greek in our thought processes. From a Jewish perspective all of creation was good and the gracious gift of a loving God. In the passages here, there are echoes of the Genesis creation narratives that lurk in the shadows. Without understanding this these passages make no sense. The Greeks, and others in the ancient world, did not hold this same perspective. God had prepared the Jewish people to carry this message forward in time to all the world. Here Paul speaks of reconciliation, and not counting trespasses (verse 19) in a manner that echoes this perspective that the creation of God was always

intended to be a blessing and good and was in fact polluted by mans's disobedience, arrogance, and self centeredness.¹⁵

God allows Paul and his companions to be a part of this great message and work of reconciliation (verse 19). He has entrusted them with this great and precious message. In verse 20, he describes himself, and his companions, as “ambassadors” (πρεσβεύομεν). This term for “ambassadors” is a noble and high office and is a title found in inscriptions in connection with the legates of the emperor. Those who served the emperor as legates were sent to represent the emperor and to deliver his message and not the ambassador's own words. When Paul claims this title he is claiming that the words that he delivers are not his own words but those of Christ, for who he acts as “ambassador.” God is making his appeal through them (Paul and his companions). For Paul there is both grace and challenge in the gospel of Christ. It is perhaps the case that Paul sees reconciliation as an ongoing process rather than just a single point in time. However one views this reconciliation, it is God who is

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 122.

effecting the reconciliation, but here Paul calls human beings to be the primary actors in His great drama.¹⁶

Paul gives all credit and glory to God who made Jesus Christ to be sin in order that we might be transformed into the actual righteousness of God. God has helped us and it is through him that we have this great hope of becoming the “righteousness of God.” It is through God that we can now become agents of God in this great new creation that God has begun with Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 117-118.

Synopsis

As Paul moves into chapter 5 he reflects on thoughts introduced in chapter 5. He powerfully and forcefully continues his reorientation of the world-view of his audience. Paul clearly sees this reorientation of perspective as of major importance to the people of Corinth. He transfers focus from the “earthly” to that which is “heavenly.” He contrasts these two perspectives in terms of that which is fragile and temporary with that which is not fragile and not temporary, but “eternal.” He also addresses what is certain to have been an issue for his audience as he talks about life after death and powerfully indicates that the promise of God, in Christ, is an immortal, eternal life. The issue of the Spirit acting as a guarantee comes to the fore.

At verse 6, Paul expresses his confidence that is generated by these facts, indicating that this confidence comes from faith and not just walking by human sight. He wants his audience to begin viewing the world through spiritual eyes rather than just with the physical, earthly eyes. He introduces the concept that all must appear before the “judgment seat of Christ” and answer for the things they have done in the flesh, “whether good or evil.”

Paul links this judgment with the concept of the “fear of the Lord” as part of the motivation for their efforts to persuade others. It is likely here intended to be Paul and his companions concern for others that is linked here to the aspect of fear, rather than fear for their own welfare. This would mesh well with what is said in verse 14 regarding being urged on by the “love of Christ.” Paul also introduces the idea of dying; both of Christ’s dying and of those that following Christ dying, likely to self and living for Christ rather than living for self. He then links these deaths and lives to the “raising up” of Christ.

In the last section, beginning at verse 16 Paul focuses once again on perspective and challenges his audience not to view anything from “a human point of view.” Here there is the challenge to see the things of the “new creation.” Those, in Christ, are challenged to recognize their roles as “ambassadors” for Christ bringing his words and his appeal to the world and being agents of reconciliation of the world to God. In all of this the transformative power of God is linking us powerfully and firmly into the righteousness of God. Paul works hard in this section to change perspectives from a Roman imperial perspective to an Empire of

God perspective and to recognize the differences and live in light
of those differences.

Questions

1. What are some things that you think of as being “earthly?”
2. How would you describe “eternity” to someone?
3. Compared to your house, what are some things that are different between it and a tent?
4. What are some things that you have truly longed for in your life? Why?
5. When you think of heaven what are some things that come to your mind? Why?
6. How would define life?
7. What do you think it means for Paul to say that God has given the “Spirit” as guarantee?
8. How would you define faith?
9. What is the difference between faith and sight?
10. What are some things that you only know for sure by faith?
11. What do you think it means when Paul says that we must all appear “before the judgment seat of Christ?” Why do you think it matters?

12. Why do you think Paul mentions people being judged by what is done in the body?
13. How were you persuaded that the Gospel was true?
14. How would you define love?
15. What does the word “die” mean to you?
16. How do you think Paul wants his audience to understand the term “die”?
17. What is a “human point of view?”
18. What does it mean for something to be “new?”
19. What do you think it means for someone to be an “ambassador of Christ?”
20. How would you define righteousness?
21. How does your perception of the world change your daily priorities?