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# Physical Failing in Ministry Faithfulness

## 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10<sup>5</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Wake up, brothers and sisters. This world, this creation is failing...

We are all getting older...

Many are growing sicker...

Some are becoming weaker...

So how do we not succumb to discouragement and hesitancy?

There are two issues that can affect us:

(4:16) Discouragement, depression,

(5:10) Hesitancy, fear, loss of confidence

Though Paul was outwardly wasting away (cf. vs 7-12) he did not lose heart, because inwardly he was being renewed day by day. And in any case, the outward troubles were but light and momentary compared with the weight and eternal character of the glory he was to experience as a result. Paul endured afflictions in the present visible world by keeping before him the glories of the yet unseen world. (NBC, p. 1196)

One commentator helpfully wrote, "In the second letter he writes representatively of all believers who face the prospect of death before the intervention of the new age. If, in his former letter, the emphasis was 'we shall all be changed', in the second letter it is 'If the earthly tent ... is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven' (5:1). In this letter, therefore, Paul is affirming that death in no way deprives the believer of the glory of the coming age." (Barrett, p. 94-95)

Paul's writing is personal and theological. He reaches out in this letter through the church Corinthian to us. Out of his own experience of frailty and affliction, he redirects our gaze and firmly sets our trust and hope on Christ and His unchanging promises.

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## Our Present Realities (4:16-18)

Our present situation is no always so promising and often is discouraging.

<sup>16</sup> So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

### ***Renewal in the Midst of Decline (v. 16)***

Paul words this in a way that speaks of inner renewal in the midst of outer decline. It is tempting to equate the outer solely with the body and the inner solely with the soul. But he is referring to more than just that. Through our body we are present in and connected to the Old Creation, now fallen, cursed and laden with sin. Through the Spirit who lives within us, we are connected and are a part of the New Creation. Since we are in Christ and the Spirit is in us, we are a new creation.

Paul then is reminding us of the ever-growing renewal of the presence of the New Creation in the midst of the Old. As our body is in decline, we are not only reminded that the old is passing, but we are actually experiencing its fading and failing decay.

### ***Preparation in the Midst of Affliction (v. 17-18a)***

There is a purpose for living in the Old in the light of the New. We believe by faith that God is at work. What God is doing in this world with all its troubles is to pile them up as treasures in the new. There is a present and future aspect to it. We believe it is happening now. But we will see the gems most clearly in that future day in that lovely land. This is always what is doing. Through death God brought about our salvation. Through resurrection God brought in the new creation. We live now in the both-and worlds. But the wonderful, amazing wisdom of God is actually using the afflictions of the old as the smelting pot, as furnace where bright and everlasting treasures are being forged.

### ***Declaration in the Midst of the Temporal (v. 18)***

The basic truth that we must hold fast to is what we often feel is so real is actually transient and temporary. So, we confess that the old creation is passing away and will not last even when we can touch, taste, see and feel it. And we confess that the new creation is sure, real and eternal even when we struggle to see or understand it.

We truly live, as C.S Lewis said, "In the shadowlands." To our minds this present existence is solid and real, whereas our coming existence seems shadowy and insubstantial. Paul teaches us that the reverse is true. The life which is to come is strong, permanent and real; the present life is lived among the shadows.

But I think that most of us don't believe this. We know it; but we don't believe it. How do we know that? Because we pile up and cling tenaciously to all that we can in this world. We save for it, worry about it, protect at all costs. We seem to treat our homes, our cars, our jobs as though they were the greatest treasures we have. Then hardship, afflictions, troubles, come and we don't handle it well. We are more "Corinthian" than we think. Oh, we may not be Charismatic, but we are deeply embedded in and committed to what will not and does not last and will eventually be utterly destroyed. And what will you have

left? I am not advocating vows of poverty and living as though this is a third world country. But I am calling you to repent of your worldly values, your heart treasures and stop living as though the shadowlands were the heavenly country.

Let's take just the issue of the body... How much time, effort, resources, money and energy do you put into your physical well-being. Do you have any sense of balance in investing in your spiritual well-being? But this is not even the base-line. Paul says that he is willing to burn himself out *for the spiritual welfare of others*.

You say, "That's ridiculous..." Well, not so much.

## **Our Future Guarantee (5:1-5)**

Listen to how Paul thinks about our present physical tent in the light of God's promises.

<sup>1</sup> For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. <sup>2</sup> For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup> if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. <sup>4</sup> For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup> He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

### ***Our Permanent Home (v. 1)***

We here have a tent that will be destroyed. But in the new heavens and new earth we will have a permanent residence. The building here is reference to our body, not a "room" to live in heaven. Here we have a tent. There we will have a permanent abode for the soul. In the future, we will not live as disembodied souls. Our souls will be living in a new body, a resurrected body, a glorified body. It will never decay, never fail, never get sick – it will be perfect in all ways.

One writer reminds us, "The emphasis of the verse is, ... to contrast the inferior, impermanent, present mode of existence (literally 'our earthly tent-house') with the superior, permanent mode of our coming existence (a building from God, an eternal house in heaven)." (Barrett, p. 94)

### ***Our Painful Longings (v. 2-4)***

But here, now, in this tent, we go through troubles and afflictions. Our present afflictions in the body fuel our longing for our future body. We are not merely longing to be rid of this body, this tent. Our longing is for the new body, the new home. Otherwise we are longing to be "homeless". Or as Paul puts it a bit more powerfully, unclothed.

Like other texts on the subject, this text raises the question, "What is the state of a believer between physical death and the return of Christ?" No one in the New Testament tells us definitively. But we do know certain things that help us:

When we die we will immediately be in the Lord's presence.

We appear asleep to those here. This is constant in the New Testament.

We may have some "form" in which our immaterial part will live until Jesus comes.

When Jesus comes, we will receive our glorified bodies through our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:35-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

It is difficult, therefore, to avoid holding some theory of what is called the 'intermediate state' of existence between death and the general resurrection. For Paul, death meant 'gain' which he explains as 'to depart and be with Christ'. The passage under review suggests the immediate possession of 'a building from God' when the 'tent' is destroyed (verse 1). To be away from the body is to be at home, at once, with the Lord (verse 8).

We have no information about the bodily form of the believer between his death and the resurrection of the body. The effect of what Paul writes, however, is to encourage a deep sense of security about our future even if we are unable to develop a detailed description of the 'intermediate state'. On the one hand Paul assures the Colossians that their 'life is hid with Christ in God' and that 'when Christ ... appears'

And so we long for the new body that God has prepared for us and that we will be receive at His coming. What if this is not the case for us? What if we do not have that longing?

Are we too comfortable in this world?

Have we no afflictions or sicknesses to discomfit us?

Are we too engaged with the maintenance of this body?

### ***Our Settled Guarantee (v. 5)***

<sup>5</sup> He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

God has prepared us to receive this new body. How has God done that?

He has redeemed us. Our salvation is not just of our inner persons, our souls. We, the whole of us, the totality of us, have been saved. This is what qualifies us to receive our new creation, glorified body.

He gave us the Holy Spirit. He is the down payment in us. He belongs to the new covenant age and the new creation. The Holy Spirit guarantees us that we will receive our new creation, glorified body.

He takes us through afflictions and decline. This is a part of the preparation for the new. God shows us in our own experience the decay and decline of the old creation. This is what inclines us to receive our new creation, glorified body.

He takes us through death. For most Christians, this is the final step of preparation. Most Christians will die. Some will be caught directly to Jesus when He comes. But most of us should expect and should be prepared for death. Death is the definitive end of the old creation for us. This is what transports us into the final phase and reception of our new creation, glorified body.

The Spirit within us causes deep longings for our future experience. Through the Spirit we think about and imagine in faith what that day will be like. The Spirit gives us a present sense of that future reality. But we do not have it fully yet. That will come when the new age is fulfilled in the new heavens and new earth. We will one day enter into that fullness. The presence of the Spirit in our life guarantees it. Even in all the present decline that makes that seem so far away.

## Our Present Aims (5:6-10)

What does this mean to us living in this world now?

<sup>6</sup> So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, <sup>7</sup> for we walk by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup> Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup> So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

### ***To Live Accepting our State (v. 6-8)***

Since this is the case, we will face the future here and there with courage. Paul faced significant opposition in the church at Corinth. He was physically broken down. He carried the weight of the churches and the mission God gave Him. But because He, by faith, believed what he taught, he faced it all with courage. No, we are not Apostles. But we have our own level of life difficulty, physical challenges, ministry weights... do our convictions fuel courage to carry on?

Barrett summarizes it this way, "Although the coming age is present with us now in the 'down payment of the Spirit' (verse 5), given to us by God, our life in the present is to be marked by faith not by sight (verse 7). In the new age, we shall 'see' and be with the Lord, but in the present age we relate to him by faith exercised in response to the gospel." (Barrett, p.95)

I love Paul's "both-and". We have courage to live and serve in the body now. And we would rather be with the Lord receiving the final fullness of His promises. We affirm both. This is how we live by faith now. Brothers and sisters, is this what your life looks like? Do you sort of nod, agree that this is amazing and a worthy aspiration? What then? How does that affect all of your life?

### ***To Live Pleasing to God (v. 9)***

Here is what it means. We make it our aim in everything to be pleasing to God. This is not a "goal" like in business where you hope to hit and can adjust it when you don't. No, this is an "aim". This taking up the bow of faith and the arrow of your life and you aim it towards pleasing God. Then your life's trajectory on its flight actually is pleasing to God.

### ***To Live Anticipating Rewards (v. 10)***

We want to be pleasing to God because our present choices will have future consequences. We will stand before the Lord. We will receive or lose rewards based on what we did in this life. Your attitudes, your aims, your actions matter.

What does Paul mean to receive what we have done in the body, whether good or evil? Or we going to face future punishment as Christians?

First, the language here is not that of the courtroom. Paul is not talking about our being punished for sins. That has been dealt with at the cross. The punishment for all our sins has been settled.

What, then, is this talking about? The language here is from the Olympics. The Greek word for "judgment seat" is *Bema*. A Bema seat was the panel of judges who gave out the

rewards for successful completion and winning of an athletic event. The crowns and medals were awarded only to those who competed according to the rules. If the rules were broken, then the reward was forfeited. This is what Paul has in mind. We aim to be pleasing to the Lord because one day we will stand before him to receive our rewards. We will receive or forfeit those rewards depending on what we did. While there will be no legal punishment for sin, there will certainly be a loss of rewards.

Now, this text does not say that so clearly. However, in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, Paul, using the same analogy, is very clear this is what will happen. This was in the first letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and is the background for what he writes here.

<sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup> each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. <sup>14</sup> If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Also, notice what Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:6–8 in regards to his own expectation when standing before the Lord.

<sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Finally, John warns his readers in 2 John 8 to be careful.

<sup>8</sup> Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what [you] we have worked for, but may win a full reward.

So, we want to be pleasing to the Lord in this old creation in view of His rewards to us in the day of the fulfillment of the new creation.

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## Reflect and Respond

Three simple calls to you from this text.

Live now in the light of the new age...

Aim to be pleasing to God in all facets of your life...

Faithfully serve in the midst of difficulty and decline until death...