

Dying to Live, Living to Die: Part 1

2 Corinthians 5:6–10

Introduction

What do you think of when you hear the word, “Eschatology”? Some of you think, “Where’s the dictionary?” “Eschatology” comes from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means “last,” and the word *logos*, which refers to the study of something. So “eschatology” just means “the study of the last things.” What do you think of when you think of “the last things,” or “the end times,” or, we might say, “the doctrine of the future”?

For some of us, the notion of eschatology reminds us of those who seem to have an unhealthy obsession with the events of the end times. These are the people who are intrigued by the “date-setters”—sensationalist false teachers who believe they’ve decoded some mystery in the Bible and have discovered the precise date of Christ’s return. The Harold Campings, and the John Hagees, and their followers. Or, if they don’t go that far, these are the people who some call “newspaper exegetes.” These are the people who are constantly trying to read current events into the prophetic portions of Scripture. Though the New Testament reveals that we entered into the “last days” at Christ’s resurrection in the first century, these folks read a disturbing news story and declare that *now* we must be living in the last days. For some of us, “eschatology” brings these kinds of unpleasant thoughts to mind.

And perhaps as an overreaction to that, for others of us, eschatology just seems like a series of arcane, impractical speculations on things that Scripture hasn’t told us about. Some of you hear about debates between premillennialists, postmillennialists, and amillennialists—between pretribulationists, posttribulationists, and midtribulationists; between futurists, historicists, preterists, and idealists; you have charts and timelines, the intermediate state versus the eternal state, spirits versus bodies; the sheep and the goats judgment, the judgment seat of Christ, the Great White Throne Judgment—and you think eschatology is just a series of thought experiments for professors and theologians who have nothing better to do than speculate about what they can’t really ever know. And even if you were more sympathetic than that, if you heard we were going to do a sermon series on eschatology, you might be *interested*—you might be intrigued to see what the Bible says about the future—but I bet at least some of you would be tempted to think, “I wish we would study something *practical*.” For many of us, when we hear, “Eschatology,” we don’t think, “Now here’s something that is going to have a practical effect on my daily life!”

And yet in 2 Corinthians, we’ve been seeing that just the opposite is true. It is precisely the Apostle Paul’s doctrine of eschatology that strengthens him, and that drives him to persevere

through the difficulties and the opposition that he faces in his ministry. As we've listened to the Apostle Paul throughout this letter to the Corinthians, we've learned—over and over again—that true Christian ministry is marked by immense suffering. So far from disqualifying him from ministry, as the false apostles were accusing him, Paul's weaknesses, and infirmities, and conflicts, and afflictions are precisely what proved that he was a true servant of Christ. Because just as Christ's ministry was marked by weakness, and indignity, and shame, and suffering, so also is Christ's messenger's ministry marked by the same weakness.

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, chapter 4 verse 7. The minister is nothing but the fragile, breakable, replaceable, unimpressive clay pot that holds the treasure of the Gospel, and displays its glory by contrast. He says in verses 8 and 9: We are in all things afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. Verse 10: We are "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus." "Our lives look like the death of Jesus! When you look at us you can see the vestiges of His suffering! And in verse 11, "For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake." And we have become very well-acquainted with those lists of his sufferings throughout this letter. Chapter 6 verses 4 and 5, he speaks of "afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments," and more. In chapter 11 verses 23 and following he speaks of stonings, shipwrecks, robbers, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and exposure.

And yet! He says in chapter 4 verse 1: "We do not lose heart"! And in chapter 4 verse 16, "Therefore we do not lose heart"! And as we come to chapter 5 verse 6 today we see, "Therefore, being always of good courage"! In the face of all the debilitating discouragements of ministry, Paul has found a source of strength! Paul has discovered the secret of pressing on in joyful, enduring ministry even in the midst of affliction!

And that source of strength is multi-faceted, but what we've been seeing in chapters 4 and 5 most clearly is that Paul's endurance is fueled by his eschatology! In chapter 4 verse 13, he says, "We go on boldly preaching the Gospel in the face of hostility and even physical opposition," verse 14, "*knowing*," or "because we know that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus." Verse 16: "We do not lose heart," why? Chapter 5 verse 1: "*For we know* that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Paul's sure and confident hope that, to use the words of Job, even after his skin is destroyed, yet in his flesh he shall see God, is what causes him not to lose heart. Even if his ministry for Christ's sake should cause him to lose his very life, the certain hope of life on the new earth in his resurrection body frees him to wear this tent of a body out in service to Christ and His Church! Paul derives strength to persevere in difficult, life-sacrificing ministry from his theology of the last things!

And inasmuch as Paul has been the pattern for faithful Christian ministry, we ought to do the same as we seek to be faithful ministers of the Gospel. Our theology must be brought to bear on

our lives and our ministries. The certain truth of God’s revelation given to us in Scripture is designed to be the foundation upon which we live for Him and serve His people. And that’s true for all theology, but it’s especially true of our eschatology. This doctrine that is so often thought to be the most impractical is presented in Scripture as immensely practical—giving comfort and strength to carry out the ministry that God has given us to do.

And so this morning we’re going to continue in our study of eschatology—especially as it relates to strengthening us for the joyful, enduring *ministry* in the midst of affliction to which our God has called each one of us. Our text for this morning is 2 Corinthians 5, verses 6 to 10, but for the sake of the context we’ll read verses 1 to 10. “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, ³inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. ⁵Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. ⁶Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight—⁸we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. ⁹Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

In his ninth resolution, Jonathan Edwards wrote, “Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.” In these verses, Paul continues to reflect on his eschatology, that is, on what awaits him—and all believers—when we pass from this life to the next. And his understanding of these things bears heavily on how he lives and ministers in the present. So, continuing from last week, we’re going to examine **three** more **elements** of the Christian minister’s view of life and death. And as we understand what God has given us in this portion of His Word, my prayer is that we, like Paul, will be fueled by our eschatology to lay down our lives in sacrificial ministry to Christ and His Church.

I. The Minister’s Settled Preference (vv.6–8)

First, note the minister’s settled preference. Look at verses 6 through 8. Paul writes, “Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

Now, this verse begins with the word “Therefore,” and that points us back to Paul’s previous thoughts in verses 1 to 5. There, Paul celebrated the truth that even if his earthly tent was torn down—even the constant opposition, conflict, and persecution that results from his ministry results in losing his life—he was absolutely certain that God would one day raise him from the dead in a glorified body. And he could be that certain because God Himself had given him a pledge—an earnest—the down payment of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in his heart, guaranteeing that God will one day deliver all the fullness of Paul’s heavenly inheritance. And Paul says that the consequence of that Spirit-guaranteed assurance of a resurrection body is “good courage.” Verse 6: “Therefore, being always of good courage.” And then again in verse 8: “We are of good courage, I say.” The word means to be boldly and confidently courageous. He could face *any* circumstance—whether the beatings and stonings and imprisonments that would come as a result of preaching the Gospel to the lost, or the distrust and the false accusations and the heartache of broken relationships that would come as a result of ministering to the church—he could face it all with courage and confidence.

And friend, so can you. There is *so* much strength and courage to be drawn from the magnificent reality that the Holy Spirit of God Himself is dwelling in you, fighting sin in you, warring against the flesh in you, and who will one day Himself raise your mortal body from the dead into conformity with the body of Christ’s glory, which body the Spirit also raised! As long as that Spirit dwells in you, and guides you and leads you into holiness, and empowers you for ministry, you need never despair in the midst of your labors. You can be always of good courage. One commentator said, “The good courage that animates the [believers] is as permanent and serene as the Spirit dwelling within” (Hughes, 175). The Father’s pledge of the Spirit in our hearts is cause for fearless sacrificial ministry.

But he goes on. That bold confidence for ministry even in the face of death comes not only from the pledge of the Holy Spirit, but also from the promise of increased fellowship with Christ in death. He says, “We’re of good courage, *knowing*”—and there we are again. Once again Paul’s theology—his knowledge of divinely-revealed truth is grounding and buttressing his courage for ministry—“We’re of good courage, *knowing* that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” Now, his argument is a little hard to follow because he interrupts himself with that parenthetical comment in verse 7, but if you read verses 6 and 8 together without the interruption, you see that it’s a glorious argument.

First, let’s just observe precisely what he’s saying, because it’s just ridiculous how many branches of so-called Christian theology get this wrong. This verse decisively teaches that when a believer in Jesus dies, he immediately goes into the presence of Christ in heaven. Look at it: At home in the body? Absent from the Lord. Absent from the body? At home with the Lord. There’s no in-between state when you’re absent both from the body *and* the Lord. This deals the

death blow to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which teaches that after death the believer has to endure additional punishment for his sins—being purified for what may very well be thousands of years—so he might eventually be fit to enter into Christ’s presence in heaven. This text also deals the death blow to the doctrine of “soul sleep,” held to famously by the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other cults. This is the teaching that, when a Christian dies, he enters into a state of complete unconsciousness—as if he’s sleeping—until the Second Coming of Christ. Now, it’s true that the New Testament describes death for the Christian with the metaphor of “sleep” (e.g., 1 Thess 4:13). But that’s simply a figurative way of referring to the rest that a believer enjoys when he’s ceased from the struggles of this life. There’s simply no way around it: to be absent from the body in death is to be present with the Lord Jesus in heaven.

So now that we’ve understood what he’s said, let’s understand how the statement functions in the flow of Paul’s argument. Paul is saying, “I can be fearless and courageous even in the face of life-threatening opposition to my ministry because as long as I’m alive in this body, I’m away from the Lord Jesus. As long as I’m in *this* body, I’m not in Christ’s immediate presence in heaven, worshipping Him face-to-face with the saints and angels. But the thing is: I much prefer to be there with Him than here in my body! So, the very worst they can do to me is take my life. But for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain! Christ is more satisfying to me than all that life can offer and all that death can take! So if I leave it all on the field—if I spend and am expended for the sake of Christ—if they kill me, they do nothing but chase me right to heaven! They do nothing but fast-track me to my greatest joy and happiness: unhindered, sin-free, face-to-face communion with my dear Savior!”

Dear GraceLife, so far from allowing the fear of death to hinder you from sacrificial, life-laid-down ministry in Christ’s name, the prospect of death ought to entice you to that kind of ministry! Paul says, “Not only am I not fearing death—not only am I not allowing the potential of death to drive me to despair and to abandon as a coward the ministry Christ has called me to—my **settled preference** is to be absent from this body and to go and be with Christ! So Charles Hodge summarizes it by saying, “Death is not an object of dread, but of desire” (499).

You say, “Really, Mike? We ought to *desire* our death? Isn’t that a little morbid?” But would you accuse the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Himself as he writes this, of being morbid? He says, in verse 8, we “*prefer* rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord!” And so absolutely! You ought to be able to say with Paul in Philippians 1:23, that you are possessed with earnest desire—the intense longing and yearning of from the bottom of your heart—to depart from this life “and be with Christ, for that is *very much better!*” In fact, John Calvin wrote, “Let us consider this settled, that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection” (*Institutes*, 3.9.5).

How are you doing with that? Do you so desire Christ—is He the heaven of heavens to you—such that the prospect of death brings joy and even excitement? Have you been able to wean your affections off of the fading pleasures of this world, so that you can truly say, “To die is gain! I can lose everything I have in this life and call it *gain*, because I will gain Christ!”? Or have you gripped this world so tightly that, rather than a pilgrim in exile in a foreign land, you’ve gotten so comfortable and complacent that this world feels like your home? That when confronted with the loss of all that this life *has* given you and *can* give you, you backwardly cling to it, and say, “I have the earnest desire to stay in this life away from Christ, for to me, that is very much better”?

Dear friends, I tell you that one sight of Christ in His exalted glory in heaven will absolutely dwarf the most magnificent glory of the very best this life has to offer! And I need to share Jonathan Edwards with you on this subject. I don’t know of anyone who has captured the glory of heaven more beautifully than he did. In a sermon called, “The True Christian’s Life a Journey Towards Heaven,” he wrote, “God is the highest good of the reasonable creature. The enjoyment of him is our proper happiness, and is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here: better than fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of any or all earthly friends. These are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean. Therefore, it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven” (*WJE*, 17:437–38).

And then, in the sermon he delivered at David Brainerd’s funeral, preaching on our very verse, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Edwards wrote, “O how infinitely great will the privilege and happiness of such be, who at that time shall go to be with Christ in his glory.” It is “the privilege of being with Christ in heaven, where he sits on the right hand of God, in the glory of the King and God of the angels, and of the whole universe, shining forth as the great light, the bright sun of that world of glory, there to dwell in the full, constant, and everlasting view of his beauty and brightness, there most freely and intimately to converse with him, and fully to enjoy his love, as his friends and spouse, there to have fellowship with him in the infinite pleasure and joy he has in the enjoyment of his Father, there to sit with him on his throne, and reign with him in the possession of all things, and partake with him in the joy and glory of his victory over his enemies, and the advancement of his in the world, and to join with him in joyful songs of praise, to his Father and their Father, to his God and their God, forever and ever” (*WJE*, 25:243–44).

Dear brothers and sisters, do you prefer Him? Is it your **settled preference** to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord? Then I charge you, in the face of difficult, dangerous, sacrificial ministry, do not lose heart! Don’t abandon your ministry for the sake of comfort or safety! Be of good courage! Be fearless in the face of opposition! And let that fearlessness—that

invincibility that **prefers** death to life—galvanize you to life-laid-down, give-your-life-away ministry to the body of Christ!

Now you say, “Does it all have to wait for heaven? Is there any way that I can behold Christ’s glory now?” And that leads me to make a few comments on the parenthetical statement that we skipped over in verse 7. Paul says, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” Now, the reason Paul includes this parenthetical comment is to anticipate and answer a potential misunderstanding from what he said in verse 6. To say that as long as we are in the body we are absent from the Lord does not mean that there is no fellowship with Christ to be had in the present body. Certain Greek philosophers in Paul’s day, called Gnostics, taught that bodily existence was an impediment to true spirituality. The body was sinful, and fleshly, and tempted man’s base instincts. And so it was regarded with contempt—nothing more than a prison from which our souls long to escape. But Paul was no Gnostic. The whole previous paragraph is written in defense of an eternal *bodily* existence! So Paul doesn’t mean to say that, since to be at home in the body is to be absent from the Lord, that there is absolutely no communion with Christ until we’re freed from the prisons of our bodies. No, the only sense in which we are “absent from the Lord” now is simply that we do not physically see Him face-to-face like we will in heaven. In this age, we do not walk by physical sight.

But we do see Him. The glory which we do not yet behold with our physical eyes, we do presently behold with the spiritual sight of faith. In fact, John Owen said, “No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by *sight* hereafter, who doth not in some measure behold it by *faith* here in this world” (*Glory of Christ*, 1:288). Faith is the spiritual sight by which “we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.” What we cannot see with our physical eyes, we behold with our spiritual eyes—the eyes of faith. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That word “conviction” is the word *elengchos* in the Greek. It comes from the verb *elengcho*, which means to *expose*, to *reveal*, to *bring to light* (BDAG). The author of Hebrews says that faith is the *exposing*, the *revelation* of that which is not seen. That’s why, in Hebrews 11:27, it says that Moses left Egypt by faith, as seeing Him who is unseen. Faith is the spiritual sight by which that which is naturally unseen and invisible becomes perceptible to the eyes of the soul.

And so when Paul says, “We walk by faith, not by sight,” he doesn’t mean to diametrically oppose faith and knowledge—as if faith is just some blind leap in the dark that takes over when knowledge runs out. The contrast is not between sight and no-sight. The contrast is between *physical* sight and *spiritual* sight. Though we may be absent from the Lord while we are at home in the body, it does not mean that there is no fellowship with Him now. In this age, the true Christian walks not by the physical sight of our natural eyes, but by the spiritual sight of faith. The glory of Christ that we will lay our eyes on in heaven—that communion that we long for, that fellowship that is our **settled preference** above all that this life can offer—we may behold

that very same glory now through the spiritual sight of faith. And, as Paul says in that precious verse, 2 Corinthians 3:18, “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.” If what will make heaven *heaven* for us is to finally behold the glory of Christ—if, as Owen said, “The immediate sight of Christ is that which all the saints of God in this life do breathe and pant after”—then we ought to be chiefly occupied with beholding the glory of Christ by faith now, in any measure that He is revealed. Dear GraceLife, make it your daily, your hourly, your moment-by-moment task, to, with the eyes of faith, fix the gaze of your spiritual sight on the glory of Jesus.

II. The Minister’s Supreme Ambition (v. 9)

Well, we have seen that the minister’s settled preference is to depart from this life and be with Christ in heaven. **Secondly**, I’d like to draw your attention to **the minister’s supreme ambition**. And we see that in verse 9. Paul writes, “Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.”

The relationship between this verse and the previous is instructive. “*Therefore* we also have as our ambition.” “Therefore” signals that this is a consequence of the preceding truth. So what is the necessary consequence of having the settled preference to die and be with Christ? What is the necessary consequence of breathing and panting after the glory of Christ—longing for unhindered, sin-free, face-to-face communion with Jesus? If the open enjoyment of Christ’s glory is the great hope of your life in the *future*, then that means your **supreme ambition** will be to be pleasing to Him in the *present*.

This phrase, “We also have as our ambition,” speaks to the intensity of Paul’s desire to please Christ above all else. It is his **consuming ambition**—the driving force behind all he does. This is what animates him, what drives him, what fuels him. Usually, the concept of ambition has a negative connotation. An ambitious man is someone who is wholly preoccupied with self-promotion and self-glory. A young man enters the corporate world with designs of running the company one day. This is his prize, and he shapes his entire life to lay hold of it. His ambition is to climb the corporate ladder straight to the top, no matter who he has to *step* on to get there. A politician has the ambition of winning the election to public office. No matter what happens, he is consumed with this goal. He strategizes and schemes and conspires as to how he can put himself forward, undermine his opponents, and portray himself in the best light, so that he can win the favor of the electorate. A teenage boy has the ambition of playing professional baseball, and he shapes his entire childhood around receiving the proper training and coaching, putting in the necessary workouts, watching his diet, getting good grades to go to a Division 1 university—he eats, sleeps, and breathes baseball, all so he can wear that uniform and play in front of thousands of fans.

And with that same all-consuming passion (albeit expressed positively rather than negatively), the Apostle Paul says, My **supreme ambition** is to always be pleasing to Christ. Charles Hodge comments, “As ambitious men desire and strive after fame, so Christians long and labor to be acceptable to Christ. Love to him, the desire to please him, and to be pleasing to him, animates their hearts and governs their lives, and makes them do and suffer what heroes do for glory” (500).

Pleasing the Lord Jesus is the sum and substance of the Christian life. It absolutely permeates the entire New Testament. In Romans 12:1, after all that great Gospel-theology that has come in the first 11 chapters of the Book of Romans, the immediate consequence of that theology is Paul’s exhortation for the church to be pleasing to God. “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, **acceptable** [or **pleasing**] to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” And what he prescribes *to* the church, he prays *for* the church. In Colossians 1:9–10, he says, “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, **to please Him in all respects**, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, he says that the goal of apostolic instruction is to teach them “how you ought to walk and **please God**.” In Ephesians 5:8–10, he says that what characterizes the “children of Light” is that they “try to learn what is **pleasing** to the Lord.” And of course, this is only following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Himself, who devoted His entire life to pleasing the Father. In John 8:29 He says, “And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are **pleasing** to Him.” The all-consuming, driving passion of the Christian’s life is to be pleasing to Christ.

And I love this verse, because it tells us that we who talk the talk also need to walk the walk! It simply cannot be that we fix our hope upon communion with Christ in heaven as our greatest and ultimate desire, and at the same time fail to pursue communion with Christ in *this* life along the path of obedience. Again, Charles Hodge puts it helpfully. He writes, “Longing after communion with [Christ] produces the desire and secures the effort to be found **acceptable** [or **pleasing**] to Him. ‘Those who have this hope purify themselves as he is pure,’ 1 John 3:3. It is impossible that those who regard the presence of Christ, or being with him, as heaven, should not desire and labor to be pleasing to him, by living in obedience to his commandments” (500).

What this text is teaching us is that the one who claims to love Christ and desire fellowship with Him in heaven will, of absolute necessity, be consumed with *sanctification*—with pressing on to make progress in holiness. Like that young businessman with his sights set on the corner office, like the politician who devotes himself to planning and strategizing to achieve his goal, like the athlete who shapes his entire life in order to lay hold of glory for himself, the Christian plans, and strategizes, and shapes his entire life around bringing glory to Christ and enjoying His favor.

We want nothing more than to bring a smile to His face and hear, “Well done, good and faithful slave,” and so we are serious about keeping watch over our hearts; we are serious about praying so that we do not enter into temptation; we are serious about fighting temptation with the sword of the Spirit; and, when we discover sin in ourselves, we are serious about summoning a holy violence against our sins, engaging in the work of mortification—of putting to death the deeds of the flesh, and putting on in their place the new self that has been recreated in Christ, and walking in holiness and righteousness, bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Talk about a practical eschatology! Everything in Paul’s life is driven by his future!

Owen is right when he says, “No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by sight hereafter, who doth not in some measure behold it by faith here in this world.” But if we behold Christ’s glory with the eye of faith, 2 Corinthians 3:18, we will necessarily be sanctified—transformed into the image of His glory, conformed into the image of Christlikeness. Which means that you ought not to deceive yourselves. You who would profess great love to Christ, and who would proclaim to want nothing more than to enjoy His glory in heaven, and yet have no taste for obedience, and make no progress in personal holiness, and have no heart to give your life away in the service of the church in ministry, you may talk a big game, but you’re no true lover of Christ. Those who long to behold His glory by sight in heaven, do behold it now by faith, and are thereby transformed from one degree of glory to the next.

The true Christian’s **supreme ambition** is to be pleasing to Christ. Now, Paul is not speaking here of a mercenary transaction. We’re not trying to *earn* Christ’s favor by accumulating some level of merit. No, by virtue of Christ’s own work on the cross—by virtue of His own righteousness that is counted to be ours through faith alone—we already have His favor. We already have all the merit we need to be found acceptable before God. The **supreme ambition** of the Christian is not to earn righteousness, but, as one who has been freely given all righteousness in Christ, our great desire is to bless the heart of our beloved Savior who *is* all righteousness to us. The true believer wants nothing more than to bring a smile to the face of Christ—to be a cause of joy and delight in His heart—by doing the things that are pleasing to Him, by following after Him in faithful obedience.

Reflecting on this, Alexander MacLaren writes, “Now such an aim as this implies a very wonderful conception of Jesus Christ’s present relations to us. It is a truth that we may minister to His joy. It is a truth that just as really as you mothers are glad when you hear from a far-off land that your boy is doing well, and getting on, so Jesus Christ’s heart fills with gladness when He sees you and me walking in the paths in which He would have us go. . . . So this strange, sweet, tender, and powerful thought is a piece of plain prose, that Christ is glad when you and I are good.” Just like a son is eager to please his father—not in order that he may become his father’s son, but precisely because he already is his father’s son, and loves him, and delights in the blessings of his relationship with his father—so the true Christian is eager to please Christ—

to be instrumental in ministering to His joy and happiness. It's like a husband, who is eager to please the wife he loves, and buys her a thoughtful gift that he knows she'll love. He doesn't buy the gift to purchase her affection for him; he doesn't buy her a gift so she won't be mad at him anymore. No, he simply delights in her happiness; he wants to bring a smile to her face; his joy is complete in her joy; and so out of the overflow of his love for his wife, he acts to please her. So also does the true Christian love Christ; his joy is complete in Christ's joy; he wants nothing more than to bring a smile to Christ's face and to bring joy to His heart.

Friends, think of it! What a privilege we have to bring joy to that heart that was pierced through with the sword of God's wrath for us, precisely because we could bring no pleasure to God in ourselves! What a privilege to be able to bring joy to the heart of the One who has filled our hearts with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet 1:8)! What an unspeakable privilege to delight the heart of the One who by simply revealing the glory of His own face has birthed in us ten thousand delights! What a powerful motive for sanctification! Dear GraceLife, make it your **supreme ambition** to be pleasing to Christ!

You say, "But isn't the idea of our being pleasing to Christ because of our obedience—isn't that legalistic? Isn't that man-centered, to say that Christ delights in *us*? Wouldn't that, then, make our sanctification a ground for boasting? Isn't it prideful to say that sinners like us—we who have nothing in ourselves that can properly be called "pleasing"—could by any stretch of the imagination please the King of Glory, whose name is Holiness? No, not at all. Because by God's great grace, the holiness that pleases Christ is *His own* holiness! The beauty of holiness in which Christ delights is not *my* holiness, but *His* holiness, traced upon my soul by the pen of the Spirit's sanctifying grace! Friends, what is our holiness but Christlikeness? What is sanctification but being progressively conformed into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29)? You see, as the Spirit reveals the glory of Christ to us, He thereby transforms us more and more into His own image and likeness. We simply reflect His own glory—His own beauty, His own loveliness—back *to* Him! And so far from being man-centered, the pursuit of holiness for the sake of being pleasing to Christ is God-centered, because it seeks to please Christ with no other glory than His own.

Dear people, what an astounding work God has accomplished in His Son! It is one thing that sinners like you and me—we who so severely disfigured the image of God in ourselves, we who defaced the beauty of God with the ugliness and pollution of sin—that we could be counted righteous in Christ through faith in His atoning death! It is the marvel of heaven that we who are sinful in ourselves should justly be declared righteous! But then to take those justified sinners and actually work righteousness in us!—to not only remove our guilt, but to remove our corruption—what a mighty Gospel, what a mighty Savior it must be who accomplishes that work!

Dear people, if any of you here this morning are outside of Christ, I call you to run to that mighty Savior at once! In yourself you are sinful. In yourself you have nothing pleasing, nothing commendable to offer to God. While you remain in your sins you have nothing to look forward to at the end of this life—no blessed reunion with the ravishing beauty of Jesus in heaven, no resurrection body fit for sin-free communion with Him, but only, as Hebrews says, a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume God’s enemies (Heb 10:27). Dear friend, that is what your sins deserve! And yet Christ has borne the sins of His people! On the cross, He has taken upon Himself the judgment, and the fury, and the wrath which your sins deserve! And because He died and rose again, you also may be united to Him by faith, and die with Him to the penalty and power of sin, and be raised with Him unto newness of life! Own your guilt. Stop making excuses. Stop trying to explain your sins away. Confess your sins to Him, and *wash* them away in the blood of the spotless Lamb of God. Turn from all of your “good works” by which you would seek to earn forgiveness and purchase divine favor. And trust in Christ’s work alone for forgiveness and for cleansing.

III. The Minister’s Sobering Evaluation (v. 10)

Well, we’ve seen, first, that the minister’s settled preference is to prefer the next life to this one—to happily renounce all that this life has to offer for the gain of seeing Christ face-to-face in heaven. And we’ve seen, secondly, that the minister’s supreme ambition is to be pleasing to Christ in all we do. There’s a **third element** of the Christian’s view of life and death that deserves our attention, but which we’ll have to save for next week.

But just by way of introduction, I’ll give it to you. The minister’s settled preference, the minister’s supreme ambition, and **thirdly, the minister’s sobering evaluation**. And we see that in verse 10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

Our desire to please Christ is motivated by a love for Him that longs to be with Him and longs to bring a smile to His face. But here we learn that it is also motivated by the desire to obtain a favorable evaluation from the Lord when we stand before Him in judgment. Be with us next week as we consider the minister’s sobering evaluation.