

## **Our Longing and Our Hope (2 Corinthians 5:1-5)**

Sunday, April 5, 2020

Good morning! Thank you for joining us online for worship on this Palm Sunday. My name is Sam Creagar, and I am the Outreach Pastor here at Faith E Free.

For the past few weeks we have been taking a look at a couple of chapters from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Christians living in the city of Corinth.

We've seen that Paul wrote to these brothers and sisters in Christ in order to help them understand the role of hardship, suffering, and trials in this life. The followers of Jesus in the first century experienced everything from marginalization and persecution for their beliefs, to struggling to survive as diseases ravaged their own neighborhoods, towns, and cities.

Yet no matter how bad the world around them seemed to be, Paul's encouragement and instruction remained the same: keep the faith. Keep believing in Jesus, and rest assured that any trouble you encounter in this life will not compare to the wonder and the glory that every Christian can expect to experience when they finally enter into the full presence of God.

All the humility, service, reverence, respect that hardship cultivates in this life blossoms into something indescribably beautiful in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And in the passage we'll be reading this morning, 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, Paul tries to share just a small but wondrous truth about the nature of eternal life for those who love God. He moves back and forth, trying to balance between what we know from personal experience about this earthly life, and what we hope for about the life that will continue after our death, and after the return of Christ.

The difficulty in understanding this passage is that the Apostle Paul uses a complex series of images and metaphors, in rapid succession, to describe something that is far beyond anyone's knowledge or experience.

It can be...tricky, and even exhausting, to keep up and keep track of Paul's argument in these few verses. (Trust me.) It took me several days and several commentaries to finally have an "ah-ha!" moment of understanding. But when I did, the time and effort were so, so worth it.

It was a little bit like when you're trying to put together a new piece of furniture, but at first you can't seem to make heads or tails of the instructions. You flip back and forth between what seems like way too many pages for something as basic as a table or a chair, you read and reread steps 1 and 2 before realizing you've stumbled upon the section that's not written in a language you understand, you scratch your head for a good 5 minutes because there are 4 different sets of screws yet they all look the same in the diagrams, you step back to regroup, eat a sandwich, take a nap, ask your spouse for help (my wife has some sort of supernatural ability to understand furniture instructions)...and then, suddenly, it all clicks -- you know how all the little screws fit into all the little holes, all the pieces fit together nicely, and before you know it you're proudly showing off your carpentry skills to the world via social media.

That feeling of accomplishment and breakthrough happened for me this week as I studied this passage once I finally grasped what I believe Paul was driving at in this passage. So, as we get into the complexities of these few verses this morning, if you start to get a little confused or overwhelmed, what I want you to do is hold on to and keep considering this one main idea:

***Be sure your deepest longing and greatest hope is Christ, His resurrection, and the resurrection He secured for you.***

Personally, this idea, this truth -- of being sure that my longing and hope are in the right place and on the right person -- has been a powerful reflection this past week, because all-things related to COVID-19 have worn me out.

- I am tired of all the precautions we must necessarily take for the common good, and tired of seeing that even with the collective national and global effort...people are still getting sick, and still dying.
- I'm distracted by news and updates, and by trying to become an amateur specialist of infectious diseases.
- I miss my friends, miss you all, I miss seeing your faces and hearing your voices raised loud in song and prayer here, in this room on Sunday mornings.
- I'm worried about the spread of the disease, about the impact it is having on everyone's livelihoods, and for the health and wellbeing of everyone (especially those here in America and around the world living in harder-hit areas).

It is too easy these days to fall into despair, to focus on my weariness, and to let my mind and heart drift away from the one thing that can *actually* give us the strength we need to get through these hard times; (which, again, is to:)

***Be sure your deepest longing and greatest hope is Christ, His resurrection, and the resurrection He secured for you.***

That's what we'll be exploring today in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5.

Now, as we turn our attention to the passage, it'll be important to have a few of the verses and ideas that Paul covered in Chapter 4 in the back of our minds, since they set the context and tone for what comes in Chapter 5.

Remember that this whole discussion about our lives -- now and in the future -- began with Paul saying in 2 Cor 4:7 that our lives are like "jars of clay". We're fragile, brittle, and breakable. In 4:16 Paul said that "*we are wasting away*". And yet followers of Jesus know that there is much more to life than just our bodies, just what is physical, or just what is temporary. There is something glorious and amazing about life that is unseen yet still very real, and it is to that truth Paul turns his full attention in 2 Corinthians 5:1.

*1 For 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.*

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Paul compares our physical bodies to a tent (he was, after all, a tentmaker!). They are useful, but subject to wear and tear. They are typically sufficient for their purpose, but they are not meant to be our permanent dwelling. Our bodies are not our true homes. And eventually, for everyone, our nomadic, transitory, hard, vulnerable tent-life comes to an end. The tent is destroyed, and we die.

But death is not the only certainty Paul talks about in v1. With the same confidence he has in assuring his readers that our earthly tents can be destroyed, he also says that we have a "*a building from God, an eternal house in heaven*". Those who trust God, confess His Son as their Savior, and are filled with His Holy Spirit, have an everlasting, eternal, resurrection body that has been crafted by the hands of God Himself, waiting for them beyond the veil of death.

This is not an abstract wish. It's not a myth. This is the very bedrock and foundation of Christian hope. We are people who are sure, who declare (to the best of our ability and beyond thanks to the love of God) that life goes on in the heavens and in the presence of God forever.

Now, there are MANY opinions, interpretations, and guesses as to just what that life looks like for those who die now, for those who have been dead for some time, and for what happens after Christ returns and fully establishes the eternal Kingdom of the New Heavens and New Earth. But we're not going to worry about all those this morning. Instead, what I want you to

focus on is the primary point that Paul wants to make with this first verse: our bodies will fail us some day; we will die, but we know death is not the end. What we'll celebrate next Sunday is the power of death being broken by our God who loves us. Life goes on in the eternal house -- the resurrection body -- prepared for you the Lord.

Until that day, Paul says, it's important that we long for and hope in what really matters:

*2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*

2 Corinthians 5

The greek word for "groan" in v2 isn't meant to imply despair, agony, or a mournful state of being. Paul does not groan because life is terrible and his body is "wasting away." Instead, the sort of groaning he's talking about is more like a "hopeful longing." It's like if your heart could sigh -- a full bodied and even full-souled expression of something deeply and dearly hoped for. A strong and burning desire for something you want, and something you know is coming, but you just aren't there yet.

Our dog, KC (*a picture of her should show up on the screen, because these days we need all the happiness we can get, and what is happier than a cute dog?*), her entire life is consumed with the hope and pursuit of three things: (1) undivided attention and unconditional love from my wife and me; (2) the daily quest for food other than her kibble; (3) long walks in our local park.

She now knows that if we put a bandana on her and tell her to get into the car, there is a very good chance that one of the greatest three things in her life is about to happen to her. As we drive to the park she gets more and more restless, and after we make the last turn down the road that takes us to the parking lot, she begins to whine and whimper and get doggy-happy-feet in the back seat. By the time we park she's unable to contain her excitement, happy-whimpering until we open the door and she bolts into the field for the best day ever (there are many "best-day-ever" in a dog's life).

That's a little bit like the groaning and longing we have here in v2. Paul desperately wants and eagerly awaits the day he can move out from this temporary body and into his heavenly dwelling. He wants to be entirely clothed in the resurrection body that God has set aside just for him -- the same way God has one set aside and waiting for you, too.

And just to be clear, Paul did not have a desire to experience death (and neither should we). Elsewhere in Scripture Paul makes it very clear that although death's power is greatly diminished thanks to the resurrection of Jesus, death is still a consequence of sin, it still destroys life, brings suffering, and therefore is still an enemy of the human race. Jesus himself -- knowing he was following the exact plan of God and would be raised again to life in three days -- prays in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his arrest and crucifixion to be spared from the path set before him. Death remains something introduced into the world due to our disobedience and won't be fully defeated until the return of Christ.

*But it no longer gets the last word.* That's the miracle of the resurrection and the beauty behind our upcoming Easter celebration. We don't pass from this world into some ambiguous ending. We're not left naked -- we're clothed in the wondrous protection, provision, and paradise of God's presence. And so our longing and our hope is in the promise that "*what is mortal may be swallowed up by life*" -- what we have now is incomparable to beauty and the wonder of what is to come. We think we have "life" now...but the life to come will be greater still. That's why, we we started today, I encouraged you to cling to one idea above all others from this passage:

***Be sure your deepest longing and greatest hope is Christ, His resurrection, and the resurrection He secured for you.***

Here's the big takeaway for me from a week of studying this passage.

Because of all the radical changes COVID-19 is causing in our lives, I have an ever-growing list of things I wish were different, of things I miss, and of things I long for.

- I can't wait for the day I get to hang out in the same room with all my friends, and hug them again. (And I'm an introvert...if my arms are aching for the people I love, I can't even imagine what you extroverts must be going through).
- I can't wait to go back to my favorite shops and coffee places and restaurants in town.
- I can't wait to peruse the shelves at the bookstore, and read the first few pages of half a dozen books.
- I can't wait for baseball to come back.
- I can't wait to delete Zoom from my phone.
- Lord willing, in a few weeks my beautiful wife will give birth to our beautiful daughter. In all likelihood we'll have to wait a while before we can introduce her to everyone in our lives. That'll be hard. (Though I'm sure I'll find it hard to wait to show off my kid to y'all.)

If I give you all even just a few minutes I bet you could list off as many things as I have, maybe more, of what you hope for and long to do when this whole pandemic is over. And those things are good things, and it's okay to hope for their swift return.

BUT...if your heart and your focus and your hope are only set upon these temporary fleeting things, if you've slipped into groaning only for the things of this world, if you long only for the gifts God gives and lost sight of what Paul says is the greatest possible joy our hearts could long for...then take a step back and ask yourself whether or not you've lost sight of what really, truly matters. A pandemic does not change what should be first in our hearts.

***Be sure your deepest longing and greatest hope is Christ, His resurrection, and the resurrection He secured for you.***

There is nothing in heaven or on earth that should take the place of Christ in our hearts. Nothing greater than the work he did to secure our salvation. Nothing more worth longing for than the gift of our own resurrected life, waiting for us to take up once these bodies finally fail.

I will confess to you -- as a pastor, as someone in vocational ministry, as a follower of Jesus -- this week I realized I had allowed the things I miss and the ways I wish the world was different to completely replace any notion of a longing for the ultimate gift God has for me. Easter is 7 little days away...and I stand before you today, confessing that my desires are way out of order. Not because missing my friends or my normal way of life is a bad or sinful thing, but because I've desired those things more than I've desired what my loving God has planned and prepared for me.

If you are listening this morning and can confess something similar, then I have three hopeful things to offer you that have been important for me to consider and act on this week.

1. God is ready to forgive even this misalignment of what is really important. All you have to do is confess and repent.
  - a. Today is Palm Sunday. If you look in the Gospels you can find the story of Jesus arriving in Jerusalem to great fanfare, to people praising his name, hoping he was there as a revolutionary and conquering leader. His disciples walked beside him, wondering if it was finally time for their teacher and Messiah to take back from the Romans what they all felt was rightfully theirs.
  - b. Less than a week later, that same crowd would be rioting, calling for Jesus' crucifixion. His disciples would be fleeing his side, abandoning him to death, watching from afar as he was nailed to a cross.
  - c. The story of Easter is filled with people losing sight of what really matters. Missing the true meaning of God's love. Not understanding what Jesus was really there to do for them, the freedom he died to secure.

- d. But from that sacrifice comes an outpouring of compassion, understanding, and forgiveness. Because of Jesus' great love for us, confession and repentance restore us to the delight of his presence. It's why the disciples would go on to teach things like 1 John 1:9 --
    - i. *9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)*
  - e. So, if you've lost sight of what really matters, take heart: Jesus is ready to forgive. He's never stopped loving you. He's just waiting for you to turn back to him.
2. Commit to exploring the true beauty of the resurrection story.
    - a. On Friday we made a Holy Week Reading Guide available to everyone. If you need a copy sent to you, just reach out to us by emailing [info@faithmahattan.org](mailto:info@faithmahattan.org), and we'll be sure you get one.
    - b. Rediscover why Christ's work is so amazing. Or discover it for the first time. Get yourself ready for Easter by checking on your heart.
  3. Your salvation is guaranteed by something far more reliable than your ability to keep your desire and longings in their proper order. Paul's words in v5 bless us with much needed assurance.

*5 Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

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Pauls' confidence comes not from his own strong will, but from the will of God. God "*fashioned us for this very purpose*" to live, and to die, and after death to be swallowed up by life. The guarantee we have that this destiny is real is the longing we have for it, stirred up in our hearts by the presence of the deposited Holy Spirit.

Despite the suffering Paul had experienced, and the prospect of his death on the horizon, he was absolutely confident that he would inherit the glory of the resurrected life because of his God-given longing for it. If God had not planted this seed of hope in his heart, his suffering would be all that could be expected and would ultimately serve no purpose. But because of the Holy Spirit living within him, Paul knew he had "*a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands*" -- and as followers of Jesus, you have a glorious resurrection dwelling waiting for you too.

----- Communion -----

It is fitting that this passage, and the reminder to be sure our ***deepest longing and greatest hope is Christ, His resurrection, and the resurrection He secured for us*** comes to us on the first Sunday of the month, the Sunday when our church regularly celebrates the Lord's Table together.

Today, this will obviously have to happen quite differently than it normally does. Typically, one of the most meaningful and holy things about communion is being able to partake as the gathered Body of Christ -- followers of Jesus all in the same place, participating in the same acts of worship, eating the broken bread, and drinking from the cup as a community.

But just because we can't be physically together to enjoy this sacrament as the church gathered, we can still be together as the church united in spirit by the things that matter the very most: our common faith in Jesus, and our remembrance of his love and sacrifice for us.

In Luke 22:19, when Jesus shared the first meal that would inspire the celebration we now call communion, he gave one very clear instruction about what was to happen at every Lord's Table:

*19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

At this table, in these next few minutes, we are called to share in a holy time of remembering our Savior. We have a chance to slow down and dwell on the truth that ***our deepest longing and greatest hope must be Christ, His resurrection, and the resurrection He secured for each and every one of us.*** You have a few minutes to reflect, confess, and offer to the Lord what might change in your life and in your heart to surrender more and more of it over to His good plan, His eternal salvation.

I would much, much rather have this celebration with you all gathered in this room. It's a loss not to have you here. There is a heartache to leading communion while in a (mostly) empty room. But there is still great value and tremendous opportunity in sharing this time together, even in an online/digital environment.

Because there is nowhere in heaven or on earth that God is not present, or that Jesus does not reign. We share faith in the One who is greater than the distance that separates us or the disease that threatens to afflict us. And it is this One, our everlasting God, who will make these moments meaningful and holy.

We are not in the same room today. But that's okay. Because God is, and in the end His presence is what will make these moments count.

At Faith we normally use bread, or wafers, to symbolize the body of Christ that was broken for us on the cross. We also normally use juice to symbolize his blood that was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. You may have something like these already prepared so you can join us in communion. You may have something very different. Either are perfectly acceptable before our Lord. Please, feel the freedom to use whatever you need, whatever you may have on hand, in place of the bread and the juice. We believe the significance of the Lord's Table does not lie in the elements used, but in our united remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

In just a moment we'll give you a few minutes to reflect on anything the Holy Spirit may have placed on your heart this morning. If you are joining us this morning and did not come prepared for communion, we invite you to use these next few minutes to find what you need to participate. Again, it can be any food and any drink.

At Faith we invite all who are believers in Jesus to join us for the celebration of the Lord's Table. If you happen to be watching this morning and are not yet a follower of Christ, we would still love for you to stay with us, watch, listen, and if you feel led to do so, pray. We're so very grateful for this chance to connect with you.

The screen will now change, and our time of reflection and/or time to gather the needed elements will begin. When the screen changes back, I will share some Scripture and we will eat and drink of the Lord's Table together.

*Father God, although this is not our typical way of celebrating communion, please bless this time for each and every person watching and listening this morning. We long to be with each other, but most of all we long to be with you. Help us seek you in this time. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.*

What we have received from the Lord, we now pass on and share with each other:

*The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

*25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*