

June 28th 2020 Clothed in Immortality!

Rev Tim Perkins

Reading: 2 Corinthians 5: 1 – 10

Awaiting the New Body

5 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. 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. 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.

⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Perhaps an easy way into this passage is to think about it through the lens of Home Improvement and DIY!

I am surprisingly good at decorating. We have a lovely royal blue and white back room otherwise known as the Leicester City shrine that I am immensely proud of. But if you were to put a hammer, saw or drill in my hand instead of a paintbrush, I guarantee you would soon see numerous unnecessary holes in walls, or pictures and book shelves hanging at a slightly awkward angle. I remember once needing to cut a piece of Perspex to replace a broken windowpane in a shed. I measured the gap. I measured and marked the Perspex to the right length and cut it accordingly and then still found that it was 3 centimetres too short when I came to fit it! I am not sure that my attempts at home improvement add any value to the Manse!

And Paul is writing about home improvements, about turning tents into solid buildings. Paul, of course, as a tentmaker by trade, was good at DIY and knew what he was writing about. But the tent and building he is writing about are not the homes that we live in but the bodies that our souls' dwell in throughout this life.



And our society knows a thing or two about home improvements when it comes to our physical bodies. We spend an enormous amount of time, energy and money trying to improve our bodies, trying to make them last as long as possible, trying to hide or remove the bits we don't like, trying to replace the bits that are wearing out, trying to care as best we can for them and keep them healthy. Sometimes the DIY tasks are purely cosmetic, sometimes they are necessary for health reasons. Sometimes we want bigger, fancier tents. Sometimes we find that they are no longer weatherproof and need patching up!

The truth that Paul places squarely before our eyes is this: one day, your tent is coming down. How does that make you feel? Does it affect the way you live your life now?

I have just finished reading one of the best books I have ever read. It is called "The Divine Conspiracy." It was written by Dallas Willard, former Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, and one of the most influential writers and thinkers on the role of spiritual formation in daily life of the last 100 years. As the theme for the final chapter of the book, Willard takes "The restoration of all things," and writes about the prospect of eternal life. I want to just quote three short paragraphs.

"To live strongly and creatively in the kingdom of the heavens, we need to have firmly fixed in our minds what our future is to be like. We want to live fully in the kingdom now, and for that purpose our future must make sense to us. It must be something we can now plan or make decisions in terms of, with clarity and joyful anticipation. In this way our future can be incorporated into our life now and our life now can be incorporated into our future.

I meet many faithful Christians who, in spite of their faith, are deeply disappointed in how their lives have turned out. Sometimes it is simply a matter of how they are experiencing ageing, which they take to mean they no longer have a future. But often, because of circumstances or wrongful decisions and actions by others, what they had hoped to accomplish in life they did not. They painfully puzzle over what they may have done wrong, or over whether God has really been with them.

Much of the distress of these good people comes from a failure to realize that their life lies before them. That they are coming to the end of their present life, life 'in the flesh', is of little significance. What is of significance is the kind of person they have become. Circumstances and other people are not in control of an individual's character or of the life that lies endlessly before us in the kingdom of God." (Willard D, 'The Divine Conspiracy', Fount, 1998, P. 410)

Our tents sag a little more with each passing day! Many people like camping. I am not one of them. Give me a solid building with walls and a roof, a good cooker, and most importantly, a comfy bed over a tent and camp bed any day of the week. I am sure there are many good points to camping holidays but when I am on holiday, I much prefer just a little bit of luxury.

What Paul is writing about is of course the difference between what is temporary and what is permanent, what is perishable and what is imperishable, what is deteriorating and what will last for ever.

Of course, there is something of God in every aspect of the created world, including every human body and each and all should be cherished, honoured and nurtured because it is God's gift for us to live out the days of our physical life on this earth. Sadly, what God gives freely, this world often despises or damages. Paul has already written in the previous chapter about the trials we face in life and the damage that life outside of God's kingdom does to us and notes that we "have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Cor. 4: 7) But he goes on to write about how life in this world can be used to address and change our character in preparation for life lived fully in the glorious kingdom of God: "Therefore", he writes, "we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." (2 Cor. 4: 16-17)

Our journey through this life and the transient nature of our 'tents' may not seem to us much like they are 'light and momentary troubles,' but viewed through the lens of God's eternal perspective that is exactly what they are. It is something, as a person who lives with a chronic illness, that I remind myself of each day.

Both of my parents knew a thing or two about the problems that our 'tents' can cause. Just after my mum turned 60 she was diagnosed with severe scarring of both her lungs. Her tent needed some serious repair work. She was fortunate enough to get a lung transplant and had another five years on this earth after her operation. But she used the time before her transplant to prepare herself for dying well and living well in God's kingdom. Her Thanksgiving Service was a truly remarkable event and one of the greatest testimonies to the glory and goodness of God I have ever had the privilege to participate in. The reading she chose for us to reflect on that day was Ps. 139 – "I am fearfully and wonderfully made, I know that full well...All the days of my life were ordained by you before even one of them came to pass." She faced the light and momentary troubles of this life from the perspective of a glorious eternity.

My dad, though living into his 80's also knew the trauma of a failing body. I will not go into the details as it would take too long, they were that numerous! He did not leave as much detail for his Thanksgiving Service as my mum who had it all written out word for word! But he did ask for two things. The first was our reading from 2 Corinthians 5. The second was the hymn with which I shall finish this reflection. Both speak of how the certainty of the life to come in the glorious kingdom of God should inspire the way we seek to live our lives in these flimsy tents that we call home – at least for now!

"I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me,
How he left the realms of glory for the cross of Calvary:

*Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me,
Sing it with his saints in glory, gathered by the crystal sea.*

I was lost; but Jesus found me, found the sheep that went astray.
Raised me up, and gently led me back into the narrow way:

Faint was I, and fears possessed me, bruised was I from many a fall:
Hope was gone, and shame distressed me; but his love has pardoned all:

Days of darkness still come o'er me; sorrow's paths I often tread:
But the Saviour still is with me, by his hand I'm safely led:

He will keep me till the river rolls its water at my feet:
Then he'll bear me safely over, where the loved ones I shall meet:
(Francis Harold Rowley (1854-1952) Singing the Faith No. 323)

Prayers (taken from 'The Last Journey' by John Bell, GIA Publications 1996)

I will do it only once, Lord, though my whole life moves towards it. So I pray for a good death when the time is right, when I have finished my business, when I have come to terms with my mortality.

Before then, in the small and large losses of life, in the giving away of fond possessions, in the parting of close friends, in the changing of job, house or church, may I sense a meaning in loss and have a foretaste of resurrection.

Thank you, God for the good prospect of heaven, inhabited by those who have died in the flesh but risen in the body as Jesus did before them.

Let me remember them with you, those I loved here but see no longer, who now serve and sit with you. Tell them I love them, and, if it be your will, may they be among the first to welcome me into heaven.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.