

Believe in God's Promises

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence. 15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. 17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, 18 because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

In 1934 two heavyweights took a few intentional swings at each other—think of perhaps Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman. The opponents were not professional boxers with gloves sparring in a ring but two testy European theologians, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, who traded jabs of the pen. At stake was determining once and for all the Anknüpfungspunkt (namely the "point of contact") between God and human beings.

Emil Brunner believed the point of contact was located inside of us, while Karl Barth saw the point of contact as truly beyond us. To generalize many pages of argument, Brunner believed there were echoes of Eden still inside our heart, soul, and mind, while Barth staunchly argued God was nothing like us, but instead distant and ultimately "other."

In the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul suggests, amidst the travails of life and ministry, we can take comfort that a resurrected Christ lives inside of us. Like Brunner, Paul locates the Anknüpfungspunkt at first as inside rather than outside of us. He writes, "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16).

Bede Griffiths is a Benedictine monk who in his travels around the world asked various people of faith, "Where is God?" Hindus and Buddhists in the East, he discovered, would typically point to their heart while Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the West would point outside of themselves to the heavens. Now, I ask you, where do you imagine and believe the intersection occurs between God and your own life. Inside or outside? Up or down? What do you think of Paul's claim that our inner nature is being renewed? Will this renewal eventually draw to a close when "the earthly tent we live in is destroyed" (5:1). Paul's point is that at some point we will all die—that in time everything human will crumble and perish, whether it is a city, a home, or even our own life. In the face of our death, and the struggles of life and ministry, Paul then steers his readers to the hope found in "eternal" things. What does he mean? Like an inner nature grounded in a resurrected Christ, there also exists, says Paul, divinity "outside of us," another reality to restore us, but one not easily seen. So, we might say that if Bede Griffiths happened to meet Paul and asked his question, "Where is God," Paul might have pointed at first to his heart, and then with his other hand to the world and the stars above.

When commentator **Mark Barger Elliott** ask people in a Sunday school class to describe their experience of God, they often begin by referencing moments they cannot fully explain but that somehow hint at a spiritual dimension in this world. Celtic Christianity describes such moments as "thin places." He finds church members often describe them as coincidences or *déjà vu*.

In his book *The Sense of Being Stared At*, Rupert Sheldrake observes how some animals have a sixth sense. Sharks and birds, for example, have a magnetic sense to enable them to respond to the earth's magnetic field. Sheldrake goes on to suggest human beings may not have this sixth sense but have what he calls a seventh sense—a spiritual awareness that connects us to each other, to the world,

and to the realm of the spirit. For example, he observes how a majority of us believe we have sensed people staring at us even though our backs were turned at the time. Sixty percent of us claim to have experienced telepathy. Sheldrake guides his readers to the skaters Jayne Torvill and Chris Dean, who dazzled us during the Olympics, and how, according to Dean, the reason they could skate together so fluidly and beautifully was telepathy. "There's simply no other way to explain it," says Dean.

"Have you ever thought of someone right before the phone rang, and then heard that person's voice? Have you ever woken up before the alarm rang? Or before your baby started to cry?" In our passage Paul seems to indicate that just as Elijah heard a still, small voice, and Moses climbed a mountain to see God's glory, we can discover God's presence all around us—inside and out—if we have the eyes of the heart to see. **Mark Barger Elliott**

Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth that we have this "spirit of faith," which is basically trust in God's grace and promises, Paul has hope. While we are outwardly wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed, directing our attention not to what is transient but to what is eternal (cf. the "straining upward" of Phil. 3:13). Then Paul spells out what is hoped for. He mixes his metaphors: body, tent, building, garment. His point is that this inheritance is already secure, quite unlike the changing and insecure situation at present.

Just as in chapter 4, Paul's expectations are sobered and become more realistic. Earlier he had assumed that he would be alive at Christ's return (1 Thess. 4:13-17; 1 Cor. 15:18, 20, 51). Now he considers the possibility that he might be among those who die. In that case, he would be "with Christ" (2 Cor. 5:8, Phil. 1:23). But that would not yet be the fulfillment he hopes for. He will not receive his resurrection body until Christ's return. Until then he "groans" for a transformed body (2 Cor. 5:2, Rom. 8:22-23), when mortality will be "swallowed up" in life (2

Cor. 5:4, 1 Cor. 15:54). In the meantime, he expresses a certain indifference about whether he lives or dies (2 Cor. 5:9; Rom. 14:8), because neither condition is the final goal.

Paul thus sets the tone for Christians who for twenty centuries have wondered when the end will come: very soon? in the more distant future? not at all in the literal sense? Paul teaches us how to live in a "between time," when the new age has been inaugurated in Christ and renewal has begun, but the old age persists.

In many ways hope remains unfulfilled. And yet the new has already begun. Paul's best explanation is that the faithful have received the Spirit as an *arrabōn*, an earnest, a down payment, a guarantee of what will be conferred in full at a later time (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). Life in the presence of Christ is not yet possessed. But the Spirit is a guarantee that all God's gifts are to be possessed in the future (cf. Rom. 8:18-27). **Eugene Teselle**

The *Spiritual Renewal Bible* puts it this way:

When we surrender our lives to God, two opposite and somewhat confusing processes are simultaneously at work. On the one hand, physical deterioration and eventual death are inevitable, as are the distressing trials that accompany them. On the other hand, the glorious inner growth is preparing us day by day for the overwhelming glory and blessing we will experience in the presence of God throughout eternity. We may have to wait awhile for God's eternal blessings. But if we believe and trust God to help us in this life of decay and death, we can be sure of his blessings in the future.

There is an old story about a disciple and his teacher, a story Paul might have liked. "Where shall I find God?" a disciple once asked. "Here," the teacher said. "Then why can't I see God?" "Because you do not look." "But what should I look for?" the disciple continued. "Nothing. Just look," the teacher said. "But at what?"

"At anything your eyes alight upon," the teacher said. "But must I look in a special kind of way?" "No, the ordinary way will do." "But don't I always look the ordinary way?" "No, you don't," the teacher said. "But why ever not?" the disciple pressed. "Because to look, you must be here. You're mostly somewhere else," the teacher said.

The Pauline theologian J. Christiaan Beker once summed up the canon of Paul's thought as underscoring "the triumph of God." Beker believed the triumph of God is discovered when we come to understand, "the Christian already lives in the dawning of God's coming reign...[and] since the coming of Christ and his victorious resurrection, suffering becomes all the more tolerable." Perhaps Paul would have said both Brunner and Beker were right, that God's presence and triumph is both internal and external—as the resurrected Christ renews us from the inside out, but also as God continues to birth in our midst, and before our very eyes, a new heaven and earth. **Mark Barger Elliott**

[David L. Bartlett (2013). Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]