

Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008

## SHARED LIVES

*Shared Future: Heaven is waiting for you*

March 5, 2008 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:1-6:2

Gretchen Steer



Today our passage begins, **“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed...”** If this is not an invitation to tell a rustic camping story, I don’t know what is.

Actually, the picture of the tent is central to our understanding of this story. When you are backpacking, one of the heaviest items you carry is your tent, which together with the stakes, frame and footprint only weighs about 5 lbs. But that is 1/6 of a thirty pound pack. And the tent, along with the food, provides both survival and comfort. Without a tent you are completely exposed to the elements, whether that is biting wind, freezing temperatures, rain, snow, hail or incessant mosquitoes.

Since we hiked our stretch of the John Muir trail I’ve been reading different accounts of other hikers. We were blessed by incredible weather. But one of the dangers of being so high in altitude is your exposure to the fierce storms that sweep over the Sierra Nevadas. Here is one account written by friends of my sister Paula, who hiked the entire 220 miles of the John Muir Trail a couple of years ago. They were camping in a large open area near Muir Pass, at about 11,000 feet, when suddenly a storm kicked up:

**“The next few minutes were to become some of the most memorable of our lives. As we sat inside our little tent, the hail started coming down in shovelfuls and the temperature plummeted almost 50 degrees to below freezing. For the moment we put dinner aside and instead began putting on all the clothes we had, and then wrapped our sleeping bags around our legs for added warmth. Outside the storm was getting worse. The thunder and lightning were stupendous and by now almost continuous. Worse yet, the time delay between the lightning flash and the sound from the thunderclap was becoming so short that it was almost simultaneous, which meant that the lightning strikes were getting closer, MUCH closer. With no place to run or hide we took the only precaution we could, which was to fold our Thermarest pads in two, thereby doubling their thickness and insulating ability, sit crosslegged on top of them and hope for the best.**

**By now the wind had increased to well over 40 mph, which was whipping up tsunami-like waves on Wanda Lake and sending them crashing on the shore just 100 feet away. As they smacked against the rocks the wind carried the water spray along with the still falling hail, which all began hitting us squarely on Susie’s side of the tent. I looked over and there she was: her shoulder leaning into the wall of the tent and one arm outstretched in a valiant attempt to keep the wall from collapsing.”** (*Following John Muir*, by Mike Miner, pg. 78).

Now that passage illustrates why most normal people do not want to go backpacking in high mountains. In fact a thunderstorm was my greatest fear and I counted my blessings that we did not encounter one, because you literally have nowhere to go. In some of those barren landscapes even a three foot high tent is the tallest object in the area. But it is still your only protection. The flimsy walls of the tent provide some shelter as well as a psychological conviction that you have a home – that it's not just you, open to the sky.

Paul uses the analogy of the tent to describe our earthly bodies, and it's a very good one. When things are working well our bodies seem to provide a hearty shelter for our souls. Yet we know our bodies are fragile and temporary, and the older or more ill we become, the more aware we are that their protection is limited. In contrast, Paul also paints the picture of the heavenly or eternal dwelling that awaits us.

So let's look first at

### **I. Our heavenly dwelling (2 Cor. 5:1- 10)**

First, Paul tells us

#### **A. The good news (v. 1-9)**

**“Now 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. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” (2 Cor. 5:1-5)**

We see that

- ***The earthly tent is temporary, but the heavenly building is permanent.***

A tent is good when there is no building, but is only a temporary measure. When we were little my brother and I used to make forts in the backyard out of blankets, and sometimes we slept there. But pretending to live outside during the day was a whole lot more pleasant than sleeping out there at night, when it was dark and scary and full of mosquitoes. The temporary structure has its limitations. It only can provide the illusion of permanence.

Here is a picture of Frank Lloyd Wright's house Falling Water in Pennsylvania. John and I visited it last summer. Now here is a picture of that backpacking tent again. They are both structures which are useful for protecting us from the elements, and both are set in beautiful outdoor locations...but which one looks more permanent? Although in an eternal sense neither one is, I put these pictures up so you can get the contrast between the earthly, temporary tent (our bodies) – and our heavenly, permanent resurrection bodies. Our heavenly bodies are to our earthly bodies as the tent is to Falling Water.

The passage also tells that

- ***The earthly tent seems real, but the heavenly building IS real***

Of course this earthly tent of our bodies is real in the sense that it truly exists, but if we think of the body as merely transient housing for our soul, then the permanent resurrection body that is coming to us will be far more real (in the sense of lasting and unchanging) than our earthly bodies ever were.

Knowing that our bodies are transient is a lot more attractive as our bodies start to fail us or fall prey to disease. Last week when I had the flu it felt like someone had wired my skeleton together with hot wires. Even the fillings in my teeth hurt because of the aches. This was a minor, passing experience compared to what many of you face day in and day out, with chronic diseases that cause you to long for the heavenly body, free from pain, that you will enjoy one day.

- *The earthly tent is mortal, subject to death; the heavenly building is eternal and immortal*

Think of how people strive for immortality. They build buildings and monuments in their memory. They have children to pass on a family name or inheritance. They fight against aging and ill health. But in the end, every physical body wears out and dies.

Not so with the resurrection body. When it houses our souls that will be a permanent arrangement, with no physical suffering, no mortal decay.

How do we know all this to be true? Paul tells us in verse 5: **“Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” (v. 5)**

God has actually designed us to live eternally. We know this is true because scripture tells us so, and because the Holy Spirit has been sent in advance as a proof or token of the truth of God’s words. In this life we have the Spirit to help us. In the next we will have a face to face relationship with all three members of the Trinity.

Paul goes on to say:

**“Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:6-9)**

Paul tells us “it’s all good”. It’s good whether we are here in the body, because then we can do the Lord’s work on earth. But it’s also good to look forward to a time when we will not be plagued by the physical shortcomings and ailments of a dying body.

One of the dubious pleasures of being sick, as I had the flu last week, was that I could do nothing but lie in bed for four days. So I read books and slept. And I was finished one of my favorite books, the third novel in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s trilogy about Poland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These are huge books, and by the third novel I had followed the adventures of Pan Michal, the knight, through almost 3,000 pages. But at the end of the third book, Michal is in charge of holding out against the Mongol and Tartar invading hordes...hundreds of thousands of soldiers invading the southeastern border. The first town in the way of the invasion is a castle where Michal heads a small group of Polish defenders. The night before the big battle Michal and his dearly beloved wife Basia are able to meet for a few hours on the battlements. They know that it’s unlikely that he’ll survive the next few days. But he makes an impassioned speech to her and says “Basia, it’s nothing. I will be in heaven waiting for you to join me. This is just a transition. We will always be together in heaven.”

And then the two of them kneel and pray as their last act together. When the fighting starts the next day and Michal can see the way it's going, he sends a message to her "Basia...it's nothing. Remember that." It is very hard indeed to think of this life as "nothing" when we have to forcibly and painfully give it up. But he's got the right perspective. In comparison to heaven, this earthly tent is...nothing.

If we are not here, we know we are with Christ. To Paul, that's all good! Faith has always required us to look steadfastly at things we cannot necessarily see with our eyes. **"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."** (Hebrews 11:1). And faith in Christ causes us to look heavenward for our true home.

Those heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 were commended partly because they understood earth was not their final home:

**"And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."**  
(Hebrews 11:13-16)

One of the last things Jesus told his disciples was that he was going to heaven to prepare a place for them:

**"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."**  
(John 14:2-3)

I am comforted by these verses, because they explain to me why often times I have felt out of step with the world. If this earth is not my natural home – just a way stage, really – then it makes sense that somewhere there is a home for me which will be so exceedingly permanently homelike that it will make the comfiest of homes here seem rude and bare. On some level we know that we are aliens and strangers here. But we also know that we have our home in heaven.

But the important thing to take away from this passage is verse 9: **"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it."** If we make it our goal to please God, then it doesn't matter whether we are living for him on this earth or in eternity. It's really all the same. It's nothing whether we are here or there, because we are always with God.

Now some questions have arisen regarding this passage concerning what happens at death. From verse 6 we get the sense that as believers we can only be in one of two places...either at home on earth in our bodies or with the Lord, in our heavenly body. There are various doctrines among denominations about soul sleep or Purgatory or other stopping place prior to receiving our resurrection body. But this passage is overwhelmingly clear that we will be with the Lord after death.

I think we can take comfort from Jesus' words to the dying thief on the cross: **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."** (Luke 23:43). That seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it...TODAY. Not after you spend years in Purgatory trying to get clean

enough to enter heaven. Not after you sleep as a disembodied soul for a period of time. It's also apparent that Jesus received his new body at the time of his resurrection from the dead, because that's the body he was walking around with on the road to Emmaus, on the shore of Galilee, and in the upper room. This resurrection body retained some of the identifying marks of the old – they recognized him, but not immediately; he was able to show his side and his hands to Thomas; but it had other abilities...he was able to pass through the locked door of the Upper Room, for example. We expect that our resurrection bodies will be beautiful and indestructible and strong as well. Our confusion about what point we receive them could be as much due to the confusing nature of time and eternity (remember, time is described in heaven as “a day is as a thousand years.”) as it is to our lack of knowledge about what, exactly, happens when we die. But we should take comfort from knowing that we are either here in the body or with the Lord.

But there is serious as well as comforting news in this passage:

### **B. The serious news (v. 10)**

**“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:10)**

Logic tells us that there should be consequences for the choices we make. And this notion is confirmed elsewhere in the Bible, in stories like the parable of the sheep and the goats and the parable of the talents. We will be held to account for how we lived, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Now please don't misunderstand this verse. The judgment seat of Christ is the point at which we look him in the face and explain what we did to live for him on this earth. If we have given ourselves to Christ as our Lord on this earth the Judgment Seat does not mean that we lose our salvation because of something we've done. Rather, it's an accounting of how we spent our time. So there really will be a difference in our experience at judgment if we have said yes to Christ but failed to do anything with the financial resources and the time he gave us on this earth. Paul addresses this issue more fully in 1 Corinthians 3:

**“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 3; 10-15)**

When the children were younger, but still old enough to be responsible, I sometimes left them at home for an hour or so while I did errands. When I came I would check to see if they had done the tasks I'd left for them. Usually they had, but sometimes they had not. Sometimes they had instead gotten into an argument with each other and were angrily self justifying why they hadn't done the dishes. As a parent, it was disappointing to me, and all the reasons in the world did not take away

the fact that they hadn't done what they were supposed to do. What will Christ say to us when we face him at the end of our lives? Have we done his work or not?

Having looked at our heavenly dwelling, now let's look at

## **II. Our heaven-directed task (5:11-6:2)**

In this passage, Paul tells us we have two responsibilities. The first is

### **A. Persuasion (v. 11-17)**

**“Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.**

**So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:11-17)**

When Paul says he knows what it is to fear the Lord, he doesn't mean that our motive for belief is being afraid of what God can do to us. The word “fear” in this context means “a holy awe”...the sort of fear that's referred to in the Psalms when we talk about the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom. In other words, when we fear God we have enough sense to put ourselves in our rightful place in relation to God. Paul says, “Because we understand who God is and what he has done for us, we want to persuade others to this understanding too.”

Some people thought that Paul was nuts, but he was glad to be considered out of his mind if it meant that people would listen to the message of the gospel. Over and over again you hear the passion in Paul's voice. It is the passion of someone who has been irrefutably changed. He once regarded Christ “from a worldly point of view.” He was the man who assented to Stephen's death and who went from house to house hunting down Christians. But all that changed when Christ met him face to face and suddenly Paul was a new creation.

This passage has to do with our natural response to the deliverance we have had. We understand what it is to fear God; how can we not try to persuade others to see what has been shown to us?

When we are ecstatic about something – a place we've visited, a new restaurant we've discovered, a relationship – we cannot help but tell others about it. But how often do we feel that compulsion to tell others about God in the same way? This news is too good to keep to ourselves.

The use of the word “persuasion” is helpful, too. We cannot argue other people into agreement with the gospel. We can't force them. Nor can we get off the hook by assuming that if people like what they see in our lives, they'll automatically connect it to Jesus. They may just think we're nice people or have it together, not understanding that the grace evident in our lives comes from God

rather from inside us. We can't assume that they will understand the premise if we don't say anything, and so we are left with persuasion – a winsome, thoughtful alternative.

Persuasion is the use of our words and actions to graciously convince. We don't do it silently. Nor do we do it by haranguing. So our first heaven-directed task is Persuasion.

But our second heaven-directed task is

**B. Reconciliation (v. 18 – 6:2)**

**“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

**As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive the Lord's grace in vain. For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:18 – 6:2)**

Notice that Christ's sacrifice was deliberate and planned. Sometimes we think of the atonement as an afterthought, a sort of 'plan B' when things went bad in the Garden of Eden. But God's intention was to first reconcile us and then use us in the ministry of reconciliation on this earth. Paul explains it more fully in Ephesians:

**“His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (Eph. 2:15b-16)**

Notice too that God is making his appeal through us.(v. 20) If we are honest and know that we are not making God's appeal to the world by spreading the gospel, then we are falling down on part of God's plan. We are dropping our end of things.

But most importantly we learn that God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. And this should make us ask two questions:

- ***Do I have work of reconciliation to do with those around me?*** It's difficult to talk about reconciliation if we ourselves cannot get along with the people around us. Reconciliation begins with forgiveness and a desire to draw near. What work of reconciliation needs to be done in our lives?
- ***Am I reconciling others to God?*** With this question we have to ask ourselves whether or not we are communicating enough about God's desire for reconciliation through Christ to the people around us so that they “get it”. Are we actually opening our mouths and SPEAKING about Christ?

This weekend I was away with about 21 of the small group leaders. These leaders' retreats are always a memorable experience. We have a lot of fun and laughter but we also do a lot of serious

interaction. I don't want to tell you too much about what goes on, but I do want you to know that every time, I am reminded of the tremendous potential of the small groups in the Bible study. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of the extent of reconciliation and unity that is possible to know in Christ. Our small groups are a place where reconciliation can begin – the kind of reconciliation that needs to take place woman to woman so that we draw near to each other. Because, you see, women need each other. We need each other in supportive, loving, reliable friendships that will help sustain us through changes and disappointments. If our friendships with other women only exist on a superficial level, if there's no one we can admit our failings and our fears and shortcomings to, then life can be pretty scary and hard. But if we work to base our friendships on the common ground of Christ, and if we see our work in this world as being reconcilers between God and man, we will have, truly, something unbreakable that will carry us through every challenge.

I am particularly reminded of relationships in this chapter because Paul is so open about his feelings. He is pouring out his heart. How can we not do that for each other as well? This fifth chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians holds a particular relationship memory for me. 1986, the year that our daughter Kirstie died, was also a year of great tragedy for our church. We used to refer to it as "The Year Everybody Died." It began on January 4 with the death of one of our dearest older friends. We lost our daughter in early May. Shortly after one of our young fathers, Bruce, was diagnosed with brain cancer at age 30. Six weeks later he was dead, leaving a daughter Kirstie's age and a wife five months pregnant with their second child. His wife, Becky, and I became good friends during that year of terrible sorrow. After John returned to the pulpit following Kirstie's death he began preaching through 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians.

I remember very vividly sitting next to Becky, this young, pregnant widow, during the sermon when John spoke on chapter 5: **"Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed by life."**

I could not have had a clearer illustration of how we felt right then. We were clutching each others' hands with tears running down our faces. Becky was a young mother with a daughter and no husband. I was a young wife with a husband and no daughter. And that morning in June Becky and I groaned, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because it seemed so far preferable to remaining here in our mortal clothes, waiting to be swallowed up by life. If we had not had the hope of the resurrection right then, we surely would have despaired. But instead we sat there in church, listening to the hope of eternal life, gripping each other's hands with shining eyes.

As Paul wrote in 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15, **"For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."**

**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." (1 Cor. 15:16-22)**

Jesus' resurrection from the dead means that we too will have a resurrection from the dead. Off will come these mortal clothes. On will go the imperishable ones. Death will be swallowed up by life, and the mortal by immortality. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

## Questions for Shared Future: Heaven is waiting for you

### Intensive Study

Memory verse: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (2 Cor. 5:15)

1. What does Paul mean in v. 4 when he talks about “being clothed with our heavenly dwelling”? Do these verses imply that we go straight to God when we die? Do they imply that we immediately receive our resurrection body when we die?
2. Why do we have to appear before the judgment seat if we have already been saved and made righteous by Christ? What happens at the judgment seat? Find at least one other passage that pertains to the judgment of Christ. Is it possible for a Christian to lose his salvation in that moment, or to be judged unworthy?
3. Paul uses the idea of the unseen being more important than the seen or observable several times in this passage. Find two verses in this passage on that theme. In each, what is seen and what is unseen? Can you think of other N.T. passages speaking about the seen and unseen? Now find a biblical definition of faith.
4. Paul also gives several reasons for wanting to share the gospel. Name two. Now find another N.T. passage that speaks to someone’s motivation to share Christ. Who wrote that passage, and what motivates them?
5. Look at 2 Cor. 5:17. If we are new creations, why do we still sin? [hint: look in Romans]
6. What is the ministry of reconciliation? How we practice that day to day? What attitudes or actions in our lives might hinder the message of reconciliation from being heard by others?

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you fear death? Why? What comfort can the Christian take in dying?
2. What would you say to a person who has had a very unhappy life on this earth? Is there any reason for that person to look forward to heaven and eternal life? Where would you point them in the Bible?
3. Paul says that Christ has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19b). How does one live that out in this world? What should we do to be reconcilers? What, exactly, are we reconciling?

Questions about this lecture can be directed to [wbs@autumnridgechurch.org](mailto:wbs@autumnridgechurch.org)