

# How Can We Avoid Being Discouraged?

by Ron R. Ritchie

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Many times we find ourselves asking the eternal questions, 'Where did I come from?', 'Why am I here?', and, 'Do I really have to leave?' Life is a mystery. It is a challenge to Christians and non-Christians alike. Our time on earth brings many seasons of joy, laughter and happiness as we seek fulfillment of our hopes, our dreams and ambitions. Yet we also experience seasons of faded hopes, broken dreams and unrealized ambitions. Those are the times when I hear myself singing an old 60's refrain, 'It's a strange, strange world we live in, Master Jack.' I find myself becoming discouraged. So the obvious question comes to mind, 'How can we avoid being discouraged?'

Discouragement immobilizes us. It takes away our inner joy, peace, and sense of wholeness. Recently a leader of the 'human potential' movement claimed to have developed a philosophy to avoid being discouraged. He wrote, 'I am bigger than anything that can happen to me. All these things, sorrow, misfortune, and suffering, are outside my door. I am in the house and I have the key.' How I wish life were that simple! The folly of that kind of thinking leaves many adrift on a sea of uncertainty. The philosophy that says 'I am the captain of my fate' is unrealistic, false, and totally unacceptable to the Christian.

The Christian seeks reality in the word of God. When he asks the question, 'How can I avoid being discouraged?' Scripture is the rock on which he takes refuge. In this series from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians we are discovering that the apostle sets forth many spiritual principles for living in this 20th century day. This time we will see that he has an answer to that question which we all ask at one time or another, 'How can we, avoid being discouraged?'

We have already seen that Paul has shared the secrets of his life and ministry, why he did not lose heart. (11 Cor. 4:1-15) First, he depended on the indwelling Holy Spirit as he shared the gospel plainly, living in the sight of God and trusting him to break through the veils of pride and self-sufficiency of his hearers. Last week I spoke to 120 people (98% of whom were non-Christians) at a funeral service for a woman who had become, a Christian just moments before her death. Before I spoke, several poems were read and strange statements were made about where she had departed to. Those present seemed to be trying to wave goodbye to her. I began to feel discouraged, but I stood up anyway and said, 'I'd like to give you some good news: Jesus loves you and died for your sins and mine.' Two people in the front row said, 'Oh no!' They were angry because I had made mention of the deceased's salvation. What a moment of discouragement! Then I remembered the apostle Paul, who was quite used to this type of situation. That got me going again. I noticed, however, that as soon as I said 'Amen,' 120 people shot out the door! I didn't have a rush of people telling me the good news that they had become Christians as I was talking. But I wasn't discouraged, for I knew God would somehow use his word to make light come out of darkness.

The second reason Paul did not lose heart was that his goal was, as he wrote, to 'preach Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake'; thirdly, Paul realized he was a 'jar of clay' like everyone else, yet he contained the treasure of Christ and his word, and his life was being used to the honor and glory of God; and fourthly, he lived by faith, believing that God was using his afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and traumas to lead many to himself.

In the section we will be looking at today we will see that Paul reveals three more insights which helped him as he sought to answer the question, 'How can we avoid being discouraged?' First, we should fix our eyes on the unseen; secondly, fix our minds on our eternal home; and thirdly, fix our hearts to please the Lord.

## 1. Fix our eyes on the unseen 4: 16-18

**Therefore 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. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**

Paul was a realist. When he wrote this letter he was probably in his mid-50's. His step was not as quick as it had been, he did not see as well as before, his hair was not as thick as when he was a youth. He would have agreed with the words of Job, 'My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle. I waste away. I will not live forever.' We are but jars of clay, dust designed to contain God himself. Yet these containers are wasting away as rust eats into iron, as moths eat into cloth. The good news for the Christian, despite the fact that with the rest of humanity he watches his physical body waste away, however, is that when he came to Christ he was 'born again' spiritually. He became a new creature, a new man. The inner man became an eternal-life being. And this new life is not wasting away. On the contrary, the Christian is being 'renewed day by day,' not by activity but by the presence of the Holy Spirit within him. In the words of Isaiah 40:28-31:

**Do you not know? Have you not heard'  
The Lord is an everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He will not grow tired or weary,  
and His understanding no one can fathom  
He gives strength to the weary,  
and increases the power of the weak.  
Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fail.  
But those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow tired,  
they will walk and not be faint.**

When I meet old friends from my past before I became a Christian, they always remember me as I was then and assume I'm the same now. I find myself thinking, 'I don't think they know who they're talking to. There's a new me now, a new me that's being renewed day by day.' As a young man I was playing baseball one day and a dear old lady friend of mine, close to 80, was watching the game as she sat in her rocking chair on the front porch. Between innings a few of us sat with her and talked. I asked her, 'How do you like the game?' 'I love it,' she said, 'What are you thinking about while we are playing?' I asked her. She replied, 'I was thinking, if it wasn't for this body I'd be on second base!' We are wasting away, aren't we? Last night I watched a television show on models. They all seemed to agree that their greatest fear was the fear of wrinkles and grey hair. An ex-model, however, said she had stopped thinking that her body was all she was. She said she had gained wisdom about life. Although she wasn't a Christian she had learned one of the secrets of her humanity.

The second reason Paul was not discouraged is this: 'For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.' Paul is weighing, on an imaginary set of scales, his afflictions on the one side and the glory to come on the other. He sought to understand life from God's point of view, to look over God's shoulder, as it were, and view the spiritual realities behind his present outward circumstances. The apostle and his companions had experienced afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, trauma, hardship, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, shipwrecks, and to Paul was added a thorn in the flesh, but all of these were achieving 'an eternal glory that far outweighs them all,' Paul says. They somehow fit in with our maturing process, God's plan of redemption, and his eternal kingdom. Be encouraged. God is at work in these jars of clay. We are not just getting old.

Here Paul contrasts the terms eternal and momentary, weight and light, glory and troubles. In the original language, 'weight' had the idea of authority, influence and responsibility. Here is how the Jerusalem Bible translates this verse: 'Yes, the troubles which are soon over,' though they weigh little, train us for the carrying of a weight of eternal glory which is out of all proportion to them.' God is using all of this to train us for something better. Every day we're learning something new in order to be better prepared for where we're going.

This verse goes right along with some of the promises which Jesus made to his disciples in the Upper Room. Speaking of his coming kingdom, he said, 'And you are those who have stood by me in my trials. And just as my Father has granted me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones, judging [governing] the twelve tribes of Israel.' (See also Matt. 19:27-30) Paul used that same theme of judging in I Corinthians 6:3-4, when he told the Corinthians that one day they would judge angels as well as the world. That word should encourage our hearts when fear and discouragement face us.

But don't try to stop the process of trials and perplexities because God is getting you ready for 'an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.' First we must follow in the steps of Jesus. however. As Philippians 2:5-11 says.

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death\_ even death on a cross!  
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

2 Timothy 2:11-12 says, 'Here is a trustworthy saying, If we died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.' In his book 'The Eternal Weight of Glory,' C. S. Lewis wrote, 'The promises of Scripture may very roughly be reduced to five heads. It has promised, firstly, that we shall be with Christ; secondly, that we shall be like him; thirdly, that we shall have glory; fourthly, that we shall, in some sense, be fed or feasted or entertained; and finally, that we shall have some sort of official position in the universe--ruling cities, judging angels, being pillars of God's temple.' All of this is saying that this life is important to the next. Everything that occurs to the Christian in this life is adding up, and the best is yet to come. First the suffering, then the glory. When we have that perspective, how can we be discouraged, disheartened and complaining? Everything is on schedule.

So Paul says, 'We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.' The key to understanding life is to live by faith in Christ, for faith is trusting in the unseen realities. 1 John 2:15-17 says, 'Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.' Everything we see and become involved in while we are on this earth is temporary in light of what is coming.

The writer of Hebrews says this about the unseen: '...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful man, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.' So that you will not be discouraged. In the story, 'The Little Prince,' the fox which the prince had trained shared his secret about life: 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.'

How can we avoid being discouraged? First, we must fix our eyes on the unseen; and secondly, we must

## **2. Fix our minds on our eternal home 5:1-5**

**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 up 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.**

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand three basic truths which would help them not lose heart and become discouraged in their immediate stressful and troubled circumstances. First? he says, '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.' First century Greek and Roman philosophers regarded their bodies in a much different light. Epictetus (65-120 A.D.), the Greek Stoic philosopher, said of himself, 'Thou art a poor soul, burdened with a corpse.' Seneca (65 A.D.-?), a Roman philosopher and writer of tragedies, wrote, 'I am a higher being and born for higher things than to be the slave of my body, which I look upon as a shackle put upon my freedom...in so detestable a habitation dwells the free soul.'

But Paul says our bodies are 'jars of clay' and 'earthly tents.' They are fragile and temporary; they are wasting away. The apostle had written in Philippians, 'To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.' But at our physical death--for that is our fate, since through the sin of one man death entered our experience because all have sinned (Rom. 5:12)--our bodies go back into the ground. But, Paul says, we also know that our bodies are 'tents,' and as such they are designed only for 'camping out.' When our tent is destroyed (in physical death) our inner man will receive a permanent eternal home, formed by the hand of God, a house designed for eternity to house our eternal soul and spirit, for a body of some kind is essential to our personality (1 Cor. 15). So physical death for the Christian is, as it were, 'breaking camp' before we go home. We use our tent for a season of camping, but we don't want to live in a tent forever. Anyone who has spent a week camping out in summer knows that.

Helmut Thielicke in 'The Mystery of Death,' writes:

...Death acquires...a different quality. It ceases to be a hostile barrier let down between time and eternity... Now death becomes a bridge, a transition...death is no longer a judgement that compels us to leave all; then it becomes the joy of going back home. For now the Lord awaits me on the other side of the dark grave and he heads me from faith to sight, from this world where we see in a dim mirror to the table of the Father.'

Death is simply breaking camp and going home to dinner with the Father.

'Meanwhile we groan...,' Paul says, introducing the second truth which will encourage the Corinthians in their troubled circumstances. '...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 up by life.' The living groan for their eternal house which will be given to those who are alive when Christ returns, as well as to those who have died in Christ. And it will be given immediately because we do not want to be 'found naked,' i.e., we don't want to be found disembodied spirits. We long for our covering, we for identity, to be clothed with a resurrection body. During the Depression my family had to leave our home and live, in a tent. This was no camping trip. The tent was our only hoary' until a tree fell on it during a storm. I remember my mother, sitting in the rain, groaning for her home. Our eternal home i i like a great gown that will cover us better than our present tent. Then we will be swallowed up in eternal life--life with God, a life was intended to be lived.

Here is the third truth: 'Now it is God who has made us for this s very purpose and has given us the spirit as a deposit. guaranteeing what is to come.' We owe our existence to God, who grants to us our resurrected body so that we may reign with Christ forever. And God in Christ has given his church, his bride, an engagement ring--the presence and witness of his Holy Spirit Ephesians I says that when we believed we were 'marked with a seal. the promise of the Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's own possession--to the praise of his glory.' (Eph 1:13-14)

How can we avoid being discouraged? First, we must fix our eyes on the unseen; secondly. we must fix our

eyes on our eternal home; and thirdly. we must

### **3. Fix our hearts on pleasing Christ 5:6-10**

**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. we 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.**

The resurrected Christ is now present and reigning in our hearts. The Holy Spirit lives within us. and though we sense that our body is wasting away. yet in this time of 'tenting' we live by faith, not by sight. Faith is the key to Christianity. All the saints of the past had to live in their tents as we are now doing. Hebrews 11:9-10 says, 'By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents. as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' Jesus promised his disciples, and us as well, that although we have to 'tent' on earth for a season, and thus be away from his visible presence, by faith we will one day see him face to face. That is why Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.'

'Therefore we are always confident...I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.' Paul is saying, 'You know, I would love to leave the afflictions perplexities, persecutions and trauma of this fallen and evil world, with all its sorrow, grief, pain and disappointments, but I'm not in control of my life or the time of my "tenting." ' Psalm 90 says. As for the days of our life they contain seventy years; or if due to strength eighty years...so teach us to number our days that we may better present to Thee a heart of wisdom.' In other words. buy up the time because this life isn't all there is. Use God's wisdom, love and knowledge. Don't waste your life on things that are passing away. Psalm 139 says, 'In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me when as yet there was not one of them.' God knew when you were going to be born and how long you are going to live.' Job 14:5 says, '...[man's] days are determined, the number of his months is with thee, and his limits you have set so he cannot pass.'

So the apostle continues. 'We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.' In other words, 'My body is not who I am. If I wear a tent or a house that has already been prepared by God, which one day I will put on, that isn't me. Who am I then? My inner man is who I am. I'm a new creation in Christ and that is what I will always be. As such I have been given power to choose. I have made and am making it my goal. my ambition to please the Lord.' That means to be Christlike, drawing on his power moment by moment. Jesus said, 'I am here only to do the will of my Father. I only do, say and go where the Father leads.' That's how we too please God. Make it your ambition to be like Christ. 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Without me you can do nothing of eternal value or consequence.' To please God, then, has to do with our relationship to Jesus. As Augustine said, 'Love God and do what you please.' Obviously if you love God you'll do exactly what he wants you to do. It has been said of Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, who died in 1892, 'In his heart Jesus stood unapproached, unrivalled. He worshiped Him. He adored Him. He was our Lord's delighted captive. Whatever Spurgeon did he did for Christ, and it was the controlling aim of all his life and work.' A delighted captive of Jesus! Make it your aim to be likewise a captive of Christ!

Now the motivating factor behind Paul's ambition to please the Lord with his gifts, his life and his time: 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad.' In Corinth there was what was called a 'bema seat,' a judgment seat, where justice was dispensed and official business was carried out. According to Acts 18, Paul himself had been taken there to face the magistrates once.

Many people are confused about the 'judgment seat.' Here is the Holy Spirit, of these fleshly motives, he would judge them a letter and response on this subject which I saw in a Saudi Arabian newspaper I receive regularly:

Q. What is the suffering in the grave? I will be grateful for a detailed account of what happens to a Muslim after he is buried until the time when he is resurrected on the Day of Resurrection.

A. We are told by the Prophet that when a person is buried two angels come to him and question him about his beliefs. He is also asked about how far he translated his beliefs into actions. A good person who has conducted himself well in this life, and has observed the teachings of Islam with diligence, will find good reward in the grave, while a person who has failed to observe the proper teachings given by Allah and the Prophets will receive punishment in the grave before he is resurrected on the Day of Judgment. The prophet describes the grave as either a garden of Heaven or a pit of Hell.

That's terrible news! What a frightening place to be, because you never quite know what's going to happen to you.

But Paul says he is motivated by the judgment seat of Christ. He will not appear for his sins because they're all forgiven. When he appears, rather, he will be judged based on his works, whether he did them in the flesh or in the spirit. The issue is, what is our motive behind our good works? If they are done in the flesh they are wood, hay and stubble; if they are done in the spirit they are gold, silver and precious stones. (I Cor. 3:12-15) Paul has already mentioned that we walk by faith, drawing on the life of Christ for everything we do.

As Paul went through life, drawing on the life and power of Christ, he discovered that there were times when he slipped back into the flesh. When he became aware, by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, of these fleshly motives, he would judge them and then go on depending on the Lord for godly motives in his words and actions. So in a real sense he realized that the judgment seat of Christ was already open for business. At the same time he knew that on occasion he could not be sure of what was correct (I Cor. 4:3-5), so he would wait to do a final walk through of his life in eternity with the Lord. As it was with Paul, so it is with us. 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...' It will be a time of judgment as well as a time--of encouragement. It will be a time of 'official business for the judgment is also necessary for the appointment of places of rulership and authority with Christ in his role as King of kings and Lord of lords at his revelation in power and glory.

How can we avoid being discouraged? We must fix our eyes on the unseen; fix our minds on our eternal home; and fix our hearts on pleasing Christ. Was Paul discouraged at the end of his 'tenting' season? Here are his words to Timothy, written just before his death in Rome:

**I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.**

The tent which we are wearing is not who we really are. It has been designed to get us through this earthly existence, that's all. All the afflictions, struggles and stressful circumstances we face on a daily basis are training us for our eternal weight of glory which God himself will award to us on that great day.

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March 31, 1985

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