

REMAINING ENCOURAGED IN A DISCOURAGING ENVIRONMENT

SERIES: HOW TO LIVE CHRIST-LIKE IN A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

by Ron Ritchie

How many times have you found yourselves asking the classic 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, dreams, and ambitions. But we also experience seasons of faded hopes, broken dreams, and unrealized ambitions. Those are the times when I hear myself singing an old sixties refrain, "It's a strange, strange world we live in, Master Jack." And this strange, strange world is getting even stranger as we watch our whole western society trying to build life on the foundation of relativism as it worships at the pillars of secularism, antihistoricalism, naturalism, utopianism, and pragmatism.

The Christian community is seeking to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus in this post-Christian society even while coming under more and more attack. Film maker Oliver Stone (producer of *JFK*), when asked recently by a reporter from *The New Republic* if he felt guilty because he owned four houses, said, "I don't feel guilty. That's a Western Christian trip." The world is confused about the love and mercy of Jesus, especially when it sees things like the murder by a Christian of abortionist Dr. Gunn. These are just a couple of the kinds of things that discourage many in the Christian community who are trying to be light in this dark world.

Discouragement saps us of our inner joy, peace, and wholeness and leaves us immobilized. That is why the writer of Hebrews wrote, "...encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today', lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ...." (Hebrews 3:13-14.) The secret of remaining encouraged in this currently discouraging world system is to remember that we are partakers of Christ...He is the vine, we are the branches, and without him we can do nothing.

Paul picks up on that theme in 2 Corinthians and shares with us the fruit of living our life in Christ. His world was, as ours continues to be, in a fallen condition filled with temptations for Christians to become discouraged. But in chapter 4, verses 1-12 we saw that Paul did not lose heart because he had come to this spiritual realization: Once he had placed his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he had become a minister of the new covenant, drawing daily on the power of the Holy Spirit to cope with all his present realities. This kept him transparent before men and God as he preached with integrity the message, "Jesus is Lord." He realized that he was ministering out of a weak "clay pot" that contained the treasure of our risen Lord and his word. And God places all our clay pots into this fallen world where we are stressed, perplexed, persecuted, and traumatized so that "the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves," resulting in the salvation of many.

As we turn to 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 we will find that Paul reveals three spiritual insights to help us remain encouraged in the midst of a very discouraging environment: We should fix our eyes on the unseen, fix our minds on our eternal home, and fix our hearts on pleasing the Lord now and forever.

Fix our eyes on the unseen

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Paul was a realist. When he wrote this letter he was probably in his mid-fifties. His step was not as quick as it had been, he did not see as well as he had, and 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,
and they come to an end...."

We are but jars of clay designed to contain God himself. And these human containers are wasting away as iron is eaten by rust and cloth by moths. But Paul knew that we who have placed our faith in our risen Lord have become a new creation whose inner person is now an eternal being. This new inner person is not wasting away, but on the contrary is "being renewed day by day," not by activity but by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, regardless of the condition of our clay pot. So what happens to the clay pot ceases to matter.

In the words of Isaiah 40:28-31:

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?

The LORD is the 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 fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Paul also was encouraged because he understood that "...momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison...." Notice how he contrasts the terms eternal and momentary, weight and lightness, glory and affliction. The trials were producing eternal glory. Paul is describing an imaginary set of scales with his afflictions on one side and the glory to come on the other; he is seeking 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 circumstances. The apostle and his companions had experienced afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, trauma, hardship, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, and shipwrecks; and to Paul was added a thorn in the flesh. But all of these were achieving "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison." On the imaginary scales the glory to come far outweighs all the afflictions.

In the original language the word weight carried the idea of authority, influence, and responsibility. Paul understood that these afflictions were designed by God to prepare us for responsibility in eternity. Be encouraged; God is at work in these jars of clay. We are not just getting old. This is in total contrast to the modern view of secularism that teaches people to live only for the present because there is no other life. But who we are as Christians and what we do on earth have eternal consequences.

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 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 [fellowship], and you will sit on thrones [positions of power], judging the twelve tribes of Israel [governing]" (Luke 22:28-30). Paul used that same theme of judging in 1 Corinthians 6:3-4 when he told the Corinthians that one day they would judge angels as well as the world. This word should encourage our hearts when we face fear and discouragement. Keep in mind that God is using our trials to get us ready for an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs all our troubles. 2 Timothy 2:12 says, "Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him."

Revelation 3:11 says, "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God...."
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, "...while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." The key to understanding life is to live by faith in Christ, for faith is trusting in the unseen realities. In 1 John 2:15-17 the apostle John warns about the seen things: "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh [power] and the lust of the eyes [possessions] and the boastful pride of life [position], is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides 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 looking at 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 men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12:1-3.)

In the story *The Little Prince*, the fox that 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."

The key to remaining encouraged in a discouraging environment is firstly to fix our eyes on the unseen and then to...

Fix our minds on our eternal home

2 Corinthians 5:1-5

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

Here Paul tells the Corinthians three basic truths to help them not to lose heart and become discouraged in their immediate stressful and troubled circumstances. Paul is recalling, first, that we are aliens on this earth following in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. He has just talked about how we are eternal beings living on this earth as "clay pots" to contain the risen life of Christ. Now as a tentmaker himself he wants the Corinthians to see that in light of eternity these clay pots are also tents that we use to camp out in until we are called home to be with our Lord.

First-century Greek and Roman philosophers regarded their bodies in a much different light. Epictetus (65-120 AD), the Greek Stoic philosopher, said of himself, "Thou art a poor soul, burdened with a corpse." Seneca (65 AD-?), 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."

In contrast to the thinking of Paul's contemporary society, his understanding here is that once God calls believers to join him in eternity, He simply "breaks camp" and folds up our earthly tent. When our tent is folded up in physical death, our inner man will receive a permanent eternal home formed by the hand of God, a house designed for eternity to hold our eternal soul and spirit, for a body of some kind is essential to our personality (see 1 Corinthians 15). Moses and Elijah were seen wearing their eternal houses on the mount of transfiguration, where Jesus took off his "tent", which he had been wearing since his conception, and put on his eternal house, which he hadn't worn for some thirty-three years, and joined them for a few moments in glory. Then he came back into time and put his earthly "tent" back on until his physical death on the cross, at which time he again put on his eternal house forever.

Now Paul introduces a second truth to encourage the Corinthians in their troubled circumstances: "...longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan...." 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 home until a tree fell on it during a storm. I remember my mother sitting in the rain and weeping for her home. In this way we groan for our eternal houses. "...being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." We do not want to be found naked; that is, to be disembodied spirits. We long for our covering, for identity---to be clothed with a resurrection body.

What exactly happens when a believer dies? One idea is called soul sleep: When you die you fall into a deep sleep and are unaware of time until the Lord returns, at which time you are awakened and given your new resurrection body. But when the dying thief on the cross said to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when You come in your kingdom [acknowledging him as Messiah]!" Jesus replied, "...*today* you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Italics mine; Luke 23:43.)

I call another idea "rent-a-suits." Some think that our tent is placed in the ground and our eternal spirit is given a rent-a-suit that we will wear in heaven until the Lord returns again to earth. At that time he will collect all the rent-a-suits from those believers who have died on earth and give them as well as the believers on earth who have never died their eternal houses (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54). This thinking comes easily to us because we are caught in time and space, and all of our thinking is locked into a sequence with a beginning, middle, and end. But from God's eternal state everything happens all at once; we can't bring time into eternity.

A third idea I would term instant resurrection bodies. Jesus' resurrection body is our best example that from God's point of view believers immediately receive their eternal house as soon as they fold their tent on earth. Moses and Elijah had their eternal houses on when they met Jesus in his eternal house at the transfiguration. It appears, further, from many other Scriptures that from God's eternal point of view we will all arrive in eternity at the same time---Adam, Moses, Elijah, Stephen, Paul, Peter, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Smith, Stedman, you, and I. In Hebrews 11:39-40 the writer has just listed all the saints placed by God in the Hall of Faith, and then he adds, "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect." I wish there was time to share more of this concept. In Ray Stedman's book *Authentic Christianity* he has a chapter entitled "Time and Eternity" which would give more insight into this view. But we should take encouragement from the fact that the time is short indeed until we all receive the eternal home we so long for.

Here is the third truth Paul tells the Corinthians to eliminate their discouragement: "Now he who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge." We owe our existence to God, who grants to us our resurrection 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 1 says that when we believed we were "marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession---to the praise of his glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14.) Every time we become aware of the Holy Spirit's activity, we should take heart, because it reminds us of God's guarantee of the reality of our eternal home.

The key to remaining encouraged in a discouraging environment is to firstly fix our eyes on the unseen, secondly fix our minds on our eternal home, and thirdly...

Fix our hearts on pleasing Christ

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord---for we walk by faith, not by sight---we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Our risen Lord Jesus is present and reigns 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 are certain that 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 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."

"...We are of good courage..." Paul says this two times. He is saying, as he reflects on his life up to that point, "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, and finally come into the presence of my personal Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But it is not my will but his be done." So then he concludes: "Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him." In other words, "My body, or this tent, is not who I am. Who am I then? My inner man is who I am. I am a new creation in Christ, a child of God, and that is who I will always be. As such I have been given power to choose. And I have made it my goal, my ambition, to please the Lord." That means to be Christlike, drawing on his power moment by moment. Jesus himself said, "I am here only to do the will of my Father. I only do what the Father

leads me to do, say what he leads me to say, and go where he leads me to go." That is how we, too, please God. So make it your ambition to be like Christ. He also said, "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 with Jesus. As Augustine said, "Love God and do what you please." Obviously if you love God you will 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 unrivaled. He worshipped 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." He was a delighted captive of Jesus!

Now we come to the motivating factor behind Paul's ambition to please the Lord with his life, gifts, talents, and time: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." In Corinth there was what was called a *bema* or 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. That *bema* seat still exists in ancient Corinth.

Many Christians are confused about God's judgments. Let's talk about them for a moment. There is the judgment of our sins on the cross. Jesus was willing to go to the cross and take on himself the full wrath of God against our sin; he became our substitute and died in our place. If we place our faith in him as our substitute, our sins are not only forgiven but never remembered again, which God promised in the new covenant.

There is the judgment of the nations (see Matthew 25:31-46). The nations will one day appear before Christ and be judged according to how they treated Israel during the great tribulation period.

There is the great white throne judgment (see Revelation 20:11-15) in which all who are not found in "the book of life" are cast into the lake of fire. This is called the second death.

Then, finally, there is the judgment seat of Christ. It is this present and future judgment that is a motivating factor in the life of Paul. This is not the judgment of a person's sins, for they have been dealt with. Nevertheless sin has an effect on our service for the king. This judgment has to do with the motives behind our good works: Were they done in the power of the flesh or the power of the Holy Spirit? According to 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, if our good works are done in the flesh they are wood, hay and stubble and will be burned up. If they are done in the Spirit God views them as gold, silver, and precious stones.

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 of these fleshly motives by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, 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 was not able to determine his true motives (see 1 Corinthians 4:3-5), but he knew that in eternity Jesus would walk through his life with him and show him whether his motives were of the flesh or the Spirit. As it was with Paul, so it is with us. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...." It will not be a matter of salvation but of reward and loss at that time. It will be a time not only of judgment but also of encouragement. And it will be a time of official business, for the judgment is necessary for the appointment of places of rulership and authority with Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, at his revelation in power and glory.

How can we remain encouraged in a discouraging environment? (1) We need to fix our eyes on the unseen. Physically we are decaying, but our inner person is being renewed day by day. The trials and struggles of this life are producing for us an eternal weight of glory, and it is becoming clearer every new day as God gives us the spiritual eyes to see that this world is growing strangely dim in the light of the glory of our Lord Jesus. (2) We need to fix our minds on our eternal home. As we live our lives by faith and not by sight we realize now that all of life is not just camping out in a tent on this earth, but that we are looking forward to our new eternal

house. (3) We need to fix our hearts on pleasing Christ, whether here on earth or in heaven. For we are all presently standing and will stand in eternity before the judgment seat of Christ so that the motives behind our good works can be judged, resulting in our place of responsibility in eternity with Christ Jesus.

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." (2 Timothy 4:6-8.)

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