

This Advent Season we have been talking about coming home for Christmas. This week, we are going to think about what it might mean to Come Home Forever. We are going to think about the promise we have of eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord! Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept you Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:9 Common English Bible (CEB)

13 We have the same faithful spirit as what is written in scripture: *I had faith, and so I spoke.*^[a] We also have faith, and so we also speak. **14** We do this because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus, and he will bring us into his presence along with you. **15** All these things are for your benefit. As grace increases to benefit more and more people, it will cause gratitude to increase, which results in God's glory.

16 So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. **17** Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. **18** We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal.

5 We know that if the tent that we live in on earth is torn down, we have a building from God. It's a house that isn't handmade, which is eternal and located in heaven. **2** We groan while we live in this residence. We really want to dress ourselves with our building from heaven— **3** since we assume that when we take off this tent, we won't find out that we are naked. **4** Yes, while we are in this tent we groan, because we are weighed down. We want to be dressed not undressed, so that what is dying can be swallowed up by life. **5** Now the one who prepared us for this very thing is God, and God gave us the Spirit as a down payment for our home.

6 So we are always confident, because we know that while we are living in the body, we are away from our home with the Lord. **7** We live by faith and not by sight. **8** We are confident, and we would prefer to leave the body and to be at home with the Lord. **9** So our goal is to be acceptable to him, whether we are at home or away from home.

Come Home Forever

If you have ever spent any time in a tent, you know that living in a tent is not as comfortable and secure as a house. You may have found out that it is extra hot or cold depending on the weather, and that a storm can totally wreck a tent, and the ground is really hard if you are trying to sleep. Tents may be great for a weekend adventure, but much beyond that and the tent loses its attraction. It's easy to figure out that a tent is only temporary.

And in today's scripture it is this image of a torn tent that the Apostle Paul uses to describe our earthly bodies. It is in the letters to the church at Corinth that Paul talks a lot about the suffering that he went through. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul writes about all the crazy things he had suffered for the sake of Christ: shipwreck, imprisonment, beatings, hunger, cold, thirst, stoning, danger from robbers, from his own people, and from the Gentiles. In 2 Corinthians we see Paul really being very honest about the hardships he has gone through; and he is also very honest about his weaknesses. And the main point of this letter is to show that it is in our

weaknesses that the power of God can be seen – it is in our weakness that the greatness of God stands out like a sore thumb. And ultimately when our struggles on this earth are ended, Paul says we can expect a different kind of place to come home to He says:
We know that if the tent that we live in on earth is torn down, we have a building from God. It's a house that isn't handmade, which is eternal and located in heaven.

Now it seems to me that Paul loves to use metaphors. And we know he's not really talking about a tent. Instead, Paul is comparing our bodies with torn tents. He's saying our bodies are temporary shelters on this earth. I think we would all agree with that. When we reach a certain age our bodies start to rebel on us, don't they? Our bodies get weaker, we start to ache and hurt, we get wrinkles and gray hair, we can't move around as well, and our systems malfunction. And not only are our bodies like torn tents because of the normal aging process, but at all ages we are susceptible to disease and injury. And our bodies will eventually give up.

And relatively speaking, we are alive on this earth for a really short period of time. Just to get that in perspective, I want you to think for a minute about this. Think of the names of your grandparents if you can. And then would you think of the names of your great-grandparents if you can. And then it gets even harder, would you think of the names of your great great grandparents. Now some of you are genealogy buffs, but most of us have trouble naming these ancestors of ours. My point is that our time on this earth is limited, and we seem to live like we will be here forever. We forget that we really are in a temporary living condition here on this earth – and so Paul describes our earthly life and our earthly body as a tent that is torn down. It is our life after death when we really truly come home --- forever. And it is this home that we long for!

Now although there are so many beautiful words and profound ideas in this scripture, for me Paul has two main messages. The first one is that when the tents that are our bodies are torn down, that is not the end of our story. Paul is confident in the power of Christ – he is confident in the story of Jesus's resurrection. And he is most certain that all who believe will also be resurrected – they will soon have resurrection bodies and a house that is eternal in heaven. Paul is certain that we are only passing time on this earth until we get to our ultimate eternal destination. In 4:14, Paul says:

We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus, and he will bring us into his presence along with you. (4: 14).

Paul's faith in Jesus is so strong that he is certain that just as Christ was resurrected, he and the other believers will be resurrected, too. In Philippians 3, Paul says that our citizenship is in heaven --- not on this earth. (Phil. 3:20). Paul sees his trials on earth as nothing compared to the promise of eternal life. In 2 Cor 4:17, Paul says it like this:

17 Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison.

Now I need to say that 2 Corinthians is a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth--his audience was mainly folks who already believed in Jesus. He is writing to first century Christians and encouraging them in their faith. And so I encourage you **all** today with Paul's words – whether you are a believer or not, know that it is through faith in Christ that we can

experience life everlasting after our torn tents fall apart. When our bodies fail, God “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus, and he will bring us into his presence.” This is God’s promise to us. It is through faith in Christ that we are saved. So I urge you to come to Christ this day! Like Jesus said to his first followers, “come and see” what it’s all about. I urge you to come to Christ for the first time **or** in a deeper way. This invitation is for each of us! The question we **each** face is how will we respond?

The second big idea I want you to take away from this scripture is that because our time on this earth is short and because our citizenship is in heaven, it ought to change how we live! We need to make the most of our lives. There is no time to waste.

Now the first century Christians in Corinth were convinced that Jesus would return during their lifetimes and that they needed to be prepared for this to happen at any moment. And there are people today who argue the end is near. Regardless of when Christ returns, the end of **our** lives could come at any time, so we too have a high incentive to come to Christ—to profess our faith — to say “I believe.” But then we also have a high incentive to live totally focused on our mission for God because we **don’t** have a lot of time and there **is** a lot at stake. Paul says in Verse 5:9 that “our goal is to be acceptable to [God], whether we are at home or away from home.”

As followers of Christ we are called to live not for ourselves but for the sake of others. There is nothing about salvation that is simply for us. Instead we are in this together. (Wesley Study Bible, 1465). Our mission on this earth is to love God and to love people. And one way that we are specifically called to accomplish this is to go and tell others about the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul says it this way starting with verse 13 in chapter 4.

13 We have the same faithful spirit as what is written in scripture: *I had faith, and so I spoke.*[a] We also have faith, and so we also speak.

Our faith is to be used for the benefit of other people. The Apostle Paul poured out his life to speak for Jesus. If we have faith, we are supposed to speak— right? We are supposed to tell others this good news of great joy! Now I know that many times it is uncomfortable to speak to others about our faith. But I think it is really important that we speak about our faith in a normal and natural way ----- and I believe we are **only** called to speak as the Holy Spirit directs us to. And sometimes, God’s Spirit won’t leave us alone about speaking up about our faith. Have you ever experienced this movement of the Holy Spirit where someone or something gets on your mind and you can’t shake the nagging feeling to say something or do something?

God wants us to speak and act toward our unchurched friends and family and coworkers and neighbors in a way that reveals the light that Jesus brings! And we don’t even have to do it of our own power or with our own words because scripture tells us that the Spirit will give us words and power to do that.

Gary Tyra wrote about his experience of speaking for Christ when he was a brand new youth pastor in the 70s. He had just read the book *The Cross and the Switchblade* by Dave Wilkerson, about his outreach to drug addicts and gang members in Harlem in the 50s – it’s an amazing story of sharing the light of Christ. And it was after reading *The Cross and the Switchblade* that the youth pastor noticed a group of rowdy kids hanging out in a neighborhood park causing problems. He wrote that the Spirit gave him the strong feeling that he needed to stop and talk to the kids. But he was very introverted and inexperienced. He had only recently

come to faith. And he resisted for a long time. But the Spirit kept nagging him to do it. And so here's what happened:

"Finally, I could no longer withstand the pressure the Holy Spirit was applying to my conscience. One day as I drove by the park I spied a good number of the kids up to no good. For heaven's sake, I remember thinking to myself, if David Wilkerson could take the gospel to Harlem, I can take it into this little neighborhood park. So, on an impulse, I quickly swerved my car to the side of the road. In a flash, I flung open the car door and jumped out, heading across the street toward where the [kids] were standing, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. My church required me to wear a suit and tie. So the sight of a guy in a suit, bringing his car to an abrupt stop, emerging quickly and striding toward them in a determined, forthright manner, caused the gaggle to assume that I was some version of "the man." As a result, they began to scatter in all directions! But I called out to them, assuring them that I was not there to hurt or roust them in any way. Remarkably, all of them returned and stood in front of me, about a dozen and a half rowdy teens.

After taking a moment to collect myself, I opened my mouth and began my impromptu ministry presentation, simply saying, "Hey, I could be wrong, but I have this strong feeling that God wants me to tell you guys a story." I then proceeded to share the gospel with them in the form of a parable. A pretty lame parable as I recall. And yet the Holy Spirit was obviously involved in all this.

He says the Holy Spirit took over for three reasons: First, he had done what he felt compelled to do, second the kids had come back to listen, and third he was able to articulate the gospel which was heard. He writes that at the conclusion of his story, every single one of those [young people] knelt in the grass, raised their hands toward heaven as a sign of surrender to God and followed along with a prayer of faith. He said, "It really did happen just like that. My youth group grew about 30 percent as a result of my visit to the park that day. It all started with a prompting from the Spirit to speak and act in Christ's name." (*The Holy Spirit in Mission* by Gary Tyra). When we have said "yes" to this invitation to come home, our faith compels us to share the invitation with others.

I love to hear dramatic stories of how the Holy Spirit works alongside us like this one. I love to think about the scared youth leader talking to the kids in the park. I love the story of Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 people came to believe and follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit of God is just that powerful and can appear like a howling wind. But the Holy Spirit of God is also **so** powerful that it comes like a still, small voice --- in one on one conversations with people we know the best -- in simple invitations to "come and see" that could turn into **God's** invitation to come home forever.

The message today is two-fold: each one of you are invited to come home forever!

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. John 3:16

And ----- we are each called to generously share the invitation with others.

Friends, our time on this earth is limited.

We live in torn tents.

But one day all who believe in Christ Jesus will have eternal life! No more torn tents. Instead, we will live in a place where there is no more crying or mourning or pain. When we

come home forever, we will be in the presence of our holy, holy, holy God --- in a place where we can worship the King of Kings together with all of Creation.

As we stand to sing our praise, to pray, to light a candle -----I invite you to say yes to God in a new way today. Christ invites you to come home forever!