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Proper 6 • 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 (11–17) • June 14, 2015

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Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul rides a roller coaster of emotion. In the opening apology, Paul defends himself against accusations of carelessness and callousness (1:8–2:16). He then writes with joy concerning his apostolic mission and of the glory of the gospel (2:16–4:6). But while the gospel has glory, a minister of the gospel should not expect plenty of glory. So far as appearances go, the opposite is often the case. Nevertheless, Paul trusts in the steadfast love of God. In weakness, God is proving the power of the gospel. Paul will have, in exchange for the weight of suffering here, “an eternal weight of glory” hereafter (4:17).

In 5:1–10, Paul uses a number of strong, balanced contrasts (“at home” *ἠδημέω*/“away from” *κδημέω*; “earthly home”/“heavenly dwelling”; etc.) to illustrate the separation that characterizes this life. Hoping for the future body, which is from God in the heavens, not made with hands, and eternal, we live in present bodies, which are earthly, temporary, and separated from full communion with Christ.

While this separation is stated as a fact (*οἶδα* in 5:1), it is not absolute. Indeed, we are always of good courage (*θαρραυτες . . . πάντοτε*; 5:6; cf. 5:8) for through the first installment of the Spirit we are linked with Christ (cf. 2 Cor 1:22). The Spirit whom the Father has given (note the aorist, *δος*, in 5:5) is the present guarantor of our future salvation.

A further operation of the Spirit is that we “know” (*οἶδα* in 5:6; cf. 4:14; 5:11, 16) the nature and condition of our present pilgrimage. In Paul’s writings, the Christian way of life is closely linked to baptism. Through baptism we receive the Spirit and participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism then puts to an end walking in sin (Col 3:7), gives victory over “human ways” (1 Cor 3:3), and puts the “walk in the flesh” in the past (2 Cor 10:2ff.). We are now controlled by Christ and his Spirit (5:14; cf. 12:18).

Yet the phrase in 5:7 (*δι πίστεως . . . περιπατομεν*) is unique. It is the only instance of *περιπατέω* with the preposition *διά*. This pairing “denotes not the nature, but the accompanying circumstance of the walk.”¹ We should expect, then, that our life in this world is marked by boldness *and* “groaning” (*στενάζω*, repeated in 5:2, 4). Groaning is the result of the eager longing of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:26), and this God-given, Spirit-driven longing to have our perishable bodies replaced by something permanent is evidence that full communion with the Father is possible through Jesus Christ who died for all. Guarding against presumption or despair, Paul admonishes that in all things we strive to “be acceptable to him” (5:9).

Armed with this knowledge, Paul encourages us to persevere through hardships and to proclaim God’s offer of forgiveness and reconciliation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (5:11–17) for all is not as it seems. Just as we do not consider Jesus from a human perspective but through the eyes of faith, believing he died for all and was raised, we do not look at one another or ourselves from the world’s point of view. All who are in Christ are now a new creation.

In a world in which the future can appear to be frightening either because of past sins or present confinements, this text brings a strong word of hope: *all is not as it seems*.

No matter the circumstances of our lives and our world, God is doing a new thing through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus illustrates the power of the gospel with the parable of the tiny mustard seed that becomes a great shrub that shelters the birds (Mk 4:30–32). Ezekiel describes God planting a young and tender twig, and it becomes “a noble cedar” (Ez 17:22–24). In worship, we are brought to the cross of Christ—the tree of life into which we are grafted through holy baptism and sustained with its fruit in the supper we share. It may not look like much, but it grows with a power beyond our understanding.

Daniel Eggold

¹ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Online ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:374.