

July 12, 2009 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 “Longing for God-Life” by Richard Boatman

¹Now we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ²Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, ³because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴For 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. ⁵Now 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.

Do you ever get flies in your car? I'm sure you do. A few days ago, I was driving somewhere when a fly kept buzzing around me. He'd fly over by the passenger window, so I'd roll it down. But instead of flying out the window into freedom, he'd turn back around and fly towards me. I tried using my arm to angle him into the corner of the dash by the window. Then I took my hand and tried to gently push him out. Again and again he flew around my hand and back towards my head. I said to this fly, "You're not very smart, are you? I open the window to help you escape and you keep flying back. You're not very bright." But then it occurred to me, *I'm* the one talking to a fly. How bright can *I* be? Finally, after much effort, the fly made it outside.

Like my attempt to move this fly from captivity in my car to the freedom of the great outdoors, so we are being moved by loving arms towards liberation. Now a part of the process for ultimate spiritual freedom to happen is for this earthly body to be changed. Just as there is a type of death that happens to a caterpillar in order to be changed into a butterfly, Paul says this earthly tent is also being torn down so that, like the butterfly, we can receive the liberation of **resurrected bodies**. This is what the great apostle is talking about when he says in verse 1, "**...we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven...**"

If you were an astronaut and needed to do some work on the space station, what would you need to wear? You'd need a space suit, wouldn't you? The realm of heaven requires a "suit" called a resurrected or glorified body or what Paul calls here "a building from God, an eternal house" that allows us to function in that dimension.

Larae has a double first cousin whose son, named Hans, longed to work for NASA from the time he was kid. A few years ago we went out to the state of Washington to visit this family. This young man who at the time was seventeen already had his

pilot's license and flew us around this magnificent region of the country. He has since graduated with an aeronautics engineering degree and works for NASA. His goal is to be an astronaut. There has nearly always been something within him, an **inner cry, a longing** to work for the space program. He is in a process, cooperating with this longing all along the way.

Verse two says, **“Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling...”** Paul is telling us there is something within the believer that yearns for completion, that longs to be equipped and trained for the heavenly “NASA” program. In Romans 8, the apostle says, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (26).

A minister was giving a sermon on being dead or alive. To add emphasis, he used an illustration. He placed four worms into four separate jars. The first jar contained alcohol, the second cigarette smoke, the third chocolate syrup and the fourth contained clean soil. At the conclusion of his message, the minister reported the following results: The first worm placed in the alcohol was dead. The second worm placed in cigarette smoke was dead. The third worm placed in chocolate syrup was dead. The fourth worm placed in clean soil was alive. “So,” the preacher asked the congregation, “what can you learn from this demonstration?” Maxine who was sitting in the back pew quickly raised her hand and said, “As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!”

Sometimes a congregation hears the right words but doesn't get the correct message. The text says, “Meanwhile we groan...” For Paul this verb always conveys the idea of yearning for home, a heavenly homesickness. It's similar to Psalm 42:1—“As the deer longs for the water brooks, so my soul longs for you, O God.” Or Psalm 63:1—“O God, you are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my soul thirsts for you, my body yearns for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

When it comes to groaning and longing for God, there are at least two branches of Protestant thought. One theological idea is formed by the writings of John Calvin. It argues that only the elect, those destined for heaven even possess this “groaning” this hunger for our heavenly house. It's certainly an explanation as to why two people can hear the same message and one becomes a follower of Christ and the other remains apathetic to the cause. Why do some go through all the rituals of the Church—baptism, confirmation, communion, hear sermons, etc.—and remain uninterested in the things of God? Reformed thought says there is no spark of the

Spirit within them. But Anglican or Wesleyan thought sees it a little differently. For Wesleyans, everyone has an inner longing for God, but it becomes convoluted or we get sidetracked or we try to fill the groaning for God with substitutes, false remedies that, if unrepented of, ultimately destroy us. G.K. Chesterton, the great Anglican preacher said, “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God.” He is describing this concept that there *is* a longing in all of us but, like the country song says, we’re “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

I come to you today from a Wesleyan bent. It seems too cold and callused to say to those lacking a sense of longing, “Well, that’s a shame. Sorry, I guess there’s no divine spark in you.” From an Anglican or Wesleyan view, we can at least offer the hope that everyone has a longing for the God-Life, but in many it is simply misdirected, choked to silence or dulled by intoxicating choices. From a Wesleyan perspective I can at least declare to you, Wake up from your spiritual sleep! Stir up the gift within you! Stop living in dead lifestyles and turn to the living God.

It is this **longing for God-Life** that informs all of Paul’s letters. But such longing is only legitimized if it leads to surrender to this process of transformation, “...so **that**,” as 2 Corinthians 5:4 says, “**what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.**” And this process, like the development of the young man working for NASA, begins in this earthly realm. Hans didn’t just go from reading comic books to showing up at NASA’s doorstep when he was twenty-three and say, “Gee, I’d really like to fly in a rocket.” He surrendered to an ongoing drive, a yearning that caused him to be educated and trained in the area of his pursuit.

It is presumption and arrogance on our part to assume we can just say “I believe in Jesus” but never be held accountable to yield to God’s Spirit in the very process of transformation necessary to experience this “mortal [being] swallowed up by life.” In the Greek, the verb “swallowing up” is emphatic and means “without remainder or completely.” The other day having lunch with a buddy, the sauce on the food we ate was so good that he kiddingly said if it weren’t improper, he “could just lick it off the plate.” He could “swallow [it all] up” leaving no remainder of it. That’s how thoroughly the God-Life is working in us, leaving no trace of the old self-life.

Verse 5 says, “Now it is God who has made us for this...purpose.” The *purpose* refers to this movement or change from a mortal body to a resurrected body, from this tent to our heavenly dwelling which is a new spiritual-physicality. So this movement and change of who we are in Christ *is* the purpose itself. “Why am I here?” That’s why. “Why’d God allow this?” Well, sometimes it’s our own silly choice that causes something. But if it wasn’t, then God allowed it to change us.

What Paul is talking about is what we might call vital Christianity. *Vital* means “essential to life.” It is the root word for *vitalize* which means “to give life to, to give vigor or animation to.”

Quaker lecturer and author, Elton Trueblood wrote, “No vital Christianity is possible unless at least three aspects of it are developed. These three are [1] the inner life of devotion, [2] the outer life of service, and [3] the intellectual life of rationality.” Trueblood is arguing that vital Christianity is expressed in a balanced life of prayer, work & service, and mental exercise and growth. Our minds cannot be renewed if we do not learn to think in line with the vital presence of the Spirit that indwells us. Gordon MacDonald asserts, “The person who does not know how to think will be relentlessly shaped and influenced by the dominant culture around him or her.” As I have often said, vital Christianity’s prime directive is simple, but it is not easy. And we cannot accomplish it without the Holy Spirit’s help.

To this end, verse five continues, “...and [God] has given us the Spirit as a **deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.**” Two things to recognize: 1) When God gives a down payment on something, he’s good for the rest of the purchase. Philippians 1:6 says, “And he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” 2) And the “currency” that God uses for the deposit is of the finest value. The Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us, not merely from a propositional or theoretical standpoint, but experientially: “And we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our human spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:15-16). That’s experience. It is the experience of the Holy Spirit that gives substance to all we say and do.

Recently Larae’s parents were out doing yard work. Because of a storm they had had, Howard was cleaning up debris while Marion was mowing. At one point she asked Howard to lower the blade more as it wasn’t cutting close. He told her it was already as low as it would go so she’d just have to make do. After Howard got done picking up the yard, he went to relieve Marion. She started to get off the mower when Howard said, “Make sure you turn off the blade first.” She said, “How do you that?” He said, “Well that lever there; you move it.” Marion said, “Oh, oh.” She had mowed half the yard without ever turning on the blade! Many of us are guilty of the same thing. We get on the mower of Christianity and go in circles, but nothing gets cut. There is no real dying to self or changing of attitudes or surrender of our stubborn will. But then, by the grace of God, the Spirit gets through to us. He shows us that our “blade” isn’t even turning. He converts our cold heart and gives us a longing, a longing for the God-Life...resurrected living.