

ABSENT FROM THE BODY; PRESENT WITH THE LORD. 2 Corinthian 5:8

Sermon to the saints at Westboro Baptist Church on April 26, 2020

For good reason I will take a temporary break from a sermon on charity to talk of the instantaneous change which all of the believing children of God will undergo at their appointed time. Be thankful for the wisdom and the power of that appointing authority, an Almighty and merciful God. Whether it is by a corporeal death or if we are caught up together with the Lord at his second appearing. This change is the same instantaneous change. We will start in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9:

“For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.”

“We know” is a very instructive use of a phrase. Job used it in his declaration of faith: Job 19:25: *“For I know that my redeemer*

liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.” Among many places it is also used at 1 John 5:20: “*And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.*”

Paul was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3), and he uses the metaphor of a tent—a tabernacle—a temporary abode which is very frail and of short continuance—to carry his point. Job 4:19: “*How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth?*” 2 Peter 1:13-14 “*Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me.*” It is very easy to dismantle a tent. Judges 7:13: “*And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along.*” No matter how bad the baker, a cake cannot be weaponized and knock a tent topsy-turvy, can it? Yes. Ask our friends who like to go camping. Use of the term “tabernacle” or a tent also teaches us how frail and the short continuance of its existence. By the very nature of tents they are made for persons who are looking for a very temporary stay. “[F]or ye are strangers and sojourners with me.” (Leviticus 25:23). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were tent-dwellers. Hebrews 11:9-10. “*By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations,*

whose builder and maker is God.” We too are strangers and sojourners in this world.

Peter uses the same kind of language—“dissolved”—at 2 Peter 3:11: *“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness.”* Dust dissolves. Genesis 2:7: *“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”* Genesis 3:19: *“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”* This process, called “dissolved,” is not an annihilation but a dissolution of the body’s union with the soul.

The soul will live for eternity, so 70 years of living in this natural body is a very short, fraction of a time. According to Psalm 90:10 70 years it is our expected lifespan. The Bible uses about every form of human expression to describe the shortness of our life on this earth and therefore the use of this body in its fallen condition, even under the very best health and environment conditions possible. For example, James 4:14: *“Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”*

Ethan the Ezrahite describes the work of God to help us here:

“I have laid help upon one that is mighty!” Psalm 89:19

“We have a building of God.” God built it. We have it. The use of “we have” in the present tense—not we will have—is very instructive and comforting. See, for example: John 3:36 *“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”* And,

John 6:47: ***“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.”***

And as a double reassurance it is described as ***“not made with [man’s] hands”*** and ***“eternal in the heavens.”***

Our Lord Jesus Christ described this building project at John 14:1-3: ***“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”***

This eternal home is sharply contrasted with the earthly tabernacle in 1 Corinthians 15:44-49:

“It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.”

They will immediately enter into that new tabernacle, made without hands. No more sin, suffering or death there. 1 Peter 1:4: ***“To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.”*** This was the subject of the accusation of the “trial” of our Lord Jesus Christ before the

Sanhedrin. That Great Prophet (Luke 7:16) had articulated this doctrine very well. Although those that hated him did not understand it at all. The “*accuser of our brethren*” (Revelation 12:10), in his Indictment will get some things right but it will be framed as an accusation like it is a prosecutable offense for us to accurately think or articulate words about the nature and attributes of God, eternity, heaven, hell and God’s judgments. The accusation; Mark 14:58: “**We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.**” Guilty?!?

“For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.”

We know that we have it, because we groan after it here, with the influence and direction of the Spirit of God, who makes intercession for us, for grace and for glory, according to the will of God. See, e.g., Romans 8:22-27. God, who has planted in us that longing desire for that heavenly bodily, does not do so in vain. The promise of the power which fulfils the promise is found in Philippians 3:21:

“Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.”

The heavenly glory is what the soul enters into upon the removal of this earthly house of the body. White and shining robes of purity, perfection and glory is what they will be clothed with as soon as their tabernacles are dissolved (Revelation 3:4, 18). This clothing is what is fitting to be in the presence of the King of Glory (Psalm 24:7-10).

They are then delivered from every oppressor, sin, Satan, and the world; they are now unburdened by that body of sin and death they carry about with them on earth. Paul, groaning out loud about this said, ***“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”*** (Romans 7:24). So, Paul, was earnest in his desire: Philippians 1:23 ***“For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.”*** The house we desire to be clothed upon is glory, incorruption, immortality and everlasting life; and suddenly, as in the “twinkling of an eye” in the presence of the Christ in glory. “Twinkling of an eye” is expression that means a very short moment. Literally the moment upon being absent from the body, you will be present with the Lord, as Paul will shortly state emphatically! ***“For He is faithful that promised.”*** (Hebrews 10:23). And we know that those who have died in Christ are in glory, including because of Colossians 3:4: ***“When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.”***

The “naked” which is sought to be avoided is described in at least two places in Revelation: Revelation 3:18: ***“I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.”*** Revelation: 16:15: ***“Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.”***

“Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and

willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”

It is good to always be reminded of how this is the sovereign and omnipotent work of God in us: he is the potter, we are the clay (Isaiah 64:8). Philippians 1:6 *“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”*

This “earnest of the Spirit” is practical language designed to provide us great assurance of the performance of the promise. The Spirit is kind to us. We always have words from the Holy Spirit which make accommodations for us in communicating accurate thoughts plainly, clearly, and easily. This is very much like that out of Hebrews 6:17-20:

“Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus.”

Finally, to the title of my sermon: absent from the body; present with the Lord. Paul was always willing to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. Immediately absent from the body means present with the Lord. Simple, plain, beautiful language.

It ranks right up there with two others of the Holy Spirit’s writings by Paul on this same subject. (I digress a moment. In addition to Robert Haldane’s writing of the exposition of the book of Romans, he wrote this book (it is actually published in two volumes):

“The Evidence and Authority of Divine Revelation.” He spent hundreds of pages expounding his point, and we’ve read most of them and it wasn’t a waste of time, but the truth of the doctrine really is as simple as the following Bible verses: 2 Timothy 3:16: ***“All scripture is given by inspiration of God (God-breathed), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”*** 2 Peter 1:19-21: ***“We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”*** That Apostle, who in his own estimation was ***“born out of due time”*** (1 Corinthians 15:8), had a lot to say on today’s topic, including at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

The beautiful simplicity of these words are immeasurable in their value of comfort for us.

Also see Philippians 1:20-23:

“According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. ¶ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.”

What is this “gain”? What is this that is “far better”?

The believer is delivered from “the body of this death.” (Romans 7:24; Hosea 13:14: ***“I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues”***; 1 Corinthians 15:55: ***“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”***).

The believer is delivered from all the troubles and distresses of this life, arising from diseases of body, losses and disappointments in worldly things; from the oppressions and persecutions of wicked men; from indwelling sin, unbelief, doubts, and fears, and the temptations of Satan. (Job 1:6, 2:2; Isaiah 25:8; Isaiah 49:10; Isaiah 57:1-2; Isaiah 60:10; Hosea 13:14; Matthew 4:1, 6:19-20; Luke 20:36; John 17:24; Romans 8:35-39; Hebrews 11:37; Revelation 7:15-17, and 21:4).

The believer instantly enters into the presence of God (2 Corinthians 5:8), where is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11; Isaiah 51:11; Jude 1:24), and are immediately with Christ (Philippians 1:22-23; 2 Corinthians 5:8), which is far better than being here, beholding his glory and

enjoying communion with him (Psalm 73:23-26; John 17:24; 1 Peter 4:13; Jude 1:24).

The believer is at once in the company of angels and glorified saints; and, is possessed of perfect holiness and knowledge (Genesis 28:12; Psalm 17:15; Matthew 18:10; Luke 16:22; Ephesians 5:27; Colossians 1:22; Hebrews 12:10, 22; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 Corinthians 13:12; Revelation 5:11).

The believer inherits a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34), and wears a crown of life (James 1:12), righteousness (Isaiah 61:10; Daniel 9:24; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 19:8), and glory (2 Timothy 4:7-8); enters upon an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled (1 Peter 1:4); is received into everlasting habitations (Luke 16:9), into mansions (John 14:2) of light (Colossians 1:12), life (1 John 2:25), love (John 15:10), joy (Matthew 25:21), peace (Psalm 37:37; Isaiah 9:6-7), and consolation (2 Thessalonians 2:16); is at perfect rest (Isaiah 57:2; Revelation 6:11), and surrounded with endless pleasures (Psalm 16:11; Psalm 36:8).

Yes, great gain and far, far better.

In his first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:15-17), Paul wrote my final thoughts for today's sermon:

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

I love you. Amen.