

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(December 5, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC**

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

### **A Free Gift PLUS Rewards**

(2 Corinthians 5:1010)

Study #8

#### **Introduction:** Preparing for Denver...

Ten days from now Kathy and Erin and Ben and Melissa and Sadie and Carson and I will fly to Denver for my son's (Zach) wedding to a lovely young lady, Courtney Kay Wilson.

We bought our plane tickets a couple of months ago, so we knew HOW we would get there. Now the thing is to make sure we've got everything we'll need for the time we're there.

Obviously, Denver's not San Antonio, especially in December. So, we'll have to bring the right clothing. Weather forecasters have been predicting that a major weather event would hit the Denver area around the 18<sup>th</sup> for the past several weeks.

There will be lots to do in the days leading up to the wedding, so we've got lists on top of lists of things that need to get accomplished.

Some things can be purchased in Denver (I hear they have stores there), but we'll need to bring some things with us.

We don't want to get to Denver and realize that we should have packed differently or that we didn't bring the necessary items.

#### *The planning principle*

You know the importance of planning and preparation prior to taking a trip, whether it's a weekend getaway, an extended time away, or a permanent change of station.

Before you hit the road or take to the skies you want to make sure that you've got what you'll need once you arrive or the whole trip could be a bust.

It turns out that "the planning principle" applies not only to trips we take in this life. It also applies to the journey each one of us will take at some point, the journey into eternity.

We've got questions about that trip and we'd love answers: What will happen to us after we die? What awaits us on the other side? How do we best prepare for that trip? Are there things I can do in this NOW to prepare for that THEN?

In the passage of Scripture before us this morning the apostle Paul pulls back the curtain and allows us to glimpse eternity. As he does so, he not only whets our appetites for what is to come, he tells us how to best prepare for the day when our permanent address will be "Heaven."

#### *No need to lose heart*

Paul has been telling us that there is no reason to lose heart in serving Jesus.

For one thing, life-changing impact is not, ultimately, up to us - it is God's job to change hearts. And for another thing, our personal limitations aren't a limiter. The "resurrection principle" says that life comes out of death, God's strength comes from our weakness, and His glory shines out of common things.

We can also avoid losing heart when we fix our gaze on the INTERNAL (not the physical body, which is decaying), the INVISIBLE (the things unseen are more beautiful than what our senses perceive) and the ETERNAL (not the temporal stuff that is here today, gone tomorrow).

And speaking of the eternal...<sup>1</sup>

### Our New Home - In Heaven! (5:1-5)

#### Our Current “Camp Out” (v. 1a)

*[1a] For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down*

I like the way the man talks. While I’ve noticed in recent years that the earth’s crust has been getting rockier and harder, especially at night in a sleeping bag, I’ve also always enjoyed camping in tents. Paul presents this life on earth as nothing more than an extended camping trip.

Tents are temporary dwellings. Every tent eventually gets torn down.<sup>2</sup> And the tent we’re carrying around with us on this lifelong expedition, our body, will also be torn down. In this context, to have our tent “torn down” is to die.

Just think about that. One day, your tent will be torn down. Meditate on that thought long enough, and you will inevitably wind up asking questions. Questions like,

*“What happens to me when I die?”*

*“What is the weather like?”*

*“Will I know anyone there?”*

*“Will we be sitting on clouds all day long?”*

*“Will there be excitement?”*

Ask ten people those questions and you will probably get just about as many answers.

Some people hold that **nothing** happens when we die. We simply cease to exist. We enter an eternal nothingness. (This was my own belief before I placed my faith in Jesus.)

Others believe that it is impossible to know about life after death. They say that **anything** might happen.

Paul says the believer in Jesus has **something** very specific to look forward to.

#### Our Future Mansion! (vv. 1b-5)

*Heaven, a REAL place (v. 1b)*

*[1] 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.*

When this tent is torn down, it will be replaced with a solid, stick-built “home” that we will enjoy for eternity. Death is the door through which we must pass in order to inhabit a new and improved permanent body.

Paul says that our **“building from God”** our **“house”** is in the Heavens. The Bible always speaks of Heaven as a PLACE. Heaven is not just a state of mind. Heaven is a place more REAL than anything we have ever known.

And there is more.

*Heaven, a permanent HOME (vv. 2-4)*

*[2] For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from Heaven, [3] inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. [4] For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.*

Ever had the experience of waking up with “groaning tent syndrome?” I sure have!

Increasingly, this “tent” which is our body is sagging in the middle. The stakes are loosening and the rivets are ripping out.

<sup>1</sup> Even though there is a chapter division, what we find in chapter 5 is really a continuation of the thoughts expressed in chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter of John’s Gospel, we are told that Jesus “dwelt” with us. The Greek word that is used for “dwelt” is the word meaning “to camp in a tent.” The implication is that Jesus was physically with us only a brief period of time.

Having experienced tent failure, I can tell you that it's no fun to be stuck in a tent that's coming apart at the seams.

One time, years ago, I took my sons and three of their friends on a campout to the Hill Country State Natural Area (near Bandera). The night of the campout we received eight inches of rain. Yes, a river ran through it - the tent, that is!

We started out the night with six of us in two tents. The other tent collapsed and the morning saw six of us in one three man tent. We were all sopping wet from head to toe.

Tents sag. Our current tent/bodies say. But our home in heaven WILL NOT sag!

We won't enter eternity with THIS body - to which I say, "Whew!" And we won't enter eternity DISEMBODIED - what a horror that would be.<sup>3</sup>

No, we will enter eternity with a NEW, GLORIFIED body!!

I breathe a sigh of relief - and a sigh of **gratitude** to God - when I think about this stuff. On the other side God will provide me with a real body. And He will also give me a greater sense of being at home THERE than I have ever felt HERE.

*Heaven, HOME at last (v. 5)*

**[5] Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.**

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes tells us that God has placed "**eternity in [our] hearts.**"<sup>4</sup> We are designed by God to hope for eternity and are rightfully concerned for eternal safety.

Everyone was made to enjoy an eternal, glorified body, not this disease-ridden, decaying, accident-prone groaning tent we currently inhabit.

And we who believe in Jesus have the promise from God that "**a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens**" is our future.

Now, given this amazing hope for eternity we have a certain resolve for the present. We who anticipate Heaven want nothing more than to live for the One who has given us such an awesome hope.

### **Our New Life's Aim: Pleasing Jesus! (vv. 6-10)**

#### **Home (there) or Absent (here)? (vv. 6-8)**

*Encouraged - by faith - even NOW while absent from the Lord (vv. 6-7)*

**[6] Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord - [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight -**

There is a great irony in the way we talk about Heaven. We say that people "die and go to Heaven" as if Heaven was a place for dead people. Then, we refer to this present time when we are absent from the Lord of Life as "life"!

We have it all backwards! One of the great evangelists of the 1800's, Dwight L. Moody, said this from his deathbed:

*"Soon you shall read in the newspapers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe it. I shall then be more alive than now!"*

Yes! And that is an explicitly Christian perspective. And that confidence about what our LIFE to come will be like doesn't come because we can "see" what lies beyond the grave. We can't.

Let's be honest about this. There is mystery about what is on the other side. None of us has ever been there.

Our confidence is linked to our willingness to **BELIEVE** that what Jesus says is coming, is coming. As Paul says, **[7]...we walk by faith, not by sight.**

<sup>3</sup> The Lord Jesus will have a body throughout eternity, that body demonstrating an eternal joining of His deity and His humanity

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:11

Paul continues with his faith eyeballs wide open and focused.

*We would rather be absent from the body and at home with the Lord (v. 8)*

***[8] we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.***

Paul had a clear preference for Heaven over his present life. And if we are sometimes guilty of not longing for Heaven the way Paul did, it is because we have not dwelt on the truths that:

- our most boring experience in Heaven (if there will ever be one) will make our most exciting earthly experience seem bland, boring, and tasteless by comparison.
- our relationships with each other now, which are sometimes wonderful and genuine and intimate, will be far richer than they are now, since there will be no taint of the sin we have to wrestle with here.
- our fellowship with God, sweet and rich at times here, will be complete and unveiled there.

As much as we might want to believe that this world is home and as much as we try to make this world seem “homey” with creature comforts and Michael W. Smith Christmas songs and impressive man caves and warm decorating touches, this world is NOT our home.

Linger long enough in a wonderful moment and something will sour. Eventually, **something** comes unglued, **we** don’t quite fit. Here, there is always something wrong with everything.

But not there.

And when we keep the future on the front burner, it impacts the way we live, here and now. On the basis of that future hope, Paul adopted a certain life agenda.

**We Want to Please God - Wherever! (v. 9)**

***[9] Therefore, we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.***

He’s living for Jesus. And he commends that same mindset to you and me.

Our sins are forgiven. Jesus died for us. Our future in Heaven is secure because of Him. So, because of all that He has done for us and because of all that He promises to do for us, we want to live in such a way that glorifies Him and pleases Him.

This is a grace orientation to the Christian life.

And then comes verse 10.

*Shifting gears...*

Right out of the blue, immediately after a passage dealing with the grace of God and Heaven, Paul brings up the most sobering of all biblical topics - judgment!

Frankly, at first blush, the words of verse ten don’t seem to fit. It is sort of like being at the Super Bowl and having the guy next to you want to talk about knitting.

In Paul’s mind, though, this discussion of an after-this-life judgment does “fit” AND it doesn’t violate grace.

Let me ease into a consideration of verse ten by saying a word or two about the appropriateness of referring to Jesus as Judge.

**And, By the Way, We Will All Stand Before Christ as Judge..... (v. 10)**

*Christ, the Judge (v. 10a)*

***[10a] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ***

God as a Judge

Many people think that the concept of divine judgment is **antiquated** or even **contrary** to the idea of God’s love.

Nonsense!

In the Bible, God is always seen as a God who executes judgment on sin. The rationale for judgment is that justice is a function of love. Take away judgment, you've also taken away love.

Jesus was the most loving Person who ever lived - and at times He is described as a judge in the Gospels. When He is revealed in the book of Revelation, He is executing judgment.

Our loving, compassionate God is also a consuming fire.

So, realizing that Paul is writing to and about Christians, how can he be speaking about judgment, since the Christian escaped eternal judgment when he or she placed their faith in Christ?

Well, while many people are unaware of this, the idea of an after-this-life-is-over judgment of believers is a rather prominent topic in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> It is not at all an isolated theme.

#### Judgment of believers?

You could find plenty of other passages that deal with the judgment of Christians. (For starters, try Galatians 6:7-9, Philippians 2:16, Ephesians 6:8, Romans 14:10-12, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 and 9:24-27, Colossians. 3:24-25, 1 Timothy 4:8 and 6:19.<sup>6</sup>)

Of course, **punishment** is not at issue when we speak of believers' judgment. The Lord Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of everyone who places their faith in Him.

And, neither is **condemnation** at issue in the judgment of believers. Once a person is made a part of the family of God, God remains their Father forever. No believer will lose his or her salvation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One Bible scholar, Thomas Meachum, has said about believer's judgment, - "*The New Testament places just as much emphasis on the judgment of the believer as it does upon the judgment of the non-believer.*"

<sup>6</sup>These passages do not refer to judgments that equate with Revelation 20. That is the judgment of the great white throne where the issue will be eternal punishment in Hell.

<sup>7</sup> As Paul says in another place, [*Romans 8:1*] *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Nevertheless, judgment for Christians is real. And, there will not be a select few "bad believers" who will face the judgment of the Lord Jesus.

Paul says that, "*we must ALL stand before the judgment seat of Christ!*"<sup>8</sup>

So, what is the Judgment Seat of Christ?

#### The Judgment Seat of Christ

The word that we translate "judgment seat" is the Greek word BEMA (Greek - *βεμα*). In the ancient Greek world, major cities always had a BEMA. It was the official place of legal justice.<sup>9</sup>

There was a BEMA in Corinth (the city to which Paul was writing this letter). Archaeologists tell us that it was a large marble covered platform located in the center of the main market.

In fact, when Paul references the BEMA here in 2 Corinthians 5, his readers probably would have thought back to the time when Paul was brought before the Corinthian BEMA to be tried for breaking the law.<sup>10</sup>

In ancient Greece, a civic leader would stand at the BEMA and preside over a trial. In 2 Corinthians 5, though, the Judge is Jesus.

So, what happens at this Judgment Seat of Christ? I want to know, since I will stand before Christ's BEMA. You probably want to know, too, since you also will stand before Him.

While we aren't given many details, Paul does outline the essentials of Jesus' judgment.

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<sup>8</sup> Or, a better translation, "*we will all be manifest at the judgment seat of Christ.*"

<sup>9</sup>In Nehemiah 8:4, the wooden podium upon which Ezra the scribe stood to read the words of the Law to the people was referred to as a *bema*.

<sup>10</sup> And, there are other BEMAs mentioned in the New Testament. The BEMA in Jerusalem was the place from which Pilate condemned Jesus to death (Matthew 27; John 19). At the end of the book of Acts, when Paul made his defense before the Roman government official, Festus (Acts 25), Festus was seated at his BEMA.

*God's Rewards Program (v. 10b)*

The purpose and the upshot of the BEMA is [10b]...***that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad***<sup>11</sup>.

(Or, as The Message puts it, “we’ll take what’s coming to us” as a result of how we have lived.)

Now, this may or may not surprise you, but I believe that when we read these words Paul wants us to think of a commercial transaction.

The Greek word we translate “recompense” (Greek - *κομιζω*) almost always had reference to the world of finance and business. When a purchase was made, the seller would be *recompensed* (same word as in 2 Corinthians 5) with money for the goods or services he provided.

To put the idea into more modern terms, think of the current “cash back rewards programs” offered by credit card companies.

When you purchase something with your American Express card or Visa/MasterCard or Discover Card, you may receive a % of that purchase price back.

At the end of the year, if you make enough purchases, you could get a pretty sizeable amount of money back from American Express, or Master Card. You would be recompensed with money for having spent money.

Now, I know that the whole thing is a ploy/scam by the credit card companies to get you to buy more stuff with their card. If you are frugal with your purchases you won’t get much money back. But if you spend enough to put yourself in the poorhouse, you’ll get a good amount of money back.

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<sup>11</sup> Some Bible teachers have taught that the word “evil” here (Greek, *φαιλος*) really means “worthless,” and not “sinful.” But, a careful examination of virtually every other place where this word is used reveals that the only translation value possible is “evil” or “sinful.” Other New Testament passages using the word *phaulos*: John 3:20; John 5:29; James 3:19; Titus 2:8; Romans 9:11. In all of these passages, the word clearly refers to sinful acts, or to an evil character.

What a deal. Spend money - and get money! Spend more money - and get more money!!

It seems to me that the credit card companies’ “cash back reward” programs give us a really good picture of how God deals with His children at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Our good deeds

Think of faithful, obedient, loving, and God-glorifying deeds as *currency*. Every time you plop down a loving deed, God puts reward in your eternal account, payable at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

If you spend that currency like it’s going out of style - love sacrificially, obey like crazy, live for His glory alone - then at Jesus’ BEMA you will have an amazing pile of rewards waiting for you.

There is one huge difference, though, between God’s “reward program” and that of the credit card companies.

American Express only pays you a paltry percentage of your original purchase as a reward. But God will reward you at the Judgment Seat of Christ in such an over-the-top way that you will count whatever sacrifice you made in this life to earn His reward completely insignificant!

Judge Jesus is a VERY gracious and extravagant gift-giver! He wants us to pile up reward. He will be delighted to reward us with bonus points at the BEMA for our God-honoring lives.

Our evil deeds

However, if we choose to be stingy in this life with our things, if we are misers with our love, if we choose to be penny-pinchers with our obedience and worship, we’ll get to the other side and find no reward.<sup>12</sup>

That’s pretty sobering. And I don’t think any of us wants to realize while standing before Jesus, “*Man, I sure do wish I hadn’t passed up all those opportunities to spend my love and worship and service on earth.*”

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<sup>12</sup> According to what we read in 1 Corinthians 3, those deeds will be burned up, and will merit no reward at all.

Our faithfulness will bring us reward and what is the reward our faithfulness will bring? Well, Paul's really pretty vague...

*The outcome of the Judgment Seat*

It is clear that we will each experience the inviolable law of the harvest. In some manner, we will reap what we have sown.

- Perhaps our reward will be an increased capacity to enjoy Heaven.
- Or maybe our reward will be an enhanced ability to manifest God's glory.
- There are at least hints that some will have more responsibility and authority in Heaven than others, and that greater privilege may have something to do with what happens at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

**Conclusion:**

But one thing about that the Judgment Seat of Christ makes clear is this:

**THIS LIFE REALLY COUNTS!**

The years we are given here prepare us for the life to come. And while Scripture is not as detailed about Heaven and the Judgment Seat as He might have been, God has told us enough.

God says, "*Heaven will be wonderful beyond your wildest dreams.*"  
God says, "*You will stand before Jesus as Judge.*"

But we are tempted to believe that the good will not be THAT good. And when we give in to that temptation we are robbed of the wonderful motive for holy living of eager anticipation.

AND

And we are tempted to believe that Jesus' judgment won't be that serious. When we fall for that ruse we are robbed the powerful motive for holiness of urgency.

So, we come at the end to the central theme of the spiritual life: trust God.

As Paul knew so well, to live with an eager anticipation of Heaven while preparing to stand before Jesus as Judge, requires FAITH.

After all, "*we walk by FAITH, not sight.*"