

The Sanctity of Life

Lesson 7: Suffering, Dying Well, and the End of Life -- 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:1

There is a kind of room most of us will sit in eventually. The light is low, a machine beeps softly in the corner, and someone we love is slipping away by inches. Or perhaps the bed will one day be ours. We do not like to think about it, so mostly we do not. Our culture has become expert at hiding death, sealing it behind hospital doors and hushed voices, as though if we look away long enough it might not come for us. But it comes for everyone, and the gospel does not ask us to look away.

The apostle Paul knew suffering that would have broken most of us, and he wrote about his own decline with a steadiness that can seem almost impossible. “Though our outer self is wasting away,” he says, “our inner self is being renewed day by day.” He does not pretend the wasting away is not happening. He felt it in his beaten, imprisoned, aging body. But he had learned to look past the seen to the unseen, past the momentary to the eternal, and so his afflictions, real as they were, could not have the last word.

This is the hope Christians are meant to carry into the hardest room. Our bodies are tents, Paul says, temporary dwellings, and one day this tent will be folded up. But we have “a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Death, for the believer, is not annihilation and not the end. It is the laying down of a worn-out tent in exchange for a glorious and lasting home. To know that changes everything about how we face our final days and how we walk with others through theirs.

It also gives us wisdom for the tender decisions that gather around the end of life. Because life is God’s gift and death is in His hands, we do not seize the keys of death for ourselves; we do not actively take a life, our own or another’s, to end suffering. And yet, because death for the believer is gain, we are not required to cling to every last breath by every possible machine, fighting God’s timing as though this world were all there is. There is such a thing as dying well, with faith, with comfort, with loved ones near, entrusting ourselves to the God who holds our life and our death. This lesson is about learning to face that frontier with hope.

Group Discussion: Why do you think our culture works so hard to hide death and avoid talking about it? How might a clear hope of resurrection change the way Christians face their own dying and walk with others through theirs?

Personal Reflection: How do you honestly feel when you think about your own death or the death of someone you love? Where do you most need the hope of the gospel to meet your fear or grief?

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:1

Study Questions

1. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–18. Paul says, “though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” How does this teach the believer to face physical decline and suffering with hope rather than despair?
2. Where in your own life, or in the life of someone you love, are you watching the “outer self” waste away? How does Paul’s perspective on the unseen and eternal speak to the fear or grief you feel?
3. Read 4:17. Paul calls his afflictions “light” and “momentary” compared to the “eternal weight of glory.” How can a believer hold suffering and hope together without either denying the pain or losing the hope?
4. How does the way you think about your own death need to be reshaped by the gospel? What would it mean to prepare to face death not with denial or terror, but with the hope Paul describes?
5. Read 5:1: “if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God.” How does the promise of the resurrection body change the way believers regard the frailty and even the loss of this mortal body?
6. When you imagine your final days, what do you most fear, pain, loss of control, being a burden, the unknown? How does the hope of a “building from God, eternal in the heavens” speak to that specific fear?
7. Read Philippians 1:20–24. Paul holds together a readiness to depart and be with Christ and a willingness to remain for the good of others. How does this passage help us value life while not clinging to it in fear, and accept death without seeking to seize it?
8. Consider how our culture often responds to suffering and dying. Where might you be tempted either to treat suffering as meaningless or to assume that a suffering life is no longer worth living, and how does the gospel correct both?
9. Scripture teaches that life and death are in God’s hands. How does this help us distinguish between actively and intentionally taking a life to end suffering, which Scripture does not permit, and the legitimate acceptance of death, including declining extraordinary or futile measures and embracing comfort care? Why does affirming the worth of every life, even amid severe suffering, not require us to prolong dying by every possible means?
10. Look back over 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:1 and Philippians 1:20–24. Name one specific way the gospel is reshaping how you face suffering and death, your own or a loved one’s, and one concrete way you will live or care for someone this week in light of that hope.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Job 1:20–22, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord; Psalm 23:4, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; 1 Corinthians 15:53–57, this mortal body must put on immortality; Romans 8:18, the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, the time of my departure has come.

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com