

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

6 ...we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 For we live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!

Mark 4:26-34

26 He also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28 All by itself the soil produces corn – first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.' 30 Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.' 33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

A new creation

2 Cor 5:6-10, 14-17, Mark 4:26-34

2 Cor 4:18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Paul is emphasising that we actually live in a temporary reality and the spiritual, unseen reality is the much more permanent thing. Hard as it is we must fix our eyes on what is permanent. This is particularly difficult if you are living with physical pain. So we have Paul's image of a heavenly home in vv. 1-5 just before our reading.

How do we imagine life after death?

My mum told me she thought she was going to be part of the cosmic consciousness, but maybe some of us think there is an actual city paved with gold. And many people think that this is all there is, the physical universe. One thing we do know is that we don't really know, so anyone who is certain they do know in my opinion is not really trustworthy!

The descriptions of Jesus after the resurrection make it clear that he did have a body, although it was very different and not immediately recognisable. We trust His word that there is something infinitely better.

We have so little that's trustworthy in life at the moment that Jesus comes into sharp focus as the one who spoke truth and claimed He was the truth. There are a growing number of agnostics and new atheists who are realising this. Even Richard Dawkins has now admitted to being a 'cultural christian' and loving hymns and churches, maybe because of the emptiness of unbelief, I don't know. He describes christianity as 'fundamentally decent'! I've been reading a book called *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, of conversations with the Australian rock singer Nick Cave, who since he lost his son Arthur at the age of 15 to a tragic accident, in his grief has been drawing closer to faith in Christ, while still finding it difficult to describe himself as a believer. But he acknowledges the power and reality of his belief that there is a God as what motivates everything he does and he admits always has done, despite a chaotic early life of dependence on drugs. p32: *It actually feels like grief and God are somehow intertwined. It feels that, in grief, you draw closer to the veil that separates this world from the next. I allow myself to believe such things, because it is good for me to do so. So if this life seems a struggle we can identify with Paul and probably many people that we...would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. v8*

There is the challenging reality however that we face judgment, v10, without which none of our hopes will come about. In the forum in Corinth, in the place where the governor dispensed justice, was the judgment seat, the image which Paul had in mind when he wrote this, perhaps the most clear teaching in the New Testament about the last judgment. We are saved, not *by* our good works but *for* our good works; for a life of service to God. We are judged as to how we have fulfilled this in our lives, which explains why as Paul says in verse 9, *we make it our goal to please Him.*

Nevertheless we are 'with Christ' right now in the sense that He lives with and in us through our faith and by the work of the Holy Spirit. It's not a geographical thing of Jesus up there and us down here, it's relational: He is *with us*.

The Spirit transforms us gradually if we submit to Him. This is a spiritual truth which we find it hard to put our finger on, or measure. I think only when we look back do we see how we've changed and deepened in our understanding. Maturity of faith is interestingly most often characterised by an increasing lack of certainty about what we believe!

But it results in a greater need to trust and hold on to Jesus himself.

This is why I find the tick box mentality of some Christians so unconvincing; if you don't express your faith within certain parameters of language and behaviour then you are not seen as a 'proper believer'. If you express doubt you're frowned upon. Yet so much about faith is very difficult to nail down because we are all at different points in our spiritual growth. Paul elsewhere in Corinthians says this: *2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.* It's not about our own formulations of what faith should be but how we interact with God as unique individuals, and so people like Nick Cave or Richard Dawkins approach Jesus from very different directions to our own, but will find the same acceptance and response *if* their search for Him is sincere. We must never presume to do the Spirit's work for Him; the mechanics of how any one person comes to faith are a mystery to all but God and that individual.

As we look at the second part of our reading Paul drives home the point that our focus is on God and not our own personal salvation

He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

How much ultimately even within our faith journey are we living for ourselves, for what we might gain, when Paul categorically restates that true life is found in living for God?

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!

What does that mean?

Simply that we are created to live in relationship with our Maker, and fullness of life and a fulfilled life is found in living for Him, so as followers of Christ, surrendered to Him, we are literally new creations. In our need for control over our own destiny we react against this to our own detriment because it's genuinely the source of all joy and hope that our lives be given completely to Him. Amen.