

A Mini-Commentary on 2 Cor. 5.1-10

Transcript of the YouTube video presentation

J. Webb Mealy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXLdZ4oEtQ4>

Hi, my name is J. Webb Mealy. I'm a Bible scholar with a specialty in the Book of Revelation and biblical eschatology. Today I'm going to be doing a presentation on 2 Cor. 5:1-9, showing its background in some other biblical passages.

To begin, I'd like to talk about the context in Paul's life when he wrote this portion of 2 Corinthians. He wrote this letter around November of AD 56. Earlier that year, in the spring, he had been in Asia—what we now call western Turkey—and had been planning a collection in Macedonia and Achaia, that is, Greece and Macedonia, to benefit the poor in Judea. He intended to bring the contributions with him to Jerusalem the following spring, around AD 57.

But in the spring of 56, the silversmiths in Ephesus, where Paul was doing his gospel work, realized that if everyone in the area became Christian, their idol-making business for the goddess Diana would suffer. Angry, they stirred up the entire city into a mob, nearly killing Paul. He had to flee under threat of death, crossing the Aegean Sea to Corinth.

Originally, Paul had planned to travel overland to Macedonia, then around the Grecian peninsula to Corinth, and finally to Jerusalem with the collected funds. But after being chased out of Ephesus, he arrived in Corinth earlier than planned, only to find that some cynical people were questioning his motives, claiming he wasn't a real apostle. This confusion and betrayal, on top of the threats to his life, left Paul emotionally and spiritually exhausted.

He then traveled to Troas, on the west coast of Turkey, and undertook a missionary trip with Timothy and another companion to Illyricum, northwest of Macedonia. During the summer of 56, he once again came close to losing his life. So, when he writes 2 Corinthians, he is deeply worn out physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Now, to understand 2 Cor. 5:1-9, it helps to look at the end of ch. 4, which leads into ch. 5. Paul writes about the treasure of the gospel—the glory of God in Christ—being carried in “jars of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7). These jars of clay represent our fragile, mortal bodies. “Though we are afflicted in every way, we are not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (4:8-9). Paul's sufferings in preaching the gospel demonstrate that the surpassing power belongs to God, not to us (4:7).

Paul emphasizes that death is at work in us, yet life is also at work, since we share in the Spirit of faith (2 Cor. 4:12-13). He points forward to the hope of Christ coming in glory, when both the faithful dead and the faithful living will be united with him (4:14). The experience of God's glory is prepared for us through these present afflictions (4:16-17). This theme echoes Rom. 8:18, written around the same time, which says that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed.

So let's look now at 2 Corinthians 5. Paul says, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (5:1). He's now speaking of the human body—this one that he's finding is getting kind of threadbare, torn up, and stressed. But if our body is torn down, he says, “we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (5:1). What is that building from God? I'm going to argue that it is the intimate presence of God that we think of when we think of heaven.

This business of “not made with hands” recalls Jesus in Mark's gospel, where he is quoted as saying, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands” (Mk 14:58). So “made with hands” means created by human ingenuity and strength.

Heb. 9:11 says, “When Christ appeared as the high priest of the good things that have come, then he entered through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is not of this creation.” A few verses

later in the same chapter, it says, “For Christ has entered not into the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24).

So the tent of witness, or the tabernacle—also known as the tent of meeting—that Moses was instructed to create according to certain specifications, and which in many ways Solomon copied when he built the temple made of stone, are both made with hands. They are human constructions, but they are not the true presence of God. They symbolize the full and intimate presence of God, like the holy of holies, where you have the cherubim symbolizing God’s throne—the place of his full presence, power, glory, and intimacy. Those things are only symbols, earthly models to signify God’s presence.

Hebrews 12 says, “You have not come to what may be touched [a physical mountain like Mount Sinai], but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb. 12:18-24).

So the Zion above is the holy city, and the city here on earth is only symbolic of the place in heaven, where God resides in intimate communion with all the faithful of all time. Paul says something similar in Galatians: “The Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother” (Gal. 4:26).

In Revelation 7, which is a vision of what happens when Christ comes in glory, John sees a multitude so large you couldn’t count it. They all have white robes and are holding palm branches, praising God and praising Jesus. The angel says, “These are the ones who are coming out of the Great Tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple, and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, thirst no more, the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:14-17).

These themes of God’s intimate, protective, and provident presence are reprised in Revelation 21, in the context of the new creation at Christ’s coming in glory. John says, “And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away’” (Rev. 21:2-4).

Now, the ESV translators say, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man” (v. 3), but in the Greek it is literally “the tent of God.” In both Greek and Hebrew, to dwell in a tent can be expressed as a verb. So it says, “The tent of God is with humanity, and he will tent with them.”

The true tent—the full, glorious, protective presence of God—will be with humanity on the earth when Jesus comes in glory. This is what is symbolized by the tent in the wilderness and by the temple, and what is symbolized by Mount Zion in this age will be fully manifested on earth in the age to come: the New Jerusalem, the community of all the faithful of all time, in intimate communion with God and under God’s full presence and glory.

So that is the temple not made with hands—the true temple of God, the true city of God, and the true temple of God. In Revelation 21, John sees that the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven has cubic dimensions and that it is gold all over. This immediately evokes the holy of holies in the wilderness tabernacle, which was 10 cubits by 10 cubits by 10 cubits, a cube. The holy of holies in Solomon’s temple is also cubic, overlaid with gold on all surfaces. What this is saying is that the New Jerusalem in the new creation will be the holy of holies. The entire community of faith on earth, with God’s full presence, will be the true holy of holies, the place of God’s full and intimate presence.

Now let’s look back at 2 Corinthians 5 in that context.

Verse 1. “We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands—eternal in the heavens” (5:1). He’s talking about God’s intimate presence.

Verses 2-3. “In this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor. 5:2). We want to go and be in God’s intimate presence. He goes on: “...if indeed by putting it on we might not be found naked” (5:3). In this body—with God in heaven and us here on earth—we don’t feel like we’re fully clothed with God’s glory and presence. We feel a yearning for a deeper connection with God that we can’t have in this mortal life. There’s something more for the life to come.

Verses 4-5. “While we are in this tent [again, the body] we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed...” [in other words, we don’t want to lose our bodies], but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” What life? The life of God’s full and intimate presence. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of resurrection life. We get a down payment, a foretaste, of the full presence of God in and through us that will be our experience in resurrection: “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (v. 5). So God is preparing us in this life by giving us the Spirit and training us into the holiness that befits living in his full and intimate presence. He’s working on preparing us—“sanctifying” us is the old fashioned word for that, right? God’s Spirit sanctifies us to prepare us for full participation in the life of God.

Verse 6. “So we are always of good courage, knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord.” That’s just life. I mean that that’s the way it is—that we cannot in this mortal life, the way it is set up right now, be in God’s full and unmediated presence. That is something we only achieve in the age to come: as Paul says in 1 Cor. 13:12, “Now we see in a glass, dimly, but then face to face.”

Verses 7-8. “For we walk by faith, not by sight—yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and home with the Lord [Jesus].” Paul understands that there is such a thing as being dead but also being with Christ, just as the book of Hebrews chapter 12 says—that all the faithful that have gone before us are in heaven and they have been fully sanctified and they are waiting for the resurrection there (Heb. 12:22-24). We have hints of that also in the Book of Revelation. In Rev. 6:9-10, in the fifth seal, John sees the souls of those who had testified to God and to the truth in their mortal lives but were killed for it, and their souls are right there under the altar in God’s presence. So Paul says we are of good courage, we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. He would prefer, as he said above, to come into God’s full and glorious presence without losing his body. But if it was a choice between the two—staying alive in his mortal body on earth and feeling away from God’s full presence, and losing his body and coming into God’s full presence—he will personally choose the second. Because he has no enjoyment of being in this body. His ministry has taken him from one kind of pain to another—the stress and heartache and persecution and threats of death—he’s ready to be with his Lord, even if it means dying to go there.

Verses 9-10 “So whether we are at home [in the body] or away from it, our aim is to please him, because we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so each one may receive what is due for what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.”

So that is the portion.

Let’s now look at this again. I’m going to go back to verse 1 here and look through it and see how well it works in one of the standard interpretations, which is that the home we are yearning for is our resurrection body.

Verse 1. He says, “For if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God.” Do we have our resurrection bodies now? No, we don’t. We do have God’s home in heaven now, waiting for us, but our resurrection body does not now exist. It’s not like there’s a warehouse in heaven full of resurrection bodies hanging on hangers up there, waiting for us. So it’s not true that our resurrection body is something we already have. Consider the phrase “a house not made with hands.” Well, of course, the resurrection body is not made with hands, but then again, our current body is not made with hands either. So it’s not a proper comparison. It is buildings that are houses made with hands, not our bodies.

“Eternal in the heavens,” he says. Well, is our resurrection body eternal in the heavens? No. It has a beginning. God’s presence is eternal in both directions. Our resurrection bodies—once we’re given our

resurrection bodies—then they will be incorruptible and will last forever, but they're not eternal in both directions, as God's home is, so to speak. And our resurrection bodies are not in the heavens, nor do they stay in the heavens forever. When we receive them, they come to earth along with God in the new creation, and we live on this glorified earth in glorified bodies. That is what is promised in Revelation 21 and also in Romans 8 and Isaiah 66, for that matter.

So nothing in verse 2 Cor. 5:1 here works with a resurrection body. It works perfectly if we understand that the house not made with hands is God's intimate, full presence, which is now in heaven.

Verse 2. "In this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling." Yes, but in v. 4 it says, "While we are in this tent we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed." No, that's not correct. I'm not yearning—I don't think anybody's yearning—to put on their resurrection body over this mortal body. That doesn't make any sense. But to put on God's intimate presence as our clothing—that makes sense.

So in verses 1 and 4, what Paul's saying is perfectly compatible with the idea that he's talking about our desire to be with God in those dwelling places that Jesus promised God has for us in his intimate presence (Jn 14:1-3). And it's not compatible in any way with the idea of a resurrection body.

Verse 6. He says, "So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord." Well, that works perfectly with what I've been saying—that the dichotomy is between mortal life here on this earth and being in God's intimate presence in heaven, whether we have our bodies or not. But it doesn't really jive with the idea that we're yearning for our resurrection bodies. Receiving a resurrection body is not the same thing as being at home with the Lord. Even the wicked will have resurrection bodies—but they will not be at home with the Lord.

This concludes my exegesis of 2 Cor. 5:1-10. I welcome any comments or questions you may have.