

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10
(Proverbs 1:20-23; Matthew 13:44-46)
“Looking at What Is Unseen”

Introduction

Paul has just described what seems to be a central paradox of the gospel: the only treasure worth seeking in this life is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6). But this greatest of treasures is to be found, not where the world would look for treasure, not in places of power, prestige and wealth, but rather, “in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (4:7). The key is that we must seek this treasure with unveiled faces, in order to know the One who made us for himself.

This paradox of God’s glory entrusted to jars of clay leads Paul to the sweeping summary of the gospel that is before us this morning. Sadly, this text is so often used at funerals that it is thought by many to apply mainly to death rather than to life. But that is to miss the main point that Paul is making. He is calling us to a new way of seeing things, to an entirely new vision of the meaning and purpose of life. Paul is proposing a new understanding, a fresh vision, of the nature of reality and the nature of humanity. He is calling us to a new way of seeing the world around us and of seeing ourselves. And then, in the light of that new perspective, he is proposing a new understanding of the purpose and goal of life.

Body

1. He offers a new understanding of the nature of reality (4:16-18).

A secular view: Essentially sees life from the perspective of this present age as grasped by the senses, the world as we see it, with its needs, longings and desires. This is what is, what is real, what we must deal with. Our focus is here. One may believe in God and be a professing Christian, and yet live life and make decisions just as if the gospel were not really the treasure, and as if this life were all there is.

A religious view: Essentially sees life from a so-called “spiritual” perspective. Because the form of this world is passing away, we must not view this world with its needs and longings as if it were the real world. We must get free of this world through religious disciplines, through meditation, through self-denial, because this world is sinful and to ascend to God and dwell with him, we must stay clear of the world. This is probably the prevailing view of most religious people, including most Christians.

A biblical view: Essentially recognizes the reality and importance of this present life, the wonder of this world in which we live and move and have our being, and the treasure found in human love and meaningful work. It delights in beauty, in art and music and literature, in athletic excellence, in a summer day of laughter and friendship. But it also recognizes how deeply wounded the world is by our rebellion against God, with its ravaging effects seen in cruelty and violence, in environmental destruction, and in the refusal to acknowledge God as Lord.

Yet this does not lead to cynicism or despair, for we believe that both humanity and the cosmos have been given a new beginning in the life, death and victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death. We live in hope of the new heaven and earth, the new cosmos, when Christ wipes away our tears and makes all things new.

So the things of the spirit for which we long are not apart from this world, but are to be found in its salvation, in the resurrection of our bodies and in the resurrection of this cosmos. Our view of eternity is not of disembodied spirits in an insubstantial heaven, but of resurrected, enfleshed persons, in a recreated world of mountains, rivers and fields, and a city such as humanity could never build apart from the power of God. All the treasure of culture, of art and music and poetry, of dance and film and fulfilling work, will be part of the world for which we are invited to look and wait with longing.

What awaits us is glory, the character and splendor of God made visible in all he has made, and we are invited to begin to gaze at it even now with the eyes of the soul, before our physical eyes can yet see it, as our lives are reoriented and reordered toward what God has promised us is coming.

The key: This view captures both sides of the paradox, both the “surpassing glory,” and the “jars of clay.” We see ourselves not as escaping this present age unscathed, but rather as entering into the depths of the joy and sorrow, the pleasure and pain, of giving ourselves in Christ to bring into this present age something of the presence of the future, a taste of what God has prepared for those who love him.

2. He offers a new understanding of the nature of humanity (5:1-8).

A secular view: Life here and now in this body is all that is certain and sure. Only in this present moment can I be sure of happiness and pleasure. The worst that could happen to me would be to suffer and die without fulfilling my hopes and dreams. To die young would be the greatest tragedy. When this body dies, I don't know what happens. Maybe it all ends. Maybe I come back in some other form, or maybe I go somewhere else. There is really no way to know. All that is for certain is this present moment.

Sadly, while no Christian would admit to holding this view, it may well be the operative view of most people, including most Christians.

A religious view: Human life is really a matter of soul or spirit, and does not really begin until I die and get free of this body. The body limits me. It is the source of sin and of unsatisfied longings and desires, and the reason for suffering and pain. It is an earth suit to be discarded at death. Salvation is to be liberated from this body and to live as an unhindered and unencumbered soul. On this view, salvation involves a denial of all we hold dear: physical pleasures are to be despised, cultural activities are a waste of time, and government is too permeated by sin to accomplish anything good. Salvation is an eternity as a free spirit in an ethereal, non-physical heaven.

Sadly, many serious, but mistaught, Christians hold a version of this view and think that spirituality is a denial of what it means to be essentially human.

A biblical view: Human life, as God created it, is an embodied soul. To be apart from the body, to be separated from it through physical death, is not to be free, but to be naked (4:3-4), and the longing of the apostle Paul for his so-called “heavenly dwelling” is for the body given at resurrection, a body like that of the resurrected Christ that was able to partake of both the spiritual and physical world, in preparation for the age to come when the two worlds become one and God makes his home with us in the new cosmos.

The key: Our hope as Christians is not to be disembodied spirits in an insubstantial heaven, but to be resurrected ensouled bodies, or if you prefer, enfleshed souls, in a recreated cosmos of rivers, trees and flowers, and the city of God, prepared for those who love him, a place of art and music and life.

3. He offers a new understanding of the purpose of life (5:9-10).

A secular view: The purpose of life is simply to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, to maximize a sense of personal fulfillment and minimize a sense of futility. If your greatest pleasure comes from being considered a good person, then you are willing to suffer a bit to win the respect and admiration of others. If your greatest pleasure comes from entertainment, then you may be willing work hard to make enough money to acquire the toys that bring you the greatest amount of pleasure. If your greatest pleasure comes from being loved, then you will do whatever it takes to get someone to love you.

You may appear very religious because you have factored God into the equation and very much want for him to help you get what you want. But make no mistake: what matters to you is whatever brings you the greatest sense of pleasure and fulfillment.

A religious view: The purpose of life is personal salvation: surviving death, avoiding punishment, and reaching eternity intact. This life is seen as, at best, a test. But we long to be out of it and into real life, which does not begin until death.

Many Christians hold this view, and I shudder to think how often in preaching carelessly, I may have contributed to some of you holding this view.

A biblical view: Paul puts it this way: “We make it our aim to please him” (5:9). Eternal life begins, not at our physical death, but at salvation, when our old life ends spiritually and our new life begins in Christ. “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (5:5). Life even now has ultimate meaning because through us, God walks the earth as he walked the earth in Christ, and through us is reclaiming it for his kingdom. It is not as another body that we will be raised, but as this very one in which we walk the earth (see 1 Corinthians 15:42).

So we are no longer our own, but have finally found perfect freedom in becoming what we were created to be: God’s own people, filled with his life, given his work to do, even now tasting and seeing the life to come, and always remembering that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (5:10).

The key: This not frightening, but energizing, to those who have been born of the Spirit, and who are now alive in Christ. It means that every single day and every moment in it is filled with eternal significance. What we do, how we live and love and labor, matters eternally!

Conclusion

So, what am I saying? Most Christians, sadly, hold to what I have here described as a religious view of things, rather than having a biblical perspective. And many who hold a religious view nevertheless act according to a thoroughly secular view. But both of those views are mistaken and fail to grasp the wonder, the hope, the joy of a biblical view of things, which combines the reality and importance of this life here and now, of the profound significance of this present age, transient though it may be, with the eternal purposes of God as he acts even now through us his people to redeem human beings, human history and the history of this cosmos.

Those who know this, begin to see the entire universe as one great sacrament, revealing its Maker and inviting us to taste and see how much he loves us. And we live for the moment when, at last, we see him face-to-face.

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