

SERMON FOR THE 2ND LAST SUNDAY
(Cape Town - 16 November 2008)

Text: ¹ Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed over with our heavenly dwelling, ³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. ⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ 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, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

Despite the baptism of Erin today, I have decided to keep to the prescribed sermon text for this Sunday. I said last week already that the last three Sundays of the church year all focus on the end: the end of this world, the end of our lives, and also the end or final judgement.

So from baptism and the celebration of a new life, we will simply shift focus to the end of our lives. Needless to say, this is not a topic we reflect on voluntarily. We tend to resist it and try to avoid it at all cost.

Years ago, I was struck by the words of a visiting evangelist who suggested to a group of young people: "Every month you spend at least 15 minutes in a cemetery." I assume, sitting in a cemetery every month is the last thought on your mind. But our sermon text is a kind of a "cemetery meditation" - and that is exactly what the evangelist had in mind.

This text was written by the apostle Paul at a time when his own life was threatened and the circumstances really *compelled* him to reflect on his death. In this letter to the Corinthians he shares his thoughts with his congregation. And we are privileged to listen to him.

I would like to highlight three aspects of this meditation:

I

This first one is Paul's "confidence" in the light of death.

When you consider the topic of “death” it is rather surprising to see with what “joy” Paul reflects on this topic. The reason for his joy is the anticipated going “home”.

We all know the saying: “There is no place like home”. After a hard days work, that is where you want to be: You just want to go home. Likewise even after holiday, it sometimes just nice to back in your own home again. This is the thought that strikes Paul when he thinks about death: He is going to be home.

He starts our passage with the words: **“We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house (or home) in heaven”**. For him, life on earth is a “tent-like-experience”. It is like camping. After a while you pull the tent down and go home.

I sure most of you have been out camping. As a family we don’t camp often. The only time I think we did was years ago in the Kwazulul-Natal Drankensberg. We were a whole group of friends that went away for the weekend. Not being regular campers we didn’t have a tent, of course. But I had an commando major in the congregation. He organised us an army tent. We assumed the tend would fairly small: 3 by 3 meters. I should suspected something when they loaded it into our trailer. When we unpacked it just became bigger and bigger and bigger. It was huge. The whole group could fit into tent. For my family, camping of the first time, it was totally embarrassing. Everybody who walked by stopped and glared. You could see it a mile away. After the weekend, we were just too happy to pull it down.

That is the way “life” is, Paul says. Our life on earth is not like a fortress, build to last forever. It is a tent. We are just passing through. Life will end.

This idea, however, of life ending elicits great “joy” in Paul’ heart. There is no fear, no sadness. And the reason for it is: He is certain of his destiny. He is going home! So often we avoid to think about death, simply because we are so uncertain about what is going to happen to us.

But where does “Paul’s” confidence come from? Was he a better person that you and me? That is not the way that Paul saw himself. He said: “Of all the sinners, I am the greatest” His confidence was based solely on the death and resurrection of Jesus. He says: I *know* (in my heart) where I am going to!! **“God has given his Spirit as a deposit (in our heart)”** (v.5). In other words: God’ s Spirit himself tells him. To the Romans he writes: **“The Spirit ... testifies with our spirit, that we are children of God”** (8:16).

By the way, Erin, received this Spirit today. She was baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the *Holy Spirit*. If she remains open for the dealings of God Spirit in her life, she will grow up as a person “confident” in her eternal home. This is so important!! If there is one thing that is inevitable, then it is death. And if there is one thing that we should have certainty about, then is our life *after* death.

Paul *knows*, where he is going to. So when he reflects on death, he rejoices: I am going home.

II

The second aspect that strikes me in Paul's meditation is, his groaning. He says in verse 2: "**Meanwhile we groan...**"

That sounds a bit like a contradiction: "Joy" on the one hand, and "groaning" on the other hand - simultaneously. But that is life, isn't it? We may have "joy" as we reflect on eternity, but this not exclude the groaning in the face of death. Remember death is the punishment for sin. Death is not easy. There is always hurt.

If you relocate and move from one house to the other (especially from own community to another), you will know exactly what Paul speaks about. When we, for example, came to Cape Town almost six years ago, we were excited and full of joy. But at the same time leaving our previous home and friends really hurt. Likewise leaving this life behind always hurts.

Paul reflects on the hurt. To a certain degree he shies back death! He says, it will be like being undressed. With our clothing we can cover a lot, can't we? The 40 something can cover their bulging stomachs or widening hips. But when you die, Paul says, you are being bared. You will be standing before God naked. Every aspect of your life will be uncovered: Your pride, your selfish ambitions, your ego, your evil thoughts - everything. You will see yourself, as you really are, for the first time. And then only will we as children of God really understand the meaning of grace.

We don't always understand the magnitude of God's grace, because we don't see what we are really like. It will happen. And it will hurt. But then there will be joy.

III

The third aspect of Paul's meditation is this: Death is grace. It leads us to God.

Paul writes: "**We are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord**" (v.6). Do you want to remain in your body? Then you will never be with God. Death opens us the door to Paradise again.

We see this in Genesis. In the garden of Eden are two significant tree (3:22) . The one is the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil". The other is the "tree of life". God said to Adam and Eve. You can eat of all trees, but do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good of evil. But they ate. And suddenly they were torn between good and evil ... good and evil every day, as we are. But why did God banish them from the garden?

The answer is, to prevent them to also to eat from the tree of life, meaning they would never die. They would be bound to this world forever. Just imagine that!

Death is a “saviour”. It is an act of grace. It concludes my life of toil on earth and paves the way for something brand new: perfect life with God. And about this life Paul is *confident*. He *knows exactly* where he is going to. And if you know your destiny, you can live in peace and do the work given to you by God.

And that is Paul’s message to us. Don’t be afraid to meditate on death. Spend your 15 minutes a day reflecting on it. Death forms part of life. But remember Jesus has opened the door to God again. That is where we are going. Amen.