

AN URGENT MINISTRY 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-6:2

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This section of 2 Corinthians teaches that Christians should balance a realistic assessment of their human frailties with the honor Christ gives them now and after death. When we do this, we will hold fast to faith in Christ and receive the salvation God has offered in him.

TEMPORARY AND ETERNAL DWELLINGS (5:1-5)

Paul contrasted his fragile life and glorious ministry: life in this world is like living in a tent while waiting for a house.

5:1. The apostle began with a statement of confidence. **We know** that certain things are true (compare 1:7; 4:14; 5:11). Paul had already taught these truths to the Corinthians, and he was confident that they had not forgotten them.

Life in this present body is like living in an **earthly tent** because this body is being **destroyed**. All human bodies suffer the processes of aging and death. Yet, as the previous chapters illustrate, Paul, his company, and to some extent all believers experience intensified destruction of their earthly bodies. Suffering on Christ's behalf aggravates the decay the Fall brought upon the human race. As Paul put it in the previous chapter, we are but fragile jars of clay (4:7).

Paul was sure that his readers knew another truth as well: all true believers **have a building from God** that will replace the **earthly tent**. The present bodies of believers are only temporary homes; we wait for a permanent house. In Paul's day, people used tents while they traveled, and while they were building more permanent homes. Paul had in mind tents in which people lived as they waited for permanent dwellings to be built. Peter employed this same metaphor (2 Pet 1:13-14), and the Old Testament also spoke of earthly life as a tent (Isa. 38:12).

Paul described the **building from God** as an **eternal house in heaven**. His words here are difficult to understand, and have been the subject of controversy. At least two prominent outlooks have been taken. First, some interpreters have thought that Paul spoke of believers receiving permanent heavenly bodies when they die. This understanding agrees with Paul's individual, personal focus in this discussion. Yet, it seems unlikely because Paul taught that believers' bodily resurrection would occur at Christ's return (1 Cor. 15:42-55; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:15-17).

Second, other interpreters have suggested that Paul spoke of the heavenly temple of God providing protective cover for all believers. This view appeals to the expression **not built by human hands** that the writer of Hebrews uses to describe the heavenly temple (Heb. 9:11). This interpretation is possible, but it is hardly unquestionable.

The third and most likely possibility is that Paul referred to the future resurrected bodies of believers, focusing on the eternal state without differentiating it from the intermediate state. In this view, Paul did not address our heavenly experience prior to Christ's return. Because the intermediate state is not the goal believers are to keep in mind, it is overshadowed by the permanent state after Christ's return. The last verse of this section (5:10) supports this view. Paul directed his attention not to the human condition during a long intermediate state. Instead, he focused on the day of judgment. The contrast he set up in 5:10 was between what is done **while in the body** and how we will **receive what is due**. In this view, Paul referred to the individual believer's glorious resurrection body, but had in view the reception of that body on the last day.

5:2. Before Christ returns, believers **groan**. This terminology (*stenazo*) usually connoted pain and agony of some sort. Paul had in mind the **longing** which believers experience when they compare their present existence with their condition when Christ returns. The suffering and pain of life in this world causes those with hope of resurrection life to cry out with intense desire for **our heavenly dwelling** (compare Rom. 8:23).

5:3-4. Next, Paul explained (**because**) why we groan for the heavenly dwelling. This verse is problematic in that textual witnesses differ. The NASB ("having put it on") and NKJV ("having been clothed") follow the same text as the NIV (**when we are clothed**), but the NRSV reads, "when we have taken it off." Discerning the better reading is difficult, but it seems that the more difficult reading — and thus the more likely reading — is "when we are clothed." In all events, the basic idea is clear enough: we groan in our present condition because **we will not be found naked** when we leave this life.

Nakedness here is a metaphor for being without a body. Literal nakedness brought shame to sinful Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:7-10). God remedied their nakedness with clothing (Gen. 3:21), covering their shame, and clothing remained a consistent requirement throughout the Scriptures. For this reason, Paul likened being without a body after death to the condition of nakedness. Ultimate salvation is not that disembodied souls enjoy eternal bliss in the heavenly realms, but that they are bodily resurrected (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:12-57; Phil. 3:11; Heb. 6:2) and inherit the new creation (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-7). The Corinthians understood this so well that Paul did not even argue for it. He simply assumed they knew that the groaning of this life was a longing for glorified, resurrected bodies to be received on the day of Christ's return. The contrast here was not between physical and spiritual, but between present, mortal, physical bodies and future, immortal, physical bodies.

5:5. In great confidence Paul proclaimed, “**God ... has made us for this very purpose.** As Genesis makes clear, God did not design human beings to die, but to be clothed in immortal bodies. If Adam and Eve had passed the test of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would have realized this destiny immediately. Now, however, that destiny has been accomplished in Christ, who has redeemed his people and secured immortal bodies for them, to be inherited in the future.

Paul also taught that current earthly life is not entirely devoid of God’s future blessing. Believers have already received **the Spirit** who is **a deposit guaranteeing what is to come** (compare 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-14). Here he drew upon the business analogy of a down payment that guaranteed full payment in the future. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in his life and in the lives of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 6:19; 12:1-13) was a **deposit** or first portion of full salvation in the future. Paul saw his life and the lives of other believers both as suffering and death, and as grand blessings from God.

ABIDING CONFIDENCE (5:6-10)

From the knowledge of the presence of the Holy Spirit, Paul drew and encouraged abiding confidence in future salvation.

5:6. Paul concluded that **we are always confident** (see also 5:8). Paul and his company knew that **as long as** they and other believers were **at home in the body**, they were **away from the Lord**. Short of leaving this life, believers must endure physical separation from God’s glorious presence. But the hardship, pain, and trials they endure will all disappear when final salvation comes at Christ’s return.

Paul did not mean that God was absent from the lives of believers — he had just affirmed the Holy Spirit’s presence (5:5), and Jesus himself had sent the Spirit so believers would not be orphans (John 14:16-18). Yet, the Spirit’s ministry is just a small portion of what is ahead. His presence neither removes the trouble of this life, nor stops the groaning. Rather, as Paul said elsewhere, the Holy Spirit actually joins us in our present groaning (Rom. 8:26).

5:7. Paul explained himself further (“for” NASB, NRSV, NKJV; from Greek *gar*) by characterizing the entire Christian life as living **by faith, not by sight**. As the writer of Hebrews put it, “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). When the ultimate salvation of God’s people becomes reality in the new creation, **faith** will no longer be required; all will be **sight** (compare Rom. 8:24). Until then, however, **faith** that God will bring about all he has promised is required from all who serve Christ.

When the Corinthians looked at Paul’s life, they were not impressed. He did not have much to show for all of his effort. He had no money, power, or possessions, but

only suffering and the appearance of failure. This was another reason he explained that his ministry had to be evaluated in terms of **faith** and **not sight**.

5:8-9. Paul was **confident** that this present existence involves separation from God (5:6), but he was also **confident and would** have **prefer[ed]** to leave his present **body** behind in order to be **at home with the Lord**. He greatly desired to endure the time of separation from his final salvation, and finally to be with **the Lord**. He longed for the day when sight would replace his faith (compare 1 Cor. 13:12). This deep desire compelled Paul toward one supreme **goal: to please** and honor Christ.

5:10. Why is it so important to please Christ in every way? Put simply, Christ holds the power to grant or withhold the heavenly final salvation for which every believer longs. Paul wanted to please Christ because (**for**) **all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ**. The rest of the New Testament teaches that Christ will judge all people (Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 14:10; 2 Tim. 4:1). Everyone **must ... appear**, no one can avoid the judgment. Moreover, at this judgment **each one will receive what is due him**. The judgment will be individual (**each one**), based on **the things done while in the body** (i.e. in this life). Christ will consider both **good and bad** that is done (see also Matt. 12:35-37; John 5:29; Rom. 2:13; Rev 22:12). Paul sought to please Christ so that he would pass the judgment and receive his eternal reward (compare 1 Cor. 9:27).

Many interpreters think Paul's doctrine of final judgment is inconsistent with his doctrine of justification by faith alone. If salvation is a free gift by faith alone (Rom. 4:9-16; 5:1-2; 11:6; Gal. 2:15-16; Eph. 2:8-9), then does anyone who is saved receive **what is due him**? The resolution of this tension appears later. In 13:5, for instance, Paul spoke of the Christian life as a testing period. It was a time when he and the Corinthians would prove whether or not they actually had saving faith in Christ. From Paul's perspective, no one earns or maintains (Gal. 3:3) salvation by works. Yet, every person will be judged according to his or her works. The well-known adage is true to Paul's theology: "Saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone." In other words, those who have genuinely placed their faith in Christ will demonstrate to one degree or another their justification by living to please him (compare Eph. 2:8-10). In this way, they will necessarily be blessed when they are judged.

PAUL'S URGENT MINISTRY (5:11-15)

Paul had many motivations for his ministry, but here he focused on the judgment of Christ that was sure to come. The approach of that great day of judgment gave an urgency to his ministry and drew attention to the importance of finding salvation in Christ.

5:11. Summarizing his previous remarks about judgment before Christ, Paul said that he and his company knew **what it was to fear the Lord**. Here he drew upon the Old Testament expression "the fear of the Lord" (2 Chr. 19:7,9; Pss. 19:9; 43:11;

111:10; Prov. 1:7,29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 14:26-27; 15:16,33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; Isa. 11:2-3; 33:6). Paul soberly apprehended what the judgment of Christ could mean for him if he were unfaithful to his calling (compare 1 Cor. 9:27). If he hoped to receive the reward of eternal salvation, he had to demonstrate his faith in Christ through faithfulness to Christ.

Consequently, Paul sought **to persuade men**. It is possible that he had in mind persuading people to accept his integrity, as he did throughout this letter. Yet, these words may also include his broader purpose in life. The apostle's responsibility was to reach the lost on behalf of Christ. He was called to take the gospel to all people. At times, this task merely involved proclamation, but at other times it involved persuasion (Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4; 19:8,26; 26:28; 28:23-24).

Despite what Paul's opponents in Corinth had been saying about him, Paul was convinced that it was **plain to God** what he was. God knew his heart and understood his motivations perfectly. He hoped that his ministry was **plain to** the Corinthians as well.

5:12. Paul forthrightly explained that he was not trying to **commend** himself or his company to them **again**, that is, as he had in earlier chapters before. Instead, he was trying to give the Corinthians **an opportunity** to understand correctly the nature of his life and ministry so that they could **take pride** in him. As elsewhere in this epistle (1:14; 9:3), the term **pride** (*kauchema*) did not have negative connotations of arrogance or self-conceit (compare the verb *kauchaomai* in 7:14; 9:2; 10:8,17). It meant legitimate delight and joy in the accomplishments of a dear friend or family member. Paul considered himself the Corinthians' spiritual father (1 Cor. 4:14,15; 2 Cor. 6:13; 12:14) and brother (1 Cor. 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15; 2 Cor. 1:8; 8:1; 13:11). He had pride in them (2 Cor. 1:14; 7:4; 7:14; 9:2,3) and he hoped they would have the same feelings about him.

Paul wanted to instill this pride in them so that they would be able to **answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart**. Paul's opponents had deprecated Paul's ministry by pointing to his outward troubles and failures. But Paul had explained these apparent weaknesses in terms of the nature of life in this world (5:1-10). He had not failed. He served as all Christians should: by faith and not sight (5:7). Paul's opponents did not look at Paul's **heart**, but he now hoped that the congregation as a whole would reject their attacks on him and understand his motivations.

5:13. Apparently, Paul's opponents also thought he was **out of his mind**. They may have referred to his extraordinary experiences of revelation (Acts 16:9; 22:17-21; 2 Cor. 12:2-4), but the immediate context makes it more likely that they attacked the apparently ludicrous nature of Paul's ministry and apostleship.

Paul's response revealed his deepest commitments. **If** there were any sense in which he was beside himself, it was not because he was not an honorable apostle; it was **for the sake of God**. Paul had fully committed himself to God's service, even to the point that he seemed to many people to have lost his senses. **If**, however, he were actually in his **right mind** - doing and advising what was appropriate - it was **for** the Corinthians. Paul had two motivations: love for God and love for neighbor (see Matt. 22:36-40). These dual motivations made him look insane at times, though in reality he was quite sane.

5:14. Paul then explained (**for**) why these two motivations controlled his ministry. He began with the profound statement that **Christ's love compel[ed]** him. Interpreters differ as to whether Paul meant the term "Christ" to be taken subjectively ("Christ's love for us") or objectively ("our love for Christ"). The grammar permits either reading. Because the following context focuses on Christ's sacrifice, it seems best to understand it to mean "Christ's love for us." Paul was compelled in ministry by the love Christ demonstrated when he **died for all**.

Christ **died for all and therefore all died** with him. Dying with Christ was one way Paul described conversion to Christ (Rom. 6:3-8; 7:4; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:20; 3:3). For this reason, at face value, this passage appears to teach universalism, the belief that Christ's death brought salvation to every person. But the rest of Scripture stands strongly opposed to this interpretation. Only those who have saving faith in Christ are saved (John 3:18; 2 Cor. 4:3-4; 2 Thess. 2:12; 1 John 5:10-12; Rev. 21:8). The language here is similar to Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22. In this context, the **all** in view is **all** of the Corinthian Christians. It is not that Paul was utterly assured of the salvation of each individual in the church — he plainly stated that he was not (2 Cor. 13:5). In this passage, he simply accepted their professions of faith at face value for the purposes of his argument.

5:15. Paul's main point was that Christ died for them and they **all died** with him **so that those who live** through the power of his resurrection (Rom. 6:4-11; 1 Cor. 15:21-22; Phil. 3:10-11) **should no longer live for themselves**. Those for whom Christ died are **bought at a price** (1 Cor. 6:20), and no longer belong to themselves. Therefore, they are to **live ... for him who died for them and was raised again**.

Paul ministered at great personal cost for the Corinthians' sake because he was compelled by the love displayed in Christ's death. Christ died to redeem the lost so that those for whom he died might live for him. Because this was the purpose of Christ's death, it became the goal of Paul's ministry.

THE URGENCY OF RECONCILIATION (5:16-6:2)

Having refuted the negative views of his ministry (5:11-15), Paul provided a positive portrait of his apostolic work.

5:16. In the first place, Paul pointed to a change that had come over him and his company. He concluded (**so**; “therefore” NASB, NRSV, NKJV) that **from now on** something had changed. “**From now on**” may refer to Paul’s personal conversion (Acts 9:1-20) or to the death of Christ (5:14-15). “**Now**” may also identify the new era inaugurated by Christ’s life, death, resurrection and ascension. As he wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:2, “**Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation**” (compare Rom. 3:21; 8:1; 11:30; 13:11). If this last understanding is correct, “**from now on**” would measure the time from Christ’s death, and would include Paul’s own experience of salvation in the new era (compare Rom. 5:9,11; Gal. 2:20; 4:9).

In all events, the change Paul had in mind was his outlook on people. He **regard[ed] no one from a worldly point of view**. This manner of expression does not appear elsewhere in Paul, and it is difficult to know precisely what he meant. Probably, he meant that he was committed to viewing people in the light of their participation in Christ’s death and resurrection (5:14-15; compare Gal. 3:27-28; Col. 3:9-11) rather than viewing them as he had before he became a Christian. **Once** he had **regarded** even **Christ** in worldly terms, failing to see the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection, and considering him a false teacher. But he could **do so no longer**.

5:17. Paul asserted that every person who is **in Christ**, who is joined to him in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-11; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; Gal. 2:20), has become **a new creation** (compare Gal. 6:15; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:9-10). Here Paul drew from Old Testament prophetic language describing the new world that God would bring at the end of time (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). This language also appears in the New Testament (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). “**New creation**” appropriately describes those who follow Christ because they have begun the transformation that will eventually lead to their full enjoyment of salvation in the new heavens and new earth. Christ’s death and resurrection introduced a foretaste of that new world to come.

The KJV, NKJV and NRSV follow a less reliable Greek text of this verse. Instead of reading “all things are become new” (KJV; compare “all things have become new” NKJV; and “everything has become new” NRSV), Paul simply wrote **the old has gone, the new has come** (compare “new things have come” NASB). Paul knew that no follower of Christ would be completely changed before the return of Christ. This was the basis of his discussion earlier in this chapter (5:1-10). Yet, countless inward changes do occur in believers (2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10).

Paul’s ministry was compelled by the display of Christ’s love on the cross. Moreover, Paul himself had been united to Christ in his death and resurrection, and thus had been inwardly renewed and regenerated. Paul truly was a new creation. In this changed state, he began to look at people differently. Prior to coming to Christ, Paul would not have thought about the Corinthians much. He certainly would not have worked and sacrificed for the Gentiles in that church. But now, the shadow of Christ’s cross fell across his view every time he looked at other people. He saw believers as

new creations in Christ, and unbelievers as people in need of Christ. This perspective shaped his ministry.

5:18a. Having described the remarkable changes that came upon him, and that come upon everyone who has saving faith in Christ (5:16-17), Paul remarked that **all this** (i.e. the previously described changes) was **from God**. Throughout his writings, Paul consistently attested that every dimension of salvation results from divine grace (e.g. Rom. 3:24; 4:16; 5:1-2,15-21; 11:5-6; 12:6; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 1:12; 9:8; 12:9; Gal. 1:6; 2:21; Eph. 1:3-7; 2:5,8-9; 4:7; Phil. 1:6-7; 2 Thess. 2:16; Tit. 2:11; 3:5-7; 2 Tim. 1:9). Here, he had in mind the radical transformation of his outlooks on other human beings (5:16) which evidenced his transformation into a new creation. This dramatic change was a work of God in his heart.

5:18b-20. Paul explained the change that God had wrought in his life in terms of **reconciliation**. He repeated the Greek terms for “reconcile” and “reconciliation” (*katallasso/katallage*) five times throughout 5:18b-20, greatly emphasizing his point. In his other epistles, Paul used this terminology another five other times (Rom. 5:10,11; 11:15; 1 Cor. 7:11), four of which also pertained to divine-human relations as here (Rom. 5:10,11; 11:15). In a word, reconciliation is the establishment of harmony and peace between enemies. Enemies are said to be reconciled when their hostility ceases and mutual love binds them together. Paul’s explanation centered on this doctrine.

Paul spoke of divine reconciliation in two ways in this context. First, he stated that God had **reconciled** Paul and his company **to himself through Christ**. By his own testimony Paul had been a vile opponent to the ways of God. He had even persecuted the body of Christ (Acts 9:4-5; 22:4,7-8; 26:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13,23; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13). Yet, God mercifully established peace between himself and Paul **through** Christ. This act of divine love and grace deeply transformed the apostle.

Second, Paul said that God **gave** Paul and his company **the ministry of reconciliation**. Why had his personal reconciliation dramatically changed his outlooks on other human beings? It was because God had a special destiny for Paul, **the ministry of reconciliation**. Put simply, a **ministry** (*diakonia*) is a service to others on God’s behalf. God had called Paul to be an instrument of **reconciliation**, his entire life was devoted to making peace between God and humanity through the preaching of the gospel.

5:19. Paul continued to focus on his ministry of reconciliation by defining what he meant. First, he explained that **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ by not counting men’s sins against them**. In Paul’s view, human beings had become enemies of God because they transgressed divine law (Rom. 5:10; 8:7; 11:28; Phil. 3:18; Col. 1:21). Men and women without Christ are hostile to the things of God and subject to his judgment (John 12:48; Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 2:16; 8:7). Reconciliation, therefore, requires that God forgive people of their sins to remove this hostility.

Paul spoke of God reconciling **the world to himself** because he knew that the ultimate end of God's purpose was worldwide. At times, this passage has been used to support the false doctrine of universalism, the belief that every individual will be saved from judgment. Although Paul spoke categorically of **the world**, he described this worldwide reconciliation as taking place **in Christ**. For Paul, the expression "**in Christ**" consistently referred to the union that men and women have with Christ in his death and resurrection as they place their faith in him (Rom. 6:1-11,23; 12:5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20; 3:28; see also Deeper Discoveries on 1 Cor. 1:2,4). So, we must understand his categorical terminology here and in similar passages (e.g. Rom. 5:18; 11:12,15; 1 Cor. 15:22; 1 Tim. 4:10; Tit. 2:11) in light of his clear teaching that salvation comes only to those who trust in Christ for salvation (Acts 16:30-31; 17:30-31; Rom. 10:13-16; 11:19-20; Eph. 2:8; 2 Thess. 2:10-12). After all, Paul also wrote that **the world** would be **condemned** (1 Cor. 11:32), which clearly cannot refer to those who trust in Christ for salvation. The reconciliation of **the world** is the goal of the gospel in the sense that salvation will extend beyond the nation of Israel to all the nations of the earth (Rom. 1:16; 2:10; 3:9-24; 4:9-12; 9:24; 10:12; 11:12-14,30-32; 16:26; 1 Cor. 1:23-24; Gal. 2:14-16; 3:6-8,28-29; Eph. 2:11-16; 3:4-5; Col. 3:11). In accordance with the prophetic word of the Old Testament, the ultimate end of the gospel ministry was the reconciliation of those who are united **in Christ** from all nations of the earth (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Pss. 22:27-28; 61:1-7; 72:9-19; 86:9; 117:1; Isa. 2:2-4; 25:6-8; 66:18-23; Jer. 3:7).

Paul also explained his own role in this worldwide plan. God had **committed to** Paul and his company **the message of reconciliation**. This phrase may also be translated "the message about reconciliation," which is exactly what Paul explained this message to be (5:20-21). In other words, Paul went about as an apostle of Christ proclaiming that God had provided the way of salvation through Christ. He saw himself called by God to the all-important task of bringing to fruition God's plan to reconcile the world in Christ.

5:20a. Paul's vital role in the divine plan of reconciliation led him (**therefore**) to a remarkable claim. He and his company **were Christ's ambassadors**. "**Ambassadors**" was a technical political term used in Paul's day that closely parallels our English word "ambassadors." An ambassador represented a nation or kingdom in communication with other nations. In this case, Paul had in mind his apostolic call to represent the kingdom of Christ to the nations of the earth. Ambassadors held positions of great honor in the ancient world because they represented the authority of the kings on whose behalf they spoke. Nothing less was true for Paul as the ambassador of Christ. When he spoke the **message of reconciliation**, it was **as though God were making his appeal through** him. Rather than speaking directly to the nations of earth himself, God ordained that human spokespersons would speak for him. As an apostle Paul had infallible authority to lead and guide the church (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:3,10; 1 Thess. 2:6). Yet, this description applies to all who bear the gospel of Christ to others, even to those who do not bear apostolic authority (Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 4:11). Though we may not present the gospel as perfectly as Paul did, we nevertheless speak on

God's behalf when we bring the message of grace to others. Paul and his company, however, were to be received as mouthpieces of God in the most authoritative sense. Many in the Corinthian church doubted Paul's authority, but here he asserted his claim to apostleship once again (1 Cor. 1:1; 4:9; 9:1-5; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; 11:5; 12:11,12).

5:20b-21. With his authority asserted, Paul summarized the content of the **message of reconciliation** (5:19). His summation includes an expression of his heart, an appeal, and an explanation. First, Paul introduces his message in highly emotional terms, expressing his heart. He spoke **on Christ's behalf** because he was an ambassador. But as ordinary ambassadors often sought reconciliation between national enemies with intensity, Paul **implore[d]** others to be reconciled to God. The term **implored** (*deomai*) often connotes beseeching ("beseech" KJV) or begging ("beg" NASB) (compare Luke 5:12; 8:28,38; 9:38,40; 10:2; Acts 8:34; 21:39; 26:3; Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 8:4; 10:1; Gal. 4:12). In imitation of the passionate ministry of Christ himself (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34; 19:41-44), Paul so desired to see men and women come to Christ that he saw his ministry as begging. To be sure, Paul did not often actually beg people to have saving faith. He spoke metaphorically here in an attempt to convey the motivations behind his ministry. Paul intensely appealed to others for their own sakes, even when he was firm or harsh. He knew that the enemies of God would suffer divine wrath (Rom. 1:18; 2:5; 3:5-6; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:5-6). For this reason, his ministry was not impersonal or emotionally disconnected. He intensely desired to see men and women come to Christ, as should all who minister the gospel on Christ's behalf.

Second, Paul summarized the content of his message of reconciliation in a short appeal. His practice was to tell others to **be reconciled to God**. The fact that Paul had to appeal to others to be reconciled demonstrates that he did not believe that the work of Christ automatically reconciled every human being to God. Christ's saving work on the cross is sufficient for every human being, but it is effective only for those who believe. As the imperative (**be reconciled**, from *katallasso*) indicates, those who hear the gospel are responsible to believe in Christ in order to become reconciled to God.

Third, Paul briefly explained that sinful men and women, who are the enemies of God, can be reconciled to God only through Christ and his work on behalf of the human race. Here Paul summarized Christ's work in two elements. On the one hand, **God made** Christ, **who had no sin** of his own, **to be sin**. Paul did not mean here that Christ himself actually became a sinner. Throughout his entire humiliation, Christ remained entirely faithful and righteous. It is likely that in this case Paul followed the Septuagint's practice of using the term **sin** (*harmartia*) as a circumlocution for "sin offering" (e.g. Exod. 29:14,36; 30:10; Num. 6:14). The New Testament frequently refers to Isaiah 53 in which the Messiah's death is declared to be "like a sin offering" (Isa. 53:10; compare Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Pet. 3:22-25). This language stems from the Old Testament sacrificial system and identifies the sacrifice that removed judgment from and brought forgiveness to those for whom it was made (Lev. 4:13-35; 5:5-10). In this sense, Christ became the sin offering **for us**, i.e. for all who believe in him. In the

gospel of the New Testament, salvation comes to sinful enemies of God because Christ himself became the perfect and final substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of those who have saving faith in him as their sufficient sacrifice.

Paul then explicitly pointed to the purpose (**so that**) of Christ's sacrifice. It was **so that in him we** (i.e. all who have saving faith) **might become the righteousness of God**. Note first, that it is **in him** (i.e. in Christ) that reconciliation takes place. The concept of "in Christ" formed one of Paul's central theological categories. To be "in Christ" was to be joined with him in his death and resurrection and thus to receive the benefits of salvation from him (see 5:19 above). In this passage, Paul summarized the benefits received in Christ by stating that believer become **the righteousness of God**. The precise meaning of this expression has been the source of much controversy throughout the history of the church. It is likely that Paul intended the expression **of God** to be taken as "from God" as Romans 1:17 suggests. Yet, is this righteousness that is infused into believers as they live the Christian life (i.e. sanctification)? Or is it the righteousness that is imputed to believers when they initially turn in faith toward Christ (i.e. justification). Probably Paul's emphasis is on imputed righteousness, since it was by imputation of our sin to Christ, and not by infusion, that Christ was **made ... to be sin for us**. Still, it may be best not to divide these issues so sharply as we approach this passage. As Romans 1:17 suggests, the **righteousness from God is by faith from first to last**. In other words, believers become the righteousness from God when they first receive the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification, but they also receive the continuous blessing of the experience of righteousness in their lives as they grow in their sanctification (compare Gal. 3:1-5).

6:1. Having explained the ministry of reconciliation that God had given him and his company, Paul concluded this section by making the practical implications of his ministry evident. He and his company appealed to the Corinthians **as God's fellow workers**. In the preceding verses Paul had already spoken of his ministry **as though God were making his appeal through** Paul and his company (5:20). Paul and his company served alongside God as **Christ's ambassadors** (5:20). Because Paul and his company spoke the true gospel as God ambassadors, the Corinthians should have received and honored them, especially by complying with their petition that the Corinthians be reconciled to God (5:20). So, Paul **urge[d]** them **not to receive God's grace in vain**. On a number of occasions, Paul warned the Corinthians not to falter in their faith (1 Cor. 2:4-5; 16:13; 2 Cor. 1:24, 5:6-7; 10:15; 13:5). He did not believe that true believers among them could lose their salvation (Rom. 8:28-39; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 4:13-14; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; Phil. 1:6; Col. 3:3-4; 1 Thess. 5:23-24), but he was not convinced that everyone in the Corinthian church was a true believer (13:5). During this life, it is necessary for all who profess faith in Christ to make certain that their faith endures. Otherwise, the mercy shown to them in the preaching and reception of the word of God will be **in vain** or useless.

6:2. To support his earnest appeal, Paul referred to Isaiah 49:8. This prophecy focused on the restoration of God's people after exile. God promised that he would

respond to the cries of the exile, **in the time of his favor and in the day of salvation**. Paul focused attention on Isaiah's emphasis that in God's timing salvation from the judgment of exile would come.

As a result, Paul pressed the significance of this prophecy on the Corinthian situation. The days in which they lived, the days of the New Testament, were not times to be ignored or taken for granted. Those days were, as our own days are, **the time of God's favor and the day of salvation**. When Christ came to earth, he began to restore God's people from exile. After Christ ascended into the heavenly places, we continue to see him fulfilling the hopes of restoration. Of course, Christ will complete his saving work when he returns in glory. In the meantime, everyone must recognize the urgency of the times in which we live. We are in the day of great opportunity because the final saving work of God has come to the earth. Yet, we are in a day of great danger because failing to receive this salvation through enduring faith will bring a severe judgment. The New Testament age is the climax of history. There will be no possibility of salvation beyond the New Testament. Paul wanted the Corinthians to prove faithful in light of the critical moment in history that they occupied.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Reconciled, reconciliation (5:18-20)

Paul used the word group **reconcile/reconciliation** (*katallasso/katallage*) only modestly in his epistles, and no other New Testament author used these words at all. In the Septuagint, *katallasso* is never used, and *katallage* appears only once (Isa. 9:4). So, it is interesting that Paul chose to describe his entire ministry in terms of reconciliation in this passage. Fully half of the uses of these words appear in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, with four of the five others appearing in Romans (Rom. 5:10,11; 11:15). In all uses in both Romans and 2 Corinthians, Paul spoke of God as the active agent who reconciles men to himself. Only in 1 Corinthians 7:11, wherein he encouraged Christian women who left their husbands to be reconciled to those husbands, did he use it in reference to human relationships and/or refer to a human as the performer of the reconciliatory action.

Fittingly, the only Old Testament usage of *katallage* (Isa. 9:4) comes in the context of a hopeful prophecy about the Davidide who would put an end to the enmity between God's people and the Gentiles. Christ ultimately fulfilled this prophecy, and Paul wrote to the very Gentiles whom Christ reconciled. Further, Isaiah 9:4 uses *katallage* in the context of warriors throwing away their bloody clothes from battle. In this context, reconciliation appears clearly to be the ending of bloody hostilities, cessation of war, and uniting in common peace. It is possible that Paul had this passage in mind as he explained that Christ could end the hostility between God and sinful man so that man might receive the blessings of the kingdom of the Prince of Peace rather than be slaughtered by him in his anger on the day of judgment.

B. Implore (5:20)

Deomai, here translated “**implore**,” has a rather broad range of meaning. At times it carries only the force of a polite request (e.g. “**please**” in Acts 8:34; 21:39). At other times, it means outright begging, as is evident by the contexts of such passages as Luke 5:12 in which the man who performs this action does so while prostrating himself at the feet of Jesus, or in the case of the demoniac in Luke 8:28 who begged not to be tormented (compare Luke 9:38,40; 2 Cor. 8:4). It is also one of the normal words for “pray” (Luke 21:36; 22:32; Acts 4:31; 8:22,24; 10:2; Rom. 1:10; 1 Thess. 3:10). In the passage at hand, it most likely carries the meaning of “beg” or “implore” because it comes in the context of Paul asking those whom he loves to find peace with God so that they will not be destroyed a truly urgent situation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To what did Paul refer as an earthly tent? To what did he refer as a heavenly dwelling? What burdens accompany the earthly tent? What benefits does the heavenly dwelling have over the earthly tent?
2. When will believers receive their heavenly dwelling? How is the Holy Spirit a deposit of the heavenly dwelling?
3. What does it mean to live by faith and not by sight? Why should believers prefer to be away from the body? What does the heavenly dwelling have to do with the judgment seat of Christ? When does that judgment occur?
4. What does it mean to fear the Lord? How can a Christian both fear the Lord and be confident in the Spirit?
5. Why would anyone think Paul was out of his mind?
6. What does it mean to live for Christ? Give some examples from your own life.
7. Give some examples of how you might regard others from a worldly standpoint. Explain how your regard for them would be different if you followed Paul’s teaching.
8. What does it mean to be “in Christ”? How does this relate to a new creation?
9. What is reconciliation? To whom or what must one be reconciled? Why is this important? What happens to those who are not reconciled? How does one become reconciled?
10. Did Paul urge reconciliation to God to the same people in whom he expressed confidence (2:3; 7:4)? How can you be sure of your answer? What contextual clues

help you answer this question?

11. How might one receive God's grace in vain? Have you ever felt that you might have received God's grace in vain? Why? What has encouraged you that you have not received God's grace in vain? What is the result of receiving God's grace not in vain?
12. What is "the day of God's favor"? When is the day of "God's favor"?
13. How does this passage function in the course of Paul's larger argument in this letter? How does it flow from and lead into surrounding material?