

## **“From Tent to Eternity**

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

*Series: Believe Week 10: Eternity*

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Some of my favorite family memories are in a tent. My mind goes back to hikes up to the bald spot on Bear Mountain where I could see to the edge of eternity, sunsets on Cranberry Lake with the sky on fire, songs, stories and roasted smores around a crackling campfire. I'm glad my children love camping as much as I do. In fact, it's almost a miracle. With all the things that went wrong, I wouldn't blame them if they never intended to be in a tent again. Camping also means air mattresses that go flat in the night, tents that drip through a deluge and outhouses that are too far when you need one and too close when you don't.

Years ago we had a four-person tent. It must have been manufactured in munchkin land. We were stacked on top of each other. Add a downpour and you have a recipe for one miserable camping trip. I can handle all that. But every once in a while, in the middle of the night, it dawns on me that a layer of vinyl, a half a millimeter thick, is all that stands between my family and a rabid bear, an escaped murderer or Jason. One night Lisa jostled me and said, "Doug, wake up! I think there's something outside the tent." I was instantly wide-awake. "You're right," I whispered, "I hear it too." "I think it's a skunk," she said. "Me too," I replied. "I'll stay here to protect the kids while you chase it away." Suddenly at that moment there was something more dangerous *inside* the tent. She was not a happy camper.

This week in the *BELIEVE* our theme is Eternity. Compared to heaven, the Bible says this life will seem like living in a tent. The Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study says many believe in heaven and hell.

72% Americans say they believe in heaven — defined as a place “where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded,” (while) 58% of U.S. adults also believe in hell — a place “where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished.”<sup>1</sup>

This shows there is some agreement and some disagreement with this week's key idea in BELIEVE: “I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus will return to judge all people and to establish his eternal kingdom.” There is so much to cover on this topic that it would take an eternity for me to talk about eternity. I don't think you have that kind of time. What's more, among Christians there are many different teaches about eternity. Here are a few key Biblical teachings. I hope you will discuss more in your Growth Groups this week.

First God's Word teaches us: **Life in Heaven Will Be More Real than on Earth.** In fall 2014, Rolling Stone magazine interviewed Stephen King, who has spent his career

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/>

writing about death. When the interviewer asked, "Do you hope to go to heaven?" he responded, "I don't want to go to the heaven that I learned about when I was a kid. To me, it seems boring. The idea that you're going to lounge around on a cloud all day and listen to guys play harps? I don't want to listen to harps. I want to listen to Jerry Lee Lewis!" Like Stephen King, many picture Heaven as a kingdom of clouds where wispy, almost see-through souls float around. Most would say they have no physical bodies. In fact, if you believe movies such as The Preacher's Wife, there's a long line of souls in heaven dying to come back down to earth where the real action is. Earth, according to popular opinion, is more real, more solid and even more fun than Heaven.

Scripture teaches the exact opposite. It describes our life on earth as one long camping trip. Paul says:

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. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked (2 Corinthians 5:1-3).

Paul knows a lot about tents. His real occupation is making tents. So Paul, of all people, knows tents are flimsy and temporary. He describes our earthly body as a tent. Our heavenly body he calls a building, "an eternal house in heaven not built by human hands." There is no time when a soul is "naked," "unclothed" or without a body. In God's Kingdom a believer exchanges one body for another. We even get an upgrade.

A couple came up to me in the hallway last Sunday and said, "Pastor we just have a quick question." "Yes," I replied. "We'd like to plan our funerals." "Right here in the hallway? What do you want to know?" "Is it okay for Christians to be cremated?" It's a question I'm often asked. After all, the Creed states we believe in "The resurrection of the body." If I incinerate this body, will I be out of luck at the Resurrection? I assured them they can choose cremation. The truth is, no matter what method you choose, all our bodies decay. Paul knew this. That's why he teaches in 1 and 2 Corinthians that we exchange this imperfect, physical earthly body, this temporary tent, for a solid, perfect spiritual heavenly body, a house made by God. To catch a glimpse of what it will be like, look at Jesus' resurrection body. It was both physical and spiritual. He could eat fish and hold hands yet He was not bound by time and space. The Apostle John says,

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

Given the choice, I'm sure all of us would choose a house over a tent. During a camping trip on Skyline Drive in Virginia my daughter Kristin started feeling sick. We drove all the way down the mountain to a doctor in the valley where the waiting room was packed with patients. When we walked in everyone scowled at us. "Just try to get past us yankee city-slickers!" Then Lisa said to the receptionist, "Can you give us a bucket, I think our daughter might throw up" and suddenly we moved to the head of the line. The doctor gave us some medicine and told us she would be fine tomorrow. So we

drove all the way back up the mountain and laid down like sardines in our tiny munchkin tent. The rain beat down, the hours passed, the deer hung out in our campsite – Bambi and his homeboys – and Kristin’s fever did not go down. None of us were happy campers. Finally I said, “What are we doing here? Let’s go home.” So we packed up everything in the rain and drove six hours straight home. It was midnight when we arrived but we were glad to be in our nice warm, dry home.

When you reach Heaven, life will be more solid, more real, more alive than anything you experience here on earth. In fact, by comparison, it will make this life look like a wispy, ghostly shadow. You will be glad to be home.

Second, Scripture teaches **To Enter Heaven There is One Way and One Judge**. Despite what many may say today, the Bible clearly says Jesus is the only way to heaven. Jesus Himself said this:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6)

Peter and John say the same:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

There is a very ancient belief which still exists to this day that people be rewarded with heaven if their good deeds outweigh their bad. In my office there is an ancient Egyptian picture which shows a person’s heart weighed on a scale with a feather. If his heart is lighter than a feather – it’s filled with more good than bad – he will be admitted to the afterlife. If his heart is heavy with bad deeds a hungry baboon will gobble it up. People still believe this today.

God reveals a different picture: we are all weighed down by sin. We are all condemned. Because we love the darkness of sin we are all on the path toward the outer darkness which is also called hell. So God sent Jesus on a rescue mission. You probably know the first part of this passage but have you ever read the rest of it?

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved

darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:16-21)

We are all drowning in the darkness of sin and the question is: will you take Jesus' hand and let Him pull you into the Light or will you refuse His help, do it your way and plunge deeper into the darkness?

On January 18, 2010, Martin Bromage set out to join a rather exclusive club—those who've circled the globe by air. The goal of the trip was to raise \$250,000 for a soldiers' charity called "Help for Heroes." Bromage estimated it would take 8 weeks to travel over 11,000 miles in a microlight plane. Sadly, the Microlight crashed into the English Channel less than five hours later, and Bromage perished. He didn't make it beyond the borders of his own country.

The story of Martin Bromage is a tragedy. He was a man of courage, self-sacrifice and high ideals. He was on a mission to help others. Yet none of that could save him. When the coastguard recovered his body from the channel they found "his aircraft was very well equipped for all emergencies and carried a life-raft and life-jacket," he said. "But sadly none of it seems to have helped him."<sup>2</sup>

Our good deeds and our high ideals cannot save us. We need a Savior. He is the only Way. He reaches out a nail scared hand to you. Will you take it?

Immediately someone will object: what about those who've not heard about Jesus, who lived before Jesus came or in a place where the Gospel was never proclaimed? What about those who grew up in another religion? Just as there is only one Way to heaven the Bible says there is only one Judge.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

I am not anyone's judge. Neither you nor I decide who is in and who is out. The consistent message of Scripture is that Jesus is the Judge at the last Judgment. My hope is that everyone will have a chance to surrender their will to Jesus, to believe in Him, to take His hand and to receive His gift of eternal life. I believe C.S. Lewis said it best:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done."

Hell is the place where everyone selfishly gets their own way while Heaven is where everyone says to the Way, "Thy will be done."

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<sup>2</sup> Sophie Taylor, "Heroic failure: microlight pilot dies in Channel," [www.thefirstpost.co.uk](http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk) (1-19-2010)

Third Paul says **Heaven Makes Life on Earth Bearable**. If all we have is this life, our suffering is unbearable. Little good can come from it. If this is all there is, our struggles are unfair and our burdens crush us. Paul endured terrible suffering. But it never destroyed him. Why? He knew this life is not all there is. He was certain there is life beyond this earthly suffering. He did not say God sends the suffering. Instead, God sends the Holy Spirit to help us endure suffering and grow through it. He writes:

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. 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. (2 Corinthians 5:4-5).

Those who have no hope for heaven often fear their lives will be swallowed up by suffering and death. Paul, who looked forward to heaven, knew his temporary suffering would “be swallowed up by life.” Why was Paul so sure he had a house in heaven? God already made the down payment on that house. The Lord gave him the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in your life is God’s first “deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

Jeremy Begbie tells about a worship service he attended in a poor South African township.

Before the service, I was told that a house around the corner had just been burned to the ground because the man who lived there was a suspected thief. A week before that, a tornado cut through the township, ripping apart fifty homes; five people had been killed. The very night before, a gang hounded down a fourteen-year-old member of the church's Sunday school, and killed him.

The pastor began his opening prayer: "Lord, you are the Creator and the Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our own children, when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we are in the midst of death."

As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then, once he finished his prayer, very slowly, the whole congregation began to sing, at first very quietly, then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song of praise—praise to a God who in Jesus had plunged into the very worst to give us a promise of an ending beyond all imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of the end.<sup>3</sup>

Believers still sigh and groan through the pain and struggles of this life just like everyone else. The difference is God gives us hope that the devastating tragedies of this world are not the end of the story. Despite all the troubles and tragedies that swirled around him, Paul did not lose hope. Why? Because he fixed his eyes on the end of the story.

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<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, editor, *A Place for Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 2010)

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 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. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

In the fall of 1991, a car driven by a drunk driver jumped its lane and smashed headfirst into a minivan driven by Jerry Sittser. Sittser and three of his children survived, but Sittser's wife, four-year-old child, and mother died in the crash. Over the years Sittser has offered some profound reflections about loss, grief, and suffering. In his book *A Grace Revealed*, Sittser shares how his son David responded to the tragic accident.

My son David has always has been quiet and reflective. After the accident, he was the least likely to talk about it; but when he chose to, he usually had something significant to say or ask. Once, when David was eight, we were driving to a soccer match some distance from our home. Typically David was quiet but some question was brewing inside him.

"Do you think Mom sees us right now?" he suddenly asked. I paused to ponder. "I don't know, David. I think maybe she does see us. Why do you ask?" "I don't see how she could, Dad. I thought Heaven was full of happiness. How could she bear to see us so sad?"

Could Lynda witness our pain in Heaven? How could that be possible? How could she bear it? "I think she does see us," I finally said. "But she sees the whole story, including how it all turns out, which is beautiful to her. It's going to be a good story, David. God knows the whole story. He knows how it all turns out, which is glorious."<sup>4</sup>

Take Jesus' hand. And when the day comes for you, you'll be ready to fold up your tent and go home.

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed* (Zondervan, 2012), pp. 138-139