

## SOMETHING NEW

### 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

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In 1939, New York City hosted one of the most ambitious events the world had ever seen: the World's Fair. For just a few dollars, visitors were invited to walk through shimmering pavilions and exhibits that promised a bold, beautiful future. It pointed to highways stretching across the continent, towering cities of glass and steel, and machines that would lighten every burden of daily life. Its central theme read: "The World of Tomorrow."

It was a spectacle of engineering and art. Forty million visitors lined up to walk through exhibits that painted a vision of a future that was brighter, faster, cleaner, and more hopeful than the past. They marveled at new technologies like washing machines, color televisions, and even early robots. Each promised to lift the burden of everyday life.

The clouds of war still hovered over Europe and uncertainty filled the air, but the World's Fair celebrated human achievement as if to say: "It doesn't have to stay this way. A new world is coming." It was the epitome of the belief that through progress and innovation, man could build a better future. It was a hope rooted in human achievement.<sup>i</sup>

You can hardly blame them, can you? All of us long for something better. On big and small scales, we value self-improvement. It is the foundation of an entire self-help industry. The trouble is that the whole premise is gravely mistaken. The world we long for won't come from within. Paul knew that, and it was important to him that the Corinthians knew that.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul shares a hope that is rooted in something far deeper than human progress. His hope is anchored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the truth that something new had happened. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul announces not a dream of human progress, but the reality of God's power to make all things new.

Paul writes, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature." He is saying that from now on, now that Christ has come, nobody ought to regard us from a purely human point of view. Paul says, it is as though God started all over again and was making a new world. You might even call it "the world of tomorrow." There was a first creation with the Spirit of God brooding across the waters, bringing light out of darkness and the world. And Paul says, in Jesus something like that has happened: Genesis 1 all over again.<sup>ii</sup>

The late Haddon Robinson has described Corinth in this way: **"If ever there was a culture in the ancient world that didn't need help, it was the Greek culture. The Greeks had everything. They had the great philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. They had orators, men who could hold people spellbound. They had architecture like the Parthenon, that magnificent**

temple built over 2,000 years ago that still astounds us. They had the arts... They had sports, huge stadiums in which athletes competed. One classical historian says of the Greeks that anything the Greeks needed, they had invented. Anything that they wanted, they had. But he was wrong. There was one thing they did not have. They did not have hope. Because they did not have hope, they gave themselves to all kinds of sensual indulgences. It's true of that culture; it's true of our own.

The historian Matthew Arnold put it this way: "On that sad pagan world, disgust and secret loathing fell. Deep weariness and sated lust made human life a hell." As Paul said, they were without God, and they were without hope. If there was one city in Greece that typified the hopeless condition of a people, it was the city of Corinth, a great throbbing, commercial center surrounded by two great seas. Moral people despised Corinth. To be called a "Corinthian" was to be considered amongst thieves, robbers, idolaters, and the sexually perverted. It was moral darkness without hope.

Then one day a little Jewish man from Tarsus showed up in the marketplace there. By his own admission, he felt very weak. He said he was afraid to speak into that darkness this word of hope, but he did. I'm sure that at first the Corinthians who heard him walked away mocking him. But then some came to listen, perhaps to laugh at him. They stayed, because the message this little Jewish man preached—the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified—somehow grabbed hold of them. They found in his words something different. They saw in his life something new. These people cast themselves with a reckless abandon upon God's truth and grace, and they were changed." <sup>iii</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul is writing to them about two big ideas: The reality of life beyond death and this ministry of reconciliation which God has given to Paul. At the heart of the passage is the beautiful summary announcement: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature!" (NASB1995) The grammar is tricky. That's why our translations vary in how to best put it into words. In the original Greek, there are no verbs. They have to be supplied, which is a fairly common process of making one language readable in another. <sup>iv</sup>

Many of us carry translations that read as we've read it today: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature." But if we translate this literally word by word, it will simply read: "If anyone in Christ, new creation." This is why others choose to render it as "*there is* a new creation" or like the latest version of the NIV: "the new creation has come."

Paul never uses the noun "creation" (*ktisis*) to refer to an individual person (see Rom 1:2, 25; 8:19–22, 39), but always to the larger reality. The beauty of this passage is that being "in Christ" means that God has made you personally and spiritually into a new creature. But it also means that, for those who are in Christ, the new creation has come! The new world that Christ announced through his death and resurrection has broken into the present.

We're not talking about some inner subjective change of individual heart: If anyone is in Christ, then that person just feels differently about some things. Paul says, if anyone is in Christ, there's a new creation. There's a whole new world. The old is gone. Behold, the new has come.

To help us better understand all this, Paul points out several differences between the old way and the new way. He tells us a few things about God's world of tomorrow so that we can be sure we're not still clinging to the old world.

*Verses 14-15: For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.*

One certain sign that you're still holding on to the "old" world is that **you live for yourself**.

### **LIVING FOR YOURSELF**

Ernest Gordon was a British officer captured by the Japanese in World War 2. Gordon was put to work building the Burma-Siam railway through the thick, Thai jungle near the River Kwai. The Japanese hated those who were willing to surrender rather than die, and their treatment of the soldiers was appalling. Prisoners were beaten to death if they appeared to be lagging, they worked in 120 degree conditions, and eventually 80,000 men died building the ill-fated railroad.

Jospeh Wood described it this way: "In the almost indescribably horrific conditions of those camps, death was a daily reality for the prisoners. The cruelty of the guards, the wretched food, the dangerous and incessant labor, and disease left the prisoners in a state that would best be described as subhuman.

Gordon describes the attitude of the prisoners in the early days of the railroad construction as survival-of-the-fittest, every-man-for-himself. The prisoners were as far as imaginable from the civilization from which they had come. Acts of kindness were rare and rendered only with an accompanying cynicism that marked the success of the Japanese, who had vowed to reduce the prisoners to a state worse than the lowest coolies in Asia.

But two extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice occurred and changed the tenor of the camp, at least for some. One prisoner was discovered to have starved himself to death to provide rations to a dying friend. Another accepted the death penalty imposed by the guards for the alleged theft of a shovel: when the guards threatened to kill all the members of a work party if the thief did not come forward, this prisoner claimed to be the culprit. Shortly after his execution, the shovel was found in its usual place, miscounted rather than missing.

These acts of magnificent self-giving launched a spirit that soon reached Gordon himself. At his lowest point, after suffering from malaria, appendicitis, diphtheria, various parasites, and other diseases, he lay crippled at one end of the camp morgue, written off as beyond hope by the British doctors. But some friends built a small shelter for him, and two men in particular came to his aid. Dusty Miller, a down-to-earth Protestant Christian who in civilian life was a gardener,

and Dinty Moore alternated shifts bathing Gordon, caring for his wounds, and massaging his legs to help him gain the strength to walk again.”<sup>v</sup>

Gordon regained his physical strength and came to life spiritually as well. “If anyone is in Christ, New creation!”

That’s what Mary discovered from the gardener, too. Well, he wasn’t the gardener, but she thought he was. It wasn’t at the cross or even the empty tomb that she really understood. Easter began the moment the gardener said, “Mary!,” and she knew who he was. That is where the miracle happened: in her encounter with the living Lord. <sup>vi</sup>

The risen Lord had business among the living, to whom he appeared not once but four more times in the Gospel of John. As Barabara Brown Taylor points out: “Every time he came to his friends, they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him.” This became the only evidence they had to offer those who ask us how we can possibly believe. It’s your only evidence, too. Because we live; that is why. Because we have found, to our surprise, that we are not alone.

When the life of Christ invaded that POW camp, Ernest Gordon said everything changed. He describes it in his own memoir: “The wind of the spirit had blown upon us; we could not prove how or whence it had come. But our experience pointed to a source beyond ourselves. We knew personal fulfillment, love, joy, peace, wholeness, as we committed ourselves to the one who called us. Only as we responded to this Word did we receive the power to progress towards true humanity. Our life on the horizontal plane was made meaningful at the point where it was met by the vertical. At the point marked by the Cross we found ourselves.”

Verse 15: *“And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”*

Another certain way to hang on to the old creature is to **recognize everyone from a human point of view.**

### **RECOGNIZING EVERYONE FROM A HUMAN POINT OF VIEW**

Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians aptly demonstrate what this new life looks like and the fruit it can produce. Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf was from a noble family in early 18th century Austria and was set to inherit title, land and money. He could have simply coasted through life as one of the elite.

Part of the fallout at that time from the Protestant Reformation was persecution by the Catholic Church of some sects of Christianity, including Mennonites and Anabaptists. After inheriting some family land, Count Zinzendorf offered asylum to a number of persecuted German-speaking Christians from Moravia and Bohemia beginning in 1722. They built the village of Herrnhut (literally, “The Lord’s Protection”) on the corner of his estate, which became a refuge for 300-400 people seeking religious freedom.

At first, his experiment was a complete disaster. In many ways, the Catholic Church's fears were realized at Herrnhut - each subgroup had different practices of faith, and that produced considerable tension. Zinzendorf eventually took a leave from his position in order to devote himself to resolving the intense conflict in the village. He began to visit every single home in the village to pray with them and to plead with them for unity around the most essential tenets of Christian faith. In response, the men of Herrnhut started gathering for intense Scripture study and prayer.

Through these disciplines, they recognized that their strife was not what God was calling them to as believers. They created a new covenant, forged in this new sense of unity. Zinzendorf began to hold daily meetings for prayer and Bible study, and the entire community was invited to take communion together on August 13, 1727. Revival broke out.

They recognized that the revival God was bringing to their community was not for them to hoard, but rather it had to lead to renewal for others. Just as the light in the Jewish temple was never extinguished, they arranged a system of hourly intercession so that someone was always praying in Herrnhut. That prayer meeting lasted without interruption for more than 100 years. Their fervency in prayer birthed a passion and vision for world missions, which has been unsurpassed to this day. The Moravians did more than all the missionaries since the book of Acts up until that time.<sup>vii</sup>

After Count Zinzendorf heard a story about a slave converting to the Christian faith, they realized that some of the most neglected places were the slave islands in the British empire, and they committed to missions in those places. In one particularly remarkable incident, two Moravians sold themselves into slavery and went to the Caribbean to witness to other slaves who had no other access to the gospel. They went to the island, and soon thousands were converted, as was the case in many other places around the globe.

Verse 16: *"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."*

The Moravians were also behind a number of other missionary movements. When William Wilberforce was trying to make his case to the Parliament for the freedom of slaves, he cited the islands that the Moravians had visited. The father of modern missions, William Carey, walked into the Baptist Mission Society with one of the Moravians' pamphlets, threw it down and demanded that the Baptists pursue the lost "like the Moravians."

The Moravians' story may seem larger than life, but our actions do not have to be heroic or dramatic. Remember that this revival began with one man going to his neighbor and praying that they would be united.

"If anyone is in Christ, New Creation!"

A third way to find yourself stuck in the old creation is to start **counting the sins of others against them**. We're so good at that. We don't want to evaluate ourselves, but we feel better when we start tabulating the wrongs of others.

### **COUNTING THE SINS OF OTHERS**

In October of 2006, Charles Carl Roberts entered a small Amish school house, locked the doors, and took the life of 5 Amish school children before turning the gun on himself. Five girls died. Five others were seriously wounded. The shooting shocked this quiet, rural county and horrified countless outsiders glued to the nonstop media coverage.<sup>viii</sup>

His mother, Terri Roberts, remembers discovering the news: "Not only was my son not alive, he was the perpetrator of the worst crime anyone could ever imagine," Terri Roberts said.

On the day of the shooting, Terri crawled into a fetal position, feeling as if her insides were ripped apart. Her husband cried into a tea towel, wearing the skin off his face wiping away tears. That week, the Robertses had a private funeral for their son, but as they went to the gravesite, they saw as many as 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard, surrounding them like a crescent. They were there to live and to say what they believed: "We forgive you."

After the shooting, the world was riveted by the remarkable display of compassion shown by the Amish, as the quiet Christian sect embraced the Roberts family and strove to forgive its troubled sinner. The other side of the story is not as well-known: the grief-torn mother seeking the still, small voice of God in the aftermath of tragedy.

Three months after the shooting, Chuck and Terri Roberts began visiting the victims and their families. Terri invited the surviving girls and their mothers to picnics and tea parties at her home. At one tea, Terri asked the mothers to sit in a circle and share the highest and lowest points of their lives. She yearned to connect with Mary Liz King, the mother of a paralyzed girl named Rosanna. Terri asked if it would be possible for her to help with Rosanna once a week. Almost every Thursday evening since, Terri has visited the Kings for several hours, singing to Rosanna, cleaning her bedclothes, bathing her limp body and reading her Bible stories. "I read to her, I bathe her, dry her hair," says Terri, who herself is battling cancer.

Verse 18-19: *"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."*

Hope doesn't look like man's best inventions, engineered efficiency, or modern marvels. It looks like resurrection life doing away with the old so that the new can come in. It looks like the people of God waking up to a new world.

In a world weighed down by fear, division, and despair, your new life in Christ shines as a living witness that love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death. This old world doesn't

know much about it, and it's no good at finding it. Out there the story is to live for yourself, see from the human point of view, and count others sins against them.

But not in here. Not with you.

**"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come!"**

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<sup>i</sup> As illustrated in Sky Jethani, *Futureville: Discover Your Purpose for Today by Reimagining Tomorrow*

<sup>ii</sup> Will Willimon, *New Creation* (March 25, 2001) Duke Chapel

<sup>iii</sup> Haddon Robinson, "Love Keeps Going" 1 Corinthians 13:10-7 (*Preaching Today*)

<sup>iv</sup> David Garland, *2 Corinthians* (New American Commentary), 286-288.

<sup>v</sup> Joseph R. Wood, "Ernest Gordon: Building Heaven in POW Hell" canaacademy.org (October 27, 2017)

<sup>vi</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Escape from the Tomb (Jn. 20:1-18)," *Christian Century* (April 1, 1998), 339.

<sup>vii</sup> John Tyson and Heather Grizzle, *A Creative Minority: Influencing Culture Through Redemptive Participation* (2016) 21-25.

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/30/495905609/a-decade-after-amish-school-shooting-gunman-s-mother-talks-of-forgiveness>