

Be of Good Courage

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17

⁶ So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

One of the most remarkable women Mark Barger Elliott ever met suffered for over fifteen years from ovarian cancer. When asked why she continued to believe in God through one debilitating cancer treatment after another, she said that if she looked really hard she could sense God's presence even in the exhausting chemotherapy treatments and the endless oncologist visits.

God was not the source of her cancer, she often said, but God was the source of her strength and determination. At her memorial service the congregation sang a praise chorus with the lyric, "O my soul, claim nothing as your own. For you there is God and God alone." Many commented how this lyric summed up Lynda's life. Although battered in her struggle to defeat cancer, she discovered through the

experience that she was never alone when she was in remission, or when the news was grim. Always Christ was in her and she was in Christ.

The fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart once observed, "The spiritual life is not a process of addition, but rather of subtraction." What we subtract in our lives depends of course on what initially fills it—ambition, addiction, suffering, even our misgivings. In the face of all of our trials and tribulations Paul reminds us transformation is possible when we invite Christ into our lives and enable him to make us a new creation from the inside out, subtracting our anxieties, doubts, and fears. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

As biblical scholar James Dunn observes, in Paul's understanding, "Being in Christ is not any kind of mystical removal from the real, everyday world. On the contrary, it becomes the starting point and base camp for a quite differently motivated and directed life." In Paul's mind our faith in Jesus does not inoculate us against the reality of hardship, but reframes our life with Christ at the center—the Christ who suffered on our behalf. When we come to discern this truth, we also discover the true source of our strength in the person of Jesus Christ.

Parker Palmer writes on matters of faith and life and how the two intersect. In his book *The Active Life* he describes going on an Outward Bound course (Outward Bound International is a non-profit, independent experiential learning organization serving schools in 33 countries which more than 250,000 people attend each year. Classic extended wilderness expeditions take participants into pristine wilderness environments and help individuals discover strengths they didn't know they had. An essential confidence-building experience, Classic courses are available year-round at locations across the country. Courses range from four-day programs to several weeks-long expeditions, with challenging

activities include backpacking, canyoneering, canoeing, dog sledding, mountaineering, whitewater rafting, rock climbing, sailing, sea kayaking, skiing and snowboarding. Whether travel is on foot, by raft, kayak or canoe or under sail, participants emerge to find out that they can do more than they thought they could.):

I took the course in my early forties, and in the middle of that course I was asked to confront the thing I had fears about since I had first heard about Outward Bound: a gossamer strand was hooked to a harness around my body, I was backed up to the top of a 110-foot cliff, and I was told to lean out over God's own emptiness and walk down the face of that cliff to the ground eleven stories below.

I remember the cliff all too well. It started with a five-foot drop to a small ledge, then a ten-foot drop to another ledge, then a third and final drop all the way down. I tried to negotiate the first drop; but my feet instantly went out from under me, and I fell heavily to the first ledge. "I don't think you quite have it yet," the instructor observed astutely. "You are leaning too close to the rock face. You need to lean much farther back so your feet will grip the wall." That advice went against my every instinct. Surely one should hug the wall, not lean out over the void! But on the second drop I tried to lean back; better, but not far enough, and I hit the second ledge with a thud not unlike the first. "You still don't have it," said the ever-observant instructor. "Try again."

Since my next try would be the last one, her counsel was not especially comforting. But try I did, and much to my amazement I found myself moving slowly down the rock wall. Step-by-step I made my way with growing confidence until, about halfway down, I suddenly realized that I

was heading toward a very large hole in the rock, and—not knowing anything better to do—I froze. The instructor waited a small eternity for me to thaw out, and when she realized that I was showing no signs of life she yelled up, "Is anything wrong, Parker?" as if she needed to ask. To this day I do not know the source of my childlike voice that came up from within me, but my response is a matter of public record. I said, "I don't want to talk about it."

The instructor yelled back, "Then I think it's time you learned the Outward Bound Motto." Wonderful, I thought. I am about to die, and she is feeding me a pithy saying. But then she spoke words I have never forgotten, words so true that they empowered me to negotiate the rest of that cliff without incident: "If you can't get out of it, get into it." Bone-deep I knew that there was no way out of this situation except to go deeper into it, and with that knowledge my feet began to move.

Author Brennan Manning has made the observation that in everyone's spiritual journey there is that first moment when we believe, when we stand before a congregation, or privately before God, and profess our faith. But that is only the first step, says Manning, because in the spiritual life there is always a second step, when we come to trust God walks beside us through all the peaks and valleys of our lives. This is where the journey of subtraction will end, as Meister Eckhart suggests, when we are able to lean upon a God as near to us as our very breath, dwelling inside us, waiting to be discovered so that the work of re-creation and transformation can begin. **Mark Barger Elliott**

The Psalmist says that we can have courage, in Psalm 46 because:

¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."

¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

AMEN!

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