

New in Christ

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!

Commentator Mark Elliott says one of the most remarkable women he 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 funeral 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!"

The basic situation is that "while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord," since "we walk by faith, not by sight." Paul was writing about his own divided situation and the attitude he is to take toward it; but Augustine found these words so convincing that he took them as the charter for a comprehensive interpretation of human history, developed most fully in *The City of God*. Many since Augustine have found his perspective persuasive.

The book, *The City of God*, presents human history as a conflict between what Augustine calls the Earthly City and the City of God, a conflict that is destined to end in victory for the latter. The City of God is marked by people who forgo earthly pleasure to dedicate themselves to the eternal truths of God, now revealed fully in the Christian faith. The Earthly City, on the other hand, consists of people who have immersed themselves in the cares and pleasures of the present, passing world.

We dwell either "at home" or "away from home." Being away from home was the situation of the sojourner in ancient Israel and the Greek and Roman worlds. All of us are born children of Cain, the founder of the earthly city (Gen. 4:17); but some are reborn as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26). Then we

become sojourners in the earthly city. But that does not mean being indifferent to the earthly city. Jeremiah had told the exiles in Babylon—certainly a worthy image of the earthly city, then and now!—to "seek the peace (welfare, shalom) of the city where you are, for in its peace you will find your peace" (Jer. 29:7, my translation). The peace of the earthly city is worth seeking, even by those who are not fully at home in it. In our own day, of course, the metaphor of sojourners has been adopted by Christians to describe our task of radical discipleship and witness within the earthly city, where a righteous life is expected at the judgment. But it is accomplished not by trying to achieve a righteousness of one's own but by receiving righteousness from God as a gift (Gal. 2:16, 3:22; Rom. 3:26; Phil. 3:9). The judge will be Christ, the one who surprised many people by proclaiming the priority of love over law and inviting sinners to receive the grace of God. **Eugene Teselle**

Paul says we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. This new way of seeing others becomes the point. The old has passed away; behold, everything is different now! If we also see, in the imagination of our hearts, ourselves, our foes, and this old world all thus transfigured by the death of Christ, will we not deal differently with each? **John K. Stendahl**

As biblical scholar James Dunn observes, in Paul's theology, "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." 1 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:

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.

Commentator Mark Elliott tells the following story, which I may have shared several years ago, so it may sound familiar:

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**

"So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (v. 17). Remember, we are new in Christ. Our words and actions should show this!

[David L. Bartlett (2013). Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]

Believe the good news of God's abounding love in Jesus Christ. By confessing faith in Christ and being baptized into his church, we are giving new life. Through faith and baptism, we receive a new identity, life in the Spirit. Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, commit yourself to his ways through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: O God, thank you for providing the way to faith and salvation, the way of eternal life and a new identity as your child, your unending love and mercy. Thank you for the power of your good news. Thank you for inviting us to be your partners in mission and ministry. Thank you for equipping us through Your Holy Spirit. Thank you for the gifts that work together for your glory and honor. Lord, teach us to trust and depend on you. Lord, teach us to show love and concern for others in the things we say and do. Lord, protect us, guide us, forgive us. Replace our fear with faith and courage. Replace our sickness with your healing. Replace our sadness and anxiety with your joy, peace and hope....in Jesus' name, Amen.

Now, go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage, hold fast to that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, may the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with each of us. Amen