

Near the end of this reading, the apostle Paul simply says, "We are always of good courage" (v 6). As we walk by faith, not by sight, we are courageous. We are confident.

But hard times come and that confidence can be shaken. We struggle with doubts and fears. That's when the "courage" Paul talks about here becomes more like *discouraged* because of what we see, what we hear, or what we feel.

The apostle Paul knows all about this. In verse four of our text, he says, "We *groan*, being burdened". Paul knows that our bodies will groan. At the beginning of this passage, he compares our bodies to tents: "the tent that is our earthly home... For in this tent we groan" (vv 1, 2). As a tentmaker, Paul would know what happens to tents. They're not permanent or strong structures. Winds can come and blow them away. If they stay up too long, the material deteriorates, and they wear out. Our bodies are a lot like tents.

Every week we look to the bulletin and see the names of brothers and sisters in Christ who have asked for our prayers for their health and well-being. We also often lift up prayers of comfort for and speak words of consolation to those who have lost loved ones.

Maybe someone close to you has battled, or is battling, heart disease, cancer, Parkinson's, anxiety, depression, or some other affliction of the body or mind. Maybe a friend has an injury. Perhaps a loved one gets called home to heaven quite unexpectedly through illness, heart attack, or accident.

But it doesn't have to be one of these deadly diseases, tragedies, or misfortunes. For many of us, our bodies just wear out. You get older. I'm almost fifty-three. I still exercise every day, to maintain good health and stamina, but over the past year or so, I've noticed how tired I get, especially on Sunday afternoons after a big morning at church. In fact, I will admit that sometimes when I wake up on Sunday mornings, my first thought is looking forward to my Sunday afternoon nap!

For all of us, if the Lord grants us many years on this earth, the body wears down. It grows old. And unless Jesus returns first, it will one day

die. With all that's going on with our bodies, these tents, how can Paul say, "We are always of good courage"? How can we always be confident and "walk by faith"?

Well, Paul certainly knew what happens to the body. Earlier in 2 Corinthians, he wrote about a brush with death that rocked him to his core. He had also been persecuted, run out of town, and thrown in jail, and he had faced death numerous times. His body was growing old. I'm sure he had hoped that Jesus would come back before he died, but now he's beginning to realize that probably won't happen. He knows that he is soon going to die.

With that in mind, he gives the Corinthians, he gives us, and perhaps he even gives himself a better word and the best word that gives courage. We are of good courage as we walk by faith because of the better and best that are yet to come.

The **better** word is that when we die, we will be with Jesus. Paul writes, "Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (v 8). But then, a time will come that's the **best** time of all, because there will be a resurrection of the body.

In other words, it's **good** to be in our bodies now to serve the Lord. It will be **better** to be with Him after we die while we are waiting for Him to come back. That in-between time is a time when our souls are with Jesus. It is a time of peace and rest for our souls. But the body is still here in a grave or as ashes in an urn or decaying somewhere else. So, during that in-between time, our souls rest with Jesus as our bodies return to the dust of the earth, and that is better, Paul says, than what we experience in this life. But what is **best** is yet to come on the final day of resurrection.

An author by the name of Chad Bird writes for an organization called 1517. One of his recent pieces had a title that caught my attention. It said, "I Can't Wait to Get Out of Heaven." What he was getting at is that we've become sloppy in our language about what happens when we die. Too often, we just talk about going to heaven when we die and that's about it. That's all we're hoping for. Now, going to be with Jesus will be wonderful. But Bird reminds us, that's not our Christian hope in its entirety. That's not the eternal life we are ultimately looking for.

He gives this example: Suppose you have a house that's been built to your exact specifications. It's by a blue pond, in a beautiful setting. It has all the creaturely comforts, everything you ever wanted in a home, and it's ready for you to move right in. But it's a two-day drive to get there. So, you spend the first night in a motel. This motel is outside Rocky Mountain National Park, with all the grand mountain vistas to enjoy. The room is comfortable, with a nice bed. Everything's been taken care of for you. But when you wake up the next morning, you're not going to stay in the motel. You're going to turn in the key. You're going to get back in the car and start driving, because you know that the *best* home is waiting for you.

He says that in-between time—like a motel room—can be wonderful. But the *best* is yet to come. Because on the Last Day, the day when Jesus returns, all of creation will be renewed. We will rise with our bodies glorified. There will be no more groaning, no more pain, no more death, no more disintegration, no more decay. Our eyes will see colors more vivid than any rainbow; our taste buds will explode with flavors of foods that we cannot even imagine now. The smells will be aromas you want to breathe in deep and long. We will touch with nerve endings that are alive once again, perhaps caressing a face of someone you so loved. And we will hear music lifting us up to the greatest heights. We are waiting for that day when Jesus returns to make everything new once again. So, we walk in faith, believing all this “best is yet to come” will one day arrive, because Jesus has already been resurrected in His body.

Easter was just a few weeks ago. During the Easter season, we heard of Jesus risen from the dead with His body glorified. Mary's outside the tomb. He speaks her name, “Mary,” and she grabs hold of His legs. He sees the disciples in an upper room, and He eats a piece of fish to show them that He is not a ghost. He can let Thomas touch His hands and side and then say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). He eats breakfast on the beach with his disciples. Jesus has risen from the dead with His body glorified. And because He has, we, too, will one day rise. That resurrected body will be our permanent home; it will be the immortality we put on over this body. Instead of a groaning body, we will live an eternity with Jesus.

But we are not there yet. We are still alive, and Paul says that is good. It is good when we are always of good courage as we walk by faith. How do we do that? By seeking to please the Lord with our bodies. Paul says, “We make it our aim to please him” (v 9).

Sometimes that calls for courage in a world where the sanctity of human life is often thrown away. So, we take a courageous stand for those who have not yet been born, for the children growing up in the inner city who do not get a good education, for those who are struggling with depression and discouragement and thoughts of suicide, and for those who can no longer fully take care of themselves in their old age.

Or maybe living the good life calls for a courageous stand in the midst of what’s happening with sexuality, gender, and marriage. We simply say marriage is between a man and a woman and all sexuality, all nakedness, is to be in that relationship and that relationship alone. That calls for courage.

But perhaps the greatest courage is to say no to our own bodies. We need to say no to the desires we have that will not please the Lord, whether it’s a desire for more money and stuff instead of being content, or jealousy instead of rejoicing with what someone else has, or anger instead of seeking peace, or ugly words that we want to use instead of building someone up, or looking at things that our eyes should never see. We need to have the courage to say no when our bodies are not doing what’s pleasing to the Lord. We need the courage to say no to some things and yes to what pleases the Lord.

Now such a courage comes not from within us but from that promised, guaranteed Holy Spirit. The Spirit works through the Word and Sacraments to give us that good courage even when so many things we see and hear can discourage us.

It is *good* to walk by faith and not by sight in this life, to be of good courage, to do what is pleasing to the Lord. It is *better* to die and go to be with Him. But what is *best* is yet to come. And so, always, we are of good courage. Amen.