

This Old House

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16 – 5:10

Baxter T. Exum (#1524)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
November 24, 2019



This morning, I would like for us to study a question that came from one of our guests a while back. I am always thankful for questions and comments. We usually keep some kind of sermon request card in the entryway, but those are also welcome via email or text to my number on the front of the bulletin every week. But a while back, one of our guests turned in this question: Why is it a blessing to grow old, even with wrinkles and arthritis? What an interesting question! It is purely coincidental that we are covering the idea of growing old the same week that many on Facebook are doing the “Ten-Year Challenge,” where for some reason the thing right now is to post a picture of you NOW alongside one from TEN YEARS AGO. Obviously, I have not changed a bit! But for those of you who might be aging, I sent out a good article along with the bulletin last night, we posted it on the church’s Facebook page, and I put the hard copy in the cubbyholes for those of you who don’t have internet access. The author had some great thoughts that we won’t have time to consider this morning. But today, I want us to look at a passage in 2 Corinthians, as we discuss the question: Why is it a blessing to grow old, even with wrinkles and arthritis?

Dowell Flatt was one of my favorite professors at Freed-Hardeman, and brother Flatt used to say that 2 Corinthians is perhaps the most neglected book in all of scripture. He explained that many Bible classes will study 1 Corinthians, but by the time they finish all sixteen chapters of 1 Corinthians, nobody’s in the mood to dive into 2 Corinthians, so they move on to something else, and they never get back to studying 2 Corinthians. That makes sense to me! I understand, and I’m pretty sure that I’ve seen that happen. It does seem true that 2 Corinthians is often overlooked. We will not be overlooking 2 Corinthians this morning. Today, we are going back to chapters 4-5, a passage addressing some of the challenges of living in a human body.

In the first part of Chapter 4, Paul makes some contrasts, and he continues into our passage today, as he compares this old house we are living in now to the amazing reward that is to come. So, as we think about the blessing of growing old, even with wrinkles and arthritis, I want us to think about what Paul says here, as he compares where we are now to where we are going. Notice, please, 2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:10,

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen,

but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

¹ For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, ³ inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴ For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

⁶ Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight— ⁸ we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. ⁹ Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

As we think about this message from God, I want us to apply the inspired message to the question that came in from one of our guests: Why is it a blessing to grow old, even with wrinkles and arthritis? And to do this, I want to basically use Paul's words here as our outline. You might notice in your copy of the scriptures that we seem to have three paragraphs. As Paul continues the contrasts and comparisons from earlier in this chapter, he continues. He doesn't want us to lose hope, and so he gives us basically three benefits of living in these earthly bodies, as imperfect and as fragile as they are.

I. And we start in 4:16-18, as Paul explains, first of all, that living in this decaying body reminds us that THE INNER MAN (THE SPIRIT) IS BEING RENEWED DAY BY DAY.

And for most of us, there is no doubt that the bodies we are in are truly decaying. The older we get, most of us understand more clearly every day that the bodies we are in are falling apart. We go to the doctor, and we come in with a checklist of everything that hurts, everything we might be concerned about. We then leave the doctor with a new list of everything she is concerned about. It's almost like maintaining an old car. Over time, problems start to multiply. I'm driving a 2010 Subaru with more than 150,000 miles on it right now. And bad things are starting to happen. The clicker no longer works on the driver's side door lock. It's not terrible, but it is a bit irritating. The switch for the blower doors for the heat and air is starting to fail – I can no longer reliably switch between defrost and feet and face – sometimes it just cycles randomly, sometimes even after I turn the car off, and that's kind of weird! I have some rust starting to form around the rear wheels. I'm starting to add oil between oil changes. I've got a heat shield starting to rattle. Things are falling apart, and what happens to cars starts happening to us. I think it was my grandfather who used to say, "After 50, it's just patch, patch, patch." And over time, the aches and pains start to catch up to us. The first time I ever hurt my back was during a clothing give-away at the church down in Janesville. But it wasn't from lifting boxes. You know what did me in? I bent down to pick up a gum wrapper off of the floor! It was almost as if somebody had shoved an ice pick into my lower spine. I was only in my mid-20's, and I remember thinking, "Oh no! This is what it means to get old!" Little did I know! Over time, we might slowly lose our vision or our teeth or our hearing, we need new hips and knees, the heart starts to fail, bones become brittle, and on and on and on.

But instead of being overwhelmed and discouraged, I want us to notice how Paul takes this truth, and he basically uses it as a reminder to be thankful for the renewal of the *“inner man”* (in verse 16). And in verse 17, he continues by explaining that the *“momentary, light affliction”* we suffer here in this life actually *“produces for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.”* By the way, he is not dismissing the *“affliction,”* he doesn’t deny that we are afflicted – we are. Paul was afflicted. The context here is persecution. Paul has been beaten, left for dead, he’s suffered shipwreck, and on and on. He’s not minimizing the suffering we experience, but he’s reminding us that the afflictions we suffer, are actually *“momentary”* and *“light”* when compared to what is coming. What we suffer here will not last long. Over the past few weeks I’ve been watching a Netflix program about a helicopter trauma team over in Yorkshire, England. On every flight they have a doctor, a pilot, and a trauma nurse. A few weeks ago, they showed up at a crash scene. I can’t remember if it was a bicycle or a motorcycle, but when they showed up the man’s foot was actually beside his head. He was looking at his own foot in a place where it really shouldn’t be. His thigh bone was completely broken. Well, they assessed the situation, and they said to the man, “What we are about to do will hurt. It will hurt a lot. But it will be brief.” And maybe that is what Paul is saying here. What we suffer in this life is *“momentary.”*

And not only do we just endure the decaying of the outer man, but he reminds us here that the decay and suffering actually points us to something better. Hardships make us stronger. Perhaps we endure some level of pain at the gym, because we know that there is a purpose for it. And that’s what we find in verse 18 as he encourages us to *“look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.”* As the outer man decays, therefore, we don’t focus on the outer man, we don’t focus on the suffering and decay, but we focus on the inner man. We focus on the spiritual. We focus on the renewal that is happening on the inside.

The human eye is rather interesting in that we cannot focus clearly on more than one thing at a time. For those of you who shoot handguns, we understand the advice is usually to focus on the front sight. We have choices, don’t we? The target, the front sight, or the rear sights, but we can’t focus on all three at once. If you want to try it, hold your hand out at arm’s length as if you are aiming at me, and focus on your fingerprint. You’ll notice that you need to choose; you cannot focus on both. When you focus on your fingerprint, notice how everything else goes blurry. There is discussion on this as there is on everything, but the advice I’ve heard is to focus on the target while drawing the weapon, and then shift the focus to the front sight, to be most accurate. I think I’ve mentioned this before, but back when my grandfather was preaching, he measured the distance from his eyes to the pulpit, and he had an identical pair of glasses made with just the reading part. So, during that song before the sermon, he would swap his glasses. And I don’t think anybody ever knew this, but when he was preaching, he could only see his notes. Everything else was blurry. The whole church could have left, and he wouldn’t have known it! I remember him saying that all of his nervousness faded away! I say all of this to illustrate that we need to choose what we focus on in this life. And Paul’s clear advice here is that we focus on the eternal. Focus on what is truly important. Focus, not on what is seen (in verse 18), but focus on what is not seen. And the reason is: What we see in the world around us is temporary, including these bodies we are in. We focus, then, on the spiritual. Instead of getting distracted by these bodies we’re in, instead of getting distracted by aches, and pains, and wrinkles and arthritis, we focus instead on the renewal that is happening on the inside.

I look around this room, and I see some bodies that are failing, but I also see some of our senior saints who are incredibly strong, spiritual giants who are doing some amazing things for the Lord, men and women who are *“...being renewed day by day.”* Here at the beginning, then, we find that we don’t lose heart, because our failing bodies actually give us opportunities for spiritual renewal, and that happens when we focus, not on what is temporary, but on what is eternal. A failing body pushes us toward spiritual renewal.

II. **There is a second big idea that comes in 5:1-5, and that is: Our failing bodies remind us that WE ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO NEW BODIES.**

And notice: Starting in verse 1, Paul compares our earthly bodies to a tent, and he makes the point that this tent that we are living in right now is in the process of being torn down. And when this tent is torn down, ***“...we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”*** And so, he is making a contrast between a tent and an actual building. Most of us know what it means to live in a tent. Most of us have lived in a tent from time to time, maybe a few days or a week or two at the most. We do it for fun, to get away, to relax. Someone has suggested that camping is what happens when you spend hundreds of dollars to live like a homeless person! And yet for some reason, we continue to live in tents. We know the advantages: Tents are lightweight, a tent can provide practically instant shelter almost anywhere. The tent up here is the one I taped to the deck of an ocean-going ferry for 3-½ days up in Alaska. It served me well. I have a larger version of this tent I use at our Bible camp up near Eau Claire. Aaron and I camp out in the woods to get away from the children. And yet we also know that tents have their limitations. After a storm followed our family around Lake Superior for about a week when I was growing up, we finally got sick and tired of spending all day every day drying out our gear. Today’s tents are a lot better than the tents we had 30 years ago, especially in the rain. I have not had a drop of water in any of my tents over the past 10 years or so. But one morning in Wawa, Ontario, the guy in the camper across from us had to call for help, and the authorities had to come and get him out. His camper was completely surrounded by water, he had a wooden leg, and rescuers had to lay a plank across the water so the guy could get out without getting his leg wet. And here we are in our tent! When your campground starts looking like a scene from a pirate movie, that’s when it’s time to quit. My dad packed up the tent, we went to a hotel, and that was it. As I have mentioned before, his theory now is that the world’s worst hotel room is better than the world’s best tent. I’m not there yet, but we do see the advantages of a building over a tent. And remember: What did Paul do for a living when he wasn’t preaching full-time? He was a tentmaker! He was dissing his own profession here! A building offers better protection from animals and the weather. A building provides better security. A building will generally last longer than a tent, and so on.

But notice the point Paul is making here: In this tent we ***“groan.”*** And he uses this word twice in this paragraph. In this tent, this earthly body, we ***“groan,”*** we long for something better. And so we have the picture of perhaps camping in the rain, we are cold, maybe we’re getting harassed by raccoons or something, the lightning is striking all around us, the wind is blowing, and as we’re laying there miserable, we long for something better. We long for a better dwelling. That’s the picture Paul is painting for us here. This earthly body is a tent, but we are looking forward to something better.

And so in terms of our question today, it seems that growing old might be something of a reminder, that something much better is on the horizon. As this tent falls to pieces, we remember that we are looking for something much better. There is a time coming when we will take off this tent, just like we might take off a piece of clothing. And when we do, ***“...what is mortal will be swallowed up by life”*** (verse 4). For now, though, we ***“groan.”*** For now, we groan whenever we bend down to pick up those gum wrappers. For now, we groan as we go through surgery after surgery. For now, we groan as say goodbye to those who are closest to us. For now, groan as we are weighed down with sin, and sickness, and sadness. In the meantime, though, we have God’s Spirit as a ***“pledge,”*** as a down payment (verse 5).

As we think about what Paul writes here, we need to be asking ourselves whether we are really groaning as we should. Or are we a little bit too at home down here? Have we become so comfortable in our tent that we really aren’t looking forward to that new body as much as we should? In my opinion, this is probably more of a problem

for those who haven't yet injured themselves by sneezing! As we get older, life has a way of reminding us that this tent we are in is temporary, and so we look forward to something better. So, instead of getting too discouraged by camping, Paul reminds us that something better is coming.

So what? What does this mean for us? It means we need to be careful not to live our lives right now as if we are at home. We are not at home! "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through," as we sometimes sing. So, let's not complain when tent things happen to us. This body is a tent. This is not our permanent dwelling.

So, first of all, the trouble we have with "this old house" actually leads to spiritual renewal. And secondly, the trouble we have with our earthly dwelling also serves as a reminder that we are looking forward to a new and permanent home. This body is only a tent, so we expect to have some level of trouble with it.

III. All of this leads us to a third benefit of "body trouble" – we find it in verses 6-10 as Paul uses these issues to remind us that we are not yet AT HOME WITH THE LORD.

I don't know how many of you have had the privilege of picking out cemetery plots with your parents, but I have. We buried my brother-in-law there, at Oak Hall Cemetery off of Highway M in Fitchburg. It's owned by the city, and it is a beautiful place. It's where Vince is buried. If I were to die today (assuming my wife doesn't hide my body somewhere), this is probably where I will be buried. There's an old section with some graves from the mid-1800's, and as we were walking through there several years ago, my dad and I found an old, old tombstone with a reference to Psalm 73. It's a passage I don't remember seeing before, but it was so appropriate – Psalm 73:25-26,

***Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.***

Isn't that what Paul is saying here? ***"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."*** When my flesh fails, I know I'm going home to be with the Lord. In a sense, the trouble we have with our earthly bodies causes us to be homesick. As this body fails, I want to go home. I want to go home to be with the Lord. As this body fails, I realize that I am ***"absent from the Lord"*** (verse 6); I realize that things are not okay. As this body fails, we get more and more homesick.

As a result, Paul tells us that we are to ***"walk by faith, not by sight."*** The answer to a fragile body, then, is to ***"walk by faith."*** The world around us deals with body failure by looking to technology, and science, and medicine. And we are thankful for the advances. We are thankful for new knees, and transplants, and all of the surgeries. But science and medicine can only delay the inevitable. The benefit to getting old, then, is that we get more and more homesick for heaven.

And this brings us to Paul's conclusion (in verses 9-10), ***"Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."*** Knowing that this tent is failing, I need to do whatever it takes to live a life right now that is ***"pleasing to Him."*** And I live this way, knowing that there is a Day of Judgment out there on the horizon.

Conclusion:

All of us are getting older. There are some benefits:

- As the outer man decays, the inner man grows stronger.
- As this old tent falls apart, we look forward to our new and permanent dwelling.
- And finally, as this old house deteriorates, we get more and more homesick, longing to be with the Lord.

I am so thankful for the question that led to today's lesson! As we close, I want to share some good news about an older woman who was baptized just a few years ago, at the age of 108! Her name is Lula Wallace. She has since passed away, but toward the end of her life, her daughter, Margaret Cook, 78 herself, continually prayed that her mother, Lula, would someday obey the gospel. Margaret eventually studied with her mother, and Lula decided that she was ready. They live in Mississippi, but they drove up to Memphis and met a distant cousin, John DeBerry, a gospel preacher and also a Tennessee state representative. I've heard John speak a number of times, and John is one of the only politicians I would happily vote for if I ever have the opportunity. Two of Lula's grandsons carried their grandmother in her wheelchair down into the water and baptized her. I share this by way of encouragement. As long as we are still alive, we have the ability to turn to God in saving faith. Please, do not wait until you are 108! But if you are ready to walk by faith and not by sight this morning, we would love to help with that. Jesus died for us, and he now commands that we turn from sin, and that we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we want you to know that heaven will surely be worth it all. Come talk to me now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com