

For we know that if the earthly house of our tent is dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens. For most certainly in this we groan, longing to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven; if so be that being clothed we will not be found naked. For indeed we who are in this tent do groan, being burdened; not that we desire to be unclothed, but that we desire to be clothed, that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now he who made us for this very thing is God, who also gave to us the down payment of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord; for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are courageous, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord.

Consumer advocates say that in order for us to get the best products and the most for our money, we should comparison shop.

Comparison shopping works for pancake mix. Here's how you do it: You place your cart dead center in the middle of the aisle and you go to the grocery shelf and you pick out two boxes and you stand next to the cart. (I have done it and I have seen it done, so I am pretty sure blocking the aisle is one of the most important parts of the process.)

The second thing you do is check the weight—you CAN check the side panel and I think most women do that, but men know that numbers can't be trusted, so we hold one box in each hand and kind of juggle them like this [show].

When you are satisfied that you know the comparative weights, you go back and squint at the price on the shelf to see which one costs the most. Now, in the OLD DAYS that some of you barely remember—when the prices were on the boxes themselves—you could go check each package and see if one of them was priced two-cents cheaper from week before last's sale.

So you have compared the prices and the weights—so it is time to check the ingredients.

No matter what they tell you about nutrition, don't believe them. I'll tell you the REAL truth. Always avoid all-natural ingredients. If you look up that term in the food dictionary, the primary definition is “sawdust” and the secondary is “straw or wood-chips.”

Now look at the nutrition panel—everyone knows you should look there—but here's how you REALLY use it. Look at the sodium and the calcium and the carbs and the fat and all that.

Especially look at the fat. If it says “fat free” then avoid it at all costs—because “fat free” means exactly the same as “all natural ingredients.” That's right, “sawdust or straw or wood chips.”

When we were at Smyrna, one of my deacons was diabetic and he explained his own special diabetes diet in one sentence. “If you put it in your mouth and it tastes good—spit it out.” Bobby knew something that nutritionists may not realize. All the taste in food comes from fat and sugar and salt and artificial flavorings.

Knowing that, my method for comparison shopping is to find the box with the most of those things for the least amount of money and put it in the cart.

In our passage for today, you might say that Paul was doing some comparison shopping—or encouraging us to do some comparison shopping. In a sense, he has asked us to stand in the middle of the aisle and compare two different houses, or two cloaks or two different bodies.

In this passage, Paul is going to help us choose one over the other, but it is not exactly by weight or ingredients. It is by qualities.

The first comparison Paul makes might be found in the “labels” just like those foods we were talking about. It has to do with “nature.” In one hand you see a package or a house for the soul that is “all natural.” This is the body you were issued when you first came on active duty as a human being. You and I still have the very same body we got from the beginning.

Kind of like that old familiar car in the driveway. It used to be shiny and new. But now it has a few nicks in the paint and dings on the bumpers. Most of us have had a bit of body work done, but I think some of you may have been totaled and rebuilt. As I look out there (and in the mirror) I can see some mis-matched paint and some wrinkles in the body work.

Like an older car, most of us who are over 30 don't run like we used to. We cough and sputter a bit when we try to get started up in the morning. Some of us run like we are driving on flat tires and yet, this old house—this old body, this abode of the soul is familiar to us. We've never been without it and we are comfortable with it. Even when it doesn't work right or even when it is full of pain.

In the passage we just read, Paul is talking about a trade. A trade-up that is possible. An offer that we can hardly refuse.

I can imagine him as a salesman in a bad-plaid coat. “Just look at this baby! NOTHING like that old model you've been riding in! It doesn't just get GOOD gas mileage, it doesn't use any gas at all! It's faster than the internet and it stops on that proverbial dime! It is more comfortable than anything you've ever seen and it was made JUST FOR YOU! Never touched by human hands. Warranty? Well this baby is guaranteed to last forever!!! You have the solemn pledge of Almighty God on that!”

That solemn promise he is talking about is found in verse 5. Different translations put it different ways, but this is the earnest money—the pledge—or the “down payment” as our version said. Paul says that the down payment or the earnest money is the Spirit of God.

I like the term “earnest money” best of all for this term. Most of you know what that is. It is money used to seal a pledge or a promise. I come to you and say that I will buy that car you have for sale, but since it is the weekend I can't get enough money out of the bank—so we write up an agreement and I give you \$500 to hold the car until money. That way you can see that I am serious about my promise to buy the car.

Paul says the sending of the Holy Spirit was giving earnest money or a pledge or a down payment God made on our new body—on our eternal life.

No only is the Holy Spirit a comfort in the here and now, he is the proof and the pledge of what God has in store for us once we've been translated from this world to the next, in his presence.

Let's go back to that pretend car lot I was talking about.

On this hand, you have an old worn out model. It was pretty awesome in its day, but that day is long gone. Some of you guys out there have some sheet metal sticking out through that vinyl top. :) Some of our old models are rusted through and have bald tires. Doesn't want to start up in the morning. Runs hot (or cold). Leaks. Sometimes it even backfires, doesn't it? I wonder if mine will get me there and back sometimes.

On the other hand, we have fingers [wiggle them—"dumb joke, sorry"] . On the other hand, we have a new model. Well crafted and perfect in every way—and if you think about it the old model never really was perfect. Doesn't even require fuel. Feels better. Fits better. Smells better. Looks better. In fact, it was made by God Almighty just for you—he has given a pledge, an earnest, a down payment—a promise—that it will never fail, never quit, never get old, and the paint will never fade.

I know that most of us live in the here and now and that most of us can hardly imagine what God has in store for us when we leave this place, but go with me here for a minute. Think about those two models. Which one weighs out the best in your hand?

If you think about what is and its imperfection and what is to come and the perfection it bears, does it make you groan just a little? Driving this old model when the other is there waiting?

In verse two, Paul says that on a spiritual level, we Christians do just that...groan. We are spiritual beings. We are spirits housed in a temporary body. In a sense, we are trapped in a natural, physical, limited body—a place we don't ultimately belong. As God's children, we have that promise—we can “sort-of” see in the “down payment” of the Holy Spirit what is waiting on the other side.

The world around us may think that this is all there is, but we know better. We have seen the future through our spiritual eyes and on some level we can hardly wait. Sometimes, on a cold and damp Winter morning we may groan a bit. Partly out of age and pain and imperfection, but partly out of our desire to have what has been promised us and what we have experienced a little of through the Spirit of God.

Have you ever seen those bumper stickers like: “My Other Car is a Rolls-Royce” or “My Other Car Is A Corvette”? Or the bumper sticker on an old clunker that says, “I Love My Ferrari”? Of course you almost certainly know that none of those stickers are true. If they had something that didn't belch smoke and leak oil all over everything, they would probably be driving it.

Christians, maybe we need to get some stickers and put on the back of our heads that say, "My OTHER Body is Perfect." That way when we trip over a crack in the sidewalk or drool or when we say something with a really high "DUH!" quotient or otherwise show our imperfection, we could just point to the sticker and smile.

Paul tells us that because you and I are here, we are absent from the Lord Jesus Christ. We are absent from the direct presence of our God.

I did a study of heaven some time ago. There is a famous Christian artist named Joni who is paralyzed and who paints holding a brush in her mouth. In an interview she talked about how she loves her life but that sometimes she gets still and quiet and a faraway look comes to her eyes and she longs for that new body and that new home. She loves the here and now but also longs for fellowship with those loved-ones who have gone on before.

She longs for a direct conversation with her Savior and with the saints. As long as we are in this body we cannot walk and talk with Jesus in person.

But we do have the comfort of the Holy Spirit. We have a foretaste of what it is to walk and talk with God. We also have Christian companionship which helps us understand what a wonderful future we really do have.

Paul tells us that we were prepared—we were CREATED for fellowship with God. We were intended to walk and talk with him just as Adam and Eve did so long ago—before imperfection changed everything. We were created for perfection. We were created to inhabit the newest and best model.

I kind of like this old body. It really has been good to me. I know it isn't what it once was, but it isn't so bad. Dented a little. Scraped and scratched up a bit. Sometimes I think it misfires and runs on seven cylinders—but I am comfortable with it. I can use it to get around here on earth and I can even use it to do God's work. Sometimes I use it to do a bit of fishing and a little hunting. I can use it to eat some of that food I should avoid—maybe I'll go this afternoon and buy something at the grocery store that is full of fat and sugar and artificial ingredients :)

In comparison—in comparison to what is waiting, there IS NO COMPARISON. This temple, this temporal abode is nothing compared to what we have been promised.

If you are a child of God—a Christian—I encourage you to remember that there is more and better to come. We are still here because it is God's will and God's plan that we do his work and that we spread his Good News with all we are and all we say. We have people to love—our families and our family of God. We still have justice to pursue. We still have starving children to feed and clothe—and buy coats for. It isn't time to trade in this old model yet.

BUT. Someday we will. The deal has already been made. The earnest money has been paid. The new model is waiting, waiting for our trade-in.

What is that going to look like? What are WE going to look like? What are we really going to be like?

I really don't know. I don't think that it is possible to know with our limited human minds and bodies. We don't have the words or the experiences to understand.

As we come to a time of invitation to hear God's Spirit and seek his face, if you are here and you have not come to a place of calling on Jesus as Lord and Savior, I encourage you to consider that today. In this passage Paul talks about non-Christians as being found “naked” for eternity—in other words, not being clothed in that new body God promises.

Christians, God expects us to seek as much perfection as possible in this world—so this invitation is also for you and me. Is God leading us to confession and renewal? Is he calling us to service? Is he just seeking a closer walk and a more open ear?

If you are not a member at Zion—would he have you cast your lot with us and serve in this place? It isn't perfect but it IS a good place to serve and to worship.

I like it here—at Zion, but also here on this earth. I like my body and I love my life. And yet, there is a little bit of longing. There is a wondering what it will be like on the other side.

There is a single that gives us a clue—or at least gives a glorious look at how “clueless” we really are as we try to think about eternity and perfection with these human minds. I want to close with that verse.

This is the verse that causes me to sometimes use the word “translated” instead of death. Because it seems that we will have our essence but we will exist almost in another realm or plane even another language—a holy place or holy language we can't know or even imagine.

This verse is found in I John 2:2

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it is not yet revealed what we will be. But we know that when he is revealed, we will be like him; for we will see him just as he is.

When that day comes and when we see him—he will be so glorious that the very sight of him will translate us into something new. We will be transformed into something so great and wonderful that it can't even be revealed until that moment.