



Do Not Lose Heart

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Rev. Fred Greco

I'd like to draw your attention once again to the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. We have been going week upon week through this book, and we have now reached the end of chapter 4. Our text this morning will be 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, a short text in which Paul gives us three contrasts to show us how we are to deal with our circumstances.

Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians 4, beginning at verse 16:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we acknowledge that there is none like you, that you, O Lord, are perfect in all your ways. We also acknowledge, Lord, that we are in need of your grace even to understand your Word, so we ask this morning that you would send your Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds, that as we study your Word, we would know you more and more, we would see the Lord Jesus Christ, and we would praise him for all that he has done. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

All of us are prone at one time or another to lose heart, and often, our answer to that is to ignore reality, to just pretend that what we see around us doesn't exist and that we can somehow look past it and pretend that circumstances are different, but Paul tells us here that the real answer is not to pretend that reality doesn't exist but to see a greater reality.

There are three comparisons Paul gives to us this morning to help us see the greater reality of what God is doing in our lives. First, Paul says *we are wasting away, yet renewed*. Secondly, he says *we have a momentary affliction, but there is glory that awaits*. Finally, he says *we have the seen that is around us, but we are to look to the unseen*. Wasting away but renewed, momentary affliction but glory, the seen but the unseen. What we have here is Paul laying out three contrasts for us to help us understand how God works in the life of a Christian.

Wasting Away, But Renewed

Let's begin, then, by looking at the comparison of wasting away but renewed. The connection of this passage, verses 16-18, with the previous passage is important, because the context is that it is a ministry that gives Paul hope. Specifically, the hope he has is the resurrection and presence of Christ. This hope Paul describes is a common hope

for all believers, that God will raise them all up together and bring them into his presence. God's grace is designed to reach many people for the glory of God. We saw that in verses 14 and 15.

So, as we come to this passage before us, the *we*, the *us*, the *our*, is all believers. Paul has been sharing his weakness with us, and he has done this not only to vindicate his ministry but also to connect with all believers. Paul knows you have difficulties also, and he doesn't want you to pretend that everything is perfect. This can be a way we use to get past our difficulties and troubles, but it only creates a greater problem.

I remember when I lived in Jackson, Mississippi, in seminary, there was down the street from the seminary a large Word of Faith church. If you know anything about the Word of Faith organization, so-called churches, their thought is that when you become a Christian, you should be completely healthy, have more than enough money all the time, and never have any problems. And if you have any problems, then it's your fault. You don't have enough faith. You need to work harder so God will bless you.

Well, what happens when you have that kind of a theology is at this church down the road from the seminary, people would come to church, but before they would come to church they would stop by the local rental car dealer because they didn't want to drive to church in their normal car. That would show that they weren't blessed enough, that they weren't faithful enough. So they would go to a rental car dealer and rent a car so that, when they pulled into a parking place, someone would say, "Now there's a real Christian. He pulled in in a Cadillac."

That's not how this works. The Bible doesn't understand that we are blessed without any affliction, without any problems, just because we follow the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, often, following the Lord Jesus Christ brings about persecution and trouble. At the same time, Paul does not want you to despair about your circumstances.

He wants you to understand the reality of what's before you, but he doesn't want you to despair, so he repeats what he said at the beginning of chapter 4 in verse 1: Do not lose heart. Don't give up. Don't grow weary. He gives now three contrasts to help us to not lose heart, and in each contrast, he acknowledges the reality of the difficulties before us in life, and then he points us to a more real blessing the Lord has for us.

The first difficulty Paul describes is that our outer self is wasting away. The most obvious way to apply this is to our physical self. You've probably heard it said, and it's true, that it is no fun growing old. Our bodies get weaker, frailer. They're subject to breaking down. We have pains where we didn't even know we *could* have pains.

This is what happens each year that we grow older, and I encourage and guarantee you young people that you will experience this too if God gives you length of days. It's the nature of the body. It's actually part of the greater principle of the world. Things get old and break down. Machines rust. The whole world is wasting away. From the very first sin, creation has been degrading.

We can see this just by walking outside. We see leaves falling off trees. We see that the body itself is dying. Even the sun and stars in the sky are burning out. Scientists call this the *second law of thermodynamics*. It means everything is wasting away, everything is degenerating. This concept is important for us to understand what Paul is saying, because when Paul is talking about us wasting away, he means more than our physical bodies.

Sure, Paul's body was wasting away, but it was more than that. The afflictions he writes about were for more than his body. They affected his mind. They affected his spirit. That's why Paul despaired of life itself in chapter 1. That's why he was perplexed in chapter 4. What we have to understand here is Paul is not giving us a dichotomy that says the body is bad and the spirit is good. That's not biblical Christianity; that's paganism that sees man as divided and he needs to jettison his body so he can be good again.

The Bible teaches us that we are one whole being, body and spirit together. That is how we are and will ever be. So, instead, what Paul is talking about is all of the believer's person that pertains to the old creation. This world is running down because of sin. That is the old creation. This affects every aspect of our lives. It's the reason we have physical pain and weakness, but it is also the reason we have emotional loss, broken relationships, and emotional pain.

Paul acknowledges the reality of life in the present, but don't miss how the sentence begins here in verse 16. "Though our outer self is wasting away..." This word *though* is actually three words in Greek. We might expand it by translating it *but even if*. Paul's acknowledgment of the reality of difficulties in life comes in the context of a contrast. "Even though we are wasting away, yet our inner self is being renewed day by day." That's the contrast.

The outer self is wasting away, but the inner self is being renewed. Just as the outer self is more than the body, so the inner self is more than the soul. Our wasting away affects all of us, so our renewal affects all of us. The inner self is the new creation God is making in Jesus Christ. You might think of it this way: if who we are in Adam is what is being deconstructed, then who we are in Christ is what is being reconstructed.

The word Paul uses here for *renew* is only used one other place in the Bible by Paul himself in Colossians 3:10. The parallel between Colossians 3 and 2 Corinthians 4 is instructive. In Colossians 3, Paul tells believers to put off their old self and put on their new self. They are to put off their old self and its practices of sin, and they are to put on the new self, which is being renewed, Paul says. Renewed how? In knowledge after the image of our Creator.

Paul is telling you not to lose heart, because even though you see that your life here and now is hard and seems to be wasting away, that is not what is important. Your inner self is your true self, and that is being renewed day by day. Not periodically, not something you need to wait years for, but each and every day it's being renewed. That means that each and every day you know more and more about Jesus. Each and every day you become more and more like Jesus. The problem is we are tempted to look at our lives like we are a child of the world, and the Bible is telling us to look at our lives as a child of God.

Momentary Affliction, But Glory

Then, in the next verse, Paul gives a second contrast. He speaks of the momentary affliction we experience but of an exceedingly great weight of glory. It's a contrast between affliction, the same word Paul has used in chapter 1, verse 4; chapter 1, verse 8; and chapter 2, verse 4... Paul knows affliction well. It's a contrast between affliction and glory.

He's following the same pattern we've just seen. He acknowledges the reality of suffering in this world, but he sets it in comparison to God's blessing. The connection between verse 17 and verse 16 is deliberate. Verse 17 begins

with the word *for*. This is the reason verse 16 is true. Paul is going to tell us in verse 17. He tells us that our focus should be on the inner man who delights after God rather than on the outer man that is suffering, and he gives us a further reason why.

Our affliction is not something that should overwhelm us. He describes affliction as light. Now, don't think for a moment that Paul has developed amnesia. He's not saying that his afflictions were nothing, that they were but trifles. Paul felt the full force of affliction. He was whipped, beaten, hungry, cold, shipwrecked, subject to the ungratefulness of others, subject to sorrow, but all of these afflictions were light in comparison to the glory God had prepared for him.

When he uses this word *light*, he uses the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 11 to describe *his* burden. Jesus tells us to follow him because his burden is light. The comparison is what helps us to see affliction as it truly is. When I was younger and before my body had been wasting away as much as it has, I enjoyed baseball. If you've ever watched a baseball game, you will know that in addition to the batter who's at the plate ready to hit, the next batter stands in the on-deck circle and prepares to hit.

What the batter will do is he will take a bat, and he takes a round circle weighted device, usually made of a hard rubber, and he puts it on the bat. These are affectionately called *doughnuts*. It adds pounds of weight to the bat. In the on-deck circle, you swing the bat with the added weight, because then when it's your turn to bat, you take the weight off the bat and your bat feels like a toothpick. It's so much lighter because you're used to the weight. The comparison makes all the difference.

That's what Paul is talking about here. Afflictions are light compared to weight of glory. But more than being light, he says that afflictions are *momentary*. This is a word that means on the spot or immediate or for a very brief period of time. The whole idea is that these afflictions are passing away. They're leaving quickly. Again, we might wonder. Paul was afflicted for years upon years, and you might say, "But, Pastor, my troubles sure don't seem like they're only a couple of minutes long."

Again, we have to remember Paul's scale. He is weighing and measuring affliction not in itself but in units of glory. When compared that way, affliction is light and brief. So, let's see how Paul describes glory. He wants you to see that what God has prepared for you, not just in the abstract but in comparison to your affliction, is glory. It is a glory beyond all comparison. This glory is heavy. This is why we don't lose heart. We look past our afflictions to the Lord, and we see the weight of the glory he has for us. Affliction is light; glory is heavy.

Now, when you've picked up something that's very heavy, it's almost a joy to carry something that's light, isn't it? The light is inconsequential. There's no comparison at all. Paul wants you to understand this. He's being very emphatic here. He actually uses, interestingly enough, a Hebrew pun. That may seem very odd considering that Paul is writing in Greek and it's being translated for us in English. You ask, "Well, Pastor, how do you get a Hebrew pun out of this?"

It's because in the Old Testament, the word for *glory* is *kabowd*. It means heavy or weighty. Something is glorious because it's weighty. It's worthwhile. It's serious. Do you see what Paul is doing here? He takes the Greek word for

heavy or *weighty* and the Greek word for *glory* and puts them together. It's as if he's saying, "It's a glorious glory. It's a heavy weight." He's emphasizing it as much as he can. He uses this pun to that effect.

But it's not just that. He tells us that it is beyond all comparison. If we thought Paul could match affliction with glory, he tells us, "No way. You can't compare affliction to glory." He says this in the strongest way possible. He actually makes up a unique phrase. He takes the word for *surpassing* or *beyond measure* that we have seen before. You remember in chapter 1 that Paul said he was utterly burdened, and you remember in chapter 4 there was the surpassing power of God.

He takes that word for beyond measure, beyond comparison, overwhelming, and he uses it not once but twice. He says it is beyond all measure to beyond all measure. It is excessively excessive. It is beyond anything that is beyond anything. This glory is without parallel. There is no comparison. Then Paul tells us that one of the ways in which it is incomparable is that it is eternal. Afflictions are but for a time, momentary, but glory is forever. It is eternal.

As you grow older, you see how time passes quickly. Things that at the time you thought were a very long period of time now seem so short. That's because of the perspective. Paul wants you to have this perspective now. Eighty years might seem like a very long time, but does it in comparison to thousands, to thousands of thousands, to never-ending time?

Paul tells us that our afflictions are not only eternal, not only beyond comparison, not only weighty; they are actually preparing glory for us. "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory." This is important for us to see. The word *preparing* means to bring something into being, to accomplish it, to produce it. Affliction is not just something to be endured; it is the way in which God brings us to glory. Affliction itself does not earn us glory, but it is the means God uses to give us glory.

The Seen, But the Unseen

That brings us to Paul's third contrast: the seen and the unseen or the fleeting and the eternal. This contrast is closely connected with the last one. We see that in our translation in verse 8 in the word *as*. Some translations will translate the beginning of this sentence *while*. The verb *look* that is found here is a present participle. That means the action of that verb is happening while the action of the main verb is going on. They're happening while the other is happening, at the same time.

The main verb is *preparing*. Afflictions are preparing glory for us. And what are we doing while afflictions are preparing glory? We are looking. Not glancing, not even seeing, but we are scoping out. This verb for *to look* is related to our words for *telescope* and *microscope*, to look intently at a point. For example, Jesus in Luke 11 tells us to be *careful* (same word), lest the light in us be darkness. Paul tells us to *watch out* for those who create divisions in the church in Romans 16, and we are to *keep watch* on ourselves lest we be tempted by sin.

What we are to do is to fix our eyes on something, and we are not, Paul says, to fix our eyes on things that are seen. Now what *are* these things? They're the things Paul has already been telling us. They are the temporary, momentary afflictions that surround us. They are the outer self that is marked by the old creation. They are the things that draw our attention because they are visible. They are before our eyes right now.

We should not be obsessed with them, we should not focus on them, because they are fleeting, they are passing, they are going away. That's what the word *transient* means. The English word *transient* comes from two Latin words that mean to go away or to go across. They're like the seed that fell on the rocky ground, and then it shot up, but it fell away because it had no root. It was transient. It was passing away.

Far too often we focus on the transient. You have to repent of that. Do not sacrifice what is enduring, what is truly significant, for what is passing away. You will wake up one day and regret it. Instead, we are to set our eyes on the things that are unseen. Now, this seems to make no sense. Why should I look at what I cannot see and not look at what I *can* see? Well, Paul gives us the answer. Because the things that are unseen are eternal.

Notice that what we are called to look at are the things that are unseen *now*. We have to understand real reality. There is a real reality behind the things we see. All that is around us, all that people are so obsessed with, will fade away when Jesus returns. I have to tell you, no one will remember that time you were right on the Internet or that shiny new toy or car or house you have. Even nations themselves will fade away.

The irony is that the things with real permanence are unseen now in this world, like the fulfillment of the promises of God. They are yet unseen, but that doesn't mean they're not real. The kingdom of God is not fully revealed, but it *will* be. Perhaps most importantly, at his return we will see our beloved Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter puts it this way in 1 Peter 1: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory." What is real, what is eternal, are the things of God, the kingdom of God, and our Savior. Paul puts it this way in Philippians, chapter 3: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."

Your hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ. Your hope is in Jesus' return when he sets all things right, when your inner self is completely renewed. Do you believe that? Is that your hope? Are your eyes set on Jesus? When they are, you will take them off the things of this world. The only way to bear with the affliction you experience, the wasting away of your outer self, is to set your eyes on eternal things, to know that your inner self is being renewed day by day, to know that your afflictions are preparing for you such a weight of glory as cannot even be described. Don't lose heart. Focus on Jesus.