

May 16, 2021

THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SEEM

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

(10 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

One of the things that Paul is so good at when he's making an argument is anticipating the way someone might try to challenge him. Think, for example, of Romans 6. After delighting in the rich grace of God that abounds even in the face of our sin, Paul anticipates that his opponents could say that he is encouraging sin. After all, it might seem that if you tell someone that grace abounds where sin abounds, then people might think that they should just continue in sin so that grace may abound. But, if you remember the text, Paul anticipates that argument and cuts off that conclusion. He writes, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means" (Rom 6:1-2), and then he writes about why Christians shouldn't pursue sin. He does something similar a chapter later after celebrating the fact that Christians are no longer bound to the law of Moses. He, of course, anticipates someone attacking him by saying that Paul is arguing that the law is sinful. And so he raises the question himself, saying, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!" (Rom 7:7), and once more launches into his argument. And this is just a taste of how Paul does this in his writing. Think of Romans 9, where after highlighting the sovereignty of God, he anticipates someone saying that it isn't fair or just and so answers that charge. Or consider his writing to the Galatians where after telling us the law does not save, he raises and answers the question of why God gave us the law in the first place in Galatians 3. And we could go on, pointing to the numerous examples of this in his letters.

Throughout 2 Corinthians we've seen this as well. We've seen Paul at times raise specific questions like "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2:16) or "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?" (3:1). But we can also see that he is anticipating and answering challenges even when he doesn't explicitly state the challenges themselves. In 3:7-4:6 we saw him answering the question as to why he is so bold, fighting to ensure that the Corinthians don't listen to his opponents. His answer is that the glorious nature of the ministry itself demands this. After that, he proceeds to answer the challenge as to why such a glorious ministry is carried out by one who looks so weak or even feeble. Paul answers that question in 4:7-12, noting that we have this glorious ministry—this treasure—in jars of clay so that it might be clear that the power of our ministry belongs to God and not us. And yet—as we noted last week—this answer itself raises the question why Paul would keep pressing on when this ministry requires him to expose himself to all kinds of affliction. He answers that question in 4:13-15 by running through a list of motivating factors, culminating in the deep desire he has to see the Lord glorified in his life and ministry.

But as we get to this point in Paul's letter, what charge would one raise? Or, we might more accurately ask, what charge is Paul seemingly anticipating that causes him to write as he does in 4:16-18? And I think the charge Paul answers in our text is simply that Paul isn't being realistic. You could imagine Paul's opponents saying, for example, "Paul, you don't seem to be living in the

real world. You're talking about pressing on because of your beliefs or hopes in a future resurrection or love for people or the glory of God, but in the end, if people imitate you, it will bring about real life suffering. That is, you're talking a good game, but we can see with our eyes that your life is terrible."

And it's in answering here that Paul is perhaps at his best in this letter. He answers in this text much the way he has elsewhere in the letter. We've noted how Paul often takes the very issue his opponents see as a weakness and show why it's a strength. He's done this with regard to defending his weakness and multitude of sufferings. And now he does it here. If one were to say that Paul is motivated by things that we can't even see while wilting away before our eyes, he will answer that it's what we can't see that is most real, most lasting, and most important for us. And it may well be that you and I find ourselves in a place where we need to hear that. You may feel like in your personal life that things are crumbling, and you're losing heart. And if you don't feel that way in your personal life, perhaps you feel that way about the world around us. It's almost impossible to open a web browser or have a conversation without being reminded of something terrible going on in the world. And it may well feel like you're losing heart in regards to persevering in faithful obedience to Jesus. So let's pray that this morning we'll have our eyes open to the glorious realities that Paul holds up so that we may be strengthened for endurance. Because what Paul shows us in these verses is that there are greater and more encouraging realities than what we can see with our eyes. Paul names three.

God's work in us is greater than the decay and death we know so well

Paul begins our section by writing, "So we do not lose heart" (v. 16). This, I think works in pointing us back to what we've seen and forward to what is to come. We know it points us back to what we've already covered because Paul has actually noted this already. He began his present argument in 4:1, writing, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." So everything he's said in 4:1-15 has been providing rationale for why we don't lose heart. But it seems that Paul repeats this again because he wants to remind us why he's writing this section. He wants to bring us back to what we may have forgotten, that Paul is encouraging us not to lose heart in the midst of obeying Jesus, even while facing suffering and affliction. And he begins this additional word of encouragement by acknowledging that in our bodies which are subject to the curse in Genesis 3, we continually see the reality of death. And yet there's something glorious going on as well. Paul writes, "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day" (v. 16). Let's start by recognizing what Paul is saying when he tells us that our outer self is wasting away.

You and I find ourselves in an interesting place as believers. When Adam sinned and brought condemnation into the world, all of mankind after him fell subject to the reality of sin, condemnation, and death. We're all sinful. Paul will tell us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We're all condemned in Adam. Paul will tell us in Ephesians 2 that you and I were once "children of wrath, like the rest of mankind," which reminds us that outside of Jesus Christ there are no exceptions—all are condemned before God unless we're trusting in Jesus.

And therefore we're all headed toward death as the "wage" for our sins and condemnation, to use Paul's language in Romans 6:23.

But as we come to Christ, something changes. We're made alive. We're born again. We are given life so that we're no longer dead in our sins. We are justified, meaning our end-times' judgment is pronounced on us right now. But one other thing happens at that moment that we might not always think about. Paul writes it this way in Colossians 1:13. He says that God "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." We've been transferred from one kingdom to another. What does that mean? Well, in this world, after sin and death entered with Adam's sin, we see a world in bondage to Satan, sin, and death. We were once part of that—condemned before God, bound to sin, and blinded by the devil. And one day there'll be a new creation where there's no more sin, no more death, and Satan will have been thrown into the lake of fire.

What's that have to do with us? Well, when you and I were born again, it's as if the world to come invaded this present age of decay and death. We were given new hearts. We were given life. We were freed from the bondage to sin. We are no longer under condemnation. We were made part of the new creation, as Paul will note in 5:17. And yet we still live in this world and see all the death and decay around us and even see and feel it in our own bodies. We're both part of the new creation that shows itself in the fact that we have new hearts, new life, and new affections, and part of the old creation which is subject to decay and death. And this is exactly what Paul is talking about in verse 16.

He is able to look at his body and see it wasting away. No doubt the countless beatings, stonings, and the like took their toll on Paul's body, but also just the fact that it is still part of this world means that it is wasting away with the old created order. Paul knows that. But the problem is that this is all Paul's opponents see. This is all they value. But Paul knows that this isn't all there is. Just as Paul sees his body wasting away—being the jar of clay that it is—he also knows that every day he's being renewed. Experiencing a taste of the new creation when he was given life by the resurrected Lord, he sees himself every day being renewed by God's grace and mercy, strengthened by the Spirit's presence. Every day he wakes up knowing that he is being conformed to the image of Christ—being made more like Jesus one degree of glory at a time. And that is an eternal reality.

And so it is with us. With every passing year as we examine the decay our bodies are facing, it may look like death is winning. But Paul would remind us that every day we're only being prepared more and more for the world that is to come. And this is why when we hear of someone diagnosed with cancer, we do indeed pray, asking the Lord to heal that person. But even more importantly we pray that the Lord would make them more like Jesus through this and thank God that cancer—even if it kills—is not the last word. This is why Paul didn't lose heart. He wasn't unaware of the decay his body showed. But he knew that God was working within him daily by his Spirit. And these things are lasting. They're more valuable than whatever would have been gained by avoiding suffering by not obeying Jesus. We don't lose heart because the Lord is working in us, even if our bodies are wasting away.

The glory to come is greater than our present affliction

After noting that the life God is working in us is greater than death, Paul tells us that the glory to come is greater than our present affliction. He writes in verse 17, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” Now, when we first read this it can sound offensive, can’t it? Paul calls the suffering people face in this world “light momentary affliction.” Is he saying that to the woman who is forced to watch her husband murdered in front of her because he won’t renounce Christ, or to the person who has chronic pain every second of his life, or to the couple who has faced miscarriage after miscarriage, or to the family watching their loved one forget who they are? Is he making light of this suffering? Let me assure you, he isn’t.

Paul knew suffering. In fact, he knew more suffering than the average person. I’d dare say if we brought our suffering to the table in a competition against the suffering that Paul faced in his life, he’d win hands-down every time. So, no, he’s not making light of suffering. He knew the depth of suffering very well.

What Paul *is* saying, however, is that if you compare the suffering that we face in this age to the glory that we will know at the resurrection, there simply is no comparison. Our suffering here, first of all, is momentary—even if it lasts our entire life! Let’s say that we suffer for the seventy-five years or so we walk this earth and then enter into the glorious reality of heaven that lasts forever. It’s fair to call that seventy-five years of suffering “momentary” in comparison to forever, isn’t it? That’s why Paul says it’s momentary. But why does he say it’s light?

Let’s think through this. Have you ever described your suffering in terms of weight, as if you’re being weighed down by it? When you’re weighed down by suffering, you don’t walk around skipping or with any kind of spring in your step. It’s as if you’re carrying around a weighted blanket. Even the smallest of tasks feel weightier and more burdensome. On the other hand, there can be something so glorious, you almost can’t take it. Joy can be weighty as well. I’ve sat in this room, for example, singing of the glory of Christ with you all and felt so overwhelmed at how glorious the truths we were singing were that I had to stop singing, be silent, and wipe the tears from my eyes. There was a glorious weightiness I felt. And Paul says that the weight of the glory that we’ll know in eternal is so much more than the suffering we face here that the weight of our suffering here is light in comparison.

In fact, I’ve understated what Paul says. After making the comparison of weightiness versus lightness and eternal verses temporary, Paul adds that the glory to come is “beyond all comparison.” This is quite similar to what he tells us in Romans 8:18 when he says that the suffering of this world isn’t worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Do you remember ever in school having those logic problems where you say “x” is to “y” as “blank” is to “z” or something like that? I’ve been trying to come up with an illustration to demonstrate what Paul is saying here by trying one of those logic problems, but it’s impossible.

So maybe the best way to illustrate this is to invite you into this problem with me and see what you can come up with in your own mind. So here goes. Let's start off by being as generous as we can and assuming that we're all going to live to be 100. Okay, so Paul is comparing our hundred years to eternity. So now I'm trying to come up with a unit of time to compare with our earthly existence that might parallel that. In other words, we might say one second to my hundred years is like the hundred years is to eternity. But that's not quite right is it? When you're trying to compare a finite amount of time to forever, the comparisons get really hard. Do you see? So, we've got to already acknowledge that one second is way too long in our logic comparison exercise, but let's use it anyway. If you could take all the agony, pain, suffering, etc. and cram it into one second in this life so that afterwards there was no agony, pain, or suffering to speak of the rest of your hundred years, would you do it? Of course, right? I mean, we would laugh at anyone who stressed over this decision, saying, "Well, that really would be a rough second." Well, this is Paul's point.

The Corinthians were hesitating to listen to Paul's teaching because they could see that obeying Jesus had brought much affliction into his life. And yet Paul is saying, "But look at this in light of eternity." If we'd happily choose one second of pain to get a lifetime full of blessing, why in the world would we hesitate to follow Christ—with all that it costs us—when we have eternal glory awaiting? Does it really look like Paul is the one out of touch with reality? What's unrealistic is anyone who thinks that suffering in obedience to Christ is too great of a cost when eternity awaits us.

Moreover, notice that Paul says that "this light momentary affliction *is preparing for us* an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." In other words, Paul isn't simply saying, "We're facing affliction that is light and momentary in light of the glory to come." He's telling us that our present, momentary, light affliction (in comparison to what awaits us) is actually being used of God to prepare us for what's to come, which I think is tied in to the point made in verse 16. Our suffering is a means the Lord uses to renew us and make us more like Jesus as we await the glory to come. Isn't this what the Scripture elsewhere says? Paul will tell us in Romans 5 that "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (vv. 3-5). And James tells us, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas 1:2-4). I want you to know this: your heavenly Father is not letting one ounce of your suffering to be spent in vain. He is using it to prepare you for an eternal, weighty glory that will be so great that there's no use even attempting to compare your present suffering to it. That's why Paul does not lose heart. He knows the glory to come is far greater than our present suffering, even beyond comparison. And finally he notes one more element.

Things we can't see are greater than those we can

Paul ends by saying in verse 18, “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.” Paul knows that everything he has been talking about that gives him reason not to lose heart are things that you don’t see. You don’t see the renewal of our inner self, you just see the wasting away of our outward self. You don’t see yet the eternal weight of glory, you just see our present sufferings. So, you can see why Paul’s opponents would say, “Don’t listen to Paul. Is he embodying who you really want to be?” And it’s as if Paul says to the Corinthians, “Before you answer that, listen to me. Don’t judge by what you see.” After all, what we see is transient. It’s here today and gone tomorrow. Judge by what you can’t see, which is eternal. And only a fool would choose to shape his life around what is temporary instead of what is eternal.

So if you’re an unbeliever this morning, get your eyes off this life only and consider eternity. Jesus lived, died, and was raised so that we might—through repentance and faith—have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But if you refuse to believe, you’ll face eternal torment. So, as you contemplate Christ now, look beyond this world to the world to come and the choice will be obvious. And if you’re a believer, tempted to lose heart in the midst of your suffering, look as well to what is unseen. Press on because this world that is wasting away will not have the last word. There is an eternal glory to come. Let’s live for that day. Amen.