

May 9, 2021

SPEAKING THE GOSPEL AND HOPING IN THE RESURRECTION

2 Corinthians 4:13-15

(9 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

One of the most memorable moments in my life took place in a phone conversation on a Sunday morning. The two days prior had been painful. My friend from college had been asked to come home one weekend only to be told when he'd arrived on that Friday evening that his mom was leaving his dad to be with their neighbor, with whom she'd been unfaithful. He called me shortly after that, updating me on this terribly painful news, asking me if I would pray for his family and even come and minister to them through this. I knew the family pretty well. I'd actually visited their home a few times, eaten several meals with them, and—if I'm honest—really envied the seeming perfect family my friend had. Every Friday night their home was the sight of a neighborhood Bible study. I'd sat through those before and been overwhelmed at the seeming spiritual maturity of everyone in the group. I never saw this coming. But I figured that with my friend and his dad in such pain, of course I'd go be with them and try to minister to them. After all, I could be back before Sunday, when I'd have responsibilities at church. So I packed an overnight bag, jumped in the car, and headed for Alabama.

I don't know what I expected to find when I got there, but it was worse than my expectations. My friend's dad was so overwhelmed with pain and anger and every other kind of emotion someone would have by finding out his wife of twenty-two years had been unfaithful and was now leaving him for their neighbor, whom he'd regarded as his closest friend. When his body physically couldn't handle the emotional toil he was under, he'd get nauseous and throw up. Between such episodes, we'd talk, pray, and shed tears. The next day I got up, told them again how sorry I was, hugged my friends, prayed with them, talked a bit more, and headed back to Jackson. It was a rough twenty-four hours or so to get a glimpse of pain I'd rarely encountered. But as I mentioned, the most memorable moment of that weekend happened in a phone conversation.

The next morning, while I was getting up and making sure I had everything ready for our service that Sunday, the phone rang. It was my friend. He wanted to tell me about a conversation that he'd just had with his dad. My friend's dad was the song leader at their church, but my friend fully expected his dad to take the day off. After all, he was not able to control his emotions and still having nausea get the better of him. Nevertheless, that morning my friend told me that he'd awakened to the sound of his dad getting ready for church. Then he went and assured his dad that everyone would understand if he needed to take the day off. Why go when no one was really pressing him? And my friend said over the phone, "So when I asked him why, here was his answer. He quoted Job and said, 'Though he slay me, I will hope in him.'" And as I've said, I'll never forget that phone call. What a powerful testimony of trust in the Lord.

But the question my friend asked his dad is precisely the question that we could ask Paul at this point. Why? I mean, laboring to take the gospel to people and build up the churches had cost him so much, and it continued to cost him. We've noted that the list of his sufferings is coming.

When we get to chapter 11 we're going to be overwhelmed at all the pain and suffering that following and obeying Jesus had brought into Paul's life. When Paul tells us that he's lost count of the beatings he's received, we start to get a picture. And even now in his ministry to the Corinthians, he's being afflicted. The mere attacks of his opponents at Corinth would go away if Paul would just quit trying to minister to these people, love them, and help them to obey all that Christ commands. So, again, why? Why press on? Why keep going? That's the question that Paul answers in our text this morning—2 Corinthians 4:13-15.

And it's good for us that Paul does answer this question because it may be a question that the enemy is whispering to you this morning. Maybe you're striving to walk in obedience in a difficult marriage, or seeking to walk in unity when so many divisive issues keep coming up, or seeking to minister in a situation that has only brought greater struggle and difficulty in your life, and the enemy is saying, "Why keep trying to obey Jesus when it costs you so much?" And if you're honest, as he attacks you with these questions, you're growing weary, and the questions are landing heavier than ever before. Well, if that's where you are, then God has graciously given us this section of Scripture that can serve as weapons against the enemy and reminders to us of why we do press on, why we don't grow weary and lose heart. We know that's the aim of this section because Paul says right after these verses (in verse 16), "So we do not lose heart." What is it then that Paul gives us as reasons for why he presses on, even in costly obedience?

He presses on because he believes

Paul begins this section, writing in verse 13, "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' and so we also speak." Now, what's key for us here is recognizing that he's quoting from Psalm 116—the psalm we read to open the service. And the context there is important. The psalmist begins by declaring that he loves the Lord because he had cried out to the Lord in a time when death encompassed him. We don't know exactly why death was encompassing him. Maybe his enemies were against him or maybe it was just some illness. But he notes that he suffered distress and anguish. Then he cried out to the Lord, "O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul" (Psalm 116:4), and the Lord did. Again, in the words of the psalmist, he says to the Lord, "You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling" (v. 8). And then he reflects back on what drove him to cry out to the Lord in his affliction, saying in verse 10, "I believed, therefore I spoke, 'I am greatly afflicted.'"¹

The psalmist cried out to the Lord because—to use the words of Hebrews 11:6—he believed that God was there and would reward him. He thought God would hear him and act, and so he took his need to the Lord. And it's those words Paul uses to tell the Corinthians why he speaks the gospel, even though it costs him so much to do so. He says that he has the same Spirit of faith in him that he sees in the psalmist. If it was the Spirit stirring up belief so that the psalmist was moved to pray, believing that God would answer, so Paul is now stirred up by the Spirit to believe,

¹ Paul is quoting from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, which reads, "I believed, therefore I spoke."

and therefore, he also speaks. In other words, Paul continues to speak because he believes. He knows what he's saying is true.

One reason that we press on in obedience to Jesus—even his command to be his witnesses, making disciples of all the nations—is because we know that what Jesus says is true. He is who he says he is. He did what the Bible says he did. If we're believers, there really is life after death. There really is forgiveness of sin if we repent and believe the gospel. People really can live their lives knowing that they're approved of by God. It's all true. And if it's all true, then we must herald the truth. If it's true, we must obey. If we believe it, then we must speak. That's Paul's first point. He believes, and therefore he speaks.

That's why you press on in obedience, even in the most difficult of times—because it's all true. Every word of Scripture is true. And if it's true, then Jesus is worth obeying. He's worth everything. If it's true, then Jesus can be trusted more than anyone or anything else, for he is the one who, as the God-man, lived, died, and was raised for us. So we do not lose heart or grow weary but press on in obedience to Jesus because we believe. That's what Paul tells us, but he also notes that he presses on with his eyes toward the future.

He presses on because of the resurrection

But Paul doesn't stop merely at the level of believing what he speaks as reason for continuing to obey, though speaking invites all kinds of affliction into his life. He focuses on one specific belief as great motivation in verse 13. He writes, "Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence." He presses on because of the resurrection.

This is a consistent note with Paul to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 15, he'd told them, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." If there is no resurrection, then we are fools for sacrificial obedience. If we could avoid painful obedience, then we should do so. If there is no resurrection, then we should just live for the day. Again, from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (v. 32). If there is no resurrection, then this life is all there is, and that means that we should simply attempt to seek the easiest, most pleasing path in life. If your marriage is hard, get out of it. If obedience to Jesus will cost you something, don't do it. If in any way you can bring greatest pleasure or prestige to your life, chase after it. *But*, if the resurrection is true, and this life isn't all that there is, and one day Jesus is coming back to bring us to be with him forever, and this life will be but a blip compared to the eternity to come, then why wouldn't we obey Jesus as the one who is going to raise us and bring us into his eternal presence? Why wouldn't we lay down our life now to take it up in eternity? In a paraphrase of the famous words of Jim Elliot, why wouldn't we give up now what we cannot keep anyway in order to gain at the resurrection what we will never lose? As believers, we do not have to live for this life only, for we know that this life is not all there is. And if the resurrection is coming, then a life of costly obedience is nothing compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us. But Paul notes that he has even more motivation to press on, not grow weary, and not lose heart in obeying Jesus.

He presses on in love for the church

As Paul continues, after noting that he speaks because he believes and presses on in light of the resurrection, he adds at the beginning of verse 15, “For it is all for your sake.” In other words, he presses on because of his love for the church, and in this case specifically, the church at Corinth. It’s hard to overstate the love Paul has for the church. In our text he’s also acknowledged that as he thinks of the glorious resurrection to come, he doesn’t think simply of himself going to see the Lord but being brought “with [the Corinthian believers] into his presence” (v. 14). But the Corinthians weren’t unique. Paul told the Philippians that he yearned for them “with all the affection of Christ” (Phil 1:8). He told the Colossians that from the day he’d heard of their faith he had “not ceased to pray for [them]” (Col 1:9). He pictured leaving the Thessalonians as being “torn away” from someone who was his “glory and joy” (1 Thess 2:17-20). And I could go on. But suffice to say that Paul’s love for the church was great, and it was a great motivation for him to keep pressing on in ministry.

But how does this kind of love happen? That is, how does someone become a person who loves the church? And why is love for the church a standard Christian characteristic and something that motivates us to obey Jesus, even when it costs us? Well, the answer to the first is that love for the church is simply the result of being born again. When we’re born, we’re born into some particular family and situation. When the Lord does the work of new creation in our hearts, giving us new life, he causes us to be born again—born into another family (and much larger one!). And when he does that life-giving work, he of course gives us love for himself.

I was reminded of this recently listening to Sam Allberry share his testimony a little over a week ago at Fellowship Bible Church. Growing up, Sam says that he realized that he actually found himself attracted to the same sex, not the opposite sex. And so he says that he was standing at a street corner, knowing that university was on the horizon for him, and finally thought to himself, “I’m gay.” So he thought to himself that as soon as he got to university, he would begin living out this lifestyle. But then Sam said that something happened to him between that moment of saying to himself, “I’m gay” and going to university where he planned on living it out. He became a Christian. And here was the most powerful moment, I thought, of his testimony. He said, “And I knew that Jesus could be trusted. Whatever Jesus said about any issue, including how our sexuality, he could be trusted.” So he consequently opened his Bible, read that Jesus says much about our sexual practices—namely that sexual activity must be limited to a man and a woman who are bound in marriage—and so he followed Jesus and has obeyed him to this day.

But what struck me so powerfully as I heard Sam say that was his confidence that Jesus could be trusted. Imagine going your whole life, planning how you were going to live, and then meeting someone, and the second you meet them you decide, this person can be trusted, whatever he tells me I’ll do. That would seem crazy, wouldn’t it? But that’s what Sam said with Jesus. He says he knew he could trust him. In fact, he trusted him so thoroughly that he knew whatever Jesus said about our sexuality, Sam would obey. Why? What brought that about?

What brings this about is the Spirit's work of giving us new hearts and dwelling within us. Remember when Paul said that unbelievers have a veil over their minds that keeps them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ? But when someone is born again, he told us, God is doing a work like he did at creation, giving life and shining into our hearts "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). He's putting his Holy Spirit in us, causing us to walk in his ways—in accord with the new covenant promises he made through Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Well, when he does that miraculous work, you love God, don't you? And this isn't surprising. If part of what goes on in being saved is that we have God the Spirit dwelling in us, giving us new desires, it shouldn't be shocking to see that he gives us love for God. But that's not all that he does. He also gives us love for others who love our Lord (i.e., the church). The same divine work that made Sam Allberry instantly know that he could trust the Lord with anything is the same divine work that made Paul go from persecuting Christians to be willing to die if only he might love them, serve them, and help them obey Christ more. And so part of what motivated Paul to press on was his love for others. He loved the church, and he wanted others to be part of the church, and so he gave his life to this end.

Brothers and sisters, it is good and right for us to sacrifice ourselves in love and service for others. It is good and right to say, "My flesh wants me to take it easy, but love compels me to sacrifice my time and energy to make sure my brother or sister is built up in the faith." As believers, we often acknowledge that there's no sort of thing as lone ranger Christianity, but it's good to be reminded that as we pursue knowing and loving God more, that is a corporate pursuit, where we're not only interested to find that we're growing in knowledge of and love for God but those whom we love so dearly are as well. And there's one final motivation Paul notes for us.

He presses on for the glory of God

In verse 15 Paul writes, "For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase in thanksgiving to the glory of God." When the light shines into our hearts to set us see "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," then we come to realize that there's nothing and no one more glorious than Jesus. He loved us and gave himself for us, living and dying so that we might be his. He prayed for us in the garden before he went to the cross. He's interceding for us continually. And one day he'll come back to get us. And until then he is so kind and gentle with us. He is present with us in our pain, sympathetic to us in our weakness, and holding us in his hand every moment, letting nothing or no one pluck us from him. And when we get a glimpse of how glorious and good he is, it will become the all-encompassing desire of our hearts to see him glorified. We will desperately want others to see that he can be trusted and obeyed. We will be eager to see others bow the knee to him. We will yearn for others to gather with us and sing his praises. We will long for others to hold fast to him, even in difficult moments. We will want him to be glorified. Paul had seen how glorious Jesus was and how glorious was his redeeming work for him, and this became his all-encompassing desire—to see Christ glorified.

So, if following Jesus and continuing to be about making disciples and teaching others to obey Jesus costs Paul so, so much, why did he keep pressing on? It's because he knew all that Jesus said was true. The Bible is true and trustworthy in all that it says. He knew that this life isn't all there is. One day we'll be raised. He deeply loved the church because the Lord had given him a new heart and put his Spirit in him, the Spirit that yearns deeply for others who know and love our Lord. And he knew how beautiful, and glorious, and good Jesus is. And when you know that, seeing him glorified is worth every sacrifice. So let us this morning pray that the Lord may anchor these realities deep in our hearts as well so that we press on in obedience—even costly obedience—to the one who is worthy of our everything. Let us remember and not lose heart. Amen.