

“Do Not Lose Heart,” 2 Corinthians 4:1-18 (Seventh Sunday of Easter, June 2, 2019)

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup> For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.

<sup>13</sup> Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, <sup>14</sup> knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. <sup>15</sup> For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. <sup>16</sup> So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> 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.

## PRAY

We are continuing our series in 2 Corinthians on Sunday mornings and in chapter four we read that twice the apostle Paul, the man who wrote 2 Corinthians, gives a particular command to the church at Corinth. He says, “Do not lose heart” in verse one and then again in verse 16.

That’s a command, in other words, not to get discouraged. The great temptation of the Christian life is not arrogance. I admit there are many professing Christians who are arrogant and insufferable, but that’s not a temptation when someone is genuinely trying to follow Jesus. Rather, when you’re really working hard to follow Jesus, when you’re really trying to be obedient and serve him, when you read the Bible and see what all is involved in the Christian life, you will continually find you are prone to discouragement.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 tells us of three goals we should constantly set for ourselves as Christians, and if we try to meet them it will help limit our susceptibility to discouragement. We’ll look at those three goals, then come together to take the Lord’s Supper. First, Paul says we must expect suffering. Second, we must seek to speak the truth. Third, Paul says we must look to things unseen.

First, we must expect suffering. Paul says in verses 8-9 that he has been afflicted, crushed, persecuted, and struck down. He suffered. Later in the summer we'll look at chapter eleven of this book, and in that chapter Paul writes in detail about some of his suffering. "24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." 2 Corinthians 11:24-27.

That suffering! Now will we suffer like Paul did? Probably not. Thankfully there's not much chance of someone lashing you 39 times under the color of law. But we will suffer.

Why is that? This world was not designed by God to be a place of suffering, not in the beginning. Rather, God designed this world to be a paradise. When the Bible talks about the Garden of Eden, the garden God placed the first humans, Adam and Eve, in to live, it wasn't just a gorgeous, friendly physical environment. C.S. Lewis has this great place in his book *The Problem of Pain* where he speculates that in the garden before sin entered the world Adam and Eve could control their bodies to a degree unimaginable to us. They were perfect and complete in every way. They never grew tired, so while they could sleep they didn't have to sleep, and they could remain conscious through sleep just to enjoy the experience. Perhaps, he says, they could control themselves even down to the level of the cellular. If they wanted to eat for the pleasure of it, they could, but they didn't have to. If they willed that their bodies would not grow old, then they would not. Perhaps that's why we read of such long lifespans early on in the book of Genesis, but then gradually over successive generations you see lifespans shrinking as Adam's descendants begin to lose this ability.

But then sin entered the world and now for us paradise is lost, and suffering became part of man's lot on the earth. This world is good, very good, but broken, so we should expect suffering and not be surprised when it comes. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." 1 Peter 4:12.

Americans, by the way, are the worst people on the planet when it comes to suffering. We have been sold a false bill of goods that we can expect, and indeed should demand, a life that is completely pleasing to us. We have been told in thousands of ways over the years that we deserve the best and we should get it our way, right away. But it's not true.

Last week Carolyn Mahaney, a writer and a pastor's wife up in Louisville, wrote an article on what she's learned from studying the book of Ecclesiastes. The title: "Every Day Is a Bad Day." She writes, "Our problem is that we don't *really* believe life is an unhappy business. We think if we work hard, we'll eventually succeed. We imagine suffering is short-term, pain is the exception to the rule, and failure merely the prelude to victory. These illusions leave us blindsided by setbacks, devastated by failure and loss, bewildered by trials, confused by pain. [We think *t*]his isn't the way things were supposed to go! We talk about having 'a bad day' as if it should be one in a thousand, but Ecclesiastes (and really the rest of Scripture, when

you read it right side up) tells us that they are all bad. Daily work under the sun is an unhappy business.”

Understanding this and expecting suffering helps keep us from discouragement. How? Think about it like this. You’re going out of town on a business trip. You get to the airport, you hail an Uber, and you get in the car. The driver says, “You’re going to such-and-such hotel? That is an amazing place. The beds are so comfortable. The rooms are pristine. The food is wonderful; it’s so good. The staff is so friendly. Oh, I’m jealous. You’re going to love it.”

What happens? You get there, and you look around, and you say, “This is just a regular old *Hampton Inn*. I was expecting *The Plaza*. I mean, it’s ok. I thought the staff was going to be nicer, though. I thought the bed would be more comfortable. I was expecting an actual restaurant from the way he talked about the food, and all I got was this continental breakfast.”

But what if you get in the Uber and the driver says, “You’re going to such-and-such hotel? Oh. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s not a dangerous place to stay or anything. But it wouldn’t be my first choice.” But then you get there, to the same hotel, and you look around and you are relieved. You were expecting a dump, and *you got a clean Hampton Inn!* You’re happy now. Why? The only thing that changed were your expectations.

***This world is fundamentally good, very good, but broken.*** When it comes to your health, your relationships, your possessions, it’s all always tending to fall apart. Suffering is part and parcel of existence. And until you remember that, until you stop being surprised by the fiery trials, you will always be prone to discouragement.

But Paul does also say this: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed ...” <sup>2</sup> Corinthians 4:8-9. God never allowed Paul, a man who experienced a kind of hostility and persecution you and I cannot even imagine, to get overwhelmed by the suffering. God always sustained him. So you too can expect that no matter how horrible the suffering might get (and it might get far worse than you can right now believe that you could possibly endure), God will sustain you. As Psalm 91:9-10 (NIV 1984) puts it, “<sup>9</sup> If you make the Most High your dwelling— even the LORD, who is my refuge— <sup>10</sup> then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.” Elisabeth Elliot used to quote this verse all the time and she’d say hurt is part of the Christian life, you must expect it, but not harm. God will let nothing ultimately harm you, crush you, drive you to despair, or destroy you.

Second, to keep from discouragement our goal must be to speak the truth. All people, whether they are Christians are not, experience suffering. That’s common to all men. But Christians suffer in a particular way that unbelievers do not.

Christians know this good news about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. That’s verse 6 (and what a verse it is): “<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Christians know that rather than leave us in our sin and suffering, God sent his son Jesus Christ to earth. In Jesus God became a man, and he lived the perfect life we were all designed by God to live but haven't. On the cross Jesus died the death we deserve to die for our sins. Jesus took the punishment we deserve so we don't have to. And now we can look to God through the face of Jesus Christ revealed to us in the Bible and we can see God's glory. In particular, we can see the holiness of God who hates sin enough that he is determined to punish all evil in the world and he will not let anyone get away with anything. But we can also see his glory in the mercy he has on sinners like you and me, by sending his Son to save us from our sins. The glory of God in the face of Christ.

***Once you see that glory you are a Christian, and you want everyone around you to see it, too.*** You especially want the people you love the most around you to see it.

***But not everyone will.*** Nothing is more painful to a Christian than to have a good friend, or a sibling, or a parent, or a spouse, or a child who just can't see what you see when you look at Jesus. You talk about this good news with them and you might as well be speaking Sanskrit. They just don't get it. It is so painful because as long as those whom you love know Jesus Christ, then no matter how bad things get there's always hope. But if they don't know him, then no matter how good things might be right now, it's only temporary. Judgment is coming for sin.

The question then becomes "what can we do about it?" Paul tells us in verses 1-2. Remember, he faced this problem as well. He loved the people of Corinth but there was a faction that did not accept his ministry, and it broke Paul's heart. But Paul says, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

Our responsibility is to communicate the gospel plainly to the people around us. Christians, we do not have the power to make our loved ones, or anyone else, believe the good news. We can't force them to see the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as there are spiritual powers at work that are keeping people from seeing God's glory – that's what Paul writes about in verses 3-4.

All we can do is communicate the gospel clearly, and trust that in his perfect timing God will pull back the veil. God will open their eyes to see. I don't know if you've ever paid attention to it but almost every time before I preach I pray these words: "Give us all eyes that can see, and ears that can hear, and hearts that can receive the gospel." I pray that because I know that unless God does the work in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, making a way for the words, I am wasting my time up here preaching. But I also know that if I am faithful in making an open statement of the truth, and I refuse to tamper with or water down God's Word in any way to make it more acceptable to your ears, God will honor that preaching and accomplish his purposes in your lives.

And that's true not just of preachers but also of all Christians. I know one faithful Christian who has a daughter now in her 30s, and she does not accept the truth of the gospel. In the words of his wife, her mother, "She's as sweet as the day is long but she just doesn't believe." She has

heard over the years the gospel from them and from their church hundreds, thousands of times. She lives in a different city from them now, and when they visit now he doesn't launch into a gospel presentation all over again. She knows the gospel.

So when they visit now this father trusts the Lord. He does not try to manipulate her into saying some magic formula about Jesus nor does he talk himself into believing something about her faith that clearly isn't true. Instead, *he does not lose heart*. He knows he has fulfilled his duty to her, he knows that by the open statement of the truth he has commended himself to her conscience time and time again, and now it is up to the God who loves her more than he does to lift the veil and open her eyes.

Third, if we want to keep from being discouraged Paul says we must look to things unseen. “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> 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.” 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, welcome – we are so glad and thankful you are here. It may be that you're not a Christian in large part because of what you've been told these verses mean.

You may think Paul is saying here, “This earth is temporary, and after we escape it into heaven it's all going to burn up. So you don't worry about it or get too involved with it.” A couple of weeks ago I read a book review in *The New Yorker* by an author who grew up in a very conservative Christian environment, where the message he heard from his church and his family was, “Don't worry about the environment, don't worry about the poor, don't worry about justice. Forget about the earth and all its problems because this world is basically evil, it's going to hell in a handbasket, it's going to burn, and all you need to do is focus on heaven.” But he loved other people, his loved this world, so he couldn't accept that and he left the faith.

That is not what Paul is saying. Remember? The world is broken, but it's fundamentally good and there are plenty of commands in the Scriptures to care for this world, for the poor, and for justice. Christians could be doing a lot more than we are doing now and still not fulfill those commands.

So what is Paul saying? Well, he *is* saying, “The world as we know it is transitory and it is wasting away.” And it is – I mean, have you looked in a mirror lately? I can look at a picture of me at 21 and I can look at a mirror now at 42, and it's clear to me anyway that things are going in the wrong direction. We are all wasting away physically, emotionally, intellectually – we're gradually losing it all until we die.

But let's read again verse 17: “For this light momentary affliction is *preparing for us* an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison ...” Something is happening while we are wasting away. We are being prepared for something glorious.

What is it? For a long time I thought it was the vision of God, seeing his glory face to face. Drew talked about that last week. And that's true, we will see him.

But that's not Paul's focus here. What is the eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison? To answer we must dip our toes into the passage for next week. "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. <sup>2</sup>For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup>if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. <sup>4</sup>For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." 2 Corinthians 5:1-4.

Paul is talking about the resurrection bodies all who trust in Christ will get when he returns and ushers in the new heavens and the new earth. It's clear, because Paul talks about jars of clay in verse seven, a reference to the body. He talks about carrying around death in our bodies in verses 10-12 and being raised by the Lord Jesus in verse 14. These bodies that we receive can't get sick, can't wear out, cannot die. Bodies that, like Adam and Eve's, we can control completely and will be able to do things that can only be described now as supernatural.

I for one do not want to live forever ... in this body. This body that gets heavier every year, no matter how much I work out. This body that gets slower every year, grayer every year, less flexible every year. But mostly I do not want to live in this body forever because of how much it likes sin. I'm tired of knowing what I ought to do and yet not being able to make myself do it. I'm tired of hurting people and letting people down because I'm too weak to do the right thing.

But I'm excited about the eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison that will come when I leave this earthly tent behind and I am finally, fully clothed. When I'm completely free from the power of sin in my life.

Drew and I were in Washington, D.C. at a conference last week. The conference was housed in a church in southeast D.C. and over Memorial Day weekend ten people were murdered in that community. In fact, while we were meeting at the church on Friday, the last day of the conference, there were gunshots across the street. The men who lead this church, good men, godly men, Bible men, asked us to pray for them. They said they were tired of the battles they face in their community every day.

But they also said they knew that one day the war would be over. Not because God was going to burn SE D.C. to the ground and put it out of its misery, but because one day Jesus will return to purify and restore it. He would destroy the power of sin that kept their community divided and kept breaking peoples' hearts. And friends, Paul tells us that must be our hope, too. Oxford may look more put together than Southeast D.C. but I assure you, when you scratch below the surface, it is not. There's just as much sin per capita here as there is there. Our hope must also be to fix our eyes, not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is passing away, it won't last, but what is unseen is eternal.

We're going to take the Lord's Supper now. We invite all believers today to participate with us in the Lord's Supper, whether you're a member of this church or not. Whether you've been

baptized or not. Even if you started believing in Jesus during this service. But the command is that we only take the Lord's Supper "until he comes." When the unseen arrives, we won't need the Lord's Supper any more. We won't need to remember the body and blood of Christ, because we will see him face to face. What a hope. What a glory. PRAY