

Don't Lose Heart! Your Suffering has a Purpose.
2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 16-18
Sunday, November 29th, 2015
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The Passage: 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

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, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 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.

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.

Let's Pray

Introduction:

We live in a world full of pain and suffering. You only need to turn on your TV, or radio, or look on the internet for a few minutes to realize that there is a lot of pain, suffering, and tragedy that happens every day.

We have the terror attacks in France, people killed in a protest in the twin cities, a man being shot on his last day of work before retirement in Florida.

We have new viruses and types of cancer that are taking people's lives every day, weather tragedies like earthquakes, tornados, tsunamis, floods, and mudslides that kill hundreds if not thousands either in our country or across the globe every year.

We have the stresses and sufferings of everyday life as we deal with physical issues, emotional turmoil, financial hardship, and relationship stresses in marriages, families, and friendships.

And when you take all of these sufferings and tragedies and you start to compile them together it paints a pretty bleak picture of our existence.

It's a picture that can drive us at times to the brink of despair where we almost jump off the edge of the cliff and shout "meaningless" it's all "meaningless." Life as we know it is so hard and is so full of tragedy that there is no way that it can have any purpose.

Yet, before we jump and commit Hari-Kari, there is a tether or rope that grabs ahold of us and pulls us back. It is a tether that shows us that all of the tragedies in the world are not meaningless. It is a tether that takes all of the hardships and sufferings in our life and says "purposeful."

It is the tether for us, as believers, which allows us to make sense out of all of the evil and suffering that we see committed every day. It is the tether which allows us to endure this life even when we want to give up, because it reminds us that these sufferings are meaningful and are producing something in and through us for our good.

It is the tether of God's Word.

And we see this tether or rope most clearly in the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. A man who uniquely suffered and endured hardship in a way that most of us could never relate to is throwing us a rope this morning so that **we will not lose heart**. So that we will understand that the hardships and sufferings of our past, present and future all have a purpose.

A purposes of proclamation (proclaiming the gospel), of producing (spiritual renewal), and of preparation (preparing us for eternity), as we look to our eternal hope in Christ.

So my hope this morning is if you are suffering, that you will not lose heart.

If you are discouraged this morning may you be encouraged, if you are full of sorrow may you leave with joy, and if you are close to looking at life and saying meaningless may you leave with a renewed conviction that everything is totally meaningful. **So let's get into this text this morning as we look at the first reason that we should not lose heart.**

1. Don't lose heart! Your sufferings proclaim the gospel. (V. 7-12)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Right away in the first 6 verses of chapter 4, Paul is making a defense for his ministry by saying that what he and his companions proclaim is not themselves, but Jesus as Lord. They do this because God is the one who has opened their hearts and has put the truth of Christ deep within them.

So Paul proclaims Christ because God opened his heart to that truth. However, Paul wants to communicate more than just, "I proclaim the gospel because God saved me." **He wants to communicate the means; meaning, that he wants to communicate how God works through him to communicate and proclaim that gospel.**

This is where verses 7-12 come in. Paul says in verse 7 that we have this treasure in jars of clay.

Now think about this:

If you have a super valuable treasure, are you going to put it in a clay jar? No! Why? Because clay jars are not sturdy and they can break very easy. But Paul is making the statement that we have this valuable treasure (the gospel) in weak pots, and the weak pots in this metaphor represent us as believers.

Paul is pointing to the reality that the means by which God has chosen to proclaim the good news of the gospel (this great treasure) is through the weakness of man. **For what purpose?**

It says right in verse 7: So that the surpassing power; meaning all the power, glory, and honor, will belong to God and not to us.

Paul makes this point even clearer in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 when he says:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

God chose what is foolish, weak, low, and despised in the world to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ so that no human being can boast in the presence of God. **He chose jars of clay.**

But how does that relate to my current suffering?

Well, Paul tells us in verses 8-12 of 1 Corinthians 4. He says in our human weakness we are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down.

How many of you feel afflicted? Maybe you are dealing with debilitating pain in your body that the doctors can't figure out, or maybe you are struggling with depression and emotional ailments that never seem to get better despite all of your best efforts.

What about perplexed? I know that in my own life I am perplexed every day. I have three small wonderful children that God has graciously given to us, and yet they often seem like monsters from another planet.

And I am perplexed and baffled often about how I am to love, honor, cherish, and discipline them well to the glory of God when all I really want is sleep.

Maybe you feel persecuted or struck down or hurt by someone close to you, and the wound is so great and so deep that you are unsure if you will ever recover.

These terms personify not only how Paul is being persecuted for his faith, but they also speak to the suffering that we all are currently facing.

Yet, there is a surpassing power that meets us in our weakness.

It is a power that is so great that though we are afflicted we are not crushed; though we are perplexed we do not despair; though we are persecuted, we are not forsaken; though we are struck down, we are not destroyed.

Meaning that God by His **grace and power** meets us in our sufferings and sustains us. And as we will see in verse 11, **He sustains us with a purpose.**

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.

So God sustains you and me in our weaknesses and in our sufferings so that the Christ can be manifested in us.

This means that as we walk through sufferings and continually cling to Jesus, trust Jesus, and follow Jesus, that God, by His power, is proclaiming the gospel through us.

So all of our sickness, despair, emotional issues, family issues, financial struggles, work pressures, etc... all have a purpose. That purpose is gospel proclamation through our utter and total weakness so that all the glory, honor, praise will belong to God and not to us.

So don't lose heart! Your suffering is an integral part of God's plan to fulfill the Great Commission.

2. Don't lose heart! Your suffering produces spiritual renewal. (V. 16)

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

Paul knew he was dying. That is why he said in verse 12, **“so death is at work in us”** and then in verse 16, **“our outer self is wasting away.”** All the sufferings, beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, pressures, sickness, frustrations, and disappointments have taken a heavy toll on Paul's body and his physical life is wasting away.

And though we may not be enduring the exact same circumstances as Paul, I think many of us in here can understand and comprehend in a very real way the reality that we as human beings are wasting away.

Every time you take a step and your ankle or back or knees hurt, it is a reminder that you are wasting away. Every time you can't keep your food down because of the chemotherapy treatments, it is a reminder you are wasting away.

Every time you find yourself exhausted from the weight of your job responsibilities, or from raising kids, working through marriage issues, or just from the day in and day out frustrations, anxieties, and sorrows of living in a world that at times feels like it is in such disarray that it is a wonder that any good even exists within it.....It's a reminder that you, and I, and all people are wasting away.

For me, I have a piece of metal in my heart that I got when I was 9 years old that is a constant reminder that this body is wasting away every single day.

As Ecclesiastes 3:20 says:

“All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.”

Now if Paul were to just tell us that our outer self is wasting away this text would be very sorrow inducing. It might cause us even to sink into a pit of despair at the idea that we are decaying

However, Paul starts verse 16 by telling us not to lose heart. And he tells us that the reason we are not supposed to lose heart is because something else besides decay and wasting away is happening.

And that something is **“daily spiritual renewal”**.

So we should not lose heart as we waste away physically, because God is renewing us and strengthening us on a daily basis. Look at Paul's prayer for the Colossian church in Colossians 1:11:

“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,”

So God gives us what we need every day to endure this life. He strengthens us and renews us daily so that we can make it to the end of our days, though weak and wounded, sick and soar, we can make it without losing heart.

So in our suffering He (God) becomes our strength and renewal. He gives us what we need on a daily basis to endure this life with patience and joy.

But there is more. God is using our suffering to proclaim the gospel, and through it He is giving us the strength and renewal we need to endure this life with joy. However, our sufferings are not just about gospel proclamation and endurance, but they are also about preparation.

3. Don't lose heart! Your suffering is preparing glory for you. (V. 17)

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

Now, I don't know about you, but at first glance this verse makes me a little upset. Paul are you calling what I go through on a daily basis light and momentary? Paul are you calling the crippling anxieties that I went through as a kid light?

Are you calling the suffering of God's people who have chronic issues that may never get better momentary? Are you mad Paul, because I am sure that what you were going through when you wrote this was not light and momentary, in fact it did not end until you died Paul. So how can your afflictions, my afflictions, our afflictions be light and momentary as if they are nothing?!

And Paul answers us back by saying, **“because I am comparing them to an eternity with Jesus.”**

You see, Paul in no way was down playing the severity of his, yours, and my suffering; however, when they are put in the context of forever with Jesus, these 70 or 80 or 90 years of suffering become pretty light and momentary in comparison.

This means that the suffering that was once such a burden to us becomes light and weightless and therefore easier to endure as we remember that there is a forever with Jesus. **This keeps us from losing heart through the pain and agony that can come upon this world and upon God's people.**

And as if that isn't enough, these light and momentary afflictions are also preparing something for us. As verse 17 says **they are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.**

What does that mean?

One, it means that your afflictions are not meaningless, but are meaningful; they are not purposeless but are purposeful, because God is using them to preach the gospel and renew you as He prepares glory for you.

But how does God prepare glory for us?

Now, I can freely admit that I cannot in anyway fully comprehend how this works and what this means, but what I do know is what the text tells me, and what it tells me is that God through our afflictions and sufferings is preparing for each one of us particular glories in the age to come.

That means God is producing something meaningful and amazing for each one of us through our particular sufferings as we endure them by clinging to Jesus. But can we comprehend what that is? No! As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:9:

But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”

So I in no way can comprehend the glory that is being prepared for you as you walk through the troubles of this life. I have no clue what God is preparing for you as you endure your personal pains and sufferings on a daily basis. But I do know this: I know that what he is preparing is good.

Romans 8:28:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

And I know it is a treasure that is better than anything that this world can offer us, and it lasts forever.

Matthew 6:19-20:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

So what God is specifically preparing for us in our eternity with Jesus, through our sufferings and afflictions is a good and eternal treasure that is beyond comprehension. I cannot fully understand what that is but I am excited about it and you should be too.

So all of your hardships, sickness, afflictions, stresses, pains, worries, struggles are not meaningless, but are used by God to proclaim Christ, to make you more like Christ, and to prepare your eternity with Christ.

There is so much purpose in our sufferings that they are like a condensed protein shake of meaning.

So don't lose heart, because your sufferings are preparing glory for you.

But there is still the question: how do I live as if these truths are real today? How can I really stand for the gospel when I want to cave and give up? How can I really be renewed when all I seem to experience is a weary and tired existence? How do I endure as I wait for this glory, when the pain is crippling and it feels like it won't ever end?

Here is the answer that Paul gives us.

4. Don't lose heart! Look to the hope of your eternity with Jesus. (V. 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's answer to these questions is to look away from your circumstances to the unseen promises and realities of God. This means that we turn our attention away from this life which is wasting away and we turn our eyes to the **eternal promises and life** that are ours now and one day will be fulfilled when Christ returns.

We need to look at these promises, think about these promises, chew on these promises, memorize these promises, and preach these promises to ourselves daily.

This means that you also need to go to the place where those unseen promises are, and that place is God's Word. You need to read God's Word, pray God's Word, Memorize God's Word, and fight daily to believe God's Word and all the promises of your future with Him, so that you don't lose heart.

And when you and I fight to keep our eyes and our heart focused on these promises we will more clearly see the reality that all of our suffering and wasting away is meaningful; meaningful in proclamation (of the gospel), in spiritual renewal and strengthening, and in preparing glory for us in eternity.

And all of this suffering in the face of God's promises will ultimately produce within us hope and joy.

And we will be able to echo Paul's words in Romans 5:3-5:

Not only that, but 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.

So my question is this: do you have hope this morning or have you lost heart? Do your afflictions seem hard and meaningless or are they meaningful? Do you believe that God has a plan that He is working out through you that is for your good and your joy?

My desire for you this morning wherever you are at is to turn your face to Jesus, trust His promises, believe His promises, and live His promises.

Open His Word, see what He is doing through your sufferings to proclaim the good news of Christ, receive the daily renewal and sustainment that He has for you, and know that He is preparing for you an eternity and glory that is far greater than anything that you see now.

So don't lose heart! See the wonderful purposes in your suffering, and know that one day your faith will surely be sight, and eternal glory will be yours. Let's Pray.