

Incomparably More Than Meets The Eye

2nd Corinthians 4:16-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 26, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (2nd Corinthians 4:16-18, NRSV)

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“We do not lose heart.” What does that mean to you? How many of you could unequivocally make that statement: “I do not lose heart. No matter how the day unfolds. No matter what news the headlines bring. No matter what the diagnosis reveals. No matter what the stock market does. No matter what other people end up thinking about me. No matter who gets elected. No matter what happens to my job, or my grades, or my love live, or my kids. *I will not lose heart.* I will not become discouraged. I will not give up.”

I’ll be honest with you. I lose heart sometimes. I wake up discouraged and go to bed discouraged. Not every day, but some days. The passion and vision of one day seems to evaporate the next day. Hope wanes. I become weary in my spirit.

This is not what I want. I don’t want to lose heart. You don’t either. Nobody does. Everybody you know is searching for the answer to this question: How do we live each day encouraged, with hope and strength and joy, constantly renewed in spirit? In our culture we tend to look to celebrities for the answers. Remember that show in the mid-90’s called *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Host Robin Leach would interview wealthy entertainers, athletes, socialites and business moguls and the rest of us were supposed to imagine what it must be like to live such a wonderful life. Problem is the illusion can’t be sustained. There are just too many examples, one after the other, of those who supposedly “have it all” but are living empty lives scarred by depression, addiction, isolation, and anger. Apparently even the rich and famous lose heart, often times even more quickly than the rest of us.

But then here comes Paul making this audacious statement: **“We do not lose heart.”** In fact, the more

you know about Paul the more audacious the statement becomes. His lifestyle was anything but rich and famous. When Christ first revealed himself to Paul he said this about him, **“I myself will show [Paul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”**

Later in this same letter Paul chronicles those sufferings, reminding the Corinthians that on countless occasions he has been imprisoned, flogged, tortured, beaten, stoned (the old fashioned variety), shipwrecked, lost at sea, robbed, attacked and hated by his own people, starved, left naked, and all because of his faithful service to Christ. He’s writing this letter, in fact, because the Corinthians think he is such a pitiful figure that they don’t think he’s worthy to be their leader.

Nonetheless, this is what he declares: **“We do not lose heart.”** The way he says it implies that it’s a determined choice he and others like him have made. He doesn’t just wake up encouraged every morning by fate or accident. There is something about the way he lives his life that enables him to never lose heart even in the face of the harshest circumstances. Isn’t there something in you that is dying to know his secret, especially these days?

Thankfully, Paul makes no secret about it. **“Even though our outer nature is wasting away,”** he continues, **“our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”** Human beings have two natures, one external and one internal. Most people find that both natures in them are wasting away. In Paul’s case, however, the inner nature is being constantly renewed, which is the secret to why he does not lose heart.

This isn’t complicated. Our outer natures are wasting away. I’m 54 years old. To some of you that seems relatively young. To others of you, that’s quite old. I used to think 54 was old. Either way, there is no denying that my outer nature is wasting away. I can’t read the fine print without cheaters. My lower back never feels 100%. If I don’t stretch, I pull a muscle. If I pull a muscle, it takes weeks to heal. The hair up top is getting thinner and, at the same time, showing up in places it didn’t used to be. And it’s only going to get worse. I can slow the decline, but I can’t stop it. Eventually, cancer, or a drunk driver, or just plain old weariness, something or someone will take me down one day and finish the job. Our outer natures are

wasting away. In your mind you can deny it; your body will never agree.

In spite of this reality, however, every human being also has an inner nature which does not need to waste away. It can, and often does, but it doesn't have to. In fact, the human soul can keep expanding through the years on into old age. This occurred to me some years ago and it came as wonderful news. I love the idea that even as my body declines my spirit can continue to grow. As long as I live I can continue to mature in wisdom, and love, and kindness, and generosity, and faith. My relationships can continue to deepen and expand, with God and with others. Specifically, year after year I can look more and more like Jesus. In fact, the most Christ-like people I know are mostly older people. It takes time for God to shape us. It's tragic to me that when we think of old age in our culture we focus on the inevitable wasting away of the outer nature when we really ought to focus on the possibility of the perpetual renewal of the inner nature.

So how does this happen? How do we become people, regardless of our age, who are renewing our inner natures day by day so that we do not lose heart? Verse 17 holds the answer: **“For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.”** There's a lot here. Let's unpack this carefully, piece by piece.

First, notice that the goal is glory. This is what we are after. The word for “glory” here in Greek is δόξα. It can also be translated “praise”, or “honor”, or “splendor”, or “renown”. We sing the *Doxology* every Sunday. That just means “words of praise.” And this is what we are after. Who is the person who does not lose heart? Isn't that the person who is always receiving words of praise? Isn't this the desire of your soul, to be a person who is worthy of praise, somebody held in esteem, honored for who you are. Don't we spend our whole lives striving after this?

But remember that glory ultimately belongs to God alone. Right? As creator of all that is, he alone can declare that something is worthy of glory, worthy of praise. With this in mind, scripture tells us that God desires to give us glory. Psalm 8:4-5 declares, **“What are human beings that you [Lord] are mindful of them...Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”**¹ Paul makes clear here that God wants to prepare us for glory. But notice what God is going to use to bring us into glory. *Affliction* is God's chosen instrument. It is through the wasting away of the outer nature that the

inner nature will be renewed. Let me say that again. It is through the wasting away of the outer nature that the inner nature will be renewed towards glory.

To get at this let's explore a stark comparison Paul makes here between affliction and glory that will help us understand their necessary relationship. First, Paul describes the affliction of this life. He calls it slight and momentary. To be clear, the affliction he speaks of is the hardship of this life, particularly the hardship we experience as we seek to be faithful to God. We seek to live faithfully in this life and yet we are burdened by temptation, and loneliness, and illness, and grief. If we seek to honor Christ with our lives we may face scorn from others, or betrayal, or even persecution. All of this hardship, including the wasting away of our physical lives themselves, Paul says it's all slight. It's nothing. It's fleeting. It's like a vapor or a flower, here one moment gone the next. The blink of an eye.

Stop and think of how outrageous this statement actually is, how offensive it might come across to some people. Can you imagine sitting at the hospital bedside of a young woman who is dying of cancer, or beside parents at the freshly-dug graveside of their dead child, and saying, or even believing, that all this affliction they are experiencing is slight and momentary? All of human suffering is small potatoes. The only way Paul can possibly get away with saying this is by comparison. Standing on its own, human suffering is anything but slight and momentary. On its own it is crushing and endless. But Paul does not let it stand alone. *It is only slight and momentary in comparison to a coming glory which is weighty and eternal.*

To be clear, this is not earthly glory we're talking about here. Earthly glory is a professional golfer being cheered by thousands of people on the 18th hole of Augusta as he putts in to win the Masters. Nothing against golf, a game I really enjoy playing, but that golfer is being praised for his uncommon ability to put a little white ball in a little round hole. It's impressive. It's fun to watch. But it's cheap glory with little substance, which means it will quickly fade.

Who was People Magazine's “Sexiest Man Alive” in 1987? Who won the World Series MVP in 1992? Who was the president between Grant and Garfield? Most of us have no idea. In the moment there was much glory attached to these people in these positions. Now, without Google most of wouldn't even be able to answer these questions. When I was in junior high we had to take typing class. In 1979 I was the typing champion of my 8th grade at Terra Linda Middle

¹ Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

School, a blazing 65 words per minute. I basked in the glory of it all. My lightning fingers were the envy of at least three or four other kids. But it was cheap glory, and cheap glory fades. Today, nobody remembers. Except my kids, because I've boasted to them on occasion.

All kidding aside, start thinking honestly about all the ways we assign glory to people in this world in the arenas of sports, and business, and entertainment, and politics, and education, and even in our own little social circles, and you will realize that most of that glory isn't weighty or lasting. People spend their lives seeking after this cheap version of glory, but it never satisfies.² The poet William Cowper described the vain pursuit this way: "It's the toil of dropping buckets into empty wells, and growing old drawing nothing up."³

Paul has in mind here a different sort of glory. This is a glory with substance. It doesn't fade. It can't be lost because, unlike cheap glory, it isn't tied to anything that can be lost. And the only way Paul can dare call the affliction of this life slight and momentary is because he knows that the eternal, weighty glory which awaits us is, in his words, "**beyond all measure.**" It's an incomparable comparison. There is nothing on earth like it.

If you live in Florida, you know what it's like to live in the flattest place in the country. The highest elevation in Florida is 345 feet! Now, imagine meeting a person in Florida who has never lived or traveled anywhere else and trying to describe Mount Everest to that person. If you had no photos or video, what would you use as a comparison? See that highway overpass? See that bunker next to the green on the 14th hole? See that sand dune on the beach? Mount Everest is sort of like that, but a lot bigger. Forget about it! Nothing will compare. They would not be able to even imagine a mountain nearly 30,000 feet high.

When C.S. Lewis talked about the coming life we have in Christ he said it makes this life seem like we are now living in a land of mere shadows by comparison to the real thing we will experience one day. Paul put it his way in 1st Corinthians: "**What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor the heart of man imagined, God has prepared for those who love him.**"⁴ It requires faith to believe that if we place our lives in the hands of Jesus he has in store for us such glory that it will make every

suffering and hardship of this life seem, by comparison, slight and momentary.

We talk about this glory often around here. Imagine hearing God say to you one day, "**Well done, good and faithful servant...Come and share your master's happiness!**"⁵ Or, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, on whom my favor rests."⁶ It's all rooted in God's grace, of course, poured out for us through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. For that reason, the glory in store for us is weighty and eternal because it is rooted in something which will not change or fade. God's love for you and his grace towards you *will not diminish or change*, because it is rooted in who God is and what God has done, not in who you are or what you have done.

But again, it is affliction which is preparing us for this glory. At the root of that word 'affliction' is the word pressure. But think of pressure in this sense. It is intense pressure that causes carbon, over time, to be transformed into diamonds. In a way, it is the pressure of a red-hot fire that refines gold and makes it pure. It is pressure that a gardener applies to a plant when she prunes it to make it more fruitful. An athlete uses the pressure of exercise to get his body into prime physical shape. Like it or not, God is using the pressure of affliction in our lives to prepare us for glory. In a thousand challenges we face that lead us to realize that we cannot overcome without his help, God humbles us so that we turn to him and discover that he is the strength in our weakness. Without affliction we would never realize this. It's what James means in his letter when he writes, "**My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.**"⁷

But furthermore, as we face affliction for Christ's sake, we realize that the road he has laid out for us to glory is a road marked with suffering. It is the way of the cross. As his followers, we are not called to lift ourselves up, to seek glory on our own. Rather, we are called to give our lives away, to forsake life on our terms in favor of life on God's terms, to consider others better than ourselves, to love as we would want to be loved, to ultimately die to ourselves. This dying is not easy. Dying is never easy. But there is no other way to life in the end than through death. As Jesus himself put it,

² After the first and highly successful *Live Aid*, Bob Geldof turned to his fellow organizer Midge Ure and asked, "Is that it?" It was his reflection on the success and joy of *Live Aid* – a reflection which became the title of his autobiography.

³ Read the whole poem here:

<https://www.bartleby.com/345/authors/116.html>

⁴ 1st Corinthians 2:9

⁵ Matthew 25:21 (NIV)

⁶ Words spoken to Jesus from his Father which we believe will also be spoken to all who trust in Christ and come to share his inheritance.

⁷ James 1:3-4

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”⁸

Are you beginning to see how Paul can declare, **“So we do not lose heart!”**? As we continue to pursue Christ, to seek his pleasure rather than our earthly glory, we will find ourselves renewed day by day by day no matter what circumstances we face. For by comparison we know that the afflictions we face are not only slight and momentary, but are valuable in the sense that God is using them to shape us for the eternal weight of glory! Earlier in the chapter Paul writes, **“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 made visible in our bodies.”⁹**

Remember that this is a choice. You have to *choose* not to lose heart. Imagine a thirsty person that discovers one day that water will quench his thirst. The next day that person doesn't wake up thirsty and say, “Well, water worked yesterday, but I wonder what will work today.” No, he goes back to the well and draws more water, day after day after day. Paul is clear that it's no different with our faith. It must be renewed day by day by day from the same source.

In the end of the passage he says this to clarify: **“...we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”** Put simply, we have a choice when it comes to where we put our eyes, our attention, our affection. This is not complicated. Listen to me. Regardless of your circumstances, if are not somebody who can say with Paul, **“I do not lose heart!”**, then the problem is likely that your eyes are looking at the wrong things. This could be that you've never come to realize that there is something else to look to, or you have realized this but chosen to continue looking elsewhere.

Think about it this way. What is temporary, here today gone tomorrow. Let's make a short list. Earthly beauty is temporary, style and fashion as well. Material things and money are temporary, every single cent and every item in your possession. The business you work for or built is temporary. Your earthly reputation, all the

accolades you have received in this life, they are all temporary. The Democratic party, along with all their policies, is temporary. The Republican Party, just as temporary. The United States of America itself, along with every other nation on earth, is temporary. Even your earthly family and your marriage are temporary. Your good health, if you still have it, is temporary.

What is, on the other hand eternal, here today and guaranteed to still be here tomorrow? The love of God for you and everyone you know is eternal. God himself, of course, is eternal, along with his rule and reign, what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. The life of Christ is eternal. He died, yes, but rose again and is alive today. The church, the family of God made up of those who have been saved by grace through faith, is eternal. Not this building or this congregation or this denomination, but the brothers and sisters who make up this community and others like it around the world, they/we are eternal! The end of the Apostle's Creed is a great summary of that which is eternal: “the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic [i.e. universal] church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, life everlasting.” All eternal.

So here's a question only you can answer. Where are your eyes these days? It's what we focus on that matters. Yes, we live in this world and Jesus calls us to actively engage in this world. We have to buy clothes and food. It's good that we start and raise families. We enjoy creation. As followers of Jesus we should actively participate in the politics of our nation, working to put in place leaders and policies that benefit all people. We should stay informed with the news. Enjoying entertainment and leisure can be a gift. But at the end of the day, is it possible that you have shifted much or most of your focus to these things which are all ultimately temporary? The condition of your heart is going to be profoundly affected by the object of your attention and the content of your head.

C.S. Lewis once said, “A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.”¹⁰ Without becoming so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good, we must keep our eyes on things unseen - glorious things unseen! – even while living for Christ in the midst of all we can see.¹¹

⁸ Luke 9:24

⁹ 2nd Corinthians 4:8-10

¹⁰ He goes on, “The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It

is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.”

¹¹ Paul puts it this way in Colossians 3:1-2, **“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated**

There are no shortcuts or secrets here. The message of Christ must be foremost in our minds. God's Word must take center stage. We must constantly focus on God's promises and teaching. We must set our minds on them, meditate on them, memorize them, proclaim them and teach them to one another. It's why it's so critical that we are in God's Word, each of us, every day. Christ's voice must remain preeminent. It's why when people neglect meeting together, stop gathering for worship, stop meeting in Life Groups or other small communities of believers, they always eventually turn their focus on to that which can be seen and, in time, they lose heart.

Some of you have run a race before, a long distance race. I go to a lot of races and every race I've been to there are always people along the way cheering on the runners. When everything in your body is telling you to give up, others are there, sometimes even fellow runners, encouraging you to not give up, reminding you of the finish line and what it will mean to complete the race. But imagine a race where nobody cheered you on. Or worse, people shouted words of discouragement meant to make you lose heart. "You've never make it! Give up now!" I need you to cheer me on, just as you need me and others to cheer you on that we will not lose heart.

Did you know that Jesus never once foretold his death without also foretelling his resurrection? It was always before him as it to be always before us. Whatever you face today or tomorrow, the very wasting away of your outer nature, if you know and trust Christ, and continue to know and trust Christ, all of it collectively is merely a slight, momentary affliction which is preparing for you an eternal weight of glory, incomparably more than meets the eye.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl captured this beautifully when he reflected on his time in a Nazi concentration camp:

I can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances – to choose one's own way. Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'.¹²

Brothers and sisters, we have a 'why' to live? It's called hope, and its ultimate source is found in Christ, and

only in Christ. Those who know this hope can choose to say, day after day after day, **"We do not lose heart."**

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 again. It's a short passage but loaded. What stands out to you?
2. Do you ever lose heart? What causes you to lose heart?
3. Paul speaks of his inner nature being renewed day by day. What do you think this means? Have you experienced this? Would you like to?
4. Reflect for a moment on the relationship that Paul suggests exists between affliction and glory. What is God's Word teaching us here? Look closely at Paul's words and really seek to understand.
5. Honestly, where is your attention these days most of the time, on the temporary which can be seen or the eternal which cannot be seen?
6. The Lord wants you to be able to say with Paul and other believers, "I do not lost heart!" He wants you to be able to say this regardless of the circumstances of your life. Do you believe this is true? What is God teaching you in all this today?
7. We need to be in God's Word and around God's people regularly if we are to stay encouraged and focused. Are you? If so, reflect on what that has meant to you. If not, what is one step you can take this week in that direction?

at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

¹² Source unknown.

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday: Acts 1 / Psalm 116

Tuesday: Acts 2 / Psalm 117

Wednesday: Acts 3 / Psalm 118

Thursday: Acts 4 / Psalm 119

Friday: Acts 5 / Psalm 120

Saturday: Acts 6 / Psalm 121

Sunday: Acts 7 / Psalm 122