

12/1/14

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

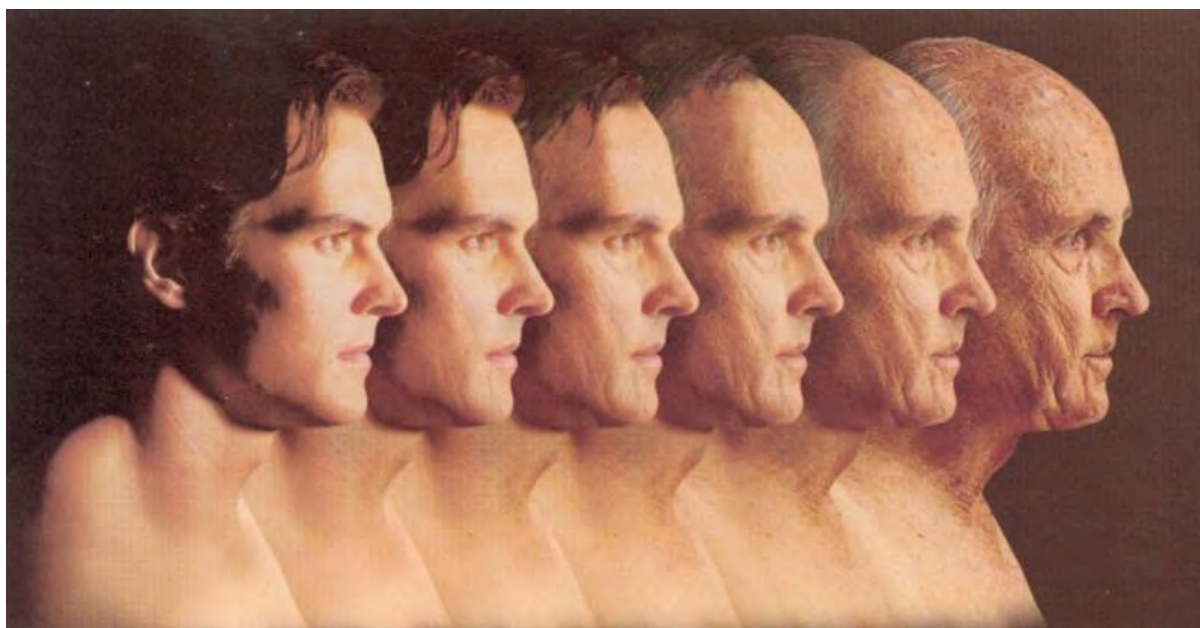
This passage has been very important to me when I've been in difficult situations in the past few years. I am excited about trying to explain it this morning but I confess that I also approach it with a fair amount of fear and trembling, because I know that the struggles that many of you are undergoing or have undergone dwarf those in my own experience. You're always aware when you preach about a passage on suffering of the pastoral impact of your words and in the past I have had people speak to me about those sorts of passages I have preached on in a way that hints at their own suffering. So I don't take the responsibility of preaching on this lightly. In any congregation there will be those who have suffered abuse, those who have been touched by severe mental or physical illness, who have had family members die young and so forth. It will have been very difficult for you to process those experiences. The Bible doesn't always give easy answers but hopefully what it says this morning will help you process some of those things.

[*read*]

The Christian faith is characterised by a number of contradictions or contrasts. Think about what Jesus said. The first will be last and the last will be first. He who is prepared to lose his life will save it but he who is intent on saving his life will lose it. Blessed are you when people persecute you. This can be hard to process and it seems perverse, almost deliberately so. This morning's passage continues that example of contradictory statements, or contrasts if you like, that show us how to look on our sufferings. We'll see three things here:-

- Firstly, outward decay and inner renewal;
- Secondly, troubles leading to glory; and
- Thirdly, fixing our eyes on what cannot be seen. Looking at what you can't look at, if you like.

So let's take them in turn. Firstly, outward decay and inner renewal. Verse 16: "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day".



It's undeniable – we are all outwardly decaying. It may not feel like we are wasting away after the intake of all that food at Christmas time, but it's true. Our bodies are wasting away. After you reach a certain age, you find that your ability to do certain things begins to go downhill. You can't run so far, or so fast. You need glasses to see things you didn't need glasses to see before. Your skills begin to waste away. You see this with sportsmen and sportswomen at the end of their careers. When Wimbledon comes around you see this with guys who previously won the tournament or featured in the final going out in the first round, apparently shocked at being beaten by some 19 year old from Slovakia who is moving faster than them and hitting the ball stronger than them. At work, you're not able to react as quickly maybe as you were 5 years ago. But more than that – your relationships are falling apart. It takes more time and effort to keep up with friends. They move away, or get married and move on.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes said that life was nasty, brutish and short. Do you see how Paul agrees with him? Paul includes the line "though outwardly we are wasting away" more or less as a throwaway line, maybe because all his readers would have understood it already in an era where life was much more unpredictable and the environment more hostile than it is today. Today we believe that we can stop the ageing process with diet, exercise or

cosmetic surgery, we can take pills or treatments to combat many diseases that would have been killers in years gone by and we have more access to food, clothing and shelter than those in the church in Corinth would have had. But Paul's words are as true today as they were then. Paul says that outwardly we are wasting away - but fortunately he doesn't stop there. He speaks of us being inwardly renewed day by day.

Now this is an odd contrast. How can something that is decaying be inwardly be renewing? It's not as if Paul is saying that your body may be failing you but your mind is getting stronger because as we grow older our minds get slower as well. What Paul is talking about is about what the Bible calls the "inner person". This is the term that the Bible uses to describe the process where God creates a new person out of the old so that when it is finished it will be entirely new. It's not something we can see – all we see is the outward decay – but it's something we are told is there and that God is doing. Even while the outward self decays the inner person is being built up, made more like Jesus and prepared for heaven. It is this, the new creation, the new being, that is glorious and eternal.

The nearest illustration I can get to this is in the natural world.



Before a caterpillar changes into a butterfly it first forms around itself a chrysalis, a hard shell. The hard shell is nothing to look at and look like a seed pod or something on a leaf – nothing you would notice. But inside the chrysalis a new creature is being formed, which

looks very different from the caterpillar it came from. It is more beautiful and more elegant than the caterpillar. It can fly whereas the caterpillar could only shuffle. But to set the butterfly free the chrysalis has to break. Once the chrysalis breaks, the butterfly is freed and can begin to fly. The outward shell serves a particular purpose and is designed to fall apart after a period of time. Inside it is new life which develops gradually until it is fully formed and ready to break free. Outward decay, inner renewal.

Secondly, troubles leading to glory. Verse 17: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” So we think, OK, the reason that Paul is able to discount his troubles is because they are pretty insignificant ones. But turn back a few pages and look at chapter 1, verse 8: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death”. These are the “light and momentary troubles” that Paul refers to – troubles that placed such a great weight on him that he despaired of life and felt like he was under a death sentence. Doesn’t sound very light and momentary to me.

So what can Paul mean? [**get out scales**]. Well Paul refers to the idea of different weights of things - so imagine that this side of the kitchen scales is you and you are beset by troubles. They are on top of you and weighing you down. Your troubles are crushing you and grinding you into the ground. The weight on top of you is very heavy. But what happens is a much larger weight is placed the other side? The thing that was weighing you down isn’t weighing you down any longer – it’s in the air. In comparison to the thing the other side it is light. It’s still on top of you but it isn’t any longer grinding you into the ground or crushing you – it’s simply on top of you. You’re in the air because of the much larger counterbalance.

This counterbalance is provided here by what Paul calls the “eternal glory that outweighs them all”. What does glory mean? It’s a hard thing to get a handle on. In the Old Testament the word glory in Hebrew means “weighty” or “heavy” – something of

significance and importance. In the New Testament the word glory in Greek is a word which means something that relates to the view of others. If you are glorious then in the New Testament meaning it means primarily that you are great in the eyes of others.



This is how I tend to envisage glory – on the main stage at a large music festival with your band in the zone and the crowd going nuts for you. Interesting to see the parallels between a festival crowd in full flow and a lively church congregation – the crowd is engaged in effect in the worship of the band. They might not describe it that way, but they are giving it glory.

So how might our troubles be outweighed by the promise of glory? Well maybe by understanding what we will be – ultimately and eternally important and significant, and valued as such in the sight of the only person who really matters and whose approval we most hunger for – God. It's interesting that sometimes the Bible talks about the opposite of glory as being like chaff in a field after the harvest



– worthless husks of grain that are weightless and float about in the wind. I don't know if you have ever felt that way or have come across people like that. I've come across people who through their behaviour have effectively distanced themselves from others such that they don't really matter any longer to anyone – no-one notices if they're not there. No-one seeks their opinion. When people make plans they're not taken into account. That is hellish for these people. That's the opposite of glory – we all desire to be wanted, to be respected, to be *significant*. Glory means all those things. Of course that's an imperfect picture because none of us can begin to understand what it is like to share in God's glory, and to do so for all time.

But Paul goes beyond saying that our troubles are outweighed by our future glory. He has the audacity to say that our troubles are *achieving* for us this glory. Now this is where I need to tread very carefully and be really clear. **Paul is not saying that the troubles are in themselves good.** If a marriage breaks up, if abuse is suffered, if a terminal illness is diagnosed, this will lead to huge pain and suffering. Let me make this absolutely clear – abuse is never good. Death is never good – the Bible tells us that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus, not that he danced a jig. Coming back to that bit in chapter 1 we looked at earlier, Paul's own experience was one of the crushing weight of despair. It doesn't sound to me like Paul was full of optimism at that point in this ministry. But let's look back at those verses – verse 8 and 9 of chapter 1: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. *But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*" This experience of crushing despair, Paul says,

has taught him to rely on God. Paul feels that he has benefitted from this experience, even though the experience was not good. It may only be something he sees after the event, but that doesn't make it any the less true. God was able to make something good come out of something bad.

There is a mystery here. We may look at situations of defeat, destruction or pain and think "nothing good can come of this". Paul tells us in this passage that it can and does. There's an often misunderstood and very famous promise in the Bible that God works in all things for the good of those who love him and follow him. The promise means that God works in all things to bring us to his glory. All things. Not just the enjoyable or good things. All things. This is what the Bible teaches. This is where some of you have challenged me in the past to say "this thing that has happened to me is so bad that it can't be good". To which I believe that this passage and others in the Bible say, yes, it's not good, **but God has promised to work good in it**. Whether it's by teaching us to rely on God, like Paul in chapter 1, or in some other way, the Biblical promise is that God works in all things for our good if we follow him. So, our troubles achieve for us a glory because God works in them to make us more like Jesus, to refine us, to bring us to glory.

Finally, Paul instructs us to fix our eyes on what cannot be seen. Verse 18: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." This is very confusing. How can we look at something that can't be seen? Paul here points to our future glory – that's what can't be seen because it's in the future, it's not visible at the moment. He points in verse 14 to Jesus's resurrection as proof that we also will be raised from death and share in God's glory. Although Paul experiences the difficulty and the nearness of death he is able to look beyond it at the future certainty of glory.

Which you may think is all very well as a spiritual theory but not very practical. How can we realistically focus on our future glory when we are suffering so much on earth? I guess I would answer that in a few ways. It's difficult. It needs the help of others. It needs discipline. It depends on having the future absolutely in your mind. It depends on being certain that you will be raised to life and that you will enjoy God's glory.

Do we have that certainty that is so strong that it can become a controlling force in our lives?



Athletes have this. They have the hope of glory in the Olympics to fix their eyes on. They know that getting to the Olympics will involve pain and discipline but they put themselves through it for the moment when they are acknowledged as Olympic champion. Now of course the pain of training for an Olympic event is very different from the pain of illness or whatever else, but it's the same principle – we endure the pain because our hope is for a great and enduring glory. Now of course, the glory of the athlete is uncertain and fleeting, but praise God the glory we are to enjoy is certain and eternal.

How do we do this? Well, as I've said, it's difficult, it needs discipline and it needs the help of others. You have to look beyond the here and now. It can be very counter-intuitive. It goes against what you can see. What's the most crushing defeat you can imagine?



Think about what it would have been like to be the apostle John. You see the man you have followed for three years come into Jerusalem acclaimed as King. A week later you standing

at his feet as he is tortured to death on a piece of wood, and you hear him cry out from the depths of hell that God has abandoned him. Does that look like victory or defeat? It looks like about the most emphatic defeat you can imagine. Yet we celebrate the cross and the resurrection of Jesus as the supreme victory won by God over Satan. And we're told that even as Jesus was going through that torture, that separation from his father for the first time ever, he was able to look forward to the joy set before him. The joy of gaining us by his sacrifice.

We know that we will never be asked to endure what Jesus endured on the cross. We know that his death and resurrection has brought us the promise of eternal life. From this promise we are able to encourage each other to persevere. We can do so in the small groups we have in this church and other Bible study groups – each of us can encourage others by seeking to apply the great Biblical promises pastorally as we unpack how we apply the Scriptures to our own individual situations. We can do so also on our own – there's a couple of psalms I am very fond of where the psalmist in effect talks to himself – “why are you downcast my soul and so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him – my king and my God.” The psalmist's soul is disturbed so he disciplines himself to focus on the future certainty of praising God. We can do the same.

Paul is writing big things here. It can be hard to see what good can come out of bad things, but that's the promise that is made here – that troubles which can be crushing can in some way achieve for us a future glory. It's hard to understand how this works and I don't underestimate the challenges that many of us face in having the sort of perspective that Paul has here. So let's work together to unpack this. Let's support each other in our troubles and not be afraid of claiming what the Bible promises us in those troubles. Let's do so sensitively and carefully but let's do so.