The Future Present
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

We're looking at Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth, and one of their problems was this group of new leaders who were critiquing Paul's life and ministry. Because if you applied the criteria of image and success, which is what mattered to his critics, to Paul, Paul didn't look all that special.

And Paul knows that. He knows that in comparison to what others think a successful like looks like, his doesn't look that great. But think about your own. Do you ever finding yourself thinking the same? Compared to the glossy media images of the amazing life you're supposed to be living, you've got problems with your health, or relationships, or your own character. Or life's just hard. And sometimes, it can be enough to get you down, can't it?

Churchill said, 'If you're going through hell, keep going!' Which is great, but how do you do it? When by any external measure things don't look great, how do you not give up? How do you not get down? How do you not get discouraged?

Well, that's what Paul wants to show you.

Perseverance
There's an English expression that says, 'don't judge a book by its cover'. Meaning, don't judge someone or something by external appearances: 'I mean, sure he may not be much to look at, his nose it too big, and he's a bit short, but he's got a heart of gold.' But when it came to Paul's critics, they were most definitely judging by external appearances. Because, by all appearances, Paul's ministry and life was not exactly star-spangled. And in a culture like Corinth that valued the entrepreneurial, a grab-hold-of-life and appearance-is-everything attitude, Paul did not exactly glow. I mean, he got beaten up by mobs, and accused before magistrates, and thrown out of cities and thrown into jails, and lived short on cash, and even had to work a dead-end job as a tent-maker to make ends meet. Hardly the life of the celebrity, aspirational role model.

But, if that was how things appeared to his critics, how did Paul's life appear to himself? Well, look back at chapter 4:7, 'We have this treasure *in jars of clay*.' And then v8, 'We are *afflicted* in every way, but not crushed; *perplexed*, but not driven to despair; *persecuted,* but not forsaken; *struck down*, but not destroyed.'

So as Paul looked at the external reality of his life there was plenty to be discouraged about: Physical weakness, affliction, things like decisions or other people's attitudes not always being clear, persecuted, attacked. And yet, listen to what Paul says, v16, 'We do not lose heart.'

Now, think about that. Because you don't need to put yourself in Paul's shoes to see how remarkable that is, do you? Paul describes himself as a jar of clay. That he's nothing special. And you can look at yourself and know with zero sense of self-pity that, 'I'm not one of the world's beautiful people. I'm nothing special. In fact, I'm painfully aware of my brokenness, of my weaknesses.'

And Paul says he's afflicted. And at the moment, as I know some of you are, you may be suffering physically or emotionally. Paul says he's perplexed, and maybe you can look at the circumstances

of your life, or your family, or the world around you and wonder, ‘how did we get here?’ Paul says he’s persecuted, and you can feel like it’s getting harder and harder to live out the faith and be a person of integrity, to say nothing of what it’s like to raise kids today. Paul says he’s struck down and maybe you feel like you’ve been taking blows, and that some of them have landed.

And when life’s like that it’s easy to lose heart and become discouraged.

But Paul says, we do not lose heart. Despite all this, we’re not discouraged.

And that’s not because he refuses to accept reality. Verse 16 again, ‘Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.’ So Paul knows that from an external perspective he’s wasting away, that things don’t just look bad, they are bad. So he’s not a fantasist. He’s not burying his head in the sand. Su says that I live under this delusion that I’m still 24. Which is sadly true. But then occasionally, I’ll being walking down the street and catch my reflection in a shop window think, ‘Wow! That can’t be me! I’m an old man.’ But Paul says, I know this is me. My body’s ageing, externally things aren’t all sparkly. Paul’s a clear-minded realist.

But, Paul says, that’s not the only way to view things, because, v16 again, 'our inner self is being renewed day by day.’ Now, Paul’s *not* saying, ‘well, there’s this outer physical stuff, like my body, but that’s not the real me. The *real* me is the inner me!’ He’s comparing what he and these Corinthians, and you and I can see - the difficulties and sufferings and tribulations of life, and comparing *that* with what God sees. Because, Paul says, there’s a whole other dimension, and when you see it it changes how you see everything else.

Perspective

Now, recently I was told that I could audition for the role of Ghandi in a film. I didn’t know whether to be flattered or offended. But apparently Ghandi once said, ‘The future depends on what we do in the present.’ And there’s some truth in that. But Christianity says something different. That what you do in the present should depend on the future. That how you live now should be shaped and inspired by what’s to come.

You see, it’s always the end of the story that determines the meaning of everything that goes before it, isn’t it?[1] Whether it’s a novel, or a film, if it’s a good one, you get to the climax and there’s this ‘aha!’ moment. ‘Ah! Now I understand, that's what that character was doing, that’s what those clues were about, that’s who the culprit really was. Now I get it!’

Well, look what Paul says in v17, ‘For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.’ In other words, fast forward to the end of your story, read ahead to the finale, see how everything God is doing in your life is going to work out, and you’ll keep going; you’ll take heart. Because as Paul turns the light of the future onto the shadows of the present, things that when you’re experiencing them are heavy and feel like they’re never going to end, become light and momentary.

Why? Because it’s not just that God is working in our sufferings but through them. That these afflictions themselves, he says, are preparing something far greater for us. That just as fire purifies precious metal, and pressure changes coal to diamonds, so present difficulties are preparing for us

[1] Ed Welch. A Small Book for the Anxious Heart, 24.

an eternal weight of glory.[2] And when you see that, Paul says, very real, present, heavy suffering becomes lightweight. Something hard that leaves you saying, 'I just want this over' becomes momentary, here today, gone tomorrow, in comparison to the real weight of the eternal, never ending glory God has in store for you.

Now, to say it again, Paul is *not* a naive optimist. He's not saying, 'Pull yourself together, you're just imagining things are this bad. You need to be more positive.' He's saying, no, they really are this bad, but in comparison to what's coming, they're light, so you can bear them, they're momentary, so you can endure them.

You see, why does worry invade our present, even to the point sometimes of controlling us? Because we think our present and future are out of control, out of our control or God's control. And as a result our problems grow in size. But when you realise God has got all this under control, and he's not just working in our lives *despite* our problems, but that *through* them he's preparing us for something far more glorious, then your problems begin to shrink in size.

And look how Paul says that happens, v18, '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.'

Now, if you were living in Corinth, life was all about the stuff that's seen. Food, water - your life depended on them. Image, appearance, wealth, power - this was the stuff that made wheels turn. And they're are all tangible. They're all concrete. And so are their opposites, like poverty, or suffering. And it's no different today. Which is why 'the seen': tangible, concrete success or power or appearance, or their opposites, have this power to grab our attention and shape the way we see and do life.

But Paul wants you to see a whole other realm: the realm of the unseen. And the things you can see, they all have a time limit, a sell-by date. The beautiful person will age, and those perfect white teeth will fall out; the powerful person will fall from power; your bank account will be of no interest to Death when Death comes knocking. And when it does, even suffering will end. Success, or suffering, they all have a shelf-life. But the unseen lasts forever Paul says. And it's that unseen realm that you've got to learn to see.

Remember the story of Elisha and his servant, surrounded by an enemy army? And Elisha's servant rightly interprets just how bad things are. To use a theological term, they are totally stuffed. But Elisha sees things differently because he sees the unseen and says to him, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:16). And then Elisha prays that his servant's eyes would be opened to see. And they are. And now, the servant sees what Elisha sees: the mountains around them are filled with horses and chariots of fire. What does that do for the servant's fear? Suddenly that enemy army doesn't seem quite so large and so scary after all. Because, Paul says, he's seen the unseen.

But what is that?

The Truly Permanent

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[2] Timothy Keller, The Songs of Jesus, 284.

Every Friday morning, I spend an hour with my elderly neighbour talking French. And he makes these incredibly detailed scale working models of old sailing ships, with remote-controlled sails that go up and down, and cannons that fire gunpowder, and his latest one even has a barrel of rum that'll pour you a drink. And when I'm not understanding something in French and he needs to explain some meaning to me, where do you think he turns? To boats and model making, because that's what he does. And Paul's a tent-maker, so where does he go for an illustration?

Chapter 5:1, '*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.' In other words, your physical body, your life, Paul says, is like a tent. A man made tent. A temporary structure. And it's slowly being dismantled by ageing and the trials you're going through. And one day death will complete it. But when it does, God is going to give you a house, a building, 'not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.' Your resurrection body.

Now, when the weather's good, a tent's fine. But when the weather's bad, you know you're in a tent, because the poles are bending and the sides are bowing, and you wonder why you didn't book the hotel instead. And it's when you're going through trials in life that you know just how weak and frail you are, and wish you weren't. Verse 2, 'For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.'

Now, I don't know about you, but there is something about camping that makes you groan, isn't there. You pitch your tent thinking, 'wonderful, we get to camp out under the stars and be at one with nature!' But what happens? There's a baby in the text next door who cries the entire night. But the next morning you smile and bless them because you're a Christian, and you tell yourself, I'll sleep well tonight. But then your mattress deflates in the middle of the night, and there's this stone right in the middle of your back. And what do you? You groan. And that's life, Paul says. The hard realities of life, whether it's other people or ourselves, can leave us groaning.

But why? Why groan? Why, when life is hard, do we think it shouldn't be? Why do we view suffering as an unwelcome, alien intruder? That life shouldn't be like this? Because it shouldn't. Because you were made for a world where there is no suffering. Because you're longing for another world. As Paul says, you're longing to put on your heavenly dwelling, a house not a tent, a resurrection body not a mortal body. Because you're longing for the reality of the unseen, for the new heavens and the new earth.

But is that just fairy tales? I mean, how can Paul be so certain? Why the overflowing confidence of v1, 'For we know…'? Because the other apostles in Jerusalem, and Paul on the road to Damascus, encountered Jesus, risen from the dead, in the solid, tangible, more-real-than-life reality of *his* resurrection body. And Jesus was crucified in weakness but raised in power. And in his first letter to Corinth, Paul says Jesus' resurrection was just the beginning, 'Christ has been raised from the dead, *the first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). And it's the fact of Christ's resurrection that makes our future resurrection more real and more solid than anything we experience now.

So when the day comes when it will feel like the darkness has won, and death comes, Paul says, that's when you'll experience the true reality of the unseen. Verse 5, that 'what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.' When, as he says in 1 Corinthians 15, 'The perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality [and]… death is swallowed up in victory.' (1 Cor

15:54). You see, we think this life is life. And it is. But it's mortal, it's perishable and in Christ something far more solid, far more real, far more lasting is coming.

In his Confessions, Augustine talks of a time early on in his life when he looked at the circumstances of his life and they were just overwhelming him with worry. And he tried to hand his worries over to God, but they kept on sliding back. And he came to realise the reason - 'You were not yourself, but a mere phantom, and my error was my God.' His anxieties, his current problems were his God, because they were more real to him than God was. And in comparison to all these seen problems, God was just a phantom. And he says of God, 'You were not to me any solid or substantial thing.' But when, as happened for Augustine, God and the future he's preparing for us becomes solid and substantial, anxieties about the present disappear like shadows in the light.

Look at v5: 'He who has prepared us for this very thing is God.' Now, a trainer might prepare a boxer for a match, but he's still got to get into the ring and fight and he still might lose. A coach might prepare his team for a game, but they've still got to out and play, and they might still lose. That's not what Paul means by preparation. Because, v5, God 'has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.' So Paul's not talking about preparing for something where the outcome's in doubt. He's talking about being prepared for something that's guaranteed - like a bridegroom preparing his bride for their wedding by giving her an engagement ring - that says 'you're mine and one day I'm taking you home as mine'. And the Holy Spirit is in you as God's guarantee, Paul says: His promise that he's preparing you for the reality and solidity of eternity.

So, it's no wonder Paul gets back to his theme, v6-8, 'So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage.'

So, this life, in this mortal body, is our home and yet, it's not our home, because v8, 'we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.' And so in between, v7 again, 'we walk by faith, and not by sight'. We live trusting, knowing that God is something solid and substantial and that he's working something solid and substantial through our suffering. Martin Luther said it's the faith that's 'a living, daring, confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God's grace… makes men glad and bold and happy.'

You see, when you know the grace of God, that the tent of Jesus' body was broken down for you, that he suffered for you, you'll trust him that he's working through your suffering. Because the story didn't end with Jesus' broken body but with his resurrected and glorified body. It ends with the empty tomb and sin and death vanquished and Christ ascended and reigning in his glorified body. And that along with him he is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory. It's that grace, that he would do all that for you, that makes you glad and bold and happy.

But it'll also do something else.

Living to Please Him

Look at v9-10: 'So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.'

Now, in Roman cities, the tribunal, with its judgment seat, was typically located in one of the central squares. And the governor would sit in judgment there. In fact, during his first visit to Corinth, Paul had been brought before the judgment seat of Gallio, the proconsul, to make a defense of himself.

And Paul is saying, it's not just that one day your physical body will be raised, it's that one day we will all stand before Christ at his judgment seat, and that should radically impact the way you live now. We live to please him.

But you can want to please someone for two very different motives can't you. Out of fear or out of love. If you have a bad boss, you may want to please him just to stay out of trouble. But if you have someone special to you, you want to please them because you love them. Which is it with Jesus? Does Paul think you and I are in trouble and are going to have to plead our case? Try and get him on our side by all the good things we've done? No.

Paul knows that Jesus stood before the judgment seat of Pilate and was condemned in our place, so that for all who put their trust in him, there is no condemnation. That we will appear before him for commendation, not condemnation. For 'well done, good and faithful servant'.

You see, when you know that Christ loves you so much that he was condemned for you, you'll love him. And you'll see all the things he's given you, your gifts and abilities, your influence and your intellect, as his good gifts, entrusted to you as his servant, and use them for his glory and others' good. You'll live to please him, because you want to please him. You'll take your success and use it to build up others. You'll take your suffering and use it to care for others. And the solid realities of the future will flood the present as you walk by faith, not by sight.