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Gazing Intently at What You Can't See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Last week I began with a confession. I suffer from a chronic spiritual disease called perplexity! It's an affliction that I've had for as long as I can remember. There is no known cure, at least this side of heaven. It's not like puberty! That is to say, I don't anticipate ever growing out of it. And it's not a sin. If anything, it's a sin to try to live in denial that you suffer from it. Perplexity is a perpetual burden that we all carry with us throughout life. Of course, there are varying degrees of perplexity. Some people struggle with it more than others. And I assume that all of us experience seasons of great insight and understanding as well as times of darkness and confusion.

By the way, I hope it wasn't a surprise to you, far less a disappointment that I should make such a confession. I always want to be honest with you about my own life. I suppose there are some Christians in a certain kind of church who would be shocked and even offended to discover that their pastor admits to being perplexed by some of the things in the Bible and the experiences he has in life. But I hope that isn't the case at Bridgeway.

I'll try not to repeat what I said last week, but for the sake of you who weren't here, let me explain what I mean.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 Paul not only describes his own life but also the lives of all Christians. We are all "jars of clay" (v. 7) in which God has deposited the glorious treasure of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He arranged it this way so that when people come to saving faith upon hearing that gospel they won't be tempted to thank us or to think that we are responsible for their conversion. Rather, as Paul says in v. 7, God set it up this way "to show the surpassing power" belongs to him "and not to us."

He then describes in somewhat shocking terms what we can expect to experience as "jars of clay". We are, he says in vv. 8-9, "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." ***Praise God for the "but not's" of the Bible!*** They are there to remind us that no matter how hard or dismal or frustrating life can be, God has made adequate provision for us through his Spirit to live in obedience to his commands and for his glory.

Last week we focused in on the phrase, "***perplexed, but not driven to despair***" (v. 8). Whereas we are all perplexed, at least those of us are who are honest enough to admit it (!), we need not be driven to despair. We need not be hopeless. We need not fall into such confusion or heartache that we become disillusioned and utterly reject God as unworthy of our trust.

But how do we avoid falling that far? Last week I mentioned Romans 8:18 as providing us with at least a partial answer. There Paul said that he is convinced that the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us when Christ returns. In other words, as bad as it may get in this life, and yes it will often get really bad, the glory that God has destined for us will far outweigh all such hardship and the pleasures of eternity with him will more than compensate for the pains of this life and the loss that it often brings.

I want to return to this preliminary answer and notice how Paul expands upon it here in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. But before I give you the biblical solution to the threat of despair, I need to mention *a few solutions or proposed remedies that ultimately don't work*. In fact, they always prove disastrous.

Alternative and Unbiblical Solutions to the Threat of Despair

There are a variety of reasons why Christians might "lose heart" and an equal variety of tools or tactics they employ to avoid it. Here are a few.

(1) Some are so overwhelmed by the hardships and heartaches and disappointments of life and live in such fear that they might never get away that they ***anesthetize their souls*** against the pain of it all by immersing themselves in

sinful pleasures. It may be illicit sex, alcohol, drug addiction, or perhaps what money obtained by illegal means can buy for them.

Some do much the same thing but they employ what would otherwise be considered legitimate activities. It may be a hobby in which they so immerse themselves that they don't have time or energy to deal with life's struggles. It may even be something as seemingly good and holy as service in the local church. For others they live their lives entirely for other people, serving and sacrificing and expending every waking moment to alleviate the heartache in others' lives. That's a good thing, unless it is done so you don't have to face your own pain and the tribulations that would otherwise threaten to make your own life miserable and not worth living.

(2) Other people adopt what can only be described as a *legalistic* approach to Christian living. They convince themselves that all the bad things that might lead to despair are punishment for sinful behavior and will eventually go away if one can simply do more good things for God. They say to themselves, "The reason why I'm about to lose heart is because I deserve to. I've failed God miserably, even if what I failed to do isn't required of me in Scripture. So, to avoid despair I must create a list of extra-biblical rules and guidelines and do my best to obey them, and hopefully get others to do the same. Then I can have some peace in life and reasonable expectation that my troubles will eventually disappear."

(3) More and more people today, sad to say, do not lose heart, or at least pretend that they haven't lost heart, by giving themselves over to *the power of positive thinking*. If they can only increase their faith and believe good things are coming their way, all the bad things that are a recipe for despair will disappear. They say to themselves, "If I'm about to lose heart, I need to stop thinking about the things that lead me to lose heart. I need to stop using the negative language that brings me down and depresses me and leads me to embrace a pessimistic perspective on life. But if I can figure out a way to speak positively and think good thoughts and perhaps attribute all bad things to the Devil, God will turn everything back to good and I won't be tempted to lose heart."

(4) Then there are those who think the only guaranteed way of avoiding despair and not losing heart is by *sheer will-power*. They think or say to themselves: "It's all up to me. It's simply a matter of the force of my personality. I will grit my teeth, confront head on whatever challenges come my way, stiffen my neck, clench my spiritual fists, dig in my moral heels, and press through."

(5) But the Apostle Paul has a different solution. He very clearly sets it forth in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. He tells us as clearly as he can that the way one does not lose heart is *by gazing intently at what one can't see!* I realize how strange this sounds, so let's take some time to unpack what he has in mind.

The Sanctifying Influence of Gazing Intently at what we Can't See!

I can't remember who said it or wrote it, but I agree with it: *the power to persevere comes from gazing intently at what you can't see*. Needless to say, if it can't be seen then the gazing must be of a spiritual nature, not physical. But let's first consider the context.

The context is Paul's discussion of how we as Christians daily carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, and do so without succumbing to despair or bitterness. His comments that concern us today, in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, still have in view the experience he described in vv. 8-12, one that entails affliction, perplexity, persecution, and being struck down. What that meant for Paul and his ministry in Corinth might not be the same for you and me, but all of us, in our own unique way, face disappointment and suffering that threaten us with discouragement.

So how does one not "lose heart," to use Paul's very words? Where does one find the power to persevere? If we're going to profit from Paul's perspective, we first need to understand his terms.

The *outer self* in v. 16 is not a reference to the *old man* of Romans 6:6 (or Col. 3:9 or Eph. 4:22). The *old man* refers to the moral or ethical dimension of our fallen, unregenerate nature. *Outer self* or *outer nature*, on the other hand, refers to *our bodily frame, our physical constitution, our creaturely mortality*, the "jar of clay" or "earthen vessel" of 2 Corinthians 4:7. Thus, the "decaying" or "wasting away" of our "outer self" is most likely a reference once more to the hardships of vv. 8-9 and our carrying about in our bodies the dying of Jesus of v. 10 and our being handed over to death of v. 11 and the death that is at work in us of v. 12.

Of course, it also includes *the progressive decay or deterioration of the physical body, whether a result of persecution, disease, or just growing old*. The "renewal" of the *inner self*, therefore, is probably synonymous with what Paul earlier said in 2 Corinthians 3:18 when he declared that "we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

What makes this truly remarkable is that *these are simultaneous processes!* At the same time Paul was physically weak and materially deprived and oppressed by his enemies he experienced unparalleled spiritual success. Our inner, spiritual renewal is not hindered or interrupted by the various trials, challenges, or physical setbacks that we experience.

Paul explains this in greater detail in v. 17. There he says, in utterly stunning terms, that the persecution he endures and the trials he confronts daily are but "*light momentary affliction*"! Paul was no Pollyanna. The suffering in his life was very real, not imaginary, and if viewed only from an earthly or temporal perspective would probably be more than any human might endure. But when viewed from the vantage point of eternity "the suffering took on the opposite hue – it seemed slight and temporary. The eye of faith," notes Murray Harris, "creates a new perspective" (363).

Note carefully the contrasts in view: "*momentary*" is contrasted with "*eternal*," "*light*" is set over against "*weight*," and "*affliction*" is counterbalanced by "*glory*". Similar language is used by Paul in Romans 8:18. There he says that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

God is not asking you to treat pain as though it were pleasure, or grief as though it were joy, but to bring all earthly adversity into comparison with heavenly glory and thereby be strengthened to endure. Look at the crushing afflictions of life and weigh them against the splendor of the glory that God has prepared for us. Only then will you find strength to endure and not lose heart.

It's encouraging to know that whatever suffering we might endure now, in this age characterized by pain and injustice, cannot overturn or undermine the purposes of God! If you have no genuine vision of eternity to come and all that God has prepared for you, it will be difficult to keep your head above the flood waters of despair and disillusionment.

But note well: this inner transformation in the midst of outer decay *does not happen automatically*. This may be the most important thing for you to see about what Paul is saying. *Carefully observe the relation between v. 16 and v. 18*. In other words, the renewal Paul describes (v. 16) only occurs while or to the extent that "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" (v. 18).

As we fix the gaze of our hearts on the glorious hope of the age to come, God progressively renews our inner being, notwithstanding the simultaneous decay of our outer being! Let's be clear: this is no fleeting or casual glance or occasional thought concerning the "glory" of the age to come. The apostle has in mind a spiritual fixation, an attentive and studious concentration on the inestimable blessings of heaven.

Perhaps I need to pause here and say something about what Paul means by the word "*look*" in v. 18. He's not talking about something you do with your physical eyes. To "look" at the "things that are unseen" is to meditate upon them, to study them, to trust in the certainty of God's promise that such things are ours and that they truly are coming. *To "look" is to prize and treasure and cherish and to hold dear in one's heart the eternal truths of what God has promised for us when Christ returns*. It means to prioritize eternal values above temporal ones. It means to *think* often and intently and in faith on the glory that is to be revealed to us in eternity future.

But it isn't just future spiritual realities that Paul has in mind. The "things that are unseen" (v. 18) also include *present truths and experiences* like justification by faith, adoption as God's children, redemption from sin, the reign of Christ at the Father's right hand, the indwelling presence and power of the Spirit, and every other spiritual blessing that is now ours because of what Christ has accomplished.

We must also remember that when Paul refers to “the things that are seen” he does not mean material or physical things, as if to suggest that “matter” is evil or unprofitable. God created “matter”! All things were pronounced “good” (Genesis 1). After all, we will live forever on a new “earth” which will be quite tangible and physical. Rather, *the contrast between “the things that are seen” and “the things that are unseen” has in view the distinction between all that is temporal and subject to sin and decay, as over against the unchanging righteousness and incorruptible reality of all we have now and all we will have in the age to come.*

So don’t use this passage to justify a careless, indifferent, or neglectful disregard for the daily responsibilities of life in the present day. *Paul is simply warning us against a carnal fixation on what this world system can provide and calling us to set our hope and confidence on the eternal values of God’s kingdom.*

Here, then, is the power to persevere: by setting your mind and fixing your gaze and focusing your heart on the unseen yet eternal realities of what God has secured for you in Christ. If I may be allowed to turn the age-old and misguided adage on its head, you will never be of much earthly good unless you are utterly heavenly minded.

A Personal, Real Life Illustration of what Paul means

Let me give you one real life illustration of what Paul is talking about. Many of you won’t recognize the name of Ken Stinson except from having heard us request prayer for him. For the past four years Ken endured an almost endless regimen of treatment for lung cancer, a disease that subsequently spread throughout his body. These past four years were extremely difficult for Ken and his family. *Ken suffered greatly.* But he did so with courage and joy and with an unshakeable faith in his Savior, Jesus Christ. And his suffering is over, forever. Ken passed away just a few weeks ago on September 18. He now knows only joy and peace and unimaginable delight as he lives in the presence of God.

But he didn’t just “live” during those four years. He refused to become bitter or resentful or angry at God. He was determined, instead, to be an encouragement to others, to point them to God and his goodness and to inspire their walk of faith. I can’t begin to tell you the number of people whose lives were challenged and changed by the life and testimony of Ken Stinson. He was a model of humility, honesty, and perseverance. Of course, he would have been the first to tell you it was by the grace of God alone that he endured and thrived as he did.

What might we conclude from the life and death and now new life of Ken Stinson?

First, **God is good!** Why do I conclude from Ken’s life that God is good? Because 4 years of suffering from lung cancer and the equally painful treatments that he endured, as horrific and seemingly tragic as it may appear from a human point of view, is **nothing** in comparison with the indescribable, ineffable, unfathomable beauty and bliss of heaven! **Nothing!**

Do you know what the Bible calls four years of suffering such as Ken endured? *Light, momentary, affliction!*

All of us who walked through these past four years with Ken and Vicki are keenly aware of what the apostle Paul means by the words “wasting away” of the “outer self.” Ken was an extremely strong, energetic, and athletic man. That’s what makes it really hard to remember what he looked like at the time of his death. He had lost so much weight. His body looked like it had been beaten and battered. Ken knew precisely what Paul meant by the “wasting away” of the outer nature.

But Ken also knew what Paul was talking about in v. 17 when he says, in utterly stunning terms, that this “wasting away,” this suffering, in whatever form it takes, is but “light momentary affliction”! Ken had fixed his gaze and set his sights on the things that can’t be seen and in doing so he experienced a profound inner transformation and renewal that occurred simultaneously with the deterioration of his body. Stunning!

Some of you may be inclined to push back: “But Sam, I can’t see it! I just can’t see this! It makes no sense to me.” *If you can’t “see” it, it’s probably because you’re looking at the wrong thing!* Paul says that this perspective is possible only for those who gaze intently at what they **can’t** see! That’s not a contradiction in terms. Look again at his language. *We are enabled to “see” persecution and paralysis, cancer and heart disease, oppression and every*

other obstacle we face as a weightless trifle only so far “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.”

In spite of the tragic decay and disability of his outer physical frame, Ken’s “inner man,” his inner “self” was being renewed daily because *he resolutely fixed his gaze upon what he couldn’t see with his physical eyes.* With the eyes of faith and hope and love he riveted his heart and soul on the reality of eternity and the unending glory and grandeur of his savior Jesus Christ!

That is why I conclude from Ken’s life and death that God is good.

Second, **God is great!** Listen to me well: you only have two options. *Either God is great or people like Ken are fools.* Both can’t be true. If God is *not* great, then Ken was a fool to have trusted him (and so too are you and I). If God is not great, Ken should have taken the advice of Job’s wife who told her husband, “Curse God and die.”

On the other hand, if God **is** great, then Ken was no fool. If God is good and great, Ken was among the wisest of men to have trusted him. If God is good and great, the most sane and rational thing Ken could have done was to continue, notwithstanding his condition, to love and honor and cherish God. And that’s precisely what he did.

Ken understood that *suffering always has a purpose.* The purpose is to mold us and shape us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. If Ken had not believed that God was worthy of his devotion and that God was great enough to turn his suffering into something good, he would have fallen into despair. Or to use Paul’s language, he would have “lost heart.” But he didn’t. He persevered in faith right through to the end. By God’s strengthening grace, he did not lose heart!

Third, **God is glorious!** Again, why do I say this? Indeed, *how* can I say it? Well, ask yourself this question: *What must this God be like to have warranted Ken’s love and faith through these last four years of anguish?* What kind of God is it that can remain the focus of a man’s devotion when that man lives as Ken Stinson did?

Some of you may be more inclined to ask: “What kind of God is it that would have permitted this horrible tragedy and then left his child in this horrible condition for four years?” I understand that reaction. Truly, I do. But I’m more inclined to ask: “What kind of God is it that could inspire and sustain such love and devotion *in spite of* what Ken endured these past four years?”

Some look at Ken and say, “Wow, that’s some kind of *faith.*” Well, yes. But may I suggest we look at Ken’s faith and say, “Wow, that’s some kind of *God!*”

Have you thanked God today for feet and hands and eyes and ears that work? Have you proclaimed his greatness and kindness for lungs that aren’t infected with cancer? Have you praised him for the ability to think and speak and eat and play with your grandchildren? Do you take driving a car for granted? Have you presumed upon the sunlight or the air you breathe or the blood coursing through your veins? When was the last time you paused to reflect on the thought that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)?

I’m sure I’ll think often of Ken until I stand with him before the throne of God above. But until then I pray that by God’s grace I will be able to look at his life, his suffering, his death, and the example that he set and say: **God is good! God is great! God is glorious!** But that will only happen to the degree that I stop looking at the things I can see and fix my spiritual eyes on the things I can’t see!

Conclusion

Perplexity is here to stay. So too are afflictions and persecution and the wasting away of our physical bodies. But there is absolutely no reason whatsoever why this means a Christian should ever be driven to despair or lose heart. The strength and energy to press through and persevere and even to thrive in joy and delight in all that God is for you in Jesus comes when you fix your faith and thoughts and desires and dreams on the unseen realities of the spiritual world and the glory that is to be revealed to you and for you when Jesus comes back.