

4. The Eternal Weight of Glory

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] The Apostle John in the book of Revelation opens to us the great vision of the eternal city, the city that is real and lasts forever in a way that our cities and our very world does not.

And John writes this, To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

And our dear Lord Jesus, we think of the glory and dominion that are rightly yours forever and ever. We think of you at this very moment, seated at the right hand of power, next to the throne of God the Father, in that eternal habitation, which is bright and glorious, and characterized by beauty and joy and holiness and celebration and delight.

How we thank you for it. And we thank you so much, Lord Jesus, that in the scriptures you have promised us, God the Father has promised us in so many ways, that all who belong to you will surely be inheritors of that great city and that we shall be there with you.

And we pray, and we pray, therefore, Lord Jesus, that you will keep our eyes fixed upon that wonderful future, that you will build us up in our faith and give us joy and perseverance, and help us to hold out the words of life and truth, the gospel, to our friends and loved ones and our neighbors and workmates.

[1 : 41] And help us, Lord Jesus, with our eye upon that great eternal future, to be firm and steadfast and bold and strong for you, so that in our lives and our words, others may see that you are the great God who has mastered us and has power and sovereignty over us.

So please strengthen us through your word today, the word of the Apostle Paul, and please build us up so that our lives may honor you.

And we ask it all for your dear namesake. Amen. Well, if you'd like to follow in your Bibles, you'll find our Bible reading in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, and this is on page 965, in our Visitor's Bibles, page 965.

We've been working our way through the whole of this fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, and this afternoon I want us to look only at the final three verses, but I'll read from verse 7 so that we can get a bit more of the context and be reminded of what Paul is saying.

So 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, beginning at verse 7. But we have this treasure, he means the treasure of the gospel, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[3 : 16] 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 may also 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 nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight 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.

[4 : 57] For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord bless it to us today.

Well now, as I've said over the last few weeks, the main theme that really holds together this part of 2 Corinthians, is Paul's theme about not losing heart, how not to lose heart.

So he says in chapter 4, verse 1, having this ministry by God's mercy, we do not lose heart. We've just seen it again in verse 16, so we do not lose heart.

And in chapter 5, verse 6, he's still on the same line here, so we are always of good courage. Now the reason why the Apostle Paul can write so powerfully on this theme of not losing heart, is that he himself knew the temptation, in his own experience, to lose heart.

And there are good reasons for this. To put it mildly, Paul had been very much bruised and buffeted. Preaching the Gospel in the Mediterranean world in the first century AD was an extremely risky business.

[6 : 09] And it proved to be very costly to Paul. It landed him in prison several times. It landed him in the stocks. It led him to places where he was arrested and beaten and whipped and stoned and abused.

Sometimes he was afraid. There are clear signs in the Acts of the Apostles that there were moments of fear. Sometimes the Apostle Paul reached a point where he even despaired of life itself.

In fact, he puts it like this in chapter 1 of this very letter. Chapter 1, verse 8. We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

I think we would be wrong to think of Paul as a man of iron. He was certainly very determined. But he was very human at the same time.

He felt pain. He felt the fierceness of men's opposition to him. And the opposition all came because so often his hearers did not like his message.

[7 : 16] They found it offensive because it stung their pride and undermined their cherished values. The gospel was not then and is not now a neutral message.

People either love it or hate it. And when they hate it, they hate not only the gospel but those who preach it. And yet Paul, because he doggedly went on preaching the gospel, inevitably he caught it in the neck time and again.

And yet in the midst of these afflictions, he found out how to keep going and how not to lose heart. And in this chapter 4, he passes on these priceless lessons to the Corinthians and to us as well.

So we come to the final three verses of chapter 4 today. Verses 16 to 18. Last week, we were looking at verses 13 to 15.

And we noticed, especially in verse 14, that what kept Paul going was his conviction that he would be raised from the dead, even if his gospel preaching led to him losing his life.

[8 : 19] And a fortnight ago, looking at verses 7 to 12, we saw that what encouraged Paul was his conviction that even if he and some of his fellow Christians were killed for their pains, it would mean life for their hearers.

Now here in verses 16 to 18, Paul introduces a new element. In these verses, he contrasts things that are temporary and passing with things that are eternal.

And his message is, there is no need to regret the passing of what cannot last when you possess what can never be taken from you. So let's take the three verses in turn.

First of all, let's look at verse 16, where Paul is saying that our bodies are decaying, but our inner life is being daily renewed.

And his message here is, don't worry about the decay of your physical frame, because for Christians, inside, we are being daily renewed. So here's verse 16.

[9 : 23] So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. Now we can be quite sure, I think, that the Apostle Paul was very conscious that his body was beginning to fall to pieces.

He would probably have been in his fifties at this stage when he wrote this letter. And in Paul's day, there was no penicillin, there was no paracetamol, no anesthetic, if you had to have a tooth pulled.

There wasn't even Rennes or Alka-Seltzer. Anybody who got to 50 plus in the first century was a tough old bird. But Paul had the additional problems of his physical sufferings, the whippings and beatings and stonings that he'd had time and again, which must have taken a great toll of his body.

He was well aware that, to use his words, his outer nature was wasting away. Now friends, you and I are well aware of this fact as well, aren't we?

Even if you're quite young, I can see folk here in their 20s, perhaps even a bit younger, even if you're only 30, you can't cover the 100 meters dash in the same way that you could when you were 18, can you?

[10 : 34] And if you're 60 or more, and I speak from experience, having just turned 60 a few weeks ago, if you're that sort of age, sometimes you feel like an elderly dog that hasn't the energy even to crunch its bone, don't you?

In fact, I find these days it's not very wise to look at my face in the mirror first thing in the morning. First thing. Because when I do, I sometimes wonder if what's looking back at me might have died in the night.

The truth is that once we've passed the age of about 21, it is downhill all the way as far as our bodies are concerned. And we know that, don't we? So how do we respond to the aging process?

I think perhaps we have two natural modes of response. The first is to pretend that it's not really happening at all. So we say to ourselves, I still feel like a young man inside.

And then perhaps when nobody's looking, we run up the stairs at home two at a time just to prove to ourselves that we still can. I sometimes do that. Aren't we silly old things?

[11 : 41] We're trying to pretend that it's not happening. Apparently, research has shown that people over the age of about 40 think of themselves on average as being 17 years younger than they really are.

So a typical 50-year-old will think of himself as being about 33. A typical 67-year-old will think of himself or herself as being about 50. So that's our first mode of reaction.

We pretend that it's not really happening. And even we help each other in that pretense. We meet each other and we say to each other, you're looking so fit and well. Even if you're not.

But our second mode of response is to stop pretending altogether and to get mournful and sad. We look at our bodies. We see how much they're getting saggy and baggy and lumpy and bumpy and wrinkly and crinkly.

And we look at young people with their supple and confident, swaggering way of walking about and their clear skins and their bright eyes. And we can feel rather sorry for ourselves.

[12 : 48] The novelist Daphne du Maurier once wrote a book that she called I'll Never Be Young Again. And we can share that sense of sadness.

Now in the face of this dual response, either pretending it's not happening or getting mournful and sad, the Apostle Paul has something to teach us. Look again at verse 16. Though our outer nature is wasting away, yes it is and we accept it, he's saying, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

Now he's writing here to Christian people about Christian people. To be an aging unbeliever is a thoroughly sad and poignant thing because life is drawing to a close without hope.

But to be a Christian facing old age is a completely different matter because in Paul's phrase, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. Just think of what is happening in the life of a Christian as the Christian gets older.

Yes, the body is wearing out, but not the person who lives inside the body. Inside, the Christian keeps on growing and keeps on getting stronger. As the years go by, the Christian gets to know the Lord better and better, a great deal better.

[14 : 04] The Christian becomes more useful in the Lord's work, becomes more confident that the gospel really is the truth, becomes more conformed and shaped to the likeness of the Lord Jesus, becomes more able to strengthen and encourage younger Christians.

So the outer person, the physical person, becomes weaker, but the inner person grows continually stronger. But it's so different for those who are not Christians because for them, life becomes increasingly restricted.

They can do less and less. Their horizons shrink. And the things that they've spent their life's energy doing seem to become frail and valueless.

In the words of Moses, in Psalm 90, they bring their years to an end with a sigh, almost with a groan. But for the Christian, death becomes the gateway to life.

So there's the first thing. Paul teaches us to live contentedly with the fact that our bodies are wasting away because the inner nature of the Christian is being renewed day after day.

[15 : 13] Now secondly, from verse 17, our afflictions, our sufferings, are momentary, but God's glory is eternal. Let me read verse 17 again.

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Now I think there is more than one slightly odd thing about this verse.

The first odd thing is that Paul should describe his present afflictions as slight and momentary. Perhaps you'd turn over with me a page to chapter 11.

Let me read to you a list here of Paul's slight momentary afflictions. I want to read from chapter 11 verse 23, partway through the verse.

With far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings and often near death, five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I was adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, the Jews, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

[16 : 50] And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Now, to go back to chapter 4, verse 17, my question is, how can Paul possibly describe those gruesome and protracted sufferings as slight and momentary?

Has the man taken leave of his senses? Is he perhaps deliberately understating the fierceness of his sufferings? A bit like, perhaps, the captain of a British warship in the Second World War, whose ship gets very badly holed and torpedoed and just manages to limp back into harbour.

And as he gets off the boat and onto the shore, somebody says to him, how was your voyage, Jack? And he replies, oh, well, we had a little trouble in the Atlantic. My ship isn't quite in tip-top form, but, you know, it was no more than a scratch.

You know the kind of thing. It's rather English. Is that English or Scottish? More English, isn't it? Sort of English sense of humour, understatement. So my question is, is Paul giving us an English-style bit of understatement like that?

Well, I don't think he is. Surely, in verse 17 here, he's telling us, without his tongue being anywhere near his cheek, that he really does regard his sufferings as slight and momentary.

[18 : 12] That is really how he sees them. But it's the rest of the verse that tells us why he sees them like that. It's because, with the eyes of faith, he can see up ahead of him the glory of God, which he knows he will soon share.

And what characterises the glory of God here in verse 17? Two things. Its eternal nature and its weight or solidness. In verse 17, the word eternal is being contrasted with the word momentary.

And the word weight or the idea of weight is being contrasted with the idea of slight. So Paul is saying, when you come to grasp something of the real nature of God's glory, the glory of which every Christian will one day share, when we come to see how solid it is, how substantial, and how it is indestructible and lasts forever, then by contrast, the sufferings of this world show themselves up for what they really are, slight and momentary.

And let's notice another odd thing here in verse 17. At the very end of the verse, there's that phrase, beyond all comparison. What Paul means is that we cannot look at the sufferings of this life and the glory of the world to come and compare them as though they somehow might balance each other out.

That's really a non-Christian way, a pagan way of looking at these things. A person who's not taught by the Bible might say, well, the sufferings that you get in this life will be balanced out by the peace that you get in the life to come.

[19 : 53] So if you've had a hundred kilos weight of suffering in this life, you'll get a hundred kilos weight of peace in the life hereafter. Now Paul says, no, no, no, that is not God's way of looking at these things.

For the Christian, our present afflictions are featherweight, bantamweight, but the glory to come is so heavy that you simply could not weigh it.

You simply cannot compare the two. Now the Lord has given the Apostle Paul a true perspective on all this and we must take Paul seriously for the simple reason that by any human standard his sufferings were so severe.

If Paul had had an easy life, we might doubt him. We might say, but Paul, brother, you haven't been at the sharp end. But we can't say that. We can't dismiss him. He has been at a sharper end than any of us.

This is a man who suffered greatly in this world. But the Lord has opened his eyes to the glory of the great future. He's looking at things from a vantage point that you and I have not yet reached.

[20 : 59] and he's able to tell us authoritatively that the weight of the glory to come is so tremendous that in the light of it our present troubles are truly slight and momentary.

Now isn't that a great encouragement to us friends today? I've no doubt that in a group as large as this there are some folk here today who are going through very real affliction.

There may be some here who feel that you're almost at the end of your tether. Well here is Paul. The Lord has given him a view of reality which we can't yet see from our present vantage point.

But let's believe the apostle. His words are here to teach us what is true. And if we're Christians we will one day see that our earthly afflictions although they were so painful at the time were truly slight and momentary when viewed in the light of God's glory which is utterly substantial weighty and lasts forever.

So there's Paul's second point. Our afflictions truly are momentary but God's glory is eternal and the glory of God is our destiny if we belong to Jesus Christ.

[22 : 17] Then third from verse 18. This world is passing away but God's home never passes away. Let me read the verse again.

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 or passing but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Now there's a rather important verb at the beginning of verse 18 the verb look as we look and I want to return to that verb in a moment but let's first notice the contrast that Paul draws between two realities which he calls the things that are seen and the things that are unseen.

Now what does he mean by these two phrases? The things that are seen must refer simply to the world that we live in and look at day after day.

We see a great deal don't we? Our eyes are a remarkable channel of communication to us. Most of us I guess have seen a great deal even since getting up out of bed this morning starting with the face in the mirror on the bathroom wall but since then what have we seen afterwards?

[23 : 29] Well I saw the kitchen that was my next sight and the dogs and the fridge and the cornflakes and later the pavements and the trees the trees now stripped of their leaves the traffic the river the bridges the trains Buchanan Street John Lewis's the Blue Lagoon Scotland's finest fish and chips and here we are in this building again using our eyes looking at the building and looking at each other and think of everything that our eyes have seen in the course of our lives so much that is interesting and wonderful each of us can remember when we have seen breathtakingly beautiful things isn't that right?

Beautiful things I can remember the very first time when I came to Scotland I was an English schoolboy aged 15 and I went to boarding school in the south of England and I had a good friend at school who lived in Newcastle upon Tyne and I was spending a few days with him in the Christmas holidays the very beginning of January it was there I was in Newcastle and my friend's father said to him and me two boys he said come on hop in the car I'll take you up into Scotland and I'll show you one or two things so we hopped in the car and we drove up we crossed the border at Carter Bar where it came up through Edinburgh and went up to Stirling and there I was a 15 year old boy we climbed up to Stirling Castle which as you know sits up on that bluff and we climbed right up onto the battlements the walls about the 2nd of January it was a clear beautiful calm frosty bright skied winter's day about 2 o'clock in the afternoon as I stood up on the walls there I looked up to the north and the west and I could see range upon range of beautiful snow covered hills and I said to myself

I must get to know this Scotland it was terrific I've never forgotten that moment it was absolutely beautiful now all of us have had moments like that haven't we when our breath has been taken away by the beautiful things that we have seen now towards the end of verse 18 Paul says the things that are seen including the Scottish mountains are transient passing they have a limited life the time is coming when they will all be swept away everything that is seen everything Paul is saying is transient and in the context of 2 Corinthians 4 Paul is also thinking of his sufferings being transient the whips and rods and stonings that have beaten his back the prison walls and the prison bars they too thank God are transient and if you and I are suffering let's remember that our sufferings too will not last forever the very thing that pains and troubles you most at the moment will not last forever and Paul contrasts the things that are seen with the things that are unseen now what does he mean by the things that are unseen he must mean the dwelling place of God himself that wonderful realm we sang about it in our hymn the wonderful realm that John the Apostle speaks about in the book of Revelation the new Jerusalem the eternal city where God's people are destined to dwell forever the place where God himself is seated on the throne with the Lord Jesus sitting at his right hand the realm where angels without number are praising God and where ransomed and rescued people without number are gloriously praising the Father and the Lord Jesus on whose glorious body the scars of crucifixion are still visible so that we shall never be able to forget the price with which we were ransomed now all these things are unseen to us at the moment we have earthly eyes which cannot look beyond this world at present but the fact that we can't see the eternal city is no reason to doubt its existence it's the Bible it's God speaking to us in the Bible who tells us about it and we can trust the Lord to tell us the truth so let's look at this verb in verse 18 we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen in that verb look

Paul is describing the focus of his mind his mind's expectation and joy he knows that the visible world around him is passing now he has to live in the real world he has to deal with the world he has to go to the shops he has to earn his living by making tents and leather goods he has to pay his taxes to the Roman government and all the time he's got to get on with his work of preaching and teaching and travelling visiting churches and appointing elders and collecting money booking tickets on Mediterranean vessels to get from A to B all that goes on in Paul's life because he has to sustain his life and his work but in his heart and mind he is already in another country there's a part of him which simply can't wait to be with the Lord as he puts it in Philippians chapter 1 my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better don't forget Paul had already met Jesus 20 or so years previously when the Lord Jesus had stopped him in his tracks on the Damascus road said to him

Saul Saul why are you persecuting me he'd met him then that meeting had been so dramatic and so terrifying that it had changed Paul's life utterly but now he wanted to be with his beloved master do you remember the extraordinary words that King David writes at the very end of Psalm 17 he says as for me speaking to God here as for me I shall behold your face in righteousness when I awake I shall be satisfied with your likeness there's no final satisfaction in this world but when we awake when all this is over we shall see his face and we shall be satisfied and for Paul it is the sure promise of what is coming at the end which keeps him going in the difficult present and this is why

[29 : 59] Paul is able to persevere as a Christian without losing heart look again at that lovely simple sentence at the beginning of verse 16 so we do not lose heart why not our bodies are decaying but our inner life is being daily renewed our afflictions are momentary but God's glory is eternal and substantial and this world is passing away but God's home never passes away so friends at moments in life when it seems so hard to keep going as a Christian this is one of the great chapters for us to turn to again and again let us pray together dear God our Father we thank you so much for helping Paul your servant to keep going and for showing him these things these reasons why it is possible to continue to live the Christian life not only with perseverance but with great joy too and we pray that you will write these lessons this message deep upon our hearts so that each of us here who belongs to you will be able to continue joyfully to the end of our life and look forward with eager expectation to the glory of the world to come and we ask it through our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ Amen