

HAVING AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE



Catalog No. 20201213
2 Corinthians 4:16-18
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December 13, 2020

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As some of you may have heard, I plan on retiring during the first part of the coming year—retiring as both the recovery pastor and as one of the elders. It has been a great honor and privilege serving here among you. However, a few years ago, I realized that I'm growing old. Perhaps some of you realized that about me a long time ago, but you've just been too polite to tell me.

On the upside, my eyesight appears to be getting worse at the same rate as the rest of me, so when I look in the mirror, I thankfully keep looking about the same. In fact, recently, after seeing my reflection in the mirror, I told my wife that she was looking at a man in his best year. I'm not sure why, but for some reason, she simply walked off shaking her head.

In any event, today, I've been asked to give a final sermon—a final sermon talking about any subject I feel led to talk about. That is, of course, a very broad assignment. However, as I was praying about it, a passage came to mind from the end of 2 Corinthians 4. It's a passage that has something to do with growing older, but, as I hope we'll see, it also applies to every believer, regardless of age.

The passage today is connected with an important question. Namely, it is connected to the question: how is it possible to go through difficult times? How is it possible to go through afflictions, hardships, and difficulties without losing heart and losing hope? How can we go through afflictions like the current pandemic, political polarization, racial tension, and economic upheaval without being overwhelmed and defeated?

The apostle Paul, of course, went through his own share of afflictions and difficulties, some of which he lists in 2 Corinthians 11. Those afflictions included beatings, floggings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, dangers, and sleepless nights. On top of that, his relationship with the Corinthian church was sometimes filled with agony and tears, and his opponents sought to discredit him and smear his reputation.

Thankfully, in 2 Corinthians, Paul not only tells us about his afflictions; he also tells us how he went through those afflictions. He tells us what made him tick, so to speak. Paul tells us the secret of how we can go through our own afflictions without losing heart and hope.

Paul's secret of going through afflictions without losing heart and losing hope has essentially two main components. There were two things that helped Paul to go through the difficulties and hardships he encountered. Today, we will only be talking about the second of those two things involved in not losing heart and losing hope.

However, because the two things are interwoven, I would at least like to mention the first component briefly. Namely, as Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 3:5, his sufficiency came from God and not from himself. Paul's sufficiency, his adequacy, his strength, and his power came not from himself but from God. He was able to go through the hardships of life because of his continual reliance on God and not on himself.

A while ago, I was reminded of this when I was taking a walk. I was taking a walk and praying about the myriad of things I had to do. In the midst of my prayer, I cried out to God and said, "God, I can't do all this! I can't do all of the things I need to do!" I didn't actually hear an audible voice, but, when I said, "God, I can't do all this!" I received a very strong impression from the Lord. The impression was basically, "Andy, you can't do any of this!" In my own strength and ability, I am incapable of doing anything that needs to be done.

Ultimately, this idea is at the heart of real Christianity. It is at the heart of what Ray Stedman called 'authentic Christianity.' We need to be relying on God on an ongoing moment-by-moment basis. As Jesus tells us, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5)—or at least nothing of any eternal value or consequence. And, conversely, as Paul tells us in Philippians, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). We can do everything with God and nothing without God.

That is part of the secret—part of the secret to what enabled Paul to endure afflictions, hardships, and difficulties. Paul had learned to rely on God. He had learned that his sufficiency came from God and not from himself.

Today, however, I want to focus primarily on the second part of the secret. I want to focus mainly on the second component involved in not losing heart and hope in the midst of affliction. Specifically, I want to focus on the idea of having an eternal perspective. I want to focus on the idea of seeing our lives in a larger context—in a context more extensive than the 50, 70, or 100 years we might have in this world. Moreover, as we gain an eternal perspective, I hope that it will help us to go through afflictions, just as it helped Paul.

As we look at this idea of having an eternal perspective, I would like to highlight four different aspects of having an eternal perspective.

The first of these aspects is referred to in first part of 2 Corinthians 4:16.

2 Corinthians 4:16a:

So we do not lose heart.

The verse begins with the word “So,” or, as some translations put it, “Therefore.” Based on what Paul has declared in the previous verses, he announces his conclusion. Based on what he has just said, he declares, “So we do not lose heart”—“Therefore we do not lose heart.”

The question is, what was Paul just talking about? What had he been talking about in the previous verses? The answer is: Paul was talking about the resurrection. He was talking about his faith in the resurrection. As he put it, “...knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (2 Corinthians 4:14).

This life is not all there is

The first aspect of having an eternal perspective is quite simply: this life is not all there is. This life is not the end of the story. As we say in the recovery ministry, “Your current situation is not your final destination.” Our lives in this world are simply part of a much larger journey—a journey that will one day take us to our eternal home with the Lord.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, “Well, that’s incredibly obvious. When we die, we go to heaven.” However, as obvious as this might be, I’ve discovered that afflictions can work against having an eternal perspective. Afflictions, especially prolonged afflictions, can rob us of our eternal perspective and cause us to become spiritually myopic. Afflictions can cause us to become spiritually near-sighted.

As Dan Westman, one of our pastors put it, “If you burn your tongue, it’s hard to think about much of anything else.” If you drop a big rock on your toe, it’s hard to look up and appreciate the sunset. On top of that, as we become spiritually myopic, we begin to lose heart. We begin to lose heart and hope.

Hope, as someone defined it, is the expectation of good. When we have hope, we expect something good to happen. Also, hope sustains us. Hope sustains us until the good we are expecting finally occurs. Conversely, when we lose hope—when we lose an expectation of good—we eventually lose both heart and hope.

No doubt there are some of you today who are losing heart and losing hope. Perhaps you are feeling overwhelmed after months of the pandemic and months filled with political divisiveness and animosity. My goal is certainly not to be dismissive of what you might be going through. It is not to make you feel guilty that you have lost heart and lost hope.

Instead, as former PBC pastor Rich Carlson said, “A pastor’s job is to help people to find God in the midst of whatever they’re going through.” In particular, a pastor’s job is to help people find the God of hope in the midst of whatever they’re going through. As Paul says in Romans 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

The truth is, as we believe in the God of hope, we will abound in hope. We will abound in hope, along with joy and peace. Indeed, hope is an integral part of believing. It is an integral part of faith. As we are told in Hebrews, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Paul had an eternal perspective. He had an assurance of his hope in the resurrection—an assurance in his hope that this world is not all there is. May God help us to have that same sure hope. May we have that same sure hope, and may we be able to declare along with Paul, “So we do not lose hope.”

Focus on the inner

2 Corinthians 4:16b:

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

The second aspect of having an eternal perspective involves focusing on the inner and not the outer. The outer, as Paul tells us, is wasting away. After years of being beaten, flogged, shipwrecked, and imprisoned, no doubt, Paul found it harder to travel around the Roman Empire. His physical body simply wasn't able to do what it once could.

In my case, I've found that there have been three stages in terms of my physical strength. Stage number one was, I was in shape. I was in good physical condition and could pretty much do whatever I wanted. In stage number two, I knew I could get in shape if I put forth some effort. I knew if I made a concerted effort to eat and exercise properly, I could still do pretty much whatever I wanted. In stage number three—the stage I'm in now—I'm just trying to hold onto what I have. I'm just trying to slow the decline as much as I can.

Ultimately, if we're relying on the outer—if we're relying on our physical strength to sustain us—we are fighting a losing battle. If we're relying on the outer to sustain us, eventually we will lose heart and lose hope. As someone observed, "You can diet and exercise all you want, but at the end of the day, the death rate is still 100%." At the end of the day, these physical bodies will waste away.

Consequently, if we are not going to lose heart and lose hope, we need to focus on the inner. We need to focus on our relationship with God. It is our relationship with God that will sustain us. It is our relationship with God that will sustain us during the afflictions and difficulties of this world—and, indeed, that will sustain us throughout all eternity.

As an example of someone who had an eternal perspective, as someone who focused on the inner, is Mary O. Much of Mary's life was filled with affliction. She was the sixth daughter in a Japanese farming family in Southern California, and her mother died shortly after giving birth. Her father didn't want another daughter, so Mary ended up in an orphanage suffering from neglect.

Eventually, Mary was adopted by a single Christian woman who took her to church, where she became

a Christian and developed her love for the violin. She even received a scholarship to study violin at the university. However, when World War II broke out, Mary was placed in a Japanese internment camp in Arizona. After the war, the university refused to honor the scholarship she had been awarded.

At the end of her life, Mary developed cancer and died after the disease had caused her to waste away to just skin and bones. During that final chapter of her life—when she was bed-ridden at home and receiving hospice care—my wife and I would visit her every two or three weeks. Those visits were truly amazing. It was truly amazing seeing her confidence and hearing her sense of humor and her optimism. She will always stand out to me as a person who had an eternal perspective. She went through incredible afflictions, essentially from birth until death, but she knew her life in this world was not all there was, and she remained focused on the inner, not the outer.

There is no comparison

2 Corinthians 4:17:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

The third aspect of having an eternal perspective involves realizing there is no comparison between the present affliction and future glory. Our present suffering is light and momentary, whereas our future glory is weighty and eternal. The picture Paul provides is of a balance scale on which two things are being weighed. On one side of the scale is our present affliction; on the other side is our future glory. The weight of our present affliction is like a feather, while the weight of our future glory is like a bar of gold. Indeed, the weight of our future glory is like the weight of all the gold in Fort Knox. There is no comparison.

This is an incredible thing for Paul to say, especially given the horrible afflictions he went through. He gives us a partial list of those afflictions in 2 Corinthians 11, where he says,

"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, 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” (2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

Not only did Paul see his afflictions as light, but he also saw them as momentary. From an eternal perspective, our 50, 70, or 100 years in this world are like the snap of the fingers or the blink of the eyes. Yes, it feels incredibly long to us now—and, again, I do not wish to be dismissive of the pain people are currently experiencing. However, as my wife says, “The days go slowly, but the years go quickly.” While we’re going through it, the pain passes slowly, but, looking back, our entire lives seem incredibly brief. As James says, referring to our lives in this world, “For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

Affliction is preparing glory

The fourth aspect of having an eternal perspective involves realizing that affliction is preparing glory. The pain we are going through now is preparing—producing, achieving—the glory that lies ahead. God is doing something glorious in and through our lives now, even though it may not feel like it at the moment.

Paul is not talking about salvation. He is not saying that our afflictions are somehow going to save us—that we are somehow earning our salvation. Salvation is strictly and completely by faith is Jesus’ sacrificial death for us. Rather, Paul is saying that when we are saved, Christ comes to dwell within us. He declares in Colossians, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). Christ comes to dwell within us, and he wants to do something incredibly glorious both in and through us.

Specifically, Jesus wants to make himself known. Jesus wants to make himself known in and through our lives—make himself known to a lost, broken, and hurting world that desperately needs him. As the old saying goes, the invisible God wants to make himself visible. He wants to make himself visible through each person who has placed his or her faith in him.

Often, God does something glorious through our afflictions. He makes himself known in a powerful way in life’s most painful moments. The supreme example of this is Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross. No greater affliction, no greater agony, will ever or can ever be experienced. And yet, it was precisely through Jesus’ affliction—through Jesus’ agony on the cross—that God’s glorious work of salvation was accomplished.

Clearly, Jesus had an eternal perspective. He knew his affliction was preparing or producing something glorious. That is why we are told in Hebrews, “For the joy that was set before him [Jesus], he endured the cross, despising its shame” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus’ eyes were fixed on the joy that was set before him. His eyes were not myopically fixated on the suffering of the moment. He knew something glorious was being accomplished, and his knowledge sustained him through the pain.

Similarly, this can be the case in everyone’s life, who is a follower of Jesus. I remember, for example, a man I met on a mission trip to India. The man was a Christian, and, one time, while he was sharing Jesus, a group of people threw gasoline on him and set him on fire. When I was talking with him, he pulled up his shirt and showed me the scars left by the burns. Incredibly, he told me, “I considered it an honor and a privilege to have suffered for Jesus! I couldn’t wait to get out of the hospital, so I could start telling people about him again!” The man’s faith was glorious—his glorious faith was bright in the midst of his suffering.

Again, by way of example, while I was on that same trip to India, I also met a man who had driven a small van around the country with some other Christians passing out Christian literature. At one stop, while they were in their van, they were attacked by a group of Hindu extremists—extremists who began pounding on the van with sticks, seeking to break into the van so they could kill them. The man I spoke with, who was the driver, tried to start the van, but unfortunately, it wouldn’t start.

At that point, the mob began pushing the van, attempting to make it roll off a cliff. However, the car was a stick shift, and, as some of you may know, when you are unable to start a stick shift, you have people push it so you can ‘pop the clutch’ and make the vehicle start. In this case, that is precisely what happened. As the extremists were attempting to push the van filled with Christians off the cliff, they actually provided the necessary momentum, allowing the driver to pop the clutch. The car started, and the Christians drove away and escaped.

Amazingly, a few years later, those same Christians went back and built a church on that very spot where they had almost been martyred. Again, what an incredible and glorious testimony of affliction accomplishing something glorious.

These are clearly extreme examples of God doing something glorious through affliction. And yet, I believe God is doing the same thing in each of our lives. He is

doing something eternally glorious in both the extreme and the less extreme afflictions of our lives. It's simply that we don't often realize it at the moment—and may not realize it until we get to heaven.

Have an eternal perspective

Our passage today ends with an exhortation encouraging us to have an eternal perspective. Paul says,

2 Corinthians 4:18:

...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.

Paul is exhorting his readers to keep their spiritual eyes fixed on things that are unseen, not on things that are seen. What exactly does he mean? How is it possible to see what is unseen?

The answer, of course, is through faith! Faith, as has often been said, is spiritual eyesight. Faith allows us to see what our physical senses cannot. Faith is what allows us to have an eternal perspective.

This is the kind of faith, for example, that Moses had. As it says in Hebrews, "By faith he [Moses] forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27 KJV). Moses endured his afflictions because his faith allowed him to see what was invisible. His eyes of faith allowed him to see what his physical eyes could not. It is also the kind of faith Paul had, and the kind of faith Paul is exhorting us to have as well.

May God help us to have spiritual eyesight genuinely and to have the eternal perspective spiritual eyesight provides. May God help us to see life through the eyes of faith, revealing what our physical eyes cannot perceive. Moreover, as we gain an eternal perspective, may we also draw our sufficiency from God. May we have an eternal perspective and draw our sufficiency from God, knowing this is the secret to going through times of affliction without losing heart and without losing hope.