

Why we do not lose heart

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 2nd September 2012.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Introduction

Paul opens these verses with the phrase, “Therefore we do not lose heart”. I think we can safely say that he wrote this because he knew that there was a danger for his readers that they would be tempted to lose heart, and to become discouraged. We can also safely say that the Holy Spirit inspired these words for our benefit, because God knows that we also are liable to be tempted to lose heart. There are many things which, if they are not counterbalanced by other considerations, may make the Christian lose heart: poor health, poverty, growing old, physical tiredness and weakness, worries for family members, bereavement, apparent lack of success in Christian work, persecution, and, above all, frustration with his or her own slowness in becoming like Christ. Whoever you are, whatever age you live in, whatever your background, whatever your outward circumstances, if you are a Christian, I think I can safely say that there will be times when you will be tempted to be discouraged. And the more keenly you seek to serve Christ, the more strongly you will be tempted to be discouraged. This being the case, all of us who are believers should have something to learn from what the apostle says here about how he does not lose heart. I hope that as we look at what he says we will be encouraged and strengthened, particularly at this juncture, the beginning of a new academic year, which is, in some respects, also the start of a new church year.

We can see from these verses four reasons that the apostle gives for not losing heart:

- Because we are being renewed inwardly by the Holy Spirit
- Because our troubles in this world are “light and momentary”
- Because God is using our troubles to add to our eternal glory
- Because we focus our attention on what is invisible rather than what is visible

Let us consider these things together.

1. We do not lose heart because we are being renewed inwardly

The apostle says in verse 16, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

Note the frank acknowledgement of our physical weakness and frailty that we find in this verse. Outwardly we are wasting away.

Every one of us who is more than 25 years old will have to acknowledge that he or she is, in various ways, “wasting away”. There are fewer hairs in our heads, what hairs are left are going grey, our muscles are growing weaker, we feel more tired, we are more prone to sickness, our memories are starting to fail, we get out of breath more quickly when we take exercise, our stamina is lower, our looks are fading. Day by day the effects of the curse are being seen more and more clearly in our bodies. As we grow older this decline will accelerate, until for many of us we will be unable to do more than shuffle a few feet with the aid of a zimmer frame, and hold only the briefest conversation before becoming exhausted. Finally we will be unable to do even that, and we will be on our death beds, gasping for our final breath.

The Bible paints a very stark picture of the frailty and mortality of man:

Psalm 90.5 - 6: “You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning — though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.”

Psalm 103.15 – 17: “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

Isaiah 40.6 – 8: “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall.”

Our bodies are under the sentence of death, on account of the Fall. Our spirits have been redeemed, but the redemption of the body is awaiting the resurrection. This truth, taken on its own, would make any one of us discouraged. Some people try to forget their frailty, and have plastic surgery to make themselves look younger. A friend of mine recently posted up on the internet a strange photograph of a 90 year old woman who had had plastic surgery and looked 40 years old. But the trouble is, the woman is still 90 years old, and she will soon succumb to the illnesses and frailties that 90 year old people generally fall prey to. Some “whistle in the dark” pretending that they are as young and as strong as ever. But as Christians we do not need to have plastic surgery or whistle in the dark. We can face our looming old age and frailty with confidence and peace. How? Because, says the apostle, “inwardly we are being renewed day by day”.

To understand what he is saying we need to understand the Biblical view of man. We have an outward person, the body. This outward person is subject to the fall and will finally die and rest in the grave or be cremated, waiting the resurrection, and then will be gloriously raised and will be perfectly restored to something vastly better than was the case before. The outward, physical, man is all that the unbeliever, in most cases, is aware of. So as his body wastes away he has no resources to withstand the sense of gloom and discouragement that he feels. But the Christian knows that he has an inner man, a soul, which is his seat of personality, and which relates with God. And whereas the unbeliever is dead spiritually and knows nothing of the life of God, the true believer has been made alive to God and knows the life of the Holy Spirit pulsating through him. “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.” Ephesians 2.4 – 5. This is what is spoken of when the Bible talks of the Christian as having been “born again”. And this is not just a one-off injection of life, which then, like the life of the body starts to fade and die away. This is eternal life, a life which once started in a person cannot be stopped. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11.25 – 26). I once had a friend who said on the basis of these verses that he would never see physical death. Jesus is not saying that

the person who believes in him will never physically die. What he is saying is that the spiritual life that he gives to his people is so strong and so powerful that even death cannot kill it off.

So here is the great comfort that the Christian can hold onto, even in the face of physical weakness and looming death: God has placed his Spirit in him, and that Spirit is continuing renewing and refreshing his soul. This process will continue right through death and beyond into the "intermediate state" when we will be in paradise with the Lord, and then beyond that to the resurrection of the body when our renewed and vibrant souls will be reunited with glorious rejuvenated bodies which will never again grow tired or weary, or be prone to sickness.

So, if you are a Christian, do not loose heart. You may be wasting away. You may have some hospital appointment looming over you, and you may be dreading what the consultant will say about your health. There may be some lump that has come up, and you dare not see the doctor about it. But do not fear. As your body wastes away, you are being, and will continue to be, inwardly renewed day by day in your soul, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Who is doing this renewal? God is. Does this mean that we can just sit back and let God renew us inwardly? No. As long as we have our faculties we should do what we can to strengthen the life of the Holy Spirit in us, by prayer, reading our Bibles, listening to God's word being preached and sharing fellowship with other believers. But we can have assurance that as our faculties fail, God will carry us through, continuing to renew us and strengthen us in our inner man, and bring us safely into his eternal kingdom.

2. We do not get discouraged because our troubles are "light and momentary"

Paul says in verse 17, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

You might say, "Well that is all very well, for Paul. Maybe his troubles were light and momentary. But my troubles are really heavy, and they just seem to go on and on."

However, just a cursory glance through this letter will show us that Paul knew every bit as much about suffering about any one of us. Let us look at some

examples together.

Chapter 1 verses 8 and 9: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Chapter 4, verses 8 – 11: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body."

Chapter 6, verses 4 – 10: "As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Chapter 11.24 – 29: "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?"

So Paul was no stranger to suffering. He suffered much more than any of us is

ever likely to suffer. Yet he called his suffering “light and momentary”. How could he do so? Because he was seeing his suffering in the light of eternity. If you put all your suffering on one side, as it were, of the scales, and put the glory that you will enjoy on the other side, all the suffering of your life, taken all together, becomes virtually insignificant in the light of the massive “weight of glory” on the other side.

Paul says something similar in Romans 8, verse 18: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Try to conceive of how unspeakably wonderful it will be at the resurrection. We will have wonderful new bodies which will be strong and healthy and without any pain; we will be surrounded by a wonderful renewed creation which is breathtakingly beautiful and completely devoid of any of the effects of the Fall; we shall be in perfect fellowship with all of God’s people, and there will be no arguments or quarrels to damage this in any way; we will be totally free from temptation and sin; and best of all, we will see our glorious Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, face to face, and have perfect and unbroken communion with the Father. After just a few minutes in glory we will say to ourselves, “Why did I ever moan about lot while I was on earth? If only I had known how wonderful this would be, I would never have felt sorry for myself!”

And this will experience of glory at the resurrection never “perish, spoil or fade” (1 Peter 1.4). Every day will be better than the day before. And it will continue for millions and millions of years, time without end. We will never grow tired of glory or get bored. This is why the apostle can say that our present troubles are “momentary”. Even if the troubles you are currently experiencing last for all the rest of your life, when you get to glory that will seem like just a flash in comparison with the unending happiness you will experience.

So, if you are a Christian, lean to think of your troubles, grievous though they may be, as “light and momentary” in the light of the eternal glory that is going to be yours at the resurrection.

3. We do not get discouraged because our troubles contribute to our glory

Listen again to what the apostle says in verse 17, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Not only are our troubles “light and momentary” in the light of the glory of the

resurrection, but they are also doing something for us. They are adding to that glory.

We need to be clear that salvation is entirely by grace. As Christians we do not in any way earn our place in heaven. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast." (Ephesians 2.8 – 9).

But having been saved, Scripture is clear that if we serve God as we should, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will add to the glory we will know at the resurrection. Jesus talked in the Sermon on the Mount about how our Father in heaven will reward us if we serve him in the right way. He said that when we give we should do so privately, without publicising our gifts to others, and then "your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Mathew 6.4). When we have our private devotions we should go into our room and close the door. Then, he said, "your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:6). Again, when we fast, we should not let this be obvious to others, and then "Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:13). To some extent our reward may be in this life, through experiencing blessing and answered prayer, but there is a clear implication of reward in the life to come. He also said, as regards our use of money, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." Matthew 6.19 - 20. The apostle Paul also in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 says that each one of us needs to be careful about how we build our work for God. Our work will be tested with fire on the final day. The person who has built with "wood, hay or straw" will see his work burned up, though he himself will be saved, as through fire. The person who has built using "gold, silver, costly stones" will "receive his reward". (1 Corinthians 3.10 – 15).

From what the apostle says here, it is clear that going through suffering also adds to the reward that we will get in heaven, especially if we respond to our suffering in the right way. Like private giving to the poor, private prayer, and fasting, how you respond to the trials in your life will be largely a very private matter between you and God, as you quietly rejoice in him in your afflictions and continue to trust him and give glory to him. Apart from the fact that people will not hear you moaning and complaining, very few other people, apart from perhaps your immediate family, will know the monumental struggle you are

going through. But God knows. And all those battles you go through, and all the times when you are tempted to collapse into self-pity and anger against God, and you overcome, are noted by him, and will be richly rewarded by him on that day.

The world says, and many misguided Christians also say, that those who suffer must have displeased God in some way, or be lacking in faith, or in some way be immature and unspiritual Christians. The opposite may well be the case in many instances: that God looks down from heaven and sees a faithful believer, one who, like Job, is righteous in many of his ways, and reliable in his faith. God knows that this is a person of such a calibre that he can trust this person to handle suffering in the right way. God sends affliction, not because he is displeased with his servant, but because he is pleased with him and loves him, and wants to give him the privilege of serving God by going through the furnace of affliction, so that he can be rewarded in glory with a special reward.

So if you are going through the mill at the present time do not lose heart. These trials that you are going through are God's way of blessing you and increasing your spiritual treasure for the resurrection. Be thankful to God that he has so ruled over your life in perfect wisdom that you should go through these difficulties. Be patient in your affliction. Trust God. Rejoice in him. Look to the reward that will be yours on the final day if you respond to the affliction in the way that God would have you to respond.

4. We do not lose heart because we focus our attention on what is invisible rather than on what is visible

Note what the apostle says in verse 18: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

When he says "we fix our eyes" clearly he means to say, "we fix our attention on", because you cannot literally fix eyes on things that are invisible. And what are the things that are "unseen" that he fixes his attention on? Clearly things to do with God, who is unseen. He dwells on God himself, and his attributes: his majesty; his sovereignty; his almighty power; his perfect knowledge and wisdom; his immortality; his holiness; his righteousness, his love and his unchanging nature. As well as God, he fixes his attention on spiritual blessings which emanate from God, which are also, at the present time, largely unseen:

the gift of the Holy Spirit, communion with God, fellowship with believers, and above all, the glory that will be ours at the resurrection.

By contrast, he says that he does not fix his eyes on what he has seen. He does not focus his attention on either the blessings or the troubles of this world. Of course we cannot and should not ignore these things. If we see a beautiful sunset, of course we marvel at it and rejoice in the glory of God's creation. And if we suffer a bereavement, of course we are sad at the loss of the loved one. But, says the apostle, we do not fix our eyes on these things. We do not dwell on them. We dwell rather on the things that are invisible.

And he gives the reason: because the things that are seen are temporary, whereas the things that are unseen are eternal. Whatever blessings you have now, and whatever troubles you may have, they will not last. They will soon fly away. But the knowledge of God, and the spiritual blessings that we have in him, never pass, and will only go on and on increasing.

Clearly Paul says he fixes his eyes on what is unseen rather than on what is seen, because he wants his readers, and the Holy Spirit wants us, to learn to do the same. This takes a great deal of mental discipline and faith. It is so much easier to be completely preoccupied with the things of this world, whether they are good or bad for us, for the very reason that we can see, smell, hear, touch and taste these things. They immediately hit our senses, whereas spiritual things we can only "see" by faith. So we have to make a determined effort not to take too much notice of what our senses tell us, and instead to be guided in our thinking by what faith teaches us. We need to be dominated by the Word of God, rather than by what we might otherwise infer from our present experience.

Put yourself in Job's position. In quick succession you learn that all your wealth has been taken away from you, and all your servants, and that you have lost all your children. What will your senses be telling you? That your life is hopeless. That God does not love you. That you have no reason to live. But he did not respond in that way. He responded by faith. He looked to the things that are invisible. He worshipped God, and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1.21). He also said, later on, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes — I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"

(Job 19.25 – 27). He had many questions. There were many things he did not understand. But this was his fundamental position. He looked to what was unseen rather than what was seen.

This is also what sustained the Old Testament saints. This is how they were prepared to suffer for God's sake. Abraham left the comfort of his home in Babylon, and was willing to live in tents for the rest of his life, a stranger in the land that one day would be his, because "he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11.10). Moses preferred to suffer disgrace among the people of God, rather than to continue living in comfort in Pharaoh's palace. "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Hebrews 11.26).

These things are reported in Scripture that we might learn to do the same. We are called exercise the same faith as the Old Testament saints, to "live by faith, and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5.7).

Conclusion

We have seen that there are powerful reasons for the Christian not lose heart, even if we experience great suffering in this world. We may indeed be wasting away outwardly, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Our troubles are "light and momentary" in comparison with the eternal glory we shall receive. Moreover, our troubles are serving to add to that glory, if we respond to them in the way that God would have us respond. Furthermore, we can and should fix our attention on things that are unseen, the vast spiritual blessings we have in Christ, and not on what is seen. Let all of us who are believers heed this message, and say "no" to discouragement, and learn to fix our attention on spiritual things, and find our encouragement there.

What we have learned today can be true for every Christian. But only for the Christian. So before we close I must ask you this question: are you a Christian? Are you born again? If not, then you are a stranger to these comforting thoughts. Rather than having heaven to look forward to, you have the reality of hell to face. But God has provided a Saviour for you sins, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died so that anyone who trusts in him can receive eternal life. Come to him. Let him wash your sins away. Receive from him the eternal life that is available to you. Then you will be able to know in your life the comfort in

affliction that we have talked about this morning.

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