

The Dream of Glory

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

This is a continuation of the message from last week where we looked at the first part of 2 Corinthians 4 and some of Paul's reasons for why he didn't lose heart in gospel ministry even though he faced tremendous hardship, persecution and suffering. We saw that he didn't lose heart because of the awesome importance of gospel ministry, because of the awesome mercy God showed him when he called him into that ministry, and because he knew there were things happening in the spiritual realm beyond his proclamation of the gospel that were leading people to both accept or reject it.

So these things helped Paul and encouraged him to keep going, and they can help us as well. But there's another reason to not lose heart in 2 Corinthians 4 and I think this one really knocks it out of the park. Our passage today is a huge encouragement for weary Christians, whether you're weary from the turmoil going on in our nation and world, or in your personal life, or in your personal efforts to fight against sin, or as you face opposition to the gospel. It's been one of my go-to passages that I need often to keep my eyes, purpose, and priority in the right place. It serves the much-needed purpose of keeping our eyes on the prize so we keep moving forward.

There are a lot of things in life that keep us pushing through pain and misery. Last Friday, when it was 97 degrees, I spent all day outside, working in the heat. The sweat was just pouring off my body. I was so hot that I had to spray my head with cold water at least four times to cool down and try to avoid overheating. It was miserable. Why would I keep working? Well, I was planting food plots! It was the dream of great hunting memories for me and my kids that kept me going. (oh, and providing for the family)

Sounds kind of ridiculous, but we do that kind of stuff all the time! You might not plant food plots in sweltering heat, but I bet you push through suffering for other reasons. The Olympics are full of these kinds of stories. Athletes enduring years of grueling training to try to be the best in the world. We endure and push forward because we have hopes and dreams of good things for ourselves and our families and we know that we're going to have to go through some pain to get there.

Today we'll see the one hope and dream that surpasses them all, for those who are children of God, and that dream needs to be on our minds and become a key motivator for us in pressing onward in gospel ministry, especially when we're weary and facing persecution and hardship. Paul writes about this dream often and our text for today is one of the best.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

One of the things I don't really like about gospel ministry is that God often uses suffering and hardship to make it more fruitful. Jesus said this in John 12:24 about his own suffering: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*" God used the suffering of our Savior to begin a great spiritual harvest on earth and as his followers continue to gather that harvest, God continues to use suffering to do it.

Read Col. 1:24-29

In describing his gospel ministry, Paul writes about why God uses suffering to spread the gospel. It's the perseverance of the saints in the mission through suffering and persecution that actually manifests or displays the life of Christ to the unbelieving world.

Paul points out that as Christ's gospel messengers, we are carrying around the treasure of the gospel wherever we go. But instead of being an armored security truck that's unbreakable, we're just normal clay jars like everyone else. We're vulnerable, weak, and able to experience pain and suffering. God gives us all the spiritual protection we need, but he doesn't turn us into

untouchable gospel-bearing superheroes. We can be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down.

But what Paul says is that when he and his team were, they still weren't crushed, or driven to despair, or forsaken, or destroyed. And because of that, their perseverance in ongoing ministry said something to the unbelieving world... It said that the power in them didn't belong to them, it belonged to God. It said there was something deeper going on than just another group of people trying to spread another philosophy or ideology.

It's when we're given over to death (which is suffering and persecution) for the sake of Jesus that the life of Jesus is clearly seen in us. And God uses that manifestation of the life of Jesus to bring about his new life in other people. The suffering of the ministers of the gospel is what God often uses to bring about spiritual regeneration in other people.

How do you like that? I kind of wish God would just use other ways to bring sinners to repentance instead of the suffering of his messengers. He does use other things, but it's clear that he often ordains our suffering in gospel ministry (and perseverance through it) to be the thing that opens people's hearts to the gospel.

What are we supposed to do with that? Are we supposed to just grin and bear it and fulfill our duty? "Christ is worthy to suffer for, and he suffered for me, so shouldn't I just be willing to suffer as a good soldier?" Well, the answer is yes, we should be willing, but there's far more to it than that. God doesn't just leave us with suffering for the sake of duty. He calls us to suffer, but then he follows that up by promising a reward that will make it all worth it. And that's where Paul goes next. Yes, they were always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus would be manifested in their mortal flesh, but they also believed in something beyond just doing their duty...

Read 2 Corinthians 4:13-15.

¹³ 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, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us

with you into his presence. ¹⁵ *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.*

This begins to give you the vision in Paul's mind that kept him going in times of suffering for the gospel. Paul and his team were more than willing to go through suffering for the sake of gospel ministry because they believed that *"he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence."* They believed in the resurrection and that it would be glorious. And when they thought about it, they thought about all the joy and thanksgiving there would be by all of those they suffered for and reached with the gospel.

Their suffering wasn't just an act of duty, it was an investment in their hopes and dreams of the joy and glory of the resurrection. As God's grace extended to more and more people through their suffering and those people put their faith in Christ and experienced the life of Christ, Paul knew it would result in more and more thanksgiving, joy, and celebration at the resurrection, to the glory of God. That's a lot better than a gold medal or a fun hunting season. So Paul was motivated to persevere by the reward he knew was ahead.

He expresses this same desire in Philippians 3:8-11: *"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."*

It was this vision of the resurrection and the glory and joy of heaven that motivated Paul in gospel ministry and kept him going when times got tough. He willingly suffered for the sake of the eternal reward.

He closes chapter 4 with a summary of these truths and great encouragement for us today...

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 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.

These are the verses you should have memorized or posted somewhere to give you a burst of encouragement when you're suffering in gospel ministry. The afflictions we face for spreading the good news about Jesus are light and momentary compared to the eternal weight of glory they are preparing for us – a glory beyond all comparison to be experienced at the resurrection when we gather together with all the saints, including those in whom God used our suffering to reach.

So, as Paul says, we don't focus on the suffering, because it will pass. But we keep our eyes on the hope and dream of the glory of our eternal inheritance, that will last forever and ever.