

300 Feet of String

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Preacher: Paul MacDonald

[0:00] Hi. Hello. I want to welcome Paul McDonald from the Spokane Church.

! I'm just waiting to hear what he has to say about some strength.

Yeah, me too. Welcome Paul McDonald. Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I know. Yeah, thank you. Good morning. It's nice to be here.

Thank you for having us. It's been a couple of years since we've been here, but we always enjoy being in this beautiful part of the state up in the mountains.

The air is a little bit clearer here than where we've come from. So, I just really appreciate the honor and the privilege it is to be with you. We don't know each other really well, and so I'm hoping that you won't think a lot less of me when I tell you what I'm about to tell you, because you could walk away from this thinking, that guy's a real dummy.

[1:18] But years ago, we visited Washington, D.C., and it was the first time that I had, I think you had been there before, but it was the first time that I had been in Washington, D.C., and really enjoyed it.

And we spent a day in the city, you know, traveling and seeing the sites and taking it all in. And then the next day, my lovely wife, Deborah, had things that she had to do.

We were out there for a celebration, and she was going to help with that party. But we were traveling with a really close friend of ours, and that friend and I went back into Washington, D.C. from where we were staying and spent another day, because there's just so much to see. And one of the things that's really incredible are the Smithsonian museums, right?

If you haven't been there, you know, we hear about the Smithsonian. But as it turns out, there are a number of different museums that all fall under the umbrella of the Smithsonian. And one of the places that we visited was the Smithsonian Museum of American History. Fascinating.

My wife will tell you that I'm one of those guys that, when I go to a museum, I want to stop and read every little thing. It drives her crazy, because she just wants to shoot through as fast as she possibly can. And I want to read every little thing. So I was just having a great time. But at a certain point, we walked around the corner into a real dark room. And back behind glass was this really large American flag. And you could tell it was old. And I looked at it, there's sort of a hush that fell over everybody. And this is where I tipped my hand at not being the sharpest tool in the shed. I said, what is this flag? And somebody next to me said, well, this is the Star Spangled Banner.

[3:10] And I said, no, no, yeah, I know. I mean, I understand it. It's an American flag. But like, what's this flag? What's... And they looked at me like I was an insane person and said, it's the Star Spangled Banner. It's the flag. That's the flag that flew over Fort McHenry.

That's the flag that Francis Scott Key looked up the next morning and saw flying over the fort. That's the... I said, that's the flag? I had no idea. I mean, it looked old, but I didn't think that that... I mean, that was in 1812, right? And then I joined everybody else with just this hush. I was just blown away. I had no idea that that flag still existed, that it was there and that you could see it. And the reverence in the room was just palpable. It was a shift in perspective.

It didn't change anything about the facts of the matter. It just changed my perspective. And my perspective being changed really altered the way I felt about what we were doing there and what we were seeing. I think that's what the Bible often calls us to, is to change our perspective, to shift our perspective. And that's what I want to look at today as you turn in your Bible to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. I'm going to look at this together. And I'm going to start in verse 7 here.

2 Corinthians 4, 7. I know I'm getting older because I have to wear reading glasses more and more. Getting old stinks. Can I get an amen? Yeah.

2 Corinthians 4 chapter 4 verse 7. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. Now, if we're savvy as good Bible students, we ought to stop right there and say, wait, what treasure? Right? Remember, this is a letter. I'm so thankful for the people who, way back when, broke our scriptures into chapters and verses. It's really helpful for us to be able to find things. And moreover, they've broken this into sections. In my Bible, this section starts with treasures in jars of clay. But I think if we're not careful, we might take this and section it out and say, here's Paul writing this section. Remember, what the Apostle Paul was doing when he wrote this is writing a letter. You realize that? He's writing a letter to a church, just like this one, that happened to be meeting in the city of Corinth.

[5 : 59] This is the second letter that we have. That's why we call it 2 Corinthians. There are some Bible scholars that say that there may have been more letters that if you really pick up on some of the subtle clues that are there and read between the lines, that this may have even been the fourth letter that Paul wrote to the church. What I'm confident in is that God gave us the letters that he wanted us to have in our scripture, right? So we've got that. But this is at least the second letter that Paul has written to this church in Corinth. And so he's not, listen, when you write a letter, does anybody still write letters? Actual letters? You do? Good for you. Yeah, there's some letter writers. Or when you write an email, we don't say, here's chapter one, verse one of my letter.

Right? Nobody does that. Paul wouldn't have done that either. And so sometimes this breaking up into sections, I think can almost hinder our Bible study. And so when we see we have this treasure, and I know most of you know what the answer is, but we can back up to the section previous. Now, part of what Paul is doing in this letter is he is, just to back up even further, the first letter he wrote to the Corinthians had some hard stuff in it. The church in Corinth had some really serious problems. They were dealing with some real particular sins in their church where Paul needed to come in, some may have said heavy-handedly even, but with his authority and say, hey, you've got to clear this up.

This is out of line. You need to fix this in your church. And one of the things that becomes clear in this letter is that Paul understands that they may have some harsh feelings about him, or they may be concerned that he has harsh feelings about them. And so the tone and the tenor of this letter has a lot of this sense of, well, you know how it is, those of you who have been parents, when you need to discipline a child, right? But then you turn around and you say, now listen, now I want to have a moment of gentleness with this child, of tenderness, and make sure they understand, I don't dislike them, you know, I still love them. And so Paul takes a lot of that angle here. But the other thing that's happening during this time is there are a lot of false teachers who have come into the city of Corinth. And part of what they're teaching is falsely about Paul himself and about his ministry. They're trying to discredit Paul. And part of the way that they're trying to discredit Paul, we're going to see this in a couple of verses here, is by saying, look at how much trouble he's in. The guy's always in jail. He's been beaten. He's been, he's been, you know, all these things keep happening to him. Doesn't that delegitimize what, what he's saying and who he is? And Paul's pushing back against that. He's really defending his ministry in this letter in part. And so in the section previous, he is addressing that partly, and he's addressing who he is in the ministry that he has. But in the end of this, in verse six, he says, for God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

Christ. Hallelujah. And so that's the treasure. So just because there's a new section when he says, so this treasure though, this light that God has shown forth, we have this in jars of clay.

I'm not a potter, but I know enough to know that no matter what sort of pottery or ceramics or stoneware, whether it's fine china or, or really rustic stoneware, it's somewhat brittle, right? You can't just toss that stuff around and drop it on the floor. It'll break. It's fragile. And the thinking here is that what Paul may have in mind is, is something even more brittle and less substantial.

[10 : 31] And it's very cheapest when you just take clay and you dig some clay out of the earth and you form it into a jar or some sort of a vessel, you stick it in an oven, you fire it, you put it in a kiln, dry it out. And then you don't worry about glazing it or painting it or decorate that. That's just it.

It's a very rough vessel that could just be used in a household of their day to maybe store some things in a very utilitarian. And it's thought that that's especially what Paul has in mind, this especially fragile clay jar. And he says, that's, that's us. That's you and I, we have this incredible power, this incredible light, but it's in these extremely fragile jars.

My wife and I were just talking this morning about how more fragile we feel every year. You know, some of us feel that, don't we? These jars of clay. And he says, can you, can you believe that we have this treasure in jars of clay? But he says, there's a good reason for that. It's in order to show the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. If you've ever to take an incredibly bright light and stick it in one of these real fragile jars, everybody would understand it's not the jar that's shining. It's the light that's inside it, right? And he says, this is, this is what this shows. And then he goes on to talk about some, well, frankly, some hard things in verse eight.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Now going back to where Paul is coming from here, part of what he's doing is he's defending his ministry. And so where he starts is sort of talking very personally about himself and his fellow apostles as apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he's saying, this is, this is where we're afflicted, but there's going to be this contrast, these couplets that he mentions together. We're afflicted in every way, but not crushed.

[12:48] You see what he's saying? In, in every way we were, we're pushed against, sickened almost. That word afflicted can, can mean to have an illness even. We're afflicted in every way.

He doesn't try to minimize that fact. However, he says, we're not crushed. You understand? This next couplet, we're perplexed, but not driven to despair. I really like that. When you look at this in the original Greek, the Greek words there are, are very, very similar words. They're really the same root. It's *aporumenoi* is the first word. And then the second word is *ex-aporumenoi*.

And what they basically mean, the first word sort of means, uh, to be, to be in despair. But that second one with the X at the beginning of it in Greek means to be completely in despair. In other words, what he's saying is we're despairing, but we're not completely despairing. Isn't that beautiful? I love that. I just love that little play on words there that he does. So we're afflicted in every way, but we're not crushed. We're perplexed. My translation says we're in despair, but we're not driven to despair. We're not completely despairing. We're persecuted. You know what it means to be persecuted, right? Jesus promised his followers. They would be persecuted. In fact, well, I'm going to get myself in trouble, but I think, uh, to have the minimal persecution that we have enjoyed in our country makes us the oddballs as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus promised his fault, you're going to be persecuted, right? It's going to happen. And Paul says here, sure enough, yeah, we're persecuted, but you see what he says, but we're not forsaken. What's that mean to be forsaken? Given up on. I like that. Left alone. Yeah. So we're persecuted, but we're not given up on. We're not left alone here. And then he says, struck down, but not destroyed. As if, you know, you see somebody get knocked down, but they're still able to get back up. Struck down, but not destroyed. He says these four couplets, and he doesn't minimize the fact that there is affliction, there is suffering. There is despair. There is this persecution. And yet this is all happening with the backdrop of the Lord Jesus Christ walking alongside. He says in verse 10, always carrying in the body, the death of Jesus. So that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

Paul's made this point elsewhere that, that we have this, uh, identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in his death, his suffering is his, his crucifixion. And, and Paul says, I'm proud of that.

[16:26] I love that. Every time that I suffer for Jesus Christ, I am partaking in his death. And to me, that's a beautiful thing. Right. And so in answer to some of these critics who would say, look at this Paul character, look at this guy, he's been arrested and beaten and you can't trust this guy. I mean, if God was really for him and Paul says, no, no, no, no, no, no, you don't understand.

It is a, uh, a thrill for me, a privilege for me to partake in any small way of what my Lord Jesus Christ has. But then he follows that up by saying, but we have his life in us. Hallelujah.

It's not just that suffering. It's not just that death. It says the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. And in verse 11, he sort of restates this. Whenever Paul wants to say something really important, he really wants to drive home. You'll notice this. He often states it a couple of times using slightly different words, but he says roughly the same thing here for we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus's sake. So that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. And here that, that us is, uh, sort of the universal us. Death is at work in us. That is humanity. You know, again, we, we see it if for no other way, just by the fact that we're aging and, and, and seeing things happen around us, that that's always there. All of us are experiencing death. And yet for those of you who are followers of Jesus Christ, there's this life. Yeah. I love this. It's so good.

And then he says in verse 13, since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what has been written, I believed. And so I spoke and we also believe. And so we also speak. This is really you,

most of you probably have a footnote there that points back to Psalm 116. And I hope you'll be okay if we turn back to this, cause this is, this is such a great, uh, call out. And of course we understand the apostle Paul is writing this under the inspiration of the Holy spirit. Uh, he's not just a clever man in and of himself, although he was very well educated, but this call out back to Psalm 116 is brilliant. I'm going to start at the beginning of Psalm 116. Some of you will recognize this passage. I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy because he inclined his ear to me. Therefore, I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me. The pangs of death laid hold on me. I suffered distress and anguish. Do you see the parallels here between what Paul has just been talking about in second Corinthians? You see why he, he points back to this passage that would have been so well known. The pangs of death laid hold on me. I suffered distress and anguish. Then verse four, I called on the name of the Lord. Oh Lord, I pray, deliver my soul.

[20:17] Gracious is the Lord and righteous. Our God is merciful. The Lord preserves the simple. When I was brought low, he saved me. Return. Oh, my soul to your rest for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you for you have delivered my soul from death. My eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. And then here is the specific passages quoted by the apostle Paul. I believed even when I spoke, I am greatly afflicted. You see what the psalmist is writing there is essentially I really was afflicted. He's not looking back in hindsight and saying, as it turns out, it really wasn't so bad. He says, no, it was bad. It was horrible. I really believed it when I said it. When I cried out to the Lord, I believed this because I was in distress.

I believed it when I spoke. I said in my alarm, all mankind are liars. What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. Isn't that beautiful?

He writes, I felt that reference to Sheol. I mean, he's sort of literally saying, I had one foot in the grave. That's how I felt. I felt like I was just this far from death. And then he rescued me.

When I cried out and said I was afflicted, I meant it. I believed it. I don't look back now and say, no, it didn't really happen. It did happen. However, the Lord saved me and rescued me. And Paul echoes this thought as he writes this letter to the Corinthians and says, it's the same thing. We are hard pressed. We are persecuted. We are afflicted. Let's not pretend that's not the case. However, praise be to God, we've got a Lord and Savior who is right there with us.

[23:03] We are struck down, but not destroyed. We are despairing, but not like completely despairing.

I love the honesty on display here. But it's more than just being honest about it. There's this hope. And here's what I really want to get to. And I hope you're not saying, well, if you really wanted to get to this, why didn't you just start there? We could all have been home by now. We have until like one o'clock, right? Is that okay?

Awkward laughter. Verse 14. Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

This was a big part of what Paul wrote in his first letter that we have to the Corinthians. This idea of the resurrection. He and the other apostles hit this frequently.

[24:22] We know that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And if he did that, then we have confidence, we have a promise that he will also raise us from the dead. The Bible teaches in every way a bodily, physically resurrection from the dead. This goes all the way back to the Old Testament. When the Jews talked about the resurrection that was to come, you remember the passage in Ezekiel with that valley of dry bones and God speaks to them and those bones come together and sinews pull them together and muscles put on them. It's bodily resurrection. They didn't have this idea of sort of a spiritual, you know, floating around like ghosts in heaven playing harps, you know. They had in mind a physical resurrection as the Lord Jesus Christ was physically, bodily resurrected and people reached out and touched him and ate with him and sat with him and walked with him. And he says, because we know that happened to Jesus Christ, we know that is our future too.

Hallelujah. Oh, that's good. Ah, that's good. Even in the midst of this suffering. And even as he says that we're, we're beat down, but, but not completely destroyed. And yet he goes on to say, there's more coming. Yeah. There's even more coming.

Verse 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. So we do not lose heart. Here's the crux. Here's the real

linchpin here. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away. Here again, he doesn't try to dismiss this. He doesn't say, that's not a big deal. He says, no, it is a big deal. Our outer self is indeed wasting away. That is a thing which is happening. But, though our outer self is being wasted away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light 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. For the things that are seen are transient. But the things that are unseen are eternal. I love these. He uses, you notice, in verse 17, two words to deal with our afflictions. Light and momentary. One of those has more to do with severity or most literally the weight of a burden. How heavy it is, you know. And then the other one has to do with time. So he says, these burdens are light. They don't weigh too much. And they're momentary.

Now we'll circle back to that. But then as a contrast, he says, they're light and momentary compared to the eternal weight of glory. And he uses the same ideas there. He reverses the order of them. But eternal with relation to time. If momentary is just like that, well, eternal is, I mean, you understand the difference between eternal and momentary, yes? And light and heavy. He says the weight, the heaviness of the glory that we will have cannot be overstated.

Now, what do we do with this? Here again, I think here's what we don't do. Here's the danger sometimes, that what we want to do with this, either to ourselves or to other people, is to try to use this to gloss over and minimize real affliction. That is not what scripture asks us to do. Do you understand that? It's part of the reason I wanted to take you back to that passage in Psalm that Paul quotes here, that to show the strength of that. I really understood myself to be afflicted when I cried out. It was for a reason.

[29 : 20] I didn't make it up. And all through this, Paul says, no, we are afflicted. We are pressed upon.

And one of the dangers for us as believers, as followers of Jesus Christ, I think, can at times be to almost feel guilty when we're going through something that feels hard.

Or to look at somebody else and to tell them, no, no, don't worry about that. Light and momentary. Right? That's not quite what Paul is saying. We've already mentioned the fires this morning.

We're all aware of our wildfire season. It seems to be an annual thing now. In Spokane right now, it happens to be very close. Thousands of people have been evacuated from neighborhoods in Spokane, where we live specifically, where we're fine. We haven't been all that close to that. But a lot of people have been. I know people and work with people who've been evacuated that still can't go back to their homes. And they're not really even sure if they're standing. And for me to say, well, don't worry about it. Light and momentary. It doesn't really matter. That's kind of heartless, right? That is not what scripture calls us to. And whether you're affected by a fire, or you're affected by an illness, or the loss of a job, or the loss of a loved one, or persecution in whatever form that may take, or just mental health issues, whatever it might be.

The point of the scripture isn't to say, well, don't worry about it. The point of the scripture is to put that in a new perspective, see? I brought a ball of string.

[31 : 29] This was sold to me as 300 feet of string. I have not measured it. It's possible it's 299 feet and 11 inches. I don't know. But I think you're going to get the point.

The end of that string, and it might be a little hard to see in the back, but I've just colored it black. Just sort of to represent in a really rough and rudimentary way the length of our lifetimes, our earthly lifetimes, you know. And this is what the Bible says. This is what God is telling us. Not that this doesn't matter. Not that this doesn't hurt. But what he repeatedly says is, yeah, but look at this.

Look at all of this. Look at eternity in the face of that. Now already, that doesn't look like a whole lot, does it?

Now this seems really inconsequential. And yet, we can have a tendency to really focus on that.

And the shift in perspective that the Bible calls us to, invites us into, is to say, but look at this.

[32 : 59] I mean, it just kind of keeps going and going and going. And every now and then, I still, I get really hyper-focused on that half inch down there.

And the Lord says, yeah, but come on, dude. Look at, look at, do you understand the enormity of this?

This glory, this weight, this eternity? And I still get stuck and I say, yeah, but ouch.

And the point isn't to try and say, it doesn't hurt. The point is to shift perspective and to try to focus on this. How many other places does the Apostle Paul, do other biblical writers say things like, set

your mind on things above, right?

Why? Because look at it. There's 300 feet of this. I'll just keep going all day if I need to.

[34:08] You understand? It just keeps going and going. And of course, on a very metaphysical level, this doesn't even hold a candle to actual eternity, does it?

I'm still going to run out of this. Eternity is never going to run out. And this is just string. Whereas the enormity of the glory that we will experience.

This is what we are invited into as Christians, as believers. To shift our perspective. And not necessarily to say, I don't even know where it is now.

Here we go. To try and pretend that this doesn't exist. To affirm that it does. To affirm in my life that it does. For me to affirm in your life that it does.

Remember Paul writes in Romans, Rejoice with those who rejoice. And what? Weep with those who weep. It's not just to be dismissive of this and what this looks like and what this feels like.

[35:17] In fact, later on in this very letter, if you turn a few pages back, one of the things that Paul is doing is he is collecting a collection to distribute to the brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ who live in Jerusalem.

Who are being really hard pressed. More so than the rest of the church. And so he's going around to some of these other churches in the areas that he's traveling in and saying, listen, I'm going to collect some money to take home back to Jerusalem, to this church in Jerusalem, because they're really hurting.

Let's help them. He's not dismissing this. And yet over and over and over again, the biblical writers say, yeah, but this, right?

You understand? It's that shift in perspective. This is why scripture continually says, set your mind on this.

Not to pretend that that isn't happening. Not to pretend that it doesn't hurt. Not to pretend that it's not real. But set your mind on this.

[36:35] What we are invited into by our God is a hope. Is a rest.

Is a peace. A peace that passes all understanding. How many of us can express that, whether in our lives or somebody else's?

A peace that just doesn't make any sense. Well, it doesn't make any sense unless you have the hope of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hallelujah. and because I don't know all of you well because I never know who's sitting in the room and where you are with Jesus Christ I just I would be remiss if not to take a moment and say if you are not a follower of Jesus Christ if you have not put your own personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ I invite you to do that there are zero barriers to you doing it we so frequently think I got to get some stuff right I got to get no you don't the whole point of the gospel is that you couldn't possibly get everything right Jesus did it for you hallelujah and if you have not put your own personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ I invite you to do that it's not a real specific set of words it's not a it's just you saying all right God I give up I get it I need your help and I'm going to trust the completed work of Jesus and what he's did

I'm going to follow him I'm going to make him my Lord my Savior and follow him with that comes this hope this peace that we are invited into to experience life's hard sometimes I don't know what you may be going through right now and I want to affirm for you that's not unimportant however to the best of our ability when we can shift our perspective and focus here it makes that seem so much less important not unimportant just less important yeah I invite you into that hope and that peace that God freely offers you this morning our father God we thank you for you for your person we thank you for revealing yourself to us in the scriptures God we praise you for your love your grace your mercy your mercy which you so freely extend to all of us and most of all God I thank you for the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ who has paid the price taken on himself the penalty for my sin for all of our sin for the sins of the entire world taking those on himself as a perfect sacrifice to make that payment so that we can put on his righteousness like a robe and be made new father we praise you for that we thank you for that we are in awe of you for that for those of us who follow you God help us to continually experience this shift in perspective where we have these aha moments where we recognize that no matter how rough it gets and it does get rough we live in a fallen world and it gets rough sometimes and it hurts sometimes but to help us to stay focused on what's to come focused on the fact that you are our rescuer our savior and to more and more look for and hope for that eternity in glory father thank you we love you we pray all these things in Christ's name amen

you