

An Eternal Glory

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians 4 verses 16 through 18, therefore we do not lose heart and so on.

It's just a fact of our heritage here in Glasgow City Free Church that many of us come from the Highlands of Scotland. I was brought up on a village on the east coast of the county of Sutherland. One of the things I miss about the north is the sound of the sea, soothing waves courting the golden sand. You wake up to it, you fall asleep to it, the sound of the sea casts a spell on you. In fact, the late Mrs. Moreland, David and Norman's mother, was brought up in the little village of Waternish in Skye and she was a wonderful poet and she wrote a wonderful poem about how the sea, she would listen to it from the window of her house when she was a wee lassie in the early 1900s. And if you ever get a chance, ask Norman if you can read his mum's poem about the sound of the sea in Waternish. Before the days of YouTube, there was only one way you could really hear the sea without being near the sea. You picked up a shell from the beach and when you got back to the city, you put it to your ear, you could swear you heard the sea.

I guess it's just an illusion, but I swear that every time I hold a shell to my ear, I can hear the sea in Sutherland. Now here's a shell, a bruised shell, and it's battered out of shape because it's hit many rocks in its time. It's old before its time and frankly, it's one of the least attractive shells on the beach. But you pick it up and you take it back to the city with you and whenever you hold it to your ear, you hear the sound of its home, the sea.

Here in 2 Corinthians 4 verses 16 through 18, we meet the Apostle Paul. And he's bruised and he's battered because of his many scars and struggles. And he's old before his time and he is way less appealing than many of the other preachers in the early Christian church.

But here we pick him up in these verses and we hold his words close to our hearts and we hear not the sound of flowing water, but of overflowing glory. Not of crashing waves, but of eternal joy.

[2 : 44] The shell of this minister, it just looks so unappealing. He is crooked. He is ugly. He is old before his time. But I swear that every time I hold 2 Corinthians 4 verses 16 through 18 close to my heart, I can hear the sounds of eternity. And I can feel the weight of glory. And I can see the beauty of heaven. Of course, the difference in image is obvious. Paul's a man, not a seashell. The shell allows us to hear a sound which is in our past, whereas in 2 Corinthians 4 verses 16 through 18, Paul is looking forward to the future. But we get the point, don't we? That the underlying sound and motive of the life of any servant of Christ are those of eternity. Whatever ministry God has called us to here and now, and all of us here have one ministry or another, we pursue it here and now, but its focus is there and then. You hold these verses close to your heart. You feel the weight of glory in them. You hear the sound of eternity in them. You see the beauty of heaven in them.

Let these be the underlying sound and motif of all the service in which we engage for the sake of Christ in his church. Now, there are three subchords which make up this symphony of service. Renewal, verse 16, return, verse 17, and resolution, verse 18. Think of Paul, and he is so bruised, and he is so battered, and he is bearing in his body the death of Christ. But he refuses to become discouraged because in his ears is ringing the sound of eternity. Can you hear it too?

First of all, verse 16, renewal. Paul writes, Therefore we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Renewal. One of the wonderful things about seashells is that even old shells, though they, on the outside, they may be covered with barnacles and scratches and cracks. On the inside, more often than not, they are beautifully smooth. They're made that way by the crustacean which first lived in that shell. Rough and unappealing on the outside, the shell is beautifully smooth and sometimes gloriously colourful on the inside. In fact, the older the shell, the rougher it gets on the outside, but the smoother it gets on the inside. Outwardly, the apostle Paul is wasting away.

One only has to read the litany of trials he endured, listed in 2 Corinthians 11, to realise how rough he had it. In our passage, he compares his body to a jar of clay. And as we've seen, when Paul talks of his body in this chapter, he's not talking just about his flesh, but of his mind, of his emotions, of his body. In his body, he is always carrying around the death of Jesus and his death is at work in him. Hard-pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. How much more can this man take? He has the mental and emotional fatigue of a thousand conflicts and the physical scars to prove it. He is wasting away, like a piece of fruit which is spoiling, like an old shirt which is wearing away, like a building which once stood tall and proud, but is now but a ruin.

Outwardly, that's Paul, covered with scars. He's like that old shell with barnacles and scratches and cracks. By the time he wrote 2 Corinthians 4, he was old before his time, worn out, decaying.

[7 : 04] And you'll meet many gospel servants just like that, burned out, jaded, and exhausted. They're wasting away. Their physical, mental, and emotional capacities are not now what once they were.

Just lay them down by the fireside. Let them rest. But what amazes us about this verse is that despite what Paul feels like on the outside, he refuses to lose heart. He'll not give in to the paralysis of discouragement. Rather, he says, we do not lose heart, or more literally, we are not losing heart. It is a real temptation for the servants of Christ to focus on the outward wasting and in so doing to become bitter. And so we want to ask him this question, Paul, Paul, outwardly you are wasting away. We can see the scars on your back.

Why aren't you losing heart? And he answers, it's because inwardly, I'm being renewed every day. Outside the shell is becoming rougher, but inside the shell is becoming smoother. On the inside, Paul is being renewed, constantly remade. On the outside, he is burned out and jaded and exhausted and depressed, but on the inside, he's getting stronger and more inspired every single day. Some of you will know the curious tale of Benjamin Button, a man who was born old, and as he ages, grows younger until finally he's a baby. The curious case of Paul's ministry is about a man who looks like he's getting older, but on the inside, he's getting younger. He's being renewed. He's becoming smoother and more colorful than the inward man. And he welcomes it because he knows that the only way he will experience inward renewal is if he simultaneously experiences outward wasting.

That's the hard truth for all of us who yearn for inward renewal. It always comes at a cost. Outward wasting. When we are stripped of our natural strength, be that physical, mental, or emotional, only then will God's spirit renew us. So no wonder then Paul refuses to allow his outward wasting to discourage him because along with it, he is enjoying the altogether more valuable experience of inward renewal. Now you know, I'm looking out at many of you and I'm thinking of you when I'm saying this. There is nothing quite as attractive as an older Christian who has been made smooth on the inside by the daily renewal of her spirit. And she's more passionate about Christ in her 80s than she's ever been.

She's filled with the fruit of the spirit. She is beautiful, not bitter. She's gentle. She's not grumpy. She's delightful. She's not discouraging. She's been through much in life. She's hit many rocks along the way.

[10 : 44] But her testimony is that of Isaiah 40. Those words we love so much. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. She may well be a broken shell. But she's also a soaring eagle. Because though outwardly she's wasting away, inwardly God is renewing her. Renewal.

Secondly, in verse 17, we have return, return. Paul writes, For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Return.

For the first time in this chapter, Paul introduces one of the most common New Testament words for the troubles the Christian experiences. Literally, the tribulations, the thlipsing.

In John 16, 33, John says to his disciples, In this world you will have trouble. This is the shooting certain promise of Jesus.

[12 : 05] Not that we may, but that we will have troubles. Troubles and discipleship come together as one package. That's the way it works.

Much of 2 Corinthians 4 has been Paul's autobiographical reflection on the tribulations he's experienced as a servant of Christ.

When we are enduring troubles as Christians, we must not think it's strange. Because Christ has promised them.

But consider what these tribulations, according to the Apostle Paul, are. Now, remember, this is the Apostle Paul whose litany of troubles, as listed in 2 Corinthians 11, is enough to turn our stomachs.

The Paul who outwardly is wasting away and is exhausted. He is not speaking from a position of ignorance, rather from a place of knowledge.

[13 : 09] If anyone can say that they have experienced trouble as a function of being a Christian, then Paul all the more. And what does he call these troubles? He says of them, they are light and momentary.

Let no one ever say to him, well, that's easy for you to say, Paul. But the troubles of gospel ministry and serving Christ are light and momentary.

Have you stood in my shoes recently? Well, let no one say these things. Have we ever been flogged?

Shipwrecked? Beaten? Left for dead? Betrayed like he was? He's not speaking from a place of ignorance here, but from intimate knowledge.

And yet he says of them, they're light and momentary. The word light here can be translated as simple or easy to bear, like placing a matchbox on the back of a camel.

[14 : 13] There's hardly any weight at all. The camel doesn't even notice the difference. The word momentary just means that. Immediate. In the moment. The matchbox is on the camel's back for but a second before it comes off.

Light and momentary. Paul considers the tribulations of his ministry so very trivial. Even if to our ears they sound most horrendous.

We say to Paul, Paul, that's crazy speak. Because by any standards you have suffered greatly for the proclamation of the gospel. You're wasting away on the outside through sheer exhaustion and sheer worry.

How can you talk about the triviality of your trials? And he says, it's because I'm comparing them to the exceeding weight of glory which lies before me.

He talks about them working literally a surpassing to surpassing weight of glory. He does not talk about them earning glory for him as though God will reward him to the extent that he has suffered.

[15 : 29] Rather he talks of these trivial trials working for him as surpassing to surpassing weight of glory.

That's why he can speak crazy talk when he comes to the triviality of his trials. Because compared to the weight of the glory which they are producing for him, they really are so very light and so very momentary.

These trials, they last a millisecond compared to the long ages of eternity. These trials, they are so easy to bear compared to all he stands to lose if he should refuse them.

The surpassing to surpassing weight of glory. Like a mighty waterfall of glory crashing down upon him forever and ever.

Not one of us considers it foolish to give a penny. That in return, we may receive a pound.

[16 : 43] Nearly 70 years ago, listen to this very carefully boys and girls. Nearly 70 years ago, the body of an American missionary called Jim Elliot was found in the jungles of South America.

It showed the signs of cruel torture and painful execution. The Indian tribe he had traveled so far to evangelize had killed him.

This bright, intelligent and stunningly handsome young man. Before he left America for those jungles, he wrote these words in his diary.

Words that I was told by an older Christian when I was a boy. Words that I have never forgotten, nor will I ever forget.

Because they wonderfully summarize not just Paul's teaching in this verse, but also the whole experience of serving Christ. Jim Elliot wrote these words.

[17 : 41] He said, He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Let me say that again.

And I urge you, from the youngest to the oldest, to sear these words upon your heart. He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Would any of us, if we were in our right mind, cling to the penny, they are working for us a surpassing to surpassing weight of eternal glory?

Would any of us, if we were in our right mind, cling to the penny, if we're being offered a pound? Serving Christ isn't always fun.

It isn't always a bed of roses. But what is it achieving for us? That's the question. I don't even know how to describe or picture what Paul means when he speaks of the surpassing to surpassing eternal weight of glory.

[19 : 04] Maybe you could ask one of the other ministers who's present here this evening. I honestly don't know what he means. Only eternity will reveal that to us.

But this, this I do know. No matter how much we suffer here on account of Christ, it does not compare with the glory of all we shall experience hereafter.

Such a comparison goes beyond our imagination. And this we also know. That when we are experiencing the surpassing to surpassing eternal weight of glory, whatever that means, these light and momentary troubles we are now enduring as a function of being Christians and of serving Christ, will not even register.

Today's darkness shall be smothered. By tomorrow's light. This shell so broken and rough shall be renewed.

And its inner smoothness shall become its outward sheen. So colorful. So smooth. So beautiful. Hold it to your ear.

[20 : 23] And you'll catch the slightest strains of heaven's music today. This surpassing to surpassing weight of eternal glory. Return.

And then lastly in verse 18. Resolution. Resolution. In the last analysis, what sustains the servant of Christ through all the troubles and the struggles is that he's got his eyes fixed not on the present and not even on the past, but on the future.

We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. Since what is seen is temporary, what is unseen is eternal.

Paul is well battered and deeply bruised. And yes, whilst he is being continually renewed, he shall only thrive as his eyes are not fixed on the present weight of gloom he is experiencing, but on the future weight of glory he shall experience.

Verse 18, he literally says, fixing our eyes not on the seen things, but on the things unseen. For the seen things are of the moment, but the things unseen are to the ages.

[21 : 53] There's so much here for our hearts as we refuse to allow discouragement to ruin our service for Christ. But one thing I want to draw your attention to is Paul's resolution.

Fixing our eyes, not on the seen things, but on the things unseen. The word he uses there is that from which we get the English word scope, as in a microscope, a device by which we look at small things.

The scope of something is its range of vision. And Paul says that he and his gospel servant companions have a range of vision which is fixed not on what they are presently experiencing, but on what lies ahead of them.

That which at present is unseen, but is even more real than the things which they see now. As gospel servants, if the scope of our vision is on the present, then in all likelihood we shall become discouraged, lose heart, give up.

For the gospel servant, our best life is most definitely not now. But if the scope of our vision is on the future, then all discouragement shall be swallowed up in hope and trouble in glory.

[23 : 21] Notice how he puts it. Fixing our eyes. It's a present active participle. Fixing the scope of one's vision is something he is doing all the time.

He can't allow himself to weaken in this. Rather, he is expending energy on maintaining the scope of his vision upon the unseen things of glory. There is spiritual sweat involved here in the present active maintenance of our vision on what we cannot see.

The eternal fruit of our work. The cost of gospel service is simply unbearable without this. Without that forward facing vision. And God's word is challenging all of us here today.

Whatever our ministry for Christ might be, whether it's sound or prayer, audio, friendship, encouragement, preaching, whatever it might be.

Where are your eyes fixed? Where are your eyes fixed? You know, the future glory of serving Christ is all too often treated as minor.

[24 : 35] As minor. With the present task of serving Christ treated as major. But the latter without the former makes no sense and provides no motive.

Next month I'll be trying to complete the Great Wilderness Challenge 26 mile walk through the hills of Wester Ross. It's tough. I've done it before and my legs still remember it.

And there is one particular stage at which you begin to lose the will to live. It's a steep climb perfectly called Glen the Mook. The Glen of the Pigs.

It's about 10 kilometers in and let me tell you that as you're climbing on your hands and knees up this steep hill you're wondering why you ever signed up to do the Great Wilderness Challenge. In fact, why your mother ever decided to bear you in the first place.

But having toiled your way up that one mile or so steep climb you get to the top there is this breathtakingly beautiful view and that glorious view from the top of the hill makes that pig-like climb all worth it.

[25 : 54] And Paul's saying to us this evening fix your eye on the top of the hill. You might have to painfully toil as you climb up that Glen of pigs but as you're climbing think of the view from the top of the hill.

Not only according to the previous verse does a surpassing to surpassing eternal weight of glory await us but that which awaits us is eternal.

I love the exact way that Paul Paul uses that term which we translate as temporary. Literally it means for the moment or toward the moment.

Ah but that's what at stake is it not? A life lived for the moment is one which shall become discouraged in the service of Christ because moments change into moments which change and not all the moments of a servant's life are carefree.

Well here you are. On Paul's comparison website you can have one of two deals. The first is a penny in your pocket for a moment.

[27 : 10] The second is a million pounds in your pocket forever. Which of these two deals will you fix your eyes upon? I want to humbly suggest and I'm talking more to myself more here than anyone else as you know that if we fix our eyes on the penny we're more likely to lose heart and give up serving Christ.

What as we fix our eyes on the other pocket we're way more likely to keep going and to endure in our service for Christ. Resolve then that you'll fix your eyes the surpassing to surpassing weight of eternal glory which though not seen is real.

Whatever kind of ministry God has blessed you with and he's blessed every one of us here with one at least when it's going well don't fix your eyes upon success but fix your eyes upon the surpassing to surpassing eternal weight of glory which it is producing for you.

And when that ministry is not going so well don't fix your eyes on its failure but on the eternal to eternal surpassing to surpassing weight of glory it is producing for us.

Hold that shell up to your ear yes it might be battered it might be bruised it might be old before its time but when you hold it to your ear you hear it saying to you renewal return resolution in all your service for Christ keep the eyes of your heart focused on the eternal surpassing to surpassing weight of glory.

[28 : 56] Truly this chapter of God's word is the study of a lifetime as my old friend told me 30 years ago. but more than that it really is the study of an eternal weight of glory.

And as we close if you were to ask the apostle Paul and Jim Elliot and all of God's servants who have gone before us was serving Christ in the power of the gospel all worth it?

You'd ask Jim Elliot was it worth it to have a spear thrust through your heart? And you'd ask the apostle Paul was it worth it all that you suffered Paul? They'd answered us are you kidding me?

Of course it is. I may have had this treasure in jars of clay but have you seen how smooth my shell is?

And have you seen the surpassing to surpassing weight of eternal glory? I'm enjoying now. Let us pray.

[30 : 10] Lord we thank you for the power of the gospel for 2 Corinthians 4 is not a passage which exalts the apostle Paul in any way shape or form.

Far be it from that. That a man who is battered, bruised and broken should exalt himself. Rather he says I've got this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all surpassing power is from you and not from us.

Lord we ask that this evening you would call us to serve you. We're here and we're surrendered to your will. Here we are Lord send us whatever your will is for us we pray that you would use us.

And if we don't feel that we've got any gifts then equip us. But Lord we ask and pray that from the youngest to the oldest we would have that attitude of Jim Elliot that he's no fool who gives what he can't keep to gain what he can't lose.

Help us to keep the supremacy of Jesus in mind and that surpassing weight of glory. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.