

The Connection of Trials With Triumph

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[0 : 00] The final few verses from verse 16 to the end of the chapters. That's 2 Corinthians 4 at verse 16. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

For this slight 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 suppose we might say that of all people, the Apostle Paul might have had reason to lose heart.

When you look at many times he referred to the different kinds of circumstances, especially the difficulties and the challenges and the sufferings that he went through, we can say that it's such an amazing thing to read, such a passage as this from his hand.

For example, when you go back to verses 8 and 9 here, you can see that he speaks about being persecuted, not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus.

[1 : 21] You go back to chapter 1 and verse 8, and you see, therefore we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. That was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead, and so on. And then you'll find a chapter 6 and verse 4, another example there, where he talks there about an amazing list of hardships that he went through.

As servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way by great endurance and afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labor, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, by truthful speech and the power of God, and so on.

And then you go to chapter 11, you find a similar reference there to verse 23, a similar reference to what he's been saying these other passages, where he talks there about his own experience also from verse 23.

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. I am talking like a madman with far greater labors, far more imprisonments with countless beatings, and often near death.

[2 : 46] 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.

For 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 the 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.

And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

And yet he says here in chapter four, at the beginning of the chapter, and also here in verse 16, we do not lose heart.

What an amazing thing. When you read the list of hardships that we've just gone through there briefly, yet he's now twice here in this chapter saying, having this ministry, we do not lose heart. And verse 16, so we do not lose heart. What is it that enables him to say that? How could he have such a view and such a conviction, given all that he had been through and all that he was still experiencing of hardship?

[4 : 13] Well, the key is in these verses, I think. The key is really in what he connects together here. He's connecting his trials with triumph in Christ.

The connection between trials and the triumph that he mentions there in terms of the glory that awaits him and awaits all of God's people.

It's that connection really that holds the key to how he can possibly say here, we do not lose heart. And as you look into this, our own, well, for most of us, at least certainly for me, very much less by way of suffering and trial than what the apostles suffered.

And most of you would say, I'm sure the same. That key is also the key to our afflictions, be they small or great, at any time and of whatever kind.

So here is the apostle giving us this wonderful direction as to how we actually view our afflictions and how we connect these trials, these afflictions, with the triumph that is ours when we are in Christ.

[5 : 20] He talks firstly in verse 16 of daily renewal. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

And he talks secondly in verse 17 of a productive affliction for this slight momentary affliction is preparing, and the literal word is working for us, an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

And then thirdly, in verse 18, he takes us to see that he's fixed on this particular goal that he mentions here in glory, the things which are unseen, the things which are eternal.

That is the goal that his mind, his heart, his life is set upon. All of that goes together in the way in which he so wonderfully takes us through this connection between trials and triumph.

So briefly, let's look at them. This daily renewal, he talks here about our outer nature and our inner nature. By our outer nature, he really means effectively the same as you have in verse 10 and 11 where he talks there about our mortal body and our bodies.

[6 : 35] It's really human life, including the life of Christians, human life in this world, this side of death. Because one thing is true of all of us, whether we are Christians or not, and that is that we are dying.

We are weak people in terms of the magnitude of death itself. He speaks in verse 7 there, as we read, of having this treasure, this wonderful treasure that God has given them in the gospel, as apostles of the gospel.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. And what he's saying to us at the end of the chapter here is, despite the fact that this jar, this body of mine, which is wearing out in my service for Christ, despite the fact that the cracks are all too evident in it, that I can see them and that others can see them as well in my life.

Here's a man who's dying. Here's a man who's probably looking much older than his years because of the sheer extent of effort and hardship that he suffered for Christ and his suffering.

But he's saying here, we have it in jars of clay so that the surpassing power belongs to God to show that that's where our strength comes from, that that's really the key to our triumph in Christ, the strength that comes from the grace of God to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[8 : 04] And it's an amazing thing, isn't it, that when he goes on there a few verses down from that, having spoken about being afflicted but not crushed and so on, always carrying in the body the death or the dying of Jesus.

We haven't got time to go into that phrase, but the purpose of it is so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. And he goes on to speak of always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

That's the passion of his life. That's really what he sees as the purpose of living, to make Jesus known, to make Jesus clear, not just by the preaching of the gospel for this man, but through the life that he lives, through the way he faces hardships, through the way that even as a broken jar, as a jar that's so cracked now in the afflictions he's experienced, nevertheless, the whole purpose of all of that, he's saying, is so that the life of Jesus might be made clear, might be manifested, might show through the cracks in my mortal body.

What a wonderful and challenging and amazing statement that is. That's his purpose. That's what he lives for. So now he's saying here in verse 16, our outer nature is actually wasting away.

And it's true, isn't it? You always see that. Even the fittest people, even the most complete athletes, even the best minds that have ever existed in the world, yet they still come to wasting and decay and eventually die.

[10 : 04] It's a solemn lesson for us all, isn't it? That we really need to take to heart, but as we'll see, it's not the end of the story. It's not even the beginning of the end. It's not anything other than

part of the picture because what he goes on to say is, though this is true, yet our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

And that word renewed is a clue to what he means because you have the same word in Colossians 3, verse 10, where he says, you have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creation.

In other words, he's talking about the regenerated person, the person into whose life God has come to change that person from being in love with sin to being in love with Jesus, from being lost to being saved, from being unrighteous to being righteous and all of these other terms that Paul uses. This, he says, is what is happening. This is what has happened. It is being renewed day by day. So essentially what he's saying here in the inner nature of being renewed is what's also called elsewhere, our sanctification.

Where God is working in the life of his people in the midst of their afflictions, in the experiences of their daily lives, through all that happens, to disappoint them, to challenge them, to cause them pain, all the things that are unexpected and expected.

[11:35] But he's saying here, we do not lose heart because our inner nature, what we are as regenerate in Christ, is being renewed.

God is sanctifying us from day to day. Everyone is wasting away. Christian and non-Christian, believer, unbeliever, faithful and wicked.

But not everyone that's wasting is being renewed. That's what Paul is really focusing on. He is wasting away in terms of his outer nature, just like every human being, but completely different to those who are not in Christ.

He's saying, our inner nature is being renewed. It's going on, being sanctified by God day by day. And the afflictions themselves are part of that work of God, as we'll see next.

So that's the first thing he's saying. Our renewal, our outer nature, is wasting away our inner nature, our inner man is being renewed day by day.

[12:50] Now that remains true whatever our feelings might be. Don't go by your feelings, even though your feelings sometimes are important.

You don't exclude them from your Christian thinking, from your Christian life. But the apostle, much more than feelings and much more than emotions, focuses on the mind.

And the mind is informed by the truth of God. And the truth of God assures all of us who have faith in Christ, who have placed our life in the hand of Christ by God's grace, that our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

Even when you don't yourself catch sight of that happening. And Paul doesn't explain here exactly how it comes about. How does God work this? What are the mechanics of the issue spiritually? It doesn't say. It just asks us to believe it. To realize that that's what's going on. Whatever happens to us in this life, whatever illness befalls us, whatever outlook we may have in that, this remains absolutely steady and true.

[14:00] Our inner nature is being renewed day by day. He talks then of that daily renewal. Secondly, verse 17, he talks about a productive affliction.

And of course, all of these points are very much tied together. For he says, this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Now he's making some comparisons here which themselves are actually important for us. First of all, he talks about affliction. And he talks about affliction and says that it's a light affliction or a slight affliction.

He means not very heavy. It's a slight affliction. It's not really a heavy affliction at all. How can he say such a thing when you read again as we did the passages that speak about the tremendous suffering that the apostle went through in the providence and in the wisdom of God?

How can he now say this is a light momentary affliction? It's not been heavy at all. And he's talking about it being momentary and that means short-lived.

[15:17] Well, you can probably understand that one more because it's obviously in terms of this life itself up to death. It's momentary. It's momentary in comparison with eternity.

But what he's really saying is if you keep the comparison going, this affliction is light because he's comparing it with glory. You see, Paul has he has the weighing scales out, if you like.

He's holding the scales, the old type scales where you had the balances. And he's using these in a spiritual sense. And that's the kind of illustration you need to have in mind as you read what he's

saying here.

And what Paul is doing is, well, he says, here are the scales and I'm putting afflictions on one side of it and I'm putting glory on the other side. Let's see which is the more significant. Let's see which actually weighs more than the other.

And every time he packs the one side of it with afflictions, every time he would like take everything we've seen in this epistle itself of the afflictions that he's gone through and pack them all, put them all, the whole lot of them on one side of the scales.

[16:26] And yet Paul is really saying to us, every single time they are outweighed by the glory on the other side. The glory on the other side always, always outweighs the afflictions.

However difficult our understanding of that may be when the affliction is in place. However much affliction weighs, the glory is always more than that.

It's not an equivalence in weight. It's always outweighed by what he talks about here as this eternal weight of glory.

Now glory in the Old Testament, the word glory in the Old Testament, the Hebrew of the Old Testament, has in it the idea of weight or weightiness.

And you can understand that when you follow that through in your thinking to the idea of significance or substance.

[17:31] We still speak that way of people whose lives are weighty, influential, they have substance, there's a weight to them, there's a gravitas to them. Well here it is in a theological sense and Paul is really saying this glory, this glory that is ours in Christ, it far outweighs, it's much heavier than all the afflictions that you go through in this life.

However significant they might be, they're outweighed by the glory and that's really what he's saying, isn't it, in Romans chapter 8 as well where you have a similar emphasis there.

Romans chapter 8 and verse 18. Paul again, of course, is looking forward to the future of God's people in terms of glory. so in verse 18 he's actually putting it this way, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us or revealed in us.

You see, he's doing the same thing. He's balancing, putting in the balances, the afflictions of the present time by which he means the whole of this life. And he's saying they're not worthy to be compared.

You cannot possibly have them compared effectively with the glory that is to be revealed in us. It may again not feel like that to us.

[18:58] I'm sure sometimes for myself, for yourselves, the afflictions feel far heavier than the prospect of glory. Sometimes even far more of substance and weight.

And Paul is not actually saying here in any sense at all that he didn't feel the weight of the sufferings. You cannot possibly read the lists that we've read of the sufferings he went through and then come to the conclusion, yeah, but they weren't really painful for the apostle.

Of course they were. Absolutely. They were just excruciating at times. That's not what he's saying at all, that they weren't actually painful or not worth thinking of in terms of pain, but he is saying the glory that awaits God's people is weightier by far.

It's exceedingly great. It's more of substance than anything that you can suffer or have to suffer in this life. And of course also he's saying that they're momentary, this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.

And that's the final point in that verse. it's preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. You notice it's not saying that this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for this glory.

[20:26] It's preparing this glory for us. What does he mean by that? Not that the other matter is detached entirely from that. We of course are being prepared by God even as we experience these afflictions.

But what he's really saying strictly is these momentary slight afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.

Well, you can get an idea of what that means when you think about Jesus. Because as Paul is in union with Jesus, so he has been in union with Jesus through the life of Jesus, through the death of Jesus, through the resurrection of Jesus, Paul has not been detached from that.

The life that he lives, he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for him. He could never see himself separate from his election in Christ or the death of Christ or the incarnation or anything that's in the life of Christ.

But when you think about Jesus himself, really it's the same principle that you find, take for example Hebrews 5 and verse 6 or is it verse 8?

[21 : 40] Hebrews 5 verse 8 I think it is. Though he were a son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. You see the process there for Jesus himself, for the Son of God and it's emphasizing that yes he is the Son but he learned something, obedience having come into this world, by the things which he suffered.

There was a process for him. Sufferings were preparing for him his future glory as well as he looked forward to the end of his course in this life.

The afflictions in your own life. As a Christian, they are productive afflictions. God united to Jesus. Because you're united to Jesus, you're united to his sufferings and to the principle of his sufferings and the process of his sufferings that led to his glory as it is for you. to his and that's something that we must always come back to ourselves.

Whenever we have whatever sufferings we have to suffer for Jesus from time to time, well, this is what the apostle is calling us to. This is what God tonight is calling us to.

[23 : 01] unexpected news, bad news, health issues, mental health issues, difficulties in family life, difficulties in the world, difficulties in the workplace, afflictions.

They're not painless. Sometimes they're exceedingly painful, challenging, difficult, almost we might say insurmountable. There are many questions along with them, things we wrestle with, things we try to get to the bottom of and never do.

Well, Paul is saying put them all together as afflictions, put them on the one side of the balances and then think of the glory that awaits you as a child of God along with God's people and the balance will always tip down in that way with the weight of glory.

Not only so, but these afflictions are working for you. In God's way of dealing with you in your life, these afflictions are meaningful to him in the process of sanctification, in his preparation of glory for you.

I think you could say that there is, you know, there's a note in the music of heaven, you might say, that would not be there in the song of God's people if there were no afflictions in their life beforehand.

[24 : 29] What I mean by that is that what is sung in heaven by the Lord's people has that element of affliction drawn with it.

It's no longer affliction for them, I know. And it will not be affliction in glory because there is no affliction there, there is no night there, there's nothing less than the fullness of that glory that is ours in Christ.

But the fact that you've gone through afflictions means the song of joy in heaven is all the more meaningful, isn't it? More meaningful than it would otherwise be. Indeed, you wouldn't have an understanding at all of joy following afflictions, but for the afflictions that God has given you and I to experience.

We mustn't go out deliberately to seek afflictions, that will be wrong. We leave the arrangement of our lives to God, but somewhere in that arrangement there will always be certain afflictions.

And we have to come back to this kind of passage so frequently to realize that as our outward nature is wasting away, and as death inevitably follows the process of that wastage, so also our inner nature is being renewed.

[25 : 48] And being renewed because this slight momentary affliction is itself preparing and working for us, this exceeding weight of glory beyond all comparison.

So he goes on to speak about while we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, or the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. eternal. Well, this is where the line between the worldly mind and the spiritual mind or the Christian mind is clearly shown for what it is.

The distinction, the difference, the line is drawn between them. Because it is certainly not a characteristic of the worldly mind that they are fixed upon eternal things as their goal.

But that's what Paul is saying. We look, and the word look there is related to the word he uses elsewhere in Philippians 3.14. He says, I'm pressing towards the mark. So I have a word close to

that word mark that he's using here.

[27 : 01] He's saying the things which are unseen. They actually are a marker for us. The looking is a marker for us. In other words, Paul is really saying here that the unseen things are a goal for him.

They are really the things that he's stretching forward to. That's the goal of his life beyond this world. That's the goal that he set before him.

That's what he's fixed upon. And that's really, you can see again how, why he's placing afflictions in the way he's placing it in his worldview, if you like.

Why is it that he can speak of afflictions in this way? Why is it that he can speak of them as slight and momentary? Because he's comparing what he is in this world with what he will be in the next. What this life is on this side of the grave to what it's like post resurrection. As we look, he says, to those things which are unseen.

[28 : 07] For he says, the things which are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. You know, there's so much in the world tonight that thinks we're fools.

that we're out of our minds, that we're simply crazy, living a life that really is unjustified, because we're living for unseen things.

And they tell us, you've never seen God, he doesn't exist. Why don't you just use your life and have a more useful life than just living for the things that you can't see, for a future that you can't be sure of.

Of course, the apostle is saying, that's the foolishness that does not see things in the light of eternity. Paul is saying here, the things that are unseen are the lasting things.

He doesn't just mean any sort of things. Again, he's thinking of this glory that's in Christ. That's what the context is talking about. It's unseen now as you look at it here. You believe it.

[29 : 19] You can't see it. You can't experience it until you get there, until you will be in the presence of Christ, glorified in his likeness. That does not make it unreal.

In fact, what he's saying to us here is you have to tell the world that by faith what is unseen is what is lasting. And the problem that they have is that they don't have faith.

And they don't have the kind of acceptance that you need for God's word. And of course, that can only come from God. So we're praying. When we're praying for people to be converted, this is what you're praying for.

That they will come to see those things that are unseen as the things that really matter, the things that are really weighty, the things that are significant, because the seen things are transient.

Most of us, if not all of us here, have lost people we love deeply. In the course of life, we couldn't keep them.

[30 : 23] Their life here was transient. However much we would have wanted them to remain, however much we could try and keep them a little longer, their life as ours is transient, not lasting.

but the things that are unseen are eternal. The world lives for what is seen, for materialistic things. Christian lives for what is unseen. It doesn't mean that this world is unimportant to them, but it means that that's really what the mind is fixed upon, those things which are in heaven, where Christ himself is.

And that's why Paul's suffering was really much more than endurable for him. It was, in fact, the path to eternal peace and perfect joy, because he saw his sufferings as in this world only, but as long as they were in this world in his life, they were working for him, a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

That's what's significant, friends, to us tonight. Not the things which are seen, however precious some of them might be, but the things which are unseen, because these are the lasting, eternal things that our heart must be set upon.

[32 : 01] Let's pray. Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks for the perspective that your word gives us, delivering us from our own sinful and selfish perspective on life, and even towards eternity.

Lord, we ask that you would keep turning us to these great things as they are set out for us in your word, and that when we are at times shaken by developments in your providence, help us to turn our mind to those things that we've been thinking of this evening.

We give thanks, Lord, for the faith that you give to your people that draws eternal things towards their present experience, that gives them assurance that, as your word tells them, that even their

afflictions are productive of this weight of glory for them.

Help us to keep these things, we pray, in the balance in which your word sets them forth for us, lest our lives also have such as our fate of disillusionment and despair, that we would lose our focus.

Lord, continue to sanctify us, we pray, through trial and affliction, that we may indeed also be convinced of that connection between our trials and our triumphant Christ.

[33 : 28] Hear us, we pray, for his name's sake. Amen. Well, we're going to conclude singing again in Psalm 34, this time near the end of the psalm, Psalm 34,