

James 5:7-20

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[0:00] Well, good morning, Trinity.

What a happy occasion, the installation of our pastors. I'm told that every Monday morning in the United States, three hundred and seventy-eight pastors give up and walk away from the ministry for good.

They lose heart. I'm told that between 60 and 80 percent, depending upon the statistics you use, of those who enter the pastoral ministry will quit within the first five years.

Greg, Matt, I don't know where you are, and Nick, probably somewhere there. Gentlemen, brothers, it is a certainty that you will, in your calling as pastors, be sorely tempted to lose heart, to give up, and to walk away.

I know no minister of the gospel for whom that has not been true in some measure. As one young pastor wrote, a minister of the gospel, he had been a pastor for one and a half years, and he wrote to a friend, were I to tell you of only the littlest things, of the misfortunes, yea, of the adversity which virtually crushed us, us, he was actually part of a three-man co-pastoral team, okay, virtually crushed us, you would hardly believe me.

[2:02] I am convinced that not one day passed in which I did not long for death ten times. He was writing from a brief break from pastoring, but as he considered then returning to his pastoral post, he shuddered, rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over.

That was the young John Calvin. Or closer to home, perhaps, I think of a fellow New Englander who, following faithfully God's gospel calling, endured capture by pirates, imprisonment, accusation of being an enemy spy, terrible torture.

His children slowly, one by one, died, and finally his wife died. And after all of this loss, he was further tormented by the realization in a moment of deep honesty that he had undertaken this ministry which had taken him all across the world, not for the love of God or for the love of the lost, but to make a name for himself, to prove himself a somebody.

So overwhelmingly discouraged was he that he withdrew into the jungle, dug his own grave, and sat there in utter desolation for days.

God is to me the great unknown, he said. I believe him, but I find him not. That was Adoniram Judson, America's first foreign missionary.

[4:09] Now, I'm happy to tell you that in both of these cases, there's a lot more to the story than what I've just said. But the trials that threatened the loss of heart for them were a very real part of it.

And this was so for the Apostle Paul too. He, he himself, the Apostle Paul, was sorely tempted to lose heart in the ministry to which God had called him.

Did you notice when the Scripture passage was read that it both opened and it closed with the statement, therefore, we do not lose heart?

In verse 1 and verse 6. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and open them up. 2 Corinthians chapter 4. 2 Corinthians chapter 4. You can follow along. Clearly, the Apostle was standing against and battling inducements to do just that, to lose heart.

What were these things that so threatened to discourage Paul that he might give up?

[5 : 26] That's the first question we want to ask together this morning. But he doesn't give up. We do not lose heart, he says. And he has reasons for not doing so.

Therefore, he writes, therefore, we do not lose heart. So secondly, we want to ask, given the grounds that he has for discouragement in his ministry, why, notwithstanding, does he not lose heart?

How is he able to stay in the race despite this discouragement? Now, this may seem a very sober and even a somber topic and theme for so celebratory an occasion, the installation of our new pastors.

Gee, in the last five sentences, I've mentioned loss of heart and discouragement five times. I realize that. But I am convinced far better to face these sobering realities that you will face than to press through to discover why they will not prevail and have the final word.

Remember, the apostle says, we do not lose heart. And the reasons he gives, I trust, will be a great comfort to our hearts.

[6 : 50] Now, if you're visiting us today, as has been said, what we are doing this morning is unusual. We don't usually pick out a few people in the congregation, you'll be glad to know, and actually direct our comments directly to him.

Okay, there's Greg, one of our new pastors sitting there. Matt, where are you? Okay, okay. Nick, I see you. Matt, okay, good. Now I know. Okay, at least you're here. I know that. Great. It's untypical.

We usually don't pick people out and direct them, address them directly. But today we are speaking particularly to our new pastors, Matt and Nick and Greg.

But please don't anyone think, well, I'm not a pastor. So these words aren't for me. Okay, the challenges that will be described in this word here will be in some measure the experience of all of us.

And just as assuredly, assuredly, the encouragements here offered are also ours. So let none of us miss of gathering up our portion from the word as it's spoken particularly to our pastors this morning.

[8 : 02] So, what had the prospects of discouraging the apostle in his ministry? Well, no doubt there were many things, but in our passage, he mentions three.

The first was the lack of responsiveness to his message. Now, some of us may find this very surprising.

We tend to think of the apostle Paul as having a phenomenally successful ministry. I mean, didn't churches just spring up in his wake like mushrooms? Yes, in a measure they did.

But, this response to his preaching was not always the case. It was not always positive. Violent opposition broke out to his preaching in Ephesus and Thessalonica.

He was run out of town more than once. He was beaten and left for dead. In Athens, most mocked him. Sometimes, the rejection of his message was so complete that he thought the appropriate symbolic action was to shake the dust off his feet.

[9 : 11] Indeed, this was more often the case with his kinsmen, his Jewish hearers, for whose response he deeply longed, even to the point of his willingness to exchange, if it would be possible, his salvation for theirs.

Well, one can imagine the discouragement that he must have felt. It's as if, he says, they have spiritual cataracts.

I open the Old Testament scriptures to them and it would seem a veil covers their spiritual understanding. This particular description Paul gives of his experience with Jewish hearers.

There in the earlier chapter, chapter 3, verse 15, but then in our passage, he goes on to deploy that image generally. Spiritual cataracts are not just a Jewish, but a general affliction among my hearers.

Verse 3, our gospel is veiled to all those that are perishing. It's a terribly disheartening reality for a minister called to preach.

[10:26] And no less discouraging is what Paul identifies behind this blindness. Notice the agent or agency working this spiritual, these spiritual cataracts.

Verse 4, the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the gospel. To whom or what does this refer?

Well, many early Christians interpreted this phrase to mean the God who rules this age, namely, the Lord God, capital G, Almighty God, pointing to how he hardened Pharaoh's heart, for example.

But, the God of this age seems an unlikely title for God Almighty. Seems like a stingy title, does it not, for the God of all the ages?

So, we might understand Paul to mean the God whom this age worships, namely, the devil. The devil is the one who blinds the minds of Paul's hearers.

[11:34] And this is certainly possible. Jesus, in his parable of the sower, speaks of the seed of the word being sown, but before it has a chance to take root, the devil comes and snatches it away.

And in one occasion, the devil is called the prince of this world. But he's never called a God and that seems odd. So, perhaps, another possibility, is that Paul is referring to the God who consists of this age.

That is to say that people make this world or this age their God. And that is what renders them blind. idolatrous absorption in worldly things leaves us blind to spiritual things.

Now, both of these are true, the devil and idolatry, and both are well attested scripturally. And whether Paul has here in mind the devil or idolatry, the implication is plain.

Powerful forces are at work to render your hearers insensible to the message that you as preachers are charged to proclaim.

[12:50] And that can be incredibly discouraging. As Jesus indicated in the parable of the sower, much of the seed that you sow into hearts will be snapped up by the devil, will be choked out by cares, worldly cares, and will be smothered by trials and never come to anything at all.

That can be incredibly discouraging. We can easily lose heart, be tempted to do so at least, and so it was with the apostle.

Now, this alone might be enough to give pause to any pastors, ministers, but that's more than they're going to face as ministers. And Paul identifies a further potential source of despair, namely, number two, the magnitude of the afflictions that he had to endure.

The magnitude of the afflictions that he had to endure. Look at the words he uses to describe his experience. Verse eight, we are afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down.

Indeed, the apostle thinks it not overdramatic to describe his ministry as an ongoing dying, the kind of dying that characterized Jesus' experience, that man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

[14:27] And notice verse 10, always, always caring about in our bodies this dying, not just occasionally or under extreme circumstance.

And verse 11 reiterates, constantly we are being delivered over to death. Now, perhaps this constant death and dying seems abstract.

Well, later in chapter 11 of this book, Paul takes a quick tally of what some of these things were that he had to endure as a minister of the gospel. What it cost him to stay faithful to his ministerial calling.

And as I'm drawing from chapter 11, his list there in 11:23, beatings, times without number, thrice 39 lashes, being stoned, being shipwrecked, dangers from rivers, robbers, rogues, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, cold and exposure, and on and on the list goes.

And that's just to mention the physical side. That's not to mention the far more harrowing emotional burden. He says, I have care for all of the churches.

[15:59] Paul sums it up in a chilling phrase. Verse 12, so death works in us. And I don't know what you will be called to suffer in the ministry, but I know there will be suffering.

and doubtless, I know some of you have already begun to taste some of this, and there will be more. Sometimes it's enough to make you begin to feel faint-hearted, and it was so with the apostle.

And finally, Paul mentions in the face of which he might, a final thing that he mentions, in the face of which he might easily have lost heart. And it's captured by a phrase in verse seven.

Earthen vessels, clay pots. We have a few of these in our garage at home. Well, I should say we had a few of these, for they're very fragile, and they're vulnerable to being broken and shattered.

they crack, and they crumble, just like we do, just like all of us. And youth, youthfulness may for a season disguise this fact, but with steady and inexorable step, it comes upon you.

[17:34] There's no longer quite the energy in that once bounding step. we pass a mirror and just catch a glimpse and, oh, is that my father?

Is he here? And we realize, no, it's me. The graying, the stoop, the wrinkles. Paul puts it, as Paul puts it in verse 16, the outer man is decaying.

And neither is this merely physical. It's mental as well as muscular. We find it, I mean, all these things kind of come together.

We find it harder to get any good sleep. And then we find it harder to think. I do, at least. We desire, we long to give of ourselves, but there seems less and less of us to give.

For we are slowly wasting away. and soon our clay vessels, our pitcher, will be broken by the fountain.

[18:45] This slow and steady process of decay, which touches all of us in this fallen world, as we feel it acutely whittling away our capacities and finally completely robbing us of them, it can afford temptation to lose heart.

It was so for Paul. So here we have a great part of Paul's world and that of every minister of the gospel called to declare a message to those blind to what it reveals and in pursuing this, plagued by every manner of affliction to the point of being overwhelmed and enduring all this in a frame ever vulnerable to every kind of decay and dissolution, slowly but surely wasting away.

Reason enough, reason enough to lose heart and yet and yet despite all of these powerful inducements, he does not, he does not.

He perseveres unflaggingly pouring himself out running the race that is set before him. How?

How is he able to overcome the discouragement? Because for each one of them, Paul had an answer and an answer that he had taken deeply into his soul.

[20 : 43] Let's consider them in turn. So what of the unresponsiveness of your hearers? That their spiritual sight is veiled to the glory of the Savior that we preach?

that the God of this world has blinded them so they do not see the light of the gospel. Yes, it's all true.

Their spiritual blindness against our message and behind their blindness a powerful force at work. Ah, says Paul, but behind our message an even more powerful force is at work.

Verse 6, for God who said light shall shine out of darkness is the one who shines in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul's description here harkens back to his own conversion experience on the road to Damascus. where a brilliant and blinding light from heaven shone into the darkness of Saul's heart.

[22 : 06] Ironically, temporarily blinding him physically, but opening his spiritual eyes to see the glory of the Savior, Christ. And Paul's experience is, in its fundamental aspect, paradigmatic.

It is the pattern of God savingly overcoming all of our spiritual blindness in everyone. He, God, miraculously dispels our blindness by shining the light of Christ into our very hearts.

Where we were once blind, we suddenly and savingly see, as with Saul on the road to Damascus. But do you not pick up another echo in Paul's description?

As he writes, God said, let light shine out of darkness. Does it not evoke the words that first flung the cosmos into being?

Let there be light. Paul is connecting God's act of spiritual illumination of our hearers with his sovereign act of creation.

[23 : 29] Can a more irresistible act of creative power be imagined? Yet it is this very power that is decisively, divinely exercised to make your preaching sovereignly effectual.

people. So should you, or rather, when you, face the discouragement of unresponsive hearers, when the hardness of heart seems adamant, when the spiritual blindness seems irremediable, call to mind that according to God's sovereign purpose sin plan, out of your preaching, will be heard in hearts that same voice that flung the cosmos into being and brought light out of darkness.

And by God's good pleasure, the blind shall see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Will not, brothers, will not such a truth overcome our tendency to lose heart here?

Will it not overwhelm it if we take this truth deeply into our souls? And incidentally, it was this confidence which immunized the apostle against the temptation to tamper with or trim the gospel message to somehow make it more acceptable to his hearers.

Verse 2, if the success of our message is established by divine power, isn't it silly to seek to render it more effectual by manipulative methods, watering it down or shaving off its angularities?

[25 : 33] There's no need to add force to omnipotence, to lend some further enhancement to the voice that proclaims sovereignly, let there be light.

No. Let us simply be servants of that word and of our hearers by declaring it. But what answer does Paul have to the sheer magnitude of suffering?

those outward batterings and buffetings to which he is constantly subjected? His answer is simple but sustaining as it is for any woman in labor.

Mine, he says, is not pointless suffering. It is productive. And what is this worthwhile thing that all this pain produces?

What is the precious baby, so to speak, for which all this pain is gladly endured? It is you, Paul says, telling the Corinthians.

[26:55] It is you. Verse 15, all these things are for your sakes. All this pain, all these afflictions that I endure, are simply the cost of getting the gospel, the saving message of Jesus, to you and into you.

It is simply the price of getting the transforming grace of God to more and more and into people more and more. Yes, the cost is high, but it's so worth it.

For as he says in verse 15, the result of my self-sacrifice is the grace of God reaching more and more extensively and deeply, the text says both, reaching more and more and reaching them more and more and transforming them into people whose lives abound in thanksgiving to God, all to his greater glory.

glory. Yes, the pains are great. Ask any woman in labor, but they won't cause me to lose heart, for what is born out of them is worth it.

So I will gladly go on caring about in my body the dying of Jesus, paying the ongoing price of delivering, declaring, and displaying the gospel.

[28:27] Yes, it is true. Death works in me, verse 12, but thereby life works in you.

Congregation, I wonder how clearly you see this, that for life to work in us.

Death must be at work in another. Yes, we know that Jesus had to die. The great shepherd of the flock had to lay down his life for the sheep, but do we see that our under shepherds must also undergo a death to bring that salvation that our good shepherd is purchased?

His death, our great shepherd, was alone atoning, but the announcing and the applying of that great salvation inevitably involves a dying also.

The agonizing labors, the unwearying exertions, the unflagging self-denial to declare, deliver, and display God's grace to us day after day after day.

[29:53] And God has raised up these three men and so conformed them to his son that they can say all these things are for your sakes.

they can say, so death works in us, but life in you. All redemptive love is self-sacrificial.

There is no other way. Someone has to die. And these are pastors have answered that call and said, here am I, send me.

will we as a congregation not thank God for them and love them greatly and their wives and their families who will pay a great price?

Matt, Nick, Greg, look around you at these people, these precious people for whom the great shepherd laid down his life.

[31:13] Will not your joy of seeing life springing up in them not help you to endure those birth pangs that it will require?

It was so with the apostle. And what of our present and progressive wasting away?

What's the apostle's answer to that? That remorseless process of decay, which in this world would seem ultimately to prevail when we finally close our eyes in death, that death that our ongoing dying has merely foreshadowed and finally fulfilled?

What can sustain the apostle in the face of so grim a reality? And indeed, a reality that the very prodigality of his own self-giving seemed only to accelerate, increasing pace and scope of his own wasting away.

death of his own life. Yes, says Paul, it is true. Our outer man is decaying. And yet, and yet, verse 16, our inner man is being renewed day by day.

- [32 : 47] There is, says Paul, a countervailing process at work. Yes, death marches apace and grinds us to dust, but I can carry on because there is something that I know.

Verse 14, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus. You see, says Paul, in the resurrection of Jesus, a new order of life broke into this dying out and wasting away world.

The resurrected life of Jesus is the seed of a new heavenly life that pulses with glory and works its newness reversing the wasting and decay of this world.

and one day, it will utterly prevail and this glory life will cover the whole earth, swallowing up death and dying and pain and tears forever.

This I know, says Paul, for the resurrected life of Jesus is the first fruits of this great harvest of life to come.

- [34 : 23] See, it's already begun in Jesus. And what's more? I have seen it.

I have seen this life of Jesus break out in me. You see, it wasn't just the Corinthian believers where life was breaking out.

This new life was also breaking out in the apostle himself who brought that message of life. Verse 10, the life of Jesus, he says, is being manifested in my body also.

It's breaking out in my mortal flesh, the very place of decay. Paul knew that death and decay would be swallowed up and overcome with life in his case because that life had already begun to grow in him.

He had seen its otherworldly spores producing this heavenly fruit of love and long suffering, of joy and generosity, of peace, of patience, all exotic fruit, not from this earth soil, only from above.

- [35 : 53] Yes, death would be swallowed up for him as it was already being swallowed up in him.

Something, he says, something is at work in me that is part of something more to come that for its wonder exceeds all imagining and assures me that this wasting away will not have the final say, but instead what will have the final and full say is the full noonday glory of that day, that day of which the morning star has already arisen in my wasting mortal flesh.

And knowing this, who could not face the wasting away knowing that it will not have the last word.

Brothers, is this not mighty encouragement not to grow faint-hearted in the face of our growing frailty, that in Christ our death, dying, and decay will not have the last word.

Oh, to know this would be comfort enough to persevere. But the apostle tells us more.

- [37 : 42] The wasting and the renewal are not two independent processes. They're related. Verse 17 tells us that the afflictions of our suffering and our decay actually produce, indeed, is producing the glory life.

God is using the earthly trials to produce the heavenly glories. Our very frailty and susceptibility to suffering is the very soil out of which the heavenly bloom emerges.

the fragrant flower of humility, compassion, courage, gratitude. The thorn, so to speak, under God's husbandry produces the rose.

And was it not so with the apostle? As he told the Corinthians later in chapter 12, three times, I asked God to take away the thorn, but he used it, the thorn, to perfect God's power in me.

Will not this realization hearten us to persevere, knowing that the very afflictions are wasting away, expose us to, are themselves producing in us under God's husbandry the heavenly glories, manifestations of the life of Christ in us, roses from the very thorns.

[39 : 44] Brothers, these then are the apostles' answers to those trials which exposed him to loss of heart.

And as you take these truths deep into your souls, you shall not faint. Let me conclude with a brief remark about what we see in this text as to the source of Paul's ministry and yours and its sustenance.

The source, verse 1. We have this ministry as we received mercy. Paul's ministry flowed from Christ's mercy.

Paul never ceased to marvel and wonder at the mercy of God that saved him on that road to Damascus. Him, the chief of sinners.

Paul never forgot that he had that treasure in his earthen vessel because Christ's vessel was shattered for him at Calvary.

[41 : 04] Yes, he might be afflicted in every way, but he was not crushed. You notice? For as he knew, he was not crushed because Christ was crushed for him in his place.

He may be perplexed and you will be, but he says, I was not despairing and I never will be because Jesus took that despair for me.

Yes, he would know persecution, but he would never be forsaken for Jesus was that he might never be. That cry on the cross, Father, why have you forsaken me?

Paul would never have to make it and neither shall you. We've observed that all redemptive love is self-sacrificial.

To release it into this world and into lives, someone has to die. So death works in me, says the apostle, but life in you. And it is clearly no mystery where Paul received that pattern.

[42 : 20] All his self-giving flowed from Jesus' self-giving to him. As we have received mercy, we have this ministry.

Paul was willing to take the thorn, the many thorns that came his way. For he never forgot that Jesus had taken the ultimate thorn, the only thorn that could pierce to death when he was pierced for our transgressions.

Men, never cease to wonder that you have received mercy, and you will not draw back from the high, the incredibly high cost of staying the course.

In the sands of Bahrain, there are two small graves. They are those of the two daughters of Samuel Zweimer, a missionary to the Arab world.

they were four and seven. It's often a high cost staying the course, but as Vamer inscribed on their gravestone, worthy is the lamb to receive riches.

[43 : 56] And finally, how is this perseverance sustained? As Paul tells us in verse 18, by fixing our eyes upon certain things, as we do this, we shall not lose heart.

Of course, this requires that we turn our sights away from other things, indeed away from the very things that might most naturally we be inclined to be absorbed with.

The daily dying, the decay, the pain, the pressure, the perplexity, the toil, the tears, the travail, the little graves along the way.

remember, says Paul, that these afflictions which form so much a part of the minister's life are but temporary, transient, ephemeral, in the very process of passing away, fading away.

they are the marks of this present age and soon shall be no more. And since our wasting away is itself fading away, it need not receive much attention.

[45 : 34] Since Jesus shall soon, very soon, make all things fully and finally new and wipe away every tear, let us not fret over much over them now.

Rather, let us hold in view things unseen. What are these unseen things? Not what is inherently invisible, rather presently invisible.

The things that will indeed be fully visible at the consummation, but now are only partially so. the things that are at home in this coming age, seen only now in germ, in gestation.

We cannot yet see the full host around the heavenly throne, but they are being gathered even now. It has not yet appeared what we shall be, yet we are now becoming what we shall be forever.

The unseen things are the glorious and everlasting fruit, even now in the bud, the blossom and the bloom of the light and momentary afflictions.

[46 : 55] The glory life, that when it comes in noonday splendor, shall have no end. Set and stay your sight on these things, and on him who is their alpha and omega.

And you shall ever say with the apostle, we do not lose heart. However harrowing and horrible your sufferings seem in themselves, however unlight and unmomentary they may feel at the present, in comparison to eternity, a life of utter self-denial will seem like nothing more than one sleepless night in a bad motel.

As one old saint put it, though we have a hard breakfast, yet we shall have a good dinner.

Even so, Lord, come. Amen and amen. Rob. Where is it?