

Answers for tired and bewildered believers

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[0 : 00] So, there are two key doubts that affect the Christian when they are living and serving in the body of the church.

Two main doubts that Paul is seeking to uproot in the course of this passage. This passage is really one of encouragement, not only to the tired believer, but also the bewildered believer.

The content of this passage circles around two objections that we may have, that may have fled through our minds, that maybe has even caused our minds to take residence in as we push away serving the church more, push away serving the church as we once did.

And perhaps even these objections that you haven't even formulated in so many words.

But Paul is seeking to give grounds for hope when these discouragements take root. So, the first objection is of the tired believer. It might go something along the lines like this.

[1 : 16] I'm just not convinced that the word is enough. I've shared the gospel in its fullness with people I love and care for, and nothing's happened. I haven't seen the word really do anything.

I've tried my best, and it doesn't seem good enough. And the second is of the bewildered believer. You might say, I hear you talk about this triumph, this victory of what Christ has done for us, but I don't feel very transformed.

And looking around, we don't look very transformed. What exactly are we talking about? So, before we come to Paul's responses to these in a bit more detail, it's helpful to see how he readies the stage in our minds for what he's about to say.

So, in 318, we read, It's important to take hold of this.

He refers to this truth which characterizes the Christian life. This is the process by which a Christian lives. I referred to a couple of weeks ago that we go from one stage of glory to glory to glory to glory to perfection when Christ comes.

[2 : 40] That as Christians, we see God clearly, behold his glory, worship him, and so are transformed into his image. This is a concise description of what is certain for the Christian.

So, we go in. For the matter of the tired believer. Why is it that the more devoted the Christian becomes, the harder life seems to get?

It's a very relatable objection. Looking around, sometimes we can think, God, I know for a fact my friend doesn't know you, but his family life seems to flourish, and he's far better than me in work, and everyone seems to notice what he does.

I try to introduce the gospel to him, and he flatly rejects it. He'll avoid every conversation that goes that way. And this doubt is relatable, and one that Paul seeks to address here.

He begins in verse 1. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

Here, specifically, Paul is talking about, is highlighting the mercy of God.

[3 : 53] What we sang just there, that God has... Highlighting the mercy that he has just described towards the end of chapter 3. Yet, to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts.

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and the Spirit of the Lord is... There is freedom. We know that by nature, our vision is veiled, unable to see with clarity who God is.

We're unable to see the sweetness of the gospel. The only way we can see is by God acting with mercy to unveil our sight, sparing us the eternal consequence we deserve in hell, enabling us to see his goodness towards us.

Now, it's hard to read this talk of salvation and blindness and veiling and unveiling without being reminded of Paul's own experience of conversion on the road to Damascus, when, after being struck with blindness and stripped of his self-confidence by Jesus himself in a vision, he describes his conversion as, the scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored.

So that's the kind of image we need to think about with the veiling and unveiling. Keep that in your mind. So, this ministry that he encourages us with in verse 1 is something that we're all part of.

[5 : 22] It's not just for the elite Christians that know everything. As believers in Christ, purchased by Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us.

The fruits of the Spirit, you know, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and so on, are given to us in varying measures all for the benefit of others. If you think of fruit growing on a tree, the fruit is not, the tree itself doesn't feed off the fruit, the fruit is for other people, and that's why the Spirit gives fruit in this way, that's why it's described that way.

The aim of this fruit is to love and serve those in the church and also outside. So, the mercy is to bring forth this image of indwelling fruit and how God has acted towards us.

It continues, that we take heart and are encouraged. The natural question comes that what are we being encouraged to do, what are we encouraged in?

So, verse 2, we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

[6 : 43] So, he sets up a clear contrast for what true ministry should be. Paul is point blank refusing to distort and twist what the true words of God are.

And the fact that he has to do this points towards what's being implied by the Corinthian church. If they're implying that, maybe, Paul, you'd have a bit more success with this whole ministry thing if you didn't phrase it how you did, if you removed certain things of your message.

Perhaps more people would respond and trust what you have to say. So, why don't you try doing it like that? But instead, Paul chooses a different tactic entirely to declare openly the full statement of the truth, to not water it down, to present it full strength.

Paul knows, as we do, that it's only the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation for those who believe. It's only a true statement of the gospel that will have this transforming effect.

A couple of years ago, I went on holiday to Malaysia to see my fiancée. And knowing how advantageous the exchange rate is, I expected everything to be, well, amazing.

[8 : 02] I'll tell you, it's very easy to be chivalrous when it's so cheap. But I expected to find some things cheaper there than you'd get here. And in exploring markets, I found this very much to be the case.

Items that I'm familiar with felt and look the same as they are here. But when you find a Rolex for 20 pounds, it's not quite right. It can only be something else, a cheap imitation of the real thing.

So this is an entertaining analogy or a product to get hold of whilst we're on holiday. But with the words of eternal life, this is something we cannot afford to change.

Paul knows that only the full truth will unveil sight, change hearts, and transform lives. So the question needs to be asked after this, in line with this objection.

Even when I say everything I need to say, when I'm sure I've covered every single point of the gospel, what happens when they don't respond? What's happening there?

[9 : 06] I've given them the full truth, and that's what you're calling me to do. So Paul responds, even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. Now it's a sad reality that even when we share the gospel truly, still some will reject the message.

I'm sure plenty of people will have the experiences I have where you sit down with someone willing to go through everything, you say everything you need to say, you check through, they've understood it, and still they reject it.

It's not just what we do, God has to act in order for that miracle to occur. For them, the veil still remains on their hearts.

So not to misunderstand this verse, those that are perishing are not the same as those who will be lost eternally, so just because they reject the gospel once doesn't mean that's it, game over.

[10 : 10] I'm sure, again, plenty of us will have, I heard the gospel dozens, if not hundreds of times growing up in church, and it wasn't until I was 18 that it really rested and I understood the words for myself.

God acts through others to open our eyes to him. Again, there must have been times when we're discouraged at looking at others, there must be times when someone would have looked at me and

said, he's a lost cause.

I've tried to explain the gospel to him, he doesn't understand. So it's that kind of, have that mindset, remembering your own salvation. The gospel, the gospel is important, it's only the gospel that will do the work, but God acts on top of that.

So, we do not lose heart. Knowing that it is God's word that supplies miracles in the truest sense, bringing us from death to life, so too it will give life to others by the mercy of God and the will of God.

So this Paul proves further, if you turn over to verse 13 to 15. Since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what has been written, I believe and so I spoke, we also believe and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

[11 : 35] 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 the final reason Paul gives in response to this objection, in propelling us towards being empowered to share the gospel with others, is exactly what's been going on from the beginning of time.

This ministry of the word of God, God communicating with his people, meeting them clearly, this will work because it's how it has always worked.

That when someone believes, they will speak. The path through the whole Bible is of the words of God speaking and people responding, people believing as they hear and going out to speak.

And so it is for us, as we, those who truly believe will delight to share. I think we sang it in one of the songs before. Those who believe will delight to share for the other's sake.

And when they believe, they will delight to do the same. This is how the church grows. This is the prescribed pattern for church growth. And we see towards the end there that the reason he does this is so that grace can be increased, the increase of grace to all people and a virtuous circle that as grace increases, our thanksgiving increases.

[13 : 09] The right response to grace is thanksgiving, we learn from Romans. And the response of that grace is worship. And it's that worship that leads to the transformation that Paul gives in 3.18.

So after hearing all this, a related but similar objection can arise.

And this is one of more confusion than tiredness, and this is the one of the bewildered believer. So it might be a voice like this. We've heard you talk a lot, Paul, about your confidence in the word, but really I don't see it happening.

I don't feel transformed, I don't see transformation in the believers that I know. So we call to mind again the example of the successful friend, the one who isn't a believer, yet everything they do seems to flourish.

Confusion at this process is relatable. They don't know God, but seem so happy in what they do. And we have to come daily before God and repent of our sins.

[14 : 18] Why have you designed it that way? I'd have a far easier, in the mind of this objection, I'd have a far easier way, God, if you designed it so that everyone who believes succeeds in wealth and health and all the prosperity we desire.

But God has not designed it this way. So Paul responds to this quickly and artfully in verses 7 to 10. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

So the treasure in jars of clay, this treasure is the eternal word, the powerful, God's very word to us. And the jars of clay being us. I mean, at the time, what would you have thought of when it's a jar of clay? It's not strong, it will shatter, it will break. As we learned this morning that what God values, the sacrifice that he delights in is a broken and contrite spirit.

[15 : 44] But why has God designed it this way? And he gives us there to show that though we are easily broken, the strength that gets us through is God himself.

This illustrates his surpassing power best. This is what shows Jesus' life working through us best.

So Paul was writing this amidst his most severe experiences.

As we all know, Paul was a man not unfamiliar to trials and affliction. And at this point, it's helpful to remind ourselves of the times Paul boasts of his sufferings.

So I'm just going to read from chapter 11. 23 to 28. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. I am talking like a madman with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, countless beatings, often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

[16:43] 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, from Gentiles, in a city, danger from the wilderness at sea, from false brothers.

Toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hunger and thirst, often without food and cold and exposure. And apart from other things, the daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches. It's almost hyperbolic in what he's saying.

You almost couldn't make it more than that. And this is only a brief description. It gets more, we read more in Acts of what he later suffers. Seems that every time he goes on a ship it gets shipwrecked. So, Paul was not speaking of these things and giving these encouragements from his ivory tower.

He did not learn his theology in a university, but learnt it on the ground in suffering. He knew intimately what it was to be in the face of trouble.

And yet, through these, he knew even more intimately the love and depth and access of God in the midst of it, in the knowledge, in the glory and the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

[18:01] His trials, his trials did not destroy his faith or cause him to lose heart, but that was a means through which God gave growth.

Christianity is nothing more or less than devotion to Christ. The reason we have those trials is to lead us to deeper devotion to him.

So, we return to the objection, why don't we feel or look very transformed? The reason is in some sense simple, but also it's the battle we'll fight for the rest of our life, that this transformation is inward.

You won't see triumph in the same way. You see other victories. This is far, far greater. It has been designed to be an inward reality. So, we do not lose heart, though our outer self is wasting 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. So, we do not lose heart in the Christian life because God has promised us that despite what it looks like, our inner self is being transformed.

[19:16] That's a fact. Whether we feel like it or not, whether we can't see it or we can see it, we can't. We are being transformed and that's the way Christians go towards perfection.

I mean, light and momentary, light, momentary affliction. This is what Paul is describing his life. We read before, this is a life that hardly any of us will have. Beatings and lashings and he described this as light, so not heavy, and momentary, temporary, passing, fleeting, in light of the eternal glory.

I find this a particular encouragement because he's saying that the things we go through are not purposeless like they feel. We don't understand with full depth everything that we go through.

I think John Piper said that everything that, in the sufferings and trials God sends us, that he might have 10,000 reasons for them, but he might only give us three or one or none, and it's for us to trust him that he has a purpose behind it, that through that God is achieving his sovereign purpose.

he is leading us to himself for glory and glory forevermore. So this happens and we can be witnesses to it as we look to, as we look to the things that are seen, but not, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

[20:51] So the connection between 17 and 18, that these, these light, momentary afflictions are preparing us for the glory to come beyond all compare, and this happens as we look to the things unseen, the things that we can only see by faith.

In making this effort to look to the unseen, eternal things, fixing our gaze on God and his gospel, as revealed in his word, this is the best way to remain encouraged and not to lose heart in the sum of the Christian life.

So to conclude, why should we remain encouraged in our devotion to God and the ministry to come and our own devotion that he has made this kind of sight possible in our own lives, his mercy has unveiled our sight to focus on the unseen.

This is a fulfillment of scripture, this is what has always happened and what will continue to happen, this is why we go on, and why do we not see this transformation because oftentimes we're focusing

on the wrong things.

God is designed for the trials that we go through not to destroy our faith, not to tear us away from him, but to draw him closer, draw us closer to him. God uses everything we go through in the temporal and in this time to magnify his power in us, to have the eternal happening within the temporal, this treasure in jars of clay, and so bring about the transformation that we can trust he will do.

[22 : 28] So we do not lose heart, but are stirred towards our mission to others and our devotion to Christ and what he's done in our lives. We'll now stand and sing our final hymn in Christ's land.

in Christ alone My hope is found He is my light, my strength, my song This cornerstone, this solid ground
Burn through the fears as drought and storm What heights of love, what depths of peace,
Where fears are stilled when strivings cease, My comforter, my all in all, Here in the love of Christ I stand
In Christ alone who took on flesh

Filled us apart in helpless pain This gift of love and righteousness Scared by the ones He came to save
Till on that cross that Jesus died The wrath of God was satisfied For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I lay There in the ground His body lay Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious pain Up from the grave He rose again And as He stands In victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me

For I am His and He is mine Hark of the precious blood of Christ No guilt in life No fear in death This is the power of Christ
In me From life's first cry To find a breath Jesus demands my destiny No power of heaven No scheme of man
Can ever plant me From His hand Till He returns I'll cause me home Here in the power of Christ I stand
Here in the power of Christ I stand Father we thank you for your eternal word to us

Thank you for the encouragement that everything we go through every suffering we go through is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory
We pray that this week you can help us to focus our minds on the things unseen to gaze upon you to behold you and to know that you are securing the transformation that happens within us
In Jesus' name Amen