

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Looking to the Unseen

On my 40th birthday someone said:- “Oh well you’ll now know the reality of stiff and sore joints.” I said: “I already have that so what do I have to look forward to now.” “Oh well, they said, glasses and a hearing aid.” It’s true really isn’t it? With increasing age comes decreasing health. The older you are the worse your health is.

We only get one life and every stage is something we have never done before because we have never lived life before. When you get old you’re doing it for the first time because you’ve never been old before. Like all of life.

When you are trying something for the first time you don’t consider yourself an expert so why do we think we are experts at any stage of life. Each stage is different bringing new troubles. Of course this is true when you get old.

You might say:- “What would you know.” Well not much. It is easier to hear someone because of their experience or expertise. For me I have neither. The only thing I’m an expert at this stage of life is sin ie not living life perfectly the way God wants me to.

I speak as your pastor. I don’t always bring my experience and never any expertise but I bring a Word from God.

We all think we’re not old. We all pretend that life and our bodies will get better. We all scramble for what this life offers to extend our life, which is right but as people who have hope in Jesus there is something better.

Don’t think this message is not relevant if you’re not old. We are talking about the topic of living with suffering. So it is a message relevant for all of us.

We are always in one of three phases of suffering. Firstly we might be about to face suffering. Or secondly we are experiencing suffering. Or thirdly we are coming out of suffering. Who ever we are we are in one of those three stages. No matter where we are up to this message is relevant for all of us.

In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 we are given a reason not to lose heart in the thick of increasing age and decreasing health.

Knowing that God is working in you when there are trials and knowing what happens when you die gives you daily courage so you don’t lose heart in the pain of losing your health.

1. Losing heart

2 Corinthians 4:6a says:- *Therefore we do not lose heart.*

What’s the issue Paul is talking? Losing heart. Thinking there is no hope. This can at one end of the spectrum just mean we feeling a bit discouraged or at the other end feeling like there is no hope and life is not worth living.

We can all lose heart but what causes us to lose heart?

2. Looking at the temporary and seen

Paul says in v.16 outwardly ‘we are *wasting away.*’ He is talking about our bodies. *Our bodies are not improving. Our health is not getting better. We are not getting stronger. We are getting weaker. Our bodies are wearing out. Many of us are not seeing like we used to. Or we are not walking like we used to let alone running. Or we are not hearing like we used to. We have wrinkles. You know the signs you’re experiencing them.*

As I lent down to say goodnight to one of the girls this week they looked at my eyebrows and said you have a grey one. You are old. *Like everyone else I am dying. We are all moving from the cradle to the grave.* A lot of the time even as Christians we don’t think and act like we believe this.

Jesus said in John 14:- 'Let not your hearts be troubled.' He was setting up the disciples to expect to be troubled. That is why he is reassuring them that he will send a Comforter in the Holy Spirit.

Growing up near the beach our old cars always use to rust. I had two Volkswagen Beetles. Both of them ended up rusted out. The rust was a sign for a new car. The decay in our bodies should be a sign to us that this is what we can expect.

Paul goes on to say that what we are experiencing are troubles. He admits that. But he says they are light and momentary in v.17. In v.18 he says they are temporary.

Each stage of life brings its own troubles. We are always looking forward to the next stage of life to escape the troubles we are in and expect there'll be none in the next stage. We say when I finish school - When I finish uni - When I get a wife - When I have kids - When the kids leave home - When I get a job - When I own my own home - When I get better job. There is no escaping troubles this side of heaven.

"Heaven is not here, it's there. If we were given all we wanted here, our hearts would settle for this world rather than the next. God is forever luring us up and away from this one, wooing us to Himself and His still invisible Kingdom, where we will certainly find what we so keenly long for..." Elisabeth Elliot

We lose heart by looking at the temporary and seen.

How do we not lose heart? Where do we find the courage to live on each day?

3. Looking at the eternal and unseen

2 Corinthians 4:18 says:- *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

We are not less than but we are more than our bodies. We are more than the stuff we are made of. There is an immaterial side to us as people. Knowing this gives us courage for daily life.

The most amazing and important realities in our life are unseen. What are they?

Firstly in v.16 inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

We are being renewed on the inside. When you become a Christian it is because God changed you on the inside. Changing you to love what he loves. To live for the things that please him. To live for and be like Jesus. Giving you that ability to live that way. God continues this process.

Henry Ward Beecher said:- *"We are always in the forge, or on the anvil; by trials God is shaping us for higher things."*

Some people who claim to know Jesus deteriorate inwardly at about the same rate as they are outwardly. They are content to sit in front of the television; without hunger for righteousness; they are no longer curious or hopeful about anything. There are people who take on new adventures in old age. They can't wait to learn more about the Bible; they want to be more like Jesus; they are leading people to Christ; their prayers are deeper than they have ever been. Are you aware that God is renewing you inwardly and actively working with him?

Secondly in v.17 our troubles are achieving an eternal glory.

When the Cicada turns up you know about it. It is noisy. During its life cycle there is an outer skeleton which lies underground and the cicada is formed in this over many years. At the right time the outer skeleton reaches its end and the insect flies to freedom. The outer skeleton was there for the formation of what was its true purpose, new life that would come from it.

This life and its troubles is a preparation for our true destiny an eternal home. What we are too long for is not the pleasures and possessions of this life but the promises of Jesus in the Bible.

Thirdly we have an ETERNAL glory.

John Piper says:- *Being sure of what happens when you die is indispensable as a believer in Christ for your daily courage and for not losing heart through the pain and the diminishing health of this life.*

I heard a speaker talk about what he does when one of his children is struggling to obey him. He said:- When I ask the girls to do something that don't want to I say, "Please look at Daddy's face. Do you know how much I love you? Do you know that I would never ask you to do anything that would hurt you? I am sorry that you can't understand why I am asking you to do this. I wish I could explain it to you, but you are too young to understand. So I am going to ask you to do something—trust Daddy. When you walk down the hallway to do what Daddy has asked you to do, say to yourself, 'My Daddy loves me. My Daddy would never ask me to do something bad. I am going to trust my Daddy and stop trying to be the Daddy of my Daddy.'"

God does the same thing with you, over and over again. He meets you in one of the difficult hallways of your life, kneels down before you in love, and asks you to trust his loving and wise rule, even though you don't have a clue what he is doing.

He knows there are many times when your life doesn't look like there is anyone ruling it, let alone someone wise and good. He knows there will be times when you will wish you could be the author of your own story. He knows that at times you will be overwhelmed by what is on your plate. He knows that his plan will confuse and confound you. And he knows that real rest cannot be found in understanding; because, like my children, there are things, as a limited human being, you simply do not have the capacity to understand. Real rest is found in trusting the Person who is in control of the things you don't understand.

We are to fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal. Cancer is temporary. Tumors are temporary. Old age is temporary. Trials are temporary. Disease and even death are temporary but Christ is eternal.

Verse 18 Says we are to fix our eyes on what is unseen: - The ETERNAL. We are to rivet our attention on Jesus and the promise of life beyond this one. Calvin says: – *“When we raise our minds to heaven, a thousand years begins to look to us like a moment.”*

When the signs of age appear in my body, I know it is only a matter of time. I can exercise. I can go to doctors but my ultimate hope is in God.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine, Michael Orpwood who showed me how this works in practise when you are close to dying. He showed me how to die well as someone with hope beyond this life.

Michael Orpwood was a member of the church at Gladesville where I worked as a pastor for nearly ten years. He became a Christian later in life but grew and had an influence beyond his years as a Christian. He was not only respected in our church as a godly man but he also held an important role in our society as the person who drafted the laws for the State of New South Wales. He retired in his early sixties with many opportunities for service ahead of him. He was not looking forward to retirement in the normal sense but in the sense of being freed up for the sake of the Gospel. However soon after he retired he was diagnosed with cancer. He began treatment and the road of suffering in sickness. He did not see this an opportunity to get angry with God or lose heart. He took it as an opportunity to call upon the hope he had come to know in Jesus. He wrote a series of emails to his family and friends. They were to thank people for their love and support; to give an update on his cancer but most importantly to express a longing to make Jesus known and give him glory in this time of his life.

I share with you some of what he wrote:-

“We hope that, like Job, we have become wiser, wiser in our understanding of God’s holiness, in His purposes of love, indeed, wiser in all His ways. We trust Him more. We have a greater assurance and a greater peace.

I am seeing with greater clarity that all the beautiful and beguiling things of this world and of this life are merely shadows of the reality that is to come. This seems to be God’s way. The Passover is swallowed up in the Cross. A greater than Moses comes to lead His children into their true inheritance. David, the Messiah King,

submits to the Son of David whose suffering and death provide the full and perfect atonement. The temple gives way to the body of Christ. So many examples could be given.

I find the focus of my prayers is changing. I think, previously, I have generally moved quickly from praise and exaltation to intercession, for myself and others, and perhaps that is the pattern of the Lord's Prayer, anyway. Our Father delights in our simple and constant dependence on Him. But I don't know it is the pattern of the psalmist. Now, I find I want to fill my mind with praise and wonder and awe and thankfulness and, to my regret, I find I am not well practiced.

I have always loved to sing, anywhere and at any time. Our children are all great singers...Last weekend, she (our daughter) came and played it for us. I tried, but found I can no longer sing. I am just too short of breath. I longed to be able. I wondered if the next time I might do so would be because I had been gathered with the saints in glory everlasting around the throne of the Lamb to sing and sing and sing His praise. What a prospect that is! Heaven seems so full of song!

This world has great comfort and familiarity for us. Its attractions and beauty are constantly promoted. For many of us, life here, surrounded by our loved ones, having all the bounties of privilege, and particularly blessed as members of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, is very good. But we need reminding that this world, despite all its sublime appeal, is subject to death and decay. It is passing away. It is not our home. Our citizenship is elsewhere. The kingdom of heaven, the world of life, a far more glorious destination, awaits us. It is the city of God, the city of holiness, the throne of the Lamb, where there is no more sin. I can hardly imagine that! Can you? No more sin!

I am struck by the balanced way in which Paul grapples with this tension. 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.' Philippians 1:21. 'We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.' 2 Corinthians 5:8, 9. How do we resolve this tension, while seeking ever to please God now, yet genuinely increasing our longing to go, at God's appointed time, to adore and worship him and receive the inheritance kept for us in heaven? At this point, the place of suffering, of which I have had so little firsthand experience in my life, has become very salutary.

So my poor illustration is this. It is as if, each day, a bus leaves from the Town Hall steps for the city of God. Each day I go to the point of departure and scan the passenger list to see if my name is there. It may not be there today, so I seek, so far as I am able, to press on in service, but each day is one day closer."

What is the reason not to lose heart in the thick of increasing age and decreasing health?

Knowing that God is working in you when there are trials and knowing what happens when you die gives you daily courage so you don't lose heart in the pain of losing your health.