THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN
2 Corinthians 4:13-18

“A gem it not polished without rubbing, nor a man made perfect without trials.”¹
–Chinese Proverb

“Adversity introduces a person to himself.”²
–Anonymous

Adversity shows us what we are made of! Or as someone put it,

“Christian are like tea, it takes hot water to bring out the true flavor.”

We have seen Paul repeatedly criticized and attacked. Like many others, Paul could have said, “I don’t need this!” and thrown in the towel. But he didn’t. What was it that made Paul such a strong, faithful, persistent servant of Christ? What gave him such resolve and boldness? What made him endure countless struggles and dangers? How did he keep a cheerful heart throughout his many ordeals?

It was his faith, his hope.

WE SPEAK WITH CONVICTION (4:13-15)

Paul was utterly sincere and he was convinced of what he spoke about. Why? Because his faith had been tested. His relationship with Christ had endured difficult times. He testified,

“It is written: I believed; therefore I have spoken. With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present with you in His presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”
(vv. 13-15)

David starts out Psalm 116:10 with the words, “I believed; therefore I said.” Here David speaks of his faith that moved him to call on the Lord when he was threatened. The threat of death from which he had been delivered was brought on by the false accusations of enemies (Ps 109). It is in that same “spirit of faith” that David had that Paul speaks hundreds of years later.

Benjamin Franklin used to go to hear the British evangelist and revivalist George Whitfield preach. When asked why he did so since he was not a believer, he said he liked to hear someone speak who did so with conviction. Paul’s preaching was not empty platitudes and meaningless phrases. His words were supported by the earnest conviction of his heart
And Paul was **inspired by the hope of the resurrection**. He saw beyond this life into another. He did not think of death as something which frustrated his work. Rather it gives meaning to our work (1 Co 15:58).

Paul did not see his suffering as a waste, but considered it **beneficial and helpful to others**. He said, “All is for your benefit” (v. 15). When we are able to see our misfortunes in light of advantage for those we serve, we are making progress in our walk with God. This conviction sustained Paul in many difficult circumstances. He was more than willing to go through hardship if it meant benefit to someone else.

How different from the philosophy of our age! Looking out for number one is the name of the game. Personal interest comes first. But **Paul lived with the interests of others at heart**.

Paul expresses his confidence that the grace of his selfless action will hopefully cause “thanksgiving to overflow” (v. 15). The more people that were being reached meant there were that much more people to thank God and thus bring glory to Him.

**WE DO NOT LOSE HEART AND GIVE UP (4:16)**

Facing tremendous difficulties and working under terrible pressures of life, Paul said,

“Therefore we do not lose heart” (v. 16).

He never flinched. He never lost heart. He did not swerve from his purpose. Paul was certain that he could draw on a power which was sufficient for life and greater than death. **He was convinced that God’s promises are true**. As someone put it,

“God promises a safe landing but not a calm passage.”

Since Paul recognized that we are not promised a calm passage, he **paid close attention to his inner life**. While the onslaught of opposition may take its toll on our natural physical life, the inner life of the spirit can grow stronger under pressure. While the outer person is being destroyed, the inner is being renewed. Paul put it,

“yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (v. 16).

The word “renewed” means taking something that is barely moving and making it vital and alive again. It means taking something that is barely functioning and restoring it to its full usefulness.
It is comforting to know that while our eyesight grows dim, our hands become unsteady, our bones become fragile and our memory faulty, that the inner person of the soul can grow stronger. **God can use the sufferings which lead to a weakened body to strengthen the sinews of our soul.** This He does through a day by day renewal of spiritual strength.

It is possible under the strain of normal life, with its problems and pressures, to be constantly renewed and strengthened in the fortress of our soul. As long as we maintain clear channels of communication between ourselves and God, the struggles may batter us, but they cannot defeat us. We may suffer every disadvantage, of adversity and yet be victorious through it all.

The song “Through It All” captures this thought well.

“Through It All”

I've had many tears and sorrows, I've had questions for tomorrow, There've been times didn't know right from wrong: But in every situation God gave blessed consolation That my trials come to only make me strong.

Through it all, through it all, I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God; Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word.

I've been to lots of places, And I've seen a lot of faces, There've been times I felt so all alone; But in my lonely hours, Yes, those precious lonely hours, Jesus let me know that I was His own.

Through it all, through it all, I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God; Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word.

I thank God for the mountains, And I thank Him for the valleys, I thank Him for the storms He brought me through; For if I'd never had a problem I wouldn't know that He could solve them, I'd never know what faith in God could do.

Through it all, through it all, I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God; Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word.

–Ray Boltz

The measure of this victory is the measure of a day by day contact with God. Christianity is something we apply daily. To know Christ is to walk with Him day by day.
We must be careful to keep things in proportion. Christians are easily persuaded to throw their vision out of perspective. Too many of us adopt the philosophy of escapism. We try to escape the reality of today by focusing on the glories of tomorrow. Although these glories and the ultimate triumph are certain to come, we must live and face today. We cannot afford to shirk the responsibilities of the present. The hope we are given in Scripture should be a powerful incentive and inspiration to live for Christ today.

The world is full of fearful people who go through life under a cloud of anxiety and fear. As Christians we can live with hope. We know that today’s afflictions are not the final experiences. Tomorrow will dawn with it glory, therefore, we can live life unafraid. Therefore we are secure. Secure no matter what!

OUR HOPE FOR THE ETERNAL REWARD (4:17)

Paul continues by contrasting our present, momentary life with that of our future, eternal life. He puts it,

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (v. 17).

Paul was convinced that anything he had to suffer in this world would be as nothing compared with the glory he would enjoy in the next. Although we experience hardships, it is only for a brief time. The problem is that when we are in the middle of suffering, it does not feel very brief. As someone put it,

“An hour of pain is as long as a day of pleasure.”

When you sit on a hot stove, the seconds feel like hours.

Difficulties and hardships become intolerable without hope. It becomes an endless experience of agony apart from the eternity that follows it. With hope we can withstand anything. Affliction is pressure that can work for us, not against us. It is sometimes difficult to see this at the time of the affliction and during the pain of it, but it is a fact as true as the Bible itself.

The future prospect is beyond all proportion to the present experience. If the experience is affliction, the prospect is glory. This is why Paul told the believers at Corinth,

“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” (v. 18).
It is while we are looking at things that are not seen that we can understand the meaning of our affliction. This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life: If we fasten our hope on the seen, there is little hope for us, but if we rivet our attention on the unseen, we will be filled with hope.

Materialism bases its hopes upon what is tangible to the five senses, yet everything we touch will crumble and everything we see will eventually disappear. Only that which faith sees will endure to the end.

Only the unseen will last forever. It will endure when all else fades and fails. Money, talent and time invested in the unseen will remain. It is beyond the chemical dissolution of material things.

APPLICATION

1. **Entrust your past, present and future to God.** Let go of the failures, regrets and guilt of the past, take hold of God’s daily grace for the present and His hope for the future. Though we do not know what the future holds, we do know who holds the future.

   Erwin W. Lutzer points out that God often puts us in situations that are too much for us so that we will learn that no situation is too much for God. This way we have to lean on Him.

2. **Realize that God uses affliction to make you into the kind of person He wants.** Our life is in the hands of God as a bow and arrow in the hands of an archer. God is aiming at something we cannot see. Therefore He stretches and strains until His purpose is in sight. Only then He lets the arrow fly.

   We are here for God’s designs, not for our own.

   Ted. W. Engstrom put it:

   “Cripple him, and you have a Sir Walter Scott.
   Lock him in a prison cell, and you have a John Bunyan.
   Bury him in the snows of Valley forge, and you have a George Washington.
   Raise him in abject poverty, and you have an Abraham Lincoln.
   Strike him down in infantile paralysis, and he becomes Franklin Roosevelt.
   Deafen him, and you have a Ludwig van Beethoven.
   Have him or her born black in a society filled with racial discrimination, and you have a Booker T. Washington, a Marian Anderson, a George Washington Carver. . . .
   Call him a slow learner, “retarded,” and write him off an uneducable, and you have an Albert Einstein.”
3. **Embrace the perspective of the unseen.** This does not mean that we should spend the rest of our lives by sitting and staring off into space. We are still in a world of practical reality. While we handle the seen, we do it from the perspective of the unseen. While we go to school, build houses, keep books, play with our children, carry out our regular duties, we do it with the devotion of the unseen. Thus we transfer the material into the spiritual, the seen into the unseen and the temporal into the eternal.

**NOTES**
