



## SEEING WHAT CANNOT BE SEEN

Catalog No. 1226  
 2 Corinthians 4:16-18  
 Seventh Message  
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 March 29, 1998

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the character Eustace Scrubb, who is a cousin to Edmund and Lucy, is an obnoxious boy. He is a snob. His mother makes him read economics instead of fairy tales. He comes from a wealthy background. He is very greedy; he thinks only of himself. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace finds himself in a dragon's cave, and he discovers that he has turned into a dragon. He attempts to take off his dragon skin, but he can't remove it by himself. Finally, Aslan, the lion, the Christ figure, comes to him, and, as Eustace relates it:

Then the lion said - but I don't know if it spoke - "you will have to let me undress you." I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.

This is the very process we are examining in our studies in the new covenant. It is the process by which God peels away our self-sufficiency so that we might learn to rely on him alone, and depend upon his Spirit to make and shape us into the men and women we were created to be.

Although we refer to this arrangement for living as the "new" covenant, back in the Old Testament it was predicted by the prophet Jeremiah that God would write his laws in the hearts of his people, not on tables of stone. God would live with them, they would be his people, and he would be their God. They could draw upon his wisdom, his energy, his power and his strength to meet all the demands of life. He would instruct them by his Spirit that their eyes would be opened to see the real meaning of the things they learned. By forgiving their sins at the very beginning, he would settle once and for all the question of their guilt, and all through their lives they could rest upon that constant washing and cleansing and forgiveness. This is the glory of the new covenant.

But, as we will learn in our text today, there is yet more for Christians to experience. God has prepared something unimaginably beautiful for those who love and trust him. It lies beyond time, and it is so beautiful and vast and breathtaking that only eternity is big

enough to contain it. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, the apostle Paul now lifts his eyes from his present experience to the hope that lies beyond.

Let's read the passage:

**Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor 4:16-18, NASB)**

The apostle introduces this with a phrase that we have seen before. It is a great cry of encouragement and hope. "We do not lose heart," says Paul. This is the same phrase that we saw in verse 1 of this chapter. Christians don't burn out. We don't quit. We don't give up. We don't run away. We hang in there. There is a reason for our hope. It arises not only from our present experience of the grace of God (as Paul has been describing it), and our ministry of imparting that message of grace to others, but also as we look to the future.

In the following verses Paul sets out the reasons why he has such hope in the midst of circumstances that would seem to contradict his faith. The first reason is in verse 16:

**though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.**

This is what gives him hope. It is true, Paul says, that the outward man is perishing. He is referring to our bodies, which, he says, are slowly falling apart. Many of us can attest to that. I have noticed that newspaper print gets smaller and smaller all the time. (My bi-focal contact lenses hide my deteriorating eyesight.) My family says my hearing is going, but I think they are mumbling. And have you noticed that people are younger than they used to be when you were their age? and people of your own age look considerably older than you do? I still play basketball regularly, but more and more I find myself unable to do the things I used to do.

Yes, the outward man is deteriorating, growing weak and feeble, and subject to much groaning and agony. Death is a certainty that we cannot avoid. Pascal said that the human race is like a number of people in a room, all of whom are condemned to death, and every day one is executed in the presence of the others. Daily

everyone in the room is reminded that their time will come. This is the terror we feel when we come face to face with some tragedy that brings death close to us. We know that one of these days, our time will come. One of these days, we are all going to die. We are so preoccupied with health and keeping ourselves in good shape that we act as if we are not going to die, but death is certain. You can jog, you can avoid cholesterol, you can watch your health, and you will end up the healthiest looking corpse ever!

Paul is saying, "That is what is happening to me, too. But I don't get discouraged, because the inner man is being renewed day by day." The "inner" man, of course, is the "real" you. Paul says that his inner being is renewed daily. The word he uses is "made new," "made over afresh."

One of the great privileges of being a pastor is having the opportunity to share special moments with families. I am with them during times of great happiness, like weddings, births, and celebrations, and times of deep sadness, like the death of loved ones. I have been an eyewitness to the power of this truth to which Paul is referring. In the last days of a person's life, oftentimes there is a profound contrast between the effects of disease on the body—the lessening powers, the failure of the various systems to work—and the beauty of the spirit, in the deepening of their love. There is a beauty about godly old age which young people know nothing of. The spirit broadens and grows serene, though the body trembles and feels increasing pain. The outer man is losing the battle, the strength of youth wanes and withers, the night is coming on, but the inner man is reaching out to light, growing in strength and beauty: the "day" is at hand.

Ray Stedman said: "This inner renewal is another way of describing the new covenant in action: 'Everything coming from God, nothing from me.' The law of sin and death is destroying the body, but the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is renewing the inner man, 'from one degree of glory to another.'"

Paul says this very fact is testimony that we are being inwardly prepared for something great. Something greater is ahead! Even though the physical man is undergoing struggle and difficulty, the inner man is alive and encouraged, expectant of what God is doing. This truth can provide great strength as we rise to meet each new day.

What is the reason for this kind of renewal? Paul gives this in verse 17.

**For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,**

The promise of this verse is that not only will there be glory following the affliction, but that the affliction is producing the glory. This is not merely an encouraging word to hang in there, that some day soon it will be over; it is much more than that. Paul directly links this

weight of glory, which we will one day experience, to the afflictions and the struggles of the present. The promise of Scripture is that the things you wish to be free of are the very things that are making you into what you long to be. The one is preparing for the other. The trials are not only preparing us for the glory, they are creating it!

This truth is echoed throughout the Scriptures. In Romans 8:17, Paul says, "we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." According to the apostle, no matter how great the suffering you are presently experiencing, two things are always true of it. Ray Stedman put it this way: "First, compared with what is coming, it is relatively light; and second, compared to eternity, it is relatively brief." Calvin wrote: "This comparison makes that light which previously seemed heavy, and makes that brief and momentary which seemed of boundless duration."

When we first read that, we are tempted to think, "That's easy for Paul to say! He did not suffer what I have to go through. My affliction is anything but light and momentary." But that is not all that we know of Paul. In chapter 11 of this very letter he reveals something of what his "momentary light affliction" looked like. Certainly I don't know anyone who had to endure anything like this:

**Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Cor 11:24-27, NIV)**

In Romans 8:18, the apostle put it this way, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us." Here again is this incomparable eternal weight of glory which is yet to come. According to Paul, it is beyond description.

C.S. Lewis's message, "The Weight of Glory," is based on this very passage. I recommend that you read it in its entirety. Listen to one brief passage which speaks to this point:

We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already. You can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies

know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. [And then he adds these words:] The door on which we have all been knocking all our lives will open at last.

Our present sufferings are preparing us for something so marvelous that there are no words to describe it. This truth also reminds us that every trial we are experiencing is significant. All of it plays an important role in God's plan for our lives.

Not only does our daily inner renewal suggest it, and our present affliction prove it, but the very nature of faith guarantees it.

Look at verse 18:

**while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.**

Paul's argument here is very simple. The visible things of life are but temporary displays of enduring realities which we can't see. If the temporary can exist, then the reality behind it must exist.

It has always been difficult for people to believe that there are unseen realities, things that are invisible to human investigation. One great value of our pain and suffering is that it forces us to realize that there is no future for us here in this world which is fading away. It is the dark valleys that make God more real to us. Job said, out of his own misery, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). I know from my own experience and from the experiences of many who have shared their suffering with me, that it is our pain that often cures us of the idolatries that rob us of real joy. My friend Dave Roper writes: "Pain is God's way of prying our fingers from the things that are false and not satisfying. Pain pulls us away from lesser loves and enlarges our intimacy with our Heavenly Father." God is the only one who can satisfy our longings. But, as Richard Foster says, God only becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity.

Sorrow is the means to that end to all things—God himself. It is sorrow that brings us heart to heart with God. When repeated strokes have robbed us of health, friends, money, and favorable circumstances, God then becomes the only thing in life for us. He alone becomes the object of our devotion, and we cry out with the psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you."

A cynic once asked an old saint, who for twenty years had suffered great physical pain, "What do you think of your God now?" "I think of him more than ever," he said. That is the sweet aftermath of suffering.

God is making us into men and women whose lives

are fragrant with beauty and grace. Through suffering we learn to bear pain without complaint, endure insult without retaliation, and suffer shame without bitterness. He makes us more like the men and women we have always wanted to be. We learn to "live friendly," as the Quakers say. We become more patient with others, more tolerant of their weaknesses and failure. We become kinder, gentler folk, easier to get along with, easier to work with, easier to be around.

In this materialistic world we think that the only real things are those that we can detect with our five senses. There is, however, another realm of reality that is more actual, more factual, more substantial than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell in this world. And faith is the means by which we gain access to that invisible world. Faith is to the spiritual realm what the five senses are to the natural. It is the means by which we grasp spiritual reality and bring it into the realm of our experience. "Faith," says the writer of Hebrews, "gives substance to things that are not seen."

Many regard faith as psyching oneself up to believe facts that are difficult to accept. But real faith is very different. Real faith is the capacity to look beyond the seen to the unseen world of reality, where the invisible God is at work.

One of my favorite Old Testament stories is told in 2 Kings 6. It involves the prophet Elisha and his servant, who are in the city of Dothan. The Syrian King, Ben-Hadad, is trying his best to capture and kill King Jehoram of Israel. Elisha, however, has some inside information on everything Ben-Hadad planned, and he keeps Jehoram informed so that the king is able to avoid being ambushed. Ben-Hadad suspects deceit in the ranks and summons his officers to locate the informant. "Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?" he asks. "None of us, my lord the king," says one of his officers. "But Elisha, the prophet, who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom." Ben-Hadad's bedroom was bugged by God! He overhears the king's pillow-talk, and passes it on to Elisha.

So Ben Hadad decides to put an end to the prophet. He storms in with his army to besiege the city of Dothan, where Elisha and his servant are staying. During the night, the Syrians circle the city and wait for dawn. The next morning, Elisha's servant looks out over the walls and sees the army and panics. He wakes Elisha and tells him the bad news. "It's all over. What are we going to do?" Elisha says to him "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them." At that moment Elisha could see the look of bewilderment in his servant's eyes as the man thought, "Let's see. One, two..." And Elisha prays, "*O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.*" *And the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.*"

Facts are not always what they seem. We cannot eval-

uate a situation merely in terms of what we see. What is observable is real, of course, but it is not the ultimate reality. Behind what we see is an all-powerful, all-loving God. We must continually remind ourselves of this.

The forces that gather around us in opposition always seem to have the edge. But that is false. We are never out-numbered, out-manned or out-gunned. We will always be disadvantaged, but we can never be overcome. Our awareness of the unseen world will maintain our hearts in strength and courage in the day of pressure and panic.

I don't know what battlefield you are fighting on today, but I do know that God is there with you in that place. You are on holy ground. However strong the foe, God is stronger. When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of God will raise up a standard against him.

Some of you have difficult family situations. There are no promises that God will make your home into the one you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. Can you trust him, even though others never come through? Can you trust him that he is there, even though you can't see him? Can you stand firm and hold onto the traditions?

Do you struggle with habitual sin? When you seem to be making progress in that battle, do you fall flat on your face? Well, God says "sin will not have dominion over you." Can you keep trusting his word? Can you pick yourself up and go on, even though you keep falling down? C. S. Lewis once said, "No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home... The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give up." Can you believe that one day you will be perfectly pure, even though that seems impossible now? Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Maybe you are a student in a classroom that is seething with hostility. You are the only one who takes God seriously, the sole voice for morality and righteousness, and you feel crushed by overwhelming odds. Can you remind yourself today, "The Lord and his legions are here! There are more of us than there are of them"?

Some of you are out of work. You are depleting your precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job will ever come along. Can you continue to believe that God will not leave you or forsake you? that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing? that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you?

Some of you are suffering physical or emotional pain that seems endless. Can you believe that "momentary light affliction is producing in you an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"? Can you believe that

suffering is making you a man or woman of God? that it is drawing you to him and purifying you of self-interest and self-glorification so that *his* glory can be seen? You can, if you look at the "things which are not seen."

I want to close by reading a poem by Ruth Calkins' from her book, *Tell Me Again, Lord, I Forget*:

God  
I may fall flat on my face  
I may fail until I feel  
Old and beaten and done in  
Yet Your love for me is changeless.  
All the music may go out of my life  
My private world may shatter to dust  
Even so You will hold me  
In the palm of Your steady hand.  
No turn in the affairs  
Of my fractured life  
Can baffle You.  
Satan with all his braggadocio  
Cannot distract You.  
Nothing can separate me  
From Your measureless love:  
Pain can't  
Disappointment can't  
Anguish can't.  
Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't.  
The loss of my dearest love can't.

Death can't  
Life can't.  
Riots war insanity unidentity  
Hunger neurosis disease -  
None of these things  
Nor all of them heaped together  
Can budge the fact  
That I am dearly loved.  
Completely forgiven  
And forever free  
Through Jesus Christ  
Your Beloved Son.

May God gives us eyes to see him today!

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