

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

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[0 : 00] To lose heart is an experience common to us all, to a lesser or greater degree. I would be surprised if there is anybody gathered here this evening who can say, well, no, I know nothing of that. I never lose heart.

I'm always upbeat, always positive, always able to see the bright side. Never lose heart. I would be surprised if there's anybody in that situation.

Now, while the experience of losing heart, and our concern this evening is very particularly how we are prone to lose heart as Christians in the context of our Christian service, which really is the context of our lives, for our lives are to be lives of Christian service.

Now, while that experience of losing heart is a common one, and given that it is a common one, we ought not to be unduly dejected when we experience it.

Many before us have experienced it. Many who are around us are experiencing it. And many, no doubt, will experience it in the future.

[1 : 16] And so, we ought not to be too dejected when, on occasion, we lose heart. At the same time, we have to recognize that it can be very damaging to our usefulness as Christians when we lose heart.

You know, I'm sure what I'm speaking about. You lose heart in some ministry you're involved in. And it just becomes such an effort to continue.

And the manner in which you do what you do isn't as it used to be. There isn't the same commitment. There isn't the same enthusiasm. It's all just a bit of a burden.

And maybe there comes a point when you say, well, there's no point. I'm just going to stop doing this. I'm not going to be involved in this anymore. Because you have lost heart.

It can damage ourselves. It can damage us, as I say, as regards how useful we can be as disciples of Jesus Christ. But also, it can be contagious.

[2 : 21] And again, I'm sure this isn't something that you're not able to identify with. I'm sure you can imagine occasions when maybe you've been part of a group of people involved in some ministry or mission, some act of Christian service.

But one or two within the group have lost heart. And that's evident in the way in which they speak. They say, well, there's no point in doing this. This is a waste of time. Nobody will come.

Nobody will listen. It's not working. And you start off with one or two who have lost heart. And before you know it, you have the whole group tempted to also lose heart.

So while on the one hand, we ought not to be unduly dejected when we lose heart, because then we just get into a vicious circle, as it were. On the other hand, we do have to be conscious that it is a matter to be dealt with and to be concerned about for the worrying effects that it can have.

Well, another thing to say almost by way of introduction is that not only is this experience of losing heart potentially contagious, but it also tends to be progressive in its effects on us.

[3 : 34] So we maybe begin a little disheartened. Maybe somebody said something to us that was hurtful. Maybe some aspect of our Christian ministry is unappreciated or criticized, and we're disheartened.

We feel sorry for ourselves. We feel downcast because of what has been said or the impression that has been given. But we might say, well, that's not a huge deal.

But often, or sometimes perhaps would be a more careful way of putting it, what begins as being just a little disheartened can, in due course, if not arrested, lead us to a state of being backslidden in our faith, of leaving behind things that we have been involved in, no longer willing to serve God and His people.

Indeed, in extreme cases, there are those who have abandoned the faith. And if you were to trace that process, which seldom is a dramatic moment when somebody decides, that's it, I've had enough, if we were to trace the process, often I think we'll discover that it began when somebody had lost heart, for some reason or another, in the context of the church that they were part of, the ministry that they were involved in.

So this is a matter that merits consideration. And this evening we want to see what Paul has to say to us in this regard. Paul, in the passage that we've read, in the chapter that we've read, and we're going to be particularly focusing our attention on the final three verses of 2 Corinthians chapter 4, there Paul exhorts and encourages the Corinthians with these words, We do not lose heart.

[5 : 33] He began the chapter with these words in verse 1, We do not lose heart. And then in verse 16, as he comes to the conclusion, he once again repeats these words, We do not lose heart.

Now we want to consider how Paul develops the theme, the argument that he gives for not losing heart. And that is going to be the bulk of what we want to say.

But before we do that, let's just notice in the passing, three important points about that statement of Paul. We do not lose heart. The first thing that I think is worth highlighting is that in stating his case in that way, he tells us, he makes it clear, that to lose heart, though maybe a common experience, is not inevitable.

He says, we do not lose heart. He's not saying, don't lose heart, or let's not lose heart, let's do all we can not to lose heart. He says, we do not lose heart. He's going to tell us about many reasons why he could be tempted to lose heart, but he is able to describe his own reality in this way.

We do not lose heart. It is possible. To lose heart isn't something inevitable. It's not just one of these things. Well, that's the way life is. Sometimes you do, and what can you do about it?

[6 : 58] You've just got to see how you face it when it happens. No, Paul is able to say, we do not lose heart. Another thing we can just comment briefly on the basis of these words and the manner in which Paul presents them is that it's possible for you and for me not to lose heart.

Paul says, we do not lose heart. He's not only speaking of himself. He's not saying, I don't lose heart. He says, we. And there he is speaking not only of himself, clearly, but of the Christian community that he is part of.

He says, as believers, as part of this community, we do not lose heart. There are many reasons, perhaps, many temptations, many causes for losing heart, but we don't.

Not just me. Not just the apostle. Not this giant of the faith. Well, he doesn't lose heart, but the ordinary Christians, the likes of you and me, well, we are in a different category. And yes, for us, this is just to be expected.

He says, no, it is possible not to lose heart. But I think also, just as we comment on the words that Paul uses before going on to see the arguments that he gives, I think we can also say that in order not to lose heart involves an informed decision on our part.

[8 : 17] That seems to be the stress of what Paul says when he says, we do not lose heart. It's as if Paul makes a conscious decision not to lose heart.

He makes a conscious decision to bring together all the reasons that are at his disposal to ensure that he doesn't lose heart. And we're going to consider what they are in a moment.

But it is a conscious thing. He is aware that he, like anybody, is prone to losing heart. He's aware that it would not be a surprising thing were he to lose heart, given all the things that he goes through and the opposition that he faces.

But conscious of that, he consciously and carefully takes a decision not to lose heart. It's not something that he seems to present that is simply beyond our control, that we are simply passive victims of this experience.

No, he suggests that there is something we can do about it to avoid this experience. Now, having said that, almost just by way of introduction, as we just comment on the manner in which Paul expresses himself in these words, we do not lose heart.

[9 : 34] We do, having said what we've said, we do recognize that this can be a struggle. It can be very difficult. And Paul himself, in this chapter, and particularly, and we're going to focus on these final verses, Paul recognizes that there are many reasons that would seem to give ample cause and justification for losing heart.

But he then contrasts these reasons, genuine and legitimate though they are, he contrasts them with weightier reasons not to lose heart.

He compares, he contrasts, and then, surprisingly, he draws a connection between that which could cause us to lose heart and the reasons we have for not losing heart.

Now, that all seems perhaps a bit involved in a bit of a tongue twister, but I hope that as we develop it, it will become clear. So, basically, what we want to do is to notice the reasons that Paul gives, the reasons that Paul recognizes, could indeed have as their effect that the Christian would lose heart. Notice what they are. But then notice the reasons that he gives in contrast, in comparison. Reasons that he argues are weightier, and as we grasp them and consider them, would be reason sufficient not to allow those other reasons to dominate and to produce the condition of losing heart and being disheartened.

[11 : 05] And then, briefly, we'll notice how he connects these two things. So, let's notice, first of all, the reasons that he does recognize can be a cause for us to lose heart, to be disheartened, to be cast down in our faith.

First of all, there in verse 16, therefore, we do not lose heart, though, evidently here introducing something that might be a reason for losing heart, though outwardly we are wasting away. The first reason that he identifies in this small part of the chapter. And what is it? Well, it's a failing body. Outwardly, we are wasting away. Now, in the case of Paul, it seems to me that this is not primarily a reference to failing health that was the product of advancing years, though that is indeed true.

And that is indeed so, that this wasting body is something that we all have. All of us have bodies that are wasting away. All of us are subject to advancing years and the weakness and the illness, the ill health that that brings.

That is very clear. In the case of Paul, it would seem that the attacks on his body or the weakness of his body, the pain that he suffered in his body was, though no doubt, contributed to by advancing years, was largely the product of the damage that had been done to his bodies in the cause of the gospel by his enemies and indeed by the very rigors of Christian service to which he had thrown himself into with all his might and with all his energy.

[12 : 57] Now, this is something we are familiar with. Even as we've been going through Acts, we've encountered the many ways in which he was physically beaten and attacked by the enemies of the gospel.

But just in his own words, that experience is summarized very eloquently in chapter 11 of this letter, 2 Corinthians chapter 11 and from verse 23.

He is comparing himself with those who were attacking him. And he says, Are they servants of Christ? I am out of my mind to talk like this.

I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.

Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a day and a night and a day in the open sea.

[13 : 59] 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. And he goes on. Now all of these things have taken their toll on his body.

His is a body that has been, that has gone through so many of these experiences. And so it is wasting away. It is literally wasting away as a result of all of these things that he describes for us. And that could cause him to lose heart. Is all this pain really worth it? What is my reward for all of this suffering that I am enduring?

And though we are spared in great measure, many of the experiences that Paul describes, it remains the case that sacrificial service for the master will take its toll.

[15 : 16] I hear a lot today, I hear a lot today, and I have great sympathy for the concern, let that be very clear. But we hear a lot today of how as Christians, as ministers, as those who are involved in Christian service, how we should take care not to burn out.

And yes, I think it is true. And there is wisdom in recognizing our limitations and not foolishly exposing our bodies to undue punishment.

That is fair comment and a reasonable concern. But I think it is also true, or there is certainly an element of truth in saying that to burn out in the cause of the gospel is no folly. Certainly, I'd rather burn out for the Lord than reach the grave well preserved through inactivity. And I do recognize in saying that there is a balance that we need to be careful to preserve. But perhaps in our desire for comfort and for avoiding pain and suffering and discomfort of every kind, we have gone to another extreme so often.

[16:39] But returning to the matter at hand, Paul recognizes that a failing body, outwardly wasting away, that carries with it its burdens and its pains and its temptation or producing a temptation to lose heart.

A failing body, a pain-wracked body, an exhausted body can cause us to lose heart. But Paul identifies another reason why we might lose heart in verse 17.

In verse 17, he speaks of our light and momentary troubles. And if we focus for the moment simply on this reference to troubles, he recognizes that in his Christian service, he faces many troubles. And there is, of course, never any shortage of troubles in life and in Christian service. Here in the chapter, Paul doesn't explicitly list the troubles he is referring to.

We've already read in chapter 11 of many troubles that he faced. But even in this chapter, he does make reference to some of these troubles that no doubt he has in mind as he makes mention of his troubles there in verse 17.

[18:00] For example, in verses 8 and 9, we are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed.

Though there is a victorious flavor to the manner in which he expresses these things, nonetheless, he speaks of being hard-pressed, of being crushed, of being perplexed, of being persecuted, of being struck down, many troubles that he faced in his life and in his Christian service.

And these words that he uses, I think we can reasonably and legitimately recognize as being broad in their application. We too can face many troubles.

They won't be the same as the troubles that Paul faced. But we can face many troubles. In the Christian fellowship, there can be misunderstandings. There can be conflicts.

There can be frustrations. There can be failures. There can be the limitations of scarce resources and how that may frustrate us. Disappointments in ventures that we embark on and that don't turn out as we had hoped.

[19:14] And no doubt, the list could go on and on. And all of these things could cause us to lose heart. Indeed, often do cause us to lose heart. I wonder what your situation is, how you identify or respond to this matter, what troubles you have faced or perhaps are facing in your life and in your desire to serve your master.

And these things, these troubles, they have caused you perhaps to lose heart or you feel very much that temptation to lose heart.

Well, it was no different. For Paul, he knew many troubles that had they been the totality of his reality, would have produced a disheartened apostle.

We'll see in a moment why they did not. So there is the reality of an outward body that is wasting away. There are these many troubles that he faces.

But there is also, and this is not a separate category, but perhaps a different way in which he describes the same reality, there is what he talks about as what is seen. Then in verse 18, there is another contrast on, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

[20:35] And for the moment, let's think about this matter of what is seen. As I say, I don't think this is describing something different to what he's already mentioned about the troubles that surround him.

That is what is seen, what you're able to see with your eyes. It's in your face perhaps, these troubles and difficulties and frustrations. What we see around us, in the church, among our fellow Christians, in the society in which God has placed us to serve him, what we see is often not a pretty picture.

There is much that we see that would cause us to lose heart. We think of the nation that we are part of. We see the manner in which day after day and year after year, there is a further going away and abandoning of what truth that had been part of our Christian life or our national life.

And we see much that is saddening and disheartening in the nation that we are part of. We look at the church and we see the church so often ineffective. We recognize that we have a great

message, we have a wonderful ministry, we have been given, and yet we seem to be so ineffective. There seems to be so little impact, so little result. We seem to be often squabbling among ourselves over matters of little or no consequence. And we see these things and we could lose heart.

[22 : 07] We maybe look in the mirror and what we find is something that could cause us to lose heart. What is seen could cause us to lose heart.

So no shortage of reasons to lose heart. But Paul contrasts these reasons with parallel reasons not to lose heart. And though they are parallel reasons, they are not symmetrical.

Now I hope that as we look at them briefly, each in turn, it will become clear what I mean by that. Yes, they are parallel reasons. Paul is saying on the one hand there is this, but on the other hand, and so there is this, if you wish, parallel reasons.

But though parallel, we will notice, I hope, not in any way symmetrical. What are the parallel reasons? Well, the first reason that there was for losing heart was a wasting body.

Though outwardly we are wasting away, then Paul contrasts that with, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. So in contrast to outward decay, to outward weakness, there is inward renewal.

[23 : 16] Now what is this all about? Well, here Paul is speaking of the work of the Spirit in the believer, whereby we are transformed into the likeness of Christ, as Christ Himself, by His Spirit, dwells in us and transforms us from the inside.

Paul himself speaks eloquently on this matter in the letter to the Ephesians. And in chapter 3 and verses 16 and 17, there we read, I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And he goes on. So though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly, the experience of the Christian ought to be of this constant day by day renewal.

And Paul, I think, challengingly, takes it as a given that this is a work that is ongoing in the life of the believer. Now he is no naive apostle.

He sees around in many Christians who are not being renewed day by day as they ought. And yet, he presents it as the norm, as the given. This is as it should be.

[24 : 37] Now that is so in the first instance because it is a work that God does in us. Yet inwardly, we are being renewed day by day. It's not something we do, it's something that God does in us.

For that reason, it cannot be frustrated ultimately, but it is God's work and He will do His work. He will complete His work. But it is also true, and we must recognize, that this work of God in us involves our cooperation.

And where there is no such cooperation, or where we unwillingly cooperate with God, then this work of inward renewal will be painfully slow.

And for that, we are responsible, not the one who seeks to renew us in the manner described. But when we are open to the work of God, then we will inwardly become ever more alive.

Ever more alive. Regardless of how weak our body is, regardless of the suffering that we may endure in our physical body, there is this inward renewal that Paul speaks of.

[25 : 54] And the contrast that Paul makes is this, and here is where we notice the lack of symmetry. He says, in comparison to this inward renewal that the Christian experiences, the outward wasting away, is of little consequence.

There is no comparison. Yes, I'm saying on the one hand this, and on the other hand this. But on this hand, the wasting away is as nothing compared to the wonder, and the glory, and the thrill of this inward renewal that he speaks of.

inwardly we are being renewed day by day. And where such renewal is being experienced, we will not lose heart. This is the argument that he is presenting.

So there is the contrast between outward wasting and inward renewal, but there is also the contrast in verse 17 between our light and momentary troubles that we've commented on and eternal glory. Paul says, yes, there are many troubles. I've endured more than my fair share, no doubt more than any of his readers, certainly I would imagine more than most of us.

[27 : 09] And yet, he says, to the believer, in the midst of those troubles, real though they are, consider eternal glory. Consider the eternal glory that is to be revealed and experienced in the age to come.

Here Paul is pointing the believer forward, looking into the future when this glory, this eternal glory will be revealed and experienced.

The resurrection, a glorified body that will be ours, the new heavens and the new earth, seeing the glory of Jesus face to face, all of these things await us.

And Paul says, these troubles, they're real, they're painful, and yet, in comparison to the eternal glory, Paul is able to say something that would seem quite outrageous.

He says, they are light and momentary. Light and momentary. These things that we've read of in chapter 11, light and momentary. You say, well, that's not the case.

[28 : 18] They're not light and momentary. Ah, but in comparison to the eternal glory that awaits us, he can legitimately describe them as light and momentary.

Here, the argument that has been made is a very clear one. He uses explicitly this picture of scales. On the one hand, on the scales, you have these troubles, multiple troubles that Paul endured.

And on the other side of the scale, you have this eternal glory that the believer will experience and enjoy. And he says, well, in comparison, it's almost ridiculous to make the comparison.

On this side, it's as if there were feathers that a little breeze would blow away in comparison to the weight of glory. In fact, literally, that is what Paul speaks of. Perhaps in the authorized version, that is retained.

Our light trouble compared to the eternal weight of glory. Eternal glory is a weighty thing in comparison to our light and momentary troubles.

[29 : 25] Paul really is saying to me and to you, to us, look at the big picture. I'm not denying that the troubles you are experiencing are genuine and real and painful, but in the midst of them, look at the big picture.

And as you look at the big picture, do not lose heart. But then thirdly, he draws the contrast between the seen and the unseen. And we've already suggested that here there isn't another argument, but simply another way of presenting the same argument.

The unseen is that which is not presently visible, but not that which is inherently invisible, if that doesn't sound a bit strange.

Paul isn't contrasting the material with the immaterial, the seen with the unseen. He's contrasting that which we see now with what we will see in the future, but that is presently unseen.

And there is a distinction there. There is a day coming when we will see that which today is unseen. And Paul is saying, look to that day and be encouraged.

[30 : 38] Look with the eyes of faith to that future day when what is today unseen will be seen.

Maybe if we can just give one example of that. John, when he writes his letter to the churches in Asia as they're recorded for us in the book of Revelation at the very beginning, as he would encourage them, he says, look, look that Jesus is returning and when he returns every eye will see.

Every eye will see. It's not something immaterial, it's not something mystical, it's something that you'll see with your eyes, but you can't see it now. Now it's unseen, but then it will be seen.

And what is now unseen is so much greater, of so much more significance, so much more transcendent than what you see now. These troubles, these difficulties, these problems that you have, they're real and they bear down upon you, but in comparison with the unseen that is just as real, you might say even more real, there is no comparison.

This is the argument that Paul is making. So we can see, I hope, in maybe a small measure, the picture or the argument of the apostle.

On the one hand, he recognizes the reality of a wasting body, of diverse troubles, of so much around us that is rotten and discouraging and all prone to cause us to lose heart, but, but, on the other hand, we have inward renewal, we have eternal glory, and the unseen that will presently be seen and enjoyed in all its splendor and all more than sufficient reasons, argues the apostle, not only to not lose heart, but rather to be invigorated and encouraged and to enthusiastically pursue our service for our Lord in the middle of all the problems, in the middle of all the difficulties, as we see the bigger picture, as we look beyond the immediate circumstances and see God's much bigger picture in all of these things.

[33 : 01] But then, finally, just briefly to comment on the manner in which Paul does more than this.

He doesn't simply say, well, yes, you have all these reasons why you could lose heart, but these reasons not to lose heart are bigger and better, and so, on balance, you shouldn't lose heart.

There is that to his argument, but there's more than that. Paul draws a connection between our troubles and our suffering and the glory to be enjoyed.

There in verse 17, for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us, or as it would perhaps more helpfully be translated in another version, are preparing for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So, it's not just, well, these are all the bad things, but don't worry about them because the good things are bigger and better. No, he's saying these troubles, these bad things, these difficult things are preparing us for being able to enjoy and to experience the good things that he presents. there is this almost causal connection that he makes. Paul does something similar in Romans chapter 8 and verse 17, and we can maybe just notice that briefly to see how this same argument is expressed in other words on that occasion.

[34 : 29] In Romans 8 and verse 17, really, we read from verse 16, it will help us. The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now, if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

If indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory. There seem to me echoes of what we've sung there in Psalm 126.

This order that God has established that before enjoying this eternal glory that is prepared for us, there is a life and there is a way of suffering to be traveled.

But maybe we can just make a couple of observations on the manner in which Paul not only contrasts these things but actually connects them. And I would say the following, and no doubt much more could or should be said, but I would limit myself to saying the following.

One is that a willingness to suffer for the Lord identifies us as belonging to the Lord and so rightful heirs of future glory.

[35 : 42] At that level suffering for our Lord and indeed our own willingness so to suffer identifies us. It helps us recognize who we are and it can help others recognize who we are.

But that wouldn't really respond to how this actually prepares us for future glory. glory. But we can also say this, that in God's purposes that perhaps we don't, not perhaps, we don't fully understand, in God's purposes suffering for the Lord is presented as both a privilege and a preparation for glory. Our Lord has given us an example and we are to follow that example. Suffering proceeds proceeds and indeed prepares us for glory. And though we're not going to consider this or develop this now, I wonder, and I suggest this for you, maybe you can have a look at it later on, I wonder if in James chapter 1 and verses 2 to 4 there is a hint of this, how trials and suffering prepare us for what God has in store for us.

But then it's also true as we look and draw upon particularly Paul's teaching about the big picture, the cosmic picture, it is true at that level that there is this biblical presentation of the new age that is dawning, being brought to birth in suffering.

Suffering, the birth pangs of the new age is the language that Paul uses in that same chapter in Romans chapter 8 that we referred to just a moment ago. We can read the verses in question, Romans 8 verse 22, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

[37 : 34] Not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoptions as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

There is this reality that is presented to us that suffering suffering is the manner in which this new age is brought into existence, brought into life, is given birth to use the picture that Paul uses there in Romans.

Suffering then is part, troubles, difficulties, are part of God's purpose for his people. It is not simply a necessary evil that is somehow balanced out or even cancelled out by the blessings on the other side of the scale.

It's not simply that. And simply knowing that this is so, even if we don't fully understand it, I think can help us not to be caught unawares when troubles come our way, maybe on a scale and of a magnitude that we have never experienced before.

And if we realize that this is God's purpose for us, it can help us to be prepared and consequently not to lose heart when this is our portion in his will.

[38 : 54] In conclusion, you would, of course, and I would be a fool to seek out suffering. We don't want to suffer. You would be a fool to look for troubles as if somehow there was spiritual merit in looking for trouble, in looking for distress.

But it is also foolish to try and insulate ourselves from the troubles and the suffering that are part and parcel of life and especially part and parcel of coherent and serious Christian discipleship. If we think that we can be coherent, serious disciples of Jesus Christ and escape suffering, escape trouble, escape trials, then we are deluding ourselves. And it is foolish to, as I say, seek to avoid that for that is part of God's purpose for us. And when trouble does come, then Paul encourages us to look up, to look ahead, to look at the big picture and as we look at the big picture, not to lose heart. Well, let us pray.