

Do Not Lose Heart – 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Introduction

There is a sadness to this year's Easter which makes it different to all the other Easters I've been part of. On Crucifixion Friday, I visited some of our elderly congregation members who were at home alone.¹ I saw first hand how sad some of them are as they observe the rules of self-isolation which has become the new normal for our lives while we wait for the spread of COVID-19 to slow down. Special days, like Christmas and Easter, make this time of isolation harder as we really miss seeing the people we love and care about. We are designed to be in good relationships with others and too much isolation is not good for us. But for the long term good of our society, we need to do things differently this year. That is why we are having our church online, so that we can still meet together in some way.

Well, just as Easter is different this year, so is the Bible passage I have chosen. I felt that it was important to not simply talk about Jesus' resurrection, the facts behind the resurrection, and even the salvation offered by Jesus' resurrection. I thought it was important to find a passage that helps us to not lose heart during these times of COVID-19. I'm not really sure if this is the best passage, but I hope this talk helps.

Glory

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul wrote about the Corinthian Christians being like a letter of recommendation for the ministry that Paul had done among them.

2 Corinthians 3:2-3 *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (NIV)*

Paul went onto say that the ministry of the Holy Spirit working in people's hearts is glorious. Because anyone who turns to the Lord Jesus has the Holy Spirit living in them, which means that a person is being transformed into Christ's likeness with ever increasing glory. Paul is saying that we have the glory of God within us! It is the glory of the eternal and pure God who transforms us from the inside out. It starts with Jesus, who offers us real forgiveness and cleanses us from the stain of our sin. It is also the work of the Holy Spirit, who uncovers the truth of God's Word so that we see, know and understand the good news of Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. Paul says that this good news, and the glory of Christ, is like a light that shines in our hearts as we become more like Jesus.

Could there be anything more precious than God's glory? Maybe God himself is more precious than his glory, but then how do you separate God from his glory? I'm not sure that you can. And how can you compare the eternal, creator God, who is three in one, to anything God created?

Well, you might say that we can see the goodness of God in some of the things he created but then we also see lots of terrible things in creation as well. COVID-19 is one of those things that show how broken this creation is. Its mere presence has caused suffering and havoc in this world. Yes, God is still in control, but

¹ Please note that I did not enter their homes. In accordance with the physical distancing laws, I remained outside and stood at least 1.5m away from the door. They remained behind their screen door and we talked through it.

COVID-19 is part of this fallen world, a world fallen from God's glory. That is why Paul was so amazed that God would allow his glory to live inside of the fallen and broken realm of humanity.

Everyday Containers

2 Corinthians 4:7 *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (NIV)*

Clay jars were the basic, normal, everyday type of container that people stored things in. They were cheap and easy to make. After all, they are just made of mud, which is then hardened, and they were used to store all kinds of things. If we are to think of a modern-day equivalent, then I reckon that fast food take-away containers might fit the bill. They are cheap and easy to make, and they are great for getting that meal home to you. But they can be a little bit brittle and can crack if you put any weight on them, which is horrible when you get those fast food stains and smells stuck in the carpet in front of the passenger's seat of your car. Also, you would never use a plastic take-away container to put your most precious items in, especially if you were thinking of showing off that item on a special stand with a plaque so that people could see how precious that thing is to you. I mean, even if you have a VIP guest coming over for dinner and you chose to have a take-away meal, you would still put their food on a plate rather than serving it in the plastic container.

Paul says that we are like jars of clay, made from the dust of the earth and hardened by sin. It doesn't make sense that we have the all-surpassing power of the gospel and the glory of the eternal God, which is a great treasure, wrapped up in a clay jar, or an ordinary plastic take-away container.

Paul then spoke about the stresses he faced as he brought the precious message of the gospel to people, which would transform them.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (NIV)*

Paul faced all kinds of pressures, from being persecuted to feeling frustrated, uncertain and perplexed, and though these kinds of things should have overwhelmed him, they didn't. It would be like saying that someone sat on your take-away meal when you left it on the passenger's seat of the car, only to find that the take away containers were not crushed or broken and the meal had not leaked out all over the car's carpet. That kind of pressure should have destroyed the plastic take-away containers, just as the pressure Paul faced should have destroyed him, but it didn't. In fact, those pressures said something about the relationship Paul had with Jesus and the churches he had led.

Death and Resurrection

Verses 10 to 12 are a little bit hard to understand. You have to read them a few times and really work hard on the context of the passage before you begin to get a handle on what Paul is trying to say. The NLT adds a few words in here and there which makes it easier to understand these verses.

2 Corinthians 4:10-12 *Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.¹¹ Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies.¹² So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you. (NLT)*

Paul saw a parallel between his suffering and Jesus' suffering. Not that he thought that his suffering was the same as Jesus' suffering, but there were parallels. Just as Jesus suffered and ultimately died to bring salvation to people, so too did Paul suffer and face death in the hope that he could bring the message of salvation to people. But Paul didn't want the Corinthian Christians to just concentrate on the message of the cross – as important as that is.

2 Corinthians 4:13-15 *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵ 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. (NIV)*

On Resurrection Sunday, we remember the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus did not remain in the tomb. He rose to new life, never to die again. The great thing about Jesus' resurrection is that it paves the way for our resurrection. Just like flying was impossible until the Wright brothers did it on December 17th, 1903. Since then, more and more aeroplanes have been made and most people today have been on a plane at some stage in their lives. What was impossible has now become a normal thing (except during COVID-19). Resurrection was also impossible, but since God raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins on the cross, God can also raise us from the dead. And the resurrection from the dead is not just a resurrection back into this fallen world, which would mean that we would die again. No, resurrection is about being raised in a perfected state with Jesus so that we can be presented to God.

Resurrection Sunday is not just good news for Jesus, it is good news for us. We must always be looking forward to our resurrection, because it means that we will be allowed to exist fully in God's presence. We will experience the perfection of our bodies, we will experience the purity of our souls, we will experience the full eternal glory of God as we stand in his presence and experience a relationship with him which is not tainted by guilt or shame. We will only experience the flawless, loving, intimate relationship with God that we long for.

Do Not Lose Heart

Now, in 2 Corinthians, Paul has been talking about his suffering in terms of persecution and frustration. Severe persecution still exists for Christians today, though we are still largely protected from it in Australia. The thing that worries us is the insecurity of life because of COVID-19.

I saw an interview with a man who spent 5 days in intensive care in England and survived COVID-19. He said that after 4 days of struggling to survive, he wasn't sure if he had the heart to go on much longer. Because of his illness, he was isolated from everyone except hospital staff who helped him to survive. The loneliness and the seriousness of the virus made the battle to survive so much harder. Most Australians have not had to face that battle, but we have had to face the loneliness and insecurity of isolation at this time. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, and we sometimes feel the pressure of all that is happening to us. And this is where I think the last few verses of chapter 4 are important for us to hear.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (NIV)*

It is so easy for us to lose heart at this time. You may be feeling like you are wasting away, that even though things could be far worse, you still feel sad and depressed because of the isolation and the fear of the unknown. Paul faced all kinds of hardships. He knows that pain and suffering can cause us to become self-focused and even draw us away from God. That is why we have to focus on something outside of ourselves. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus pointed to the fact that he is eternal. Knowing that Jesus will resurrect his people on that final day means that we can know that we can have an eternity with God where there will be no more crying or pain.

Paul said that his sufferings of frustration and persecution were not too much to bear because they were only light and temporary. Now, he is not diminishing the pain of severe persecution. Christians have experienced torture, starvation, being locked up, eaten by wild animals, made to watch their family being tortured and killed, burnt alive, beheaded and crucified. Paul is not saying that there is no pain in these things. But he is saying that when you compare the terrible pain of persecution to the eternal glory of God, the comparison fails as God's glory outweighs them all. Christians have, and will face, severe pain and persecution. But we are told to not focus on the pain of this world, as much as pain wants us to focus on it.

Because this world is temporary, our life in this world is temporary. Even if we live a charmed life, beyond 100 years, our life is still temporary. How much better is it to focus on the eternal! To focus on the resurrected Jesus! To focus on God and his glory!

That is why we do not lose heart, even in these times of COVID-19. We may lose all our money, we may lose our career, we may lose our house, we may lose our purpose and meaning if it is tied up in what we do, we may lose our family and friends, or even our own lives, to this virus, but we do not lose heart. Because we do not fix our eyes on what is seen, we do not fix our eyes on the things of this world, we do not fix our eyes on what is temporary. No, we fix our eyes on the resurrected Jesus and the eternal glory he promises us. That is how we are being inwardly renewed day by day, that is how we do not lose heart, by being focused on Jesus.

You may feel like a clay jar, a plastic take-away container, being pressured on every side, but won't you join Paul and the Corinthian Christians by focusing on the resurrected Jesus and the glory of God on this Resurrection Sunday.