

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Title: Seeing the Unseen

Truth: An eternal perspective prevents us from losing heart.

Date/Location: February 8, 2026 at FBC (rewrite of 2/19/2006)

Introduction

How high is the encouragement meter running in your life? Or do you tend to focus more on the discouragements? Have you had many of those lately? Paul certainly faced things that could cause him to lose heart:

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| 1. Tribulations | 7. Veil over the unbeliever's mind |
| 2. Sufferings of Christ | 8. False accusations |
| 3. Sentence of death | 9. Satan working against the gospel |
| 4. Constant criticism | 10. Difficult persecution |
| 5. Not finding Titus | 11. Regularly facing death |
| 6. Aroma of death to some | |

To this list we add three more things from 4:16-18: physical decay, afflictions, and things seen. But he also has mentioned in 2 Corinthians a great deal of reason to *not* lose heart, to not give up or be discouraged:

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| 1. Hope of the gospel | 8. Bondservants of Christ |
| 2. Liberty in the gospel | 9. Knowing God through Christ |
| 3. Work of God's Spirit | 10. Resurrection of the dead |
| 4. Ongoing transformation to Christlikeness | 11. Being presented with Christ |
| 5. Divine commission | 12. Others thanking God |
| 6. Superior covenant | 13. Glory to God |
| 7. Mercy from God | 14. Treasure of the gospel |

And we will add three more encouraging things that overcome the decay, afflictions, and things seen.

I. Inner Renewal is More Important than Outer Decay, v. 16

A. **Therefore.** This connecting word ties two smaller ideas together into a bigger idea. The smaller idea in this sentence is that **we do not lose heart**, as in 4:1. The connecting word explains that what came before shows how or why we need not become discouraged.

1. The results of the ministry in causing grace to spread to many people, resulting in thanksgiving and glory to God (4:15).
2. The promise of the ministry in the bodily resurrection of believers and his personal participation in that (4:14).
3. The power of the ministry in that the life of Christ and power of God were at work to prevent his earthen vessel from being totally crushed (4:8-12).
4. The commission of the ministry given to Paul with its unfading, righteousness-producing, Spirit-based and life-giving nature (4:1, in light of chapter 3).

We have a glorious message operative in us by God's tremendous power, with the expectation of resurrection, and the glory of God in many thankful hearts who will share in that resurrection.

- B. This all is true, but there is a problem. The passage of time and especially the severe difficulties of Paul's ministry are causing his **outward self to wear away**. Bodily, Paul has been weakened by his trials. His vigor and strength are declining. He is a "wear part," not a permanent or unchanging fixture. He expects to be spent for the gospel. That is how he wants to use his life.

A wear part is a component in a machine that deteriorates through normal operation—via friction, heat, or stress—and requires periodic replacement as part of planned maintenance. Its gradual breakdown is expected. Wear parts have a predictable lifespan and are consumed during use.

- C. The outward person is perishing. Paul is frank to admit it, and he is realistic about it, as should we. But this does impact our mindset and can cause us to lose heart. You probably do not recognize it if you are in good health, but it is coming. It is even more noticeable if you stand out for Christ and take it on the chin for Him.
- D. The thing that overcomes our outer decay is that God is constantly at work on our **inner renewal**. Our spiritual strength and wisdom become greater as God works in our "inner man" by renewing our minds, filling us with His word, and shaping us by trials and interpersonal interactions. He uses the Bible, church, family, and

all life's circumstances to do this work. By so doing, God prepares us for upcoming resurrection life. It is called *sanctification*, whereby God purifies our thoughts and conduct so that we become more like Jesus Christ in His perfect humanity. We become more holy, less sinful; more saintly and less ungodly.

A quick caution: we are a fusion of our inner being and our outer being. We are one person with an outer part and an inward part. We are not two separate things. The outer affects the inner, and vice versa. But the trajectories of these two parts are moving in opposite directions where the outer person will perish and ultimately be replaced with a glorified version of itself, whereas the inner person will grow and be strengthened all the way into heaven.

- E. This section's heading (I. above) is directly supported by the text of verse 16. It dawned on me that the text also implies inner renewal is also more important than outer *renewal*! This is because outward renewal is not something that causes us to grow in likeness to Christ. Bodily exercise does have some profit (especially if it keeps us fit to serve God and others), but godliness is profitable for all things in this life and the life to come (1 Tim. 4:8).
- F. Scripture is emphatic that inner spiritual strength is more important than outward physical strength. God wants us to be strengthened in our inner beings (Eph.3 :16). Some of the weakest in outer frame are the strongest in inner frame.

II. Future Glory is Shaped by Present Affliction, v. 17

- A. We now see that it is not just happenstance that spiritual renewal happens in the midst of afflictions. Rather, the afflictions cause the renewal. It is not just that renewal happens alongside afflictions, but that renewal happens *because of* afflictions. The text says it: "our light affliction...is **working** for us...eternal...glory."
- B. **Working** means producing, achieving, causing. God somehow uses bad things to produce good things (Romans 8:28). Believe it. But know that God is doing this little by little, not in an instant, and He is doing it *right now* in the life of every believer, in some way. See James 1:2-3 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 and Romans 5:3-5.

- C. Paul describes the affliction in two ways: it is **light**, and it is **momentary**. This is a perspective that is hard to get, but Paul got it. The things he has described in 4:8-12, including being on the verge of death for the sake of the gospel, do not seem to be to “light.” And when they are happening, they probably seem to fill the view so that they seem more than momentary. But from a long perspective, momentary is exactly what they are.
- D. The **light** afflictions are overcome by the **weight** of glory. The **momentary** afflictions are overcome by the **eternal** glory.
- E. The glory consists of all the blessings of salvation that are yet to come. We presently participate in some of the blessings (like sanctification), but that hardly scratches the eternal surface of that glory. In short, the glory is the inheritance that we will receive, including (but not limited to) perfect fellowship with the Lord (which is far better, Phil. 1:23), a new body, removal of sin and the effects of the curse, eternal rewards, a part in God’s perfect kingdom, eternal life and bliss, and much more.

III. Things Unseen are More Lasting than Things Seen, v. 18

- A. In light of eternity, the problems of this life are insignificant. To this perspective we now more fully turn with the third factor that overcomes our natural tendency to lose heart: inner renewal is the first, the working of future glory by means of light afflictions is the second, and now the third is that things unseen are more lasting than the things that are seen.
- B. It may seem paradoxical to you that you can see things that are not seen, but every Christian knows it to be true. We see in faith, by means of faith, that which is after this life, which created this life, and which sustains and guides us in this life. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is the assurance of things not seen. So, we look by faith, that is, we contemplate and focus our attention on those things.
- C. “Not seen” does not mean “not real.” You cannot see love, but it is real because you see its results or effects; you cannot see electricity, but it is real because you can see its effects. You cannot see God, but He is real and you know it because of what He has done. You cannot see Heaven, but it is there and just as real as

anything. You cannot see Jesus, but you believe in Him, and with a special blessing (John 20:29, 1 Peter 1:8). You cannot “see” inner renewal, but you know it is there.

Here are some more things that are seen and unseen:

Things Seen	Things Not Seen
Material possessions	Treasures in Heaven (Matt. 6:19-21)
Buildings, churches	There is no Temple in Heaven (Rev. 21:22)
Cities, states, countries	The Heavenly city (Heb. 11:16; Rev. 21:2)
Political systems	The Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33)
Jobs, power, and authority	Service of God (Rev. 22:3)
Physical body	Glorified body (2 Cor. 5:1-8, 1 John 3:2)
Physical growth	Spiritual growth (2 Peter 3:18)
Earthly dreams	Hope in the promises of God (Heb. 6:18)
Afflictions, persecutions	Eternal glory (2 Cor. 4:17)

“The regenerated life, the continuing ministry of the Spirit, the growing comprehension of God through daily communion with Him, the promises of God for the present and the future—all of these and many more are things not seen, but they are just as real as the visible objects of this world and are far more permanent.” (Homer A. Kent, *A Heart Opened Wide*, p. 77).

- D. Such a focus of the spiritual sight is not ultimately disillusioned by troubles in this life because this general principle always holds true: **seen = temporary**, but **unseen = eternal**. The things that are seen do not last (1 Cor. 7:31). They will be destroyed by fire at the end of the world (2 Peter 3). Even the most permanent-seeming stuff will be done away with in this fashion. But unseen eternal things are lasting. They can never be erased or done away.
- E. This perspective is crucial to a successful Christian life. It views afflictions in their proper relationship to everything else. It views inner renewal as more important than outward degeneration. You can avoid losing heart assuming that you share this view on life. If you do not, it is going to be impossible for you to see the eternal glory and the benefit of inner strengthening.

Conclusion

Once again, a pertinent application follows a pattern we have seen many times. There is a severe problem in your life if your inward person is not being renewed and strengthened, if you have no perception of eternal glory, and if you are unable to see the things that are unseen. Maybe you are “glass empty” all the time and are always in a mindset of “I have lost heart.” If any of this is true of you, then you need to turn to the Lord in genuine repentance and faith. Dump your own feeble human wisdom and appeal to God for his wisdom. “I know all that” and “I’ve read about that before” and “I have researched and thought about that” are self-centered and information-centered perspectives. Make sure you know *God* through repentant faith in Christ.

Are you concerned with the decline of the physical man more than the incline of the spiritual, inner man?

Do you allow yourself to be overwhelmed by the afflictions of life, not realizing the benefit they are working for you?

Would an external observer think your focus is on heavenly/eternal things, or on temporal things?

Christians sometimes lose sight of the inner and lasting realities of the Christian life. Lack of faith causes you to be stuck in the present, your perspective truncated, near-sighted, and focused on afflictions. But you can choose your perspective. You can change your worldview. In faith you can see beyond the momentary and temporal to the weighty and eternal. You can set your affections above (Col. 3:1-2). You can—and should—seek first the kingdom of God and lay up treasures in Heaven (Matt. 6:19-21, 33). Fix your spiritual sight on those things, which are more lasting than what you can see today. Live for Christ and do not lose heart because you have the same eternal perspective taught in this portion of God’s word.

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