

God's Promises Sustain His People

2 Corinthians 4:13–18
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Considering the severity of Paul's trials, the severity of which he described in the verses immediately preceding our text, we can only be amazed that they didn't destroy him.

We've all experienced troubles in our lives. Perhaps we've had to care for an extremely sick child, lost a business or job, lived through a horrific accident, or dealt with something just as unpleasant. Think back and ask yourselves, How long did it take before your troubles made you feel wiped out? Was it a month? A few days? Or only a couple of hours? Our tolerance for pain and suffering isn't very high. Two days in bed with a terrible cold and we're at our wits' end, wondering if we'll survive.

As hard as it is to bear unavoidable trials — there's not much we can do to prevent sicknesses and accidents — it's a lot harder to endure difficulties we can change. If Paul had just stopped preaching the gospel, most of his troubles would have gone away. But, of course, he couldn't do that. He couldn't give up the only comfort he had in life and death just to avoid a few brief hours of affliction. The trade would have cost him everything.

So, what sustained Paul during his trials? The Lord did. He did it by comforting his servant with the promises of the gospel. In the first verse of our text Paul wrote, *We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak.* The last part of this comes from Psalm 116, which David wrote after he nearly died. He wrote it to declare to others that God had protected him, just as he said he would. It announced God's mercy, goodness and faithfulness. He had kept his promise. Paul cited this verse in our text to encourage us to be just as strong in our faith. We have to trust God's promises, too.

The Resurrection

In the rest of this evening's text, Paul focused his attention on three specific promises. The first occurs in verses 14 and 15, where he wrote, *Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God.* Paul found comfort in the resurrection of the body.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was central to Paul's entire ministry. He preached it everywhere he went — even to the Athenians, who didn't know what he was talking about (Acts 17:18–20). He highlighted in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he began his grand discussion of the resurrection with these words: *For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures* (1 Cor. 15:3–4). And many years later, when he was about to die a martyr's death, he encouraged Timothy, his son in the faith, to *remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel* (2 Tim. 2:8).

Paul treasured Jesus' resurrection because it was the greatest display of God's power and grace that the world had ever seen. It testified to Jesus' divine sonship. Romans 1:4 says that Jesus *was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead*. And knowing Jesus died and rose again for him, Paul expected to share in the resurrection of the last day. In our text Jesus' resurrection was past but Paul's was future, yet both were covenantally bound together, so that what happened to Jesus will happen to his people. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, *For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive* (v. 22). Thus, he knew that he, the Corinthians and everyone who believes in Jesus Christ in every age will rise again to the glory of God. This is our ultimate hope!

Today, people are anxious and worried about everything, especially the future. Will inflation continue to eat away their buying power? Will the next president have the knowledge and skill to reverse this trend? How much will the suffering of Christians increase as society moves further and further from the gospel? How will this affect individual believers? And the list goes on and on. Throughout all the changes of life, we need to take Paul's advice to Timothy and remember the resurrection of our Savior and what it promises us. It's the one thing no one can ever take from us. It's God's promise.

The resurrection sustained Paul's faith during his trials. It gave him unshakable confidence to bear unimaginable suffering because he knew he would live and reign with Jesus. Without the resurrection, he would have had no hope at all. As he had written to the Corinthians earlier, *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable* (1 Cor. 15:19).

Unbelievers tend not to plan too far into the future. Why should they? They have no eschatology — no hope that anything they want will endure, no expectation of anything better. Today is all that matters to them. But we have everything. All things are for you, Paul wrote. This included his trials and yours, his successes and yours. It includes everything Jesus did and all that he promised. Your eternity with Jesus has already been secured.

The Lord showers us with such magnificent grace so that we might glorify him in it. And since he can't deny himself, which he would do if he ever withheld his grace, you can be assured that your salvation is rock-solid. You will rise from the dead to live with Jesus forever.

The Inward Man

The second promise Paul brought to the Corinthians' attention is in verse 16. He wrote, *For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.*

The opinion of some commentators is that Paul was referring to our bodies and souls when he wrote about the outward man and the inward man. Our outward man — our body — is perishing. They're slowly dying as age and affliction take their toll. But our inward man — our soul — is growing stronger every day and being renewed by God's grace. This is certainly true. But other commentators suggest Paul had a different contrast in view. They see the outward man as what we were in Adam. We were dead in trespasses and sins, following the prince of the power of the air. And the inward man is what we have become and are becoming through the work of the Holy Spirit. The trials we suffer in life help us crucify the outward man and bring the inward man to life. I'm not sure we need to choose between these two views because God's grace affects everything we are — our parts (body and soul) and all the changes we experience (the transformation of the old man to the new man). The *Reformation Study Bible* agrees. It says, "The contrast between outward and inward is not simply between the body and the soul, but between the old fallen nature and the renewed humanity." R. Kent Hughes explains it like this:

There is no body/soul dichotomy here. Both "outer man" and "inner man" refer to the *whole person*. "Outer man" refers to our status in Adam as part of this present age; "inner man" refers to our status in the last Adam, Christ. Therefore, Paul is saying that the old sinful man is "wasting away" (being deconstructed!), while our new self in Christ is "being renewed" (reconstructed!) "day by day."

There are few things more sad than people who can't even imagine a better life. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is a good example of this. Having suffered a severe mental breakdown when he was only forty-four years old, he spent the next eleven years in absolute despair. He declared emphatically that God is dead and that mankind could only get better, yet he couldn't see it in his own life. He fought against what he knew to be true, and his inability to solve this contradiction drove him crazy. He died at fifty-six, probably from a combination of pneumonia and several strokes.

Paul, on the other hand, had real hope — not just for the future (the resurrection) but also for the present (God’s sanctifying grace in his people). Believers grow in sanctification now. In Ephesians Paul wrote, *And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness* (Eph. 4:24). And God promises to continue this process until Jesus Christ brings it to an end either when we die or at his return, whichever comes first. Psalm 17:15 says, *As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness*. Likewise, Romans 8:29 promises that we’ll soon be conformed to our Savior’s glorious image. What precious promises!

It’s no wonder that Paul began verse 16 with the words, *For which cause we faint not*. How can anyone faint when we have such rich treasures in such a wonderful Savior?

An Exceeding Weight of Glory

But the renewal of the inward man doesn’t come easily. The outward man fights against it every step of the way. This is a big problem. But Paul focused on something else. In verse 17, he wrote about affliction. Verse 17 says, *For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*. This is the third promise Paul cited in today’s text. In it, he compared the trials of his ministry to his future glory. And what did he find? He realized that there was no comparison to be made.

Paul described his afflictions as *light*. But let’s not suppose that he thought his troubles — or ours — were painless, small or inconsequential. No, our afflictions hurt. They impose real suffering. Sometimes they hurt a lot. Sometimes they’re so bad that words prove inadequate to tell how bad the pain is. They make us feel boxed in, like we have nowhere to go, like we can never recover. We might even feel like we’re dying. Isn’t this what Job felt? And the psalmist, too. Earlier, I noted that Paul quoted Psalm 116, which the psalmist wrote when he thought he was dying. He wrote, *The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow* (v. 3). When things are worse than we ever imagined, we might even cry out like Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Consider Paul’s afflictions. He was squeezed, hounded, persecuted and cast down. That’s what he wrote in verses 8 and 9. In chapter 11, he mentioned beatings, imprisonments, shipwreck, robbers, hunger and cold, among other things. Yet, he could still say that his afflictions were light because he firmly believed that his glory was so great that it almost canceled his afflictions out.

And what glory awaits us! Our KJV translation emphasizes its greatness with the words, *Far more exceeding*. But this phrase only weakly translates the original. The Greek literally says,

“according to an extraordinary degree unto an extraordinary degree.” That is, the glory that awaits believers begins with unimaginable glory and only gets better.

Jesus promised to receive us into his glory. He said, *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also* (John 14:3). And he prayed that it would be so. He begged his Father, *Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world* (John 17:24).

Trusting this promise is the faith that Paul wanted to see in his readers. It teaches us to look beyond what we see with our eyes and hold in our hands. Verse 18 says, *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*. The Christian faith teaches us to trust the invisible God, who reveals himself in three distinct persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is our hope.

Can we bear the pains of life in a sinful world, including annoyances and colds that last more than a day? Can we trust God to see us through persecutions, sword and famine?

If so, we have to look beyond the things that cause pain to see God’s hand in them. We have to cling to the hope of the resurrection, rejoice in the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit, and understand what our trials really are, viz., nothing compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us. When we have this perspective, we can exclaim with the psalmist, *Oh how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men!* (Ps. 31:19). Amen.