

## THE GLORY THAT COMES FROM SUFFERING

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

*\*Names have been changed*

I want to begin by listing some of the troubles that have come upon families in our congregation in just the past three months:

- Jill was born on Christmas Eve day with Downs Syndrome. She is the sixth child of Dave and Ann. She had open-heart surgery on March 25<sup>th</sup> to repair two holes in her heart. At this writing (3-26) she came through the surgery very well and is in the Intensive Care Unit at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. She is off the respirator and Susan may be able to begin nursing her today!
- The evening before the surgery, 5 year old Tom fell down and hit his head and had a seizure. He was rushed to the emergency room but then sent home. Dave had to wake him up every two hours through that night to make sure he was OK. He is doing fine now.
- A family waited over a year to sell their farm and finally had to do so at auction, therefore not getting the true value of their property.
- A man lost his job on January 1<sup>st</sup>, after 20 years of employment.
- Mary and Marcy's mom died on Feb. 22 after spending over five years in a coma induced by a stroke.
- Amy's brother-in-law died unexpectedly two weeks ago, two days later her sister, his wife, had to have surgery.
- Jared, our 22 year old son, shattered his skull while skiing on Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup> and remains in a coma at UW Hospitals in Madison, WI
- Adam and Nancy were in a car accident on I-90 in which their car was totaled a couple of weeks ago. They were bruised and badly shaken up but are doing fine now.
- Jim's appendix burst on Feb. 27<sup>th</sup>. He had emergency surgery on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Thankfully the infection did not spread and he was able to come home March 6.
- Jim's sister has been in the hospital for over two months as a result of complications following surgery. She almost died but is slowly recovering at this time.

This is not even a complete list of the trouble that people in our congregation are currently experiencing. At the Discovery Group Leader's meeting a week ago, someone summarized the way many of us are feeling when he said that he's afraid to answer his phone because every time it rings it seems to be more bad news. This is a time for us, as God's people to reflect upon God's purposes in suffering. I want to reflect with you upon one of the many places God's good purposes in suffering are talked about. Here is a literal translation of 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18.

*"<sup>16</sup>Therefore we do not become discouraged, but even though our outer man is wasting away, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For our momentary, light trouble (suffering) is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup>as we do not pay attention to the things which are seen but the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."*

When Paul talks about not being discouraged he is not only talking about his emotional condition. He is talking about his determination to not give up hope in Christ. He is talking about not quitting the Christian life. He continues to trust Christ, worship God, pray and do good, even though the trouble in his life is so severe.

He goes on to talk about how it is that he doesn't lose heart. He describes life on planet earth as the process of living in a body and a world that is wasting away. Jesus uses this word to describe what moths do to cloth. The hard reality of living on this fallen planet is that life is decaying and coming to ruin, no matter how hard you try to stop it, cover it up with pleasures or ignore it. But note that Paul's experience is that while his external life is like a piece of cloth being eaten away by moths, yet his inner life is daily

being renewed. The only other time this word is used is in Col. 3:10 where Christians are described as those who have put on the new man that is being renewed in the knowledge and image of its Creator. So Paul is having these two experiences simultaneously. His outer life is being eaten up like moths eat up cloth but internally he is knowing God better and he is becoming more like him.

The next sentence shows that the simultaneous experience of your “outer man decaying” and of your “inner man being renewed” are connected. Paul doesn’t view the experience of his outer life wasting away as simply something he must endure but he views it as a necessary part of having an inner man that is being renewed. That is what the little word “for” means. This is his logic, “My inner man is being renewed every day while my outer life decays because the light, momentary trouble that is my decaying outer life is actually producing an eternal glory that is far beyond comparing with the trouble I experience.”

Here is the burning question for every Christian that is suffering. How do I not lose hope and just give up when I am going through such enormous pain? Paul gives two answers to that question in vv. 17-18. His first answer is that the pain and suffering is itself working for his good. The suffering is not vain or without purpose. Notice the language of comparison that Paul uses. The suffering he experiences is *light* and *momentary*. (It is critical to remember that when Paul talks about “light, momentary trouble” he is not talking about having a cold. Read 2 Corinthians 11: 23-33 & 12: 7-10 to get an idea of the various kinds of suffering Paul is talking about.) While the glory he will experience is *heavy* and *eternal* beyond all comparison. The word glory refers to Paul’s experience of heaven. What this verse is saying is that the suffering itself is making heaven a happier, more glorious place for Paul.

Here’s an illustration that I think begins to give us some idea of how our suffering here will increase our happiness in God in heaven. Let’s compare two Olympic athletes who both win gold medals in their events. The first athlete grew up in an upper middle class American home. His parents began training him for the Olympics when he was a young boy. He trained in the finest facilities, had access to the best coaches and athletic trainers. He ate the best food. He had to work hard but he did it in a loving, supportive home and with all the help that money could buy.

Our second athlete grew up in the slums of Mexico City. His father was an alcoholic and his mother had 4 children by different men. He barely survived the childhood diseases that took the lives of his other siblings. His mother scarcely made enough money by doing laundry to feed and clothe them. He loved to run and while in high school he began beating everyone he raced against. The Mexican Olympic committee became aware of him and began to give him some good coaching when he was 17. However, that year his mother died and he was hit by a car while on a training run. He broke both his legs and was in and out of the hospital for the next year. The Mexican Olympic committee forgot all about him. He had to train on his own and compete as an independent in amateur races while holding down a job to pay for his one room shack and food to eat. Finally, when he was 21, he regained his old form and was noticed again and ended up beating all of the Mexican competition and competing in the Olympics. Obviously both of our athletes will be happy to win gold medals but don’t we all know that our Mexican athlete is happier? Isn’t the gold medal sweeter and more glorious to him because of the suffering and hardship he endured to obtain it?

Paul knows that there is a direct relation between his suffering here and his enjoyment of Christ in heaven. Notice what this causes Paul to do in his present, difficult, painful circumstances. He does not pay attention to the suffering but rather he pays attention to the glory that will be his in heaven. He thinks much about Christ and the joy of being with him and thinks very little about the pain he is enduring because he knows the pain will increase the joy and he wants the joy of being with Christ more than anything else. He realizes that the suffering in this life is temporary whereas the glory is eternal.

The little word “as” at the beginning of v. 18 tells us that it is Paul’s not paying attention to the “seen” suffering but rather paying attention to the “unseen” coming glory that enables him to not be discouraged, to be renewed every day in his inner man. This work of paying attention is something that he does every day. Here is how to not lose heart and become discouraged in our suffering. We must remember that the

suffering itself is making heaven sweeter and more glorious for those who suffer. We must think much of the unseen Christ and the future glory that he is preparing for all who long for his appearing.

Rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God,