

Reconciliation

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[0 : 0 0] Look at this passage tonight. I'm going to split the sermon into two and we're going to sing in the middle because it kind of lends itself to that. So we're going to look at 2 Corinthians chapter 4, mainly from verse 12 of chapter 4, verse 13 through to chapter 5.

And if I were to introduce a classic missionary talk opening line, it would be that the land that I was talking about or coming from was a land of contrasts.

And that often seems to be the opening line in good missionary talks that we hear. And it's such a clear, often description of the countries that these missionaries are from.

There are often countries where there is great contrasts. Well, I'm going to do exactly the same this evening and introduce it by saying this is a chapter or this is a section of contrasts as well.

And it's speaking about the paradoxes of faith and it's very honest. Paul, remember, is defending the gospel to his people, to the people of Corinth against false teaching.

[1 : 2 0] And he's trying to express how important the gospel is and how real it is. And maybe one of the things that the congregation are attacking him about, maybe they're saying things like, well, you tell us the gospel is about life and about newness and about hope and about a future, but look at the struggles and the difficulties we're having.

Look at the doubts that we're going through. Maybe you're not really a genuine teacher. Maybe you're a false teacher because we know that false teachers were coming in and teaching things that weren't true to the gospel.

So Paul is defending not only his own apostolic claims, but he's also defending how real the gospel is and how it is a bit paradoxical.

There's both life and death. Both of these themes come into the gospel. And in verse 10 of chapter 4, where I think James probably finished, it's very key to understanding what it is to be a Christian.

He says, we always carry about in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. So he's telling us that there's a bit of a contrast. There's a bit of a battle. There's a bit of a struggle to be a Christian.

[2 : 4 5] And that's very much the theme that he goes on to speak about. There's life and there's death. I'm not going to go into that in great detail, but if we are sharing our faith and if we are talking about what it is to be a Christian, or in our themes during the sermons, or when we think about being a Christian, it's very often the life kind of themes that we stick to, isn't it?

And there's lots of life themes here in this passage. That's the emphasis we want. That Jesus brings life. He brings hope. He brings joy. He brings forgiveness.

And these themes are themes that we often kind of exclusively deal with when we're sharing our faith, or when we're thinking about our faith, here in this section, and I'm not going to look at any of them, but just mention them, the life themes he speaks about.

Faith in verse 13, the resurrection in verse 14, grace and glory in verse 15, renewal in verse 16, a very good up-to-date word. Heaven again in verse 1 of chapter 5, the Holy Spirit in verse 5, confidence in verse 6.

These are all kind of very affirming words. They're very life-giving words. They're full of life, these words. I've listed them there on the sermon note sheet for you to see.

[4 : 11] And when you hear all these words about being a Christian and all the renewal and the forgiveness and the resurrection and all these things, maybe you feel, well, that's not really how I experience my Christian life.

Maybe when you come to church and you sit down in church and you look around, you think, everyone else seems to have their Christian life in a very positive way and understands things, but I seem to be filled with failure or with a feeling of inadequacy.

And these themes are, at best, theoretical to me. And I'm battling against unbelief and I'm struggling to follow Jesus. And I don't feel that there's much life in me at all. I feel pretty dead.

And I don't understand it because the gospel is all about being friends with Jesus and the hope of eternal life and everyone's happy and no one has any problems.

Well, Paul knows that and God knows that because he also speaks about a different theme in this passage, in this section we read. He speaks about death and its related kind of themes here in the passage.

[5 : 28] And death is something that's really unmentionable today in polite company. We don't talk about such things and we think that death and struggle and battle are illegal immigrant words in the kingdom of God.

But here Paul is speaking about all these themes when he's talking about Christians. He's talking about wasting away in verse 16. He's talking about death, verse 14, talking about troubles.

Verse 7 talks about groaning. In verse 2 talks about being naked. That is being vulnerable, being exposed spiritually. In verse 3 speaks about being burdened.

You know, burdened maybe by failure, by loneliness, by guilt. And he also speaks about judgment. These are all kind of negative type of words, death related words, not words that really we would associate with life at all.

But he's wanting to get across to us something very important. He's wanting us to remember that as Christians, why we live as Christians here, there is a battle and there is a struggle that we face.

[6 : 46] There is, can I say, a negative side to faith. It's not all smiling. It's not all positive.

There is a negative side to faith. There's a battle that we need to face. There's a struggle. There's opposition. There's difficulty. There's trials. There's things that we don't want and we don't understand and we can't cope with.

We're let down. We feel God is distant. And it's all a bit confusing. When we're supposed to be friends with Jesus and He's supposed to have forgiven us and yet there's this reality that we face.

Why is that the case? Well, in verse 15, we have the key to why there's a battle and why we face difficulties and why we face things that we would term under the heading of death.

He says in verse 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.

[7 : 53] The reason we struggle, the reason there's difficulties, the reason there's opposition and the reason we need saved is because we need to understand God's grace and we need to recognise that it brings glory to God.

In other words, He's pointing us to His own salvation and He's pointing us to His own glory. This passage is speaking about very much about grace and about the fact that grace and the life that grace gives has won a victory over death and over all the negative and horrible experiences that we face.

He's reminding us that it's not an equal battle. Yes, we're in a battle but we want to be on the side of life, not on the side of death. We want to be on the side of victory, not on the side of defeat.

And He wants us to see that grace is something we can only ever accept in our lives if we have already recognised our need for grace.

Paul is kind of opening his heart a little bit and exposing his vulnerability and his need and that is why he is a believer and that is why he's an apostle.

[9 : 17] And unless we have that same admission of need and that same admission of guilt and that same admission of being under death, we will never really accept Jesus Christ and we'll never really understand grace.

Grace is about realising, a bit like what we saw this morning, that we have been rescued. That we've been rescued from the clutches of death and the power of death and the reality of death.

And that we are vulnerable people who constantly need to be filled with His grace and His help. So that all of these problems, and I'll go on to speak about that later, all of these problems are there to bring us closer to Jesus Christ.

If we don't understand poverty, spiritual poverty and spiritual need and spiritual weakness, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says something very interesting, he said, the rich, it's very hard for the rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Why is, why did he say that?

[10 : 33] Because riches make us self-reliant and independent and stop us from feeling needy. And we can kind of cover our vulnerability by paying our way out of it.

We can pay for private health, we can pay for luxury, we can pay for face lifts, we can reverse the aging process.

We can do all these things to stave off the sense of vulnerability and need that we have. And so Jesus recognises that it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And if we are people who never recognise our need, then we will find it very hard to become Christians, or to stay Christians.

At best, Jesus for us will be a kind of lifestyle choice. He'll be an added extra to us, he'll be the religious tag on to our lives.

[11 : 37] But unless we've come to terms with this whole concept of death and all the kind of vulnerability that goes with it, the loneliness and the guilt and the exposure, and the need and the troubles that accompany this world in which we live, and unless we see that spiritually, we will never come to the Saviour.

So the reality of death in our experience and the reality of trouble can expose for us the glory of grace.

And also it can remind us of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. And that is what brings most glory to God when we understand that grace is core and key to the cross.

It echoes from the empty tomb and it rejoices at the resurrection so that in the cross we recognise that death is defeated.

And all the troubles and difficulties and miseries that we face are actually ultimately defeated. And it's in grace that we will live and it's in grace that we will overcome and it's in grace that we will know peace and a future.

[13 : 00] So really grace and the glory of God come together when we recognise that the gospel is about life, but it's also about facing up to issues with regard to our death and with regard to the struggles that we face as a Christian.

I want to stop there and just we're going to sing. And then I want to look at how Paul explains or the implications for that because there are two words that always assure us that there's practical implications.

And the word comes twice. It comes in verse 16 of chapter 4 where he says, therefore. Therefore is always a connecting word. It's connecting with the truth and it gives us a practical implication.

So it's therefore in verse 16 and then there's a therefore in verse 6 of chapter 5. And we're going to look briefly at these two in terms of our practical outworking of the fact that grace and glory are intimately linked to our lives, even when we recognise the trouble and difficulties that we face.

And we're going to sing. Okay, what I was trying to say there was that as Christians we have victory. The battles that we face that are undeniably real, we do face, but it's not an equal battle.

[14 : 26] Christ to be in grace and to be in Christ is to be on the side of life, not on the side of death, which is dying in us. But we're on the side of Christ. And so as a result of that, because it helps us come to terms with the struggles that we're facing and the oppositions and the disappointments and the let down, how then do we live?

Well, he says in verse 16, therefore, he says, we do not lose heart. And my encouragement to you tonight from God's word is that however much you're struggling as Christians, however difficult the road seems to be for us, that we wouldn't lose heart and that we would remember what it means to be a Christian and that we are on the side of victory and that death even for us is a defeated foe.

And that's very important. And it's a great word, particularly for those of us who are getting older, because it says though outwardly, we are wasting away, yet inwardly, we are being renewed day by day.

That's great news for us, for all of us over 40. It's great news. We are outwardly fading away. We are getting weaker and less able to do what we wanted to do and were at one time able to do.

But the amazing thing is that for Christians, we should be aging differently. We don't age the same way as unbelievers because we have a life force within us that is the spirit of God.

[15 : 51] And so that is being renewed within us every day. We're actually getting, as it were, more alive as Christians. And you sometimes see that in the most elderly physically of Christians, that there's a spiritual vibrancy about them that defies their age, because they're not just coming to the end of the few short years that they lived and there's no future, no hope.

They're looking forward to experiencing life to the full in God's nearer presence. And there's a vibrancy about them because there's a recognition that inwardly they are being renewed.

So we don't lose heart. And we don't lose heart as we grow older as Christians, because life is victorious, grace is victorious. And even our aging can be to the glory of God.

Therefore we do not lose heart, though, outwardly or waste in a way. He then goes on to say something amazing, for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.

So he's reminding us in this Christian life that troubles play their part. Troubles play their part in our Christian life. They're not random.

[17 : 09] Paul speaks here about our light and momentary troubles. And I was Paul that was saying that. Our light and momentary troubles. This is a guy who was beaten up, left for dead, imprisoned, hated, rejected.

He had all kinds of troubles in his life who was questioned, who people had no time for. It's amazing that he can call them light and momentary troubles.

But in the light of eternity, that is what he recognizes. He sees things differently and he's looking differently. What are these troubles that we face?

Probably not the same as Paul's. Maybe illness, maybe loss, maybe disappointment, it may be poverty. But you know what I think it is very often.

And I'm sure this is the light and momentary troubles that we all face. It's people. It's just dealing with people on a day-to-day basis.

[18 : 11] Many of Paul's struggles and difficulties were with his churches. Were with those who he had brought to faith. And those who'd come in and around about them. And people can be the cause of our light and momentary troubles.

You guys have to put up with a grumpy and frustrated minister, raging and shouting at you on Wednesday nights if they've had a busy week at work. And people can be so difficult and so awkward.

Imperfect husbands, difficult wives, awkward children, obnoxious colleagues, and people in the church, people that we're supposed to love and they're completely unlovable.

And they cause us all kinds of hurt and betrayal and let down. And we struggle with these and we think, well there's supposed to be Christians.

And I don't understand this battle and this difficulty and this trial. Well he reminds us that these are light and momentary troubles.

[19 : 21] And more than that, he actually, I think, parallels them with the glory that we're going to enjoy in heaven. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

It's incomparable to what we're going to enjoy in heaven. And it may even be, there may even be a parallel between the troubles we go through and the glory that we're going to enjoy in heaven.

So the troubles we face are not without reason before God. They're not without purpose. They're preparing us for heaven. Don't lose heart. Don't lose heart, he says.

But not just that. You have and I have every day a choice. What's the choice that we have? Well we either fix our eyes on what is unseen or we fix our eyes on what is seen.

And God's wanting us to fix our eyes on what is unseen. And can I just transport a text from Hebrews there which says fix our eyes on Jesus. Because it means the same thing. Fix our eyes on Jesus or fix our eyes on what is unseen.

[20 : 35] Because what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal. So we have a choice every day to decide where we're going to focus our attention. Are we going to focus our attention on the troubles, on the let down, on the people, on the difficulties, on the illness, on the frustrations.

Is that what we're going to focus on or are we going to focus on Jesus Christ? And on his promises and on his promise that these things aren't happening without a reason and that he has a purpose behind him.

Are we going to be choosing to be bitter and angry about people, comparing ourselves with others, making the choice to become embroiled in the struggles and in the let downs and in the way that people are behaving.

Or are we going to fix our eyes on the bigger picture as Christians? This life is very short and eternity is very long and he has a great future for us as Christians.

Are we going to rely, as he says on the Holy Spirit, who has a down payment for this future that we can look forward to. So there's that great choice that you need to make and I need to make every day.

[21 : 58] What are we going to do? Are we going to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and on his promises and on his grace and are we going to rather than say, why are you doing this Lord? Are we going to maybe consider saying, what are you teaching me in this Lord?

I know I'm going through it for a reason, I don't like it, I don't want it but I know there's a reason because there's still death at work in me and in this life. It's a defeated foe but it's still working.

Am I going to allow grace to come and just overwhelm it? And I don't believe for a moment that you don't have troubles every day and I don't believe for a moment you should leave Jesus Christ out of these troubles.

I don't think for a moment that you should close the door on grace when you close the door on the church and think that's the religious bit and then the rest of my life that I can't come to terms with because it's so just in a mess. Take Christ there and listen to His voice and apply His truth to that.

You see, we're living in Madonna's world. We're living in a material world and we're material boys and girls and it's difficult for us to extract ourselves from that world and be spiritual but God wants us to fix our eyes on what is unseen because that's eternal and the struggles we're going through are temporary.

[23 : 25] Now that is not easy and it's not cheap but it's grace and it's what grace is sufficient for in our lives. Therefore, He says, we do not lose heart and He also says, therefore, we are in verse 6 of chapter 5 always to be confident because we know and believe God's promises that He has a future for us and that even if troubles we're going through are troubles for a reason.

So we are to live by faith. Believe as He talks about earlier about the resurrection. Believe in its power. Believe in what it signifies that He has defeated death for every Christian and believe that as we live by faith, we will grow as Christians. He wants us to live by faith, not by sight.

In verse 7 He says that we live by faith, not by sight. And that's difficult for us to do because everything in this world tells us to live by sight.

Live by what you can get, what you can gain, what you can be, what you can experience. And yet we're being asked to live by faith. Each of us are being asked to live by faith.

And if we lose sight of faith, we lose sight of spiritual reality. And if we only live for today, then we will be faithless or become faithless.

[24 : 57] And because we have confidence of His promises and of His future, then we make it our goal to please Him as He says in verse 9. So we make it our goal to please Him whether we're at home in the body or away from it.

As whether we're in heaven or whether we are here. We make our goal to please Him. That's why we want to follow Jesus Christ and obey Him and please Him.

Because all we do is noticed by Him and is relevant in eternity. Isn't that an amazing thought? That everything we do has an eternal relevance.

Good or bad. Unbelief or faith. Rejection or acceptance. Nothing is random. Nothing is just throw away.

It's not like the newspaper that covers the chips that yesterday's paper are no longer relevant. News is dead. Throwing away. It's not like that anymore.

[25 : 59] If I don't get chips wrapped in newspaper anymore. Health and safety and all that. But everything we do has a relevance, has a significance, has eternal bearing.

And He wants us to live to please Him. Because He's given us the victory. He's given us life. He's given us a future. And it's not a random obedience.

We don't just obey for the sake of obeying. And I think that's actually a remarkable fact. Sometimes we say, well we just obey because of His God. And He has every right to command our obedience.

It's not simply random obedience. In verse 10 He says, And that's very interesting.

Because this is to Christians. And He's telling us we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Christians will. This is a different judgment from what we looked at this morning. And Noah.

[27 : 11] This is a judgment to meet out rewards. That every Christian here will stand before Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3, there's a section that speaks about that.

1 Corinthians 3 verses 10. Just listen to this. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder. And someone else is building it. But each one should be careful how he builds.

For no one else can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. But then goes on to say, If any man, any person builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, straw, his work will be shown for what it is.

Because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.

If it is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. That's an amazing section of scripture, which you probably haven't heard many sermons on.

[28 : 23] And then in 1 John 2 verse 28, he says, And now dear children, continue in him so that when he appears, he be confident, the same word used in the chapter we're reading, and unashamed before him at his coming.

He doesn't want us to be unashamed. He wants us to be confident, because there's a judgment of rewards. And each of us has been given time and gifts and life.

And we are to use them to please God as Christians, because we know that there is this great reward to look forward to, and we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

There will be a loss on that day if we live our rubbish Christian life. And that's a shame, but we will be saved.

It's another judgment. I hope we're ready for that as Christians, and living in the light of it, and living in the light of eternity, and confident to live by faith, and also confident not to lose heart, knowing that we have the victory in Christ.

[29 : 41] So please hear the word of God, and hear it for ourselves, especially if you're going through struggles, and if things aren't easy for you as a Christian, and if you're threatening deep down in your heart to give up.

Please remember that the struggles that we all face, our light and momentary, will help us to appreciate His grace, and have an eternal consequence for our reward.

That's power, head and prayer. Heavenly Father, help us to know and to understand your grace and your glory. We thank you that Paul is so amazingly honest.

Forgive us sometimes when we either express Christian faith as absolute victory here and now, and don't take cognisance of the battle that remains with sin in our hearts, and the perfecting process that is going on, and the struggles and the difficulties and the opposition that Paul knew so much of, and if we're honest, we sense.

But may we not give up, may we not lose heart, may we recognize that none of these things are happening without a purpose for our benefit, for a greater appreciation of grace and deliverance and rescue, and for the glory of God.

[31 : 22] Bless as we pray and continue with us as we worship, and help us to be confident to live by faith as Jesus is more real to us. We ask Heavenly Father that you would be more real, that we would fix our eyes on you, and that we would not be simply living in this material world and ignoring spiritual unseen but very real realities.

We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.