

“PERSPECTIVE IS EVERYTHING”
(2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Since we’ve started our study of 2 Corinthians, two different people have told me that the verses we’ll look at today are their favorite verses in the Bible, and I would have to say they are right up there with mine as well. When we understand these verses and let them sink into our souls, it can dramatically change the way we view life.

I want to start by showing you a picture you may have seen – I believe it was drawn around 1915 – and is an early example, and most famous example, of an optical illusion. In the drawing there are two images – one of an old woman and another of a young woman. One image will tend to pop out first and once you lock onto it, it’s hard to see the other. How many of you see the old woman? How about the young woman? How many can’t see either one? The old woman is wearing a scarf and you can see her chin at the very bottom of the picture and a line for her mouth just above that. She has a very prominent nose. The younger woman is looking away and her chin line is the bottom of the old woman’s nose. If you don’t see either one, I can’t help you.

This classic drawing illustrates how we can look at the same thing and each see something different. My eyes will focus on a certain angle and yours will focus on another. This is also true of how we look at life. Some people are optimistic, and some are pessimistic – some see a brightly shining sun, and some see dark clouds – some approach life confidently, and live fearful and cautious.

It all comes down to perspective. Perspective is the ability to see the true nature of something – it’s the ability to see the big picture. Perspective is the difference between standing on the beach and looking at the ocean and standing at the top of Cape Sebastian. From the beach you can see a mile or two in each direction, but from Cape Sebastian you can see 40-50 miles in both directions.

As we come to 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, today we will see three contrasts in perspective – one perspective leads to discouragement and fear, and the other leads to hope and confidence. In verses 16-18 we read... “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 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.”

As they say, whenever you see the word “therefore,” you have to see what it’s there for, and in the verses leading up to this the Apostle Paul has been explaining what kept him going as a minister of the gospel. Paul endured just about every hardship and adversity you could imagine as he took the gospel from town to town. He was shipwrecked, beaten, mocked, thrown in jail, and run out of town. Paul’s opponents used all this hardship against him. What leader, what spokesman, what apostle has all these things happen to him? Wouldn’t a true apostle have more success?

Paul says, “All I am is just a jar of clay – a beaten down, cracked, run-of-the-mill pot – what’s important is what’s inside me. God choose me, in spite of all my weaknesses and deficiencies – to display the power and glory of Christ to the world. If people reject the gospel, it’s not because of me – it’s because the god of this age has blinded them to the glory of Christ. What happens to me is not important – the important thing is that the life-changing message of Christ gets out to the world.”

Knowing his purpose gave Paul confidence and courage to face whatever difficulty came his way. He says, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Instead of suffering being a detriment, Paul saw it as an advantage – because he was willing to endure suffering, the message of Christ was getting out and lives were being changed.

In verse 14 Paul says that what kept him going was knowing that no matter what happened to him in this life, God would one day raise him from the dead... “If I live – great – I get more opportunities to share Christ... If I die, all the better for me – I get to go be with the Lord forever.”

Because of this, Paul says in verse 16... “Therefore, we do not lose heart.” It’s easy to lose heart. When you see all that is happening in the world, you can lose heart. When you suffer physical and emotional pain, you can lose heart. When you serve the Lord and see no results – when you share your faith and are ridiculed, it’s easy to lose heart.

Yet Paul says, “We do not lose heart.” Why not? What keeps us going through all the turmoil and heartache and adversities of life? The answer is: perspective. It’s seeing all of life – including the bad parts – from the right vantage point. The first contrast Paul draws is between our outer life and our inner life – between what is external and what is internal. He says, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Our outer life – our body – is wasting away. Can I get an amen to that? Our jar of clay is fragile and wearing down every day.

When I was growing up my mom’s side of the family had a tradition of sending a Round Robin letter in the mail. Twice or so a year a big envelope would arrive in the mail filled with letters from aunts and uncles and cousins, and then my mom would write a letter with news about our family and then send it on to the next person. As my cousins and I moved into adulthood we started contributing our own letters. The younger generation wrote about college, getting engaged, having kids, climbing mountains, and seeing the world, while the older generation talked about going to the doctor, getting knee surgery, and their new prescription glasses.

One of my aunts called it an “organ recital” – reciting all that was wrong their internal organs. We younger ones would roll our eyes, not having a clue what they were talking about. We were too busy conquering the world to worry about growing older. A few years ago one of my cousins and I were reminiscing about the Round Robin letter and both agreed that if it was still going around today, our kids would be rolling their eyes as we talked about the same things our parents talked about. We all get to take our turn growing older.

Not only did Paul deal with the normal aches and pains of aging, but also all that was done to his body for the sake of the gospel. Later in chapter 11 he says, “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea” (24-25)... “I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (27-28). Paul’s was a broken-down, beat-up jar of clay because he would not stop speaking about the gospel.

“But,” he says, “While outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” What a contrast – at the same time our bodies are falling apart and winding down, inwardly our spirits growing stronger. I remember my dad often saying when he was in his sixties and seventies that he felt like he was 21 inside. Inwardly – in his spirit – he felt like he could do all the things he loved to do and used to do, but outwardly his body wouldn’t let him. It’s fascinating that there can be such a dichotomy taking place between our outer self and our inner self.

While our outer bodies waste away, our inner spirit is being renewed day by day. The word “renewed” infers that there is something within us that needs restoration. This takes us all the way back to the beginning when God created a perfect world, and the apex of His creation was making man in His own image – to bear His resemblance. When Adam sinned, the image of God in him was marred, and that damaged image was passed on to every person.

What Adam lost in the fall was regained by Christ on the cross. When we’re saved by God’s grace, He begins a work of restoration in our lives where we progressively conformed into the image of Christ, until the day we see Christ and are fully made like Him. The process of renewal takes place in our inner being. In Ephesians 3:16 Paul says, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”

While God wants to renew our inner being, the world tries to pull all of our attention to renewing our outer being. We do everything possible to stave off the effects of growing old – we take vitamins and supplements, we lift weights and exercise, we get face lifts and tummy tucks and hair transplants. And what does it all accomplish? Not much. The best we can do is delay the effects of aging, but death eventually catches up to all of us.

It's important to take care of our temple – our outer self – God’s Word instructs us to do so – but far more important is to take care of and nourish our inner being. The point Paul is making is that our earthly bodies are temporary. Moses says in Psalm 90 that the years of our life are seventy or eighty, if we are strong, but our days are soon gone and we fly away. In contrast, our souls are eternal. One day, as Paul says in verse 14, God is going to raise our temporal, earthly bodies and give us eternal, heavenly bodies. Won’t that be exciting! But until then, our focus should be on what’s happening inside us, and the work of God in renewing and revitalizing our souls to be the people He created us to be.

The renewal of our inner life is a major theme in the New Testament – it’s another word for sanctification or transformation. Renewal takes place as we yield control of our lives to the Holy Spirit, as we are nourished by the daily reading of God’s word, as we pray and commune with the Lord, and as we take an active part in church community – all of this renews our spirit and makes us strong and resilient. And the transformation within us begins to flow out from us – we become more loving, more at peace with our circumstances, more joyful and happy, and more hopeful and optimistic. And all this can take place at the same time that our body is wasting away – which is why Paul can say, “We do not lose heart because God is doing something inside us that cannot be nullified by what is happening outside us.”

In verse 17 Paul presents a second contrast in perspective. He writes... “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Paul pictures a set of scales, and on one side of the scales he places all our troubles, all our heartache, all our pain and suffering – and on the other side of the scales he places the eternal glory we will experience when this life is over. In comparison to eternal weight of glory in heaven, all the troubles we experience in this life are but a feather on the scale.

One commentator says that Paul must have had a slight smile on this face when he wrote this because he knew what our reaction would be... “Light and momentary? Are you kidding? Have you walked in my shoes and suffered the physical pain I have, not to mention the relational and emotional pain I’ve endured? What kind of person are you to say my pain is light and momentary?”

Paul is not minimizing the pain we feel on earth. In chapter one he said that he and his missionary team were burdened with affliction beyond their ability to bear, and it was so intense they thought they were going to die. Paul is not denying reality – he’s saying that in comparison to the glory of heaven that awaits us and being eternally set free from pain and sorrow – in comparison to the millions and billions of years we will spend in heaven – everything that happens to us on earth is not even be a blip on the radar.

It’s so important that we understand this because when we’re going through severe trials, all of our focus is zeroed in on our circumstances. It’s in these moments that we need to remember that what is happening to us is “light” compared to eternity. “Light” means it’s easy to bear – it’s hardly nothing – it’s a piece of lint on your shoulder – you don’t even know it’s there. When we get to heaven and all our burdens are lifted, all the burdens we carried in this life will seem trivial and insignificant.

Not are our troubles on earth light, they are temporary. Your trouble may last a long time, perhaps even a lifetime, but it won’t last forever. Your migraine headaches will not last forever, your financial crunch will not last forever, your grief and sorrow are temporary. Someday it will end.

In contrast, the glory that awaits us lasts forever. Imagine this piece of rope being endless. I don’t have an endless piece of rope to show you, so you will have to imagine. Imagine that this rope is a timeline of your existence – you exist forever. This black part represents your time on earth. You’ve got a few short years in this life, and then you have all of eternity in the next life. All most people think about is the black part – all the worries and hassles of this life – and don’t for a second even consider the millions and millions and millions of years in the life to come.

When you look at it this way, the black part seems like nothing compared the rest of the endless rope of our existence. As Christians, our focus needs to be squarely focused on eternity. Colossians 3:2 says, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” Focusing on eternity has a profound effect the way we view our troubles on earth – they are light and temporary compared to the eternal weight of glory that awaits us.

What is the “weight of glory?” Glory is a hard word to wrap our minds around, but in verse 17 it speaks of all that God has promised us as our future inheritance in heaven. Romans 8:17 says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” When we become part of God’s eternal family, Christ’s life becomes our life – just as He suffered on earth, we are called to suffer – and just as He ascended to glory once His time on earth was done, we will one day share in His glory when our time on earth is done. We like the glory part, but the suffering not so much. But that’s the pattern Christ followed, and that’s the pattern He has set out for us.

Philippians 2 describes how Jesus left the glory of heaven and came to earth – He emptied Himself of His heavenly glory, became a man, and suffered a cruel death on a cross. No one has suffered like Jesus suffered, but as horrible as His suffering was, it was temporary – and after suffering He ascended back to glory, exalted as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

We follow the same pattern – after we have suffered for bearing the name of Jesus in this life, we will share in His glory in the next life. All that God promises us – eternal life, streets of gold, unending joy and happiness, forever being set free from pain and suffering – will all be ours when this life is over and we are with Jesus. When you put all our earthly troubles on one side of the scale, and all the glory that awaits us in the future – the weight of glory makes the troubles of this world seem but like a feather in comparison.

In verse 18 Paul presents a third contrast in perspective... “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.” Here the contrast is between what is seen and temporal, and what is unseen and eternal. The contrast Paul makes is between focusing on what we see and experience in this life – the pain and heartache and affliction – and focusing on the future promises of glory that we can’t see and have not yet experienced. It all comes back to what we’re looking at.

A great example of what Paul is talking about is the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6. They are caught in a trap with hundreds of enemy soldiers surrounding them. Elisha’s servant sees the vast army and is overcome with fear... “What are we going to do?” Elisha says, “Don’t sweat it, there are more of us than there are of them.” His servant said, “Huh? I see two of us and several hundred of them.” Elisha prayed, “Lord, open his eyes so he may see.” Elisha prayed that his servant would be able to focus on the spiritual reality he could not see with his physical eyes. The Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots, with an angel army surrounding Elisha. Maybe you’re like the servant and all you can see is doom – what a great reminder this is that God surrounds you with His presence and protection – He’s in your camp – and He will deliver you in His time and His way.

What we see in this world is real – it’s not an illusion – but it’s temporary – whereas what awaits us in the future world is eternal. If we focus on the troubles and trials of this world, like Elisha’s servant we will be swallowed up in fear and lose heart. But when we fix our eyes on the unseen world to come, like Paul did, we will be confident and hopeful.

Notice the word “fix”... we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. The Greek word for “fix” is *skopos*, from which we get the word microscope. It has the idea of looking intently and zeroing in on something to the exclusion of everything else. I think of Hebrews 12:2 where it says that for the joy set before Him Jesus endured the cross, despising its shame. Jesus looked beyond the torment and agony of the cross and focused on the joy of seeing countless souls saved and set free from bondage. Having laser-focus on His goal gave Him the strength to endure.

Since we cannot physically see all the glory that awaits us in the future, we must see it through the eyes of faith. Listen to what Paul prays for us in Ephesians 1:18-19a... “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.” Because we are so focused on the world we can see, the eyes of our heart need to be enlightened to see the spiritual reality that awaits us.

There’s a whole chapter of the Bible – Hebrews 11 – that describes how Old Testament saints walked not by sight, but by faith. The chapter starts by saying in verse one... “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

By faith, Noah built an ark, believing God would send a flood even though there was not a rain cloud in sight. By faith, when Abraham was called by God to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, went even though he didn't know where he was going. What kept him going was knowing that a permanent home awaited him in heaven.

And listen to the faith of Moses... “He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:25-26).

Hebrews 11 goes on to describe how God's faithful servants faced lions and fiery flames – some were tortured and sawn in two – others lived but lived destitute, wandering in deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground, and facing cruel deaths – but they kept going because their eyes were fixed on a better world to come.

Sometimes those who suffer the most have the greatest eyes of faith. No one in our day illustrates this better than Joni Eareckson Tada, who has been confined to a wheelchair for nearly 55 years. In her autobiography she tells how as a young, athletic 17-year-old she dove into shallow water, hit her head, and it left her paralyzed in all four limbs. What's kept her going for 55 years is developing an eternal perspective.

Listen to what she writes, “Whatever troubles are weighing you down are not chains. They are featherweight when compared to the glory yet to come. I see the day when I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives to someone like me? No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.”

Perhaps 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 will become one of your favorite Bible passages. These three amazing verses inspire us to not lose heart, and remind us that our perspective changes everything.

- Instead of focusing on what's happening to our outer being and our body wearing out, we focus on what God is doing in our inner being – each day He is renewing us – even as our bodies are growing weaker, our spirit is growing stronger.
- Instead of focusing on our earthly troubles, we focus on the heavenly glory that awaits us – which is so glorious and so weighty it makes our present problems, in comparison, seem light and momentary.
- Instead of focusing on what is seen and temporary, we focus on what is unseen and eternal. Through eyes of faith we fix our gaze on the day we will be with Jesus, and all the suffering and heartache of this world will fade as we experience and enjoy the glory that is ours for eternity.

Don't lose heart – better days are ahead – may God give each of us the perspective to keep going – whatever we face this week – with joy and confidence.