

Session 7

February 23, 2020

HOW CAN I HONOR GOD IN MY SUFFERING?

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

How often have we been told that it's okay to give thanks *in* everything, but not necessarily *for* everything? Yet the Bible teaches both (see 1 Thess. 5:18 and Eph. 5:20). So how do we do that? How is it possible for someone who is going through great suffering to maintain an attitude of gratitude both *in the midst of* the pain, as well as *for it*? It's all about our focus. In this week's text, the apostle Paul uses contrasting concepts to help us focus on God's bigger picture.

Weakness vs. power (vv. 7-11). The treasure that Paul refers to is the message of salvation. He describes it as God's truth (4:2), and God's light (4:6), given to God's servants (4:5). In verses 7-11, the apostle points out the irony that such a powerful message (see Rom. 1:16) has been entrusted to such weak guardians: *us!* Such important matters should be placed in a safe or vault. We are but *clay jars*; imperfect and frail, often cracked and easily broken. It makes me wonder: what in the world was God thinking? Yet even this irony is part of God's plan. Two main ideas are emphasized. First, our weakness helps highlight God's power (v. 7). The suffering incurred by the followers of Christ in each verse is painfully severe. His ministers are *pressured*, *perplexed*, *persecuted*, and *struck down*. Yet in the midst of it all, there is startling strength. They are *not* crushed, *not* in despair, *not* abandoned, and *not* destroyed. His divine presence empowered them to "keep on keeping on," even in the worst of circumstances. Second, our mortality helps highlight Jesus' life. In verse 10, Paul admits that living for Christ means death to self. In his case, Paul bore the physical scars of suffering, a powerful witness of his commitment to Christ. Paul's purpose in life was to die to self. His purpose in death was to point others to life in Christ (see Gal. 2:20).

Suffering vs. glory (vv. 12-15). So what was the benefit of their suffering? Four thoughts are shared. First, simply put, their physical afflictions—that ultimately led to death—were worth it if others came to spiritual life in Christ (v. 12). Second, drawing on the Psalmist's confidence that even in the midst of suffering (or perhaps *because* of it; see Ps. 116:10), faith in God is increased; a lesson worth sharing (v. 13). Third, the sufferings of this world pale in comparison to the reward that awaits (see Rom. 8:18); a reward that includes presentation of those won to Christ (v. 14). Finally, the sufferings—and subsequent victories—demonstrate God's marvelous grace, result in thanksgiving from God's people, and bring glory to God (v. 15).

Temporary vs. eternal (vv. 16-18). Because suffering in the life of the believer has such potential to positively impact the world and glorify God, Paul said, "We do not give up" (v. 16). No doubt, the *outer person* (that is, the physical flesh), is indeed being destroyed. What suffering and affliction does not destroy, the God-appointed penalty for sin will. But ironically, while the outer body is continually falling into ruin, the *inner person* (that is, spiritual vitality) is continually being renewed. This continuity is expressed in the verb form Paul uses, but also in the direct statement tagged on, "day by day" (v. 16). That enthusiasm grows in the next verse. Unlike the afflictions of this world which are light burdens (Matt. 11:30 uses the same word) and last for only an instant, their result is excessively weighty, glorious, and eternal. For this reason, Paul reminds followers of Christ to focus on the unseen and eternal results of suffering in God's

grand plan, rather than the more visible—but blessedly temporary—sufferings themselves (v. 18).