

# Keys to Endurance

2 Corinthians 4:16–18

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## Introduction

One of the most clearly-revealed truths in the entire New Testament is that the Christian's life will be marked by affliction. For the true follower of Jesus who is living in a world that hated Jesus, suffering, and tribulation, and persecution, and conflict are inevitable. Scripture makes that conclusion unmistakable. Jesus said it plainly in John 16:33. He said, "In this world, you have tribulation." And a chapter earlier He explained why. In John chapter 15, verses 18 to 20, Jesus said: "If the world hates you [and the Greek construction there implies, "and it will"], you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

And so suffering is part and parcel of the Christian life. The two go hand in hand. Paul said that clearly in Philippians 1:29. He said, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." The one who has been granted faith has also been granted suffering. Acts 14:22 says it just as plainly: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And so the Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." Don't be surprised when you suffer! Don't regard suffering as a strange thing! It's to be expected! Those who think and speak and act and look like Jesus, in this world that hated and mocked and crucified Jesus, will be marked by the afflictions of Jesus. The Christian life is characterized by suffering for Jesus' sake.

And if that is the case, that means that an essential component of the Christian life is *endurance*. If our lives are to be fraught with the trials and tribulations that come from living in a world that is not our home—if we are to be afflicted and persecuted as a matter of course—we must learn how we are to endure adversity, and stand firm in faithfulness to Christ to the end. And so exhortations for endurance in the Christian life are just as numerous as promises of affliction. The Lord Jesus said, "Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who *endures* to the end, he will be saved" (Matt 24:12–13). Paul charged Timothy, in utter simplicity, to "*endure* hardship" (2 Tim 4:5). In the familiar opening verses of the Epistle of James, he says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Later in that same chapter, in James

1:12, he says, “Blessed is a man who *perseveres* under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” The author of Hebrews said the same thing in Hebrews 10:36. He says, “You have need of *endurance*, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” In 2 Timothy 2:12, Paul put it simply. He wrote, “If we endure, we will also reign with Him.” And so he said, just two verses earlier, “For this reason I endure *all* things for the sake of the elect.” It is unmistakable: the Christian is one who is marked by *endurance* through affliction.

And those two principles of the Christian life—the presence of affliction and the necessity of endurance—are nowhere better illustrated for us than in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. Paul described his ministry in 1 Corinthians 4:12 when he said, “When we are persecuted”—note, not: “*If* we are persecuted,” but “*when*.” “When we are persecuted, we *endure*.” In 2 Corinthians 6:4 he says, “In everything commending ourselves as ministers of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses.” He is distressed, he suffers hardship, and he is afflicted; and yet he is characterized by “much endurance.”

And we have learned this from our study of 2 Corinthians. Amid accusations from false apostles that Paul’s great sufferings disqualify him from being a true apostle, he explains in chapter 4 verse 7 that God has committed the treasure of the Gospel to earthen vessels; that God has chosen to display the glorious treasure of the Gospel in insignificant, breakable, unattractive earthen vessels, “so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.” You see, so far from disqualifying Paul from being a true servant of Christ, his suffering is his badge of authenticity, because his afflictions are the means through which God reveals the abundance of His divine power. And if God’s majestic power will be put on display and glorified through the minister’s affliction, then true Christian ministry will be marked by affliction.

And that was certain true of Paul’s ministry. In verses 8 and 9 he says, We are *in all things* afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. In verse 10 he says, “We *always* carry about in the body the dying of Jesus.” In verse 11 he says, “We who live are *constantly* being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake.” As he takes the Gospel message to a hostile world, and as he ministers God’s Word in service of the church, he bears the weakness, the indignity, the shame, and the suffering of the cross of Christ. Jesus’ own ministry was characterized by the laying down of His life in obedient service for the sake of His people. And Paul’s ministry was characterized by the very same thing. He embraced a life of *perpetual dying* for the sake of the Church, as he said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, “I die daily.” He says in Romans 8:36: “For your sake”—that is to say, for the sake of the church—“we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” And then in 2 Corinthians 4:12: Death works in us, but life in you. The death of weakness and conflict and difficulty and suffering works in the

minister of the Gospel, but the spiritual life of health and growth and edification and holiness works in the people of God as a result of those labors. And therefore he must endure.

And we have been looking to Paul's example as a pattern for our own ministry. As we've said throughout our series on 2 Corinthians, we are all called to ministry. We are called to the ministry of evangelism—of proclaiming the Gospel to the lost who remain dead in their sins—; and we are called to ministry with respect to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ—to serve one another, to bear one another's burdens, to meet practical needs, and to strengthen one another in our battle against sin.

And if we know that suffering is sure to come as we labor in those ministries, we also need to be equipped to endure that hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. We need to stand against the temptation to lose heart—the temptation to decide that the tension and the discomfort and the conflict we experience as we preach the Gospel to this God-hating generation just isn't worth it anymore; the temptation to decide that serving these brothers and sisters that are hard to love is just too messy—that laboring and pleading with one another to put off sin and put on righteousness is just too spiritually taxing.

And we look to Paul's example for that as well. It's that very issue of endurance that Paul takes up in 2 Corinthians 4, verses 16 to 18. He says, in verse 16: "Therefore, we do not lose heart." We do not lose our courage in the face of conflict and difficulty and opposition. We do not give ourselves over to despair and give up the fight to which we have been called. Pastor John says, "To lose heart means to become cowardly, or timid, or faint hearted, or weak, or hopeless, or fearful; to lose your boldness, your bravery, your courage; to become weary and faint hearted and quit, fold up your tent, bail out." And Paul says: we don't do that. We do not give up the task which the Lord has entrusted us. We fulfill our ministry. We go on speaking the Gospel, and we go on ministering to the saints. We endure.

And in our last time together, we looked at verses 13 to 15, where Paul gave several motivations for joyfully enduring in ministry, even in the midst of affliction. (1) We press on in enduring ministry because of a sincere faith in the Gospel; we *believe* the message that we have been commissioned to proclaim, and so we cannot help but proclaim it. We believe, therefore we speak, as Paul says in verse 13. (2) And not only that, but we press on in enduring ministry because of a sure confidence in the resurrection. We have become acquainted with the freedom of being able to lay down our lives in the service of the Gospel and of the body of Christ—we are free to give our lives away to serve Christ's Church—because we know that we will live again. We know that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, verse 14. (3) And then, in verse 15, Paul says we press on in enduring ministry because of a deep satisfaction in the glory of God. He says that as people hear the Gospel preached and are saved, worshipers of God are created! More voices are added to the chorus that sings praise and honor to God! And

as Christians grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, their worship is strengthened! The voices in that chorus of praise are raised unto sweeter and sweeter song. We press on in ministry, because our ministry results in our greatest joy: the glory and magnification of God! “*Therefore, we do not lose heart!*”

And as we come to our text this morning, in verses 16 to 18, Paul continues to explain why we do not lose heart—why we press on in joyful, *enduring* ministry, even in the midst of affliction. Let’s read our text together, 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup>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.”

In this text, Paul lays out **three keys to endurance in ministry**—three key truths that explain how the faithful New Covenant minister does not lose heart in the midst of conflict and opposition, but presses on in endurance.

### **I. The Proper Power (v. 16b)**

And the **first key to endurance** is, number one, we must be drawing strength from **the proper power**. And we see this in the second half of verse 16. Look again at verse 16. “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” If you’re going to endure the kind of affliction that is promised to be yours in Christian ministry, you need to draw strength from **the proper power**. You can’t labor in the strength of the outer man that is wasting away and decaying; you need to press on in endurance by drawing from the spiritual strength that is renewed in the inner man.

Now what does Paul mean when he speaks of the outer man? He’s speaking of his physical body—the part of him that is visible to those who observe from the outside. He’s continuing the thought he began in verse 7, where he characterized himself as an earthen vessel, that which, among other things, was perishable, and easily breakable, and transient. In verse 10 he actually uses the word “body.” He says we are “always carrying about in the *body* the dying of Jesus.” Christ’s sufferings are made evident in our *body*. And then again in verse 11, he speaks of the life of Jesus being manifested in our *mortal flesh*. *Mortal* flesh: that aspect of our existence which will wear out and die. So, when Paul speaks of the outer man, he’s speaking about his physical body.

And he says that his outer man is decaying. This word describes a process of destruction, of debilitation. It speaks of something being spoiled, or gradually destroyed through corrosion of some kind (Guthrie, 270). This is the same word used in Luke 12:33 where Jesus speaks of the

moth destroying clothing. Little by little, the moths eat holes into the clothing until it's eventually destroyed. Paul uses a cognate form of this word in 1 Corinthians 15, where he speaks about our natural body being a perishable body. From the standpoint of our physical existence, we are wearing out.

And that's true no matter who we are and no matter what we're doing. By nature, our outer man decays and wastes away. The world is broken. The cancer of sin has infected the very fiber of this natural world, and it is causing the whole creation to decay around us. Paul says that in Romans 8—that because of man's sin, creation was subjected to futility; it has been enslaved to corruption. The whole creation *groans*, Paul says, and suffers the pains of childbirth, as it eagerly awaits its redemption into freedom. Because all men sinned in Adam, we live in a broken, decaying, dying world, where tornados and tsunamis and earthquakes devour homes and claim lives, where the life and vitality of summer gives way to the death of winter, and where *we ourselves* groan within ourselves, as Paul says in that same passage in Romans 8. Our bodies break down; we can't do the things we used to; we can't run as fast, or jump as high, or lift as much weight. As time passes, our muscles weaken, our eyes dim, our ears dull; so often our organs stop working properly and we need medical attention, and pharmacy prescriptions, and surgeries. And eventually, no matter what we do to prevent it, our bodies wear out and we die.

Now that's true of all of us, by nature. But in the case of the Christian minister that process is only accelerated. Because ours is the body which carries about the dying of Jesus, 2 Corinthians 4:10. Ours is the body which bears the brand-marks of Jesus, Galatians 6:17. In Paul's case, he was in constant danger, he was hungry and thirsty, was without food, was homeless, weathered the cold and exposure of the elements, endured numbers of sleepless nights. And then on top of that he could say that he had been beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times 39 lashes, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, and on top of it all he knew the pressure of concern for the spiritual welfare of the churches (2 Cor 11:23–29). This man was decaying. He was wasting away.

You say, “Man, Mike, that is depressing!” And yet Paul says, “We do not lose heart”! How can we face the reality that our outer man—along with the rest of this world—is decaying, and yet not lose heart? Answer: “Yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” The inner man is the heart, the soul, the spiritual aspect of the believer that has been recreated in Christ and is being progressively conformed into His image. It is the eternal, imperishable aspect of the believer that has been birthed in regeneration, and is now being increasingly strengthened in sanctification. It is the “new self” of Ephesians 4:24, which, according to that verse, “in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” It is the new self of Colossians 3:10, “who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.” Paul is saying, “Though on the outside I suffer the debilitation and decay in accordance with life in a fallen world—accelerated by my great suffering for Christ's sake—I don't lose heart,

because at the very same time as my outer man decays, God the Holy Spirit renews in my heart a kind of spiritual life and vitality and vigor that only excites me to press on all the more! I may be losing physical strength every day, but God’s mercies are new every morning, and I am gaining *spiritual* strength day by day! And that’s what matters to me.”

And I want you to notice: these are simultaneous actions. Both verbs are in the present tense, which connotes continuous action. Our outer man is presently, continuously decaying, and—at the very same time—our inner man is presently, continuously being renewed. And, as one commentator put it, “The...simultaneity of these processes...suggests their proportionality” (Harris, 359). In other words, it’s not simply that these two processes occur together; it’s that the one occurs in proportion to the other. The more the outer man decays as a result of laying down your life in ministry, the more the inner man is renewed. Another commentator said, “Instead of destroying Paul, his sufferings ‘outwardly’ are the very instrument God uses to reveal the glory of his presence and power in Paul’s life ‘inwardly’” (Hafemann, 190).

You say, How do you know that? Because as we’ve been saying throughout our sermons on this chapter, these are the brand-marks of *Christ*. This is the very *dying of Jesus* that we bear around in our body. There is a fellowship—a communion, a unique bond of intimacy—that Paul shares with Christ because of this common suffering. In Philippians 3:10 he calls it “the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.” Suffering for Christ’s sake opens up unique opportunities for seeing and knowing and experiencing Christ in ways that we would never know otherwise. We learned in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that the foundational means of the believer’s sanctification is the *beholding* of the glory of Lord. Well, as we suffer for His sake, and run to Him for comfort, and pray to Him for relief, and follow Him in the example He left for us, we behold that glory in fresh ways.

And this is precisely what Paul prays for in Ephesians 3:16–19 when he prays that we would be “strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner man.” What does that power and strength in the inner man look like, Paul? Ephesians 3:17: “So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” The knowledge of Christ’s love that is uniquely experienced in the fellowship of His sufferings, as the Spirit grants renewal in the inner man, is a presentation of the glory of Christ to the eyes of our heart, by which we are transformed into His image. And the spiritual vitality and strength that is birthed in that process is sufficient to sustain the weariest of ministers’ hearts. You see, the **key to endurance in ministry** for Paul was to draw strength from **the proper power**—from the Spirit-renewed strength of the inner man.

And so, friends, when you are tired, when you are weak, when you are drained of strength; when you look in the mirror and realize that the daily pressure of concern for the spiritual health of the body of Christ has given you wrinkles; when the long days of counseling and the long nights of intercessory prayer have given you bags under your eyes; when you are exasperated from admonishing the unruly, encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, and being patient with everyone—as Paul commands us 1 Thessalonians 5:14—and it has caused your hair to turn gray, or worse yet, to fall out!; when the strain of difficult, tense conversations with agitated unbelievers has sapped your mental and emotional energy to the point where you’re just physically *worn out*; and even just when you’re tired at the end of a long week at work or with the kids, and you feel like you just can’t get to Bible study this Friday and minister to the saints——when your outer man is *decaying*, you’ll endure; because you’re going to draw strength from **the proper power**. You won’t look for strength from the outer man who is wasting away; you won’t gauge your ability by what the outer man feels like. You will look for strength from the inner man, whom the Holy Spirit of God is renewing and strengthening every day! The inner man, to whom the Spirit presents fresh displays of the glory of Christ (Eph 3:16–19), and grants communion with Christ in the fellowship of His sufferings (Phil 3:10)! The inner man, who holds this life loosely because he hopes in the life to come, and who possesses an indomitable joy in the glory of God that fuels endurance for even the most taxing kind of ministry! Dear friends, you will not lose heart; you will endure, because you know the key of drawing strength from **the proper power**.

## II. The Proper Perspective (v. 17)

There’s a **second key to endurance in ministry**. Not only must we utilize the proper power, we must, number two, maintain **the proper perspective**. And we see this in verse 17. Paul writes, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” You will endure any and every affliction that the world, the flesh, and Satan will throw at you in the path of Christian ministry when you can look at the present with the eye of eternity—when you can see your afflictions from an eternal **perspective**.

And this is just one of the most precious verses in all of Scripture. The contrastive parallelism in this verse is so elegant that it’s almost poetic. Notice: “momentary, light affliction” is contrasted with an “eternal weight of glory.” You have a contrast of duration: momentary versus eternal. You have a contrast of significance: light versus weight. But then you have a contrast of substance: affliction versus glory. And we’re going to examine those first two contrasts, but the very heart of this verse comes to light in that final contrast of substance. What will make all the difference in our ability to persevere in joyful, enduring ministry, even in the midst of affliction, is a spiritual apprehension of the glory that will be ours in heaven.

Now I know that in my preaching ministry you hear me talk about glory a lot. But I pray that if our study of 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 has taught you anything, it has taught you that glory is absolutely central and essential to the Christian life! Paul is discussing the most theologically significant, spiritually sublime realities in these two chapters. And to do it, he uses the word “glory” *seventeen times!* Between chapter 3 verse 7 and here at the end of chapter 4, “glory” shows up on average of more than one out of every two *verses!* In chapter 3, verses 7 to 11, the nature of the Old and New Covenants—the transitioning of the redemptive plan of God from age to age—is defined chiefly in terms of glory. In chapter 4 verse 4, the total depravity of man is defined in terms of blindness to glory. And therefore, in verse 6, the nature of God’s sovereign work of regeneration is cast in terms of opening the eyes of the heart to see His glory shining in the face of His Son. In chapter 3 verse 18, we’re told that the process of our progressive sanctification is a function of our beholding the glory of the Lord. It is only as we see glory that we are then transformed into the image of that glory! In chapter 4 verse 15, the glory of God is the very bedrock foundation of all of our efforts in ministry. And here in verse 17, glory is our all-consuming passion that causes the severest of our afflictions to seem momentary and light.

This is what has been designed to make us tick! Just as a car engine runs on gasoline, the regenerate man or woman has been recreated in Christ to run on glory. The glory of God shining in the face of Christ is to be what consumes us, what animates us, what energizes us! It is what we are to long for, and set our affections upon, and pursue more than anything! Glory is not just the icing on the cake of the Christian life. It’s not just a consolation prize—a nice by-product of a dutiful life. No, it is to be the very focus of our lives! We are, in a real sense, to be glory hounds! It’s just that the glory we pursue is not our own, but God’s.

This glory is so weighty, so significant, so substantial, that when you put that glory side by side with the most severe kinds of suffering that this life can bring, there is no comparison. That’s what Paul says at the end of verse 17: he says that glory is far beyond all comparison. Just a great phrase in the Greek: *hyperbolēn eis hyperbolēn*; “hyperbole unto hyperbole.” You all remember from English class that a hyperbole is a literary device where an author exaggerates to make a point. Paul says the glory that we will enjoy in the presence of God in heaven is beyond all possibility of overstatement or exaggeration (MacArthur, 156). With respect to its corresponding affliction, this glory is beyond all measure and proportion (BAGD, 840c), beyond all comparison and estimate, to an utterly extraordinary degree exceeding all bounds (cf. Harris, 361). Paul just searches for language to try to conceptualize this ineffable glory! He takes another shot in Romans 8:18, where he says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Ad you ask: What glory will be revealed to us? What is this glory that so dwarfs our afflictions? It is precisely what our High Priest prayed for in John 17:24. He prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory



which You have given Me.” If *regeneration* is having the eyes of your heart opened to see the glory of God shining in the face of Christ, and if *sanctification* is progressively beholding more and more of that glory, though only as through a glass darkly, then the *consummation* is going to heaven to see that glory face-to-face and eye-to-eye—to look upon the glory of God shining in the face of our dear Lord Jesus Himself, in His immediate presence, unhindered by any trace of sin!

Paul says when you compare that coming glory with your present affliction, you’ll recognize that there is no comparison. He calls his affliction “momentary.” Now you say, “Wait a minute: What part of Paul’s affliction was momentary?! The entire New Testament is shot through with the chronicling of Paul’s sufferings! I mean, didn’t he just say, in chapter 4 verse 10, that he is *always* carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus? And in verse 11 that he is *constantly* being delivered over to death?” And the answer is: Yes. Paul’s afflictions were momentary. They only last a lifetime! Afflictions are only for *this* life. They will not follow us into eternity. And when we view the hardships and difficulties and sufferings and afflictions of this life against the backdrop of the everlasting joy of that eternal weight of glory, we understand our affliction is momentary. James 4:14 says that our human life is “just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.” It’s like going outside on a cold morning and huffing into the air. You can see your breath for a moment, and then it vanishes away. Our affliction is lifelong; as we said at the beginning, suffering characterizes the Christian life. But because we have **the proper perspective**, we understand our affliction is momentary, and so we don’t lose heart.

He goes on. He calls his affliction “light.” The Greek word is *elaphros*. It means insignificant; a weightless trifle; *fluff*. And it just amazes me that Paul could say this. It’d be one thing if *I* wrote that; you’d say, “Mike, who are *you* to call *my* suffering *fluff*? Why don’t *you* try bearing this burden? What have *you* ever been through in your life?!” And I might understand that objection. But *I* didn’t write this! *Paul* wrote it! Five times 39 lashes? 3 times beaten with rods? Paul’s affliction was severe—even burdensome at times. He says that very thing in chapter 1 verse 8: “We were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life!” So you see, Paul was no Stoic. This wasn’t some mind-over-matter thing where he convinced himself there was no such thing as pain and suffering and then it all just went away. I love what Charles Hodge says here: “[Paul] did not regard these afflictions as trifles, nor did he bear them with stoical indifference. He felt their full force and pressure. . . . His afflictions were not light in the sense of giving little pain. The Bible does not teach, either by precept or example, that Christians are to bear pain as though it were not pain, or bereavements as though they caused no sorrow” (479).

You see, the Christian is not someone who is untouched by the sorrows of life in a fallen in world; the Christian feels the sorrows of this life deeply. Certainly Paul felt those sorrows. You say, “Well then how could he call his afflictions light? Fluff?!” Because on the one side of the

scale he put his afflictions, but on the other side of the scale he put the eternal *weight* of glory that was sure to be his. I don't think you could have looked at Paul's back and conclude that his affliction was light! A rod is a rod! A whip is a whip! And the same is true for our afflictions: It's not that they're not real! It's not that they're just imaginary or superfluous. Fatigue is fatigue; grief is grief; pain is pain. But with the **proper perspective**, the weightiness of the glory that we will enjoy in eternity makes all the suffering we experience here feel light, trifling, insignificant.

And I've got to say one more thing about this magnificent verse. I want you to notice the word "producing" in verse 17. "Momentary, light affliction is *producing* for us an eternal weight of glory." You see, glory is not merely that which *follows* affliction; affliction *produces* this glory. There is a directly proportional relationship between our suffering for Christ's sake and the glory we will enjoy in heaven. Now, that's not to say that our suffering is somehow meritorious; but there is a directly proportional relationship between suffering and glory. Peter says it in 1 Peter 4:13. He says, "*To the degree* that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing!" Why? "Because," verse 14, "the Spirit of *glory* rests on you." Romans 8:17: we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, "if indeed we *suffer* with Him, *so that* we may also be *glorified* with Him." Suffering produces glory!

And the precious implication of that is absolutely no affliction in your life—if suffered in the path of obedience to Christ and endured for His sake—none of that suffering is meaningless! There is no such thing as senseless suffering for Christ! Because every ounce of affliction that you endure for the sake of Gospel is increasing your capacity to apprehend the fullness of the eternal weight of God's glory—both in eternity, and even now in the present age, into which eternity has broken in because of the work of Christ! You see, this is not just pie in the sky religious talk. I'm not saying that we just bite down hard and bear our afflictions because one day they'll be over. There is joy to be had right now in knowing that our sufferings for righteousness' sake are actually working for our benefit! I think this is what Paul meant in Romans 8 when he said that we are more than conquerors. A conqueror subdues and defeats an enemy. One who is *more* than a conqueror defeats an enemy, and then presses that enemy into service to work for his benefit. And so in the face of affliction, when you feel the dull pain of the decay of the outer man, in the midst of that sorrow, you can be always rejoicing (2 Cor 6:10), because you know that that very affliction is being pressed into your service and is *producing* for you an eternal weight of glory, far beyond all comparison!

It's not that our afflictions aren't real. It's not that they're just imaginary or superfluous. It's not as if they don't hurt! But the eye of faith creates a new perspective. And with that **proper perspective**, we understand that not even the heaviest affliction can outweigh the everlasting fullness of glory that our affliction itself is producing for us! And so we don't lose heart.

### **III. The Proper Preoccupation (v. 18)**

But I want you to notice something immensely important. This amazing reality that the believer's affliction produces glory *is not automatic*. There is a condition—an action we must engage in if we are to know our afflictions as light and momentary. Our affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory, far beyond all comparison, “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.” That's the **third key to endurance in ministry** that Paul gives us in this passage. First, we must have the proper power; second, we must have the proper perspective. And **three**, we must have **the proper preoccupation**. And in fact, we only have *access* to the proper power—we only have *access* to the proper perspective—when we have **the proper preoccupation**.

“While we *look*.” Afflictions are momentary and light *while we look*. We do not lose heart *while we look*. The fundamental key to the Christian's endurance amidst the most harrowing kinds of affliction is *spiritual sight*. The word is *skopeō*, from which get the optical word *scope*. The word means to focus one's attention on something, to give special scrutiny or to be thoughtfully aware of something (Guthrie, 273), to look intently. The force of the verb emphasizes fixity of gaze and attention, in contrast to a fleeting or casual glance (Harris, 363). The only one who is going to know the spiritual strength that comes from the daily renewal of their inner man by the Holy Spirit—the only one who will endure lifelong, severe affliction as momentary and light—is the one whose eyes are absolutely fixed and fastened upon that which is unseen.

What do you mean? How is it even possible to see what is unseen? And the answer to that is: we see the unseen with the spiritual eyes of faith. That is the very definition of faith given to us in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” “The conviction of things not seen.” That word “conviction” is the word *elengchos* in the Greek. It comes from the verb *elengchō*, which means to *expose*, to *reveal*, to *bring to light* (BDAG). The author of Hebrews says that *faith* is the *exposing*, the *revelation* of that which is not seen. Faith is the spiritual sight by which that which is naturally unseen and invisible becomes perceptible to the eyes of the soul. Paul will say, just a few verses after our text in 2 Corinthians 5:7, that “we walk by faith, not by sight.” What he means there is not that faith is some blind leap in the dark, but rather that the true Christian walks by the *spiritual sight* of faith, and not by the *physical* sight of our natural eyes. He's saying what he'll eventually say in chapter 5 verse 16, that “we recognize no one according to the flesh.” We don't evaluate anyone or anything by mere externals; but we behold that which is unseen with the spiritual sight of faith.

And that's precisely what the false apostles were leading the Corinthians to do, wasn't it? By any external evaluation, Paul's life was a colossal waste. Here was a rising star in Pharisaic Judaism—had the best upbringing, the best education, was well-respected, learned, had a good job, a comfortable income—and now look at him. Whipped. Stoned. Bouncing from prison to

prison, from beating to beating. A decayed, shriveled-up shell of his former self, who threw away his honorable life for a life of suffering and shame. That's what the natural eyes saw. But Paul says, Oh but if you could look beneath the surface of this decaying outer man—if you behold with the eyes of faith the things which are unseen—you would see a vigorous, vibrant, renewed, and rejuvenated man, rejoicing in the sight of an eternal weight of glory that is his inheritance!

And that is what we must look to as well! As we look around us and behold with our natural eyes the great wickedness of this world, the godlessness of our culture, the degradation of education, the corruption of our government—as we look to ourselves and see a decaying man or a woman, worn out by the responsibilities of life and ministry—we need to raise our eyes to heaven, and set our minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth (cf. Col 3:2)—to fix our eyes on what is unseen. In the midst of any given affliction, if we look only to the things which are seen, we may feel like the servant of Elisha in 2 Kings 6, who saw only an army of Aramean cavalry and chariots surrounding his city. But in that moment, Christ Himself by His Spirit looks to you and says, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And without the eyes of faith, that's sounds ludicrous! “Look around, Lord! I'm surrounded!” But what did Elisha pray for his servant? “‘O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.’ And the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

Oh, if we could only fix our gaze on the things which are unseen, we would behold the glory of Christ Himself with the eyes of faith—the glory and fellowship and communion with Him that is promised to us in fullness, and is given to us even now—and beholding the glory of the Lord, we would be transformed (3:18). We would be like Moses, Hebrews 11:25, who chose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God rather than enjoying the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was *looking* to the *reward*. Verse 27: “By *faith* he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the thing; for he *endured*—” *How*, writer of Hebrews? How did Moses endure? What was the **key** to his endurance? “For he endured, as *seeing Him*, who is unseen!”

### Conclusion

Because he refused to conform to the doctrines of the Church of England, John Bunyan was one of the first of many Puritan preachers imprisoned for his preaching. Now, he was free to go as soon as he agreed not to preach any longer. But he refused. Only a few months later, he was brought before a magistrate who was inclined to release him, and Bunyan said, “If you release me today, I will preach tomorrow.” Now this was a man who understood what it meant for Paul to say, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” Who understood, “I believe therefore I speak,” verse 13.

Bunyan sat in that jail cell for the next *twelve years*. Twelve years, friends! We shrink back from evangelism, and difficult person-to-person ministry in the church, because we don't want people not to like us! We don't want to be thought of as weird. Twelve years in prison! This man had a wife. He had children! All he had to do was stop preaching the Gospel, and his kids would have had Daddy back!

What drove him to do so such a thing? How could he endure that kind of affliction? How could he endure sitting in prison for *twelve years*? Years later, he wrote: "I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyment, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. The second was, to live upon God that is invisible."

Dear friends, he had to live upon a God who is *invisible*. He had to pass a sentence of death upon everything and everyone in his life that *was* visible—to stop looking at those things which are seen, and to live by constantly looking to the God who is invisible. Bunyan saw the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ! He beheld with unveiled face the glory of the Lord! And he endured!

GraceLife, look upon the God who is invisible. Open your Bibles in the morning and look for Jesus. Pour out your heart in prayer because you want more of Jesus. Do all the duties of the ministry looking to fuel your faith with the knowledge of your Savior. And as we behold His glory, we will be progressively transformed into that same image. God will conform us into the image of His Son, and we will be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man—such that even if our outer man decays, our inner man will be renewed day by day. But only while we *look*. So look to Christ. Behold His glory. And find in Him all the endurance you could ever need to press on in joyful, enduring ministry, even in the midst of affliction.