

To be or not to be, that is the question. Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep no more, and by to sleep to say "End the heartache." End the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that the flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished: to die, to sleep, to sleep, perchance to dream. Aye, but there's the rub. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come? When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, it must give us pause. You see, there's the respect that makes calamity of so long life. Who would these burdens of life bear---to grunt and sweat under a weary life---but except for the fact that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose boundaries no traveler returns. It puzzles the will and makes us bear the ills that we have, then fly to others that we know not of. Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.

Probably you're familiar with William Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark, Hamlet, and my brutal paraphrase of his soliloquy from Act 3, Scene 1. But Hamlet gets to the heart of it. We know his struggle, maybe, if we're familiar with those words, "To be or not to be." He's struggling with the trials of life, personal heartache. He's contemplating whether or not this is worth it. And is there something, somewhere, that's worth more. Is it better somewhere else? Wouldn't it be easier just to not be here? To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream? Then he stops himself. Aye, there's the rub. For what dreams may come in that land that I know not of? He doesn't know what awaits him on the other side of the grave, the undiscovered country, death, from whose boundaries no traveler returns. And we know from this summer series on heaven and hell that there is a real eternal heaven, and there is a real eternal hell. They last forever, and every one of us and every one that we meet, and everyone that we ever have met, has a final destination in one of those two locations. So Hamlet's conclusion is to press on in this life. "Thus conscience makes cowards of us all." Hamlet wasn't interested in rushing off into the afterlife, and he concluded with new resolve to bear those ills we have, rather than fly to ills we know not of.

We're gathered here today as people just like Hamlet. We're aware of ills. We're aware of the effect of living in a fallen, sin-twisted world. The toil and trouble, right? The hardship and heartache, the problems and pain. The effects of the fall are always present with us, sometimes to devastating effect. Many of us are aware of the damage and destruction of disease, natural disasters, and to top that, the dealings with one another---all of these sinful human beings that we share the planet with. And if that wasn't bad enough, beloved, for those of us who follow Jesus Christ, for those of us who claim Christ as Savior and Lord, we have additional hardship---conflict with the world around us, the world that hates God. The world that will bring persecution your way when you stand in the marketplace and say there is one way of salvation. There's one way to be right with your Creator. It's through Jesus Christ, his one and only begotten Son, who died in the place of sinners, of which you are. That rings the consternation, the ire, the wrath of our beloved neighbors, our dear friends, our family members, our co-workers.

And yet we know that that is what we are called to. It might not surprise us when we read 2 Corinthians, the letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a church that he really loved, but was really kind of upset with a lot. And in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of sharing abundantly in the sufferings of Christ in verse 5. And in talks in verses 8 and 9 about the affliction that he experienced in Asia on a mission for the gospel where he was utterly burdened, even to the point, Paul says, where he despaired of life itself. He thought he was going to die. At any moment he knew he was. In fact, he thought---in that sentence he's saying it probably would be better, because he knew Jesus. The trials of life were real-time stuff for Paul.

I wonder if you'll permit me to loosen this top button. I have a summer cold, and I don't

think I'm going to have a voice at the end of this. *Stop shouting at us, then.*

But in the same passage in 2 Corinthians 1, Paul says he shared abundantly in the sufferings of Christ---listen---so that also through Christ he could share abundantly in the comfort, too. The comfort that is found in Almighty God who loves us intimately and gives himself for us. That when he despaired of even his own life, it forced him---in verse 9 he says---to not rely on himself, but rather to rely on the God who raises the dead from the grave. So there's a confidence. That's the confidence that I want. I want you to have that confidence, too.

We have an awesome opportunity today to look into God's word. We're going to read 2 Corinthians 4 and take a look at four things: four challenges, four words of encouragement from the apostle Paul, who walked the same planet that we do and suffered trials and hardships and heartache and pain. Maybe not exactly the way that you experience heartache and pain, but he experienced it on the same planet, in the same present age. Let's read God's word together. I'll read out loud. You follow along silently.

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every one's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So that death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

God's word for us, for you personally. A personal word is what I've prayed for each of us to have from God. Now I know that that is something that only God can accomplish: a personal and particular word to speak to your heart, to your situation, to your heartache, to your pain, to your trouble, to your toil, to your life in this present age. Let me pray for us. Gracious God, please help us. We want for you to have a free reign in our hearts. We need for you to work this truth deep within us. Lord, I pray that you would somehow, if it is possible, use this message to draw us close, closer than we were when we came in, and equip us for the week that we have ahead of us, for this life, Lord, in this present age where you have placed us. We pray in the name that is above every name, even Jesus. Amen.

Any time that we take a look at the word of God, there is encouragement to be had. But any time we take a look at the word of God, there is also a challenge for us personally. I believe that this chapter

has both: a great encouragement and actually a challenge that I've been, I think, quite frankly, wrestling with all summer long. So when Pastor Randy and I talked about the follow-up messages to the heaven and hell sermon series, this is where I almost immediately lighted. And then maybe you saw the prayer request from the Chandlers, from Dave and from Gina, to meditate on 2 Corinthians 4 this week as you pray for them and pray for others to not lose heart, to realize the temporary nature of this life. That's what we have before us today.

Paul starts....This is the Paul who lived, by the grace of God, a very hard life, but lived with the joy of the knowledge of Christ. Paul says we have this ministry 'by the mercy of God.' And it's from that foundation, 'the mercy of God,' that I believe he draws us to four things to be aware of. Don't lose heart. Demonstrate God's good news with honesty and integrity. Depend on God's strength. And direct your hope where it belongs---take it off of this other stuff and put your hope firmly in the one who will not disappoint. That's what Paul's word is, I believe, for us.

So he says, *Don't lose heart*. There's a bookend of *Don't lose heart*. The word here is 'weariness.' It's the weariness of soul. The weariness of soul. So Paul says, listen, I know that this life drags you down. It drags you down on a daily basis. And on a daily basis we need this reminder: Don't lose heart. Look to Christ. It's by the mercy of God that we've been given this ministry. The ministry he's referring to is what came before in chapter 3. Moses revealed the old covenant. It was through Moses that the law came. But Paul says we are ministers of the new covenant. We're ministers of the complete package of God. We preach the law and people realize that they are lawbreakers. And then Paul says what we do is come in with the law keeper and his sacrifice on their behalf. So Paul has laid that out in chapter 3, and then he says: Therefore, since we have this ministry of the new covenant by the mercies of God, don't lose heart. Stay in it, Corinthians. Stay in it, Columbians. We don't lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. These are the 'Don't lose heart' bookends of this chapter. God's doing a good work, even though it's difficult to see that at times.

Paul says our God is a God of mercy, and he lavishly displays mercy on his people. Remember Paul's word to the Philippian church: God, who began a good work in you, will be faithful to complete it on the day of Christ Jesus. That's a faithful God, so don't lose heart. It's that day of Christ Jesus that Pastor Randy referred to several times in the month of August, where our gracious, great Shepherd of the sheep will come back just as he left, in a body, a resurrected body, and he will judge the living and the dead. He will separate the sheep from the goats. All those images that come with the end of days. Paul says that our faithful God is working in us a completion to that day. Paul told the Christians in Rome: If God is for us, who can be against us? For God---he didn't even spare his own Son, but he freely gave him up for us all. How much more will he not graciously give us all things? That doesn't mean Lamborghinis and houses on the seashore. It means all things that we need to be conformed to the perfect, beautiful, lovely image of Jesus Christ our Lord. He'll give us everything we need for life and godliness.

So Paul says I know you're in the middle of something. The word of God through me says that to you. I know you're in the middle of something right now, in this moment in time in 2014. And God wants you to know *I never waste pain*. We've heard this adage before. But this is the God who crushed his only Son on the cross. That pain was endured with great purpose. It was to redeem multitudes of worshipers who would reflect his glory forever and ever. God says don't think that I'm going to waste the pain in your life, either. We have this ministry by the mercy of God. Don't miss what God is doing. Sometimes he deals with us through tender mercies, and sometimes through rather severe mercies.

We heard some of those mentioned in Elder Rick's prayer. We see Elder Scheerer over here sporting a new haircut that he put up on Facebook as he battles cancer and infection. And we pray for Brother David that he would not lose heart. We pray for Joanna and for the kids that they would---as David

has asked us to pray---that they would see Jesus Christ more clearly through this time of trial. That they would not run from him, but run to him, the dear, precious Savior. I see Brother Kendall up here. I don't think it has anything to do with you-all's cul-de-sac. But here is Kendall Morton in a wheelchair, because he went to a trampoline place and thought he could dunk a twelve foot basket. Upward is calling. They want your knee brace back. But we pray for Kendall when we see that request come through. And we say God, what are you doing? This man needs to be active because of his vocation, and you've got him on crutches or in a chair. We prayed with Sister Gina, that she would recover from the surgery, that God would get her to the point physically where she could undergo the chemotherapy that has been suggested for her course of treatment and radiation to follow. And we pray don't lose heart. And we could multiply this times ten, times a hundred for all of us individuals. Job loss or change, relational difficulties, the loss of loved ones that we've heard about, the ridicule that we experience when we proclaim Christ. This is what Christ wants to say to you particularly. I think this is the particular message: Don't lose heart. He is real. Believe.

While we persevere, we're given the privilege to proclaim also the glories of Christ, our Lord and Savior. So the second thing I think I see here in the passage is that we are to demonstrate God's good news with integrity. In 2 Corinthians we're picking up Paul's defense of his apostleship. There's a whole bunch of people who realize---Hey, large gatherings of people gather when this good news of Christ goes out. So false teachers have come along side, as well. And they're using a watered-down message to get a following and to make money. And Paul says we don't do that. They've cut down Paul mercilessly, out loud in public in the marketplace. They've said that his physical appearance is not very impressive and his rhetorical skills leave a lot to be desired. And they keep trying to diminish the man, so that they can diminish the message, so that their message gets to be bigger.

Paul says listen, in this present age, with just this brief time on the planet that we have, saved by the grace of God, we proclaim the good news with integrity. We don't water it down. We don't tamper with God's word. We don't switch the message to make it more agreeable, because this is how people are saved. Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ or through the word of Christ, Paul told Christians in Rome. Paul reassures us---me, you, all of us---who take with trembling hands the good news of Christ to share with someone who is God's enemy and opposed to this truth. Paul says this is what saves people. Let them know who Jesus Christ is: who he is, why he came, what he did, and where all this is leading to. That's how we share the good news of God with integrity. We don't tamper with it.

Where does the bold belief in God's truth come from? Paul says it comes first through a clear presentation of what God says about his truth. In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul says that the word of the cross is folly. I think we have to come back to this often. The Scriptures remind you that it's counterintuitive. It doesn't make sense to the natural ear. You should know that going in, so that you don't feel weird or awkward. It's a weird message, and it's a weird way in which God saves people. He does it through proclamation of the good news, not through any kind of grand devised schemes or all these other things. That's how God delights to receive all the glory. There's nothing that we can claim that we've done in the process. The passage in 1 Corinthians 1 goes on to talk about that God, through the folly of what we preach, saves all those who believe. That's God's design. We should adhere to it. That's what God is saying to you today, probably. You don't have to fear the good news. It was good news for you at one point. At one point you, too, were God's enemy. He's in the business of taking his enemy and making them his friend, bringing those who are opposed to him under his loving control and adopting them into his family. And he wants to do that through you now.

Second, Paul had a bold belief, because he knew God's truth: salvation belongs to the Lord alone. This is what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. No one reasons their way to God. In fact, apart from God's merciful intervention, we would not ever have come to him. The god of this age has blinded eyes to keep some from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. At one point, we, too,

were blinded to the beauty of Jesus Christ.

A couple weeks ago I had the privilege to serve with several CPC-ers and a couple of other churches up at New Jersey, in Wildwood, New Jersey, on the boardwalk. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has a ministry called the Boardwalk Chapel. You heard it described about a month ago as Chris Iwaskiw asked for prayer for our group. And on two occasions when I stood to preach.... We preach and there's about a hundred chairs sitting here and then behind those chairs is the boardwalk. There's hundreds of people walking up and down the boardwalk. And every night at 8:30 they do a service. It's got songs and skits and sermons. And twice during my preaching times, as I was in the middle of proclaiming God's word, a group of people walking by would shout in. One time they shouted in, "Hail, Lucifer," and another time they shouted in, "Satan is king." I have no doubt in my mind it was a group of guys trying to make a joke. Maybe one guy feels a little inadequate about himself in the group's pecking order and decided he would shout out loud show and those Pollyanna's how bold he was.

My heart breaks for that as an overt demonstration of what's being talked about here. But how many do we encounter that practice that belief every single day of their lives? Paul says that the only way to break through that blinding is the truth of the gospel. The Holy Spirit of God joins himself to the preaching of God's word, to the proclamation of God's word, to your sharing of God's word, the good news. The Holy Spirit joins himself to that word. And God who spoke, "Let light shine out of darkness," shines the light of the gospel in hearts that were dead previous to that point. Do you believe that? Do we believe that? I believe it, Lord. Help my unbelief. Because when you get the reaction, it is so difficult to stand firm. Paul's saying stand firm. Demonstrate the goodness of God with integrity. Preach the word. Let it fly. Let God be God. He's going to save people. Jesus said I will in no way lose any of them that the Father has given to me. We can trust God with that result. Amen? Amen.

There's a third component, Paul says, to bold belief in God's truth, and that's what was read here from Psalm 116:10. Paul references that directly. He said I believed, therefore I speak. That's the other component that we've got to get to in demonstrating God's good news with integrity. That is, it's an overflow. We don't hoard God's grace. You know that and I know that. I know it in theory. In practice it's so much more difficult. Like I said in the subtitle of this sermon title, it's easier said than done, but by God's grace, it is doable. I believe that. We proclaim "not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord," verse 5 says, "with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." See, we're just following our leaders' example. Jesus had every reason to boast, every reason to not humble himself. And yet he chose to humble himself and become obedient to death, even death on the cross---your cross, my cross. We have absolutely no reason to boast, yet we tend to walk around as if we deserve and are entitled to every good gift that comes our way. Paul says no, that's not what happens when God's gospel gets in our heart. We become humble servants for those that we're sharing with. We become humble servants for one another in the church as we attempt to proclaim God's news.

So we need the reminder that's the third point here. We need to depend on God's strength. Try to be humble in your own strength. Go. Okay, you fail, right? I mean, that's the test. We have none of that until we see the beauty, the face of Jesus Christ, the glory of God revealed to us. Paul says listen, we have this treasure, this message, this ministry, this treasure---we have Jesus in these jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. Paul is continuing to answer his detractors. I mentioned these guys. They were ruthless. Man, they were just cut on Paul: physical appearance nothing to look at, his rhetorical skills, the way his speech is not eloquent. Paul says tell me something I don't know. Are you kidding? You're going to cut down my outside? Go ahead! This is like a jar of clay. You know you shouldn't read that phrase as if you're going to Williamsburg and the Pottery Barn and getting some decorative piece to put on your front porch. The phrase here is a real commonplace jar of clay. It's for household refuse. It's for all the ordinary chores of life. It's easily

broken. It's easily replaced. It's expendable. And Paul says yeah, that's me.

What makes the big difference is the treasure within. Inside this nothing-to-look-at exterior and horrible rhetorical skills is the treasure of the ages. Inside this jar of clay is Jesus Christ. That's who we share. That's why he says we share Christ, not ourselves. We've become your servants. So Paul says listen, depending on the strength of God you can endure all that life brings your way. Remember it's easier said than done, but by God's grace it's doable. It's the power of God. It's not our power, it's not our proficiency, but it's the power of God that brings dead things to life, that delivers captives from slavery to freedom. It's the power of God that calls and equips evil people like you and me to be mighty, more than conquerors for Christ. It's the power of God to protect us and to preserve us, to preserve all of his people until that day when we join with him face-to-face.

Paul says we're afflicted, we're under pressure of the world, but we're not ultimately crushed by that pressure to conform to the world. That we're perplexed, we're at a loss of what to do sometimes, but we're never at a total loss. We're persecuted, we're pursued and hunted because of whose we are, but because of whose we're never ultimately forsaken by who we belong to. We're struck down, we're thrown back like a wrestler does his opponent, but we are not ultimately destroyed by that opponent. That's the hope of the gospel. That's what Paul says we need to take hold of. Afflicted, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not despairing. And that happens only when we look to Christ.

We minister in this life while carrying around in our body the death of Jesus. This verse always plagued me. What does that mean? And a closer look at the Greek for the word 'death' actually is very helpful. There's two words that are commonly used for the word 'death': *thanatos*, which is the event of a death---some of you Marvel comic fans probably know a character named that, too, Thanos. But *Thanatos* is just the event of death. And then *nekrosis*. We know what that is: dying, the process of dying. Necrotic tissue has to be cut away from a wound and stuff like that. And Paul uses *nekrosis* here. It's the dying of Jesus that we carry around in our body. What is he talking about? I think it gets back to that initial invitation from Jesus to you when you received salvation. And that is to take up the cross, his cross, daily, deny yourself, and follow him. It's a process whereby he increases and we decrease. It's that process of dying. Lord, I'm just growing in that. I'm understanding what it means for you to have all the glory and for me to benefit when you have all the glory. So help me.

And that's what Paul's getting at. It's a process where we decrease, he increases. Paul said so I rely more and more on Christ's life. You rely, believer, more and more on Christ's life. His life, then, is displayed in me. I die to self, Christ's life shows up. I die to the self of returning evil for evil, and Christ's life shows up and I bless instead of curse. I die to the self of fretting and worrying about what tomorrow holds, and the life of Christ shows up and I entrust myself to the heavenly Father who knows exactly what I need and provides for my every need. I die to myself of lusting after lesser things of this world, and the life of Christ shows up, where I understand that at his right hand are pleasures forevermore. Do you see how that works? And that's what Paul is saying. Keep looking to Christ. That's why we preach Christ. And so Paul says in verse 12: So death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. That's the exchange that we have as fellow believers, too. I'm dying to self, so Christ's life gets to benefit you because you get to see that. And when you die to self, Christ's life gets to benefit me, and all of us get to worship Christ again. That's how it works. So Christ's death is at work in me. Jesus' life can be proclaimed.

The fourth and last point, then, that I think we see here is, while depending on the strength of God to accomplish what he calls us to, we have this reminder: Direct your hope where it belongs. We really are a fickle people, us humans. We like the immediate return. We like the hit of sugar or whatever it is. We like something quick. And God knows that about us. He designed us, after all. And he says listen, the walk that you have, believing in Christ, is a walk of faith. And there's a constant reminder---we have here in our church a regular remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ---constantly

recurring and remembering that Jesus Christ died in your place, because our memories are faulty. And Paul says direct your hope where it belongs.

I want to point out two things, at least, where our hope is directed. Hope in the things that are in keeping with God's goal to glorify himself and hope in the things that are eternal and unseen, rather than temporary and seen. Because where the eternal and the unseen are, that's where your true treasure and your true security lie. I need this reminder. Paul says it's all found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Somebody conquered the grave for us. Praise God! That's what's being taught here. The thing that hangs over our head, that undiscovered country from whose boundaries no traveler returns, that thing has been conquered. Christ has risen victorious. So Paul says listen, because of the resurrection of Jesus and the fulfillment of the mission that he came to accomplish, we can hope in the things we don't see. It has been accomplished. It's finished.

God's word calls us back to the basics. We serve a God who takes rebellious creatures, conquers their hearts, makes them his children, worshipers one and all, and he gets the glory from that. And then they go out and start sharing it with other people. And Paul says---look at it there in verse 15---for it's all for your sake, it's for the Corinthians, it's for the people around you. So that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving all---to what? The glory of God. That's why we don't hoard the grace of God. We just keep sharing it. We want a whole bunch of people at that throne in that day. Why do we want it? Because that's what God wants. If God wants something, we should get on board with what he wants, right? Because we know that's going to get accomplished. Sometimes what I want and what God wants are two different things. Can you believe that. But word of God comes to us as a great reminder.

Experience the grace of God---right? We talk about this around here---and extend the grace of God. That's a twofold mission. What does it mean to truly experience God's grace? Well, that's repenting of sin. It's believing in Christ again. It's gathering to worship. It's spreading out to the world and then extending that grace. That's what's Paul talking about right here. So that it may increase the thanksgiving, all to the glory of God. That's why we evangelize. That's why we go on missions trips. That's why we structure ministry the way we do, and we're always evaluating it. Talk to any elder in this place. Man, for the last three or four years we're like on a constant evaluation. It's not a treadmill. It's an evaluation, because we want to do ministry well so that we can be clear in the proclamation of the good news. You don't just start swinging a baseball bat when you go onto the field. You study how to swing, you get into the batter's box. You learn pitches and you do all this other stuff. That's what we want to do.

Secondly, let your hope be in the eternal and unseen things where true security is found. I don't know about you, but this is where I am. Weak, wounded, weary soul---listen to Paul again. So don't lose heart. Don't lose heart. Don't lose focus of the fact that this is a temporary situation you find yourself in. Even expand that to this life. It's a momentary affliction. Paul is not making light of what you're going through; it's severe. Read the number of times Paul talks about the hardships. He never made light of those things, but he always, always recognized that those things, through the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ, were producing in him the character of his Lord and Savior. And producing in him a Paul that was better today than he was yesterday, but not as good as he was going to be tomorrow. That's how God grows us. So weak and wounded fellow pilgrim, don't lose heart. Though your outer self is wasting away, your inner self is being renewed day by day.

A couple of weeks ago, our family had the great blessing to go to the Atlantic seashore for big week of vacation. On our last day at the beach we built a big sand castle. And we built a big one this time. We built it right down by the ocean's edge. It had a king tower and a queen tower; it had a set of steps that we cut out. We built out of driftwood, we built these little handrails that you could up the steps. It was terraced all around the sides. It had a moat on the ocean side, and it had a little lake and

stuff on the inside. But we built it right there with full knowledge that it was not built for permanency.

Feel that outer self. That outer self that you sometimes stand in front of mirror and cry about is not built for permanency. It's the inner self that God is concerned about. So Paul says listen, don't lose heart. This outer self, it's wasting away. It wasn't meant to be permanent. Because of the fall it can't be. But the inner self, being renewed day by day---that's where God is at work. So hold tight to him. Cling, cling to Christ. He designed us for eternity. He's using this present experience of sufferings, whatever they are for you, to produce in you a picture of Christ, a true picture. Let me pray for us in that regard.

Gracious heavenly Father, please help us. We want to be more like Christ than we are. And we know that you do that through these ordinary means. You use the word of God, you use prayer, you use the sacraments, you use the fellowship of other believers in our lives, you use the church and its loving correction to accomplish that goal. I pray Lord, for us, that today you would meet us in that personal way like we asked, in a particular way, Lord, and equip us to be experiencing the amazing grace of God. Grace that found us when we were blind and caused wretches like us to see. And help us Lord, then, to be bold in the strength that you provide to extend that grace to others. And we will ask and pray that this will all be done for the sake of Christ and for your ultimate glory. In Jesus we pray. Amen.