

Indestructible Fragility

2Corinthians 4:7-18

I lived in south western Ontario most of my life.

I have found that one of the effects of living in a place for a long period of time is that I get used to the things around me and I often take them for granted.

I grew up just a few blocks away from Lake Erie and so I don't often think much about the amazing resource of water that we have in this region.

Did you know that Ontario has significant coast lines on four of the five great lakes and that those lakes make up just over twenty percent of the world's fresh water?

That is incredible.

One of the most impressive parts of the great lakes water system is just a few hours away from here, a place called Niagara Falls.

According to niagarafalls.ca as the Niagara River flows from Lake Erie into Ontario it hits a steep drop off of 177 feet and an astounding six million cubic feet of water flows over the Canadian falls every minute.

Because of the incredible and consistent flow rate people have been able to install hydro electric generators near the falls and they produce enough electricity for just under four million homes on the Canadian side and a little over two million homes on the U.S. side of the border.

That is just an amazing amount of power.

How many people have been to the falls?

It is an amazing sight and to hear the sound of the rushing water is something to experience.

Considering the height and the force of the water it is mind boggling to think that some people got it into their heads to go over the falls in a barrel.

One of the first known survivors of the trip was Annie Taylor a school teacher from Michigan.

She had fallen on hard times financially and thought the stunt would be a means to generate some income, so on her 63rd birthday, October 24th 1901, she climbed in an oak barrel and over she went.

From what I could gather online many people attempted the same feat, but of the thousands that have gone over the falls in various contraptions less than twenty survived the trip.

When you consider the terrain and the forces involved it is amazing anyone made it at all.

[That is the picture that came to my mind as I was reflecting on our text for this morning **2Corinthians 4:7-18**. In these verses the apostle reminds us of how incredibly fragile we are as human beings. He tells us how he and his fellow workers have faced things that should have

been the end of them and yet they are still standing. I imagine the apostle could relate to the feeling of going over Niagara Falls in a barrel and surviving it. His experience has some really important lessons for us as Christians. You see if you don't know this already all of us are incredibly fragile. While most of us take daily life for granted it's amazing any of us survive a single day physically let alone remain in the faith. The amazing lesson of these verses is that as believers we have an indestructible fragility. How can that be? That sounds like a contradiction. Paul begins his explanation by teaching us in verses 7-11 that...]

Point #1 – Life and faith are sustained by God's power. (Verses 7-11)

It doesn't take much to reveal the frailty of the human condition and as believers we should be keenly aware of it so that we have at the forefront of our minds our great need of the LORD.

Whatever Paul's opinion of himself may have been before he met the Lord on the road to Damascus; we can see here in verse 7 that the years of following Jesus have taught him humility.

In the first part of the verse he writes, "...we have this treasure..."

Verse 6 tells us what the treasure is. It is that Almighty God, "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

We know from the end of chapter three that this is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit indwelling and transforming the believer for the purpose of making God's glory known in the world.

It is impossible to have a treasure of greater worth than that.

What could be worth more than God the Holy Spirit living in those that belong to God through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Now, look at what he says! (**Verse 7a** stop at "jars of clay").

You may have a translation that says 'earthen vessels'.

These are common place works of pottery which could be used for a variety of things.

All the commentaries that I read on this passage agreed that whatever the shape, size, or use of these types of containers two things were true about them.

Number one, they are worth next to nothing and number two they are fragile.

A cup, bowl, or jar made of baked clay requires only a small amount of force to crack or even shatter it into pieces.

This is also long before the invention of crazy glue so if you shatter your coffee cup there is only one thing to do and that is through it away.

So the picture is this treasure of infinite worth is kept in a weak and worthless vessel.

Why? (**Verse 7**)

The treasure being put in a weak worthless vessel demonstrates the power of God.

He goes on to show this is true in **verse 8-9**.

Each of the four examples that are given in verses 8-9 should result in the thing that Paul says doesn't happen.

[It's like this jar I bought the other day at the thrift store. It's cheap and fragile. If I smack it with this hammer, what will happen? If I toss it up in the air what will happen? If I put it into a vice and crank the vice closed what will happen? Why will it break? Because that is what happens when those kinds of forces are applied to something like this. But what if it didn't? What if we subjected this jar to all kinds of stresses but it didn't break? We would start to question things wouldn't we? We would start to wonder if it is really made out of what it appears to be made out of. What if we could show that it is just as fragile as it appears but yet it does not break? Then we would have to that something else is at work to keep the jar whole.]

That is Paul's conclusion about the Holy Spirit being at work in him and his gospel co-workers. (**Verse 10-11**)

He should be dead or at the very least crippled or incapacitated.

He should have given up on the ministry of the gospel and faith in Jesus by this point.

How is it that they are being constantly given over to death and still going?

They are being sustained by the power of God so that they might make known the life of Christ to the world.

It's a miracle.

We are not supposed to marvel at the strength and perseverance of Paul here, we are supposed to marvel at the power of God sustaining him.

It is the exact same for us.

We are just fragile jars of clay.

What then is our hope in trial and suffering that should be more than enough to break us?

Things that ought to drive us away from Jesus or at the very least drive us to wallow in despair?

Our hope is that God would display His all surpassing power and keep us from breaking.

[Most of the time we put treasure in a container to keep the treasure safe. It's quite the opposite for the Christian. It is not the container keeping the treasure it is the treasure keeping the container. Some of you know what it is like to be sustained in faith through very trying times. Praise God for you because He is displaying His power in you. That is amazing! Now someone might ask, "How can we know that is true? How can we know that we will make it through tomorrow even though we have made it through today? Those are great questions and we find a good answer in the next few verses. Knowing that it is the power of God that sustains life and faith, we are also shown here that...]

Point #2 – No affliction can undo the power of Jesus' resurrection. (Verses 12-15)

Jesus being alive and reigning in heaven for the good of His people is always true and no amount of hardship can change that.

Paul continues with the theme of death and life in verse 12.

As he is thinking about all the difficulties that he and his fellow workers have faced, he likens it to 'death being at work' in them.

Look at the result of that for the Corinthian believers. It is that life is at work in them.

In other words despite all the trials, challenges, and sufferings that should have put an end to Paul's life and ministry, he and his fellow workers are still teaching people about what Jesus has done for them.

Once again he is careful to give credit to God for the continued preaching of the gospel (**Verse 13**).

He says the same Spirit that inspired the scriptures is at work in him.

Most commentators agree that he is quoting here from Psalm 116:10.

The author of that Psalm, like Paul, finds himself in a tough place.

It says in verse 3 of Psalm 116, "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish."

In that distress he turns to the LORD, he believes God and speaks of His saving grace.

That is exactly what the apostle is doing here.

He is believing God even through great affliction and he is still speaking of the God who saves.

At this point in the text it would be easy to write Paul off as delusional.

Why does he continue to persist in something that seems so costly and hopeless?

He tells us in verse **14**.

Why does he continue believing and sharing the gospel?

Because God has raised the LORD Jesus from the dead.

The certainty of that for Paul is absolute.

It seems to me that the testimony of the apostle leaves us with only three options. Either he is totally delusional, a liar, or Jesus really is alive.

His being a liar really isn't much of an option, because lying would require some kind of motive.

If Jesus died and stayed dead and Paul was lying about His being raised then that would have to mean that he was lying so that he could lose everything he valued and enter into a life of suffering.

No one lies in order to make their life bad, yes that is often the result of lying, but never the motive of lying. People lie to try and escape trouble.

That leaves us with 'delusion' or 'reality'.

At Paul's conversion his travelling companions, while they only see some of what happens when Jesus appears, they see enough to know it is a supernatural situation.

The fact that multiple people experience the same thing makes delusion unlikely.

Then we also have the testimony of the other apostles which matches Paul's.

On top of that we have a good number of letters from the apostle in the bible and they don't read like they have been written by someone who has lost touch with reality.

That leaves us with 'reality'.

When we consider the radical life change that takes place in Paul, going from a man who wanted the destruction of the church to a man who gave everything to build the church the most reasonable explanation for the change is Jesus really is alive and He really did appear to Paul and He did so on more than one occasion.

God raising Jesus, it says, also means that He will raise those who belong to Jesus so that they might be brought into God's presence leaving the grave behind.

Do you know what that means? That means that the believer has an unconquerable hope regardless of whatever else happens to them.

Whether it be persecution, sickness, imprisonment, or even death nothing can happen that can undo the fact that Jesus is alive and that means nothing can undo God's power to raise His people from the dead.

[When you stop and think about it there are lots of things that we can't change. If starts to rain tomorrow can we stop it? Can we stop the sun from shining? Can we alter the force of gravity?

No, we are quite powerless when it comes in the face of many things. Of course we have the capacity to deny reality. People do that every day, but we have no power to change reality.]

In our day many people would say we are arrogant for believing that the Christian religion is the only true religion.

There are so many other options, they will say, how can you say you are right and all the others are wrong?

I've been confronted with that question a number of times over the years.

My response is that it is not pride or arrogance that leads me to the convictions that I hold, but rather it is the necessary conclusion that must be arrived at if Jesus is who He says He is.

It is simply accepting the reality of the resurrection.

I can no more deny Jesus being alive than I can deny that the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

[No matter what this life may throw at God's people, Jesus is still alive and the power of His resurrection will overcome whatever afflictions we may suffer in this present world. Now knowing that should have a massive effect on how we see things in the world. That is the third lesson from our text this morning. In the last few verses of chapter four we learn that...]

Point #3 – Christian hope is built on things that last. (Verses 16-18)

While this present creation has many things that can be enjoyed to the glory of God, there is no earthly thing that we can hold onto forever; therefore, we must look past what we can see with our eyes to something far better.

In these last few verses of the chapter there is a repeated comparison between what we can see and what we can't see.

In verse 16 the apostle is taking stock of what he sees in himself and his gospel companions. **(Verse 16)**

By the time Paul writes this letter he has been through the ringer a time or two and he is feeling it.

Anyone looking at the apostle would likely agree with his assessment that he is "wasting away".

He has suffered much and on top of that he is aging.

I think it is safe to say that none of us here this morning have suffered like Paul, but even if we exercise some common sense we will see that we too are "wasting away".

Our bodies are breaking down and as we age that process has an increasing effect upon us.

Nobody that I know in their eighties is still able to do what they could in their twenties.

True we may experience this in slightly different ways but we are all on the same train and the destination is the same for all of us.

In the face of that it says, "...we do not lose heart" because though outwardly there is a wasting away, he says, "our inner self is being renewed day by day".

That is only true for the Christian. Only the Christian has the treasure of the Holy Spirit working in them, doing a work in their inner self so that they can enjoy more of who God is day by day.

The outside is getting worse but the inside is getting better.

Our culture has that flipped on its head. Most people care far more about what they see in mirror than what is happening in their soul.

He continues the comparison in verse 17.

It is strange that he calls his present affliction "light" and "momentary".

If we are just assessing things with what we can perceive in the here and now we would call it "heavy" and "long lasting".

My guess is some of you feel that this morning.

Caring for an ailing loved one, countless sleepless nights, going through an unrelenting illness yourself, laboring in prayer over loved ones, dealing with challenges at work and at school on account of being a Christian, fighting with depression and anxiety, being in a difficult marriage, and the list could go on.

Listen, Paul's point here is not to make little of the afflictions believers face in this world, his point is to make much of the glories of eternity with Christ.

[Imagine a scale with 10000lbs of weight on one side and you have to stand under it and hold it up. None of us could do it right? It is an enormous weight. Also, imagine on the other side of the scale there is a weight of 10 000 000 lbs. How heavy does the 10000lbs feel? Like nothing. That doesn't make the 10000lbs any smaller or weigh less, it is just overcome by the exceedingly greater counter weight.]

Here is the thing. We see the 10000lbs but the 10000000lbs is unseen so it says this in **verse 18.**

There is no hope in the things that we can see.

It's all wearing down and coming to an end.

That is one of the most basic laws of physics and it fits exactly with what the bible teaches about this present creation.

That means if you only have the capacity to trust what you can see with your eyes, then genuine hope is impossible for you.

The Christian knows, however, that there is much more to reality than what a human being can perceive with his/her physical senses.

Here is where a great many people make a big mistake.

A great many people think that the unseen is less real than what can be seen.

That is simply not true and even this creation can teach us that.

There are all kinds of things that we cannot see, but nevertheless are completely real.

[Did you know there is something called ‘cosmic radiation’ in space? That radiation would destroy all life on earth except for that fact that our planet is surrounded by a magnetic field. Guess what? We can’t see that magnetic field, but its invisible nature does not in any way take away from the reality of its existence.]

It is true we do not generally see God at present, but that does not take away from the reality of His existence.

At present we do not see what eternity will look like, that does not take away from the certainty of its coming.

Listen, God has done and is doing amazing things to make Himself known to you.

He has raised Jesus from the dead, He has called His people from death to life by the power of the Holy Spirit, and He is displaying His glory day after day and night after night in creation according to Psalm 19 and Romans 1.

What are we looking at this morning? Just what we can see or are we looking to what is unseen.

What would it be like if we trusted what Jesus said to His disciples, He said, **“In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.**

Believing that brothers and sisters is the foundation upon which true hope is built, because that is something that does not fade or wear out, that is eternal.

If we only look with our physical eyes we will only see our fragility, but if we by God’s grace can look to what is unseen then we will see that our life and faith are sustained by God.

We will be able to see that no affliction can undo the power of Jesus’ resurrection, and then we will be building our hope on things that last.

If those things are true in our lives then though we are incredibly fragile we will also be indestructible.

May God do that in us, so that it might “increase thanksgiving to the glory of God forever. Let’s pray.