

THE INVISIBLE & THE ETERNAL**2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18**

Have you ever heard of Japanese marathon runner, Shizo Kanakuri? Probably not. He competed in the Japanese qualifying trials for the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. He set a marathon world record and was selected as one of the only two athletes that Japan could afford to send to the event that year. But Kanakuri shockingly disappeared during the 1912 Olympic marathon race. He had had a very rough 18-day-long trip to Stockholm and needed five days to recover for the race. Weakened by the long journey from Japan, Kanakuri lost consciousness midway through the race and was cared for by a local Swedish family. Being embarrassed about his "failure," he returned to Japan without notifying race officials. Swedish authorities considered him missing for 50 years before discovering him alive and well living in Japan. In 1967, they offered Kanakuri the opportunity to complete his run. He accepted and completed the marathon in 54 years, 8 months, 6 days, 5 hours, 32 minutes and 20.3 seconds. Afterwards, he remarked, "It was a long trip. Along the way, I got married, had six children and 10 grandchildren." I guess it's not how you start the race that matters, but how you finish it.

I want you to think with me about perseverance this morning. The older I get the more I admire people who just keep right on being faithful to the Lord through good and bad times, through successes and failures, through times when all is going well in their lives but just as much as when their lives are full of trouble or disappointment. I see that quality in the great Christian leader, Paul. We're making a study of his second letter to a group of Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. More than in any other NT letter, Paul opened up about his personal life in 2 Corinthians. We get a peek into how he lived his life, how he approached relationships, what he thought was important, and how he dealt with all the ups and downs in his life as he served Jesus. What emerged is the picture of a cross-shaped life. Paul was cruciform. That's what the word means – to be cross-shaped. In other words, his life resembled and reflected the life of Jesus.

Let's read the chapter of 2 Corinthians we want to reflect on this morning. I want to draw your attention to two verses we just read. "Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up.... That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are^l being renewed every day." (2 Cor. 4:1, 16 NLT) "We never give up." That's perseverance. Persistence. Steadfastness. Faithfulness come what may in life. As I studied this chapter in 2 Corinthians, I discovered Paul's reasons for never giving up. I believe they can and should be the same for you and me. Here's the question that gets answered. What keeps me living for Jesus faithfully? If I have a cruciform – a cross-shaped – life, I'm...

FOREVER GRATEFUL FOR GOD'S MERCY.

Paul wrote, "Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up.... If the Good News we preach is hidden behind a veil, it is hidden only from people who are perishing." (2 Cor. 4:1, 3 NLT) Paul was keenly aware of a spiritual fact we should also remember every day of our lives. He was forever grateful because not everyone receives God's grace. Here's an incredibly sad fact. Most people reject God's offer of salvation and eternal life. Most people reject Jesus' death on the cross

and resurrection as necessary to pay the penalty for their sin and to establish a relationship with God. Most people still believe that if there is a God or if there is a place called Heaven, they will get there because they have lived a reasonably moral life.

Paul knew he had been “mercied” and “graced.” Even though he had lived a highly moral life before becoming a follower of Jesus, he now recognized his own morality was incredibly inadequate before an absolutely holy God. But God in His grace had rescued Paul. He had delivered him from his self-righteousness. He had saved him from the illusion he could somehow make himself acceptable to God. He had rescued him from his own terrible sins. After all, Paul had helped persecute and kill Christians before his conversion. You may be a very moral person. You may have been raised in a church. Or, you may have lived a life very far from God and committed every sin possible. Nevertheless, the fact is all of us need God’s mercy and grace equally. What are those familiar definitions? “Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve.” That pretty well sums up what God has done for us in Jesus. If you live every day consciously aware you’re an undeserving recipient of God’s mercy and grace, it has a wonderful result. It keeps you going. You persevere. You want to show your gratitude to God. It helps you to never give up and to serve Jesus faithfully every day.

Another reason to be forever grateful is because not everyone perceives God’s truth. Consider Paul’s statement, “Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don’t understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.” (2 Cor. 4:4 NLT) Why don’t people believe in Jesus and what He’s done for them? What seems so obvious and wonderful to us can be very hard to understand and accept for people who reject Jesus. When we get frustrated with people who can’t see their need for Jesus, it’s wise to remember there’s often much more going on than meets the eye. Yes, human sin and stubborn unbelief are major reasons. But there’s also something universal, demonic, and cosmic about people’s spiritual blindness. The fact is lost people are victims – victims of the Devil who has the power to help harden human hearts against God. Yes, Satan was defeated by Jesus at the cross, but he can still blind people’s minds and incite them to embrace and exalt evil rather than God.

The fact is all of us were born spiritually blind and we all have a very active, powerful enemy – Satan - who wants to keep us in the dark. But God refused to leave you there as a victim of Satan or your own sinful unbelief. It’s only when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes spiritually that any of us can ever understand what God has done for us in Jesus. God rescued you from Satan, saved you, mercied you, graced you, and enabled you to perceive His truth – who He is, why He sent Jesus, and how you can receive the salvation He offers. If you live every day consciously aware that you’ve been given the ability to perceive and receive God’s truth, it has a wonderful result. It keeps you going. You persevere. You want to keep on showing your gratitude to God by how you live. It enables you to never give up and to serve Jesus faithfully every day.

Paul underlined yet another reason to be forever grateful: because I’ve been enlightened. “For God... has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the

glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6 NLT) Paul had an actual experience with temporary blindness that, I believe, he alluded to right there. When the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Paul was physically blinded for a period of time afterwards. During that time, he realized he’d been spiritually blind to the truth about Jesus. But from the moment he was born again by the Holy Spirit, Paul was enlightened about Jesus – who He was, why He came into the world, and what the cross and empty tomb meant for humanity. That energized Paul and gave him every reason to persevere and never give up.

It can be the same for you and me. We were all spiritually blind and living in the dark before Jesus came into our lives. The same Holy Spirit who opened Paul’s eyes opens the eyes of all who believe. Do you want to know God? Do you want to know what’s true and real? Jesus reveals everything you can know about God. What a gift we’ve been given! What a privilege and blessing we’ve received! If you live continually aware of the truth you’ve been spiritually enlightened, it has a wonderful result. It keeps you going. You persevere. You want to keep on showing your gratitude to God by how you live. It helps you to never give up and to serve Jesus faithfully every day. What keeps me living for Jesus faithfully? If I have a cruciform – a cross-shaped – life, I’m...

FAITHFUL TO ACCOMPLISH THE GREATEST TASK EVER.

Paul couldn’t get over God’s goodness, mercy, and grace to him. But something else motivated him to persevere, hang in there, and never give up. He realized God had entrusted him with the greatest task imaginable. He had a duty to spread the gospel faithfully and speak the truth forthrightly. “We don’t go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus’ sake.” (2 Cor. 4:5 NLT) I hear two truths in that statement that identify the greatest task we are also called to accomplish. First, just like Paul, I am called to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus with my lips and life. He was God in human flesh sent to be our substitute through His death on the cross. And because He rose from the dead, He is now the universal and only Lord of the universe. He deserves my complete surrender to Him as my Master, my King, my 24/7 Boss for all eternity, and my Lord.

“We don’t go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus’ sake.” (2 Cor. 4:5 NLT) Second, just like Paul, I become a servant in His Kingdom. I can’t remember a time in my life when I have been more dismayed and disappointed in American Christians as a whole than I have in the last two years in the midst of all the political, social, and pandemic turmoil we’ve been living through. Why do some Christians think the greatest task in life is to support political leaders who want to make America great again – however that gets defined - or work to bring about some other utopian vision for this country? Yes, we should love our country and be involved in its life. But America never was and never will be the hope of the world. Jesus is the one and only hope of the world. And we are called to serve His Kingdom. That means doing everything possible to point people to Jesus for salvation. That means doing everything possible to disciple and grow those who are following Jesus. That means doing everything possible to advance the cause

of Jesus and His Kingdom in our country and around the world. Paul's task in life wasn't to support or tear down the Roman Empire. Rome was irrelevant to him. He had a far greater task that motivated him. If we keep the incomparable greatness of that same task – advancing the Kingdom of King Jesus - before us at all times, we will never give up. We'll persevere. We'll keep on living for Jesus faithfully.

As we keep accomplishing the great task Jesus has entrusted to us, it's important to remember it's all about Jesus not me. Paul wrote here, "We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves." (2 Cor. 4:7 NLT) Paul compared himself – and all Christians - to a common, everyday clay jar. No one took note of clay jars in the 1st century any more than we take note of fast-food cartons today. Clay jars were the throwaway containers of the ancient world. They had a short life span. They were mostly used to store and transport food and water. It was no great tragedy when they broke. They were cheap and easy to replace.

It's fun to reflect on the implications of Paul's image here: a great treasure hidden in an unremarkable clay jar. Clearly, followers of Jesus are like those clay jars, but inside of us is this great treasure. What's this treasure? It's Jesus. It's all of the good news about God contained in Jesus. By saying we're like clay jars, Paul didn't mean Christians are worthless. Instead, he meant what's most worthwhile about us is the treasure of who Jesus is and what He's done that we carry around in our lives and gets revealed to others. It was also a reminder God can use anyone. God can use any follower of Jesus who's willing to be used, because it's all about the treasure inside the jar - not about the jar itself. By saying we're like clay jars, Paul didn't mean Christians are useless either. Clay jars were actually very useful objects. Instead, he meant it's ultimately God's power working in and through our lives that makes us incredibly useful in His Kingdom. We can't produce anything of spiritual value ourselves. We're only vessels in which God's power is exhibited. In fact, as we embrace our weaknesses, our brokenness, and our cracks, God fills us with His power and that power shines out to others through us. This image of a jar filled with a treasure reminds us of this great task God has given us in this life. It's not about us, but about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Antiques Roadshow is a popular television program on PBS. In one episode an elderly man from Tucson, Arizona, brought in an old blanket he had inherited several years ago. Because he thought it possessed little value, he'd simply thrown it over the back of a rocking chair in his bedroom. It remained on the rocking chair until he took it to the experts for an appraisal. The expert told the old man that his heart almost stopped when he first saw it. The item was a Navajo chief's blanket that had been woven in the 1840s. In wonderful condition, it was one of the oldest, intact Navajo blankets to survive into the 21st century. Because of its rarity and significance, the appraiser assigned a value to it of somewhere between \$350,000 and \$500,000. As the old man walked out of the convention center, the blanket he had cavalierly carried in with him was now cradled carefully in his arms. He walked out of the building with security guards on either side of him, drove straight to a bank, and put the blanket in a safe deposit box. What had been "junk" had been instantly transformed into a precious treasure. When

Jesus comes to live in your heart, yes, you're still like a clay jar, but now you have an infinitely valuable treasure inside of you. What else will keep me living for Jesus faithfully? If I have a cross-shaped life, I'm...

FOCUSED ON THE INVISIBLE AND THE ETERNAL.

There's an amazing perspective presented here that is absolutely key to having godly perseverance in life and never giving up. "That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever." (2 Cor. 4:16-18 NLT) Regardless of what happened in his life – his own physical weakness, problems aplenty, danger, persecution – Paul found the Holy Spirit-given ability to never give up because he stayed focused on the invisible (those real, true things that you just can't see with your physical eyes) and the eternal (the stuff that matters because it lasts forever).

That profound perspective will only start to make sense if you hear what Paul said earlier in this same chapter. "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed." (2 Cor. 4:8-9 NLT) Paul defined a cruciform life in those verses. That's a realistic picture of what it means to follow Jesus faithfully your whole life. In other words, God allows - but limits - life's struggles. A lot of really bad stuff can come my way in life – very true - but it will never get so bad I must give up on God. I can be squeezed by life, but God makes sure I'm not absolutely squashed. I can get stressed by life, but God makes sure I don't completely fall apart. For Paul back then and for persecuted Christians in other countries today, I can be persecuted for my faith in Jesus, but I will never be abandoned or forsaken by God. Life can knock you and me down, but God will help us not to get knocked out totally. To use Paul's image here, it's like you're a clay jar with lots of big cracks in it. At times it feels like the clay jar of your life is only being held together somehow by divine glue, but the Light people see shining through all those cracks is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus shone through Paul's cracks. And Jesus can shine through the cracks in your life as well if you let Him!

That realization kept Paul going and gave him the strength to never give up. When you focus on the invisible and the eternal, you realize life's struggles can have a larger purpose. Paul wrote here, "Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies. So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you.... All of this is for your benefit." (2 Cor. 4:11-12 NLT) Paul explained to the Corinthians that God was using all of the hard, difficult things he experienced to help them out spiritually. To put it bluntly, those Christians in Corinth were going to be in Heaven for all eternity because Paul was willing to be killed any and every day in this life for proclaiming Jesus.

In other words, God doesn't waste anything. Yes, God allows us His servants - His children - to suffer difficult things in this life. But when we put that suffering into His hands, He uses it. Somehow it glorifies Him. Somehow it encourages others Christians to never give up on Jesus either. Somehow it can even convict lost people of their need for Jesus and draw them to the Savior. Just like God never wasted the suffering of Jesus on the cross, He didn't waste Paul's suffering and He will not waste your suffering. The very hard, difficult things that come into the lives of all those who follow Jesus are never random, haphazard, or without purpose. They're part of God's plan to spread the good news about Jesus far and wide. It's God's will that all of His fragile jars of clay show others that real power belongs to God. That's what it means to be cruciform – to live a life shaped by the cross of Jesus.

God gave Paul a perspective that explained his supernatural perseverance. The bad stuff he experienced in this life was real enough, to be sure. He didn't enjoy it. He didn't want it to happen to him. But it wasn't ultimate reality either. Ultimate reality was something he couldn't see yet or experience fully yet in this life. It was invisible. Paul wasn't going to have to endure hard, painful things forever. A resurrected, perfect, and endless life in the presence of Jesus awaited Paul. In addition, Paul knew if he allowed God to use all that bad stuff he endured to somehow point other people to Jesus, there was going to be a reward beyond his wildest imagination. What was true for Paul is true for you and me. We have an eternal life in the presence of Jesus just waiting for us. All the bad stuff will come to an end and the length of eternity will make all of it seem so little, so unimportant, and so forgettable. And if we never give up trusting in Jesus, living for Jesus, and looking for opportunities to point others to Jesus, we will receive a reward beyond our wildest imaginations as well. The hymnwriter, Esther Kerr Rusthoi, captured Paul's perspective here as well as anyone, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus, Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ; One glimpse of His dear face all sorrow will erase, So bravely run the race till we see Christ."

Pastor and freelance writer, Mark Buchanan, tells about a conversation he had with a young philosophy student. Mark had just officiated a wedding on a gorgeous day on the coast of British Columbia. At the reception the student asked Mark if he really believed all that religious stuff he had spouted at the church. Mark said he did. The young man smirked. "I tried your religion for a while," he said. "I found it's just a burden to carry. You know what I've figured out? Life justifies living. Life is its own reward and explanation. This life has enough pleasure, mystery, and adventure in it not to need anything else to account for it. Life justifies living."

Mark said. "Very good. And I believe you. Today, here, now we feel the warmth of that breeze, listen to the laughter of these people, smell the spiciness of that shrimp cooking, look at the blueness of the sky. Yes, today I believe you. A superb philosophy. Life justifies living. Only, I'm thinking of Richard. Richard is 44, looks 60, and has been living on the streets since he was 12. He's a junkie. To support his habit, he was a male prostitute until he got too old, ugly, and diseased for that. Now he has AIDS. The last time I saw Richard I bought him a bus ticket and put him on the bus. He was going to his mother's home in Calgary. He hadn't spoken with her in almost 15

years, but he was hoping he could go home to die. Richard said to me, 'I wish I'd never been born. My whole life has been a mistake. My whole life has been misery.'

"And I'm thinking about Ernie, too. Ernie was a man on the rise. In his twenties, he was already vice president of a thriving national business. Tough-minded. Skilled. Ambitious. A superb athlete. Ernie had a beautiful wife. They were unable to have children of their own, so they adopted four: three from Africa and one from Mexico. On the day the fourth adoption became final, Ernie got the results back from some medical tests he had undergone. Stunning news: Ernie had multiple sclerosis. I'm thinking about Richard and Ernie. And I have a question about your philosophy: How exactly do I explain to them that life justifies living?" The young philosophy student had no response. He said he'd have to think about it and get back to Mark. Mark never heard from him. Perhaps it was because life does not justify living. Only eternity does.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you will be faithful to Jesus right to the very end of your life. What will keep you and me faithful? We're forever grateful for God's mercy. We're faithful to accomplish the greatest task ever. And we're focused on the invisible and the eternal. When it comes to Jesus, persevere. Persist. Endure. Stay faithful and steadfast. Never, ever give up.