

November 19, 2017

“The Motivation to Keep Going” 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

FCF: The struggle to “keep going” in evangelism

PROPOSITION: (anchor) God has given us a message for the world.
(magnet) And a motivation unlike any the world has ever known.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Invictus is a poem written by William Ernest Henley in 1875 ([READ quote](#)):

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Henley penned this after complications from tuberculosis led to the amputation of one of his legs and the near loss of the other. It captures “the stiff upper lip” - the self discipline and fortitude in adversity for which the British are known. And it’s often quoted to capture such toughness.

But is it actually helpful? This is the last in a series of nine messages on Gospel-Shaped Outreach. We’ve covered a lot of ground. But here at the close, we need to ask, “How can we keep going in evangelism?” If it’s not the spirit of *Invictus*, then where does that leave us?

SCRIPTURE READING: [2 Corinthians 4:1-18](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Perhaps my question as to what will keep us going in evangelism seemed strange to some of you. If so, then let’s consider the challenges we face. In some parts of the world, it might be outright persecution - physical suffering brought on by antagonists to the gospel. Or, closer to home, it may mean alienation and rejection. Either way, there is a temptation to give up or adjust the message. We may face questions and doubts we’ve never considered before. Besides that, there can be the strain of our concern for others, the swim against the cultural tides, an awareness of our failures, and the reality of our pride and selfishness. These are all very real challenges.

It can be wearisome. Jesus speaks of a shepherd’s concern for his sheep, harassed and helpless. He speaks of a farmer and his eye to a greater harvest. We need to let those images capture our imagination. And to realize shepherds and farmers have hard work in front of them.

Evangelism can be wearisome. What will sustain us? Paul tells us in this text, writing of what sustained him. God has given us a message for the world. It is a message unlike any other. We are to be messengers unlike any other. And we have a motivation unlike any other.

What is this motivation, this fuel and fire? We see three things here - the assurance that God is working in people, that He is showing His power, and that He is bringing us to glory.

I. GOD IS WORKING IN PEOPLE

What will keep us going? First, the assurance in vv.1-6 that God is working in people.

A) The Reality of Darkness

And how. Paul begins with honest candor and alludes to the reality of darkness.

1. An inability to see

He speaks of an inability for some to see, of a blindness, of a spiritual deadness, of veiled and hardened hearts. For the influence of Satan, the god of this world, is truly and terribly real.

2. The temptation we face

And with that can come our temptation to discouragement, to take matters into our hands, to do things our way - even to change the message. The pull to such rationalization is so very strong.

B) The Light of the Gospel

What can keep that pull in check? (READ 2 Corinthians 4:5-6) The light of the gospel.

1. The necessity of the gospel

There are two things worth noting here about that light. First, its necessity. The gospel is the only means by which we can ever come to see Christ. That then is what must be proclaimed.

2. The power of the gospel

So there is gospel necessity. And then gospel power. Paul alludes to creation here. Just as at the beginning of all things when God's Word brought light where there was no light, so too again His Word is what does the same in the human heart. Dawn breaks and a new day comes.

The reality of the darkness is met with the light of the gospel. It cannot be otherwise. For that is how God does His work through us. And that assurance is what keeps us going.

Application:

How does this connect to us? Satan's work is real. But his power is limited. Think with me. Satan can only remove sight. But God can restore it. Think of just the physical analogy here. Satan can only inflict. But God can make well. And He does that through the gospel. There is this gospel power and necessity. So why on earth would we ever change the message?

Here's the assurance. Despite how things look, God is working through the gospel. He has given us a message for the world. And a motivation unlike any the world has ever known.

II. GOD IS SHOWING HIS POWER

What will keep us going? First, the assurance that God is working. And, second, that He is showing His power. We see this in vv.7-15. And, again, Paul speaks with honest candor.

A) The Reality of Weakness

He began alluding to the reality of darkness. Here, he presses on the reality of weakness.

1. Image of weakness

(READ 2 Corinthians 4:7a) These jars are ordinary disposable containers holding treasure of inestimable worth. This is an image of weakness, in this case, the weakness of the messenger. Paul follows this image of weakness with examples of weakness (READ 2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

2. Pattern of death

So, it's an image of weakness. And then, beyond even that, a pattern of death, a sharing of the sufferings of Jesus in the lives of His servants. Why? (READ 2 Corinthians 4:7, 10-11)

B) The Power of the Resurrection

Life through death. The reality of weakness is met by the power of the resurrection.

1. For Paul

First, in the life of Paul. This is a stunning statement. The power that raised Jesus from the dead was at work in him. This is what enabled him to endure such adversity (series of "but not").

2. For others

Power in the life of Paul. And then, in others (READ 2 Corinthians 4:12). His suffering enabled others to see the reality of the resurrected Savior and His kingdom rule come and coming still.

The reality of weakness is met by the power of the resurrection. It cannot be otherwise. For that is how God does His work through us. And that assurance is what keeps us going.

Illustration:

Some of you may have heard the news that there has been a change in the leadership of the Tolkien estate. This has cleared the way for Amazon to start producing a series based on Middle Earth. Which could be great or a disaster. Depending on if they stay true to the themes.

One such theme in *The Lord of the Rings* is the value of humility. Gandalf is quoted in *The Silmarillion* (READ quote), "Many are the strange chances of the world and help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter." Years later at the Council of Elrond, in the midst of the debate as to how to deal with the Ring of Power, Frodo Baggins steps forward and declares (READ quote), "I will take the ring, though I do not know the way." And who is this Frodo Baggins? Just a hobbit, a halfling. And through the hands of the weak, help comes.

Application:

It's still that way. God uses jars of clay, our weakness and suffering. Life comes through death. Put the pressure on the weak thing and its weakness is exposed. Cracks begin to form. But that's good. For it's through those very cracks that others can begin to see what's within.

It is through our weakness that His strength is made clear, through our suffering that His healing is made known. Do we dare believe that? Do we dare trust Him that much, that far?

Here's the thing. Despite appearances, God is showing his power through weakness. He has given us a message for the world. And a motivation unlike any the world has ever known.

III. GOD IS BRINGING US TO GLORY

Which brings us to the last point. What will keep us going? The assurance that God is working. The promise He is showing His power. And, then, the hope He is bringing us to glory.

A) The Reality of Hardship

(READ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18) Again, Paul speaks here with honest candor.

1. Wasting away

The physical body is wasting away, weakening, falling apart. There is a disintegration underway.

2. Affliction

Then there are our afflictions - our troubles, tribulations, burdens, anguish, and sufferings.

B) The Greater Weight of What Awaits

But, despite that, there is something else that counter-balances this and tips the scales.

1. The present work of renewal

Paul speaks of a present work of renewal - inwardly, slowly but surely, a change within.

2. The future hope of renewal

And then, beyond that present work lies a future hope. The partial renewal complete and full. All obstacles cleared away. All setbacks cast away. This renewal is coming and lasts forever.

The reality of hardship is met by the greater weight of what awaits. And, here again, it cannot be otherwise. This is how God does His work not just through us but in us as well.

Illustration:

And, again, this is no escapism. This is realism. Think back to that CSL quote earlier.

Application:

This future glory is what brings ballast, balance, and footing to the present. We are to live with one eye on the here and now and one eye on the there and then. Not playing down the reality of what's in front of us. Not at all, we are playing up the reality of what awaits.

Which simply must focus our prayers. May our troubles then be to us what they really are - light and momentary. And may the glory coming be as it is - weighty and eternal. And may we then live out of that. May we plan and pursue, hear and hold, see and speak that way.

Here's the hope. Despite appearances, God is bringing us to glory through hardship. He has given us a message for the world. And a motivation unlike any the world has ever known.

CONCLUSION:

Paul has set several paradoxes before us here - profound realities that fly in the face of our premises and assumptions. Put another way, God's ways are surprising. Should that surprise us? Is not the gospel message not only beautifully good but wonderfully surprising as well?

This week we'll be gathering with friends and family to celebrate Thanksgiving. Some of us will struggle with the topics of conversation. Wanting to avoid the raw nerves of politics and certain news stories, we will retreat towards the football games on TV or perhaps a third helping of pie. There's another option. We could shift the conversation to the roots of the holiday.

Let me read this excerpt from a Chuck Colson "Breakpoint" piece ([READ pp.36-38](#)):

Most of us know the story of the first Thanksgiving; at least we know the Pilgrim version. But how many of us know the Indian viewpoint?

No, I'm not talking about some revisionist, politically correct version of history. I'm talking about the amazing story of the way God used an Indian named Squanto as a special instrument of His providence.

Historical accounts of Squanto's life vary, but historians believe that around 1608, more than a decade before the Pilgrims arrived, a group of English traders sailed to what is today Plymouth, Massachusetts. When the trusting Wampanoag Indians came out to trade, the traders took them prisoner, transported them to Spain, and sold them into slavery. It was an unimaginable horror.

But God had an amazing plan for one of the captured Indians, a boy named Squanto.

Squanto was bought by a well-meaning Spanish monk, who treated him well and taught him the Christian faith. Squanto eventually made his way to England and worked in the stables of a man named John Slaney. Slaney sympathized with Squanto's desire to return home, and he promised to put the Indian on the first vessel bound for America.

It wasn't until 1619, ten years after Squanto was first kidnapped, that a ship was found. Finally, after a decade of exile and heartbreak, Squanto was on his way home.

But when he arrived in Massachusetts, more heartbreak awaited him. An epidemic had wiped out Squanto's entire village.

We can only imagine what must have gone through Squanto's mind. Why had God allowed him to return home, against all odds, only to find his loved ones dead?

A year later, the answer came. A shipload of English families arrived and settled on the very land once occupied by Squanto's people. Squanto went to meet them, greeting the startled Pilgrims in English.

According to the diary of Pilgrim Governor William Bradford, Squanto "became a special instrument sent of God for [our] good . . . He showed [us] how to plant [our] corn, where to take fish and to procure other commodities . . . and was also [our] pilot to bring [us] to unknown places for [our] profit, and never left [us] till he died."

When Squanto lay dying of fever, Bradford wrote that their Indian friend "desir[ed] the Governor to pray for him, that he might go to the Englishmen's God in heaven." Squanto bequeathed his possessions to the Pilgrims "as remembrances of his love."

Who but God could so miraculously convert a lonely Indian and then use him to save a struggling band of Englishmen? It is reminiscent of the biblical story of Joseph, who was also sold into slavery, and whom God likewise used as a special instrument for good.

Keep this in mind. That first year had been a nightmare for the Pilgrims. Half of their group had died from sickness and starvation. They were thousands of miles from home. And surely questioning God. Then, out of the woods, walks an Indian speaking the King's English.

My point? God's ways are surprising. So too is the gospel. So too is how He intends to send us forth with that gospel message. He has given us a message - each of us. He has given us a message for the world. And a motivation unlike any other the world has ever known.

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