

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: October 23, 2016
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“STRANGELY GLORIOUS”
Second Corinthians 4:7-11, 16-18

{Is 6:3} Today we have acclaimed the LORD’s majesty. **“The whole earth is full of his glory”!**

In contrast, my life has been short on glory lately.

☑ It is not glorious to stand naked before strangers.

It is not glorious to have inserted into one’s body a catheter that is big enough around to serve as a conduit for surgical instruments.

It is not glorious to urinate liquid the color and consistency of sludgy red wine.

It is not glorious to burn down the length of your urethra, and cramp intensely across your lower abdomen so that you have to drop to all fours.

It is not glorious to have an excruciating headache that borders on a migraine.

It is not glorious to vomit forcefully.

It is not glorious to be semi-coherent and struggle to find simple words.

It is not glorious to be wiped out by a trip from the couch to the bathroom.

I am in much better shape now than I was a few weeks ago. For this, I give praise and thanks to God!

But these afflictions have raised some questions.

❓ What is the glory of an exhausted body, a clouded mind, and a burdened heart?

❓ Do human suffering and divine glory intersect?

❓ Is God doing anything good in my inglorious pain and weakness?

■ Please turn with me to II Corinthians 4:16-18.

¹⁶ ... we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

In my opinion, this is an exquisite passage! Its beauty arises from the tensions between body and spirit, wasting and renewal, suffering and exaltation, time and eternity, mortality and resurrection.

Do these tensions make you uncomfortable? If so, it might be because they presuppose ambiguity.

Most of us don’t like ambiguity. We crave the cut-and-dried answer, the unqualified either/or, the definite one or the other.

I get it. That’s my natural preference. And, to be sure, there are absolutes in the universe.

{Eccl 3:1, 2, 4, 6} Nevertheless human life is, for the most part, a both/and affair:

**There is ... a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
... a time to search and a time to give up.**

Don't deny the ambiguity. Let's not try to resolve these tensions too quickly.

The apostle Paul does not.

★ On the one hand, he unflinchingly faces the harsh realities of discipleship, and human life in general. **“We are wasting away,”** he says, we have **“troubles.”**

This is consistent with unvarnished statements he makes earlier in this letter:

● 1:8: **“We do not want you to be uninformed ... about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.”**

■ He is not exaggerating. Verses 8b-9: **“we despaired of life itself. ⁹ We felt we had received the sentence of death.”**

■ And his ordeal is not over and done. 4:8-9: **“We are hard pressed on every side,” “we are” “perplexed,” “we are”** being **“struck down ...”**

★ At the same time, Paul relishes the victory of Christ in his life! **“We do not lose heart,”** he says. **“We are being renewed day by day”** (verse 16).

■ Going back to 4:8-9, **“We are... not crushed ... not in despair... not abandoned... not destroyed.”**

● Going further back to 1:7, **“our hope ... is firm,”** 1:3-4, ³ **“the Father of compassion ... ⁴ ... comforts us in all our troubles,”** and 1:5, **“our comfort abounds through Christ.”**

Though his troubles are factual, they are not the only facts. His tribulations are extreme, yet they do not define his existence.

The apostle lives in the tension. He wrestles with self-absorption *and* has love for God and others. He is beset by despair *and* has hope. He feels uncertain *and* has faith.

? How does he do it? How does he embrace the both/and without succumbing to the opposite and equally false extremes of desolation or triumphalism? How does he keep one foot in the ugly present and the other in the beautiful future?

★ 1st, Paul honors both the body and the spirit.

■ Verse 16: **“outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”**

Some Christians are lopsidedly “spiritual”: they undervalue or even disparage the body. Others are carnal: they neglect the spirit.

Paul treats his body as a good and essential gift. He also nourishes and nurtures his spirit.

We are not spirits trapped in bodies, neither are we bodies who just happen to house spirits. We are a union of body and spirit. That is how the Creator designed us, and that is how he will remake us at our resurrection.

✍ Honoring body and spirit equips us to cope with inglorious reality and celebrate Christ's victory in us.

★ 2nd, Paul lives in the present in light of eternity.

■ This comes out in verses 17-18: **“our ... troubles”** are **“light and momentary”** since **“what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”**

Now matters. This is the only time we have to hurt and feel good, to cry and laugh, to complain and praise.

Still, today is always becoming yesterday. And someday time as we know it will be finished and done.

{Eph 5:15-16} The key is to live with the Lord in the moment – the moment you are peeing blood and the moment you feel great – and then let it go. As Paul advises us, **“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise making the most of every opportunity.”**

✍ Living in the present in light of eternity helps us put glory and humiliation in proper perspective.

★ 3rd, Paul embraces inglorious suffering as a catalyst for eternal glory.

He claims that hardships are a means by which God prepares us to share in his glory.

Of course, while you are puking your guts out or groaning in pain, it feels like eternity will never get here and splendor is an illusion. But what if our perceptions are skewed?

{Heb 12:2} Consider **“Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross.”** There was nothing glorious about the cross. Not only did it kill, it was designed to inflict extreme agony and maximum indignity.

{1 Co 1:22-23} Yet to be a Christian is to rely on the Christ of the cross. **“To us who are being saved” “the message of the cross” “is the power of God.”**

{Mt 16:24} Not only so, to love the Son, to trust him as Savior and serve him as Lord, is to lead a cross-shaped

life! He says, in no uncertain terms, that everyone who wants **“to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

Worldly glory is generally won by great success. In exceptional cases, it is accomplished by means of a spectacular death (a la Romeo and Juliet).

{Ro 8:17; Mt 5:38, 44; Col 3:13} Eternal glory is secured by “[sharing] in [Jesus’] sufferings.” By and large this is not spectacular. It involves turning **“the other cheek,”** loving our enemies, bearing with those who offend us, forgiving **“as the Lord forgave,”** and so on.

✍ Embracing inglorious suffering as a catalyst for eternal glory empowers us to have joy in adversity.

Honoring body and spirit. Living now in light of eternity. Embracing inglorious suffering as a catalyst for eternal glory. These are sound principles.

However, believing they are true is not enough. In fact, it makes things worse when we try to do them and fail. And sooner or later we do fail. At least, I do.

I cannot do these things. Not when I can barely breathe through the pain. Not when my thoughts are muddled. Not when my heart is aching. Can you?

☪ Thank God, we don’t have to! It is beyond us, but it is not beyond Christ whose Spirit fills us.

{1 P 4:13} Peter calls us to **“rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”**

{Php 3:10} Paul testifies, **“I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings ...”**

{Jn 6:55; Mt 26:26-27} Messiah declares, **“My flesh is real food,” “Take and eat.” “My blood is real drink,” “Drink from it.”**

This language is spiritual, but not figurative. We don't physically hang on the cross; even so, the One who did really does take us into his life. We don't consume bodily flesh and blood; still, his presence really does enter into us.

{1 Co 6:19} Participation is the crucial reality. **“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”**

God the Son is fully able to achieve what no mere mortal can. He can even do it in and through us!

An exhausted body, a clouded mind, and a burdened heart is not glorious. The presence of Jesus in that body, mind, and heart *is* strangely glorious!

Human suffering and divine glory intersected in the body of Jesus 2,000 years ago. Now, they intersect in the bodies of his people, whom he indwells!

God is doing something good in my inglorious pain and weakness, and in yours: he is **“achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”**

Second Corinthians 4 is the word of the Lord.