

When Life Beats Us Down, God Helps Us Up – Part II

~ 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

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Would you be willing to die for your faith in Christ? I have thought about this question this past week because our Bible text raises it. I found it hard to identify with this question. I don't think I've ever faced death because of my faith in Christ. There may have been times I was in mortal danger because of the devil's schemes. I am not clearly aware of any such situations. If that has happened, God intervened to protect me because I'm still here. I've never had a gun held to my head with someone saying "renounce Christ or die." Would I be willing to keep the faith and die or might I deny Christ in the moment for the sake of my family or keeping my life?

Some Christians today live under a daily threat of death for their faith. They may live in a community that hates Christianity or sees it as a cultural or national threat. An angry mob could kill them because of their devotion to Christ. In fact, 13 Christians were killed in Nigeria by militants early in May. 13 more were kidnapped. Over 1000 were displaced.¹ According to the organization Open Doors, an advocacy group for persecuted Christians, an average of 11 Christians die every day in the world for their faith.²

The first Christians entered into the faith knowing they faced a high probability of martyrdom. Of the eleven surviving disciples after Jesus' crucifixion, we think 10 died an unnatural death for following Christ. That's 90%. The apostle Paul ministered for approximately 30 years. Then the Romans executed him for his faith. Persevering in the face of death became part of early church's baptism and membership class. But, losing our lives for Christ seems so foreign to us.

Perhaps part of our problem, my problem, is we have become so used to living a good life much of the time. We don't want to lose such a life. We have our plans and dreams and career paths all mapped out. Dying for Christ would kind mess all that up. Yet if someone held a gun to my head, would I be okay with being the Christian pastor who denied Christ under pressure? Of course, denying Christ is not necessarily fatal to our faith. Peter denied Christ three times and Christ restored him – to the point that when Peter faced execution later in life, he remained true to Christ. I don't think we really know how we would respond until we face that situation.

¹ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/2020/may/no-pandemic-pause-in-nigeria-as-muslim-militants-kill-13-christians-kidnap-13-more-attack-5-villages> Accessed May 28, 2020

² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/11-christians-killed-every-day-for-their-decision-to-follow-jesus/> Accessed May 28, 2020

But I wanted to get us thinking about this, because dying for the faith comes up again and again in our passage today.³

We started into Second Corinthians 4 last week where the apostle Paul talks about his sufferings and how God showed up to help him in every suffering. We saw that when life beats us down, we can get back up because of God's work in and through us. Paul listed different troubles he and his ministry team experienced – affliction; confusion; persecution; struck down. Some of those actually had the potential to kill. Yet God delivered him. He will talk about dying in a little different way than we're used to. He will show us how even in the face of such dying, God works in and through us. If God shows up in that extreme situation, we can gain encouragement that He will show up when everyday life beats us down. So would you please find 2 Corinthians 4 again. Today, we will read verses 7-18.

2 Corinthians 4:7-18 - ESV

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ 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. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³ 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, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ 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.

What is God doing in or through us when we go through affliction?

1– He works through our “dying” to bring the resurrection life of Jesus to others. Verses 10-12 hard to understand. What does he mean when he writes, “we are carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus?” Or verse 11 – “We are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake?” How do you carry around in your body someone else's death?

Some think that “death” refers to suffering for Christ's sake. Others think that death refers to “the threat of death.” Paul constantly lived under the threat of death. So he carried this threat in his actual body. These are

³ For another perspective on this check out <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/gun-to-your-head-will-you-deny-christ>.

both possible. But I agree with those who think that the “death of Jesus” refers not only to the threat of death but to the process of dying.

If we look at Jesus’ life, we see him engage in this process of opposition, persecution, false conviction, torture and abuse that ultimately led to the cross. In a way, this process of dying went on for most of His public ministry. It included people despising Him, rejecting Him, inflicting sorrow, grief, piercing, crushing, and wounding upon Him. How did Jesus endure all this? Isaiah 53:7 – He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” Jesus willingly endured the process of dying. But He didn’t do it because he had a martyr complex or enjoyed suffering. Hebrews 12:1-2 – “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of God.” The dying process took everything out of Jesus. Yet it brought life to all who trust in Him and led to His own resurrection and exultation.

Notice back in 2 Corinthians 4:10-12, Paul says that though he and his ministry team carry around or live according to this process of dying like Jesus, it results in life for others. Verse 10 – Always carrying around the death of Jesus so that the *life* of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. Verse 11 – 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 what does this look like? Well if a person goes through tremendous suffering, yet they continue to trust in Christ, this shows the life Christ brings to others. Last week’s story about 26 year old Katherine suffering a devastating stroke has such power. You can see the effects of nearly dying on her face. Yet she continues to live with joy along with her tears because of Christ. Joni Eareckson survived a near death swimming accident at the age of 17. It confined her to a wheelchair. Yet she ministers to millions over 50 years through her dying body. Or when you grieve and sorrow over your loved ones who are lost – that’s part of the dying of Jesus. When you pray for them and give up your time and day to pray, then God may grant them life.

Paul says we carry around this death or dying of Jesus in our bodies. I take this to mean that when we embrace the Christian life and follow Jesus, we will also carry around in our bodies the life of Jesus for the benefit of others. Jesus describes this in Luke 9:23-25 – If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily (that’s the dying process of Jesus) and follow me. For whoever would lose his life (the dying

process of following Jesus) for my sake will save it.” And Paul says that when he and his team carry around this dying of Jesus, it brings life to the Corinthians. Through Paul’s willingness to embrace this life, the Gospel came to the Corinthians. So when you and I give up our lives for Christ, embrace dying for Christ, God brings life to others – whether it be our kids, other family, colleagues, friends or neighbors.

George Guthrie, in his commentary on 2nd Corinthians shares a profound story about how this actually happened. “The daughter of missionaries recounted how as a little girl she had participated in a celebration of the 100th anniversary of missionaries coming to the Congo. Speeches were given, music was played and at the end of the day a very old man stood before the crowd to speak. He said that when the missionaries first came, the people thought them odd and their message suspicious. The tribal leaders, seeking to test the missionaries, slowly poisoned them to death over a period of months, even years. Children of the missionaries died one by one, but the missionaries stayed and proclaimed the gospel, even as they died. The old man commented, “It was as we watched how they died that we decided we wanted to live as Christians.” Death leads to life.⁴

Yet, who would choose such a life? Why would anyone embrace a life of affliction? The next section provides the answer. Here we see something else God does in us through affliction. **2 – God sustains the “dying” through the promise of resurrection.** Verses 13-14 – “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.” He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also. Even if they died for their ministry, they would not ultimately die. God would bring Him into His presence and then raise them in resurrection on the last day. God sustains “those dying in Christ with the promise of the resurrection.”

But, isn’t this extreme? Do we really need faith in the resurrection of Christ to keep going in the Christian life? Well, would we die for our faith if there was no resurrection? Why endure the “process of dying”, denying self, if there is nothing beyond this life? The resurrection of Christ enables us to continue going even in the face of death.

This hope shows itself in Paul’s own heart in the final verses of this chapter. He starts in verse 16 by saying “So we do not lose heart.” Why? “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” So here’s another way God helps us when we go through affliction. **3 -- God renews our inner-**

⁴ George Guthrie, 2 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2015, 266.

self daily despite our outward-self wasting away. (4:16) I don't think many people 40 and older would dispute the first part of this verse. Our outer self is wasting away. Aging brings wear and tear. Eventually our bodies wear out. Affliction also takes its toll on our bodies and minds. So there is no doubt that outwardly we are wasting away. Yet God renews us inwardly day by day. I know many of our seniors who are joyful and spirit-filled believers. They continue to live with joy despite their physical limitations.

Though Paul could have given up because of the brutal nature of authentic ministry, he does not lose heart. Paul's ministry did not look successful at that moment. According to some in the Corinthian church, Paul was wishy washy. He did not have the latest training in speaking or rhetoric. He apparently did not take over a room with his impressive personality. Yet through such "weakness" the power of God flowed. This is the paradox of our lives today. Through our weakness and outward wasting away, people can get a clearer picture of Lord's life in us. God also cares for us by renewing us inwardly while we "waste away" outwardly.

Paul will also "not lose heart" because of verse 17. "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." **4 - God uses our light and momentary affliction to prepare for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison.** To me, there are a couple of incredible phrases in this verse. First, Paul calls his afflictions "light and momentary." Yet he has spent a great deal of ink talking about their heaviness in the previous parts of this letter. I don't think he's suddenly contradicting himself. I think he takes a difference frame of reference for this verse. On their own, his afflictions certainly weighed on him and wore him down. Yet compared to the eternal weight of glory that awaits those who suffer for Christ, his afflictions look light and momentary.

The second incredible piece to this verse comes with the word translated "prepare," or "achieve" or "work for" or "produce," Paul makes a connection between light afflictions and eternal weight of glory. It's like the light bundle of affliction produces something for those carrying it. Paul taps into a broader Jewish theological tradition concerning the benefit of trials.⁵ They not only develop character in this life. They produce something for the next life. However, the production is way out of proportion to what produced it. It is both breath taking and immeasurable or something extraordinary.

New Testament Scholar Craig Blomberg writes "2 Corinthians 4:17 contains one of the most mind blowing affirmations of faith anywhere. Here Paul declares that 'our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an

⁵ Guthrie 271.

eternal glory that far outweighs' all our suffering. Light and momentary? . . . Only by really beginning to grasp the nature and duration of eternity can the horrors of the world be called light and momentary. But that is precisely what Paul has done.”⁶ Though we need to follow and persevere in our faith because it is the right thing to do, God also prepares for us this eternal weight of glory through our sufferings. As we identify with Christ in His sufferings, we will also share in His glory.

So how do we actually live like this? Paul tells us in verse 18. **“So we look not to the things that are seen but the things unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”** We need to focus on the unseen eternal spiritual realities. If we only focus on what we can see, life seems bleak. But when we focus on the eternal we gain hope. We already do this with our loved ones who have died in Christ. We focus on the unseen realm where they currently live today. Yes, we have to endure life without them for a while longer. But one day we will see them again because of Christ's resurrection and God's ability to raise the dead. Or our trials may seem meaningless if looked at solely from their bitter experience. But if we see them as producing something beneficial in life today and in glory tomorrow, we can live with more hope. When we set our hearts on the eternal and that which is currently unseen, we may gain a clearer answer to the question we started with today. Would you be willing to die for your faith? Well dying in Christ points others to life in Christ. Knowing God raised Jesus from the dead gives us confidence that He will raise us from the dead. Though outwardly wasting away and dying, we gain ultimate renewal in Christ's presence and look forward to our resurrection bodies. The light and momentary affliction of dying produces more of this eternal weight of glory. So with all we have learned here, we might gain confidence to answer yes to the question “Would you die for your faith in Christ?” But until then or when our last day arrives, we need not lose heart. When life beats us down, God enables us to get back up because of what He is doing in and through us.

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *A New Testament Theology*, Baylor U, Waco, TX, 2018, 262.