

A Mere Breath

Sermon Text: Psalm 39

Study Texts: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Sermon Recap: The main idea of this week's sermon is this: Knowledge of the eternal, holy LORD gives perspective to temporary, sinful people. Take time before your growth group to review the key points you noted from today's sermon.

Sermon Connection: Psalm 39 is a confrontational text in that it confronts a false view of life that we often hold. In our humanity, we tend to push our frailty and thoughts of death out of our minds, preferring not to think about such things. This inevitably leads us to think more of ourselves and of our own lives than we should. We forget that suffering and hardship, sickness and need are meant to point us to our need for Christ. In Psalm 39, the point of highlighting the psalmist's suffering is to remind us of how fleeting human life is. As the Psalmist notes, "*Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!*" The good news is this is not where the Bible leaves it. In 2 Cor. 4:16-18, Paul helpfully shows how the suffering and brevity of our human lives remind us to trust in Christ's provision day-by-day. We are not meant to live apart from God, and the sufferings of this life are reminders of that truth. The beauty of the gospel is that even as our frail and temporary lives pass on, we are renewed and held fast in God.

Lesson Plan

Lesson Goal: To see that our earthly lives—our sufferings, hardships, and struggles— are temporary, but God's salvation is forever.

Lesson Points:

Point 1: The Lesson in Suffering (v. 16)

Point 2: The Prize of Suffering (v. 17)

Point 3: How We Endure Suffering (v. 18)

The Context: The central theme of 2 Corinthians is the relationship between suffering and the power of the Holy Spirit in Paul's life, ministry, and message.¹ Paul had suffered persecution and slander at the hands of false teachers. They had argued that Paul suffered too much to be a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus, much less, an apostle. Yet, Paul shows through the letter that it is his ongoing suffering and hardship that demonstrate his connection with the cross of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is Paul's gracious attitude and unwavering hope that shine forth the resurrection power of Jesus' gospel. 2 Cor. 4:16-18 brings us face-to-face with Paul's unwavering hope.

Opening Question: Suppose you are greeting someone and ask, "How are you today?" Their response is the colloquial, "I'm alive, which is better than the alternative!" Why do you think we respond like this? Why do you think we fear death?

Transition Statement: We tend not to think about our own deaths because it's uncomfortable. Paul wants us to see that the sufferings and hardship we face during our earthly life is meant to remind us both of the brevity of our lives, but also of our coming incorruptible life with God.

Point 1 - The Lesson in Suffering (v. 16)

How is Paul's statement, "*So we do not lose heart...*" connected with what has already come before?

Paul is using rhetoric here to draw attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit with the suffering Christian. In v. 16, Paul is rejecting despair in the face of persecution and hardship, which is an explicit repeating of 4:1 where he writes, "*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*" The "*therefore*" in v. 16, as with most other places in biblical literature, signals that what follows depends on what has gone before.

Read 2 Cor. 4:8-9. How does this help explain Paul's words in v. 16, "*Though our outer self is wasting away...*"?

Paul's rejection of despair in v. 16 is a direct echo of his words from vv. 8-9. He notes, "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...*" As we consider each of these negative experiences Paul highlights, we find that many of our negative emotional experiences and sufferings in life are found in one or more of them. We are prone to affliction, perplexion and confusion, persecution, and being struck down or burdened. But, because of the gospel, Paul says, we do not remain here. "*Though our outer self [literally] is wasting away...*" we hold to Christ, Who renews us.

¹ Introduction to 2 Corinthians, *ESV Study Bible*, 2219.

Read 2 Cor. 4:7, 10-11. How does this help explain Paul's hope that, "...*our inner self is being renewed day by day*"?

Even as we experience the pain and decay of this life, the sufferings of sin and persecutions for faith, we have a great and steadfast God Who holds us fast throughout it all. In 4:7, Paul writes, "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*" How can we say that while our bodies, emotions, and our physical lives are wasting away, we are still being renewed? We can say this because it is God Who holds us fast; it is God Who renews us in our inner spirit. Verse 7 highlights that it is the fragile nature of our lives that drives us to God. Our dependence on Him in everything also proclaims His goodness to the world. Even as we waste away, v. 11 reminds us that Christ is working His eternal life in us.

In v. 16, how is Paul's hope of the coming resurrection and eternal life with God in view?

In all of Paul's writings, the hope of eternal life with God influences and shapes everything. This text, in particular, reveals Paul's hope of inner renewal and anticipates the hope of the coming glory with Jesus in heaven. If there were no hope of eternal life after this life, then Paul's words for hope in this text would be empty. All of the struggles he lists in vv. 8-9 would be truly crushing if it were not for the hope of eternal life with God.

Point 2 - The Prize of Suffering (v. 17)

How can Paul call the sufferings and hardship of this life, "...*light momentary*..."?

As we just mentioned, Paul's hope of eternal life with God influences everything in his writings. In v. 17, Paul is demonstrating the effect of such conviction, which is this: a commanding heavenly perspective. This earthly life does make sense for Paul without the hope of heaven. Its sufferings and hardships are seen as "*light momentary*" when compared with heaven. For Paul, the ideas of heaven and Christ are inextricably bound together. He cannot conceive of one without the other, and he knows that being with Christ for eternity will not only repay any and all earthly suffering, it will also make sense of it.

In his book, *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn notes, "To long for Christ is to long for Heaven, for that is where we will be with Him. God's people are longing for a better country (Heb. 11:16). We cannot set our eyes on Christ without setting our eyes on Heaven..."²

What does Paul say our sufferings and hardship are doing for us?

Quite literally, he writes that our sufferings and hardships are working for us. That seems extremely counterintuitive to our natural mind and emotions. When we suffer, we are losing health, peace of mind, worldly possessions, etc. Suffering and hardship are losses until they are redefined by the gospel. The gospel speaks a better word to us in suffering. As we

² Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, 20.

endure the hardships of this life, we may know 2 things: The God of the universe is holding us and renewing us, and our present sufferings are working an eternal weight of glory for us. How does this verse teach us to think about our lives here on earth and the life to come in heaven with God?

Paul's heavenly perspective shapes and influences everything about his life, even how he thinks about and endures sufferings and hardships. If we stop to consider this verse, to think deeply upon it and internalize its promises, we too will learn to live with a heavenly perspective that shapes and influences everything about our lives. It will teach us to think about our hardships differently. It will cause us to dwell deeply on the promise of God, Who, by the power of His Holy Spirit, dwells with us and renews us daily. Our sufferings and hardships, our lives that are but mere breaths before God, teach us to long for God above all things.

Point 3 - How We Endure Suffering (v. 18)

What is Paul referring to when he says, "...*we look not to the things that are seen...*"?

This is a helpful, almost pastoral point for Paul as he writes to the Corinthian church. He knows that in our flesh, in our sin, we tend to focus on what we can see, what we can feel...what we can control. Often when suffering and hardship arises, we go into attack mode. We make plans, we strategize, we worry....and in the back of our minds, we hope God helps. When suffering and hardship come, our natural response is to look to what we can see and control. But that is Paul's point. Such a response is sinful. It is not sinful to take action or to behave responsibly. But, it is sinful to neglect God in the midst of hardship. Therefore, Paul's point is to say that when hardship presents itself, our first response and our enduring hope is in turning to God.

What is Paul referring to when he says, "...*but to the things that are unseen*"? How does 2 Cor. 3:18 factor into 4:18?

As we learn to let go of hoping in the world, the Holy Spirit graciously teaches us to look to God, that is, "...*to the things that are [yet] unseen.*" In 2 Cor. 3:18, Paul notes, "*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord Who is the Spirit.*"

Paul's point is that the gospel gives us new eyes with which to see the world and a new mind with which to understand the world. This is not an instantaneous process but a process that we learn and grow in until we go to be with Him. The ESV Study Bible has a helpful note here: "As a result of beholding the Lord through the ministry of the Spirit, the believer is being transformed (a process of sanctification over time, not an instantaneous change) into the same image of God that was distorted at the fall."³

³ Scott J. Hafemann, 2 Corinthians Commentary, *ESV Study Bible*, 2227.

How does this promise and this call to action help us to endure suffering with joy?

This text is a deep and abiding promise on several points. First, we come away from this text knowing that God is at work within us, safeguarding us, holding us together, renewing our inner spirit, preparing us for eternity with Him. We also note that our sufferings are given purpose and value. While we may not know the exact reason in the moment, because we are in Christ, we may be confident that our sufferings and hardships are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that cannot be compared with anything in the world. Finally, we are reminded of our coming future: Life eternal with God where we will be fully transformed into His likeness without sin.

How does recognizing that our lives are but “mere breaths” help us in suffering and hardship? Whereas the world tends to view such a thought as negative and unnecessarily pessimistic, understanding this truth should fill the believer with the right perspective and unwavering hope.

The Big Picture - A Mere Breath, yet Life Eternal

Psalm 39 brings us face-to-face with this truth: Knowledge of the eternal, holy LORD gives perspective to temporary, sinful people. When we encounter the eternal God of the Bible, we encounter that which gives right perspective to everything. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, and thus He is the measure of all things. 2 Corinthians 4 reminds us that God is the Creator, but it also comforts us knowing that although we experience hardship, suffering, and decay, God is actively at work sustaining His people, renewing our spirits, and teaching us to long for heaven. With a right perspective on Who God is, we gain a right perspective on who we are, and thus, how we ought to live. Our earthly lives are a mere breath, and yet God will grant His people life eternal with Him.

Application Questions

- How do you normally handle suffering? How does that compare with Paul’s word in 2 Cor. 4?
- Considering the normal way you deal with hardship and suffering, what does this teach your children, your spouse, or your closest friends about God?
- Undoubtedly, there are people in your neighborhood who are suffering. Most are probably suffering without the hope found in 2 Cor. 4:16-18. What can you as a GG do about this?