

Never Give Up!

2 Corinthians 4:16 *"That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day."*

All of us struggle with the difference between 'head knowledge' and 'heart knowledge.' You never know what you truly believe until a crisis comes. As someone who experienced his fair share of crises, the Apostle Paul made a bold statement (twice!) in this chapter. He said, "we do not lose heart."

"Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (v. 1).

"Therefore we do not lose heart" (v. 16).

Or as the NLT puts it, *"That is why we never give up."* That is the great cry. *"We never give up."* In this passage Paul reveals the secret of Christian endurance. So as this new year rolls out before us I can think of no better time to encourage you to not lose heart and to never give up. I want to suggest there are three key reasons why we never give up.

1. We find life in the midst of death.

"Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (v. 16).

When Paul says that outwardly we are wasting away, all but the young understand what he means. His meaning is lost on the young because by and large they don't feel like they are wasting away. When you are 18 and just graduating from high school, you feel like your whole life is stretched out before you. You think you will live forever even if you know you won't. It's a wonderful thing to be young and full of energy. You may as well enjoy it because life will change your perspective soon enough.

The legendary actor/director/author Woody Allen recently turned 87. But I recall he gave an interview to the New York Times back when he was 74 in which he talked about his own faith. He made it clear that he doesn't believe in God:

Question: *"What seems more plausible to you, that we've existed in past lives, or that there is a God?"*

Answer: *"Neither seems plausible to me. I have a grim, scientific assessment of it. I just feel, what you see is what you get."*

Question: *"So how do you feel about the aging process?"*

Answer: *"Well, I'm against it. I think it has nothing going for it. You don't gain any wisdom as the years go by. You fall apart – that's what happens. People try and put a nice varnish on it, and say you mellow. You come to understand life and accept things. But you'd trade all of that for being 35 again. I've experienced that thing where you wake up in the middle of the night and you start to think about your own mortality and envision it, and it gives you a little shiver."*

For all his earthly achievements, Woody Allen seems to have learned nothing valuable about ultimate reality. As he gets older, he begins to fall apart as we all do sooner or later. But he has no answer for it, no hope beyond his own pending death.

When the Apostle Paul says we are all wasting away, he means it quite literally. Did you know that the human body is programmed for death? Scientists use the term apoptosis to describe this 'programmed cell death.' In the average human adult between 50 and 70 billion cells die each day. Think about that. You lost at least 50 billion cells yesterday, you'll lose at least that many today. By this time next week, you will have lost 350 billion cells to programmed cell-death. No wonder we're all feeling worn out. It's literally true. When Paul says that *"death came to all men"* in Romans 5:12, that's not just true in the spiritual realm. It's literally true in the physical realm.

We are dying every single day of our lives. Little by little our bodies are wearing out. No one can escape it. It's happening to me and I know it. As I clock up another new year, here's what I notice. Newsprint is getting smaller and smaller! I don't seem to hear quite as well as I did ten years ago. My body doesn't move as fast as it did twenty years ago. The young people seem a lot younger than they used to. And the "old people" don't seem as old as they seemed when I was young. In fact I am astounded to discover that so many of the old people around me are actually my age!

There's no question we are all getting older. But there is another reality at work within us. While we are dying on the outside, that is, in our fleshly bodies, on the inside, in the realm of the spirit, we are being renewed by God every single day. And these things happen at the same time.

We are dying - we are living.

We are falling apart - we are being renewed.

We are heading toward death - we are experiencing new life.

That's why Paul isn't overly worried about whether or not his enemies kill him. If they do, he wins! If they don't, he still wins! Strange as it may seem, Paul views his troubles as part of God's plan to renew him spiritually.

Years ago we used to sing the hymn, *"Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before."* It's not that every day seems sweeter or feels sweeter or that every day is a bed of roses. It's not. Some days are dark and desperate. But the 'sweetness' of Jesus may be seen in His goodness to us in the midst of our trials. From time to time we encounter a brother or sister in Christ who, having gone through deep waters, has emerged more beautiful than before. I have seen it happen in those who are dying of cancer. You can see their faith actually growing stronger as their body grows weaker. They are experiencing life in the midst of death. Paul says this is God's plan for all of his children – daily spiritual renewal. That's the first reason we never give up.

2. We See Glory at the End of Suffering.

2 Corinthians 4:17 *"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."*

When we are going through great suffering, it rarely seems 'light' or 'momentary' to us. Rather it seems that our troubles will never end and that we will be crushed completely. So how is it that Paul can confidently say these things?

If this life is all there is, then Woody Allen is right in his grim assessment. *"What you see is what you get."* But on the other hand, perhaps he spoke truth deeper than he knew. Since this life is all that Woody Allen can see, his viewpoint leads only to darkness and existential despair.

However Christians 'see' something that others don't see. We see beyond this life to the next. We understand that no matter what we endure now, there awaits for us an "eternal glory" that far outweighs what happens to us in this life.

Dan Crawford was a missionary in Africa, and at the funeral of a fellow missionary he described the departed saint as, *"a white, fragile-looking traveller with a Pauline gleam in his eye. So the fragrant saint died at his post. He had only died into glory – just as the stars die at sunrise."*

I like every part of that. On the one hand we are all "fragile-looking travellers" as we pass our time on earth. So many things can happen to us. We may get cancer or we may be shot during a battle or we may fall over with a heart attack. Every single week we hear of more unexpected deaths in our nation. The line between life and death is microscopically thin for all of us.

So what does our Christian faith say about death? It tells us that the believer in Christ "dies into glory" (what a wonderful picture). The stars die at sunrise because the mighty sun rises over the eastern horizon. Even so we die in this life and rise with Christ our King.

In November 1941 C. S. Lewis preached a sermon on this passage called *The Weight of Glory*. Some think it is the best thing he ever wrote. At one point he tries to imagine this "eternal weight of glory" that outweighs all our present trials. He puts it this way:

"We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already: you can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more - something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words - to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last."

This is indeed what Paul means even if we admit that we don't really understand it and how *could* we, standing as we are on this side of the door that leads on to eternal glory. We should be clear about one point. We see these things and know them by faith. During the worst trials of life, it will not seem that there is any purpose at all. Indeed, for the worst things that happen, the terrible betrayals, the breakup of a marriage, the long years of chronic pain, the sadness of seeing our children struggle in their own marriages, none of that seems to have any purpose. And I daresay that as long as we gaze upon our trials, they will serve only to perplex us more and more.

I have a folder in my filing cabinet which is full of letters, notes, cards, Scripture references, prophecies spoken over me etc. – all of which have been given to me along the way over the past 40 years or so. From time to time I sit down and go through this folder and it is always an enlightening and encouraging time. Recently, while reading some of the notes and cards I found one which had been sent to me during a particularly hard time. It is a lovely card with a sunrise photo on the front and inside it is blank except for one sentence this person has written. *"Whatever was true is true."*

During that dark time in my life, when I felt myself going under and could see no ray of light, no hope at all, and could hardly think of a reason to go on, this one thought sustained me. Whatever was true *is* true. My trials, grievous though they may seem to me, cannot abolish whatever is true about God and the universe. Truth is truth, regardless of my personal feelings about it. Jesus is Lord whether I believe it or not. He is Lord even if I deny that He is Lord. Truth does not depend upon my personal belief for its existence. 2 + 2 will always equal 4 regardless of how I feel about it.

The same is true of all spiritual reality. Even when I may be sinking down, when I feel that all is lost, whatever was true is *still* true and will *always* be true. That illustration is fitting because Paul encourages us to do our own moral and spiritual calculation.

Take all the suffering of this life,
All the pain,
All the heartache,
All the rejection,
All the misunderstanding,
All the evil we encounter,
All the hatred directed at us,
All the malice we endure,
All the sadness,
All the tears,
All the sleepless nights,
All the fear,
All the doubt,
All the worry,
All the confusion,
All the perplexity,
All the sickness,
All the broken dreams,

And then add it all up, total it up to whatever fantastic sum it may come to, and then add to that the sadness of every funeral you've attended for the death of someone you loved, think about all that death has taken from you, meditate on it, make that sum as large as you can, and place it on one side of the ledger.

Now on the other side of the ledger place these things:

The Word of God,
The promises of God,
The love of God,
The power of God,
The plan of God,
The wisdom of God,
The kindness of God,
The sovereignty of God,
The grace of God,

And then add to that the death of the Son of God with its infinite transforming power for us who believe, and then add to that the resurrection of the Son of God who came forth from the tomb undefeated, alive from the dead, holding the keys of death and hell in His hand, who is now declared the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Factor all that in and then add to it the indwelling Holy Spirit Who is the down payment on all the promises of God and the guarantee of our salvation. Now put that sum on the other side of the ledger. You do the figuring. Which is greater? Your sorrows or the vast and immeasurable promises of God, made in His Word, guaranteed by His Spirit, and secured for us through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord?

Or we can let Paul do the figuring for us. He already knows the answer. We will soon receive an “eternal glory” that “far outweighs them all.” The various translations say it in different ways, but I love the King James Version here when it uses the phrase “far more exceeding.”

Not just exceeding; not just more exceeding; but far more exceeding. I like that. Life on this earth can be so painful and so baffling but I’m so encouraged by the thought that the glory that is coming is “far more exceeding” and “far outweighs” whatever we have been through. And that’s the second reason we never give up and why:

3. We fix our eyes on eternity.

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (v. 18).

We tend to see what we want to see. We tend not to see what we’re not looking for. The same is true in the spiritual realm. Paul uses a word that means *“to gaze intently upon.”* It means that we make a conscious choice to believe that some things are true that we cannot see at this moment. I often think about this principle when I speak at a funeral service for someone I have known and loved. It’s hard to bury a body in the ground, knowing that you won’t see that person tomorrow or the next day or the day after that. In the words of the playwright Noel Coward, we live in a death-sentenced generation.

It’s easy for all of us to be overwhelmed by the power of death. When that happens to us, we end up thinking and talking like Woody Allen instead of like Christian believers. So we must train our minds to focus on things that may not be easily seen. What is seen is temporary. I’m glad about that because it means that death is temporary. It doesn’t feel that way right now. Death reigns on planet earth because sin reigns. But life has been let loose through the victorious resurrection of the Son of God.

By faith we can now “see” the unseen. The people of the world think we’re nuts because they can’t “see” what we see and the only reason we can “see” anything is because God in His grace has opened our eyes to “see” eternal reality. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. So we sing on, right through our tears. We don’t deny our tears or pretend the pain isn’t real. But we sing on anyway. We see in the distance the great City of God. We see in the distance all the saints of God. We see a light shining through the darkness that surrounds us.

So we sing on, we preach on, we pray on, and we keep on believing. God has given us eyes to “see” the unseen and so we will never give up. His kingdom is forever. As I was preparing this sermon, my mind was drawn to the final words of the final verse of Martin Luther’s great hymn *A Mighty Fortress* which builds to a triumphant conclusion that mirrors the words of our text today:

*Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.*

Those words may come literally true for us as they have for believers across the centuries. We may be called someday to pay the ultimate price, and no matter what, we all must say farewell to this mortal life sooner or later. If they kill the body, it matters not. God's truth abides. His kingdom is forever. Do you believe that?

When Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached on this text, he said the greatest need of the Church today is for Christians to live as though these things are true. The world waits and watches for believers to live by the "un-worldly" standards of this amazing text. When we live like this, when we "see" the invisible and make it the rule and ground of our life, the world will know that what we have is more than theory, that it can't be explained away as mere religious enthusiasm. The world will know that what we believe comes from some other place they can't understand, can't see, and will never duplicate.

We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. We can see the Holy City which awaits us, which calls to us every day. We see the light of God shining on its streets. We see the gates opened wide as we are welcomed into the presence of our God for eternity. That is what keeps us going. That is what renews us in our spirit. That is what gives us hope and meaning and purpose and the strength to press on. That is why we never give up!