

The eternal things of Jesus renew us in our present reality.

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

As we have spent these weeks sealed away from each other, I have started to ponder the purpose of the pandemic. Not how it happened, or where it came from, but what, in the universal scheme of things will it be used for?

I am confident that Christians are in the best spot to have a worthwhile answer. Those whose minds are dominated by political thought will have an answer about shaping elections or proving one system over another. Those whose mental energy is consumed with conspiracy will find one around every corner of the so-called “pandemic.”

But those found in Christ and pursuing him are positioned to answer that it is preparing an eternal weight of glory. No moment lost but everyone used for renewal, a remaking of the inner life headed to resurrection.

This is a truth as relevant today as it was in 1st century Corinth. As we open the Word, it opens us to the hope of Jesus.

Paul is answering concern for his ministry. That he has come up lame, exhausted, and spent. He lays out an image of life and ministry the church is meant to embrace.

In doing so he gives us our fuel - our motivation for life to keep going, and the resulting work done in us by God. As we endeavor forward we want to focus on the faith described and the formation promised.

1) Faith

This is where we are always to start. From the foundation of faith, belief in Jesus, his call on our lives, his provision, his purpose. We press on with the same spirit of faith as the people of God through the ages.

Paul quotes from Psalm 116:10, “I believed, even when I spoke: “I am greatly afflicted”; (ESV)

Because God has proven himself, because he has answered us in mercy, because he has delivered our souls from death, we have the same spirit of faith. We believe his word and promise.

I think for Paul it is what drives him to place so much trust in the gospel - the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to forgive sinners and make them saints.

He says so in another 116... **Romans 1:16** “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” (ESV)

God came to rescue his people. Jesus as our atoning sacrifice, his resurrection as the hope of life with him. His work and his Spirit keep us, hold us through eternity.

And it is faith in that truth that frees us to stand in the face of affliction, it is what keeps us from being crushed. That we too will be raised into the presence of God.

Generates in us eschatological and doxological living - the hope in Christ’s return shapes us into worshipful, hope-filled people.

Jude 24 “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,” (ESV)

Colors how we see the world and our experience in the present. The promise of resurrection and eternity with Jesus anchors us, and gives us spiritual fruit. We are able to get through, to deal because we have Jesus and his Spirit.

James 5:7–11 “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. [8] You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. [9] Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. [10] As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. [11] Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” (ESV)

Established hearts because of the coming of the Lord, from his compassion and mercy we live.

This faith is also at work forming us as we wait for Jesus to bring us to our new home.

2) Formation

I am confident in saying to you, Christians, this is the purpose of the pandemic; your spiritual formation.

All affliction is used to shape us and as we look to our future hope in Jesus, we are open to being changed.

Paul gives a view of the totality of who we are, outer-man and inner-man, not separating them but getting at the upside-down appearance of lives kept, and renewed in faith.

Externals don't match worldly expectations but internal strength, character, perseverance are all increasing. The external exists for the formation of the internal.

“By illustration, consider the cicada, a large, flying insect, which makes its annual, noisy, appearance in midsummer. During its life cycle, there is an outer husk, the exoskeleton, which lies underground and within which the cicada is formed over many years. At the right time, the exoskeleton reaches its end and the more beautiful insect flies away in freedom. The outer frame existed for the formation of that which was its true purpose, the new life which would issue from it. This life, with its troubles, is a preparation for our true destiny - an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Barnett

Our inner self renewed day by day. It gives you a different countenance. Calm, a peace, confidence in the midst of a storm. This formation refining us into Christlikeness and into the church he has destined us to be.

“God is creating within our inner nature a new person out of the old so that when it is finished it will be completely new.” Wright

Determined by where you look and what you see. Carried through, Paul says, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.

Life comes at you, pandemic hits, and you can look to transient things or “unseen” things, to spiritual reality, what God is doing, what’s at work.

“He is talking not about ‘physical’ and ‘non-physical’ things, but about the present world as contrasted with the future world. The point about ‘things you can see’ is that they last for only a short while. But God’s true reality, which will one day be brought to birth in his new world, is more richly physical in ways we can hardly imagine, though at present out of sight.” Wright

We don’t go through life so heavenly-minded we are no earthly good. Not aloof, insensitive or out of touch but engaged differently with an abiding hope that pumps through you. Because you are in for the transformation.

When you desire change, you need a disruption. If you want to lose weight, you have to disrupt your diet and activity. If you want to learn an instrument, you have to disrupt your schedule to practice. Growth always happens after a disruption - spiritual we have to be up for it.

Disruptions like this pandemic help us see clearly, they orient us to look up.

January 18, 1994, 4:30 am L.A. earthquake. so intense that the ground shook as far away as Las Vegas more than 200 miles from the epicenter. Electric lines were snapped, causing power outages as far north as Canada and as far east as Wyoming. In North Los Angeles, all power was lost. In the very early morning hours of that winter morning about 2 million residents woke up to darkness. And people began to call 911.

Residents anxiously described a giant silvery cloud ominously hanging over the city. Some sure aliens were invading, others confident the government’s chemtrails had gotten out of hand.

But what they were seeing was the Milky Way. The glory of creation typically hidden by temporary light of “seen” things. Still there waiting to be seen.

We can be humming along in “normal” which just glosses over deep things, leaves areas of our lives that need tending hidden. But a disruption comes, affliction comes, and the air clears and we can see.

This pandemic has created an environment for formation and that is the silver lining if we have eyes to see it. We should use this time intentionally for it, asking the Spirit to work in us. Seeking it together.

The Christian’s study of Scripture, both privately and in the context of fellowship, prayer, worship, and service, will be very important to rivet our attention on what is unseen. It keeps building the faith that shapes us.

“The gospel enables us to deal with difficult experiences because it assures us of the permanence of God’s promises.” The external is wasting away (things culture says I should be about), but our inner self is being renewed, reinvigorated in Christ. Present affliction is light and temporary (it will come to an end) but an eternal weight of glory is being prepared.

In faith, we can raise our voices and say that this is light and momentary in the scheme of things... our waiting is working, building toward a future hope that defines us. Like a kids’ rock tumbler, you put in course jagged rocks and run the tumbler and they are stressed, banging into each other and sand, but they come out smooth and shiny.

We won’t lose heart... the transformation at work is far too glorious and encouraging to allow for that.

And people notice. You can take it on with hope, so “that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” v 15.

Faithfulness in affliction is our witness as we believe and speak during difficult times the result is that grace extends to more people. Bringing us to our beautiful home...

Revelation 7:9–10 “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (ESV)

What we have to look forward to. What shapes us. Carries us.

“The more people are praising God, the more the world is taking the shape it was meant to have, and the more God’s power goes out to save and heal where those generous blessings are still needed.”

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“It’s axiomatic: our future hopes determine how we live in the present. The question is: how are our “futures”? What are you living for? It’s never too late to get it right.” Look up.

Have Faith - Believe in Jesus! You are kept by Jesus for glory - and you are empowered by the Spirit to live like it. Take heart, though it is hard, in him your inner self is being renewed day by day.

Be Formed - Yield to his purpose. Look to and be formed by Jesus. Immerse yourself and each other in his work, his way. That together we would all sing, “salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

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1 Peter 1:3–5 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, [5] who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (ESV)