**Seeing life from God’s perspective** 21/11/21 dkm

Read: Romans 8, 2Corinthians 4

Text: 2Corinthians 4:16-18

Psalms: 100old, 49:8-15, 113, 134a

What is your carbon footprint? Nations, business and individuals are all examining their carbon footprint. They want to be treading lightly when it comes to the amount of carbon dioxide they emit. Paradoxically, the feet of such people are firmly planted in this world. Their lives are deeply bound to the things of this world, to things of decay and death. Their vision is so impaired that they are despairing of life itself. I heard that in Portugal euthanasia is being made legal for anyone who wants it; anyone despairing of life can go to their doctor and demand he murder them.

The apostle Paul was ready to die but never contemplated breaking the commandment, ‘Do not murder’. Paul was ready to die for Jesus’ sake because in Jesus he had eternal life. Paul walked very lightly in this world, knowing it was not his home and that it was passing away. It was not passing into nothingness of course, but giving way to the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated through his death and resurrection. ‘He must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death’ (1Cor 15:25, 26). Paul knew that Jesus is risen- he saw the risen Christ- and knew that Jesus is returning again on the clouds of heaven, because Jesus said so (Mat 24:30). True Christians believe the same truths- Jesus is risen and is returning one day soon; but are our lives affected by these truths or are we living just like the ungodly?

If Paul did not believe the truth of the resurrection, and the eternal kingdom God, he would not have pressed on in the ministry as he did. The Corinthian church was causing him a lot of grief. They had not physically attacked him as yet, but the Jews had stoned him in Lystra and the Romans had beaten him and put him in prison in Philippi. Yet the Corinthians had ridiculed the apostle and accused of being untrustworthy and dishonest. A man whose meaning in life depended upon the number of followers he had on ‘Facebook’ would have given up long ago!

But Paul did not ‘lose heart’, as he said in verse 1, and again here in verse 16 of this chapter. He had this ministry because of the mercy of Jesus Christ; he was called by the risen Christ, and ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit. As he concludes this chapter he comes back to this point with renewed vigour, having been assured that, ‘He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus’ (4:14). Unlike the newcomers at Corinth eloquently preaching another gospel to their own glory, Paul preached the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again. Because Christ is risen his children will also be raised from the dead to live eternally with Christ. Paul would have known the words of Jesus: ‘Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul’ (Mat 10:28).

The three verses we are looking at today are among the most profound and most comforting in Scripture for anyone determined to live a Christian life and be a witness to this world. In these verses the apostle draws clear contrasts between the outward and the inward man, between light, momentary affliction and weighty eternal glory, and between what is seen and temporary and what is unseen and eternal.

**1. Outward and inward man**

Despite all the criticism from the Corinthians, the apostle Paul did not ‘lose heart’ or give up. Actually, he had suffered much greater opposition in other places but pressed on preaching the gospel wherever the Holy Spirit led him, and empowered him to do so. If they wondered why he did not give up, then he tells them. There were some at Corinth who suffered with Paul, and there have been many down through the ages, until today, who have suffered opposition as ministers of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. These words encouraged me as I read them again today, and I hope they encourage you in your ministry.

Paul first speaks of the outward man or outward nature that is perishing (4:16). He is referring to human mortality, to the flesh that is weak (Mat 26:41). Paul had suffered floggings, imprisonments, and even stoning, not to mention being shipwrecked. He wasn’t superman or even a gym-fit man - not that it mattered. Let no one think that being a fit and healthy person is a prerequisite or an advantage for gospel ministry.

We are all human beings with bodies vulnerable to injury or disease and ultimately death. God made man perfect but sin corrupted the flesh such that it ages and dies. Our ‘outward man is perishing’, and there is nothing we can do about it; despite the valiant efforts of many today. Paul took care of his body, and we must take care of our bodies, but he did so in order to keep preaching the gospel not so he could keep playing golf! (1Tim 4:8). Our bodies grow old and eventually perish in the grave, but we will receive new bodies fit for heaven.

Paul contrasts the ‘outward man that is perishing’ with the ‘inward man that is being renewed day by day’ (4:16). What is our inward man? Although the Bible speaks of the flesh, and the soul or spirit of a man, it does not do so in terms of Greek philosophy. As human beings we are a unity of body and soul, even though our present body will perish. The resurrection which Paul preached was regarded as foolishness by the Greeks, as it is by many today.

The inward man is that part which lives on to be clothed with immortality (5:4). This inward man begins life when we are born again of the Spirit of God, when we become a new creation in Christ Jesus (5:17). It is renewed or grows as we grow in our knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as we grow closer to Him. The body of every believer suffers the process of aging and so did Paul’s; ageing that in his case was accelerated by all the beatings he received. But our inward nature is growing stronger through the renewing power of the Spirit of God. In fact, the renewal or growth is hastened as suffering increases. Paul’s ‘inward man’ was being renewed rapidly.

The renewed inward man will one day be clothed with a new body, but even now in this world our inner self is being transformed into the likeness of Christ (3:18). That transformation is related to, and is proportional to, the weakness of our bodies. ‘The new self is progressively transformed by the principles of spiritual knowledge, true righteousness, and singular holiness (Eph 4:24, Col 3:10).

**2. Light and brief troubles and eternal weight of glory**

‘In this world you will have tribulation’ said Jesus (John 16:33). Jesus, who lived a sinless life, experienced unprecedented suffering in this world. The closer we imitate Christ, the more opposition and affliction we will face in this world. Do you understand this truth about the Christian life? Many don’t! Jesus spoke of the cost of discipleship, saying that following him means denying self and turning away from the things of this world, even family, and suffering loss for his sake. Paul, as a disciple of Christ, heard these words and sought to imitate Christ, especially in his suffering, knowing the power and the glory of the resurrection.

Reading of the suffering that Paul endured, the word ‘light’ affliction is not what comes to mind! (11:22-33). How could the apostle refer to his troubles as ‘light’, in the sense of not heavy or weighty? He does so because he looks to the glory of the risen Christ and the kingdom of heaven. This is the ‘eternal weight of glory’. Put on a balance, our afflictions for Christ’s sake are far outweighed by the glory that waits us. Paul’s choice of the expression, ‘the weight of glory’ may be influenced by the fact that in Hebrew ‘weight’ and ‘glory’ come from the same root, ‘*kabod*’(Bruce).

Peter, James and John saw the glory of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (2Peter 16-19). Paul saw the heavenly glory of Jesus on the Damascus road. We have a taste or glimpse of this glory now as we worship the Lord. God is at work in our hearts to show us his glory. In Romans 8:18 Paul writes: ‘For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us’. The ‘weight’ of glory exceeds beyond all limits the weight of the afflictions we suffer in this world; the Greek is literally ‘more and more exceedingly’ (*hypebole eis hyperbole*).

Afflictions can be measured by time, as well as severity. A few days in prison is more bearable than a few years. The apostle called his afflictions ‘momentary’, as well as ‘light’. He looked on his life and ministry from God’s perspective. God is eternal; for him a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day (2Peter 3:8). Calvin writes, ‘When we have once raised our minds heavenwards, a thousand years begin to look to us but a moment’. They say that a day is a long time in politics. We live in a world of instant gratification, with little concept of tomorrow or next year; although we are now talking in terms of decades before catastrophic warming will cause sea levels to rise and drown millions of people. People listen to their computer models (modern gods?) and fear the future. We listen to the word of God and fear him.

Paul did not look at the future in terms of millions or billions of years; he looked at it in terms of eternity because God is eternal. The first and most important question of life is, ‘where will you spend eternity?’ The second is, ‘only one life and it will soon pass, only what we do for Christ will last’.

**3. Seen and unseen**

Worldly people live by sight; if they cannot see the thing, it does not exist. They spend their life striving after more and more of the things of this world, trying to satisfy the lust of the eyes and of the flesh. Some believe in spirits and a ‘supreme being’ but do not concern themselves with searching for God. In fact, God has revealed himself to us in the creation, and in these last days in his Son, Jesus Christ. Lots of people will soon be celebrating the birth of Jesus but will they give any thought to his death and resurrection? Very few give any thought to the imminent return of Jesus (Phil 3:20).

The last contrast drawn by Paul as he considers affliction and the glory of God is the contrast between things seen and things unseen (4:18). This hardly needs explanation, but it does require considerable contemplation. Are you ready to give yourself a score with regard to the amount of time you spend focused on unseen things? If you come to worship that is one hour a week. How much time do you spend reading your Bible and in prayer? What about other times when your thoughts are on the Lord, on his grace and his glory? Do you cherish and look forward to such times, or is your main focus on the TV and shopping? It is natural for us to focus on things we see, but if you are in Christ you are no longer a natural man but a new creation in Christ Jesus. You are no longer walking by sight but by faith (5:7); you are walking with your eyes fixed on Jesus the author and perfector of your faith (Heb 12:2).

Why should we focus on things unseen? The apostle answers this question: ‘For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are unseen are eternal’- notice this word ‘eternal’ being repeated (4:18). This is a truth we must take hold of if we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will by no means pass away’ (Mat 24:35). If you really believe this you will not be laying up treasure on earth (Mat 6:19). What you have accumulated in this world will be of no use when you die- it will go to someone else, as the Psalmist says (Ps 49:10, 11).

So is everything going to disappear or burn up so that there is nothing? No. Jesus says, ‘My words will by no means pass away’. The kingdom of God which Jesus inaugurated and in which he now rules by virtue of his resurrection, is an eternal kingdom. Eternal means without end; without beginning and without end. God made the present heavens and earth at a point in time, and they will burn up at a future time determined by God. But God himself, and his Son, is eternal. Moreover, in Jesus Christ God has given us eternal life (John 3:16). If you know and believe this verse, should you not be focussing more on the things that are eternal rather than things that are transient?

If this is not your focus today, it will be in the day of tribulation- just as it was the focus of the apostle Paul, and of many other saints who have gone before us. Today is the day to turn your focus away from the things of the world, from the lust of eyes and of the flesh, and set your focus fully on the Lord Jesus Christ, and eternal glory in Him .