

TAKE HEART

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

There are certain experiences in everyone's life that teach vital truths. You never forget them. They become landmark lessons in your life. One such experience happened to me years ago. The CC Christmas party was on the horizon, and Kathy was thrilled that I'd promised her a new outfit. We loaded the kids in their car seats and headed to the department store to purchase new threads for mom. Kath began the evening with a promise. She ended it with the fulfillment of that promise - but *in the meantime* strange, bizarre events occurred.

At the time, Nick, was two years old, and in the process of being potty trained. While mom combed through clothes I whiffed an atrocious smell. There was no mistaking the aroma – Nick had pooped in his britches. Mom was engrossed in major decisions, so I set out for the van to wipe him up. As we walked down the aisle toward the exit I noticed my son walking in a peculiar manner. As we strolled down the aisle I noticed that two clumps of you-know-what had slid down his pants-leg and plopped out on the floor. I grooooaned! My first reaction was to clean it up, but I didn't have a towel. There was nothing I could do, so Nick and I kept walking to the van.

We were hustling out the front door as fast as we could when Nick stops in the middle of traffic, and announces, "Dad, I think I've got something in my boot!" Trust me, I didn't stop to find out what that something was! I picked up my son and raced to the car! After the clean up we re-entered with paper towels in hand to shovel up the mess. I was glad to see no one had accidentally stepped in the poop. Well, by this time Kathy had purchased her new outfit and was ready to leave... A promise had been made, and that promised had been fulfilled - but *in the meantime* - I had to deal with some distressing circumstances!

When you stop to think about it, all of life is lived, "*in the meantime*." It's lived between the *giving of a promise* and the *fulfilling of that promise*. The here and now – this earthly life - is the "*in the meantime*" - "*the in-between time*." Life is the interval between a *promise given* and a *promise fulfilled*. Jesus excites the Church - His Bride - with staggering promises. Yet many of those promises are still future. One day we'll walk streets of gold. One day we'll get second helpings of things for which we're now famished! Romans 8:17 tells us we're joint-heirs with Jesus. In Christ all God's wealth and wonders are in our name, but we're waiting to take possession.

When the CC Christmas Party finally arrived and I saw Kathy decked out in her new outfit, I thought, "Wow, that's one good looking babe!" My wife looked so glorious I totally forgot about my messy experience! And that's the reaction we'll have when we finally reach the heavenly shore. The future glory that awaits us will overshadow today's difficulties.

God makes us a promise and He'll keep that promise, yet in the meantime God ordains for us to walk through some poopy experiences. Our world is full of messy stuff like sin, and pain, and sickness, and hurt, and hate, and exhaustion, and injustice, and betrayal, and despair... Life in the meantime is messy business. At times it can just plain stink - but rest assured, God has a purpose for the messes we are forced to endure!

Here's a startling statistic... Did you know a child goes through 5000 diapers by the time he's two years-old? Having raised four kids, that means Kathy and I have changed 20,000 smelly diapers. Can you imagine! Here's my point, to grow a kid you have to confront and clean up a lot of poop! Maturing a child is messy. *And the same is true with a child of God!*

We enjoy the good times when God's blessings are tangible, but we learn more from the difficulties, and trials, and persecutions, and messes.

Here's a quotation to remember. You'll want to write down. It's an original Sandy Adams quotation. In fact, someone turned it into a plaque that now hangs in my office. Here it is... **"It takes the manure for us to mature."** One day all our heartaches will be worth it! We'll have no complaints in heaven - but *in the meantime* how do you handle life's disappointments? Do we take heart, or do we lose heart?

If anyone knew about poop it was Paul... If his ship wasn't sinking - he was being beaten and thrown in jail - or run out of town - or stoned and left for dead... Paul was accustomed to one *"bad-hair day"* after another... But in verse 16 Paul tells us, "**do not lose heart**" – and then he gives us three reasons why... Paul points to three different contrasts...

First, is the contrast between **the outward man** and the **inward man**. Second... between **the world's afflictions** and **heaven's glories**. And third, is the contrast between **the visible** and the **invisible**. Focus on these contrasts and you'll *take heart - not lose heart!*

The first reason Paul doesn't lose heart is **the contrast between what's happening to him physically and what's happening to him spiritually.** Outwardly we're *destined to decay*. Inwardly we're *renewed day-by-day*.

Understand, Paul's physical body was perishing... As I mentioned, Paul endured severe trials... stoned once – beaten 10 times - shipwrecked 4 times - imprisoned often! Bible scholars believe Paul had a chronic, painful, eye disease. He called it his *"thorn in the flesh."* Perhaps most debilitating was the constant stress of concern Paul had for the churches he planted. Pastor Paul's parish was the entire world.

And to top it off Paul was aging! And that alone is enough to cause a person to lose heart. Paul's physical body was slowly deteriorating... Which reminds me of a list! A Top 10 list... Here they are... **The New Top Ten Ways You Know You're Getting Older...**

- 10) The twinkle in your eye is the sun's reflection off your bifocals.
 - 9) You get cautioned to slow down by your doctor, and not the police.
 - 8) It takes two tries to get up from the couch.
 - 7) You have a party and the neighbors don't even realize it.
 - 6) You happen to spot a pretty girl walking down the street and your pacemaker sets off your neighbor's garage door opener.
 - 5) Your joints are more accurate at predicting weather than Glen Burns.
 - 4) You go to straighten the wrinkles in your socks, when you remember that you aren't wearing any socks.
 - 3) All your favorite music is in the bargain bin at Wal-Mart.
 - 2) You help a little old lady cross the street, and realize she's your wife.
- And number one... Your ears are hairier than your head.

To commemorate her 69th birthday singer Julie Andrews performed before an audience of the American Association for Retired People. She sang a special rendition of the song she made famous in the Sound of Music, **"My Favorite Things"**. Yet she changed the words for her audience.

Maalox and nose drops and needles for knitting
Walkers and handrails and new dental fittings
Pacemakers, golf carts, and porches with swings
These are a few of my favorite things.
Back pains, confused brains, and thicker eyeglasses
Thin bones, and fractures, and false teeth in glasses
And we won't mention our short shrunken frames
When we remember our favorite things.
When the joints ache, when the hips break, when the knees go bad, I simply remember my favorite things, and then I don't feel... so... bad.

Yet the truth is, these are not our favorite things. Today's society worships youth. *Nobody admires an old body.* We praise the young – the sleek – the beautiful. We have difficulty coping with our obvious mortality. Most folks just don't want to believe they're not what they used to be. Some people live in denial... Other folks search for the fountain of youth... they buy protein supplements - or sign on at the health club - or during a commercial they'll jot down the number for the Hair Club for Men. We can get quite discouraged to realize our outer man is perishing.

Yet despite the fact that persecution and growing older were eroding Paul's physical health and youthful vigor...he refused to lose heart! For Paul knew that *as the outer man deteriorated, the inner man was being invigorated.* Day by day Paul's spiritual strength was being renewed.

Paul didn't get discouraged over his aging body or chronic illness. He wasn't frightened of his own mortality, for he understood that his physical body was not the real Paul. His body was a tent – a temporary dwelling. The *real person* is the inward man - the *person of the heart.*

An iceberg moves along against gale force winds and tidal waves - and we wonder how? The answer is 90% of the iceberg is underwater. *I am like an iceberg!* Look at me and you see only 10% of what I truly am. The real *substance is under the surface.* You can't size me up by taking my measurements. There's more to me than meets the eye. I might be *fading physically, but I'm alive spiritually.*

The Christian isn't *grieved* over his *gray hair* - or *bummed out* over his *aching back* - or *devastated by his disease* - or *crushed by his cancer.* There's more to his life than bones and muscles and kidneys and livers. Even though our outer man becomes weaker and weaker, we can take heart, if we cultivate the inner man. We can grow stronger and stronger.

Once a little boy asked his gramps, "*Are you rotten on the inside?*" The man was shocked, "*Of course not, why would you think such a thing?*" The kid replied, "*Well, when an apple wrinkles on the outside it means it's rotten on the inside.*" That might be true of apples, but not Christians.

One of the modern world's best inventions are rechargeable batteries. When batteries fade just plug them into a charger and they are good for another hundred hours. Standard batteries you *use'em and lose'em.* Well, these bodies are like standard batteries. We use them, then discard them. But God made the spirit of man to be rechargeable. Daily, we can plug into God's Word, or prayer, or fellowship, or worship. Spend time with the Holy Spirit and He'll infuse you with fresh power. God's presence will stimulate a spiritual current - a joy will rise up inside.

This is why Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:8 "*For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.*" Physical exercise is good, but spiritual training is infinitely better! Who wants to exist longer, without really living? *Don't just add years to your life. Jesus will add life to your years!* It's so refreshing to watch an elderly saint grow older and younger at the same time. Their body may be aging - but their perspective stays youthful and optimistic. The only true fountain of youth... is fellowship with God!

The second reason Paul doesn't lose heart is *the contrast between the afflictions of this world and the glories of heaven.* Heaven's blessings are so heavy they make earth's *troubles seem trite.* Paul refers to the messes of the life – the poopy experiences – as "*our light affliction.*" Have you noticed, we live in a day when *lite* (L-I-T-E) is in vogue! Lite mayonnaise - lite ketchup - lite salad dressing - lite hot dogs – lite ice cream. Low calories - no cholesterol that's the ticket! We've learned how to process foods in a way as to minimize the threat of heart disease.

Paul had also learned this secret... he could process harsh, brutal trials in such a way that enabled him to see his troubles as "*lite afflictions!*" He could filter out disappointments, and reduce the spiritual cholesterol called discouragement. Paul's diet no longer included the stuff that causes spiritual heart disease - the hardening of the soul. Paul had learned the secret that enabled him to stay *buzzed* even when others were *bummed.* And recall Paul's afflictions – *illnesses, shipwrecks, imprisonment, torture, beatings, emotional rejection.* If Paul called these afflictions "*lite*" - then surely the afflictions we experience are that much lighter!

What was the secret to Paul's perspective? It consisted of two truths... **One**, Paul learned that earth's afflictions are "*but for moment.*" In light of eternity, 80-90 years is just a split second. And **two**, *Paul learned that our present suffering is working for us an elaborate and eternal reward.*

Notice, Paul calls his trials a momentary affliction, yet he suffered the better part of 30 years. How can 30 years of pain be "but for a moment?" We've all seen camera shots of the astronauts in zero gravity floating in the space shuttle. It looks fun! In watching them we learn that what's heavy on earth - taken outside of our atmosphere - becomes lite as a feather. In the heavens, heavy objects become lite!

This is what Paul did with his heavy afflictions. He tells us in Ephesians that spiritually we've been "[seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus](#)." So whenever Paul started to feel heavy, he just sat down with Jesus. When Paul viewed a problem from the scope of eternity, what seemed heavy beyond belief – what was about to bury him – *suddenly, became nothing, trivial, light as a feather*. See a trial or difficulty up against eternity, and even a whole lifetime of hurt and suffering is just a nano-second.

Christian apologist, CS Lewis, once described the whole sordid story of human history as a mere, "[false start](#)." The marathon runners are on the starting line. Twenty-six long miles lay in front of them. But just before the gun sounds, one of the runners jumps early. No big deal, at the conclusion of the race the man's eagerness will be a vague, distant memory. Now think of the whole history of humanity as a false start in light of the long, lengthy eternity that lies before us. In light of forever, 6000 years of sin and suffering is just a few folks jumping out too soon. It's a mistake - a bother - but after a million years of glory, it will be a distant memory. It's our eternal hope that makes the miseries of this world bearable.

A man was once reading his Bible, when he asked God, "[Lord, is it true that to You a thousand years is as one second?](#)" God said, "[Yes, it's true](#)." "[Then, is it true that to You one million dollars is as a single penny?](#)" God said, "[Yes, that's true too](#)." The man replied, "[Then, do you think I can have a penny?](#)" God answered him, "[Sure, no problem, just a second!](#)" This world's heavy afflictions become lite when we realize that from the perspective of eternity even a lifetime of sorrow is just for a moment.

Paul's troubles were momentary, but they also "[worked for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory](#)." We think of our troubles as intense, profound, severe experiences... but the real heavy is heaven. Life's most profound events are not earthly afflictions, but heavenly glories! The *happiness of heaven* is heavier than the *sorrows on earth*.

After you see the Cascade mountains of the Pacific Northwest, or the Colorado Rockies it tickles me to hear someone talk about the North Georgia *Mountains*. If a westerner saw what we call "*mountains*" they'd snicker. Compared to the Rockies, Georgia mountains are mere foothills. Likewise your problems might seem massive. In your mind, *nothing* could be more intense than the situation in which you're struggling. Yet if you could get just a glimpse of the *treasures and pleasures* of heaven... if you could taste a sip of the joy you'll one day Guzzle... Once you realize the intensity of the delight that awaits you - suddenly the trials you currently call "*mountains*," wouldn't be "*mountains*" after all. The wonders of heaven will make the trials of this earth seem like ant hills.

In his science fiction space adventure Perelandra, CS Lewis wondered what it would be like to taste fruit in a perfect, un-fallen world. In the story an earthling is transported to a planet unsullied by sin. He finds a cluster of un-fallen fruit, and I love how Lewis describes his reaction to its taste... "He had come to a part of the wood where great globes of yellow fruit hung from the trees. He picked one of them and turned it over and over. By accident his finger punctured it, and it went through into coldness. After a moment's hesitation he put the little slit to his lips. He had to extract the smallest, experimental sip, but the first taste put his caution all to flight. It was so different from every other taste... like the discovery of a totally new genus of pleasure... unheard of among men... It dawned on him that for one drink of this on earth wars would be fought and nations betrayed."

I believe heaven's simplest pleasures will produce an ecstasy unheard of on earth! We'll need a glorified body just to *handle the heavenly highs*! Heaven is so sweet that just a single second there will more than make up for a lifetime of suffering here on this earth. No matter what you've suffered in this life your first moment in heaven will wipe away all the pain.

People ask, "[If God is good why does He allow so much suffering and pain in the world? Couldn't He stop it if He wanted?](#)" Certainly He could. But unlike our priorities, God's concerns stretch far beyond tomorrow. God is interested in our welfare and enjoyment for all of eternity!

Rather than simply pad our tomorrows with comfort He wants to maximize our eternal experience. Heaven is forever and He wants that forever experience to provide optimum enjoyment and maximum blessing!

The problem with us humans is we often lack appreciation for what's good, and pleasant, and best - until we first taste its opposite. I've heard it put this way, "**The only way to truly love something is to first be without it.**" Human nature takes for granted even the richest blessings until they're suddenly gone - and out of our reach. We appreciate what we now miss.

I've actually heard people from Hawaii gripe about living in Hawaii. I suppose it is really rough living in a tropical paradise all year round. But here's the human reality, native Hawaiians won't appreciate what they've got until they spend a hot muggy summer in South Georgia – below the gnat line - or a subzero winter in a cold, frozen Wisconsin. Some of you complain about the Atlanta Braves. You gripe because we only won a single World Series. I'm a native Atlantan, and I remember when the Braves never played a meaningful game past August 1st. Hey, as long as we're competitive you'll never hear me complain about the Braves.

My point is we're so fickle... Humans don't appreciate anything until they've first lived without it. And given this penchant wouldn't it be horrible if God just sat us down – right from the beginning - in a perfect Utopia. Give us just a few weeks and we'd be complaining about Paradise. Understand, if you have nothing to compare it to, even perfection loses its luster. And once you're dissatisfied with perfect, *where do you go?*

Let me suggest, God knows what He's doing... By allowing you and me, what amounts to a few seconds in a fallen world, He's enhancing and securing for all eternity our enjoyment of heaven. God *sweetens the sweet by priming us with a taste of the sour.*

Well, Paul refuses to lose heart because he contrasts the outward man that's perishing with the inward man that's being renewed – and by contrasting his momentary sufferings with the weight of his eternal reward. But there was also a third contrast that causes him to take heart... He **contrasts the things that are visible with the things that are invisible.**

Paul sees beyond what can be seen. Let me warn you of a mistake we all make - we assume this tangible world we live in is *the real world...* not so! This world is merely a shadow. It's a dollhouse full of *toy types* which are dim reflections of the real thing. The "*real McCoys*" lie just beyond the curtain. *Earth's joys* are a diluted version of *heaven's highs*. *Earth's sin-inflicted pain* is a *feeble forewarning* of the *punishments of hell*. This life is just practice. Eternity keeps score. Today is daytime TV, eternity is prime-time!

Warren Wiersbe writes, "**If we would only see the visible world the way God wants us to see it, we would never be attracted by what it offers.**" Get your eyes on the invisible, and you'll see through the façade of this world. Hebrews 11:26 tells us how Moses refused the temptations of Egypt. He "*esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.*" Eyes of faith are able to see the invisible.

When you see through this world's illusions, partaking of its pleasures are like nibbling a wax apple. They're fake, phony, and spiritually tasteless. You're taste buds were made for a deeper enjoyment. One author writes, "**Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We're half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us... We are far too easily pleased.**" *Material stuff* can never satisfy a *spiritual need*. That's why we call it "*stuff*" – it just stuffs us. It doesn't satisfy us. We're left empty and hungry.

Remember that the tangible world around us is only an illustration. It's a visual aide to help us grasp the realities of an invisible, spiritual realm... A *mother's love* speaks of God's tenderness.

A *father's guidance* depicts God's tireless concern.

A *child's trust* is a lesson in saving faith.

The *romance between a husband and wife* is an introduction to the potentials for intimacy that exist between Christ and His church.

A *raging river* or *brisk breeze* whets our appetites for the Holy Spirit.

A rainbow reminds us of God's faithfulness.

A sunrise speaks of His mercy.

A lightning bolt alerts us to His soon return.

A sunset warns us of His coming judgment.

When we fail to see behind the symbols to the substance we miss the whole point of the lesson... We miss out on the real meaning of life.

Paul tells us not to look to the things that are seen. The Greek word translated "look" is "skopos", from which we get our English word "scope." Like a scope on a rifle... Or the expression, "*to scope it out...*" Paul is saying we're to focus in on the invisible world. We're to fix our minds on spiritual realities like mercy, and fellowship, and faithfulness, and integrity. The spiritual issues of life aren't hobbies or a passing fancy – something we play with, leave for a while, and come back to when we have the time. We're to zero in on these realities. Live our lives fixed on the spiritual. Paul says, "**Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.**"

Even in the real-life circumstances that preoccupy us and demand our daily attention we need to always be on the lookout for the hand of God. You never know when God might choose to intervene in your tangible circumstances. He may want to bless you, or use you, or redirect you. The reason Paul took heart, rather than lose heart, was his ability to see beyond the visible to the invisible. *He saw through the scenery to the hand behind the scenes.* We see clearly only when we see through eyes of faith!

Always remember, we've been given a promise, and God is faithful to fulfill His promise – the best is yet to come. But *in the meantime*, don't get discouraged by the poop. As I said, "**It takes the manure for us to mature.**" Let me warn you, get caught up in the *outward and cosmetic - the here and now* - the *visible and tangible* and you'll lose heart – you'll get discouraged. Rather see life from an *inward, eternal, spiritual perspective*. God is faithful to empower and encourage us – if we maintain the right perspective. In the days to come let's *take heart, not lose heart!*