

We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight

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2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

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“We do not lose heart...”

“We are always confident...”

Very few of us are born with too much confidence toward the right direction. If you'll indulge me a tennis story, back in the 70's Ken Rosewall was playing Tom Gorman in the semi-finals of Wimbledon. Rosewall was already a legend who was expected to win; Gorman was a young player enjoying a great run. After their brief warmup, they met at the net of the famed Centre Court for the coin toss (or the racket spin, which they do in tennis.) Rosewall won. Scanning up at the packed stands, he asked his opponent, “Tom, have you ever played on Centre Court before? Ever played in front of all these thousands of people, including the queen?” He paused. “You serve.” A nervous Gorman lost his serve in the first game, and the set, and the match.

Another of the best players in tennis history, Billie Jean King, was also honest enough to admit how much her nervousness would bother her in big matches. Even the best athletes in the world have to struggle not to lose their confidence.

What happens on a tennis court is one thing, but people are facing much bigger trials all the time. We get discouraged; we have to confront our limits and our uncertainties. There are life and death issues all around us: the economy is troubling and there are many around us and among us facing financial hardship if not panic. People are struggling against depression, against the illness and death of loved ones.

I'm not sure whether you find it reassuring to remember that even the Corinthians to whom Paul was writing were also having to struggle not to get discouraged. He had lived with them for eighteen months—the great teacher and evangelist and apostle Paul himself—and in this letter he has to write to remind them not to let fear get the best of them.

He urges them not to lose heart—to remain confident in every circumstance leading up to and thru death's door. We heard him mention three sets of images—contrasts. Every day, he says, our “outer nature”—our physical body—is wasting away. Every second we're getting closer to dying—and every second it is also true that our “inner spirit” is being renewed. Paul considers our trouble, our getting older, our physical decay and even our dying as

“slight” and “momentary.” In contrast he describes the spiritual reality awaiting us as an “eternal weight of glory beyond measure” outweighing (as if on the scales, the balance, used in antiquity) any earthly difficulties.

Paul compares our human physical body to a tent, which then as now meant something temporary, transportable. This he contrasts to the “building from God” which awaits each of us beyond death. A custom-built dream home. Permanent, substantial. (Paul is not, by the way, living in denial; he is no stranger to misfortune, violence, danger and death. He says he “groans” under the cruelty and pain of this broken world. No doubt—he lives in the same world we do.)

He says he longs for God's home so that the mortal will be swallowed up by the immortal, by “life” eternal. (I hope we never forget—especially just a few weeks after we have celebrated Christmas—that God has come into this world in Christ as a human being. This is the world God so loves; this is the world in which real people live and love and suffer and mourn and die. Paul is not downplaying the reality of this lifetime or this earth. What we do here is important. This world counts. God has taken it very seriously and paid a very high price to do so. But Paul is affirming that this lifetime is not everything; something even more important awaits.)

Isn't it odd that we naturally tend to get every single one of these contrasts 180 degrees backward? We think about dying and we tend to panic as if it's our worst fear. We think our problems and our suffering on earth are the heavy burdens while the glories of heaven are flimsy, ephemeral—and they may, after all, be merely imaginary. We think of these physical bodies down here as real—we can touch them, see them, weigh them—while anything that may or may not happen, any “heavenly body” we may or not have after we die we discount. We trust that death will “swallow up,” put an end to, this lifetime as surely as the bigger fisher swallows up the minnow. We live as if we think death is the end, to be avoided at all costs.

We think 180 degrees opposite of Paul, and Jesus, and wonder why we walk around scared all the time.

Paul gives us a hint as to how to remain confident. “It's God who prepares you for the life to come.” Getting prepared can sound so delicate, so orderly, like a kind kindergarten teacher handing out blankies to help little

ones get ready for first grade.

Not quite.

Preparation can be painful, challenging hard work. But if we avoid the preparation, how will we be ready for the eternal reality? How do we expect God to change our attitudes 180 degrees until we are bold and confident if we will not even cooperate with the preparation program?

Earlier this week I had the privilege of meeting with a young man, a Marine, preparing to be deployed to danger in Afghanistan. He seemed to be walking with a slight stiffness. I asked him about it. He explained to me he had spent time—hour after hour (all day long?) the day before inside an armored personnel carrier which had been flipped over and rolled, time after time. The four crew members inside might be hanging upside down or sideways when it came to a halt. Then the friendly drill instructor would specify which Marine was “dead.” Those still alive would need to wriggle around inside, push open a 100-lb plated door in order to be ready to climb out into a live combat situation. (No wonder that man was a bit sore.) But he and his crew prepared so thoroughly in order to be ready for the realities ahead of them.

No wonder I’m scared about dying if I have shied away from or refused to cooperate in God’s preparation program while I have been alive! I want delicate treatment if not soft “blankies” in this world—and I expect to be prepared to meet the eternal realities? I expect to walk with confidence thru this life?

I can think of a few reasons most of us look at aging and trials and death so opposite from how Paul does—why we have to keep struggling to be bold.

--we trust the past which we have already experienced more than the future we have not.

--we care, unlike Paul, what other people think of us.

--we trust our five senses—what we can see and feel—more certainly than what other people or what “religion” may promise to us.

--we get used to our “normal.” For most of us our “normal” isn’t so terrible, and we know it will take energy and work and risk to recalibrate our old outlook—so we settle for the outlook and the life we have settled into. We settle for what is comfortable.

--we have learned to avoid hurt, and change and risk may hurt. (Did you ever wonder why a massive circus elephant can be effectively tethered by a single rope tied to a single stake in the ground? With the tiniest effort it could rip out the stake and run free. But when the elephant was young, the trainers tied its back leg with a

rope to something which it could not rip out. To pull against the rope hurt the elephant’s leg—so decades later it has never tested that rope again, and remains all tied up until it dies.)

Like the elephant, we get used to a false reality. We start believing this world is the only one, or at least the most real one. In short, we walk by sight, not by faith. This approach is natural and understandable—just not very helpful. It keeps us tied up by a false reality. It keeps us fearful.

Jesus knew better. He kept trusting that His future was more important and more real than the present world. (He had no home, nowhere to lay his head—but He knew where He was going.) Jesus did not care what other people thought of Him. He could simply have slipped away from danger; could have quit preaching and teaching; could have quit healing people, and on the Sabbath. He longed to please the Father more than He feared the humiliation, betrayal, and agony of the cross. Jesus kept trusting the promise of the Father more than His own five senses. He endured such pain which hurt Him no less than it would you or me—yet He set forward toward Jerusalem trusting that His fasting and suffering had prepared Him for a glorious future on the far side of His suffering. Jesus trusted that His “spiritual” or eternal body was more real, more enduring than His human body, which ended up so mangled. To obey the Father’s will trumped His hopes for bodily comfort and old age ease.

I am not Jesus. I can always use more confidence in God’s eternal and invisible future. I want to highlight three things (out of many) I can do to walk more and more by faith, not by sight.

1) Pray without ceasing. The Holy Spirit within us is God’s guarantee of an eternal and good future. But to believe in God’s good future as a concept is not enough. We Christians buy the concept—and often still live 180 degrees opposite Jesus. We have trouble accessing this truth, getting traction in our lives. Our confidence comes as we abide in Christ, as we focus our time and attention on what is enduring and good and true.

It’s easy to see when we think of our teenagers. I was googling to verify the data, and sure enough, according to Nielsen the average teen sends or receives 2800 texts per month—and that was a year ago. According to the trends in place then, that number is now about 4200 texts per month per teenager (divided by 30—you can do the math—works out to 160 per day!) Not to mention the 3 hours average watching TV, and the time spent on the internet. Our children and teens spend five days a week at school, and their free time with friends. How many

hours per day to we parents get of their attention? No wonder any average 17-year-old is convinced his parents are clueless out of touch, and that his 17-year-old friends are wiser than his parents. Call me cynical, but somehow I don't think all those texts and twitters and TV hours are spent by our teens intent on pursuing eternal realities, drawing deeper into Christ.

But what about you and me? How are we any different from all those teens? How are your habits, and the ways you are spending your hours, helping you to become more and more aware of the Kingdom of God? What are you doing to allow the Kingdom of heaven to become more real, more vivid, more desirable, more immediate to you than the reality of the traffic on PCH?

We must necessarily live by sight if we don't spend time in prayer with the Holy Spirit of God.

2) Study the Bible diligently. Same principle. This world we can touch and smell and hear will surely remain our default reality if we do not become more at home with the eternal realities. The Scriptures tell the stories of dozens, hundreds of sinners and saints. To pick one, almost at random: remember Esther? She was the brave young woman, the Jew, who had been chosen into the King's court. She enjoyed access and privilege. The king issued an edict leading to the genocide, the annihilation of the Jews across the empire. Esther and the Jews in the capital prayed and fasted for three days before she risked her life. She recognized she had been given access to the king for a reason. "For such a time as this," she recognized, had she been elevated. She then risked her life, breaking into the king's official presence under punishment of death. Because her people were about to be put exterminated. She thought, "If I perish, I perish'...I don't really have a choice. I will risk everything to try to plead for my people to be spared." As it turns out, her risk paid off and her people were spared (or her story probably wouldn't have made it into the Bible.) But Esther made her decision as if her own body, her life on this earth, were not the most important factors. She trusted in God's future enough to jeopardize everything in the present. Why not fill our minds with such stories of courage rather than whatever Hollywood thinks will entertain us for an hour or two?

3) Take responsibility for your thoughts, for those tapes playing all the time in your mind. (Later in this letter Paul puts it this way: "Take every thought captive to obey Christ." [2 Cor 10:5]) The thoughts and internal voice we hear non-stop are not inevitable, and we are not helpless. Where do you think the voice is coming from which keeps questioning you, keeps insisting, keeps repeating, keeps accusing things like "You're too old to find a job." "You've been out of the workplace far too

long. No one is going to hire you." "You'll never get out of debt." "You'll never lose all that weight. Give it up." "You'll never get sober. You'll never stay sober. You're going to have a horrible relapse again soon." "The hole you're in is too deep and too black, you'll never get out." "You're going to mess up this relationship, too. You don't know how to enjoy a good relationship and you don't even deserve one." "No one's going to want you." "You're going to get old and decrepit and you're going to die totally disabled in some God-forsaken nursing home totally all alone, with nobody."

You know that voice always comes from the enemy. The enemy wants you miserable, terrified, utterly defeated, and dead. How could you possibly confuse those accusations with the voice of the Good Shepherd: "I have called you by name and you are mine and I love you." "I will not leave you as orphans." "I will never leave you nor forsake you." "The One who began a good work in you is faithful to complete it." "Whomever comes to Me I will in no way cast out." "I will come back for you." "Blessed are those who trust in Me without having seen Me." "I have plans for you; plans for your welfare and not for harm." "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

You know the voice of the Good Shepherd. He calls you to life. Then why do you allow the enemy free access into your mind all day long? Would you allow a dumptruck to back up onto your front yard and dump out loads of garbage? Then stop it.

To monitor our thoughts and become responsible is all the more important if I'm feeling vulnerable or weak. When it seems everything's beyond my control it becomes all the more important to take the small steps I can. I cannot change the economy in a day; I probably can't even get a job in a day. But imagining the worst is not going to help. Obsessing about it, staying away from Worship, is not going to help. So I do what I can: get exercise. Get enough sleep. Network. Pray. Every time those accusing, self-destructive thoughts come into your mind, name them and toss them out. You may have to do this hundreds of times a day, at first. This takes attention and energy. It's work. (I'm not that great at it yet.) Visualize the enemy behind them right at the feet of Jesus, where he belongs. Satan hates being ridiculed.

You may be groaning from worry, from sickness, from pain and fear. Your eyes may be all wept out dry from the loss of a loved one. Or you may be loving your life in this body, day by day, feeling strong and vigorous without a thought of death.

Whether you feel at home in this body, or you can't wait for that "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure"

in the next one—are you willing to set everything aside to make it your aim to please Him? Are you willing to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as God prepares you for eternal life? Are you willing to walk by faith, not by sight?

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling--if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord--for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.