

Dr. Hugh Hamilton
Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL
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LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: 9. Knocked Down But Not Knocked Out
2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Springtime floods hit Nashville, tornadoes devastated folks in Missouri, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is wreaking havoc on our gulf coast, friends are battling diseases, loved ones are grieving deaths and various losses. Up to 80% of college graduates this year are unemployed, living at home seeking work. 2010 has been a rough year and many folks are tempted to lose heart, to become discouraged. What's next? We trust God and we trust He will help – yet times are tough. It's not enough to just say "Cheer up, it's gonna get better!" because folks want to know how, when, where is it gonna get better? What do you tell them? What do you tell yourself?

2 Corinthians 4:8 affirms, "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not despairing.*" The Holy Spirit drives us on, helping us to keep on keeping on! Sometimes it seems no one else in the world believes in us but God. That is one of God's great traits: God never gives up on us! When all others think we are down for the count, God helps us to get up and fight one more round!

Twice in this fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul confidently states, "*We do not lose heart!*" Paul had known conflict and oppression: he'd been whipped, beaten, imprisoned, stoned, and left for dead. But Paul did not lose heart, did not despair, did not become bitter – he became better, and Paul triumphed! His outer person, his earthen vessel, like ours, had experienced temptation, heartbreak, illness, hardship, setbacks, betrayal, yet Paul continued on in courageous faith and defiant hope!

We grow stale, our lives grow complex, we are tempted to throw in the towel; but Paul encourages us; *your outer person is taking a beating, but your inner person is being renewed day by day by God in Jesus Christ -- don't give up... get up!*

Somewhere deep inside us, God's spirit abides and gives us the drive, the will to live, to love, to affirm the goodness of life despite the wickedness of the world. Renewed in Christ we keep on keeping on!

Volunteers are still coming to Nashville to clean out flooded homes and businesses, People have dug out from under tornado damage and rebuilding again. People are still working to end the oil spill and to clean up the gulf, and though it may be long in the making, we will bounce back, and life will go on. Though we are grieving, we still get up in the morning, get dressed, put one foot in front of the other, and go about our business.

During a time of personal crisis, Arthur Gordon talked with a close friend who had often offered sound advice. This friend seemed to have great inner peace; he was calm and assuring. His friend told Arthur that if had not always been so. He lost his fortune in the stock market crash

and the great depression of the 1920's. One day he was a millionaire; the next day, a pauper. The day of the market crash he went to his family's beach house and got drunk, and stayed drunk for 3 days, wallowing in self pity and failure. He was overwhelmed with self-disgust, choked with despair. Looking at himself in the mirror through bloodshot eyes was, he saw himself only as a failure as a man, as a husband, as a human being. He was convinced his family would be better off without him. He decided to swim out in the ocean past the point of no return and drown himself. He stumbled down the porch steps, out onto the beach, down to the edge of the water, where he saw something glinting in the sand.

Looking at Arthur Gordon, he pulled a small cardboard box out of his desk drawer and put it on the desk top. Inside the box was a small shell; long, narrow, oval, pale, graceful, delicate. We see these every day on our beach.

The man said he stood there on the beach, staggering, staring at the shell. He picked it up -- light, delicate, fragile – the least pressure of his finger would crush it. Yet here it was, undamaged, perfect. With the wind howling and the waves crashing, tons of water had flung this tiny shell up on hard packed sand, unbroken, intact. HOW? What had kept the shell intact, unbroken? “The shell had yielded itself to the forces crashing around it,” Arthur Gordon writes. “It accepted the storm as it had accepted the stillness of the ocean floor where it began. And it had survived” (Gordon, 160).

The man stood there for a long time, finally turned away from the sea, and walked back to the house determined to live again. He took the shell with him, and has had it with him ever since, to remind him of the lesson he learned that day. And the presence he discovered that day. The secret is in the name of the shell.....it's called an Angel's Wing. (Gordon, 160).

Within our frail bodies, our earthen vessels, there exists a tremendous presence that enables us to face uncertainties, to keep on keeping on, to handle our challenges, to persevere in our storms and our struggles, and to find goodness amidst change. Our bodies maybe subject to decay, but our inner person cannot be destroyed because we live in Christ and Christ lives in us! Therefore, “*We do not lose heart.*” We do not give up.

The Apostle Paul contrasts our infirmities and God's glory.

1. WE ARE AFFLICTED, HARD PRESSED, IN EVERY WAY BUT NOT CRUSHED (v8). We are pressured on every side, but not hemmed in. Social pressures, moral pressures, peer pressures, job pressures, school pressures, religious pressures, family pressures, medical pressures, professional pressures, financial pressures – they all threaten to crack our earthen vessel. Because Jesus abides in us, our vessels don't crack under pressure, and we move ahead to new beginnings, new insights, new hope!

2. WE ARE PERPLEXED BUT NOT DESPAIRING (v8). Confusion will not defeat us. To quote William Barclay, “We may be at our wit's end, but we're never at our hope's end!”

At times, we don't know what to do, but we never doubt that something CAN be done. At times, we can't see where life is going, but we never doubt that it has a destination.

At times, we have to learn the hardest lesson of all, how to accept what we can't understand, but we never doubt that God understands and will someday God make it clear.

2 Corinthians 4:18: *"We look at the things which are not seen, for the things seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."*

Things happen in life that I don't understand, and I can't explain why some bad things happen. But I have come to see that God's love is perfect, and God's justice is perfect, and God's ultimate will is for good, so I can still trust God even when I do not comprehend things, and God helps me keep on keeping on.

Paul's hope, my hope, your hope, our hope, is Jesus Christ in our lives. Jesus is our hope in life here and now and in the life to come. We may be at our wits end, but never at our hope's end while we Jesus Christ in our lives! Our outer person may decay, but our inner person is renewed day by day.

3. WE ARE PERSECUTED, BUT NOT FORSAKEN (v9). God never abandons us in our times of need, in times of struggle. Joan of Arc was forsaken by her supporters, but even facing being burned at the stake, Joan said, "It is better to be alone with God. His friendship will not fail me, not his counsel, not his love. In God's strength I will dare and dare and dare until I die."

In the words of the Psalm 27,

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life, whom shall I dread?

Even if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up!

Wait for the Lord, be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart. (Psalm 27:1,2,10)

We may be our wits end, but never at our hope's end, for Christ is alive in us!

4. WE ARE STRUCK DOWN, BUT NOT DESTROYED (v9). We are knocked down, but not knocked out. Emergencies, unforeseen incidents, crises, accidents, earthquakes, floods, diagnoses, things that come out of nowhere may sucker punch us and we fall, but we refuse to give up! We rise again.

2 Corinthians 4 is not Pollyanna optimism...it is gritty realism.

Are we under pressure? Yes!

Do we get confused at times? Of course we do.

Do we face criticism and complaints? Sure we do.

Are we sometimes knocked down, rocked back on our heels? Yes!

And we can't pick or choose our troubles. It's not as if we can say, "I'll take some light tribulation – but heh, I'll skip that part about getting knocked down." Following Jesus does not isolate us from worldly struggles and personal problems. Being Christian does not give a free pass from troubles. Far from it! Instead Christ gives us power and confidence to bear up and to move ahead.

If we cannot overcome all things, we can refuse to be overcome.
If we cannot transform everything, we can refuse to be conformed.
If we cannot change the course of external events, we can change our own course for the better.
We choose to be better, not bitter.

Jesus grants us courage and endurance, because it requires courage and endurance to follow Jesus -- it is not easy and it often involves uncertainty. But God has proven himself trustworthy; God is faithful, and strong, able to keep us safe and to deliver us in due time.

We look NOT to the things that are seen, but to the things that are UNSEEN. Sorrow and suffering are painful, they are distressing, but they belong to a world that is passing away. We belong to a kingdom that is coming –a kingdom of God’s love, and life after death, where good triumphs over evil and the Holy Spirit renews us day by day leading us toward ultimate victory!

- Therefore we find hidden blessings in calamities and troubling times.
- We receive strength when all else seems lost
- We have hope when others see only despair.
- We see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living (Psalm 27:13)

Amidst all the uncertainties and changes in life, if we look only to ourselves, depend on self sufficiency, look only to our own thinking and planning and goals setting, we will lose our center of balance and trust and fall. But if we keep our eyes on Jesus and look up to God’s bright spot on the horizon, we will find hope and direction and confidence and stamina and stability and power and joy and perseverance to do what we must do as Christ leads us on to victory, to the things that are unseen!

We may afflicted, but we are not crushed,
Perplexed, but not despairing,
Persecuted, but not forsaken,
Knocked down, but not knocked out!

Let your troubles or hardships draw you closer to God – not drive you away from God. Put your hand in His and let him guide you. Jesus loves you, Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead for you to bring you victory and hope in life! Trust him. Seek him. Rely on him and he will see you through anything and everything! He has the power that you do not, and he wants to share his power with you, to sustain you and to deliver you! Now and always!

Though our outer person is decaying, our inner person is being renewed day by day! So we do not lose hope!

Thanks be to God! Amen!

Sources

Gordon, Arthur. *A Touch of Wonder*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1974.