

Sermon

by

Mr. John S. Green

‘Troubles mercifully sanctified.’

2 Corinthians 4 v 16,17

**Sermon preached by Mr. John S. Green,
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“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;”

2 Corinthians 4 v 16,17

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As we read together this evening, this good man, the Apostle, had a tremendous life of persecution. He had very much trouble: he had enough to knock religion out of a man, and yet he was secretly supported and sustained under all these things. And as we read in Hebrews chapter 11 what some of God's dear people had to pass through on their way to Heaven - torn asunder, hated - and yet they did not faint, they did not give up. They pursued the narrow path. And it was so with the Apostle: “For which cause we faint not” - there was a cause that prevented him from fainting.

Generally, through weakness, through strain and other things, people faint; they become unconscious. We may understand this in a spiritual sense. God's dear people sometimes are ready to faint. Solomon tells us, “If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small.” And some of us may have felt this; but, “They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength;” and that is why God's dear people do not faint.

I think it is good Bunyan who tells us in the Pilgrim's Progress about where he saw a fire burning: someone continually pouring water upon it yet the fire didn't go out. It mystified him - until someone bade him look in another direction, and there was one continually pouring oil upon that fire, and that kept it going. That was the dear Lord, in His love and in His mercy, pouring the oil of grace into the hearts of His dear people; and that keeps them going. It is one of those lovely words in scripture,

“grace”. All God’s dear people love it, and the more they understand it the more they love it.

So, although Paul met with many enemies (Satan hindered him very much) and he had his afflictions and other things; yet he didn’t give up, he did not faint. There were other things that preserved him from fainting: God’s faithfulness to him - what a wonderful blessing! How God is faithful! Whatever should we do if we couldn’t believe that? Religion wouldn’t be worth anything if we couldn’t believe God is faithful. Right through the sacred Scriptures we read of a faithful God, we read of a performing God. You and I may make promises with all good intentions, but something untoward may come and it may hinder us from keeping those promises. It is never so with God. Whatever He promises He will certainly perform, and His faithfulness keeps His dear people from fainting. He gives grace to help in times of need, keeps them from fainting, giving up. And that “good hope” sometimes set before them in the gospel, preserves them from fainting.

I sometimes feel thankful, you know, that God hasn’t allotted us any longer time on earth than roughly three score years and ten. We shouldn’t want to live here always. But amidst their trials, amidst their afflictions, amidst their temptations, sometimes God’s people are like we read in Titus: “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God”. So, through many losses, crosses, trials and afflictions, God’s dear people press on. They faint not, because they believe their God will bring them through.

In the chapter we read, the Apostle had that “thorn in the flesh,” that “messenger of Satan” to buffet him. All God’s people have a thorn in the flesh. For this thing Paul says, “I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me”. God had put it there for a gracious purpose.

One of the worst things we have to contend with here below is pride: a terrible thing, a subtle thing, a soul-ruining thing. And it would have ruined the Apostle, but God sent that “thorn in the flesh”, and that made the Apostle feel his need of support and of strength. He didn’t faint under it because God gave him a remarkable word, “My grace is sufficient for thee:” - a marvellous word. I have thought many times about it, my friends: you could go anywhere, you could bear anything if God kindly and graciously said to you, “My grace is sufficient for thee”, whatever path you might be walking in. So, it’s another reason why the Apostle

didn't faint. The Lord supported him and sustained him under that heavy load, under that great trial.

There are many things in the Scriptures which testify of God's goodness and mercy to His dear people. They were brought very low sometimes. The godly Psalmist, he said in that pathetic Psalm (42), "O my God, my soul is cast down within me". Sometimes, through the working of unbelief and through adversities, God's dear people might be cast down; and yet they did not give up, they did not faint. They pressed on, pursued their way, as helped by the Lord.

Then in the next place the Apostle says, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day." Two different natures - we might almost say two different persons. At any rate, two natures in one person. He seems to speak in our text almost as if he were two people or had two natures - he speaks of the "outward man" and he speaks of the "inward man". And he says of the outward man, "But though our outward man perish". Sometimes, it seems sad to me and solemn, that everything in God's creation perishes sooner or later. We may see the goodly oak; but with the years it gradually weakens until it perishes. Whatever you might think of tonight, of a natural kind, of God's creation, - it perishes. The whole world will one day perish, be finished: "As a vesture shalt thou fold them up," and there will be an end.

But Paul comes closer home in our text; and we may, some of us, feel this. Some of you younger ones may not feel it yet, but you will do if the Lord spares you, you will find your natural strength decays, it will go. Things some of us could do easily years back we cannot do now. I was speaking to a friend a time back and he said, 'You know, I know how to do those things, I have done them many times: I know how to do them, but I cannot do them.' Strength gone - natural strength decays; and that's where some of us are tonight, we can no longer do as we have done. Now it is a good thing if God sanctifies this knowledge to us, so that we do not put our trust in the flesh or in anything we might do. There is no curse against that tried sinner who puts his hope and confidence in the Lord. There is many a curse against those who put their trust in the flesh.

So, as we mentioned, I feel this - we realise our mortality, we realise we are dying creatures; and these things, may they mercifully and graciously bring us off the things of this poor world. By these things God's people are weaned. "My soul," says David, "is even as a weaned child." Now, it may be a painful business, but a wonderful mercy, to be weaned from the

things of this poor world. So we dare not, would not, set up anything as an idol, to fall down and worship it, when we know that like ourselves it must perish. I say it is a hard lesson to learn, a very hard one, but it's a very, very profitable one.

So God's dear people, day by day, will feel what the Apostle says, "Though our outward man perish." But he speaks of another man when he says, "Yet the inward man is renewed day by day." That is the secret, that is why he didn't faint, my friends - because of those renewings. It is what his enemies could not understand, couldn't make out. They persecuted him, they hated him, they gave him many stripes, but God secretly renewed his strength. How does God do this? By mercifully and graciously feeding His dear people.

Now one good man was on the point of fainting. He hadn't had anything to partake of for a time, but the Lord gave him good food, and it is said of Elijah, "And he went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights". What a wonderful thing to know this spiritual renewing! How does God do it? Quite often it is through His precious Word; for we said this morning (I love the sacred Scriptures, they are God's Word, they contain God's will, they contain His mercy to poor sinners), "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart". My dear friends, it won't matter what our circumstances are tonight if God were to come to us and bless His Word to us. That would strengthen us with might in the inward man. There is no strength in us outwardly, but it would strengthen us inwardly, and strength is often renewed by exercise.

Oh how many of God's dear people have found their strength renewed through prayer! When really helped to pray, when they hold converse with the King of kings and Lord of lords, prayer is very sacred, very wonderful. Do you pray? Do you try to pray? Do you sometimes find a little strengthening at the Throne of Grace? Do you sometimes get a little sweet relief there, when you are enabled to cast your burdens upon the Lord, and He supports you? I don't know what I should have done, especially these last twelve months, but for the Throne of Grace. So then we experience, sometimes through painful things regarding the outward man, that "the inward man is renewed day by day." It is a mercy to have this new part (isn't it?) - a wonderful mercy to be a sinner born again.

The ungodly do not hunger and thirst for the things of God. No! I feel very sorry for the ungodly, they have nowhere to go to in trouble; no-one

to look to, no-one to help them. God's dear people have got the throne of grace, the mercy seat, and they have got a good God to help them. A God that will never fail them. And thus, through many a trial, many difficulties, through much adversity often, God's dear people still press on. But that's the secret - "the inward man is renewed day by day." Poor old nature doesn't want the things of God; it doesn't hunger and thirst after Jesus and His truth. No, it's the inward man. That's a soul born again, renewed by the Holy Spirit. That's a part going to heaven; it is indeed! That's the preparation God's dear people receive, their never dying souls are blessed.

Yet "the inward man is renewed day by day." Secretly renewed, secretly sustained. Under some of the darkest dispensations, through some of the most trying things, the inward man is renewed. And through this renewing, God's dear people sometimes get their best blessings, have their most favoured seasons.

Some of us tonight, if the Lord hadn't sanctified things to us, we shouldn't have much. We may not feel to have much religion as it is, but I venture to say this, the sweetest blessings, the most gracious helps, they have often come through the greatest trials God's dear people have to pass through. Good king Hezekiah said, "By these things men live:" that is, spiritually considered, the Lord was pleased to speak to him.

"Yet the inward man is renewed day by day." We need it. I need it. You need it. We don't know what tomorrow holds forth for us; we don't know what the end of this day has in store for us. So this is a good mark, a good evidence, in the favour of God's people - they want daily and hourly renewings:

"Daily I'd repent of sin,
Daily wash in Calvary's blood."

So the apostle says, "Day by day." As the day may demand, as the trials may demand, the Lord is able to come and to grant those wonderful and those spiritual renewings. So that wherever you might be, whatever the circumstances might be, when you get this renewing there is submission to your heavenly Father's will, there is a falling down at His feet. And this renewing takes away our fears (a sad thing is our unbelief) and it takes away the fear and dread of death. Oh! it is a good place to be brought into, to feel these heavenly renewings as we journey on.

Thirdly the Apostle he speaks of, “our light affliction”. We cannot say, comparatively speaking, that all the afflictions of God’s dear people are light. Some of them are most trying. Some poor things are born with some impediment; they are born with some weakness, that accompanies them to their journey’s end. So we cannot say, in that sense, that all the afflictions and trials of God’s people are light; yet they are supported, they are strengthened. I saw the mortal remains of one old friend laid in the grave the other day; her life had been largely one of affliction. We might say, ‘sanctified affliction’. As the hymn writer says [282], it is sweet affliction that lays me low at Jesus’ feet. That’s when we shall view it right, when God sanctifies it.

Another thing - what do you and I deserve by God’s hand? Nothing! We deserve his frown, we deserve at last to be banished to hell. Very solemn is this consideration; but if God mercifully, graciously convinces us of what we really are, we shall feel the text - that our afflictions are light. What do we deserve at God’s hand? What can we do? We can do nothing, nothing at all, nothing good whatsoever. Thus we have to make comparisons sometimes.

One more thought here. You have a little fellowship and communion with Jesus; you feel He was nailed to that cross for your sins. I was reading the other day of the sufferings of Jesus, and I felt to know my sins helped to nail Him to that cross, causing Him to suffer “the just for the unjust”. If ever you and I feel our afflictions to be light, it will be when we have communion and fellowship with the dear Lord Jesus.

Again the Apostle says that these things are “but for a moment.” Whatever we may have to suffer, whatever we may have to go through, whatever losses we may sustain, comparatively speaking, they are “but for a moment.” The wordling’s pleasure is but for a moment - it is fading, it is passing away. And the dear child of God soon comes to the end of all his or her afflictions. The Lord sometimes sends these things, or permits some of these things, to bring us to our journey’s end. Then, when that good hope sweetly springs up in our heart, when that goodly prospect is set before us, when we can sing from our heart perhaps,

“I’ve Canaan’s goodly land in view,
And realms of endless day” -

then we come right into the text, and we can use it, sincerely and rightly: “For our light affliction which is but for a moment”. Now it works

something in the hearts of God's people, so our text tells us: "Worketh for us far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." It has been said that these are amongst the most wonderful words that the Apostle ever uttered. I am not going to profess to be able to fathom them this night, but it is a good thing when the Holy Spirit does come secretly into our hearts and blesses the thing through which we are to pass, and raises up in our souls that good and that sweet hope of reaching glory.

We haven't much in the Bible about heaven really. God's good Word tells us quite a lot of what won't be in heaven, but we can get as far as one good man got when he said, 'There is a Man in heaven I love and there is a Man in heaven that loves me.' That is sufficient, I am sure it is.

So you see, in these afflictions, these trials, these oppositions, through which God's dear people have to pass, there is a secret working - a causing to cast down, to be tried and dejected - until they feel the Lord comes into that trouble and blesses it and sanctifies it. Otherwise they know these things wouldn't do them any good. But these things weaned the Apostle Paul from the things of this poor dying world. They weaned the Psalmist when he said, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." Now a little of this working, my friends, is death to the things of this poor dying world and liveliness in the things of God. Well, that's the Holy Spirit working for you that divine and that wonderful preparation for a better world.

Now I shall have to leave these few remarks here, may we be enabled to think over them, and be preserved from fainting, though the way may be rough and thorny, though the poor outward man must perish. "It is appointed unto man once to die." No getting away from it. But that need not cause the dear child of God alarm. No, there is no other way to glory, unless the Lord comes to judgement, but by death.

Thus, sooner or later the outward man will perish. I want the Lord continually to remind me of this. If He didn't I should get earth bound; I should get tied to the poor things of time and sense, and so would you. But, you see, as the Lord reminds us, we are mortal. It keeps us exercised, keeps us praying, "Prepare me gracious God to stand before thy face." Good little hymn, good prayer. And then to feel that the Lord does, from time to time, strengthen us with might in the inward man, enabling us to wait upon Him; renewing our strength, enabling us to press on and press through, though we have our afflictions, though we have our trials.

One last thought now: “Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day.” How quickly time passes!

Well, the Lord bless these few utterances for His name sake.

Amen.

[Reading: Hebrews 11]