

2 Cor 4:16-18 An Eternal Perspective Produces Perseverance

According to recent research (Barna polling), two out of five pastors nationwide are seriously thinking about quitting the ministry. Nearly 40% of pastors have thought seriously about quitting, and they probably would quit if they could find another way to make a living.

Why do you think pastors would want to quit? After all, it's an easy job—you only work on Sundays and Wednesday nights, and the rest of the time you are out golfing or fishing.

That's maybe what some people think, but it's far from reality for most pastors. Typically, those in Christian ministry face a lot of pressure, opposition, betrayal, and even violent attacks. Because of that, one of the ongoing temptations in Christian ministry is to quit. When things get hard and adversity sets in, when you face opposition and personal attacks, it's often a huge temptation simply to throw in the towel and quit the ministry.

It's not only pastors who sometimes feel like quitting. Many people who regularly serve in various church ministries think about quitting, are tempted to quit, or do quit. Perhaps some of you have quit serving in various capacities because of problems, conflicts, or discouragement.

In Gal 6:9, Paul urges us not to grow “weary in well doing.” In our passage today, he urges us not to faint in the face of adversity.

In 2 Cor chapters 1-7, Paul is giving an explanation and a defense of his ministry. Note 4:15—he's done all these things “for your sakes” and for “the glory of God.”

Then in vs. 16, he says that, in spite of all the difficulties of ministry, “we faint not/we do not lose heart.” Cf. 4:1—same word. This is an interesting word (ἐγκακοῦμεν); it means literally “to give in to bad.” It refers to being downhearted, being exhausted, losing heart, giving up, or losing interest.

If anyone had good reason to be discouraged, exhausted, and downhearted, it was Paul. He had experienced a lot of opposition and persecution in the ministry. This work had nearly cost him his life many times. He was persecuted by the enemies of Christ and often opposed and slandered by those claiming to be Christians. Some of the Corinthians had opposed him. His work had been exceedingly difficult, and no one would blame him for quitting or at least for losing enthusiasm about serving God.

But he says he's not ready to quit; he has not lost heart or enthusiasm for the work.

None of us is facing the kind of hostility and violent threats that Paul faced, but we may be tempted to quit serving God. Perhaps you are fed up with your SS class or working in the nursery. Those kids are driving you crazy! The people you are trying to serve don't appreciate your efforts. It's getting harder to serve in the work you are doing. Perhaps various afflictions and problems have made serving God more difficult lately, and you are thinking about quitting.

In these verses, Paul encourages us to persevere in the ministry. When you feel like quitting or giving up, remember Paul's advice for us here.

.16 "Therefore we do not lose heart/faint; we are not downhearted; we don't quit." Paul uses a set of comparisons or contrasts to tell us how to avoid losing heart/becoming discouraged/quitting. And his main point here is that adopting an eternal perspective will help us persevere. We must focus on eternal things and spiritual values rather than on the physical problems we are experiencing here and now.

How do we persevere in ministry when we feel like quitting?

- I. Focus on the inner man instead of the outer man. .16
 - A. We should recognize a difference between the inner and the outer man.
 1. The Bible affirms that we are a unified combination of body and soul, physical and spiritual, outer and inner.
 2. The outer man is our physical body; the inner man is the soul—the new man/creation, the regenerated inner person. We are a soul with a body; our body has a soul; we are body and soul joined into one person.
 - B. .16 The outer man is "perishing" (διαφθείρω). The word here means "being thoroughly corrupted; to be utterly destroyed; to be ruined." He's talking about the weaknesses and frailties of the human body.

What causes the destruction/corruption of the human body? Why are we "perishing"?

 1. Natural processes cause some of this decay and corruption. As we age, our bodies naturally fail and fall. Paul elsewhere described a "thorn in the flesh" that afflicted him, probably speaking of some kind of disease or physical ailment.
 2. Some people work themselves almost to death. I've read about some Christian missionaries and pastors who work so hard that they basically wear themselves out by the time they are 55 or 60 years old.

3. Some of this decay happens through stress, pressure, and opposition. It's not easy facing constant criticism and hostility. Dealing with relentless conflict wears you down.
4. Some of that happens through persecution and abuse. Paul experienced beatings, whippings, and stoning. He had suffered severe physical abuse. He's very familiar with the breakdown of his own body.
5. Eventually the physical body will wear out, run down, and fall apart. We are mortal; we will die at some point. In death, the physical body will be totally corrupted; it will perish.
6. "even though" that's happening...

C. .16b The inner man is being "renewed day by day."

1. Even as Paul watched his physical body decay and get weaker, he also recognized that his spiritual strength was growing.
2. What happens to our bodies need not affect our souls. Physical abuse and persecution cannot damage our inner person. He's referring to the soul, the spiritual and eternal part of us. *Physical* weakness does not make us *spiritually* weak.

Ps 118:6 *The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?*

3. The inner man is "being renewed." This word (ἀνακαινόω) means "to be restored; to be brought back to a previous condition." To be restored/renewed is basically the opposite of being corrupted/perishing.

Even as our physical health and vitality are *decreasing*, we may be *increasing* in our spiritual health and wellbeing. Physical problems don't necessarily have any impact on the inner man. Our soul can be in very good shape even if our body is in very bad shape.

4. And this renewal is happening "day by day." In other words, it's an ongoing process; it's continual.

Lamentations 3:22–23 *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. 23 They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*

- D. So as the outer, physical man is dying, the inner, spiritual man is growing and thriving.
- E. How do we aid in this process of the renewal of the inner man? Through Bible reading and prayer, worship, fellowship with other believers, biblical instruction, and serving one another. If you are not participating in such things, there can be no renewal, no Christian growth.

The unbeliever has no such promise or prospects for the inner man to be renewed while his outer man yields to corruption. Christians can rejoice in the ongoing spiritual vitality of the inner man even as the outer man decays. But the unbeliever has no such inner man; his soul is dark and it has no spiritual life to revive or to grow. The unsaved person decays, body and soul, to the point of final death of the physical body and the damnation of the soul.

Trans: The first thing to do to persevere in service without quitting is that we focus on the growth and vitality of the inner man, not the weakness and corruption of the outer man. If you are feeling faint and discouraged, seek that inner renewal/revival.

II. Focus on the glories of eternity instead of the present afflictions. .17

- A. We don't deny that we experience afflictions in the ministry.
 - 1. "affliction" (θλίψις) means "trouble, suffering, persecution." It's based on a root word meaning "to press, to squash." Paul was under a lot of pressure, a lot of stress (cf. vs. 8). He'd experienced a lot of trouble and suffering.

Acts 14:22 ... "We must through many tribulations (θλίψεων) enter the kingdom of God."
- B. We view our afflictions from an eternal perspective.
 - 1. They are "light" (ἐλαφρός) -- "limited, not intense, not burdensome, insignificant; easy to bear."

The only other place this word is used in the NT is when Jesus said "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30).

 - a) It's quite remarkable for Paul to describe his afflictions as "light." These afflictions nearly cost him his life on several occasions (cf. 11:23-33). He was *heavily* afflicted; he suffered desperately and very intensely.

Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:8 ... *in Asia ... we were burdened beyond measure (ὑπερβολή), above strength, so that we despaired even of life.*

- b) So it's amazing that he calls his trials and tribulations "light"—insignificant, easy, trifling. In what sense were his troubles "light"?
- c) Afflictions are "light" in the sense that they can affect us only physically and temporarily. They can affect the outer man but not the inner man. They are physical but not spiritual. They are temporary, not eternal.
- d) Do you know who has truly "light" afflictions? We do. The kind of persecution we endure surely is "light" especially compared to what others endure.
- e) Many Christians right now are under intense pressure or persecution; many have been killed for their faith.
- f) These afflictions did not prevent Paul for continuing on in his ministry.

App: Sadly, for some people, even a small amount of difficulty will stop them from serving. They'll use almost any kind of hindrance or obstacle as an excuse for quitting. Just a little pressure, a few personal attacks, a bit of conflict and they'll threaten to quit.

Maybe if we focused more on spiritual things, we'd be less obsessed with physical problems. Maybe our afflictions would be "light" if we viewed them like Paul did.

- 2. .17a They are "but for a moment" (παραυτικά) -- "temporary, brief; not lasting very long; momentary, fleeting, seasonal."
 - a) Paul had endured these afflictions for many years, yet he describes them as "momentary."
 - b) Of course, what he means is that the trials and tribulations of human life are brief *in light of eternity*. These afflictions will endure only during the years of physical life. In comparison to eternity, earthly life really is brief/momentary.

App: As we face difficulties in ministry, we should keep in mind that whatever problems we encounter are light and brief. As we think about time and eternity, our time here is momentary. We have only a limited time to serve Christ and his church, so we should make use of our opportunities. Even if Christian ministry is difficult, we should persevere in it and not grow weary of well doing.

Life is like a vapor; we have only a short time to serve Christ and his church. It's inevitable that in serving Christ we will experience opposition and conflict. Don't allow light and temporary afflictions to tempt you to quit serving God.

3. .17b They are “working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”
 - a) The language here is rather interesting (*καθ υπερβολην εις υπερβολην*). It says literally “according to excess into excess.” Or “extremely much unto extremely much, extraordinary unto the extraordinary.” The expression means something like “beyond all measure and proportion” (BGAD); surpassing all measures or bounds.

And the words seem to imply an ever increasing intensity, an increasing excess weight of glory.
 - b) These afflictions are working for us. The word (*κατεργάζομαι*) means “to accomplish thoroughly, fully.” God is transforming us through affliction.

The Bible teaches that afflictions can help us develop Christ-like character (Rom 5). Afflictions can refine and purify us. They can have a positive effect if we respond to them appropriately.
 - c) The afflictions we experience in serving God produce an eternal reward, a “weight of glory.” The sense seems to be that the reward that we will enjoy in heaven because we've endured such afflictions will far outweigh any problems we've endured. Afflictions suffered for God in his service yield a glorious weight, i.e., a large reward, a surpassingly glorious outcome.

The prospects of our glorious future is a far larger weight than the burdens of our present, “light,” momentary afflictions or troubles. What awaits us in heaven is indescribable glory, a reward that is far above our capacity to measure.

Rom 8:18 *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.*

So the more afflictions we endure in Christian ministry without giving up, the greater our reward, the more glorious our experience in heaven. Greater afflictions for Christ produce a greater and more glorious weighty reward.

If you think you are under a heavy load of afflictions right now because of your commitment to Christ, just wait until you get to heaven! There you’ll experience a much larger weight of glory—an eternal, extraordinary, surpassing, immeasurable glorious reward for persevering under pressure, when you feel like quitting but don’t.

Remember that the context here is not merely enduring the natural afflictions of human life. The context is talking about the afflictions and problems associated with Christian ministry. People have these problems *because they are serving God*, not just because they are physically alive. These are not the normal burdens of everyday life, but the afflictions associated with serving Christ and his church.

Quote: This eternal perspective and hope in things to come sustained Paul in the midst of the temporary sufferings that marked his ministry.¹

And so the glory of the reward in this text is for those who endure these afflictions in the ministry without giving up. They persevere in serving God despite all the obstacles. The promise is a glorious reward for all those who endure the problems of the ministry without losing hope or giving up.

¹ David K. Lowery, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 565.

Quote: When compared with the glory that was accumulating “beyond all measure and proportion,” the suffering he was undergoing in the service of Christ appeared both insignificant and momentary. The suffering was real, not imaginary (cf. vv. 8–11); ... but when viewed in the light of eternity, the suffering took on the opposite hue—it seemed slight and temporary. The eye of faith creates a new perspective.²

That’s what we need to have—the eye of faith that sees things from an eternal perspective. Our present sufferings are light and temporary, and they provide an exceedingly large weight of glory for us.

So next time you face afflictions and trials in serving God, just remember that those afflictions are working for you; they are eternally beneficial. They provide a surpassingly glorious weight that will outweigh all the problems you’ll ever experience.

But that promise is only for those who are engaged in serving God in some kind of Christian ministry. If you are not serving God, then these words of hope and comfort don’t really pertain to you. These are promises for those who endure faithfully in ministry in spite of the temptation to quit.

Trans: The promise of a glorious future reward for all those who persevere in the ministry should motivate us to not quit; don’t lose hope; don’t faint.

III. .18 Focus on spiritual realities instead of physical problems.

Quote: Endurance is based on a person’s ability to look beyond the physical to the spiritual; beyond the present to the future, and beyond the visible to the invisible.³

A. Don’t focus your attention on “the things which are seen.”

1. .18 The word “look at” (σκοπέω) means, literally, “to see something, to look at it.” But another sense of the word is to contemplate or consider something, to ponder or let your mind dwell on something.

² Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 362–363.

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible: New American Standard Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 2 Co 4:18.

The sense of the word is to focus on something, to gaze at it with attention. We fix our eyes on what is unseen. This is not a fleeting glance or a casual look, but concentrated attention.

2. Things “seen,” of course, are the things of this earthly life. Paul is urging us to avoid focusing on the problems of this physical life.
3. We can’t help but see the world around us, but that does not have to be our focus, the object of our concern. We don’t have to dwell on the difficulties of our physical life.
4. He’s *not* instructing us here to *ignore* the things happening around us that we see. He’s not suggesting that we become hermits or that we withdraw totally from this world. Ignorance of the world is not a virtue. We should not be apathetic or ignorant of current events. We are citizens of this world and we have responsibilities in this world; we can’t just turn a blind eye to our world.
5. But we should have a more intense focus than on this world. Instead of focusing on earthly problems, you should...

B. Focus your attention on “things which are not seen.”

1. Things unseen, of course, would be spiritual things. Paul advises us to “look” at things we cannot physically see.
2. What does that mean? We consider spiritual realities; we focus on eternal things; we maintain an eternal perspective. We focus on the glorious future, not the current afflictions. We refuse to obsess over our physical problems and we focus on spiritual things.

Cf. Col 3:1-3

Quote: The gaze of faith is focused upon eternal realities which are no less real because they are unseen.⁴

3. Our attention should shift from our earthly problems to our heavenly rewards. These things are hidden from us right now, but they are real, and we’ll see them some day.

⁴ Philip Hughes, *Second Corinthians*, NICNT, 158.

App: How do you get your mind off your earthly, physical problems? By serving God and God's people. When you busy in ministry, you are less focused on yourself and your own problems. When you are concerned about evangelizing the lost and edifying the saved, you have less time and energy to worry about yourself.

IV. .18b Focus on the eternal instead of the temporal.

The final comparison here is between things temporal and things eternal.

- A. Things “seen” are “temporary” (πρόσκαιρος)—seasonal, pertaining to a short period of time, lasting only a little while, passing away, transient.
 - 1. The encouragement here is that all the afflictions pertaining to Christian ministry will end at some point.
 - 2. Even if they extend all the way to the end of your life, they will end when you die.
- B. Things “unseen” are “eternal” (αἰώνιος)—of unlimited duration; extending forever, without end, permanent.
 - 1. There is an invisible and eternal value to our sufferings for the cause of Christ.
 - 2. The encouragement here is that the results of your ministry will extend eternally. If you have been laying up treasure in heaven by serving God, then you have a great eternal reward to look forward to. If you've been engaged in Christian ministry, you have an eternal weight of glory to anticipate.
 - 3. We don't see our rewards laid up in heaven right now, but we'll see them when we get there.

Quote: Despite afflictions, perplexities, and catastrophes, the Christian's gaze is concentrated on the glory within and beyond; his treasure is not on earth, but in heaven, and there accordingly is his heart also; he knows himself to be united in destiny with his risen and glorified Savior...⁵

⁵ Hughes, 159.

How do we persevere in Christian ministry when we are suffering afflictions and persecutions? We look at things from an eternal perspective; we try to get a glimpse of the eternal, invisible world. We focus on the glory that awaits us in heaven. We fix our attention on what cannot be seen right now.

- Focus on the inner man, not the outer man. Work at renewing and reviving the inner man.
- Focus on the glories of eternity instead of your light and temporary afflictions.
- Focus on spiritual realities instead of physical problems.
- Focus on the eternal instead of the temporal.

Affliction can cause us to be discouraged and bitter. Afflictions can cause us to lose heart and to quit. But even in the midst of suffering, we must refuse to focus on our physical problems and instead, turn our gaze on heavenly things, things not seen. God has promised that our afflictions, experienced in serving God, work for us an exceeding weight of glory. When our mind is focused on eternal realities, we are able to persevere in spite of any obstacles. In fact, focusing on eternal realities can renew our spirits and revive our souls.

If you are suffering for the cause of Christ, you can be renewed in your inner man even if your outer man is falling apart. And you can be assured that all the difficulty you endured for the cause of Christ will be worth it when you get to heaven. If you are a servant of the Lord, a surpassingly heavy weight of glory is waiting for you there.