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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The Weight of Glory

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

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### Introduction

Last week, Pastor June delivered a marvelous message from God's word regarding the Holiness of God, the Authority of Scripture, and the great gift of learning to love God through life-long discipleship. To close, she shared quotation from C.S. Lewis, which is a great launching point for us this morning. Reciting a portion of Lewis's exceptional work, *Mere Christianity*, June read:

If we let [God]... He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine... The process will be long... But that is what we are in for. Nothing less."

Our purpose today will be to look at how our eternal God loves us so much that he promises to clothe us feeble and mortal creatures, as we no doubt know we are, with everlasting life.

We are going to be looking at a passage from God's Word, one that comes from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. In the chapter that precedes this passage, Paul speaks about the surpassing greatness of the glory of God enfleshed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul draws his illustration from the Old Testament narrative in Exodus 34. Moses, having received the 10 Commandments, descended the mountain with his face still radiating from the glory of God, so much so that the Israelites could not gaze upon it. Consequently, Moses veiled his face to obscure the residual luminescence of God's glory. Over time, the radiance of God's glory on Moses' face would

fade. However, despite the fading glory, there was glory tied up in the Law of the Old Covenant. Through it, God revealed His righteousness and our profound need for a savior. The holiness of God, as June spoke about last week. And our own human brokenness. The old covenant had glory, but it was a veiled, fading glory.

However, Paul writes, this is not so with the New Covenant, the Gospel of Jesus. If the Law of Moses revealed a veiled glory, the veil that covered God's glory has been decisively removed once and for all in Jesus. In Christ, the eternal glory of God was made plain for all to see when the eternal one, stepped down from heaven in Jesus, and somehow, the eternal God suffered and died on the cross. On that cross, Jesus defeated sin by dying and by his resurrection, he defeated the final enemy, death itself, thereby opening the way to eternal life for humanity. If we let him, he will turn us, feeble as we are, into dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures.

Christians then who are transformed more and more by Christ's influence, radiate God's glory to the world. Paul says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another." Unlike the glory of the law that faded, and that Moses hid behind a veil, the glory fully revealed in Christ, which we have seen and which is made manifest in the life of a Christian, is plain for the world to see. This glory is more powerful, more beautiful, and it isn't written on tablets of stone, but upon our human heart, as Jeremiah 31 had predicted.

But here is the challenge. In the Corinthian community, Paul's life didn't bear the marks of what we would consider glory. Rather, he bore the marks that appeared like defeat. So, some leaders, who had stellar credentials including letters of recommendation from prominent leaders in Jerusalem, challenged Paul's authority, pointing to the very marks that looked like defeat.

The Word of the Lord comes to us from 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

**W**e have this treasure [that is, the glorious, unveiled gospel of Jesus] in jars of clay [the frailty of humanity], to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup>So death is at work in us, but life in you.

<sup>13</sup>Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, <sup>14</sup>knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. <sup>15</sup>For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

<sup>16</sup>So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup>as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

This is the Word of the Lord.

### **Interpretation**

For the next few moments as we dwell upon this passage, I have borrowed the title of this message from the Scriptures themselves (verse 17). The title also bears resemblance to a sermon by the same name delivered by C.S. Lewis at University Church of St Mary the Virgin—the parish church of Oxford University—80 years ago in 1941. In his address, Lewis illustrated a simple, yet profound point; **God made human beings for heaven**. As such, though our earthly lives are finite—or in the words of 2 Corinthians, *mortal*—Lewis's conten-

tion was that the human soul has longings for the infinite which cannot be satiated by any finite means. In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis writes:

If a transtemporal, transfinite good is our real destiny [that is, if we were made for eternity], then any other good on which our desire fixes must be in some degree fallacious, must bear at best only a symbolical relation to what will truly satisfy.

Though we are all clothed in mortality, which is at times painfully apparent, you were made for heaven—God’s eternal realm where His presence is all-in-all. Because we were made for relationship with God, within each of us, there is a longing in our hearts that cannot be met by anything other than God’s Presence. Lewis describes this longing for God as a longing for a far-off country, which leaves a pain within the human soul, a pain he equates to feelings of nostalgia. You know feeling of nostalgia? When you think back upon a time in your life when things were so serene that it stirs the butterflies to flit in your gut, accompanied by a sort of joy-filled sorrow. It is the feeling of joy of good memories. It is mixed with loss because time has passed, and we cannot get it back.

Analogously, we have a similar pain albeit somewhat in reverse. It is this pain of longing for eternity for the joy that awaits while experiencing the reality of sorrows here and now. To cope with this pain, human beings notoriously seek to fill this void with temporal things. However, Lewis contends,

These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

As St. Augustine famously said, we were made for thee, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee. We have a divine itch, as it were, that cannot be scratched by finite means.

The scriptures point us to this faint echo of a tune. It is as it says in Ecclesiastes: [God] “has put eternity into [the human] heart...” What we really long for is the eternal that will not perish, spoil or fade, but we too often settle for the finite, which cannot satisfy. Ecclesiastes continues: God has put eternity in the human heart, “yet so that [humanity] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Here is the paradox at the heart of our pain—God has created us with eternal longings that, because we are mortal creatures and God alone is infinite, humanity cannot fully grasp. God does this, not to frustrate us, but to ensure that we realize our incredible need for Him. This longing is only met in relationship with God, which God has made possible through Jesus Christ.

What an interesting paradox. God has created us with a longing for the eternal. Yet, human capacity is such that we cannot—we are too frail—contain or comprehend eternity.

### **The Eternality of God:**

Humanity cannot fully grasp the eternal God. We cannot comprehend something without beginning and with no end. So, here is the truth: If we try to imagine who God is, or what He is like, we will get it wrong every time. Why? The vastness of an eternal creator God is beyond our finite brainpower. There is no way that we could possibly conjure up in our own minds the true greatness and glory of an eternal God. We will always fall short and whatever we conceive of as God is too small. That is why the eternal God needed to condescend to us in Jesus Christ, because until then, we knew God’s glory only in a veiled way, partially, dimly as in a mirror. Then when Jesus came, as Colossians 1 proclaims, God placed His fullness in Christ. Jesus revealed for us exactly what God is like in a manner humanity could grasp. And Jesus also revealed what true humanity is like.

### **The Feebleness of Humanity**

Christ revealed human frailty. There is a feebleness to humanity, isn’t there? It is because of the frailty of humanity that Jesus Christ became obedient to death on a cross. It is the reality of our human condition.

This is a reality that we would rather not admit though, but to carry on pretending we do not know the truth of our own mortality.

Fifteen years ago, a week after Lauren and I were married, we honeymooned to Riviera Maya, on the eastern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. We spent a week there, during which we took a day excursion to visit the ancient Mayan Ruins at Chichen Itza. On the trip, while I don't recall all that the guide told us, I remember this one point. The guide told us that after the fall of that civilization around 900AD, the jungle in the Yucatán did what the jungle does. It simply swallowed up what was left of the once thriving Mayan metropolis. It wasn't until archeologists arrived almost a thousand years later that the ruins as they now stand were uncovered and restored. It seems almost impossible to us, but that city that thrived for over 400 years—longer, by the way, than America has been around—would fall, and the jungle obscure that a people ever thrived there.

This is, by the way, the same reality that is veiled here in Southwest Florida. Not too long ago, this area was a dense, swampy scrub. Without constant manicuring it would return to that in no time. This is a truth I battle back each weekend when I fight to keep the jungle at bay by consistent mowing and maintenance.

This is a picture of the reality of every civilization and every individual. Corporately, as in civilizations, and individually, as human beings, we have a beginning and an end. Someday, all of us will have to face our end. Like the jungle in the Yucatán, death will swallow us up. This is the reality we would rather not admit, but none of us can avoid. It's a reality we see in countless ways, even on a personal level, on our own faces each time we look in the mirror. There is a song I used to listen to frequently that says,

You may tire of me as our December sun is setting  
Cause I'm not who I used to be  
No longer easy on the eyes but these wrinkles masterfully disguise  
The youthful boy below  
Who turned your way and saw something he was not looking for  
Both a beginning and an end

But now he lives inside someone he does not recognize when he catches his reflection on accident

This song is about discovering the inconsolable truth revealed in the folds on our faces: the reality of our own aging and mortality. We try to hide it with creams and concealers, but time marches on, revealing the reality we would rather not consider—as human beings, we have a both a beginning and an end.

There are times when this truth becomes more obvious. It's the truth that becomes evident in a global pandemic. Once again drawing from Lewis's work, the pandemic did not increase the reality of death. For some, it sped up the timeline, but it has not changed the ultimate end for any of us. What it has done is brought the sting of death to the forefront of our minds and forced us to unveil it. This same thing happens in countless other ways: when we attend the memorial service of a loved one; when we, or a loved one we know, receives the call and the diagnosis; when we see a bad accident on the road or have a narrow miss ourselves. However, these are momentary thoughts, not the operating principles of our hearts.

John Calvin, a 16th century theologian once wrote:

We undertake all things as if we were establishing immortality for ourselves on earth. If we see a dead body, we may philosophize briefly about the fleeting nature of life, but the moment we turn away from the sight, the thought of our own perpetuity remains fixed in our minds.

These pull back the veil to reveal we have a beginning and an end.

### **Biblical Interpretation**

The Apostle Paul had been challenged by some individuals who he will later refer to as so-called "super-apostles." These super-apostles were suggesting that Paul's gospel was inferior to theirs. Their evidence of this was that Paul had been repeatedly imprisoned and beaten because of his witness to Christ. They pointed to the marks of suffering—literally from the beatings and persecutions which were upon his body—as a means of discrediting his ministry. Their gospel was a

gospel without hardship and suffering. In other words, they were suggesting that suffering is not a part of how God works in the world.

Have you ever felt this way? That if suffering is a part of life, then God cannot be a part of it. It seems to be the prevailing operating principle of the world. If God allows suffering, then God cannot be good, God cannot have a reason for it, or God cannot work through it. This is part of the prevailing spirit of our contemporary culture. However, this viewpoint assumes that God is as small and finite as we are, that simply because we cannot imagine a way in which God is at work through suffering, then there cannot be a way. But God is not finite, as we are. God is far beyond our ability to grasp. Our feebleness only serves to remind us of our desperate need for God's eternity.

Paul responds that these super-apostles have fundamentally misunderstood the way God works. God acts decisively and redemptively through suffering. This is the story of the cross and the glory of the gospel. It was through Jesus's suffering, death and resurrection that He made possible for us a relationship with God which would satisfy—even in the present—our longing for eternity we cannot fully grasp. And if this is how God worked through Jesus, then God can use even our own suffering as a means of redemption.

Paul holds the hope of glory in his feeble human body like treasure in a jar of clay. Clay is a common, fragile, and disposable substance. Clay is made from the dust of the earth. It is earthenware. It is easily crushed and easily destroyed. You may recall that, according to Genesis, human beings are also made from the dust of the earth. We are earthenware, as it were. There is a frailty to us. And yet, God has chosen to allow us to contain the glory of God—the hope of glory. Just as God chose to become earthenware Himself, to have His body broken, by which His blood was shed, that grace and mercy would be available for all who call upon the name of the Lord, God chooses to spread the glory of the gospel in our jars of clay. Often this is accomplished not just through our outward triumphs, but through our hardships and how we respond with grace.

So, while Paul bears in his body the marks of the suffering he has undertaken, the cracks and creases simply reveal the treasure inside and the hope that is in God and not in himself. In other words, even his suffering serves as a reminder of our longing for eternity. His weakness reminds us of God's strength. And somehow in the midst of suffering, he suggests that he does not lose heart because, though the clay jar exterior is wasting away, he is being renewed by the hope that the momentary troubles are preparing for him an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison. Though Paul is persecuted, he is not crushed. He is not overtaken by the hardships, but is sustained inwardly by God.

Whatever the hardship is that you're facing now, if you are rooted in Christ, it may last for a moment, but it will not overtake you. God will win in the end. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the one without beginning and end, and God knows the end of each of us, and will see us through even that.

Here is the surprising truth. Despite what the world would have us believe, this life is not all there is. As C.S. Lewis observed, God created us for heaven, where we will dwell with the Lord forever. Though we are physically mortal beings, when our earthly lives are gone—swallowed, as it were, by death—we will not cease to be, but rather, as Paul suggests in the subsequent chapter, we will be swallowed up with life, the eternal resurrection life of Jesus. When our earthly lives end, we will find fulfillment for the eternity that God has placed in our hearts. We will dwell with the Lord and find satisfaction in Him eternally. This is the hope that Paul has, the weight of glory that surpasses these (by comparison) momentary troubles. This is what Paul suggests in verse 14: "... knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us into his Presence."

It is this hope that sustains us in the present and makes us more than conquerors in the future. This is the weight of glory that far surpasses our momentary troubles.

This is as true as the day is long. However, the weight of this glory does not change our momentary struggles into hope automatically.

Tim Keller, who has influenced my thinking about faith more than any other contemporary author, has been an ordained minister since 1975 and has officiated countless memorial services where he has proclaimed the hope of the resurrection. In February of 2020, this preacher of resurrection was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In the *Atlantic*, he wrote an article entitled *Growing My Faith in the Face of Death*, in which he described the challenge of having preached the resurrection glory that awaits us and facing a terminal illness. Suddenly, he reflects, “I was like a surgeon on my own operating table wondering if I would take my own advice.”

What Keller articulated is that the weight of glory didn’t automatically take the momentary hardships and make them better. He had to do head work and heart work. He had to allow what was always an intellectual proposition of the mind to sink into the heart to become the operating principle of his life. It didn’t come easy. However, through the hard work of the soul, he was able to find more joy, more hope, more wonder in the present, even with the terminal illness, than before. What’s more, he also had more sorrow and hardship.

This head and heart work requires us to ensure that the treasure is indeed in these clay jars. The treasure is the hope of the glorious gospel. The down payment of that is the presence of the Holy Spirit—the eternal God who dwells in our hearts through faith. It is only by allowing this abiding presence in us that we can experience the head knowledge descending into our hearts.

Still, the only way to move through the valleys of the shadow of death and moments of despair and disappointment is with something that is bigger, stronger, more weightily glorious than anything in this life. The only thing that outweighs them is God—and HE does by far. He is that which we long for, because He is the impulse for eternity that resides in our hearts but cannot grasp. He is the one who descended to us in Jesus to make possible a relationship here and now and, ultimately, in a day yet to come. When we seek Him in the midst of the valleys, we find Him, because He draws especially

near to us then. And though the world may seek to swallow us up with death, only He can swallow us up with life.

Maybe you are here today and have been weighed down by something: a relationship that is falling apart; an illness that is ravaging your body; a disappointment or regret you cannot shake. All of these things serve as a reminder that our ultimate joy cannot be found in these temporal things. But if you've met Jesus and He dwells in your heart through faith, then in the midst of hardships, you, too, can be hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed, persecuted but not abandoned. Because the hope of glory in us far outweighs them all and reveals God's hope for redemption to the world. Would you pray with me? ■



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