

ANTIDOTE FOR ESCAPISM

2 Corinthians 4:7–18

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Follow along as we present the message from 2 Corinthians 4:7–18. The title of my message today is simply this: “An Antidote for Escapism.” Who of us, at one time or another, has not felt like the psalmist when he said, “O for wings like a dove to fly away and rest. I would fly to the far off desert and stay there. I would flee to some refuge from all this storm” (Psalm 55:6–7).

The Scripture that we have today is written by one of God’s servants who must have known what it was like to face the temptation of praying that prayer from Psalm 55—“O for wings like a dove to fly away and rest.”

When we read further in 2 Corinthians, chapter 11, we see the times in Paul’s life when he faced the temptation of escapism—frequent imprisonments, frequent floggings, frequent exposure to death. Five times, the thirty-nine lashes; three times, he was beaten with rods; once stoned, three times he was shipwrecked; a day and night on the open sea, probably floating on a board—he was constantly on the move. In danger of rivers, bandits, fellow Jews, Gentiles. Danger in the city, in the country, at sea, from false brethren. Hard work with sleeplessness. Hunger and thirst. Nakedness and cold. The pressure of concern for the churches. I wonder if Paul had had available to him the modern chorus based upon Psalm 55, “O for wings like a dove,” if he would have used it. “I’ll fly away to glory some glad morning, I’ll fly away.”

But we are linked, as with Paul, to Adam and to Jesus. Our linkage with Adam—being descended from him in the human flesh—means that the suffering, the death that is present, the tension in our work, the human frustration, is part of what we face. And because we are linked to Jesus, we also face the consequences of being alive with Him. For Paul, it was to face continual

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hardship. For us, it may be to tell the truth in our employment situation and risk being laid-off or not promoted. It may be to not join the crowd, to face the ridicule of a stand with Christ. Whether we are facing pressure because of our linkage to Jesus or to Adam, what is the antidote to an escapist attitude? What do we do in those times, when we are pressed to the wall and say, “Oh, I would give anything to escape from this!”

This Scripture passage this morning gives us five antidotes to escapism—truths that lived in the apostle Paul’s heart, as they were made real by the Spirit.

I. The first antidote to escapism is that we consider the treasure that is in us.

“We have this treasure in jars of clay [or, “vessels of clay”] to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7, NIV). We are the clay pot. The treasure is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the treasure is the good news of the gospel. The Lord’s treasures could have been stored in vessels of gold and silver, but He’s chosen to store them in us—clay pots. That is to say, persons who are made out of dust and who will return to the dust.

One biblical commentator has suggested that the earthen vessels that Paul is referring to here were small pottery lamps—cheap and fragile—that could be bought in the shops of Corinth. The followers of Christ are likened to such fragile clay lamps, because they bear in their frail mortal bodies light derived from the central source of Jesus Christ.

Paul knew what it was like to be the least of the apostles, the chiefest of sinners, to have no good thing dwelling in his flesh. He recognized that whatever was commendable in him came from the Lord. There was no celebrity status of glorying in the clay pot. The glory was in the Lord. When we see the Lord use someone who profoundly touches our lives, we always need to take care that

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we avoid the celebrity status of glorying in the person. But that, when we hear what God has done in the person, we glory in the Lord.

We consider this when we are tempted to escape—that those without Jesus are simply clay pots. And to the dust they'll return, and that's all they ever are. But we who know the Lord have a treasure that will endure because we're part of God's treasure in us.

II. The second antidote to escapism that Paul gives is that simply, when we are at the end of our resources, God is not at the end of His.

When we have reached our limitations, God has not reached of His. Verses 8–9 show us that the Christian life does not provide immunity from the harsh reality of living for us. Paul uses in fact four verbs to describe this harsh reality of living. The word “pressed,” which is a word we looked at when we opened 2 Corinthians. It means “persecution,” “suffering,” “to be put into a vice,” “squeezed.” Also he uses, “to be perplexed,” “to be persecuted” or “hunted down,” “to be struck down.”

William Barclay says of these four words and how Paul deals with them that we are sore pressed at every point but we are not hemmed in. We are at our wit's end, but we are never at hope's end. We are persecuted by others, but never abandoned by God. In fact, Paul specifically says, later in his life, as he is probably in prison in Rome, in his last letter to Timothy (4:17), “The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.” He was hunted down by others, but never abandoned by the Lord. Barclay says we are knocked down but not knocked out.

We realize how vital our attitudes are when we face a perplexing situation or a difficult situation. Paul simply has, as the Spirit gives to him, this mental attitude that simply indicates that the Spirit in us causes us to say, “We need never surrender. Never surrender! We may be pressed about on all sides, but we'll find that God will give us breathing space.” We may be perplexed as

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to why something is happening to us; how many times do we ask that question—why? But in the midst of our perplexity we have hope. We may feel like we're hunted down and the bad breaks have gone against us, but we know that, because of Jesus, we are not abandoned. And we may have been given a knockout blow, but we are only knocked down. We are not knocked out because of the Lord.

The hymn writer so eloquently described this, and I think he was referring to 2 Corinthians 4:8–9, “He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater. He sendeth more strength when the labors increase. To added affliction, He addeth His mercy. To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace. When we have exhausted our store of endurance, when our strength for the day is half done, when we reach the end of our hoarded resources, our Father’s full giving has only begun. His love has no limit, His grace has no measure, His power has no boundary known unto men. For out of His infinite riches in Jesus He’s given, and given, and giveth again.”

III. The third antidote to escapism that Paul gives us is that we as Christians live by the principle of death to self.

That’s the focus of 2 Corinthians 4:10,11,12,15. If we are going to share in the life of Christ, then we must also share in the death of Christ. If we are going to reign with Him, we are also going to suffer with Him. Paul’s whole point of these verses is that his service to Christ had cost him something. In fact, it had cost him everything. He could have, as a man, as a human being, simply chosen to give nominal service to the Lord. But he chose to take up his cross and obey the Word of the Lord by denying himself. Bonhoeffer said it years ago during the Nazi holocaust when he was held as a prisoner, “If anyone would come after me, let him come and die.”

The whole principle of effective Christian service Paul is driving at as an antidote to escapism is that the one who most effectively serves the Lord is the person who has evaluated where their

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treasure is and what their priorities are. Paul has looked at his priorities in life and said, “There are some things I can do without, so that others can have.” They’ve chosen to deny themselves so that, through that act of dying, life might flow to others. There are many of you who have made commitments of time. You could have used that for your own purposes, for your own self-enhancement, but you’ve chosen—by allocating your time to the service of the body of Christ—to practice some death to self, so that life might flow through to others.

The same could be said in the sphere of finances. Death to self, so that life might flow to others. Doing without so that others might have.

Arthur T. Pierson, the great minister and writer and commentator, once asked George Mueller, who founded the orphanages in England that were so marked by faith and by prayer, he said, “What’s the secret of your work and the wonderful things that God’s done through you?”

Mueller bowed his head lower and lower, until it actually hung between his knees. He was silent for a minute or two. Then he told Pierson, “Many years ago, there came a day in my life when George Mueller died. As a young man, I had many ambitions. But there came a day when I died to all these things and I said, ‘Henceforth, Lord Jesus, not my will but thine.’ From that day, God began to work in and through me.” The great evangelist, Chapman, asked General William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army, to tell him the secret of his great work. Booth replied, “Dr. Chapman, when I was a lad of seventeen, I determined that God should have all there was of William Booth.” None of self, but all of thee.

Our death is producing life elsewhere. What goes for attitudes and respect of ministry toward others goes as well for attitudes within our family life. Sometimes, in order for a relationship, a marriage, a family, to flourish, someone must yield what they feel is rightfully theirs and make a commitment to deny self, that life might flow into someone else.

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There's a sign on Hoover Dam that commemorates the fact that many persons working on Hoover Dam lost their lives. The plaque commemorates them saying, "These died, that the desert might blossom as the rose."

Paul had an attitude of giving of self to others that kept him from escapism. When we live only for self and things get bad, then we really have nothing greater than that driving us. Simply self, and that's not enough. But it was with the eye of service to the Lord and service to others that produced death in self and life in others.

IV. The fourth great antidote to escapism is in verses 13–14. It is simply this: Jesus has risen.

That helps us evaluate everything. Paul quotes from Psalm 116:10 in his statement, "I believed; therefore I have spoken." If you look back to Psalm 116, you'll find it to be the prayer of one who was entangled in the cords of death and the anguish of the grave. That psalm, in the midst of that terrible illness, reflects a man who has faith in God. Paul says, with that same spirit of faith, only a greater measure of faith because now we have Jesus, "We also believe and therefore speak."

What are we saying when we come to insurmountable times? We're saying that this problem may be beyond me—it is greater than me—but nothing is greater than the power of Jesus Christ. If Jesus has risen from the dead, then I can evaluate all things in light of that great event. Jesus has risen. Therefore, greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4).

These four antidotes to escapism, that we have looked at so far, are simply that when we are tempted to escape, we stop for a moment and ponder that we have this treasure in us, that when we are at the end of our resources, we are not at the end of God's. That we live by the principle of death to self. And we live with the knowledge that Jesus has risen.

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V. And fifth and final, our antidote to escapism is that our eyes are on the invisible and the eternal (verses 16–18).

“Therefore we do not lose heart [There’s that word again which we looked at last week; it’s the same word as in verse 1: “We do not ‘bad out.’” “We do not ‘drop out.’” “We do not ‘burn out’”]. Though outwardly we are wasting away” (2 Corinthians 4:16, NIV). We may feel like the little Sunday School kid that said, “I wonder what I was begun for when I am so soon done for.” Considering the outward nature of passing away, inwardly, we are being renewed.

Our life is becoming stronger in the Lord as our bodies become weaker physically. Paul then says, as he measures that, that our current suffering, our current pressure or outward squeezing, is light and momentary (verse 17). There are two things that describe the pressure we’re feeling. It’s both “light” and it’s “momentary.” You say, “Paul could say the pressures against him were light, but you should see the pressures against me.” Consider again the pressures that he faced that he called light: frequent imprisonments, frequent floggings, frequent exposure to death, being whipped five times with the thirty-nine lashes, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, a day and a night in the sea, etc. He calls all of these “light.”

Why does he call them light? Because Paul lived, as a Christian, with this imagery of life on a scale. On one side of the success scale is all the pressures and the problems now. On the other side of the success scale is the eternal weight of glory that God is preparing for us. Our problem is letting the present moment outweigh the future. But when glory is put upon the scale, when it appears to us, we shall finally be what God has called us to be—changed forever into the nature of Jesus Christ, living eternally with Him. Once we have tasted one minute of heaven, it will make everything by comparison seem light and momentary.

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That's what Paul is getting a hold of. Therefore, we can endure, because this momentary lightness of suffering is working out for us, literally, "hyperbole unto hyperbole" eternal weight of glory. It's almost impossible to translate what he's saying here. He's saying, "'surpassing,' 'excessive' weight of glory that is coming to us as sons and daughters of God."

When D. L. Moody was dying, he looked up, and his last words were simply this, "Earth is receding, heaven is approaching. This is my crowing day." When Christians are in trouble, they have something that non-Christians never have. When Christians are in trouble, they have Jesus. They have His promise. They have the certainty of His resurrection. They have the joy of knowing that sins are forgiven, that our habitation is eternally with God, that in God we live and move and have our being and everything is measured by that. Paul, therefore, says, "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18, NIV). We have to ask ourselves when we read a Scripture like that, are we letting the realities that govern our life be the things that are seen or the things that are unseen? What drives us most? The things that we can see or the things we cannot, which are nevertheless true?

You may have come here today facing things you felt like escaping from. God has given you a Scripture to put within your heart and to give you courage in the battle and tell you to go out from this place in triumph, because the Lord is never going to abandon you. And whatever you're suffering now is not to be compared with what God has laid up for you as His child.

Closing Prayer

Our gracious Father, we come to You in this moment and we ask Your blessing upon our lives as we take Your Word into our hearts. Sometimes, Lord, when the water of Your Word is offered to us, we may turn it aside, because in that particular moment we are not thirsty. But if our hearts

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have come today thirsty, we pray that this water of Your Word will become something very cool and refreshing and joyous to our lives, that we may drink it in—all of it, Lord. I pray especially for that person here today that is being called to die to self so that they may have time to give to You. Help us, Lord, to evaluate what we're doing with our time. What we're doing with our money. What we're doing for ourselves versus what we can do for You and for others. Help us to know that it's only when we give ourselves away that we are truly happy and truly joyous. There are others here, Lord, that need to do some dying in some personal relationships within marriage and family. Who need to quit standing on their rights and what makes them happy and what satisfies them and what will bring them joy, and lay that aside and—like You—take a towel and wash the feet of somebody in their family. Maybe their wife or husband. Deliver us, Lord, from an attitude of relationships that lives by “What can I get out of this? What are you doing for me? Am I happy?” to an attitude that sees someone very close to us in the same light that You see them in—someone to love. You gave up so much to love us, Lord, and we got so much from Your love. And in giving, You received. In giving up Your life, You got it back, and that's the same way with us, Lord. When we truly give from our heart, when we yield, when we die to self, You give us back life that is new and transforming. Teach us, Holy Spirit, to yield, to live with the principle of dying to self. Give each person facing difficult times courage, so that we don't simply escape but overcome. In the name of the Lord, we ask. Amen.