

So We Do Not Lose Heart 2024
Psalm 139:1-2, 13-18 2 Cor. 4:7, 13-5:1, 6-7

Psalm 139:1-2, 13-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

2 Corinthians 4:7, 13-5:1, 6-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight.

When I went to work for a fairly large Fortune 1000 corporation,
I was thrilled and couldn't believe they actually chose to hire me,
and for the first few months I was afraid they'd change their mind.

I felt anxious and concerned that my new employer would decide
that I really wasn't as sharp & capable as they had thought I was,
and that maybe I really wasn't worth all that they were paying me,
or even worse, what if I made a foolish or horrendous mistake
and was replaced by someone who'd do the job better than me?

That sort of self-doubt and negativity is not about healthy humility,
but is a destructive focus on self, our flaws, failings & mistakes,
which I believe may be derived from influences of our culture.

When I was in school mistakes and wrong answers were marked boldly
and circled in red ink to make sure that I knew I didn't get it right,
and all through our society we do tend to highlight & emphasize
failures and mistakes, & we focus on whatever we see as wrong.

Not I made a mistake, but that I am a mistake.

I think we're trained to equate our own sense of self-worth and value
by how well we have achieved & succeeded compared to someone else,
which can also influence how we visualize & perceive God.

When I say the word 'God', what image or images come to mind?
Do you perceive God as angry, distraught or disappointed in you?,
and are you anxious or worried about how it will be
in death to stand before the presence of the Lord?

Do you think God will sigh and say to you,
"I can't believe how badly you failed and messed things up.
I was expecting so much more faithful and better from you."

Growing up, I imagined an angry & frightful God, reluctant to save,
who I hoped wasn't paying very close attention, since I'd never
measure up, not even on my best day.

Many folks carry around and repeat to ourselves an ever-growing list
of their failings and those things we don't like about ourselves,
and ways that we consider ourselves unworthy and unattractive,
and how readily we'll accept and believe that we're not good enough -

- people afraid to sing because they don't have perfect pitch,
- folks hesitant to speak their opinion or join in the fun
because they're afraid that they might make a mistake...
... but that's not the way our God of grace intends for us to live.
That is not the way our God of grace intends for us to live.

That unhealthy focus on the negative and our holding onto faults
can cause us to be more afraid of God and God's judgment,
**then we are capable of believing and receiving
the truth of God's love and promises of blessing.**

Now that isn't to deny or minimize the effect of our human sin,
or to suggest that our hurtful words, attitudes & wrong-doing
are not destructive, and not sometimes cruel and wounding ,
but neither, in God's eyes are those the things which define us.

**No, we're not lost sinners in the hands of an angry & disappointed God
but we are the beloved, invited into the embrace of a gracious God.**
Through Scripture, God has declared that we're far more than
just the sum of our failings, weaknesses, faults and mistakes.

We are, each and every one of us, the uniquely and lovingly created,
& wonderfully crafted works as God intends, as in the Psalm, vs. 13-14,
For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I
am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

Psalm 139 celebrates God's opinion, who already knows us completely,
and yet who also fully knew & loved us even before we existed, vs. 16, 4
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for
me, when none of them as yet existed. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

Before you or I even existed, God had already chosen us,
made his decision to love and to embrace us with grace,

and so obviously it had nothing to do with any good we had ever done.

As the psalmist proclaims, God knows us fully and intimately,
and the Lord has always known us entirely, warts and all –
- **yet God still chose to love us in wonderful and healing ways
that are way beyond our comprehension or explanation.**

The simple message is this,
God isn't even a little bit surprised that I fail, mess up and sin,
nor is God shocked when my faith falters into fear and doubt,
or that I've not yet managed to live consistently faithful.

And here's the grace, the eternal patience and pay-off, vs. 17-18

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end— I am still with you.

God already loved you, even before knit together in mother's womb
well aware of your life's journey even before you existed,
and beyond our human understanding, **the Lord is
with us and for us all the way, even beyond the end.**

**No creaturely power can defeat the power of Lord God's grace and love.
So even if we deny or reject that love & healing,
God keeps on loving us and trying to save us,
for the God who created us
has given us a destiny, our destiny to be loved by God.**

The reason we are created, and the very purpose for our being,
is in order to be recipients of God's love and blessings...
...so our task is to see where God is at work in the world and join in.

And because God knows us completely and does love us without limit,
we do not suffer or struggle alone, but always, **God is with us -
protecting us, supporting us, sustaining us and caring for us.**

God's embrace comforts and guides us through all our tribulation,
not merely to get by & survive, but to walk in the blessing of hope.
God chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world,
by grace, already a plan to heal and save his lost children.

As the Apostle Paul describes, writing to the Corinthians, vs. 7

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

God is the potter and we are the clay. God stoops down,
scoops up some mud, and molds that mud shaping it into human form.

God is the Master Potter, we are the clay being formed into a vessel
into which God then breathes and we are given the gift of life,
to which God declares, **"You are a treasure to me!"**
(even if we're not feeling much like a treasure)

It's incredible that despite our **mortal** limitations & fragility,
God wonderfully entrusts and places his own treasure into us.

And like wrapping a priceless diamond in a filthy muddy rag,

God has placed extraordinary treasure in each one of us, 1 Cor 3:16

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

**By that Spirit within we have the capacity to know and love Christ,
and to walk guided by the very indwelling presence & power of God.**

Therefore, Paul's confidence, trust and assurance aren't based

on his own skills or abilities, **but solely in the promises of God,**

**therefore, his future in Christ was way more important
than any struggles, difficulties or failings in life.**

The Christians in Corinth

were focused on the cover, rather than the contents of the book,

evaluating and judging by the standards of this world,

rather than focusing on the Kingdom of God that awaits,

which is to miss recognizing what really matters most.

The Apostle explaining his mission and trust in God, writes,

that adversity could not and did not distract or disturb him

because his focus was on the glory of God's coming promises...

... vs. 16-18, 5:1, 7

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is **preparing us for an eternal weight of glory** beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens... **for we walk by faith, not by sight.**

Paul endured struggle and adversity not as a mistake or failure,

but as one of the ways that God builds and develops our faith ...

... preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.

His focus was on the sure and certain glorious promise of the Lord.

The promise is that this physical life isn't it, but that there is more,

in fact, our lives are but a pale shadow to the glory that awaits

for then we shall live forever in the kingdom of God.

In Seminary, when I was selected to go to Africa and study in Ghana,

we began our studies as a class long before the actual travel,

since we didn't know each other well, or anything about Ghana.

Several months before we went to the airport we started preparing,

our class met to learn about the people, culture & customs,

to get a sense of where we were going & who would be there.

We also needed to know one another better and build real relationships

that could sustain throughout the challenges of traveling together,

so we spent months preparing for our distant journey.

Recognizing the critical importance of making preparations,

and since we're going to be with God for a very, very long time,

wouldn't it be wise to use this life preparing for eternity? ...

**... which is how Paul urges the Corinthians to live out their lives,
focused on the sure and certain truth and promises of the Lord.**

Now Paul is not minimizing or denying that our mortal lives
can be difficult, disappointing & even seem hopeless at times.

**But we can look beyond our troubles, problems and disappointments
by trusting God to fulfill his promised kingdom and glory,
& that the Lord is up to something amazing, glorious & wonderful.**

For the Christian, our life is not defined by the problems we face,
but by God's promises of love, hope, joy and steadfast mercy,
for even amid our darkest and most difficult seasons of life,
yet God is with us, guiding, sustaining and blessing us.

But has Paul got it right? Is that really truthful or just words,
just a childish illusion or a verbal placebo of false comfort.
Can we reliably trust them, even amid disaster & tribulation?

**Several years ago I tested them, and was tested by them,
when I sat with my mother on the terrible night of her death.**

Sitting by her hospital bed, I didn't feel like a pastor right then,
but was her frightened, wounded, hurting and grieving little boy,
as I desperately read this 2 Cor. passage aloud,
hoping for hope in that crushing place of loss,
that place where faith is either real, or else it fails.

In my grief and sadness, in the distress of that long night,
of course I wondered, but are these words really true?
And will I for sure, ever see and know my mother again?

Well, that night was special, in a way I'll always treasure,
a gentle and powerful sense of full assurance and security
swept over me in a way that transformed that hospital room,

as the presence of the Holy Spirit filled and surrounded us,
reassuring & comforting me that everything would be alright --
that she was going to a better and wonderful place,
and that I could entrust her in hope to Jesus Christ.

**And so I can and I do live into hope by clinging to that hope,
based upon God's promises, faithfulness and steadfast mercy.**

The point is, that as Paul writes in this Corinthians passage,
**even the amid our darkest and most difficult seasons of life,
yet God is still with us, sustaining and blessing us,
and providing signs of God's loving hope and grace...**

**... and yes, I do truly believe and trust entirely
that we do indeed serve such an amazing and wonderful God,
and that we are his beloved treasure wrapped in clay.**

**The Christian life is not defined by the problems we face in life,
but by promises, gracious love and steadfast mercy of the Lord.**

For we walk by faith, not by sight (vs. 7)

And that, is the hope, the promise and truth
celebrate in our worship & life together...

that we

... I come to the end—I am still with you.

As is written in Lamentations 3,

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness... therefore I will hope in him. (Lamentations 3:21-25)