

We tend to read scripture in small chunks. Whether in church or privately, we rarely read entire books of the Bible at one sitting. Maybe we read a full chapter, or maybe it's a part of a chapter.

Or maybe we just read a verse, or see an internet meme with a verse lifted out of context. It may be a great verse. The last verse of today's Epistle lesson is a popular one:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."¹

It's a great verse. But it was never written to be read in isolation. It's part of a larger context.

This June, we're reading 2nd Corinthians. But we're only getting 4 chunks of it. Thus we sometimes miss the larger picture, the overarching argument.²

Last week for our Epistle lesson we read a chunk from the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5. This week we read from the middle of chapter 5.

BUT, we also use these same chapters for one of our more popular Epistle readings for funeral.

On top of that chapter 4 is often used as the Epistle reading for diaconal ordinations.

So we hear from these 2 great chapters in different contexts. But we can easily miss the wonderful overarching argument in this part of 2nd Corinthians. It is supremely good news. But when we read chapters 4 and 5 in pieces-parts we can easily miss it.

So what is this overarching theme? It is that we lead a paradoxical existence, and we are often too focused on one side of who we are and forget about the other side. We forget who we truly are and what we're created to be. We get too focused on our life in this world, and forget that we are destined for living for eternity with God.

And this wonderful theme comes out all through chapters 4 and 5 of 2nd Corinthians.

Early in chapter 4, Paul talks about how we are custodians of spiritual treasure. We have knowledge of who Jesus is. We are ambassadors of his message and teachings. And we also share in his resurrection and his glory.

It's not our glory. It's God's glory that can shine through us. Paul's image is that we are clay jars who contain God's treasure.³

¹ 2Cor 5:17, ESV

² Today I'm not even going to touch on the fact that the two letters we call 1st and 2nd Corinthians may have been stitched together from texts from 4 to 6 other letters—that's a different topic for a different time! In this chunk, Paul is also trying to defend himself from accusations levied against him—I'm going to also bracket that off for a different time!

³ 2Cor 4:7

Yes, we are like fragile clay jars. We are flawed, we are fallible, we are imperfect human beings.

And yet God entrusts us with sharing his love with the world. And through our baptisms, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are given a piece of God's glory. And we are given the gift of eternal life.

That reminder that we clay jars who contain God's spiritual treasure is one of the reasons this Epistle is often read at ordinations. In spite of our flaws, both ordained leaders and all baptized Christians are called to share the spiritual treasure God has given us. To share God's love. To exhibit just a little piece of his glory in our world.

In fact, in last week's Epistle reading, Paul coins a term. He says we carry "an eternal weight of glory." An eternal weight of glory. C. S. Lewis has a wonderful essay titled, "The Weight of Glory." And I'll come back what he says in just a moment.

We heard about the weight of glory in our Epistle reading last week. We also often read this section at funerals. In its larger context, Paul says this:

"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."⁴

It's a remarkable statement. First, our outer nature is wasting away, but our inner nature is renewed. Yes, we are all subject to entropy. We are subject to the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics. Over time, everything breaks down. And this includes us, it includes our bodies. Eventually, everyone dies. That's why we often use this reading at funerals.

And yet, while those processes of physical decay are happening, we can still grow as people. We can grow spiritually. We can continue to grow into what and who God creates us to be. It's a remarkable statement, and a tremendous paradox.

And then Paul sums up all the suffering we can undergo in this life with a remarkable term. He calls all the difficulties, all the pains, all the heartaches life can bring as nothing more than a "slight momentary affliction."

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul often talks about the difficulties he has endured. There are laundry lists from time to time of the things Paul has suffered, and they're not insignificant.⁵ Persecution. Imprisonment. Severe beatings. Hunger. Thirst. Being shipwrecked. And the lists go on and on. And eventually Paul will be beheaded in Rome. But Paul sums up all of these difficulties in the brief term, "slight momentary afflictions."

⁴ 2Cor 4:16-18

⁵ For example, later on in the same Epistle: 2Cor 11:23-28

It's not that Paul is a masochist. It's not that Paul is playing down the difficulties of life. But when compared to what awaits us in God's eternal kingdom, all the difficult things we experience in life are nothing more than a "slight momentary affliction."

And again, as Paul says, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure."

There's an old accusation that some Christians are so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good. The charge is often leveled at Christianity that it's all about future gratification. Karl Marx famously called religion "the opiate of the masses." He asserted that talk of future hope allowed the powerful to abuse the downtrodden, numbing them to their present condition. You may suffer now, but you'll get rewarded later. Pie in the sky, by and by.

But I think that applies more to past generations. The danger for 21st century Christians is that we get so focused on our earthly life and our earthly difficulties that we forget our spiritual nature, and we forget our heavenly destiny.

That's what C.S. Lewis writes about in his essay, "The Weight of Glory." I've quoted from this work before, but it bears repeating.

In "The Weight of Glory" C.S. Lewis speaks of who we really are. He reminds us of the importance of our future transformation as Christians, and the glory we will one day have. He says, "The dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship."⁶

He further says, "Your Christian neighbor... is holy in almost the same way as (the Blessed Sacrament), for in him (in your fellow Christian), Christ (who is) Glory Himself, is truly (present)."⁷

Because of that, Lewis says, "There are no ordinary people."

He says, "You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit."⁸

C.S. Lewis's point is that our future glory carries a tremendous weight of responsibility now. Because we are immortal, because we are so valuable in God's sight, because we have such a wonderful future in store for us, we need to begin to treat each other better and love each other more, now.

That's a startling, unsettling, and yet wonderful reminder. Remember who your neighbor is, and act accordingly. The people you encounter at school, at work—remember who

⁶ C.S. Lewis "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory* 14-15

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

they really are. The people you may find difficult to deal with—remember who they really are. The people struggling and suffering in India, in the Middle East, in Lubbock, Texas—remember who they really are.

These are people you may be spending eternity with. These are people for whom Christ died. These are people who will one day shine from within, filled with the fullness of Christ's glory. Your fellow Christians are people God will one day transform to such a degree that if they walked up to you now in their future, glorified state, you'd be tempted to bow down and worship them.

So live differently now. Treat people differently now. Remember who you are and what you're created to be. Be vessels and beacons and reflectors of Christ's glory. Yes, you're clay jars, but you contain spiritual treasure, God's treasure. Live accordingly, and treat other people accordingly

That's also where Paul ends our Epistle lesson today. Paul says,
"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view."⁹

And then he famously says,
"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"¹⁰

Live into this new creation. Live into your eternal identity.
God loves this world. But God created you to outlast this world.
You bear an eternal weight of glory.

⁹ 2Cor 5:16

¹⁰ 2Cor 5:17