Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue our sermon series titled, ▶ "Suffering Embraced." It is designed to help us think through and live through suffering.

The biblical text we're studying today is ▶ 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, written by the apostle Paul. From this text, we're going to learn about some good purposes for our suffering. Specifically, in the first part of our text, we are going to discover how our suffering can benefit others. In the last part, we are going to see how our suffering can benefit us.

This gives meaning to suffering that might otherwise seem random and senseless. The holocaust survivor and philosopher, Victor Frankl explains the importance of meaning to suffering when he says, "If we can find something to live for—if we can find something to put at the center of our lives—even the worst suffering becomes bearable."[1]

In ▶ 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The immediately preceding context helps us understand what Paul is saying here. ▶ "This treasure" of which Paul speaks is "the light of the gospel" from verse 4. It is the good news about the person and work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. According to verse 6, it is the light that "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It is the message and reality of our salvation.

Paul says, we have "this treasure" in ▶ "jars of clay." Earthenware vessels were commonplace in the first century. They were inexpensive

[1] https://www.azquotes.com/author/5121-Viktor_E_Frankl

and fragile. Given that “this treasure” represents “the light of the gospel,” Paul may have had in mind small earthenware oil lamps, such as the one shown on the screen. The light from the lamp is the gospel, and the clay vessels are believers who carry the gospel.

The intended contrast is the transforming power of the light to bring salvation to the world versus the fragility and weakness of the believers who carry the light.

One might consider our weakness a liability. That’s the way the world thinks. Weakness is always viewed as a disadvantage. We think a strong metal vessel would be better than a weak clay one. Metal would be much harder to break. And even if it were to be broken, the metal could be repaired.

But in God’s economy, our weakness is an advantage, not a liability. In fact, Paul says our weakness is intended ▶ “to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” Our weakness shows God’s strength.

Paul continues in ▶ verses 8 and 9, saying,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

Here we have four couplets. Each couplet begins with our weakness or suffering and ends with God’s strength to sustain us through it.

In the first couplet, ▶ “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.” The term “afflicted” literally means to be pressed. In this case, it is to be pressed down or squeezed with life’s troubles. And we are not just subject to pressure in one or two ways, but “in every way.”

Nevertheless, while we are indeed afflicted, by God's grace and power, we are "not crushed." God's power sustains us in our weakness. We can get through the affliction with God's help.

In the second couplet, Paul says we are ▶ "perplexed, but not driven to despair." To be perplexed is to be at a loss or bewildered concerning the suffering we face. It makes no sense. Our suffering often seems unexplained and undeserved.

Nevertheless, while we are indeed perplexed, by God's grace and power, we are "not driven to despair." We are never hopeless. God's power sustains us.

In the third couplet, Paul says, we are ▶ "persecuted, but not forsaken." The word, "persecuted" literally describes being hatefully driven out or expelled or rejected.

Nevertheless, while we are indeed persecuted, we are "not forsaken." We are not utterly abandoned. The Lord is with us and sustains us.

In the fourth and final couplet, Paul says we are ▶ "struck down, but not destroyed." To be "struck down" is to be hit with such force by troubles that we are knocked off our feet. But though we are "struck down" we are "not destroyed." We may be down, but we're not out. God's power sustains us.

Having worked through the couplets, some of you may be thinking, "Paul says we're not crushed, not driven to despair, not forsaken, and not destroyed, but it sure feels like I am. Is there something uniquely wrong with me?"

Regardless of how weak we have felt or how weak we feel now, the reality is God's strength is sufficient to sustain us in our weakness and suffering.

In ▶ verses 10 and 11, Paul returns to God's redemptive purpose of our weakness. He says we are . . .

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.
>
> ▶ ESV 2 Corinthians 4:11 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.

Being ▶ "given over to death for Jesus' sake" sums up the hardships already mentioned in the life of a believer: being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down.

But the suffering is not without purpose. It is ▶ "so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." It is in this kind of death that the life of Jesus is most apparent in us. Jesus is never more visible in us than when we are in our weakest moments. When others can find no other reason for our hope, no other reason for our joy, no other reason for our endurance, they are most likely to see Jesus in us, the one who sustains us.

In ▶ verse 12, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

When death is at work in us in the form of hardships and suffering, it can bring life to others as they see the light of Jesus shine through our fragile jars of clay.

In ▶ verse 13, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:13 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,

In this verse, the quotation, “I believed, and so I spoke” is from Psalm 116:10. Paul uses the quote as a kind of hyperlink to the entire psalm. Read Psalm 116 and you will find that the author recounts his own experience of great hardship. But God was faithful to sustain him.
So, in response to God’s sustaining provision, the psalmist believes in the strength of the Lord to save, and he speaks of it to other people.

Here in verse 13, Paul is identifying with the psalmist. Paul also believes in the saving power of the Lord in the midst of hardship. And so, like the psalmist, he is resolved to speak of it to others so that they may experience it as well.

In ▶ verse 14, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:14 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

Notice Paul’s focus on others. The phrase, “bring us with you into his presence” shows his focus is on seeing others brought into the presence of Jesus, having been saved through faith and then rewarded through faithfulness in following. Paul is dedicated to enduring hardship that others may flourish in Jesus.

Paul continues in ▶ verse 15:

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:15 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.

Paul's focus is not on more and more pain relief and comfort for himself. Instead, he focuses on helping God's grace extend to more and more people, that they may give thanks and glory to God.

Our suffering can benefit others if we navigate it well.

I think of my friend Ricky Amano, who is a regular speaker here at Moon Valley. Twelve years ago, Ricky suffered the kind of brain aneurysm that takes the life of most of its victims. Ricky survived but has lingering brain issues. Which is ironic because he is one of the smartest guys I know.

Some days he is dizzy all day. Some days he has difficulty focusing. Sometimes he blanks out. He has to be careful to manage the stressors in his life, and that can be hard when you are a primary caregiver for an aging parent who cannot live independently. I suspect there is a certain daily weight of concern about what he can and cannot do and what may or may not happen next. And he says his greatest fear is public speaking.

So, of course, we make him preach.

We don't make him. He chooses to. And he is so impactful, in part, because the light of Jesus shines more brightly from his fragile jar of clay.

Not only can our suffering benefit others, it can also benefit us. Paul begins to explain this in ▶ verse 16:

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

Notice the contrast between the "outer self," which is seen and "the inner self," which is unseen.

That which is seen includes our "outer self," which is wasting away. The pressures of life in this fallen world take their toll on our bodies. We can see the hair thinning, the wrinkles deepening, the age spots multiplying, the waistline changing, the walk slowing. In Paul's case, he could actually see the scars left from being stoned and beaten for his faith.

There is also the suffering that comes from seeing loved ones waste away. Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Nevertheless, while our outer self is wasting away, Paul says "our inner self is being renewed day by day." Outwardly, the things we see are getting worse, but inwardly, the things we cannot see are actually getting better. And remarkably, the things unseen get better—not in spite of the hardships we face—but because of them.

How can that be?

There are at least two reasons. Here's the first: suffering builds character. Paul explains this in ▶ Romans 5:3-4, saying,

> ESV Romans 5:3 . . . we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

Endurance, character, and hope are refined in the crucible of suffering. I doubt that any person ever became truly great in character without suffering greatly. Among other things, suffering teaches us to rely on God and not ourselves.

But there is another important reason suffering makes us better in unseen ways. When we faithfully endure suffering as part of living the Christian life, we will be eternally rewarded. Suffering well in this life is an unseen investment in eternity.

Paul explains this in ▶ verses 17 and 18:

> ESV 2 Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 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.

Paul describes our affliction in this life as ▶ "light." It is a translation of the Greek word, ἐλαφρός. When taken literally, it refers to having very little weight. Figuratively, it describes a burden that is easy to bear or insignificant or no big deal.

If we stopped right here, we might have a bone to pick with Paul. Because most of us would certainly not characterize our worst suffering as "easy to bear" or "insignificant" or "no big deal."

But before we stone Paul for his insensitivity, I want to show you that he is not trivializing our hardship. In fact, the persuasiveness of his argument is based on the fact that our hardships can be extremely difficult to bear.

Imagine an ancient measuring scale with two sides hanging from a central pivot.

On one side, we put all our suffering on this earth. Every pain, every loss, every stress, every hardship, every disappointment, every betrayal, every gut punch, every dream shattered. Put every bit of it on one side. That is the collective weight of our suffering. It can be enormously heavy.

Now, on the other side, goes what our text describes as the ▶ weight of glory. We thought that the suffering was heavy. But the glory outweighs

the suffering by so much that it is ▶ "beyond all comparison." The scale bottoms out under the weight of glory.

Paul is saying, as difficult as our hardships can be in this life, they are light compared to the "weight of glory" that we are going to experience. The point is not that our hardships are light, but that they are light ***in comparison*** to the tremendous weight of glory we will enjoy.

And the enormous chasm between the relative lightness of affliction and the weight of glory is widened still further by the fact that the affliction is ▶ "momentary," while the glory is "eternal."

That leaves us with an important question: What is the ▶ weight of glory?

You might think that the weight of glory refers to the eternal salvation all believers will enjoy—you know, being in the presence of the Lord with perfect resurrected bodies in heaven where there is no more sin, no more tears, no more suffering. That will certainly be glorious.

But it seems that Paul has something else in mind because he says our affliction is ▶ "preparing for us" the weight of glory. The original Greek word translated "preparing" means to bring about or to produce or to create. One English translation renders it "earning."[2] So, whatever the weight of glory is, our affliction somehow brings it about.

This seems to rule out the weight of glory being our eternal salvation because we do not earn eternal salvation through affliction or our response to it; we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone.

[2] New Jerusalem Bible.

Also, the weight of glory seems to be a weight to which more can be added.[3] It is something accumulated.[4] As such, more suffering can bring more glory.[5] Again, this does not describe our eternal salvation.

I believe the weight of glory refers to the eternal rewards we will one day receive from the Lord for not losing heart, for not giving up on the Christian life, for faithfully persevering in following Jesus in the face of hardship and suffering.

Every hardship, every trial, every ordeal presents us with an opportunity—an opportunity to turn that momentary weight of affliction into an eternal weight of glory when we do not lose heart, when we do not give up on following Jesus.

And this is a powerful motivation to persevere. Being faithful through trials is a highly leveraged investment in eternity.

Here is the big idea: ▶ When we faithfully endure in our momentary state of suffering, we joyfully invest in our eternal weight of glory.

When we faithfully endure, we joyfully invest.

That means that no suffering is ever senseless or wasted or random. For the faithful follower of Jesus, a scar can be a score.

To be sure, suffering is not meritorious in and of itself, as if we should seek it. It is our faithful endurance of unavoidable suffering that is commendable before God.

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[3] Harris, Murray J., "2 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans–Galatians* (Revised Edition), ed. by Tremper Longman III & Garland, David E. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), XI, 472.
[4] BDAG.
[5] Harris, Murray J., *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.

What exactly will our eternal weight of glory be like?

God has revealed to us in our text the general sense of how wonderful our eternal weight of glory will be. It is beyond all comparison.

But Scripture does not spell out for us precisely what it will be like. It provides tantalizing glimpses, but few details. Rewards are variously described as a treasure, an inheritance, a restful enjoyment, an opportunity to reign with Jesus, a divine commendation, a royal welcome, a special honor, and a special experience of joy.[6]

Perhaps God has not revealed more because we wouldn't understand it if he did. We must take it by faith. But it is not a blind faith. If the God who created the universe says it will be beyond comparison, we have good reason to trust him.

Another question is: How exactly are we to faithfully endure suffering? What does faithful endurance look like?

Back in ▶ verse 17, Paul says "affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory." Then, in verse 18, he describes our part in the process, saying that affliction does its job of producing glory: ▶ "as ***we*** look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen." This syntax of the original Greek implies a conditional force and suggests that the way we look at our suffering determines whether it adds to our weight of glory.[7]

The original Greek word translated, "look" is σκοπέω. It is to pay careful attention to something,[8] often to determine what it is worth.[9] In our text,

[6] Wall, Joe L., *Going for the Gold* (Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2013), 78-87.
[7] Belleville, Linda L., *2 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1996).
[8] BDAG.
[9] Belleville.

Paul is inviting us to carefully consider the comparative worth of the things that are seen versus the things that are unseen.

The things that are seen include our health, our wealth, our status, our appearance, our comfort, and our performance in this life on earth. These things are highly valued in our culture. And suffering is widely viewed as a hindrance to them all.

But Paul says, ▶ "the things that are seen are transient." They will not last.

In contrast, the things that are unseen include some of the things we have already covered. Bringing life to others as they see the light of Jesus shine through our suffering. Being refined in Christlike character in the furnace of affliction. Adding to our weight of glory as we faithfully endure suffering. In all these things, suffering is not a hindrance, but a means to exceedingly valuable ends. Paul says ▶ "the things that are unseen are eternal." They will last forever.

We put ourselves in a position to endure suffering well when we carefully consider the eternal value of the things suffering can produce. We can then embrace suffering by faith. Which brings us back to the ▶ big idea: When we faithfully endure in our momentary state of suffering, we joyfully invest in our eternal weight of glory.

Sixteen years ago, Cathy's stepfather, Gene, died suddenly. Gene was sitting at his computer, probably hunting for some collectible on e-bay, when he had a massive heart attack and died in his chair after one last mouse click.

I don't know if Gene was a believer or not. When he passed, I wondered: Have missed some opportunities to talk with him about Jesus over the years because I wanted to avoid the awkwardness of it?

Sometimes I think, “I don’t want to force my views on anybody. I don’t want to offend.” But I wonder if sometimes those are just nice-sounding rationalizations for me not wanting to be uncomfortable. I’m not always sure. I don’t want to be a jerk, but I do want to bring life.

I think it is good to mull such things. Not as some big guilt trip. Not as a form of self-condemnation. But as an important reminder. Life is short. Opportunities are limited. Eternity is a long time. When we faithfully endure, we joyfully invest.

Last Sunday, I mentioned that my daughter Candace was to undergo her tenth neurosurgery on Tuesday, and many of you have been praying for her. Thank you. I am happy to report that the surgery was successful, and the prognosis is good. She is home recovering.

On Thursday morning, I had breakfast with my wife Cathy. As we recounted with profound gratefulness how God has sustained us through the years, we remembered one of Candace’s surgeries many years ago when she was maybe eight years old. She was just about to be wheeled in for surgery. Her vital signs were beginning to fade from pressure in her head so great it made her eyes cross. Cathy and I were so fearful that Candace must have noticed.

In that moment, our eight-year-old tried to comfort us, saying, “Don’t worry. If I die, I will be with Jesus.”

It was a light shining from a little jar of clay.

Candace will soon be 45. And she will have yet another scar, a long one.

We all have scars of one kind or another—vestiges of suffering. Suffering is not always physical.

- It may be the feeling of loneliness and rejection from being single.
- It may be the betrayal of a spouse or friend.
- It may be the gut-wrenching struggle to parent a wayward and ungrateful child.
- It may be the heartache of watching your spouse ravaged by dementia and then taken.
- It may be a generalized, free-floating anxiety that seems to dog your every step.
- It may the ghosting from friends who have stereotyped you as one of those dangerously narrow-minded Bible thumpers.
- It may be the feeling of shame that comes from dutifully caring for an aging parent for whom you can never seem to do enough.

But we look to the eternal things that are unseen.

This is my hope for you. I imagine you appearing before Jesus. He's smiling. He notices your scars, the seen and the unseen. He reaches out to gently touch them. He says, "These are for me, aren't they?"

And then he points to his own scars, on his hands and his feet and his side, and he says, "These are for you. Enter your rest. Great is your reward. Enjoy your eternal weight of glory. Well done, my good and faithful servant. Well done."

Let's pray.

Lord, help us to embrace the truth that when we faithfully endure in our momentary state of suffering, we joyfully invest in our eternal weight of glory. Amen.