

2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-5:1
A HOUSE NOT MADE WITH HANDS

“If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” This is one of these philosophical questions that people ask from time to time and to which there is probably no answer. It is a philosophical thought experiment that raises questions about what we see, what we observe, how we perceive the world. You can answer the question with science and how sound works: does it make a sound? Well, we only know if there is someone there to hear it! So often, we live with a view of the world that says “the only things that exist are the things that we can see or hear; if we can’t see or hear these things, then we don’t accept that they exist!” Does my hand still exist? I’ve put it in my pocket and now none of us can see my hand; does it still exist if we can’t see it? At night, does the sun still exist? We can’t see it on our side of the planet; because we can’t see it, has it stopped existing?

There are all sorts of things that we take on trust or because we have evidence to bolster our understanding. At night, we can’t see the sun, but we have evidence that the sun still exists, scientific evidence, but also news from our friends on the other side of the planet that they can see the sun! You may not be able to see my hand, but you can take it on trust from me that it is still there and then I can demonstrate it too you again by taking it out of my pocket! I suppose the biggest question in this “seeing is believing” question is God: “we can’t see God therefore He doesn’t exist” and some people will make that argument; why would we believe in anything that we can’t see or prove and so they resist any notion of believing in anything they can’t see or prove. “*Faith is...*” (*Hebrews 11:1*) The very nature of faith is understanding and believing in God that we can’t prove or see!

Paul’s whole piece in 2 Corinthians 4 is “What are you seeing? What are you looking at?” As I said earlier, it seems as if life for the Christians in Corinth was under pressure. We’re not told why, but Paul talks about life “*Wasting away*” and “*our light and momentary troubles*”; we have little idea as to what he means by these words, but we can imagine. For the first century Christians there were times when they were persecuted for their faith: “Caesar is Lord” said Roman society and their authorities; “Jesus is Lord” said the church and there were times when these two cultures clashed and it seemed as if there would be only one winner as the Christians were persecuted for their faith. Perhaps it was simply that people were sick. Maybe Paul was feeling his age; he certainly had some recurring problem to deal with and it may well have been some kind of sickness in his body or his mind. The first century church also had to deal with questions of faith – what do we believe; what should we believe? There was more than one answer to that question!

It is not hard to translate all of that into our world. Life for us can be a struggle at times for all of the same reasons. As part of the church, it hurts to see the church struggle in our Scotland, where people seem not to want to know about Christian faith and congregations struggle to have resources of people and money to carry on. Some are getting old and a bit more frail and life is more of a struggle than it used to be; we’re not used to that and not happy with it. Some of us are sick and that weighs us down individually and as a church: you can see the church family struggle as a whole when its individual members are struggling. The Church finds it hard to deal with issues that divide us and we’re not sure what we believe any more, whether about things of faith or ethical issues. The effect of all of these is to sap our energy; they make us feel weak, they rob us of our enthusiasm and passion for the faith and may even make us think that God has gone away! If this is all we see...

“*Therefore...*” (*2 Corinthians 4:16ff*) There are things to see that are not visible! Does that make sense? Can we believe in something that we can’t see? Paul challenges us to see some things that are not visible to the naked eye, but we can only see with the eye of faith! “*Outwardly...*” (*2 Corinthians 4:16*) we can understand the outward bit, but what about our

relationship with God; is our faith growing, becoming more mature, becoming stronger? That question is just as important for us to answer.

“Our light...” (2 Corinthians 4:17) I’m not sure we’d always be happy to describe things that weigh us down and that we find hard as *“Light and momentary”* but in comparison that is how Paul see these things; he is weighing them up against the *“eternal weight...” (2 Corinthians 4:17b)* There is something else to see – God has promised that we will share in His glory, that one day the sufferings of this life and this world will come to an end and we will share in the glory that belongs to God; the glory that Jesus has now, He will one day share with us. Do we see that? This is not something to see with our eyes, but with the eye of faith. Do we believe that promise? Is that hope in our hearts?

“So we...” (2 Corinthians 4:18f) Tents fall down; they are not meant to be permanent dwellings, though for millions of refugees they might as well be permanent! Tents are meant to be temporary. The earthly tent we live in is our body, this life. But Paul writes about *“An eternal...” (5:1)* As part of this eternal weight of glory, God has promised that we will be glorified and will have a new glorified, resurrection body; we will see Jesus as He is and we will be changed, transformed to be like Him. This will be eternal, given to us by God, made by God for us, part of our new life, a *“house not made with hands.”*

Where does this hope come from? Why is Paul so confident? There is nothing in himself but this: *“because we...” (2 Corinthians 4:14)* This hope and confidence comes from Jesus and especially from His resurrection. Because Jesus is raised, Paul says, we have the hope that we too will be raised. Because Jesus is now in the presence of God, we have the hope and confidence that we too will be in the presence of God because Jesus opens up the way! A friend of mine, a colleague working a couple of days a week in an Edinburgh church was talking about visiting lots of older people as part of her ministry. She listens to them talk about their aches and pains; she hears them speak about their sense of despair, about their loneliness, people on their own living in big houses; she listens to them almost wish they were dead. But the one thing she doesn’t hear in their conversation is any sense of hope of glory; when she tries to introduce idea, they just turn away, shake their heads and stay in their despair. What do they see? They see their wasting away; their light and momentary troubles (though that’s not how they would see it), and nothing else; they have no hope, no sense of God. When my friend asks herself why they are like this, she says “they don’t know Jesus!”

This is the end of Dementia Awareness week; if ever there was an illness that robs people of sense of themselves and their value, it is this, though there are other illnesses equally devastating in their own ways. Dementia robs people of their personality, their passions, what makes them themselves. It is for most people far more than a *“light and momentary trouble”* but here is a hope to offer. There is a new “you” waiting to be revealed; the person who is robbed of themselves here will be made a whole new person in presence of God, sharing Jesus’ glory; this is our hope in Christ. What do we see of ourselves, of others?

What do we see? Where is our focus? It is entirely understandable that when life is tough our focus is simply on getting to the end of the day. When we are sick and undergoing treatment, we just want to have treatment over and move on to the next thing and our focus is so often entirely on these hard things. So, in the good days, we need to sort this in our minds. What do we see? Are we like the people my friend met, living lives only seeing money, material things, property, enjoying the good things of life, but no faith, no Jesus? In the good days, we need to focus our eyes on Jesus and learn to live by faith and learn to trust Him. When we do that in the good days, we will be able not to lose heart when life is tough. Learn to see this hope of glory, this promise of God; learn to see that because Jesus is raised we will be raised; learn to see that because Jesus shares the glory of God, we will share this glory with Him; that though the tent collapses, there will be a brand new resurrection body waiting for us one day.

The man of faith who writes Psalm 130 is in a dark place, a place of despair, probably because of his sense of failure and guilt; his life has been full of faults and mistakes and now he cries out to God. He has a sense that God forgives and speaks of waiting for God, looking for God to be gracious. He encourages the people around him, "O, *Israel...*" (*Psalm 130:7*) God will save us completely, with a new spirit and a new body; He does this for us because of His unfailing love; our challenge is to trust God, to wait upon Him, to live by faith, trusting God even in the darkness, even for the things we cannot see and cannot prove! Here's a new way of seeing, something new for our focus, a hope from God that goes beyond, that is bigger than anything we know. Jesus is raised and is glorified; we will share His glory forever. How does that sound? How does that feel? We can't see it so we will not believe it? Or will we wait upon the Lord in faith, believing the promise?