

# *Perceptions and Reality*

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2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

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Perceptions and reality. What you see, to a great extent, is what you're going to get. If our vision is flawed, then our living is going to suffer as well. The Christian faith claims to help us see reality more accurately. "Open my eyes that I may see," sings the old hymn. Throughout the gospel story, Jesus works with those who are blind. He works with those who are *physically blind*, and he works with those who are *spiritually blind*, those whose eyeballs work just fine, but who live with tragic blind spots that keep them from being able to see things as they truly are. Their perceptions are out of alignment with reality.

One of the major ways that our perceptions get out of alignment with reality, one of our major blind spots, is our over-investment in the material things of the world. You and I live in a highly materialistic culture, in which material success, physical health, and public approval are deemed to be absolutely necessary for well-being. Society trains us to crave these things and to chase them, even though that will leave us in a breathless rat race.

Now we may observe that from the perspective of biblical faith, none of these things are bad in themselves – money, physical health, happy relationships with others – all of these are good. Biblical faith, from beginning to end, teaches us that material reality is good, good, good, and very good. The problem is that the materialistic approach to life believes that material, physical reality is all there is, so there is an *over-investment* in material reality. When the money runs out, or when the body gives out, or when the approval and popularity stop, the materialistic approach has nowhere left to turn. Which means that the materialistic approach is built on a fundamental fear of running out.

But the incarnational approach of the gospel – embodied by Jesus, taught and lived out by the Apostle Paul – knows that material reality is filled with spiritual reality. "Earth's crammed with heaven," as Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day," is how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:16. In this statement, you can hear the reality, and the grief, of physical and personal suffering. "Our outer nature is wasting away." That is no small thing. But in this statement, you can also hear the resilient hope of God's renewing presence. That hope is the gospel fruit of having your perception of life align with reality.

2 Corinthians draws a distinction between the outer nature and the inner nature. 2 Corinthians is a really remarkable letter, in which Paul draws numerous contrasts between success in the eyes of the world and the failure through which God's grace comes, between physical comfort and physical distress, between the life of plenty and the life of want, and how the power of God is made manifest in human weakness. 2 Corinthians is built on the wisdom of the cross, in which God's light comes in through the cracks in our lives, and in which God's radiance is given in weary, broken places.

The materialistic approach needs everything to go its way; it does not know what to do when things fall apart. The incarnational approach is able to accept and embrace life in all of its fullness, which is why verse 16 can also say, "Therefore we do not lose heart." The incarnational approach knows that God is present in the broken places, and therefore we do not need to be afraid.

My dad is giving me an up-close, crash-course in 2 Corinthians 4:16 these days. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." I am seeing this right before my eyes. Because of pancreatic cancer, my father's body is - all too literally - wasting away. Now, thanks to the remarkable work of the team from hospice in attending to his pain levels, and thanks to a feeding tube that was not removed after last summer's surgery, his body is demonstrating that it's got a lot of fight. But he is losing a lot of weight. His outer nature is in decline, and it is not pleasant.

But his inner nature is being renewed. There is this peculiar radiance in my dad these days. The clarity and the force of his affection – for me, for my mom, and for a whole lot of other people; his yearning to reconnect with significant people from whom he had grown somewhat distant; his strong desire to be with his extended family; his utter joy in talking about God and the Bible and God's mercy and God's grace; his pondering the large themes that have characterized his life. His body is not doing what he wants, but my goodness, *he is alive*. This text, 2 Corinthians 4:16, is for real.

You may have had similar courses of your own in the reality of this text, when some aspect of your outer reality was wasting away, and yet you were in touch with an inner vitality that could not be touched. Maybe it was in the dying of a loved one; maybe it was in a failure of some sort that exposed a deeper purpose; maybe it was in a crisis that made possible something new. These are all expressions of the wisdom of the cross. The upside-down life of the gospel is for real. The world may not be able to see this, the world may not be able to trust it, but it is for real. To God be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.