

## Do Not Lose Heart

✠ **We see the light of Jesus' face.** (vv.1-6)

✠ **His life is revealed in us.** (vv.7-12)

In the name of Jesus, the kind and smiling face of God, dearly redeemed believers:

Tornados in Alabama and Mississippi this past week brought something to light again which shines more brightly in clouds and darkness. Secularists like to call it “the triumph of the human spirit.” But they’re not listening very well. As reporters catch the comments of traumatized storm victims, some sound bitter and hopeless, but others upbeat and thankful. Listen closely, and the reason shines forth.

You’ve seen this before in a pastor named John (Johann) Mentzer. Historians debate whether it was when his house, the parsonage burned down. Or was it a nearby farmhouse destroyed by lightning? Or after his first wife died leaving him with six small children, but God gave him another wife? Does it matter? Johann Mentzer wrote: *Oh, that I had a thousand voices To praise my God with tongues! My heart, which in the Lord rejoices, Would then proclaim in grateful songs To all, wherever I might be, What great things God has done for me.* (CW 194, 242) When every day is a struggle, **Do Not Lose Heart.**

✠ **We see the light of Jesus' face.** (vv.1-6)

Of all the people in the New Testament besides our Lord Jesus, who suffered the most storms and beatings and trauma in his life? Wouldn't you have to say the Apostle Paul? And when do you see the greatest joy in Paul? During his darkest hours – in prison or when wrote his second letter to the Corinthians. You remember that problem congregation, don't you? Talented, but arrogant, so full of themselves. If there was a store where you could buy congregational problems, nothing would say, “Made in America,” or “Made in China,” only “Made in Corinth.” They had it all, and Paul had to deal with all of it. But in the way the Holy Spirit inspired Paul, **We see the light of Jesus' face.**

He greets them with love: *“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* (2 Corinthians 1:2 NIV84) He has already comforted them, patiently explained his change of plans and encouraged forgiveness for a repentant member. Paul praised God's glory in the New Covenant of pure grace and mercy where God forgives us all. Doesn't this lift up your heart? *“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* (3:18) By faith we reflect **the light of Jesus' face.**

It was during one of the darkest moments of my ministry when these verses shone most brightly for me. In spite of my best efforts, I had made some mistakes that hurt my family and the church. Walking down the side aisle of our sanctuary, it struck me: *I have this ministry not by merit, but by mercy.* Sure, I knew that before – in theory. But isn't that what Paul is saying by experience? *“Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.”*

Since it was God's choice to call us as Christians, or through His Christians to call some of us into the public ministry, that's *mercy*, pure and simple. And that determines how we handle God's Word of truth. There are only two ways, you know? You can distort it for your own selfish gain by telling people what they want to hear. Or you can set it forth plainly for the sake of everyone's *“conscience in the sight of God.”* God says some do not believe because Satan, *“the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”* They prefer preachers who preach themselves, tickle their pride and scratch their ears.

But how could our congregation ever want that? And how could I deliver such sermons? *“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the*

*light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*” When the last trumpet sounds, you can forget me. But in the judgment all that you have learned to know and trust in Jesus Christ will preserve your soul and bring you to glory with God. By God’s grace we **Do Not Lose Heart**.

Not so long ago Pastor Joe Johnson (WELS Campus Ministry, U of M) shared something with me about Nehemiah. He was the governor in Jerusalem after the exiles returned from Babylon. The Levites, their pastors, were reading from the Book of the Law of God. As they explained it, all the people were in tears. They had seen God’s wrath poured out. They were struggling under such difficulties back home again. But Nehemiah dried their tears and encouraged them: *“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”* (Nehemiah 8:10 NIV84) Pastor Johnson pointed out this is not our joy in the Lord. It’s the other way around. We come to God in humble repentance expecting Him to be angry. And what do we find instead, especially on Good Friday and Easter? God is filled with joy. The joy God has is our strength. **We see the light of Jesus’ face** and know that God is no longer angry. In fact...

### ✠ **His life is revealed in us.** (vv.7-12)

So why do tornados strike the homes of Christians too? Why are we and even our pastors so weak and miserable at times? We have such a great treasure, knowing God in His forgiving grace that hurls our iniquities into the depths of the sea. God loves to forgive. God loves to welcome sinners back like that father with the prodigal son, so glad to have him home safe and sound. If all this is true, and it is, why does God allow such trouble and heartache into our lives? Sometimes we almost despair of living.

God wants us to know the answer. This is what He reveals through Paul: *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”* As Christians, we’re often like a little boy who got an electric car from his dad. “Stay close to home, son,” his father warned. But this was his car! He’d drive how he wanted, fast and hard far, far away. Even when he started to slow down, he just pressed harder on the peddle until suddenly, everything died.

How many times does God have to tell us that His power comes from Word and sacrament? Wouldn’t you rather run out of juice while you’re still close enough to recharge? I would rather have God discipline and test me, than let me crash headlong into destruction. It’s His mercy to empty me of myself, so that He can fill me with Himself. That’s when **His life is revealed in us**.

*“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”*

The Lord said something similar through Peter in today’s Second Lesson about our grief in trials: *“These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* (1 Peter 1:7 NIV84) Whenever you come to church and sit before this altar, you see this again.

During the spring of 1992, I remember him sitting with his caregiver in our Lenten services. His body was dying from cancer, but his spirit was soaring by faith in Jesus. The last year of Steve Williams’ life was his happiest on earth. The day his round window was installed about our altar was the day the Lord called Steve home to glory. It’s beautiful to see the love of brothers and sisters with their heads joined at the cross, focused on God’s Word. Beautiful in the daytime, yes, but do you know when Steve’s window is most beautiful of all? At night under the lighted cross and steeple our neighbors can see from all around. Like Nehemiah and the ancient Jews, Paul, Peter, Johann Mentzer, our brother Steve Williams shone brightest by faith during his darkest hours. Then the **life of Christ is revealed in us**. **We see the light of Jesus’ face**. Keep looking to Christ alone and **Do Not Lose Heart** – not until grace gives way to glory and our hearts explode with joy to see the face of God, smiling with delight for Jesus’ sake. Amen.