

DOWN BUT NOT OUT**2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-18**

Sylvester Stallone's "Rocky" movies have become the butt of endless jokes about hokey, poorly made movies with unbelievable story lines produced solely because they can make a buck. How many of them are there now – 6 or 7? It's easy to forget, however, that the original "Rocky" movie with Stallone playing the part of a washed-up Philadelphia boxer who gets an unexpected shot at the heavyweight boxing title was good enough to win the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year way back in 1976. If you remember, he fought so valiantly the first time – or rather the movie made so much money – that he got a return bout with the champion in "Rocky 2." He won that fight becoming the heavyweight champion of the world. Of course, every "Rocky" movie features fast and furious fight scenes. As I recall, even though Rocky was knocked down numerous times, he was never knocked out.

Life can be like a spiritual and emotional boxing match. Our opponent is the inevitable struggles, stresses, and setbacks of life. Some people get knocked down and knocked out in the first round and never recover. Others get bruised and battered round after round, get in a few good counter punches, but end up losing anyway. Some win all the early rounds, but as life gets longer and the setbacks of life get harder, their endurance falters and fails. Some people become followers of Jesus and make Him the manager of their lives, so to speak. But even then, there's a variety of outcomes. Some people naively believe that when they become Christians, the struggles, stresses, and setbacks of life will never hit them again. How surprised they are when they get knocked senseless! Others never listen to Jesus' advice and attempt to fight life's battles without His direction or power. The result is spiritual failure. Fortunately, there are some who get counsel and strength from Jesus and are then able to handle the struggles and setbacks of life effectively. Oh, they still get hit and hit hard. But by God's grace, they keep standing and they keep punching back. Yes, they may get knocked down, but they don't get knocked out. They may lose a few rounds, but they win the fight. Why? By God's grace, they develop a perspective on this thing we call life – even with all of its struggles, stresses, and setbacks – that enables them to win.

I feel like I got all my teeth knocked out this week. Our congregation has lost a fine young man, Thaddeus Lauro, in a sudden, tragic car accident on Monday. In a moment, just gone. Taken from us. One of our beloved families has been devastated by perhaps the greatest loss a human being can suffer – the death of a child. Many of us feel like we've gone 12 rounds this week and we really ache inside. We've been knocked down and we're trying to regain our footing. Our God is a God of real life. If He isn't, then we're wasting our time this Sunday morning. We should just sleep in like most of our neighbors and forget about all this "Jesus nonsense." If all we can offer each other are sweet but useless platitudes, why bother? But God's Word makes it clear that a relationship with God can provide a perspective and a power in this boxing ring we call life that's effective and can help us not only survive, but win. Now, I realize there are some here today who did not know Thaddeus personally. You do not know the Lauro family well. But, like it or not, you're in a boxing ring, too. Every person is in that ring. You have an opponent who is trying to knock you out. The fact is you're

going to get hit in life and some of those hits are going to knock you down. It's inevitable. No one escapes. But with God's help, you don't have to get knocked out. I want us to reflect today on something written by the great Christian leader, Paul. This was a man well acquainted with the struggles, stresses, and setbacks in the boxing ring of life. Get your Bible out and look with me at what the Holy Spirit inspired him to write down. Like Paul, let's face reality and admit that in life there's an...

LIFE'S ENDURING PROBLEM.

Paul was no stranger to getting hit hard and often. He knew full well life's struggles, stresses, and setbacks are an enduring problem for each and every person. I'm glad he never implied life's difficulties are easy. That's one wonderful truth about God's Word – it never minimizes, denies, or ignores the troubles of life and their effect on us. Here Paul reflected on several very tough rounds he'd endured in his own life. He even identified all the hits he'd taken. "Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm." (2 Cor. 11:24-27 NLT) In another place, he remembered one punch he took was so great, the pressure so intense, and his ability to endure so low he thought he'd come to the end of his life.

Life's punches come in all shapes, sizes, and lengths of duration. Death, cancer, stroke, divorce, abuse of some kind, addiction, bankruptcy, conflict between parents and kids – and that's just a short list. Everyone gets hit. You will not escape every blow. You will not evade every punch. And even followers of Jesus don't escape all of these painful punches life hands out to us. Even though we enjoy the great privilege of being children of God, we're still victims of circumstances, get involved in situations beyond our control, and experience many of the same changes and challenges everyone else endures. Have you ever heard the phrase – "the victorious Christian life"? Sometimes, it's implied a true Christian can live in a state of constant victory. A smile on your face and a song in your heart at every moment. Everything marvelous all the time. It's not true. In fact, the only way to ever get a victory is to first be in a battle.

Not only is this enduring problem painful, it's also perplexing. When you read the Psalms or the story of Job, over and over again people asked the question, "Why do good people suffer?" Thaddeus was a great kid. His family are great people. We understand bad people getting beat up in the boxing ring of life. That makes sense to us, but good people? Even Paul had a hard time understanding why God didn't remove something in his life he called "a thorn in the flesh." Three times he asked God to remove this problem that was causing some kind of stress and struggle in his life. Do you remember what the Lord told him? "My grace is all you need. My power works best

in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9 NLT) The Bible never answers the why question. Instead, it admits that life’s hits and punches are a fact of life. Jesus – who also experienced life’s struggles and stresses in abundance – made that very clear. He said, “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” (Jo. 16:33 NLT) In fact, experiencing life’s punches is all a part of truly knowing Jesus as your Lord and Savior according to the Bible.

Perhaps you’re asking this morning, “Why? Why, Thaddeus?” Or you may be asking why about a different hit altogether - some kind of punch you’ve sustained in your own life that’s almost knocked you unconscious. You may be asking, “What have I done to deserve this?” You may be tempted to say to God, “How come if You’re so all powerful and good, You allow this to happen?” One follower of Jesus back in the Middle Ages who suffered great persecution for his faith reportedly said to God, “If this is how You treat Your friends, it’s no wonder You have so few.” God often gets blamed for our struggles, stresses, and setbacks no matter how serious or trivial. Life has an enduring problem that’s both painful and perplexing. But despite all the unanswered questions, something within every child of God realizes the ability to absorb the hard hits, the bloody noses, and the aching ribs life dishes out to us is found in Jesus. Paul didn’t give us an answer to this enduring problem, but through the Spirit, he did provide...

GOD’S ENDURING PERSPECTIVE.

How was Paul able to avoid getting knocked out by life? He received supernatural strength from God Himself on a daily basis. He said, “That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day.” (2 Cor. 4:16 NLT) Many children of God here today can attest to those times in life when all you could do was throw yourself on God’s power and grace. The stress, struggle or setback may not have disappeared, but you received an inner, spiritual strengthening to get up and get through that difficult time.

Paul gives personal testimony to this spiritual reality in our text today. “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.” (2 Cor. 4:8-9 NLT) Stress closes in, but we’re not crushed by it. Pressure gets intense, but God allows us to breathe. Yes, we get confused and bewildered, but He doesn’t allow us to give into despair. People may attack or betray us, but God never abandons us. We can come to our wit’s end, but we never come to hope’s end. You can get knocked down, but you don’t have to be knocked out. Like Paul, you and I can experience a daily renewal of divine energy and grace that comes as a direct result of constant contact with the Lord of the universe.

Perseverance isn’t very popular today. Who wants to persevere in or through negative stuff? We’d rather escape or avoid it. But here’s what I know about being a follower of Jesus. What matters is how you finish, not how you start. Many, many people have a “Jesus moment,” and call themselves Christians. But fewer in number get rooted and grounded in God’s truth so they can endure and persevere through all the punches and

hits of life. It's a fact of life there are always more people at the start of a race than at the finish. And what counts in the race we call life is how we finish it, not how we start it. By the same token, what matters when it comes to following Jesus? It's how you finish, not how you start. Jesus said, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Mt. 24:13 NLT) Not everyone who starts to follow Jesus keeps following Jesus right to the end of life. Isn't it enough just to have a moment of deep emotion and "believe" in Jesus? No. The reality of your salvation – of a truly restored, genuine, and eternal relationship with God Himself – is determined by how you finish, not how you start. Hang in there. Get up off the canvas. Keep punching. Persevere. Your perseverance reveals the reality of whether you truly trust in God or not.

Here's another enduring perspective. God always has the ability to bring something good, worthwhile, and beneficial out of even the worst things in life. Paul told the Corinthians believers to whom he wrote this letter that they themselves were an example of this principle. His own trials and tribulations weren't useless or wasted after all. Through Paul's troubles, lives were being changed and renewed by Jesus. The more punches Paul absorbed, the more the power of Jesus could be seen in his life. When he was the weakest, Jesus was the strongest. He wrote here, "We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves." (2 Cor. 4:7 NLT) The fragile clay jar is you and me. The great treasure inside is Jesus. When that jar cracks, chips, or gets a hole in it, the great treasure inside is revealed for all to see. As children of God, Jesus lives within us. When we get punched and hit in life's boxing ring all we can see are the chips, cracks, and broken places in our lives, but others can see Jesus – the treasure inside of us. I look around this room today and I see many chipped, cracked, and broken jars. But I can also see Jesus – a lot of Jesus!

Both Christians and non-Christians are in the boxing ring of life. But it's only the follower of Jesus who gets to claim this promise, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God." (Rom. 8:28 NLT) Was the death of Thaddeus Lauroi this week a good thing? Of course not. It was and is an unspeakable tragedy. Terrible. Just the worst. But I know Thaddeus loved God. I know his family loves God. They get to claim that promise. We get to claim that promise. By all means, grieve. Mourn. Cry. But, I must also believe on the authority of the Word of God – and I ask you to believe it with me today – that God will redeem this great loss someday, somehow, someday. I don't know what that is today. Neither do any of us. But God will reveal it to all of us someday.

It's only to the child of God that God makes the promise that every bloody nose, every loose tooth, every aching rib will have a meaning and a purpose. We may not know what it is this side of Heaven, but eternity will reveal it. God has never lied, so we can trust Him to make it plain one day. When you're a follower of Jesus, every knockdown, every round in the ring has a far larger purpose and a far greater meaning than any of us can perceive today. J.C. Penny, the man whose stores still bear his name today, was a devoted follower of Jesus. He was once asked what had motivated him in his life. Without hesitation he said, "I can tell you in four words: Jesus Christ and adversity."

He went on to explain that adversity had taught him never to give up, to have the courage to start over, and to keep his faith in God strong. If you will surrender your hurt, your confusion, and your pain to Jesus, He will not waste it. Somehow, some way, some day He will use it.

Here's another enduring perspective. When you get up after life has knocked you down, God can use you to help others get up, too. In other words, your struggles, stresses, and setbacks are always bigger than just you. The Bible says, "God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us." (2 Cor. 1:3-4 NLT) When your face is flat on the canvas of life's boxing ring, where do you go to get encouragement to get up again? Isn't it from people who have also been knocked flat, too, but somehow with God's grace and help found a way to get up again? Allow God to use your experience in the ring to become a channel of His grace and His peace into the lives of others who so desperately need it.

One more enduring perspective. Every punch and hit we experience in the ring of life will seem insignificant and small from the view of eternity. "For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever." (2 Cor. 4:17-18 NLT) Paul wasn't minimizing the pain of life's punches. He wasn't denying the reality of what can knock us to the canvas. He was simply saying you have to get an eternal perspective. The boxing match will be over one day. The joys of life with God will last forever.

This perspective only makes sense to a follower of Jesus. On Wednesday, I was with Jean and Dee when they saw Thaddeus' body for the first time. It was yet another wrenching moment. Part of our conversation was about the brevity of Thaddeus' life – just 17 short years. Of course, it's sad. Sad beyond words. But we also remembered that in another sense whether you live 17 years or 117 years, it makes little difference from the perspective of eternity. When we are enjoying our 109 billionth, 867 millionth, 432nd thousandth year of eternity, will it matter then how long we lived in this life? That's why we're encouraged here to focus on the great realities we can't see with our physical eyes – God's grace, God's love, God's faithfulness – because they alone have permanence. Nothing else does. We don't place our trust in the things of this world or even in the people of this life, because one day it will all be gone. Paul knew that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead would raise him, too. He knew that when he looked at this life from the perspective of eternity, all the punches and hits he sustained in the ring would seem small and insignificant in comparison.

Arthur Gossip was a Scottish preacher from the early 1900s. His wife died suddenly. Upon his return to the pulpit following her death, he preached a message entitled, "When Life Tumbles In, What Then?" He told everyone he didn't understand this life of ours. But still less could he understand how people facing loss could give up on Jesus and abandon their faith. Speaking from the perspective of having sustained the

greatest punch in his life, he said, “Abandon it for what? You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadows must believe it. We have nothing else.” Life tumbled in on the Lauro family this week. To a lesser extent, life tumbled in on our church this week. When life tumbles in, what then? William Barclay, a Bible scholar, put it succinctly, “Life is either a journey away from God or to God.” Life is like a boxing ring. We’re going to get punched and hit. Will it drive us toward God, or because we become bitter and angry at God, will it drive us away from God?

Two people come to my mind today. One is a man I met just once. The other is a woman I never met. I met the man when I was traveling around Europe years ago with some friends. We were camping near Madrid, Spain when we met this man – a fellow American. When he learned all of us were Christians and had spent a year studying the Bible in England, he looked off in the distance wistfully and said quietly, “Yeah, once I believed. But, now, the older I get the harder it is to believe all those simple answers.” His life – for whatever reason – had become a journey away from God. I never met Ginny Frey. She was the wife of a former pastor in a church I served in Pennsylvania before coming to Columbus. Ginny Frey was loved by many in that church. She also had terminal cancer. Only a few days before she died, she said, “What is faith for if it is not for times like this?” Her life – despite being knocked down to the canvas – was still a journey toward God.

So, what about you today? Are you moving away from God or toward Him? Life is like a boxing ring. You’re going to get hit. Have the punches and hits of life so exhausted and embittered you that you’re ready to throw in the towel? Or will the punches and hits drive you toward Jesus who alone can give you the strength, the grace, and the power to win? I invite you to sing an old hymn with me as I close my message today. No instruments. Just voices. I think you’ll recognize the melody. I love the words because they encourage me to look at life’s punches and hits from God’s perspective. I ask you to sing it with me as a prayer.

*Through the love of God our Savior, all will be well;
Free and changeless is His favor, all, all is well;
Precious is the blood that healed us, perfect is the grace that sealed us,
Strong the hand stretched out to shield us, all must be well.*

*Though we pass through tribulation, all will be well;
Ours is such a full salvation, all, all is well.
Happy, still in God confiding, fruitful, if in Christ abiding,
Holy through the Spirit’s guiding, all must be well.*

*We expect a bright tomorrow, all will be well;
Faith can sing through days of sorrow, all, all is well;
On our Father’s love relying, Jesus every need supplying,
Or in living, or in dying, all must be well.*

--Mary Peters