

One popular approach to making decisions uses the idea of “The Worst-Case Scenario.” This is a concept in risk management where the planner, in planning for potential disasters of a decision they must make, considers the most severe possible disaster which can reasonably be projected to occur.

We hear each other talk this way when we say, ‘what’s the worst that can happen? You lose a little money, but you still have enough. Or, you try to repair the car yourself and end up paying someone else to repair it anyway? The hope in identifying the Worst-Case scenario is to ease the pressure one is feeling as they consider a decision. Once we realize we can live with the “worst-case scenario” it makes the decision easier. Often, we discover there actually is a safety net ready to catch us even if our decision results in the worst outcome possible.

If we look a few verses earlier in our passage from 2 Corinthians, we hear Paul and it sounds as if he is using this “Worst Case Scenario” approach. Paul’s sufferings as a disciple of Jesus are widely documented in the bible. There is no question he suffers physically and mentally, he experiences despair and defeat, and often finds himself writing to his followers from a state of illness or imprisonment.

Paul wants to express genuine solidarity with his audience, many who are also suffering from illness, poverty, hunger, family distress, even from oppressive Roman taxation. Paul writes, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” A little later he adds, “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.”

It may sound strange, but New Testament teachers tell us Paul is offering words of encouragement and strength to those suffering and ready to give up. He hopes these words will renew the faith and strength of his audience.

At our Christmas staff dinner last year, Karin generously gave me a book called, “The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook. Chapter after chapter is filled with survival techniques a person can use to overcome a variety of life or death situations. If you are attacked by a bear, if you are sinking in quicksand, etc., this technique has worked and could save your life. I often use this “Worst-Case Scenario” approach to consider decisions which, in the long run, are not very life and death at all. In addition, I find once I identify the Worst-Case Scenario, I am able to corral my own resources to be sure there is a safety net in place. So, if the worst case plays out, I know I will still be all right.

This is precisely where Paul introduces the issue of being renewed. When we spend our life trying to assure ourselves of our own salvation, we can't ever do enough, and we find, as Paul describes, our outer nature wasting away.

Is a half a million dollars in a pension enough to assure a good retirement? Oh, the experts say it has to be at least a million. Is my life insurance enough to take care of my loved ones if something should happen? I better go make more money. On and on nothing is ever enough for us, and we find our outer nature wasting away.

But Paul is talking to an audience, most of whom have very few resources. These folks do not make minimum wage, they don't have health insurance, they don't have a home with equity, they don't have pensions or savings. The people Paul is writing to are not able to create anything we would call a safety net. And it is here Paul turns them to the heart of faith in God. He teaches them that the only safety net that is not an illusion, the only safety net which hangs below every one of us, is faith in God.

We hear Paul talk about the outer nature wasting away, and the inner nature being renewed day by day. He is not summarizing his views on the body. Instead, for Paul and his audience, in the face of life and death sufferings, he is demonstrating his profound trust in the saving love of God. This is the inner nature of which he speaks. We think we need more and more, and of course we want to take care of those we love after we are gone. But that is not where safety, or its related word salvation, comes from... For a God who can defeat death itself, our frail mortal bodies are no challenge. With so great a God working among those who cannot go increase their own safety net, there is no need to allow the sufferings of the present age to deter them from living fully in the power and love of God, trusting God in life, in suffering, in death and in life eternal.

Friends the stakes are high in the gospel mission we have been given. Both life and death are at work today. And though death may be making small victories; afflictions, persecutions, hatred, oppression, war, God has already defeated death by raising the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is so absolutely convinced about the power of God, this gives him inner strength in the face of any hardship, or risk. He concludes, "God will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us into God's presence."

Some of you may have gone through a confirmation program which used the Heidelberg catechism. This Catechism is set up in a question and answer format and confirmation students used to memorize all the questions and answers and when Confirmation day arrived the pastor would put the class in front of the whole church in worship and ask each student to answer one of the questions verbatim. I jokingly call this, "Inquisition Sunday."

Some of you will recall, the first question in that catechism is "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" And the answer, edited for brevity is ...

My only comfort in life and in death is... “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ... Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

This is Paul’s lesson for all of us today. We might call it the apostle’s Best Case Scenario. The God who helps us endure day to day life, is the same God who resurrected Jesus from the dead and calls us to rise with him into a Kingdom which is both already present, and not yet fulfilled, a kingdom where death is swallowed up by life in God.

Amen