

Jars of Clay

2 Cor. 4:7-18

Some have noted that in this life, if you are not currently in the midst of suffering, it is either because you are just coming out of suffering, or because you are about to enter into suffering. Be encouraged.

We all know suffering in this life is real. No matter how **wealthy** you are, how **successful** you are, or even how **holy** you are. We all suffer in this life. Loss of loved ones, loss of jobs, strife in relationships, abuse, neglect, poverty, hatred. We **all** suffer in this life. And the Apostle Paul who is writing this letter to the church in Corinth suffered more than most.

All you have to do is take a look at chapter 11 to get a taste of his sufferings.

*Imprisonments, countless beatings, often near death. 5 times received forty lashes, 3 times beaten with rods, once stoned, shipwrecked, danger from robbers, his own people, gentiles, danger in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold and exposure, often without food. Apart from those things, **the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.***

Paul knows suffering. And yet somehow he writes ‘we do not lose heart’. How can he say that? In the midst of all that. How can he not lose heart? We’re going to look at three reasons we see in our passage. **God’s Plan, God’s People, God’s Picture.**

God’s Plan

Let’s look at v.7 *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”* What’s the treasure that he’s talking about? Well, we just have to look back at verse 6 *“God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”* There is a gospel reality we can not overlook here. The glory of the resurrected Jesus Christ is the treasure. **HE is the treasure and we are the jars.** We are the jars that glorious treasure is inside of.

In Paul’s day these **cheap, fragile, unimpressive** earthenware vessels were often used to stash your valuables in. They could be purchased anywhere, buried in the dirt, cracked open if needed. It was what was **inside** those jars that was precious to people.

Now look. I'm not saying that you are unimpressive ok. Chef's kiss to you all. But Paul... is highlighting the reality of our inherent weakness.

This natural human frailty became obvious to me earlier this year. I turned 40. Not a big deal, but my oldest also became a teenager this year. She started playing softball for school and at the end of the season there was a parent daughter softball game. I thought, this will be great. I'll get to demonstrate all the things I've been teaching her all season. And the parents did crush the daughters, but there were several times that I was just like wow, it's not there anymore. That's a pride killer. We grow old, we get sick, we are wasting away. We have emotional breakdowns. We suffer and are pained because of our fragility. But Paul says **there is a reason**. There is a **purpose** to our weakness. **To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.**

This is the gospel truth. **We don't bring anything impressive to God.** We are utterly dependent on him from day one and that does not change when you finally start making some money, when you get a promotion, when you start to have "influence", when you "get your life together", when you "grow up". On the contrary, the **only** way to thrive, to persevere (especially in suffering) is when God get's the glory. Sam Storms puts it like this. He says **"our ultimate joy is dependent on God being God."** True joy is inextricably tied to God's glory. It's not tied to our strength, our success, our comfort, or our health. That's his plan. And its for our good. God's glory for our joy.

It appears that Paul assumes that while we are here in our current state, this suffering will be the norm. The language over these next few verses is of a persistent state or continuance. **"In every way, always"**. But, our human weakness is met with God's enduring grace. Or as Paul later puts it in ch. 12 - **"the Lord said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** When we trust God's plan in the midst of our pain we can let go of our **finite resources and abilities** and take hold of him, **the one with infinite resources.**

Only there can we say -

- **We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;**
- **perplexed, but not driven to despair;**
- **persecuted, but not forsaken;**
- **struck down, but not destroyed; 2 Co 4:8–9.**

And it's only **there** we find our pain is not meaningless. Whatever you are suffering right now is not in vain.

God's People

It's not meaningless, because not only is it showing the surpassing power belongs to God, it is to be poured out (necessarily) for the sake of God's people. Over and over again in this passage Paul reminds us that this life of suffering is not a solo endeavor. This life is not a personal improvement project. Look at his language.

v.12 Death is at work in us, **but life in you.**

v.14 He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us **with you** into his presence.

v. 15 For it is **all for your sake**, so that as grace extends to **more and more people** it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Paul has poured out his life for the sake of delivering the gospel to others so that the grace of God would be received by more and more people. And as he does it increases thanksgiving. But let's not miss how this happens: *"Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies"* It may remind you of the more famous verse from Galatians - *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."* In this life as Christians we carry in the body the death of Jesus - *"always being given over to death."* There is no pain, no sorrow that is unfamiliar to Christ - **the man of sorrows**. As Christians our sufferings take on meaning and purpose in him. If this is true, then what you do with your pain and suffering matters.

I am a private person. I was raised to keep my nose out of other peoples business (Unless it makes for good gossip) and to not overshare. Basically the 90's version of 'you do you' without Facebook to help with the gossip part. Its a very self-reliant way of life that carries with it a keep-it-together attitude and a sense of shame when you fall short. I have struggled immensely over the years with sharing when I need help, when I've failed, or been broken. **When I take that attitude of self-reliance I am preaching an anti-gospel to myself.** One that says, in the best case scenario - "c'mon man, you can figure this out." But unfortunately too often shows up in the condemning voice that says "don't let **that** weakness show".

Here and in this whole letter, Paul is waving his arms saying no! Don't rob the glory from God. Don't take that for yourself. That death we wear in our bodies is the death of Christ! **Use it** to point others to him so they can share in the life of Christ with you as

well! If you do that we **all** share in thanksgiving as his grace is received by more and more people. How about evangelism that looks like that? How about community that looks like that?

God's Picture

We've looked at God's plan and his people, now **God's Picture**. I have to admit, the last three verses of this passage are somehow logically straightforward while at the same time being massively hard to wrap my head around. Because it deals with things we can't see, things yet to come. Its important to notice the connecting words of these phrases in verses 16-18. Our outer self is wasting away. We've established that already. But here he says the **inner self** is being renewed day by day. How? Isn't that just what happens when we are in Christ? In one sense yes, our heart of stone is replaced with a heart of flesh. The eyes of the heart are opened to see the beauty of Christ in our conversion from death to new life in Christ, but this is a **day by day** renewal.

He says this day by day renewal happens *"As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen."* What is that? What is unseen? He's not talking about the physical world vs the spiritual world. He's talking about the present world vs the future world. About what we experience now and what is awaiting us. He helps us to see the bigger picture of reality.

Do you ever lose sight of the bigger picture? I do sometimes with my family, probably too often if I'm honest. I'm trying to focus on something and the kids keep interrupting because they need help with things or maybe just because they're bored. Or its finally the end of the day, the house is quiet and I'm ready to sit in my chair and read, but my wife is ready for deep conversation. In those moments I often lose sight of the bigger picture. I forget that my kids aren't going to be this close and this age forever. They won't always need me to take them swimming or tuck them in at night. I forget that **deep connection with my wife** is strengthening the bonds of our marriage so that for years to come we can actually know and enjoy one another. Sometimes I forget those things. Those important weighty things when I'm only looking at what's in front of me. I am only looking at my comfort. I am only looking at what I want now.

Paul says, don't lose sight of the bigger picture. Our afflictions are light and momentary. They are transient, temporary in comparison to the eternal weight of glory that is to come. That can sound dismissive of our sufferings at first reading but it's actually not. On the contrary, the apostle Paul in many places and especially here

consistently reminds us that there is a connection between our sufferings and eternal glory **and it is found in Christ**. Romans 8 - we are: fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer **with him** in order that we may also be glorified **with him**. Ro 8:17. And earlier in this letter in chapter 1: For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 2 Co 1:5.

Because we are bound with Christ in his death and resurrection, our affliction is **actually doing something**. It is **preparing for us** an eternal weight of glory. There is a connection there because we are in Christ. The sad truth is, we don't often care about eternal things. We want it here and we want it now. If that's you, pray, beg for God to give you a vision for his bigger picture in the midst of your suffering. Ask your City Group, your Discipleship Group to pray with you for that. To help you lift your eyes to look to the unseen. **Don't lose heart**. Know, **trust** that God is doing something. He is preparing something for you through it. Something beyond all comparison.

If that is hard, let others in - ask God for faith to share it. So that ministry between one another can happen. Do this, so more and more people can share in God's grace. We are the jars. He is the treasure. Remember this and you will experience the thanksgiving that overflows in your life and in all our lives as a result. What better reason to not lose heart could we have. Let's pray.