

Weakness and Hope
2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Turn to 2 Corinthians 4 please. If you had been on the main road coming in to Corinth, when Paul first went there to preach the gospel, and you watched him come into Corinth, what would you actually have seen?

You would have seen a poorly dressed tentmaker, probably carrying a bag of tentmaking tools, and a few poorly dressed friends with him. He wrote in 1 Corinthians, *to this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, often beaten, and homeless.* (4:11)

If you followed him in Corinth, you would see him buy some leather or canvas to make tents, and start working in the market. And this man will not stop talking, day or night, about Jesus of Nazareth, Christ and Lord. That's it. That's the mighty apostle in action.

His message was this: "Jesus of Nazareth, an obscure Galilean prophet (Galilee being the back country of Judea, and Judea being the back country of the Roman empire), that Jesus, humiliated and crucified by the local Roman governor, is actually the Lord of the universe, the saviour of humanity, and the future judge of the world!" Will that message, from that man, persuade any?

Who will believe a message like that, from a man like that? Good question. The answer comes from 1 Corinthians: *No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.* (12:3)

Glory, Weakness, and Hope. Last week we talked mostly about glory, and ended with weakness. Today will be weakness, and it will end with hope. I urge you to grab hold of these three, to understand basic Christian life. One, knowing the gospel is seeing the glory of Christ.

This is the glory story, one more time: Because God loved people, at the right time he sent his Son Jesus, born to Mary. Jesus served and obeyed God, and loved people. He was arrested, and he suffered much and was shamed, and he died for our sins. He was buried, but God raised him on the third day, and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth. That's what makes him "Lord." And for forty days he was seen repeatedly by his followers, and then he was taken up to God. He is there now, with scars in his hands and his feet, and he is also with us every day, the Holy Spirit brings him to us. And when God is ready, he will send Jesus back to us. Then the dead in Christ will be raised, and we will all be with the Lord forever. That's the gospel.

From 2Cor 3:7 to 4:6, 18 verses, Paul spoke about glory. And glory boils down to this: understanding the gospel story, and making Jesus our Lord, is the same as gazing at the glory of Christ. That gospel story IS Christ's glory. If we understand and believe it, our minds and hearts are gazing at the glory of Christ.

I do not urge that we seek a spiritual experience of glory, or that we should feel something. But if we're around this story since we're young, we ourselves can get veiled from its light.

I do urge that we open our minds and hearts to this Scripture, that if we understand and believe that story, we are gazing at Christ's glory, which is a reflection of God's own glory.

And now we get to the paradox. A paradox is a statement that holds two truths that seem to contradict each other, it does not make any sense, yet once explained it is actually true.

The paradox is glory and weakness together, that this story of God's glory is carried around and lived out by weak and troubled humans. Can it possibly be true that the story of God's eternal glory is believed and carried around and lived out by weak and troubled humans? Yes.

The Reason for the Paradox 2 Cor 4:7 - *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

2 Tim 2 – *In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some are for special purposes and some for common use. Clay jars for common use, not expensive, not beautiful, not strong. Compared to wood and metal, clay is weak, fragile. We are.*

WHY is the glory of the gospel in jars of clay? *To show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* God's great power IS active in ordinary Christian life. That's already a surprise to us. And God has an agenda. He wants it clear that the kingdom of God is the work of God not the work of powerful people.

Verse 15 ends, *to the glory of God.* That's where this is going. Our problem is that weak troubled people do not seem ABLE to display the all-surpassing power of God. Is it possible that God can show his great power AT ALL through weak troubled believers?

What's more, is it possible that God can show his great power BEST through weak troubled believers? This verse leaves no doubt that God's great power works most clearly through fragile and distressed people. Furthermore, God's great power does not look like what we assume.

That story I began with, Paul coming to Corinth and speaking about Jesus. Did that feel like a picture of the all-surpassing power of God? That's not my first thought. But God used it to change the lives of the people in the Corinthian church. That was his power.

The Experience of Weakness: Down but not Out 4:8-9

On every side we are hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (The NIV does not have "on every side" first in the sentence but in Greek, *on every side* begins the sentence)

This is life as a clay jar, put in human terms. This is the life of a mighty apostle of Christ. Here's what happens on every side: *hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down*. But here's what does not happen: *not crushed, not in despair, not abandoned, not destroyed*. Endurance: we're down, but not out.

I taught Corinthian letters to a seminary class a few years ago, and a young associate pastor from Winnipeg was taking the class. I explained these two verses to the class, and this young man said with amazement, "Paul could not get a job pastoring one of our churches."

He said, if a minister was being interviewed in one of our churches, and he said, "*On every side I am hard pressed, but not crushed; I am perplexed, but not in despair; I am chased, but not abandoned; I am struck down, but not destroyed,*" church leaders would say to him, "Thanks for your time, you should keep working on your life, we don't think you're the right one for our church." We would not accept Paul. This young man was basically right, and it is a real problem.

But the important part of these verses is that the servant keeps going. The Lord's servant gets knocked down again, and again, and it is not pretty, it is painful, and hard to watch, but they get up every time, and serve the Lord again. Normal life, so the power will be from God.

Theology of Weakness: Carrying Death and Resurrection Life of Jesus 4:10-11

Verses 8-9 gave us the experience of weakness, Now we get an explanation, the theology of weakness: *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 also be revealed in our mortal body.*

The theological explanation is that we are living out both the death of Jesus and the life of Jesus at the same time. We're talking about the experience of being down but not destroyed, hard pressed but not crushed, and so on. All the things that leave us perplexed and distressed.

What's really happening is that Christ's servants on the one hand are carrying around the death of Jesus, being given over to death for Jesus' sake, and on the other hand the life of Jesus is revealed in our bodily lives, his life is displayed in our troubled lives.

Let me read this differently: we carry around in our bodies his death so that the life of Jesus may be revealed. We have weak bodies and minds, trouble and distress, so that his life can be revealed and displayed through our fragile lives. We are weak so that God can show off Jesus. That's the life of an apostle, and less intensely, all our lives.

Such Service gives Life to Others 4:12

So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Jesus died so that others would benefit. Jesus died to bring life to others. We all know that. What we may not know is that Jesus' followers also die so others will benefit. That was the life of an apostle, and all of our lives will have this flavour to some extent.

Sometimes doing the right thing is very costly. We are often urged to avoid what's bad for our bodies, and what will shorten our lives. For the apostles, serving Christ was bad for their bodies and it shortened their lives, but by that service, God's life blossomed in others.

It was bad for THEIR bodies and shortened THEIR lives, but in that way God's life blossomed in OTHERS. And my brothers and sisters, all of us who follow Christ will have this flavour to some extent in our lives. If it was true for the apostles, it will shape our lives as well. *So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*

Such Service Takes Faith 4:13

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak. The apostles kept believing and speaking. Their lives required open speech, and it was faith that kept Paul preaching in the face of being *hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down.*

The basic Christian confession is this: "Jesus is Lord, and I'm his servant." Can you say that? It is a spiritually powerful event when a brother or sister in trouble and distress can say without wavering, "Jesus is Lord, and I'm his servant." It need not be in those words, but that's the point.

That really does bring life to other followers, it certainly does to me. There is much faith like that in this room, and that is so good for the rest of us to see that.

And now, finally, we get to Hope. Paul will explain Hope from this sentence until 2Cor 5:10. We'll just begin it this week, and cover it in detail next week.

Hope from the Lord's Resurrection 4:14

because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.

The resurrection of Jesus. Let's begin with the human situation. The human race, at the core, is lost and terrified. "Who should we follow? Who shows us the way? We are all dying, and it is desperate." We distract ourselves, but there's no getting away from this.

The resurrection of Jesus goes after this darkness with a two-edged sword. One, who should we follow? Who will show us the way? God has many servants in the world, how shall we sort out the right voice? Resurrection. Paul in Athens: "God has appointed a man, and has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

Among God's many servants, we believe that Jesus is God's Special Servant, because Jesus is the only one God raised from the dead. No other faith even claims this. In our world that wants all religions to be accepted, we need to be real clear on why we think Jesus is God's special servant: God showed it by raising him from death. Our faith in Jesus rests on that.

And you may say, "they don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead, why should we say that?" Many did not believe Paul either. And they won't believe us no matter what we say, so we might as well tell them the truth, so at least it's the truth they won't believe, rather than some drivel.

The resurrection tells us who God's special servant is, who God wants us to follow, who God thinks will show us the way. That's the first edge of the sword. The second edge is that those who listen to Jesus, who believe him and follow him, will be raised from the dead in the same way as God raised Jesus. God will raise us just as he raised Jesus.

Who should we follow? We're all dying, the situation is desperate. The resurrection of Jesus answers both of those. It is a two-edged sword that cuts through a lot of darkness, maybe a little darkness left, but a lot of darkness is gone.

Paul served the Lord in a dying body because God would raise him from the dead, just as he raised Jesus. It is clear from his letters that Paul thought about this all the time, for himself. It comes up in some way in almost every letter. It was the only way he could make sense of his life. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are more to be pitied than all people." 1Cor 15.

We can't control what we feel, but we have some control over what we tell ourselves. Bring your bodily resurrection into your daily thought life. We all serve the Lord in dying bodies, because God will raise us also from the dead, and present us all of us together to himself.

Talk to yourself like this. Talk to yourself about your hope, every day. Borrow good things from the future. We regularly borrow from tomorrow's troubles to bring distress today. Why not use future blessings to bring hope and confidence today? Borrow all you want, and the reality will be no less when we get there!

Such Service gives Life to Others (Part 2) 4:15

All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. God leads us to serve him as clay jars, as fragile people, weak bodies and weak minds, often in trouble and distress. This was normal life for the apostles, and we in this church have seen enough of it in our midst.

God does this so others will benefit. Each one of us living this way is a channel of God's grace to others, and at the end thanksgiving will overflow to the glory of God.

Glory, Weakness, Hope.

Three ingredients of an apostle's life. The glory of Christ is in the story of Christ, and all of us who make that our story are seeing Christ's glory and are becoming glorious ourselves.

But this treasure is in clay jars, not expensive not strong not attractive, that would be us, weak bodies and weak minds, trouble and distress a regular part of our lives. God's power works most purely through weak fragile people, it is God's plan that his servants experience much weakness. By carrying around Christ's death, God gets to display the life of Christ in our lives.

Hope. We serve Christ because God raised him from the dead, and we serve Christ because God will also raise us from the dead, and bring all of us together to himself. More on hope next week. Amen.