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A GLORIOUS TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

(8 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

There are a couple of notable times in the gospels where Jesus' followers seem to move from confidence to questioning whether Jesus is really the promised Messiah. The first is with John the Baptist. Sitting in a prison cell that would house him until his execution, we are told in Matthew 11:3 that John sent word by his disciples, asking Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" A second time is after Jesus' crucifixion. You may remember the scene. Two men are walking on their way to Emmaus when the risen Christ appears alongside of them and engages them in conversation, only they don't know it's Jesus. So, he asks what their conversation is about, and they answer, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him." Then they add in their discouragement, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:19-21).

These are two cases where individuals are questioning or even expressing their disbelief that Jesus is the Messiah. The circumstances are different. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the most privileged of them all—because he pointed most clearly to Jesus (i.e., "Behold the Lamb of God!"). These two men on the way to Emmaus are unknown, unnamed disciples. John the Baptist sent his disciples to question before Jesus had even gone to the cross. The men on the way to Emmaus are struggling with belief after Jesus had been raised—and was even walking beside them—though they did not know it. But there is something both of them have in common. Suffering seems to be the basis for their questioning. That's certainly the case with the two men. They simply didn't have a category for the conquering Messiah to suffer and die, especially through the horrendous act of crucifixion. And John questions in the midst of his own suffering, sitting in a prison cell, awaiting his death.

The reality these two episodes highlight is that we struggle to account for the purpose or even the presence of suffering. We instinctively don't want our Messiah to suffer but to rise above the fray of this world filled with pain and death, and—if we are honest—we want to rise above it ourselves. In other words, just as we can have a problem with a crucified Savior, so we struggle to come to grip with our suffering as well. Doesn't it seem like if we could just get rid of suffering we could serve the Lord so much better? Doesn't it make sense that we could glorify Jesus more with less pain, affliction, and persecution?

As we've already seen in this letter of 2 Corinthians, this was the very logic Paul was up against from his attackers. Paul's suffering was well known and couldn't be ignored. He'll list his sufferings in great detail in chapter 11 of this letter, and it reads like a horror movie. Numerous imprisonments, countless beatings, and being stranded at sea are only a small taste of what he had suffered. And so his opponents seized on Paul's well-known suffering as an attack. Why

follow someone whose path is so filled with suffering, especially when that one says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1)? But Paul’s response wasn’t to try to downplay or dismiss his suffering. Rather (as we’ll see throughout this letter), he highlights the divine purpose and goal of it. Just as Jesus’ suffering made many dismiss him as the Messiah—missing that his suffering served a saving purpose—so Paul makes the same argument about himself (and all who follow Jesus). What others see as a reason to dismiss Paul (his prevalent suffering), he points to as a divinely ordained means of bringing salvation to others and glory to God. And he lays it out for us once more in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.

And we need these kinds of reminders because we’re tempted to despise suffering ourselves, aren’t we? We’re tempted to make the argument to the Lord that if he’d just rid us of suffering, then, we could be a lot more productive in serving and glorifying him. After all, Paul has pointed out that we have the glorious ministry of speaking the gospel and watching God unveil hearts and open blind eyes, shining his light and bringing life to people, even as he did at creation. With such a glorious ministry, why doesn’t God allow us to rise above the fray of suffering and pain and affliction in this world? Paul gives us several answers. And the first is that God purposes our suffering so that he receives glory.

God purposes our suffering so that he receives glory

After noting how glorious of a ministry we have as believers on this side of Christ’s death, resurrection, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Paul adds, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay” (v. 7). First and most obvious, what he means by “this treasure” is the glorious ministry he’s been talking about from 3:4-4:6. We get to speak the gospel message and watch God give people life where there was only death, sight where there was blindness, and new hearts that would obey him instead of hard hearts that are unaffected by his glorious truth. That’s the treasure we have as ministers of the new covenant. But why does Paul say that we have this treasure in “jars of clay”? It’s because he’s stressing our weakness and frailty.

As believers, we’re not somehow immune from the suffering of this world. We get cancer, heart disease, and numerous illnesses and afflictions just like everyone else. But there’s more. In obedience to Christ, we often find ourselves taking on things that bring more suffering and affliction into our lives. After all, Paul would never have been shipwrecked and stranded at sea if he hadn’t been determined to cross the sea and take the gospel to those who hadn’t heard. And he wouldn’t have received countless beatings if he weren’t proclaiming Jesus as Lord to a people who didn’t want to hear it. And he’s no exception here. In fact, he’ll say in verse 8, “We are afflicted in every way.” This is the path for believers. It is so clearly the path for believers, in Paul’s mind, that he’ll say in Romans 8:17 that we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him.*”

But all of this is God’s design. Paul says that we have this treasure in jars of clay “to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (v. 7). Our weakness, frailty, and suffering all speak to the fact that we are not the ones to be praised when we speak the gospel and men’s eyes are opened to the light of Christ’s glory. We are simply jars of clay—weak, easily cracked,

and easily overlooked—all by God’s design. The power is his; we are simply vessels (and weak ones at that!). So, ironically, the very reason Paul’s opponents were attempting to disparage him (his weakness, frailty, and affliction) are the very marks that show that he is a follower of Christ. So that’s one reason God purposes weakness, frailty, and suffering in our lives, but that’s not all.

God purposes our suffering to manifest his preserving power

In verses 8-9, Paul begins a pattern of saying that on the one hand, that is true of us, but on the other hand, that isn’t. Here’s what I mean. He 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.” Paul once more acknowledges that this life is filled with tribulations for the believer. We are afflicted in every way. There are times we’re confused and discouraged. We are persecuted and even feel like we’ve been knocked to the ground.

Now, Paul is going to make a contrasting point with each of these descriptions, but let’s not gloss over them too quickly. Paul isn’t saying that the believer doesn’t experience weighty suffering. In 1:8, he’d already mentioned that there was a time when he was so deeply buttered that he “despaired of life itself.” Our discouragement and depression and feelings of being overwhelmed aren’t some sign that you don’t belong to the Lord; they’re the experience of believers in this world of sorrow. The realities Paul covers here are simply what the Christian life looks like.

However, he also notes that we persevere. Though we are afflicted, we’re not crushed, we’re not despairing to the point that we abandon Christ, we’re never forsaken by our Lord, and we’re not condemned. That is, no matter what happens to us—and much will—the Lord will always use his preserving might to sustain us, hold us fast, and ensure that we make it to the celestial city. And the obvious implication is that our perseverance is a result of his power. After all, we’re jars of clay, but he’s our gracious and almighty Father. So another reason that God purposes our weakness, frailty, and affliction is so that his persevering power in us might be clearly seen. Remember when Satan himself told God that if affliction came into Job’s life, he’d forsake the Lord. And when God indeed gave Job over to Satan’s attacks, Job did not forsake the Lord. But the heroic element in the story isn’t Job’s might but God’s preserving hand, which will not let go of his own. We so often long for all suffering to disappear, but it’s our endurance in and through it that highlights God’s glorious, preserving power. And yet Paul continues to add more.

God purposes our suffering to present Christ to others

After his contrasts in verses 8-9, Paul continues in verses 10-11, noting that our suffering is a means by which God presents his crucified and risen Son to others through us. He writes, “Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

What is Paul saying here? Well, we've noted several times that salvation can be described in terms of the blessings we experience through being united with Jesus by faith. He lived a perfect life, died for our sins, and was raised as the righteous one on the third day. As we believe in him and are united with him, his perfect life counts for us, his payment for the penalty for sin counts for us, and the declaration that he is righteous which was shown in his resurrection comes to us as well as we are declared righteous. And there is much, much more I could add, but hopefully we get the gist—every blessing we have is through being united with Jesus so that what is true of him becomes true of us as well. And yet our union with Christ also means that our experiences are similar to his, since we are his representatives here. Jesus sketched out for us this reality when he said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household" (Matt 10:24-25). We are like our master, even in the experiences that we anticipate.

Therefore, just as he was entered the glory at his Father's right hand only through the path of suffering, so we anticipate the same. It's as if through us, we're always picturing the death of Christ in our bodies. And once more, this is by God's design. When Paul says in verse 11 that we are always "being given over," the implied subject there is God. It's the same language used of Jesus in Romans 8:32 when Paul writes, "He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him up* for us all." As the Father gave up the Son to the cross, so Paul tells us that we are "being given over to death for Jesus' sake." But how does our being given over to death throughout the experiences of our lives somehow glorify Jesus? That is, what does it mean that our suffering like Christ is "for Jesus' sake"?

Paul tells us in the second half of verses 10 and 11. As we are constantly being given over to weakness, frailty, and affliction, Jesus' life is being presented in us. Jesus demonstrates his own suffering through the suffering of his saints. This is what the Corinthians should have seen in Paul. Though they were tempted to despise and dismiss Paul because of his multitude of sufferings, they should have seen that he looks a lot like Jesus—suffering in order to bring them life.

One of the most powerful images of this reality comes from the pen of Eusebius, an early church historian. He wrote about the martyrdom of a woman named Blandina who was killed under the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The other believers were fearful that she might not hold up in the course of persecution because she was so small and frail, and she was being tortured repeatedly in an attempt to get her to renounce Christ as Lord. And after the soldiers put her through every kind of torture from morning till evening, to the point that they were worn out, Blandina was still breathing, and she was still holding fast to her confession. Then the soldiers took her and hung her up on a post in order to expose her as food for the wild beasts. Eusebius adds, "She looked as if she was hanging in the form of a cross, and through her ardent prayers she stimulated great enthusiasm in those undergoing their ordeal, who in their agony saw with their outward eyes in the person of their sister the One who was crucified for them, that He

might convince those who believe in Him that any man who has suffered for the glory of Christ has fellowship forever with the living God.”¹

The others saw the life of Christ manifested in their dear sister’s mortal flesh, and they were strengthened, for they saw the life of Christ manifested in her. This is how God uses our sufferings—and our obedience in them—as a means of manifesting the life of Christ to others. We do not now see with our eyes how he has suffered in order to demonstrate his love for us, but as we see our dear brothers and sisters carrying in their bodies his death, suffering and obeying, we are getting a picture—a demonstration—of the life of Christ in them. What a glorious blessing we received through our God’s purpose in suffering. And this brings us to one final note.

God purposes our suffering to bring life to others

Remember where we began in verse 7. The gospel is so great and glorious that if it weren’t delivered through jars of clay—frail, weak, and afflicted individuals like ourselves—others would be tempted to put their trust and direct their glory to us. Paul ends on a similar note, writing in verse 12, “So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

Paul’s opponents were telling the Corinthians to dismiss him. After all, who is he? He’s a frail, weak man, who probably bears in his body the marks of affliction he’s taken over the years. When he spoke before others, there’s no doubt he limped into their midst. In other words, he looked like a man who could be described as worn and beaten and frail and weak as a jar of clay. But one thing the Corinthians couldn’t deny is that they’d found life through his ministry. He’d proclaimed to them Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. He’d told them that through repentance and faith they could have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And as he spoke, the Lord had removed the veil from their eyes and shone the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ into their hearts, and their once dead heart had started beating with resurrection life. What is God purposing through exposing our frailty and weakness even as he gives us over to affliction? He’s using us as a means to bring life to others. We may have all the marks of death at work in us, but through us others may find life.

I know it’s so tempting to despise our moments of weakness, frailty, and affliction. I hate being reminded that death is at work in me. I feel it more and more, and I know that many of you have felt it much more than me. And I know that our minds tell us that if only we were stronger, free of frailty, and able to walk above the fray of suffering and death that fills this world that we would be better ministers, more powerful witnesses to the glory of Christ in this world, and those who are able to walk more intimately with Jesus. And yet Paul reminds us right here that we need to pause and recognize the ways of God. It is through our weakness, frailty, and suffering that he is bringing glory to himself, showing his preserving power, demonstrating the life of his Son, and bringing life to others. What a privilege we have as children of God. So let’s

¹ <http://pages.swcp.com/~vogs/eusebius.html> (accessed on April 30, 2021).

pray for his sustaining grace and walk in obedient faith, knowing that our God is doing more in and through us than we could ever imagine. Amen.