



Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

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If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn to the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. We're going to be looking this morning at a section of chapter 4, specifically verses 7-15. If you would give your attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Second Corinthians 4, beginning at verse 7:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 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.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord, we ask this morning that you would make your Word near to us. Bring it to us, O Lord, that we might hear you and know your will that we might do it. Bring it to us, O Lord, that we may know the Lord Jesus Christ and his mighty works better and better, that we may give him all the praise, the glory, and the honor. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

How important are you? Or perhaps a better question is...*How important do you need to be?* Oftentimes, we seek importance, and we actually want to remind others of how important we are. We remind them of all of the things we've done or all of the things we are capable of, seeking to get assurance from others that we are indeed truly important.

Our text this morning is a good reminder that we are not very important, that for the Christian, it is not we who are important but Jesus. That's where our text focuses us this morning. Paul speaks of himself and ministers as those who are jars of clay holding treasure. As a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you need to come to grips with the reality that it is Jesus who is all in all, not you.

Paul gives us two things to consider this morning. First, we are *looking beyond trouble*. As the troubles come around us, as difficulties and challenges are in our circumstances, we are to look past them to Jesus. Then secondly, Paul describes the *confidence of faith* he has, that his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ gives him a boldness, a confidence, a reason for trusting the Lord. Looking beyond trouble and the confidence of faith.

Looking Beyond Trouble

Let's begin, then, with verse 7 as Paul shows us how we are to be looking beyond trouble. Paul has been talking about the glorious nature of the new covenant ministry. He has described it as a glorious light that dispels darkness. It is a light that allows people to see God and his glory. He describes it here in verse 7 as a treasure. It is this treasure that we have, Paul says. It is something of great value. This ministry of introducing people to Jesus is of value. It is without price.

Now, how does this relate to the challenges Paul has faced? Earlier in this chapter, Paul reminded us that there are some who are blind to the light, that their minds and their hearts are hardened, darkened. Beyond that, they are blinded by our Enemy, by the Devil himself. So we ask the question...*How could Paul not despair that he was a failure?* If this ministry is such a treasure, if it is so important, how could Paul not despair when he shares the gospel with others and they reject it?

I think Paul gives us the answer here in our text. It is because he realized the ministry was not about him. This glorious treasure was contained in jars of clay. Now, if you know anything about archaeology, you know that all throughout the ancient world there are found shards of pots. It's one of the ways we learn about ancient civilizations. We look at the words or the pictures that are on these pieces of pots that have been broken and scattered all over the ancient world.

It was ubiquitous. Everywhere you turned you found pieces of jars of clay. It was exceedingly common. It was not like a metal utensil or pot that if it went wrong or if it was marred you would try to fix it. No. Instead, if a jar of clay was chipped or broken, you simply tossed it away and got a new one. It just wasn't that important. That's Paul. That's you. That's me. He compares the minister and Christians to a common clay pot, nothing special, thrown away when it breaks.

I think perhaps the best way I can press this point home by way of illustration is Paul could have said, "We have this treasure in Tupperware." You know what Tupperware is, right? It's something we all have in our homes. It's actually pretty important, not because Tupperware is fancy, not because it's expensive, but because it stores things we need...food, even sometimes expensive items. You can't heat anything up in the microwave, for example, if you don't have some Tupperware.

But what happens when you put something just a bit too long in the microwave and the Tupperware begins to warp or flake away? What do you do? Do you call the Tupperware repairman? No. You simply toss it in the garbage, get online, and order a new set. It's replaceable. It's not important in and of itself. That's how Paul is describing himself and the Christian in the ministry of the new covenant.

Now, we might ask, "Why would God do this?" Why would God give his glorious treasure but not give it to glorious messengers? Why doesn't God give the new covenant ministry, the gospel, to angels? After all, angels are glorious. Every time in the Bible when someone meets an angel, they are blinded, and they fall down and want to worship the angel. Why doesn't God give angels this ministry?

Or why doesn't he at least give it to exalted men? Why doesn't he give this ministry only to kings and princes, only to judges or only to the wealthiest and most important people in the world? Why does he give this ministry to people like you and me? It's because God wants us to look past the messenger to him. You see, God does more than overcome the weakness of the messenger. He makes us forget about the messenger entirely, and we focus on the message of the glory of God in the gospel.

So often, we think the formula goes like this: our weakness plus God's strength equals our strength, but that's not how it goes. It's rather our weakness plus God's strength equals God's strength. It's God who is strong. It's God who is mighty. We are to look beyond ourselves to God. That is where our hope lies.

Next, Paul reminds us to look past our circumstances and our troubles to God's deliverance, and he does this through a series of four contrasts. In each, he admits his weakness, and then he contrasts it strongly, using language of *but not*, with God's strength in delivering him. There is a strong contrast here. The way the Greek is structured, we might even translate it with capital letters: BUT NOT. Paul wants your attention.

He starts all of this out with a statement. Actually, the very first words of verse 8 in the Greek are *in every way*. Paul wants us to know this is happening on every occasion, in every way. There is no complete escape from it. The verb tenses in verses 8 and 9 are present tense verbs. It's something Paul is experiencing right now. It's not Paul saying, "In the past I had this issue, but now everything is fine. I used to have this difficulty, but now everything is easy."

He wants us to know this is something that happens right now in every time for every Christian. This is because, for us, we're always looking for a point when we can get past our troubles. We're always looking for the hump that we can get over. When you're in high school, slaving away, studying for tests and exams, you say, "Oh, I can't wait until I graduate this high school and get to college where I can do whatever I want."

Then you get to college, and you realize college is a real challenge and struggle, and you say, "Well, if only I can graduate and get a job and get a spouse, then everything will be perfect." Then, of course, what happens is you have children, and you say, "Well, if only we can get to the point where our young children can drive and do things for themselves. When they're teenagers, everything will be easy." Of course, every parent with teens laughs at that, because things get harder.

Then you say, "Oh, if we can only get them out of the house and established in their own home, then we can relax." But that doesn't happen either, does it? Grandparent duties are busy. So we say, "Well, if we can just reach the magic of retirement, then life will be perfect." But that's not how we're destined to live...trying to find a perfect time in our lives, trying to get over the hump.

What Paul says is we experience, as followers of Jesus Christ, these difficulties each and every day all of our lives. This is very important for you, because the longer you hold on to the thought that you can just get past problems, the longer you will live the Christian life by not seeking Jesus. You'll try to find a solution.

Paul tells us, first, that he is *afflicted but not crushed*. He's saying there's a real struggle he's experiencing. The word *afflicted* means to be squeezed in. Often, we hear about the victorious Christian life and about how the Christian

should have no problems at all, but if we think that way, what do we do when problems come our way? We think God has abandoned us or that God has failed, but it's the premise that's wrong.

"We are afflicted all the time," Paul says. "We are pressed, but not without hope." He says, "We are afflicted, but not crushed." One commentator puts it memorably: we are squeezed, but not squashed. That's what Paul is saying here. "We had these difficulties, but it is not beyond us, because God is with us."

The second thing he says is "*We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.*" This is a play on words in the Greek. It's actually a rhyme. The two words are related with the second word, the word for *driven to despair*, being an intensification of the word to be *perplexed*. We might say, "We are at a loss but not a loser. We are confused but not confounded." The idea is that Paul is weak and he's not in complete control, but he doesn't give up, because God is with him. He's not driven to despair.

The third thing Paul shares with us is that he is *persecuted but not forsaken*. This word *persecuted* means to be hunted down. That describes actually most of Paul's life in the book of Acts. God permitted men to persecute Paul and to seek to destroy him over and over again as he went from town to town, but God never deserted Paul. He never gave him over to his enemies.

This, brothers and sisters, is crucial for us today, because persecution is coming. Our brothers and sisters around the world already experience it. We need to know that persecution is not abandonment by God. It is actually a way in which he can show his deliverance of us to us and the world. So, when persecution comes, do not despair. Do not think God is a failure. Do not fall, but rather trust the Lord. Look beyond your circumstances to God.

The fourth thing Paul shares with us is he says he is *struck down but not destroyed*. He takes this illustration from the world of combat. It would be as if a soldier was struck by a weapon. We might say, pejoratively, he has been whacked. He's knocked down. The image is of a soldier being knocked to the ground. Perhaps he loses his shield. His compatriots are separated from him, and his enemy is standing over him to deliver the final fatal blow, but Paul says that blow never comes. He's struck down but not destroyed. He gets back up again.

I think Paul was likely thinking of what happened to him in Acts, chapter 14, in the town of Lystra. You remember that because Paul was preaching the gospel, people came and grabbed him and began to stone him. They picked up rocks as big as they could hold that they could also throw with great force, and over and over again, they pelted Paul with these stones. So much so that he fell to the ground, probably unconscious, seeming dead.

His enemies took him and dragged him outside the city only because they did not want him to be a dead body in their streets. They dragged him outside and left him for dead to be devoured by animals because they assumed he was dead. Then Luke describes for us how the disciples came out to Paul, and they were over him. You can imagine that they were tearful and sorrowful. They saw Paul there in a bloody heap, and they assumed he was dead.

I like to think in my mind's eye that as they were over top of him, looking down on him, Paul just happened to open an eye, and they said, "He's alive!" And then, if you could believe it, Luke tells us that Paul gets up and goes back into the city. Could you imagine what his enemies would have thought of that? Can you imagine what they

would have thought about the power of God and the gospel? They had killed him, and they still can't get rid of him.

Then what does Paul do? He takes the disciples on a journey the next day to the next city to preach the gospel. Paul is struck down but not destroyed. Now, we can focus on our troubles, we can focus on our circumstances, but Paul tells us not to do that. Not because our troubles aren't real but because when we focus on our troubles we miss God's deliverance. We miss the hope we should have. We miss the "but not" of the gospel.

We might ask, "Why does God do this?" Why does God allow his servants to experience such difficulty and pain? Why not make them an example of victory and power? Isn't that what impresses people? Well, Paul answers this by pointing us back to Jesus. You see, we have troubles so others might see Jesus' suffering. The language Paul uses is very vivid. He says in verse 10, "We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus." We might even translate it the "dying of Jesus."

For the Corinthians who did not see Jesus suffer and die upon the cross, for you and me who did not see Jesus die on the cross, what we see is the suffering of his servants to remind us of his death. Our troubles and sufferings display the dying of Jesus, because the gospel is not about overcoming hardship with victory. The gospel is about suffering and death that brings life. Death is working in us, Paul says, so that others may have life.

It is our willingness to suffer for the Lord's sake, to testify to the central truth of the gospel. Often, we want to show others that Christianity will make their lives better, that if they come to Jesus their marriages will be better, their jobs will be better, they'll know how to handle their finances better, but that's not the promise of the gospel. Faith in Jesus Christ does not promise you wealth or health or popularity. Most often it's the opposite. We need to shed that American concept. The promise of the gospel is life in Jesus. That is our focus.

Confidence of Faith

But how does Paul practically look beyond trouble? How can he see the reality of God's work? He tells us that what he does is found at the heart of the Christian life: faith. It's a confidence of faith that Paul has. He has confidence because he trusts the Lord. First, he gives us an example from the Old Testament. He says here in verse 13, "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak."

Paul is quoting David from Psalm 116, specifically Psalm 116:10. In that psalm, David is giving thanksgiving to God for his deliverance while he was in the midst of his affliction. The full quote from Psalm 116 is "I believed, even when I spoke: 'I am greatly afflicted.'" You see, David was greatly afflicted. Death surrounded him. He saw the pains of hell before him, but he didn't despair.

That was because David believed. He had faith in the goodness of God. So Paul also believed. Despite all of the suffering he had, Paul could proclaim the gospel and its benefits to himself and others. Can you speak in distress? Not afterward, but while you are in the midst of distress? That's what faith is all about: walking not by what we see around us but by the promises of God that we have.

The second thing Paul says is that faith is not an end in itself. Faith is almost a substance to us at times. We think about faith as a power, that faith is what gets us through trouble, but that's not, strictly speaking, correct. Faith is only strong when it is fixed on an object that is strong. If I have faith in my ability to fly if I jump off a building, no matter how sure I am, it is not going to happen.

Paul reminds us that his faith was fixed on the unchangeable promise of God. We might know it best from Hebrews 13:5: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." That promise cannot be broken. Even death itself cannot break it. Abraham believed that promise. He judged that if God had to bring Isaac back from the dead to keep his promise, he would; that even death could not cause the promise of God to fail.

So, for the believer in Christ, this promise comes to us. In verse 14, Paul says, "...knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence." You see, this is a promise that even death can't break. Paul tells us that the surety of the resurrection, looking to the resurrection, gives him confidence. It's a promise that's already been fulfilled in Jesus. That's why Paul starts with the resurrection of Jesus and then moves to *our* resurrection. That's what he always does.

Sufferings, even death itself, cannot break Paul's confidence. Paul may die, the Corinthians may die, you may die, I may die, but it doesn't matter, because Jesus *did* die, and the Lord raised him from the dead. Is that your confidence? Is that your confidence if the stock market drops, if the supreme court takes away some of your rights, if the whole world goes crazy? Is your supreme confidence in God who always keeps his promises? Can you look past all of your troubles to the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and can you rest in him?

The final thing Paul says is that faith rejoices in the glory of God. He begins verse 15: "For it is all for your sake..." This is Paul's life in a nutshell. He lives for others. The motivation for all that he suffers, he tells the Corinthians, is them. Now, is this because Paul is just naturally selfless or perhaps that Paul is a people-pleaser? You may think you know a person who lives for his or her children. They suffer so their children can have a better life.

That's not what's going on here with Paul. Paul is not just concerned that the Corinthians are blessed, as important as that might be. The answer is found in the rest of verse 15. "...so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

Paul wants more and more people, starting with the Corinthians, to receive grace. Why? So that there will be more and more thanksgiving and praise for God. Do you see that? It's all about God. Even our salvation really is primarily about the Lord rather than us. Do you rejoice when God is glorified? If you do, then you can look past all of your difficulties, all of your troubles, when you know that God is glorified in the midst of them.

In conclusion, life is filled with trouble, especially *these* days, but life has always been filled with trouble. What would it have been like to live when Rome fell and armies swept into cities, burning and looting; or in the days of the Islamic armies that marched and turned churches into mosques; or even today in Nigeria when Christian children are kidnapped and brought into slavery; or in China where to claim the name of Jesus Christ means the government will spy on you and deny you your rights and even imprison you?

With Paul, I call you today to look beyond your trouble to Jesus Christ. Look to him in faith, because he will never fail you. You may see your life as a chipped, cheap pot, but in Christ you are a glorious treasure. Live by faith and glorify God.