

## 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 – “Paradoxical Principles”

Building off of this incredible ministry Paul has been talking about (4:1) and how we don't need to lose hope, he now lays out several paradoxes we experience as believers. Again, it's to show us what we have in Jesus, and that we have much to live for even in the face of difficulty, that we don't need to lose heart.

**4:7 - *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.***

We **HAVE** this treasure... Paul doesn't say this is something to work for or try to earn. We don't need to go searching for or digging for this treasure. This is not a treasure *hunt*, it's a treasure *have*. It's ours as children of God; followers of Christ. Have you recognized this rich treasure contained within you?

But what is this treasure? It's the gospel of Jesus Christ! Again, it's the sweetness of the new covenant that was discussed in Chapter 3. It's the fact that we've been forgiven and cleansed of our sin, and now we can stand in Christ's righteousness and be in relationship with God.

Paul had just finished saying in **2 Corinthians 4:6**, *"For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."*

- **Ephesians 3:8**, *"To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,"*
- **Colossians 1:27**, *"To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."*

Now it's remarkable that God has given us such an incredible treasure, but the container He chose is even more remarkable. If you had something of value, you would want to keep that thing in the safest, most well protected container or surroundings. And you would think that God would do the same. Yet He chose us – simply earthen vessels. The picture here is of some clay pots. Every home would have a clay pot at their disposal. It was the cheapest means of containing something, but if they became broken, they were useless and thus disposed of. So, there was little value to a clay pot.

Yet this is what God chose to put such an awesome treasure in. I think for a couple reasons:

- 1) So that we can't boast in the fact that we have anything to do with God receiving glory. We had nothing to do with it. No one was attracted to the gospel because we were so glorious.
  - You would think that God could've used angels to be the deliverers of the gospel. That would be pretty majestic and amazing wouldn't it? Who wouldn't be enamored with the gospel if an angel appeared to you? I mean we'd be ready to move into angel worship. But He chose us to be the ones that would deliver the gospel. Nobody's going to be tempted to worship us. We're just earthen vessels. And so the reason God puts His treasure in earthen vessels is so ***the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.***
  - We have to be so careful that we're not trying to present this treasure in a manner where we're shining brighter than it is. If a person walks away more impressed with the preacher than the message, something is off. "There is something wrong when the vessel robs the treasure of its glory, when the casket attracts more attention than the jewel which it bears. There is a very perverse emphasis when the picture takes second place to the frame, and when the ware which is used at the feast becomes a substitute for the meal. There is something deadly in Christian service when "the excellency of the power" is of us and not of God. Such excellency is of a very fleeting kind, and it will speedily wither as the green herb and pass into oblivion."<sup>19 1</sup>
- 2) So that we can't contain this glorious treasure. We're fragile, we get easily broken, we leak. We're a bunch of crack pots. But this is serving a purpose, it's meant to allow the contents of the riches of God to flow out all the more.
  - Illustration: A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole, which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made.

<sup>19</sup> J. H. Jowett, *Life in the Heights*, p. 65.

<sup>1</sup> MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1834). Thomas Nelson.

But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots. But if we will allow it, the Lord will use our flaws to grace His table. In God's great economy, nothing goes to waste.

We don't need to get down on ourselves or our deficiencies. We don't need to let our frailty or weaknesses handicap and restrict us from being of service to God. Paul's point is not to dwell on the earthen vessels and remind us of our weakness, it's to point us to this treasure and the greatness within us. It's not about us, but the glory of Jesus demonstrated in the gospel; how He takes dead lives and makes them new!

These clay pots are meant to be simple vessels. They get worn, they may be brittle and break easy, but it allows the contents to be on greater display.

And Paul mentions some of the experiences he's had where it's allowed this treasure to shine forth and the power of God to be evident.

**4:8-9 - *We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—***

Paul lists 4 ways in which the weakness of the vessel only allowed the power of God to be on greater display:

1. **Hard-pressed.** Paul felt the squeeze many times. He underwent great pressure. This word is translated as *afflicted* in 1:6 and as *troubled* in 7:5. Paul said in 7:5 that they '*...were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears.*' This could give the idea for what Paul has in mind here when he says they were hard-pressed on every side. They were feeling the pressure from without and within. Yet though this pressure was giving them the anaconda squeeze, they were **not crushed**. The power of God was still greater than their seeming weakness and struggle.
2. **Perplexed.** This "is derived from two Greek words: the word for *no* plus the word for *way*. Thus *perplexed* means "to be at a loss."<sup>2</sup> It's coming to a place where you don't have any solutions on how to get out of a predicament. Yet Paul was **not in despair**. He has always seen God provide the way out. I think of the nation of Israel coming to the Red Sea. They would have been perplexed. There was no way out for them. Yet they didn't need to be in despair. Moses said to them, '*Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today*' (Ex 14:13). When the world says *no way*, we say *Yahweh!* God sees us through when we have no recourse. We may at times be at the end of our rope, but we're never at the end of hope.
3. **Persecuted.** This is the idea to pursue after. People were hunting Paul down. He knew what it was like to have an enemy in hot pursuit of him. Yet he knew that he was **not forsaken**, nor never would be. God was on His side and wouldn't abandon him. Paul lived out **Psalm 118:6**, "*The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*"

<sup>2</sup> Radmacher, E. D., Allen, R. B., & House, H. W. (1997). *The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version* (2 Co 4:8). T. Nelson Publishers.

4. **Struck down.** Paul was literally struck down, he was stoned and left for dead in Lystra (Acts 14:19). He's experienced the physical assault and attempts to take his life. But he's not been **destroyed**. Every attempt on his life has failed. God has preserved him; raised him up so that Paul could continue to proclaim the good news, and do so with even greater power!

“Paul's numerous escapes from defeat and death were signs of Christ's power at work in him.

- "Whatever condition the children of God may be in, in this world they have a 'but not' to comfort themselves with." (Matthew Henry)
- "To be at the end of man's resources is not to be at the end of God's resources; on the contrary, it is to be precisely in the position best suited to prove and benefit from them, and to experience the surplus of the power of God breaking through and resolving the human dilemma.”” (Hughes) <sup>3</sup>

Maybe you've had some challenges in your life; you've been through the struggles and have felt hard-pressed or perplexed. Yet to each of these seeming setbacks, it only provided an opportunity for the greatness of God to shine forth. The excellence of the power of God was evident. What causes someone to bounce back or keep moving forward in the face of these kind of struggles? Only the power of God can do that. Only a valuable treasure like the good news of Jesus Christ can motivate someone to keep going in the face of such adversity. And that's exactly how it played out in Paul's life. He knew this was worth living for. And if his persecutions and strikes against him allowed this message to be all the more seen and heard, then so be it. He was good with that. It's the very reason he's living his life!

**4:10-11 - *always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.***

Here's another paradox that Paul brings up: We're carrying about the death of Jesus, but so that the life of Jesus may shine through in our lives.

<sup>3</sup> [www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/2corinthians/2corinthians.htm](http://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/2corinthians/2corinthians.htm)

The Christian life is all about dying first. This is so paradoxical to the way of the world. Everyone in the world is living to avoid dying. The Christian life says die so that you may truly live!

Paul looks to Jesus and says he carries in the **body the dying of the Lord Jesus**. Now that sounds kind of morbid doesn't it? What does he mean by that? What Paul is saying is that as he serves the Lord in this glorious ministry, he faces death often. But whatever he might endure only allows for the power and life of Jesus to be all the more evident. If there's no **crucifixion**, there's no **resurrection**!! And Paul is experiencing this incredible resurrection power of Jesus at work in his life that is beyond him and can only point people further to Jesus.

“Both verses stress (through *hina kai*, “that... also”) the fact that the death and the life of Jesus were simultaneously evident in the apostle's experience (cf. 1:4,5). It was not a matter of life after death, or even of life through death, but of life in the midst of death. Paul's repeated deliverances from death evidenced the resurrecting power of God (1:9,10), just as his refusal to despair in the face of danger of death and persistent opposition (4:1, 16; 5:6) displayed the resurrection-life of Jesus operative in his “mortal flesh” (cf. Phil 3:10).<sup>4</sup>

- **Philippians 3:10**, *"that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,"*
- **2 Corinthians 1:9–10**, *"Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,<sup>10</sup> who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us,"*

Sharing this gospel is not just about speaking it out, it's about living it out. God uses us to demonstrate the power of this gospel, the hope of glory, by how we handle different circumstances of adversity. We can rejoice that persecution or even death is not the end, it simply leads to resurrection and glory!

**4:12 - So then death is working in us, but life in you.**

You might be asking, what kind of message does that send when we're sharing the gospel yet living a life that is hard-pressed, crushed, perplexed and

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<sup>4</sup> Harris, Murray J. (1976). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10* (p. 343). Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, MI.

persecuted. How is that an attraction to someone? *Would you like to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior and enter into a life of chaos?*

But Paul never considered this a life of chaos. He saw it as the natural results of a world that was opposed to Christ. To some he was that aroma of death, to others the aroma of life (2:16). And he knew that whatever trial might be happening in his life, it had the opportunity of working out something far greater in other people.

- **2 Corinthians 1:5–6**, *"For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. <sup>6</sup> Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation."*
- **2 Timothy 2:10**, *"Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."*

Paul saw the opportunity to shine forth the life giving and life sustaining power of Jesus Christ in the face of adversity. Paul's clay pot not just concealed a valuable treasure, it revealed this valuable treasure for others.

May we do the same!