

Reflections on a Difficult Year

2 Corinthians 4:7-11 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. ⁸ ¶ We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed -- ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ 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.

If you have ever done a bit of swimming in the ocean, you may have had this experience: a rather large wave comes, and you with great effort manage to swim through it or over it, and as you are panting for breath, another one comes and smacks you in the face, leaving you choking and spluttering. Just when you have coughed out all that water, and managed to stay afloat, another one hits you. You can start to feel like there is no end to the waves, and begin to despair of staying afloat.

In this regard, Paul must rank up there as one of our models. This was a man who faced trials in waves. He either seemed to be going into one or coming out of one.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 Are they ministers of Christ? -- I speak as a fool -- I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. ²⁴ From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; ²⁶ in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; ²⁷ in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness -- ²⁸ besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

1 Corinthians 15:31 I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.

And yet, after all that, he could say:

"2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

You would expect, that at some point, Paul would have simply shouted, "Enough is enough. I can't handle anymore."

But we don't find him ever doing that. In fact, it seems that Paul had reached a spiritual and mental place that did the opposite: the more pressure you placed on him, the more faith he had. Like those chemical substances which are liquid at rest, but the more pressure you put on them, the more they harden.

In this Scripture we find out why. We find out why Paul could be stretched out beyond all human strength, but then say twice in this chapter: "We do not lose heart." In these few verses, we see Paul understood the Design of Suffering, and he understood the dynamic in suffering.

I. Paul Understood the Design of Suffering

Verse 7 says, we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

What treasure is Paul speaking of? He is speaking of the treasure of the gospel. The truth of all truths, that God is revealed in Jesus Christ, who came to die for man's sin and rose again, this truth is now contained and proclaimed by fallen, broken, human beings.

This is an amazing contrast. The word for earthen vessels is the word for clay pots. It refers to very ordinary, fragile, breakable, vessels. In 2 Timothy 2:20, Paul uses the same word to speak of the dishonourable vessels:

2 Timothy 2:20 ¶ But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor.

Paul is saying that human beings in our fallen condition are like fading, broken, bashed up vessels. And it is God's design to house the shining, glorious gospel in these clay pots. This is God's design: the diamond inside the mud ball, the gold ring inside the paper cup, the ruby on the paper plate. He wants the extraordinary housed within the ordinary; He wants the supernatural housed within the natural. Why? *“that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”*

God wants weakness to carry His message, so that it becomes overwhelmingly obvious to everyone else that the power comes from God. God deliberately selects vessels that are ordinary and not mighty or noble according to the flesh, so that people must marvel, and say, how do we explain the fact that this person is still standing? In other words, God wants living, walking illustrations of the gospel – that God does 100% of the work in helpless, hopeless, weak and broken vessels.

When Elisha told the poor woman to bring all the vessels in her house, and then to begin pouring oil out of the one, you remember that the oil kept coming and coming and coming, till all the vessels in the house were filled. It would have been foolish to look at that vessel at that point and say, “Wow, it really holds more than I thought it could!” No, by the time she had filled five or ten vessels, it should have been clear, this was not something the vessel could do, this was something God was miraculously doing through the vessel.

So in the same way, Paul says, God does things to us, and allows things to happen to us, which take us far beyond our natural abilities.

Look at the descriptions: We are hard pressed on every side. This means – we are squeezed and pressed into a corner, with no way of escape. So many troubles and pressures come to you, you are in a place where all the pressure is closing in on you, and you cannot seem to get out. And yet – not crushed. No, there is a design here, and God is not trying to crush you, He is seeking to do something through you that you cannot do. And what gets in the way is when you try to control everything, or prevent God from adding those pressures, or try to do each of those pressures in your own strength. To be like Paul is to see the design: the excellency of the power is to be clearly from God, not from clay jars. So when God closes in on me, I can trust He will not crush me, but He does intend to do something through me which a clay pot cannot do in itself.

We are perplexed, but not in despair. We come to a place of absolutely no answers. We are at a loss; we have no way of explaining what is going on in our lives. We are filled with doubts. We are confused. What is going on? How can this happen? And yet- not in despair. Not losing hope. Not cursing God. Not disbelieving God. No – there is a design here. God intends to bring you to a place where your human wisdom has absolutely no way of figuring out what he is doing and why. He is not trying to cause your faith to fail. He wants it to soar. But to do that, He must take you beyond what a clay pot can think or understand. And if you fight Him, and insist on answers, and want the

control, and want to know what is happening, why and how, you will have a very uncomfortable ride.

We are persecuted, but not forsaken. We experience rejection: family rejection, work rejection, friendship rejection. We experience taunts, insults. We are passed over or ignored. Our many brothers and sisters across the world are imprisoned, beaten and killed for the faith. And I am sure that many of us would feel like John the Baptist did in prison: is Jesus really the one? Did I make a mistake? How did I throw my life away like this? But even there – you are not forsaken. There is a design. God wants to do something in and through you that cannot be humanly explained.

We are struck down, but not destroyed. One wave after another knocks us off our feet. To the watching angelic world, there must be sense of – he won't get up after that one. But he does, because God is in control. He is holding the pressure control. He is holding the temperature control. He wants us down, where we are weak, but not out, where we are useless.

How do we know that? How do we know God is really in control and will not allow the pressures to overwhelm us?

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

2 Peter 2:9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment,

He is not trying to destroy you. But in order to work through you mightily, He may have to destroy your self-reliance. He may have to destroy your fear of losing control. He may have to destroy your trust in your own plans. If you don't believe that this is His design for Christians – you may panic when it happens. You may start blaming a lot of people for the pressure in your life. You may start lashing out. No promises are given for an easy Christian life in Scripture.

If you end your days on this earth, and your life can be explained in purely human terms, you have wasted the opportunity to display the gospel. You were a walking 100 volt battery in a town of power outs, and your home looked just as dark as everyone else's. JH Jowett said, "It is possible to avoid a multitude of trouble by living an insignificant life."

Paul did not lose heart because he saw and knew the design. He also did not lose heart because

II. He Understood the Dynamic

He understood the dynamic, that is, the power that was at work. He understood the way the power of God works, when it is most active, when it is most prominent. And He didn't fight against it, or try to compete with it.

... always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ 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.

How do we survive? In our bodies, in these earthen vessels, we carry about the death of the Lord. In what way? When we suffer, in whatever form, we re-enact the death of Christ. IN Colossians 1:24, Paul says:

Colossians 1:24 I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,

When we suffer as Christians, we give the world another portrayal of the Calvary Road. We display to the world what kind of faith Jesus had in His Father. And do you know what happens when Christians die to their own strength and reputation and name and power and control? The life of someone else is manifested in our bodies. Whose is that life? Jesus Christ.

The dynamic is this: God's power takes over, at the point of our surrender.

We don't yet understand how jealous God is of His glory. God does not share the credit for what He does. God does not share the credit with us for saving us. And when He wants to give the world a living illustration of the power of the gospel, it is not going to be a shared effort, with shared glory.

Jowett says:

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.

MacDonald, William ; Farstad, Arthur: *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995, S. 2 Co 4:7

Therefore, the sooner you embrace the gospel principle, the better off you'll be. The gospel principle is: the One who gives the grace, gets all the glory. And He only gets all the glory when it is clearly His power and not yours at work.

1 Peter 4:11 If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

So to be like Paul is to preach this gospel message to yourself everyday: God, life is about Your glory. I am helpless, hopeless, weak and sinful, Even my good works are filthy rags. I come to you and ask that Your life might be manifested through me. I don't want to attempt things in my own strength. Convict me when I am no longer dependent. I trust that whatever You send me today will reveal the source of the power within.

When you embrace the gospel principle, every pressure, every trouble, every distress becomes an opportunity for the diamond to sparkle, for the gold to glisten, for the treasure to gleam.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. ⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This is once again living the gospel every day. Bring the cross of trouble, confusion, problems to bear upon your merely mortal being, and surrender to God. Allow the power of God, residing

within, give you the strength to respond with grace, patience, love, joy, peace, longsuffering. Stop trying to be impressive. Stop trying to be a perfect clay pot. Stop trying to control every detail of your life. Stop trying to screen out any pressures you think will overwhelm you. You will succeed only in becoming a tyrant to those around you, and living in fear and anger. Living like that is like having the handbrake on while trying to move the car forward. God wants to do mighty things through you, but you insist on controlling everything,

Accept the death that comes with suffering. Die to your own control. Die to your own expectations. Die to your own self-protection, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-righteousness.

If we believe there is a design to our suffering, and a dynamic that enables us in it, then despair, anxiety and misery can only come when we deny those two truths. If we deny that God has designed it this way, and kick and scream against the process of being pushed beyond ourselves, we will not take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. And if we do not understand that the dynamic of God's power takes over when we are delivered over to death, so to speak - when we relinquish control, and face suffering beyond our own abilities, we will struggle.

A.W. Tozer said, "It is unlikely that God can use a man greatly, until He has hurt him deeply." Until God has pried our fingers loose of our own control, our own reputation, our own wisdom, our own competence, our own status, we are not in a position to give Him all the glory. We want grace, plus our own works.

As you look out for the next year, preach the gospel to yourself every day. The design is in the gospel – God wants all the glory, and His glory shines clearest where the vessel is weak and helpless. God gives grace, but He gives grace to the humble, not the self-sufficient. If we keep in mind the design and the dynamic, we will not lose heart.