

This morning, I am in the fourth week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. As we have seen in the first few chapters, after Paul moved on from Corinth to start other churches, the relationship between Paul and the church became strained, and he unfortunately has to spend a good amount of time in this letter defending himself to them. One reason in particular for the strained relationship is that Paul has suffered a lot in his life as a result of his discipleship to Christ, and it has caused other teachers in Corinth to throw shade on Paul and his ministry in order to question his authenticity as an apostle. After all, they argue, shouldn’t a follower of Christ be experiencing success and blessing and prosperity, not hardship and suffering? Aren’t Paul’s struggles and his trials a sign that there is something inferior about him? Well, in the last section Paul talked about the surpassing greatness of the gospel of Jesus, and how when you faithfully proclaim it, some will receive it and find life while others will think it stinks and reject it and you as well. And in this section, we see Paul addressing the relationship between this great gospel and the reality of suffering with some powerful words. Let’s take it one section at a time:

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 - *But we have this **treasure** in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is **at work in you**. ¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 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 in his presence. 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.*

The first point Paul makes is this:

1) Let your weakness and suffering magnify God’s power

Paul begins this section by calling the gospel a treasure and comparing Christians to clay jars. He says that as believers in Jesus, we have a treasure, this gospel, this

good news, inside of us – this treasure includes, among other things, our adoption as sons and daughters of God, the forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with God, the removal of all shame and guilt, peace that passes understanding, joy untouched by the circumstances of life, the transformative love of God poured into our hearts, and a new heart and new spirit, God’s Holy Spirit inside of us empowering us to overcome any sin and free us from any addiction and to become the men and women God has created us to be. What a treasure! But even though we have this incredible treasure in us, we ourselves are nothing more than clay jars. We are not ornate or fancy. We are nothing special. We are ordinary, cracked, beaten up and beaten down. Paul goes on to say that we are hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. In other words, we take a beating and suffer much in this world. Nevertheless, he says, we are not crushed, we are not in despair, we are not abandoned, and we are not destroyed. Why not? Because we have the hope of Christ and the loving and empowering presence of God’s Holy Spirit in us.

In verses 10-12, Paul makes the point that we carry around the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed. Like the Messiah that we are following, we are suffering and facing death all the time, in order that through our sacrificial love, God might bring life to others. **Our God is the God of the resurrection**, and so we have confidence that death is not the end, nor is it something to be feared. And so, Paul tells us that we have hope, even in suffering, because we know that our God is a God who brings life out of death and hope out of seeming despair.

Remember, Paul is defending himself against Christians who are questioning his bona fides because of his suffering. In some ways, I shake my head that Paul even has to convince them; after all, if we are following a Jesus who suffered and died in order to bring others back to God, does it not make sense that we will also suffer and face death as we seek to bring others to God? Why then are they so suspicious of Paul’s authenticity as an apostle? Well, remember that Corinth was a wealthy port city, and they were being swayed by the teaching of religious leaders who were promising them that following God would result in health and prosperity and a life without suffering. While this letter may be almost 2000 years old, this sounds very familiar, as in our wealthy country, we are still surrounded by many voices trying to convince us of the same thing, that following Jesus should result in health and prosperity and promotion and increase and favor, and not a life of suffering and struggle. But such teachers are liars, manipulating people and twisting God’s Word in order to gain glory and money for themselves. The truth is that suffering is part of our discipleship to Jesus as we love others sacrificially. But the good

news is that through our struggle, and through our weakness, God's power and grace is more clearly displayed.

As NT Wright put it in his commentary, *“The Corinthians have been looking at the [container] – at Paul’s own public figure, his speaking style, and at the fact that he is in and out of trouble, weakness, and now near to death – and they have concluded that there is nothing at all remarkable about him. He ought to look more important than that, surely, if he really is a messenger with a message from the living God! No, says, Paul: you’re missing the point. Precisely because of the vital importance of the message, the messenger must be dispensable... if it were otherwise, the jars might regard themselves as important... If the Corinthians want an apostle who is living by the gospel he proclaims... then they must look for these signs. Don’t look, in other words, for a showy, flashy rhetorical presentation which leaves the problems and sufferings of the world to someone else. Look for someone who is being given over to death for the sake of Jesus, so that Jesus’ life may be revealed even in their mortal humanity.”*

Through our struggle, and through our weakness, God's power and grace is more clearly displayed. Later on in this book, Paul will double down on this argument:

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Our suffering does not need to be cause for questioning our status as a disciple, but can be a cause for pointing more clearly to the power and grace of God. **We can be honest about our weaknesses and hardships and insults and persecutions and difficulties, because it will cause people not to think much of us but to think much of God.** Because anything that is good in us, anything that is good in me, any gift that I have, any perseverance I have displayed, anything good, is because of Him. The power and the grace and the strength is His, not mine. I can look back at my time here as pastor and see how the sufferings I have gone through have humbled me into realizing that anything good in me is from Him, and that I need to do all I can to point people to Him and not to

me. I am not the treasure. Paul was not the treasure. Christ in me is the treasure. And He is available to all.

I love how the singer-songwriter Andrew Peterson put it:

“It’s the great, confounding reversal of the Gospel of Jesus. If the word we preach is one of attainable perfection, of law, of justification by works, then when we fail, our testimony fails with it. But if we preach our deep brokenness and Christ’s deeper healing, if we preach our inability to take a single breath but for God’s grace, then our weakness exalts him and we’re functioning as we were meant to since the foundation of the world.”

Anything good is from God. Let your weakness and suffering magnify God’s power and grace.

Continuing in v. 16:

*¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. ^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 5:1** Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, ³ because when we are clothed, **we will not be found naked.** ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. ⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ We live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

So Paul’s first encouragement is to let your weakness and suffering magnify God’s power and grace. His second encouragement is:

2) Fix your eyes on eternal things

One of the main purposes of this time together, when we gather for worship, is to do vision correction. It's to adjust your sight. All week we have been focused on the here and now, the things we can see and taste and touch. All week, we have been the center of the universe. We are the consumers, and everything revolves around us. But this is the time to correct your vision and to fix your eyes on true reality. To recognize that you are not the center of the universe, and you were created not to be a consumer but a worshiper. Take your eyes off of the physical, off the things you can see and taste and touch, and focus your eyes on what is unseen, for that is what is eternal. All of this stuff is passing away. God is more real than even the chair you are sitting on, for He was there in the beginning and will be here in the end.

Fix your eyes on eternal things. In fact, Paul says that even the suffering he experienced is a light and momentary trouble when compared with eternal. Now, remember: in chapter 1 this is how he talked about his sufferings:

***2 Corinthians 1:8-10** - We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,*

And later on, he will catalogue some of what he has been through:

***2 Corinthians 11:23-30** - Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from **false brothers**. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*

And yet now he says that these sufferings are “light and momentary troubles.” When he compares his present sufferings with the glory that is to come, he says that it’s like stubbing his toe. Like a mosquito bite. As Teresa of Avila said, the worst earthly life, when seen from the perspective of heaven, will seem like one night in a cheap motel. On the one hand, his troubles are so hard that he doesn’t think he can endure, and on the other hand, when he compares those troubles with the glory that is to come, he calls them light and momentary.

Paul tells us to live by faith and not by sight, to fix our eyes on what is unseen, on what is eternal. What does this look like? Remember this picture:

Revelation 21:1-5 - *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

The world ends with God dwelling with resurrected believers. Heaven comes down to earth, and the dwelling of God is with men. A renewed earth that has been joined with heaven. Sin and evil will be destroyed. And everything, including our bodies, will be perfected, never to decay again. All things will be new forever. And so Paul can write:

Romans 8:18-23 - *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

The world is broken, groaning, waiting for the day when it will be liberated. If this is what is to come, if this world is passing away, then fix your eyes on what is unseen. Make your life about His kingdom.

Hebrews 12:1-3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Continuing in 5:9 –

⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Let your weakness and suffering magnify God's power and grace. Fix your eyes on eternal things. And Paul's third encouragement is:

3) Bring Him maximum glory through your life

Paul writes, "So we make it our goal to please him." Why? Because you have been given such a great treasure, free of charge, through Jesus' sacrificial death for you. You have been forgiven, adopted, made new, empowered, and given eternal life when you deserved eternal death! If He gave His life for you, then live your life for the one who saved yours, and love others the way He has loved you! Make it your goal to please Him, because you will be spending eternity with Him! Because the things of this world are passing away! Because you can not hold on to the things around you! So why waste your time on that which is temporary when you can accumulate those things which are eternal?

Paul goes on to mention judgment. One day you will be judged. The judgment seat, or bema, is where the Roman governor would sit to dispense justice, try cases. And Paul here tells them that Jesus also has a judgment seat, where we will be judged. This world will fade away and you will stand before the God who created you. What will you have done with the life He gave you?

The Bible is clear that our sin has separated us from a holy God, and that the only way to be right with God is through trusting in Jesus' death for our sins.

Romans 3:21-24 - *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

John 3:16,17, 36 - *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

No one will be saved on the basis of his or her resume. But for those in Jesus, there is no condemnation:

Romans 8:1 - *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

What does this mean? Repent. Turn to faith in Jesus. This world is passing away, and one day you will stand before the judgment. Make sure you are right with God!

But as verse 10 makes clear, judgment is not only on the basis of our faith. We will also be judged on the basis of what we have done:

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 - *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

According to this passage, some will be saved because Jesus knows them, but all that they have spent their life doing will be burned up in the end. How you build your life will be judged. The good news is that every little thing you do for the Lord matters, and you will receive your reward.

Matthew 10:42 - *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

Do not be discouraged by the trials; they are part of following Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus and eternity, on what is unseen. For all that surrounds you is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. And so live for God's kingdom.

Matthew 6:19-21 - *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

What is treasure in heaven? What is heavenly reward and why does it matter? I don't know for sure, but allow me to speculate.

I would encourage you not to think about the concept of heavenly reward as getting a bigger mansion, or more jewels in your crown, or a house closer to the throne. Think of reward in another way: It's like all the hard work you put into your golf game so that you can receive the reward of being able to go out there and hit the ball straight and long. All the hard work you put into your marriage or friendship so that one day you really enjoy the other person. It's like learning another language so that you can read the great poets and philosopher in their own language. Or working at piano so that the reward is your ability to play freely and beautifully. These are all example of rewards that are organically connected to the activity. If this is true, then perhaps the reward of giving yourself to the service of God, delighting yourself in Him, is that one day you will receive the reward of that sacrifice and dedication, and it will make the sacrifice seem like nothing in comparison.

Or think of it another way – If heaven were a basketball game, the greatest reward would go to those who gave themselves fully to learning the game of basketball, for they would be able to most fully enjoy it and play most skillfully and have the

most to contribute. What if heaven were an orchestra? Those who dedicated themselves to the instrument would enjoy it the most. The reward goes to those who worked to prepare themselves for what was to come. But heaven is neither a basketball game nor an orchestra; heaven is love. It is service to God and service to each other. It is loving God and loving neighbor with all your heart. It is reigning over the world, playing a part in the recreation of the world. The ones who will receive their reward in full will be those who gave themselves fully to that end on earth. Those who dedicated their skills and talents to the service of God will see those talents enhanced and ennobled and given back to them to be exercised to His glory. Your striving for holiness will be rewarded in the holy new heavens and new earth, because you will be best prepared to live in that place.

Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because it is never in vain.

Remember the end of Schindler's List, where Oskar Schindler, looking out at the sea of people he has saved, breaks down as he realizes that he could have done more? He is overwhelmed by the money he wasted, the car, the gold pin, the things that could have been sold in order to purchase the freedom of more Jews. While the regret may not be there in heaven, it is worth reflecting on that scene in the light of judgment day. On that day we will realize what really matters, and those who gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord will be rewarded, while those who wasted their life on things that did not matter will miss out on greater joy and reward.

Remember Paul in *1 Thessalonians 2:19-20* - *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

On that day we will see all the people who we influenced towards God, and they will be our glory and joy. Just like Schindler seeing all the people who were there because of him and wishing he had done more, we will likely glory in those who are there in part because of our lives. Live in the light of that day. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord so that your reward will be great on that day.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*