

Treasure in Jars of Clay  
2 Corinthians 4:7-8

What do people do when they've lost hope? The first image that may come to your mind might be of someone who no longer wants to go on living. And of course, that is a sad reality. But there are other results of lost hope. There are many things people do when they feel hopeless.

Like what?

Well, think about the moral law given to us by God. We have the Ten Commandments, and throughout the Scriptures God tells us what is right and wrong according to His perfect character and ways. Why do we attempt to obey God's law? We do so out of a sense of love, and a sense of duty, out of reverence for God. We do so out of a sense of cautiousness and perhaps even fear.

But also, we try to obey God's moral law out of a sense of hope. We follow God's ways because we believe they show us the best way to live. So, we have hope in His law. We trust that these ways are best, and so we live by them.

Therefore, we obey God because we hope in Him – because we trust Him.

A moment ago, I read from 2 Corinthians 4, where the apostle Paul writes that he and others with him were "*perplexed, but not driven to despair.*" Why does he state it this way? It's because despair is a natural result of perplexity or confusion.

When we are perplexed, we naturally despair. In other words, we naturally lose hope. Now, despair may not look the same for everyone, but there is a common thread that runs through all despair.

When we despair, we resort to our own ways of dealing with a situation.

When we despair, we cope in ways that don't reflect trust in God and His law.

When things are difficult, aren't you often drawn toward breaking God's moral law in some way in order to resolve the situation or get some relief as you suffer?

You want to force some kind of result.

You want to get even, or defend yourself, or feel secure or in control, or you want to appear strong or capable, but you have to break God's law to do it. That is not the way of trust; it's the way of despair, and we've all gone that way at some time or another.

But still, even as Scripture tells us the vast and perfect law of God, it also tells us that God is full of grace. He is understanding; He's empathetic. And He's involved. The Father sent the Son into the world because God is a God of grace.

And Jesus knew what was in us – He knew we are prone to the way of despair – and still He came to save us. He came to give us life in Him, to set us free from despair. He came into the world to give us hope.

If we have Christ, we always have hope – always – because our hope is in the LORD. And to keep His moral law – to obey His ways and reap the benefits of doing so – we must renew our hope in Him each day.

You see, whatever you are carrying today, whatever you are facing, you should think about these words of Psalm 33: *“Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.”* You can renew your hope in Him this morning and every day.

But how? These two verses of 2 Corinthians 4 help us understand. I prepared a short outline for you, which you can find on page 6 in the WG. Renewing your hope in Christ is like two sides of the same coin: admitting who we are without Christ and remembering who we are with Him. Obeying God's law is a Christ-centered endeavor. Hope is Christ-centered.

Now, if you look again at verse 8, notice that Paul expresses how he and the others were *“perplexed.”* What did he mean? Well, they were baffled, puzzled, at a loss over things that were happening to them and others as they preached Christ and the kingdom of God grew.

What were they so baffled by? They were confused by the suffering they faced and the behavior of people they encountered. They were doing God's work! But they were puzzled by His decretive will. I spoke some about God's decrees last week. Anything that happens only happens according to God's sovereign decree. Anything good or bad takes place under His control and with His prior knowledge.

Paul and his companions saw many wonderful things as they ministered. They saw things that amazed them and brought them joy and caused them to praise God. But they saw confusing things as well. Can you relate? Paul had to admit that he was *“perplexed”* at times.

Have you ever made a decision where you stepped out on faith in a way that you believed God was leading you, but then things didn't go the way you thought they would? Maybe you didn't succeed or you ran into trouble. You may have inherited problems that you wouldn't have had if you weren't on that path.

It may have even become clear that to continue walking by faith and obeying God, you would need to change course once more. But you were certain that you had obeyed God – that He had led you on your way. Your experience, while perhaps not all bad, was, in many ways, perplexing.

Paul admits as much to the Corinthians. We can assume that he did so, in part, for the sake of His own soul. He does call himself, at one point, *“the chief of sinners.”* That is who Paul understands himself to be apart from Jesus Christ. In fact, he goes into detail on various occasions about who he was without Jesus and about the struggle that still went on within him between his sinful nature and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So he writes this for himself, but also, he writes it for the Corinthian congregation, so they will again admit who they are without Jesus. He wants them to renew their hope, and this is the way. Can you admit to God today what perplexes you, what totally stumps you?

Can you say to God what makes you confused and even say, *“Why Lord? Why?”* It may be a struggle within yourself – or maybe it’s trouble swirling around you. Perplexity naturally leads to despair, and you may be dabbling in despair today? You may have even started to make despair a normal part of your life.

Look again with me at what Paul writes in verse 8. He uses these terms together: “perplexed, but not driven to despair.” We should understand him as saying that his degree of perplexity would naturally result in despair. One scholar translates Paul as saying that they are, *“perplexed but not utterly perplexed.”* That’s a more word-for-word translation. *“We are at a loss, but not at an utter loss.”*

It’s the same with the previous statement you see there. *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.”* What he basically says is, *“We are crushed in every way, but not utterly crushed.”* They were confused by their sufferings, and yet, not confused beyond all hope. Their sense of hope was threatened, but they would not renounce their hope. Somehow, they had confidence.

And Paul tells us the origin of their confidence – of their hope – in his famous words just one verse earlier, in verse 7. Notice there, he writes, *“We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”* This is a metaphor with two things in contrast: something of tremendous value – something extraordinary and unique – stored in a common, frail container of little worth.

If you ever get a chance to go to Washington, D.C., you might visit the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. And if you go there, you’ll probably see a long line of people waiting to get an up-close look at the Hope Diamond. It’s valued today at about \$250 million dollars today. It was donated to the Smithsonian back in 1958 by a jeweler in New York City.

How do you think something like that would be transported to Washington? Probably not like you think. It was wrapped in brown paper, put in a box, and shipped through the U.S. Mail. The jeweler who donated the Hope Diamond later said that registered mail is, *“the safest way to ship gems. . . . I’ve sent gems all over the world that way.”* If you had something so valuable, would you put it in a container like?

This is how Paul describes our relationship with the triune God: treasure in jars of clay. It's a word picture to describe what, in Colossians 1, he calls, "*the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you.*" We can be perplexed and yet confident when we realize that our hope does not come from within ourselves.

The Hope Diamond was proudly put on display. I think the box and the brown paper were probably cast aside. Paul and these others had a confidence based not on themselves, but on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We are naturally drawn toward breaking God's law in times of trouble – and we do break it – but the gospel tells us that Christ kept the moral law of God perfectly in our place.

With Christ in us, we may be "*crushed, but not utterly crushed.*"

With Christ in us, we may be "*perplexed, but not utterly perplexed.*"

Think about whatever it is that perplexes you. Do you have a clear sense of what it might look like to walk by sight in your circumstances? You know, just doing it your way, disregarding God's ways, disregarding what His Word or what godly counsel tells you, even going against your own conscience and doing something that amounts to sin. You might say, "I know what it looks like because I've done it!"

Let me suggest, though, what walking by faith will look like. It will involve obeying His law when you don't naturally want to. And You may not have the strength to obey God's law and follow His ways. But you can receive the strength.

Scripture tells us that we don't get that strength only by looking at the rules or being told the moral law. We should and must reflect on His law, but the law does not have the power to make you obey it. We receive that strength to obey as we look to God and know Him, and we do that by seeing the magnificent glory of Christ and His gospel. To renew your hope today, you can't only admit who you are without Christ. You also must remember who you are with Christ.

Jesus has made us able to follow God's way even as sin pulls at us relentlessly. He has empowered us to continually renew our efforts to obey despite our repeated failures because we understand that Christ Himself is our righteousness before God. The source of our hope does not naturally exist in us. Our hope is Christ in us.

Is He your hope today? He is the greatest of treasures who comes to dwell in ordinary jars of clay like you and me. Will you believe on Him today? Will you renew your trust and walk by faith in what lies ahead?

Let's bow together in prayer.