

**3/22/26      God's Treasure in Jars of Clay  
2 Corinthians 4:7-15**

Welcome...

We are preaching through the book of 2 Corinthians chapter by chapter and verse by verse. Our text this morning is 2 Corinthians 4:7-15. I invite to turn to it in your Bible or follow the words on the screen.

**Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-15...**

Have you ever noticed how people usually put valuable things in strong containers?

If someone gives you a diamond, you don't store it in a paper bag.

If you need to mail something fragile, you put it in reinforced packaging.

Valuable things are usually placed in strong, impressive containers to protect them.

But God often does the opposite. God takes the most valuable treasure in the universe—the gospel of Jesus Christ—and places it in weak, fragile people like you and me. That is exactly what the apostle Paul is describing in this passage.

Last week Adrian preached the first six verses of this chapter and Paul says in verse 6 that God has shone the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ. That is the gospel—the good news that sinners can be reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Christ.

But then Paul says something surprising in verse 7: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels - or as some Bible translations say, “we have this treasure in jars of clay.”

In the ancient world, jars of clay were extremely common. They were cheap, ordinary, and easily broken. You didn't display them in a museum. You didn't protect them in a vault. If one broke, you simply replaced it. And Paul says that is what we are like.

God has placed the priceless treasure of the gospel in weak, fragile, ordinary people. Why would God do that? Paul tells us in verse 7, “To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”

God designed gospel ministry so that the success of it cannot be explained by the strength of the messenger. The apostle Paul himself experienced tremendous weakness and suffering. He was afflicted, persecuted, misunderstood, and often physically assaulted for preaching Christ. And yet the gospel continued to advance.

Why? Because the power was never in Paul. The power was always in God. This brings us to the main point.

**Main Point: In 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 we see three ways God powerfully works through weak servants to bring life to others and glory to Himself.**

**God's Power is Displayed Through Human Weakness in verse 7**

**God's Strength Sustains Us Through Suffering in verses 8-12**

**God's Glory Multiplies Through Gospel Proclamation in verses 13-15**

My prayer is that you will embrace your weakness, not try to hide it or resist it, but to see it as the very stage upon which God's power is displayed. I pray that we will be faithful servants—weak in ourselves, strong in God—so that through us, life flows to others and all glory returns to God alone.

## **I. God's Power is Displayed Through Human Weakness**

Verse 7 begins "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels."

The first word in verse 7 "But" introduces a contrast with verse 6...

The treasure is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The treasure is of incalculable worth, because Colossians 2:3 says, "in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" and Colossians 2:9 says, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form."

The gospel message reveals the most profound truths the world has ever known, which produce the most powerful eternal effects. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ people are freed from the power of sin and death (Romans 8:2; Heb. 2:14), released from condemnation (Romans 8:1), transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18), and given eternal joy, peace, and satisfaction.

Yet, amazingly, that priceless gospel treasure is contained in simple earthen vessels. The Greek word for "earthen" refers to baked clay. The vessels Paul describes here were just common jars of clay: cheap, breakable, easily replaceable, and virtually valueless.

This deepening sense of Paul's own unworthiness, compared with the magnificence of his message, characterized Paul's life. He said in Ephesians 3:8, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ."

There are too many people who say, "I'm so ordinary, so average and undistinguished. I am the very least of all saints, of all Christians. I can't do anything significant."

2 Corinthians 4:7 shows that this argument is wrong and why it is wrong. It says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels (or jars of clay!) to show us that the surpassing greatness of the power belongs to God and not to us."

God's concept of ministry is so different from the world's concept. The world stresses the elegant, refined, tasteful container, not the glory of God in human weakness.

If there is one thing that we are coming to learn together here at Cornerstone it is that God's purpose to get the glory in all things determines how we do all things.

God's purpose is to make sure that we see that the surpassing power belongs to Him and not to us. How does He do it? He puts the treasure of His gifts and His gospel in jars of clay like you and me.

Your weakness and ordinariness is not a liability; it is an asset, if you really want God to get the glory. No one is too common, too weak, too shy, too inarticulate, too disabled to do what God wants you to do.

We saw how Paul described this in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. Flip back a few pages and read with me to 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God."

God deliberately uses weak people. Why? 2 Corinthians 4:7 says, “So that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”

The effectiveness of ministry is never explained by the strength of the messenger but by the power of God. God doesn't use you *in spite of* your weakness. He uses you *through* your weakness so that the power is unmistakably His.

God intended this sharp contrast so that no one would question the source of the gospel and its all-surpassing power. Salvation is the work of God not men.

We are vessels so that God might use us. We are earthen vessels or simple jars of clay so that we might depend on God's power and not our own.

Do you remember Gideon's army in the book of Judges chapter 7. God reduced Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 men—not because they did not need help, but because God wanted clarity of where the power and where the victory is coming from. In Judges 7:2 God said, “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into your hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me.’

In other words: Israel would try to take the credit for only what God had done. So, God weakens the earthen vessel so He can magnify the power. In this case, the fewer the men, the greater the glory to God.

Oswald Chambers wrote, “All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on God made possible the unique display of His power and grace. God chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources.”

There is something wrong when the vessel robs the treasure of its glory, when the surgeon's glove attracts more attention than the skillful hand inside that glove.

There something wrong when the picture takes second place to the picture frame, and when the silverware which is used at the feast becomes a substitute for the meal.

There is something deadly in Christian service when “the surpassing greatness of the power” is of us and not of God and we try to take the credit and the glory for only what the Lord has done. Such surpassing power of man is of a very fleeting kind, and man's power will wither as fast the as the winter snow melts when spring comes.

When God acts in salvation, in providence, and in ministry- He ensures the result is unmistakable:

The power came from Him—not from us. God uses weak vessels on purpose so no one confuses the source of the power. The truth is, we are just weak jars of clay. Jesus is the true treasure within us. Through Jesus Christ:

We don't receive God's glory as our own, but we are brought into it, to reflect it. We don't become the source of glory...we become mirrors of it

God's Power is Displayed Through Human Weakness.

## **II. God's Strength Sustains Us Through Suffering**

Paul next explains the pressures of gospel ministry. He describes four realities of suffering. Notice verses 8-9...

Afflicted but not crushed

Perplexed but not driven to despair  
Persecuted but not forsaken  
Struck down but not destroyed

The first clause in each member of the series of contrasted participles, implies the earthiness of the vessels; the second clause starts with “but not” and reveals the surpassing greatness of God’s power.

Verse 8 begins we are “afflicted but not crushed.” The word for “afflicted” means pressed like grapes, contracted, squeezed and is in the passive voice meaning the affliction was coming from without, from an outside source.

The words “but not” is a strong contrast, with “not” being the strongest Greek term signifying ABSOLUTELY NOT!

The idea is that in spite of pressures that would thwart their effectiveness, these New Testament ministers of the gospel were never completely crushed so that their ministry totally failed. In Paul’s ministry there were examples of being afflicted but not crushed.

In Acts 16 at Philippi, for example, Paul was arrested and imprisoned, yet the gospel was not stopped, for the jailer and his household were converted to Christ. At Corinth Paul had been arrested and accused before the provincial governor, but dismissal of the case gave new opportunities for the gospel.

So like a tube of toothpaste, the pressure and squeezing ordained by God always brings out what is on the inside (character) and is divinely designed to make us more like Christ and to store up for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

There is a root and fruit connection, when your heart is rooted in Christ you will suffer affliction and be squeezed and what is truly in your heart will come out. Will it be pride, jealousy, anger, and malice or will it be humility, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

In short, the clay jar of the apostle Paul was continually crushed by pressing circumstances and yet he was continually sustained by a powerful Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Second, Paul says in verse 8 perplexed, but not despairing. The Greek text contains a play on words; the participles translated perplexed and despairing literally means Paul was at a loss but not at a total loss. He was at his wit’s end, but there was still a way out; he was at the brink of defeat but not defeated.

Imagine you are a pilot flying through thick fog. There are moments when visibility drops to zero. You cannot see the horizon. You cannot see the ground. Your senses begin to betray you—everything inside you says, “I’m disoriented. I’m in danger.” You are perplexed and panic begins to creep in. Because you don’t fully understand what’s happening. You can’t see clearly. You feel uncertain.

But here’s the difference: You as the pilot are not in despair—why? - because you have flight instruments in the cockpit: altitude, altimeter, airspeed.

Even when your feelings say one thing, the flight instruments tell you the truth:

You are level  
You are on course  
You are not falling

So, you keep flying—not by sight, but by trusting your instruments.

That's what Paul is saying. "We are perplexed..." There are moments in life when we don't understand what God is doing: Why the suffering continues? Why the door closed? Why wasn't the prayer answered the way we hoped?

But "not despairing..." Because we are not flying blind.

We have the promises of God in Scripture, we have the truth and treasure of the gospel, we the presence of Christ and the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Perplexity says, "I don't understand." Despair says, "There is no hope."

But the born-again believer can say: "I may not understand what God is doing... but I know who is in control. And I know God is completely sovereign, He is also infinitely wise, and He is perfect in His love for me."

So, we keep going—not because we see clearly, but because we trust completely.

Third, Paul says he was persecuted, but not forsaken. The Greek word for persecuted which means "to pursue," or "to hunt." Paul's many enemies stalked him day in and day out (Acts 9:23–24, 28–29; 14:5–6, 19; 20:3; 23:12). But despite that, Paul was not forsaken, deserted, or abandoned. His Lord never left him to face an impossible difficulty on his own.

Finally, Paul was struck down, but not destroyed. The Greek word of struck down means "to strike down," as with a weapon, or "to throw down," as in a wrestling match. The Greek word for destroyed could also be translated "ruined," "lost," or even "killed." In modern boxing terms, Paul may have been knocked down, but he was not knocked out. He triumphed not by escaping adversity but by successfully enduring it.

You see Paul understood God permits trials, God controls trials, and God uses trials for His own glory.

The difference between the believer and the unbeliever is not that we never fall...it's that we never stay down. Because Christ holds us, strengthens us, and raises us again.

The test of a true ministry is not stars, but scars. Paul wrote in Galatians 6:17, "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus."

Friends, listen carefully, to suffer for the faith is not a penalty; it is a privilege.

How can we keep from giving up? By remembering that we are privileged to have the treasure of the Gospel in our jars of clay!

Verse 10 continues...

The life of Jesus becomes visible through suffering. As Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

The false teachers in Corinth argued that Paul suffered because God was shaming and chastening him for his secret life of sin. But in reality, Paul suffered at the hands of evil men because of his identification with Jesus Christ. Those who hate the Lord persecute His people. Therefore, Paul's trials, far from being a sign of God's displeasure, were actually a badge of honor.

Verse 11...

Paul's courageous, faithful, patient enduring of suffering manifested the power of the living Christ in his life. Believers' suffering is a purposeful sacrifice that results in the power of God being unleashed in their lives.

Look at verse 12, "Death is at work in us, but life in you." Paul is no longer self-concerned or self-indulgent but self-emptying like Jesus Christ. Paul's missionary work will only result in more and more physical battering, but that physical affliction will result in more and more spiritual blessings for others.

This pattern of suffering, mortality, and blessing confirms Paul's apostolic calling because they most fully exhibit God's power and Jesus' resurrection life as the source of his own life and ministry.

What also helps Paul bear up under his load of suffering is his conviction that it bears fruit in the life of others. "Life" refers to life received from God through Christ. It does not mean that they will escape tribulations themselves (1:6-7).

Christ died that we might live. The great exchange of the gospel is: Christ's life for ours. And those who are used most to spread the good news of Christ embrace death as the operational principle of ministry

Earlier Jeff read from John 12:24...

It is so beautiful and so liberating to know that God's power in our lives does not come from our pursuit of power. How wonderful to know that "we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

Later in 2 Corinthians Paul says he suffered: Beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks and constant danger. And yet, the gospel kept advancing. God often uses the suffering of His servants to bring spiritual life to others. And this brings us to the third point in our text:

### **III. God's Glory Multiplies Through Gospel Proclamation**

Paul continues preaching because of faith. What is his motivation? "I believed, and so I spoke." (v.13)

You see, faith in the gospel compels proclamation. We cannot remain silent! Why?

Verse 14...

The resurrection gives courage in ministry. What encouraged and emboldened the apostle Paul and fortified him to preach Christ Jesus in every circumstance was his dynamic certainty and confidence about the future.

What Paul longed for and believed about the future had everything to do with how he lived in the present. And it is exactly the same for us. Our beliefs about the resurrection should exert a control that dictates how we live our present lives.

The ultimate goal is explained in verse 15...

God places the priceless treasure of the gospel in weak servants, sustains them through suffering, and uses their faithful proclamation to multiply grace, more people saved, more people giving thanks to God, and more glory going to God alone.

Four weeks ago Paula and I were skiing in Park City, Utah with our son Austin. Before we started, I prayed for opportunities and boldness to share Christ with others.

We got to one chair lift that only had two seats, so I said: “Austin, why don’t you go ahead and ride the two-person lift with Mom and I will catch the chair behind you. When it was my turn to get on the lift another man moved up and joined me. He was pretty tall and big and the two of us were about as close as you can get on the two-person chair lift. I said, “Good morning my name is John Marc, what is your name?” He answered, “Greg.” I asked, “are you from around here Greg?” He answered “No, I live in Connecticut, but I rent a house here in Park City for 3 months each winter to ski.” I asked, “Are you retired then?” He said, “Yes, I retired at the age of 46. (he looked to now be about 60 years old)” I asked, “Greg what was your job?” He said he handled all the advertising for Booking.com. He did not ask me what I did, so I volunteered “I pastor a church on the central coast of California.” Greg responded, “I could use a pastor right now.”

I said, “Here I am Greg. This a divine appointment. What’s going on?” He told me that he had been diagnosed with a heart condition that cannot be resolved. The doctors are giving him 4 years to live. His children do not know that information and they were flying out to ski with him and he said he did not have the courage to tell them his condition. Then he said, “I am trying to connect with God but there is something wrong with my heart.” I asked, “Your physical heart or your spiritual heart?” He answered, “My spiritual heart.”

Realizing we only had a few minutes on the ski lift I said, “Listen carefully Greg to what I am about to explain you. Look around who made all this beauty that we enjoy?” Greg said, “God did.” I said, “That’s right. And He made you and He made me to have a relationship with Him. But the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. In our hearts we don’t believe in God, honor God, and obey God. We have gone our own way. The Bible says we are sinners who miss the mark. Do you understand what I am saying? At this point he says yes and starts to cry. I continued, “But God in His love sent His own Son, Jesus Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves...”

But here is the thing: Forgiveness and salvation and eternal life in heaven is a gift. You cannot work for it or somehow earn it. You must humbly receive it.

There is one command, Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. Repent means to turn from your sin and your self-sufficiency and turn to Jesus Christ. Ask him to forgive you and embrace Him and His promise of eternal life.

Can I pray for you Greg? He said, “I would love that.” So I put my arm around Greg and prayed, “God, would you please open Greg’s spiritual eyes that he would see how long and high and wide and deep is the love of Christ. Lord, may Greg come to living, saving faith in Jesus and know that his sins are forgiven and to receive your gift of salvation. Jesus you said, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Whether Greg has 4 years or 14 years, may he know your Lord and the assurance of eternal life. I pray that Greg finds a good Bible teaching church in Connecticut and I pray that you give Greg the courage to tell his church the truth about his heart condition. We thank you and pray in Christ’s name, Amen”

Greg was sobbing and said, “Thank you John Marc. This was a divine appointment.” We looked up and we realized at the moment what we were at the end of the lift ride, so we put the safety bar, and he skied one way to catch up to his friends and I went another.

When I caught up to Paula and Austin, I told them what had just happened on that chair lift. I started crying, Paula was crying, and Austin stood there in amazement.

The reason I was crying was that God had so clearly answered my prayer. He gave me the richest opportunity to share Christ, and I thank God for making it so obvious. I looked for Greg the rest of the day but never saw him again. But I continue to pray for Greg.

You may be here this morning in a similar situation as Greg. You are not sure how to connect with God. 1 Peter 3:18 says...

There will be prayer partners up here on the steps after the service. Come and we will be happy to pray with you.

When we step back and look at this passage, something remarkable becomes clear.

Paul's life looked, by worldly standards, like a series of defeats.

He was afflicted.

He was perplexed.

He was persecuted.

He was struck down.

Yet Paul says something astonishing in verse 12: "So death is at work in us, but life in you."

In other words, the very things that looked like weakness and suffering were actually the means God used to bring spiritual life to others.

That is the pattern of the gospel itself. Think about the cross. When Jesus was crucified, it looked like defeat. It looked like weakness. It looked like the end. But the cross was actually the greatest victory in history.

Through the death of Christ came the salvation of sinners. And Paul says gospel ministry follows the same pattern.

God uses weak vessels. God sustains them through suffering. God spreads grace to more and more people.

And the result, Paul says in verse 15, is that thanksgiving multiplies and God receives the glory.

That means the goal of ministry is not the praise of the messenger. The goal is the glory of God. And that should encourage every believer in this room.

Because you may feel like a jar of clay. You may feel weak. Ordinary. Fragile. Unimpressive. But that is exactly the kind of vessel God loves to use.

God delights to place the treasure of the gospel in weak people so that the power clearly belongs to Him.

So do not be discouraged by your weakness. Bring the treasure. Pray for ministry opportunities. Speak and share the gospel with neighbors, coworkers, classmates and those you sit next to on a bus, on an airplane, or on a ski lift.

Trust the power of God.

Because when grace spreads to more and more people, thanksgiving multiplies—and God receives the glory He deserves.

Let's pray...