



2 Corinthians 4:7-15 Painful on Purpose

Summary: Christians accept personal weakness because it brings glory to God by bringing grace and life to others.

This past week Madeleine and I were able to get away for a few days to work on the next Turn Aside Bible Study – we’ll be digging into Exodus in the Fall. On the way home, we decided to listen to a daily news podcast that she really enjoys called the World and Everything in it. It’s put out by a Christian reporting team and does a great job giving you the daily news without a partisan slant.

The problem is, on Wednesday, the news was terrible. In 30 minutes we learned of 21 dead at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas; 200 bodies decomposing in a basement in Mariupol, Ukraine; and a 288-page report released about the mishandling of allegations of abuse by the Southern Baptists. And all of this the week after the racially motivated murder of 10 people at a grocery store in Buffalo. My friends, this is the world in which we live.

Last week I stood in this very pulpit and told you evil is real. I read to you from Scripture about [the god of this age who \[has\] blinded people lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them](#). And I said, I know that in our days of electric cars and 5G that sounds crazy, that there would be some supernatural being running around motivating evil in the world, but that’s what Scripture says, and it’s what many of us have seen and known. And now we have seen it again.

On top of all this is the chaos and confusion of our daily lives, the things that happen at work or in our home, the concerns we have about ourselves, our kids, our parents. As Dane Ortland wrote: “If we go off of what our eyes see, what our hearts feel, and what the world says, the only recourse is despair.”¹

But this is why Scripture refers to the life of Jesus and the gospel as light. Light that shines in a dark place.

So let us be absolutely clear, it is Scripture, it is the gospel, it is the life and character and conduct of Jesus Christ that tell us it is wrong to hate someone simply for the color of their skin or the language their grandmother spoke, it is unspeakably evil to target children for violence, and it is an abdication of the holy responsibility and role of the shepherd not to mention a crime in the eyes of the state, to fail to protect those in the church from harassment, abuse, or assault.

¹ Dane Ortland, 2 Corinthians, The ESV Bible Commentary.

This is what human beings do to each other. And this is why we need the pure light of the gospel. So it is Scripture that reveals the nature of God to us as well as the nature of humanity and the nature of the spiritual war unfolding on this planet. It is Scripture that tells us, yes, these kinds of horrors happen here on earth and warns us that darkness sometimes even creeps into the church where those who claim to be shepherds permit, or commit acts of darkness instead of expelling it.

This is why we cannot save ourselves. This is why we need Jesus. Friends, make no mistake: things really are this bad.

But Christian, let me tell you something else: *you are part of the answer*. You are part of God's plan. He tells you the world is a dark place, the devil is real, evil is real, people really do evil things and sometimes there are bad people at church. No one leaves this world without scars, but that is why He sent the light and that is why He called you into the light. And that is why He is transforming you into a lamp that shines the light into the darkness.

God knows you will experience hard things during your life, but the light of Christ will shine in you and be a blessing to others who will ultimately experience God's grace and bring Him praise. Read with me as the Apostle Paul reflects on his own experience of hardship in the world. Let's see how he makes sense of it and what kind of lessons we can learn for ourselves:

2 Corinthians 4:7 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. **12** So then death is working in us, but life in you. **13** And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "*I believed and therefore I spoke,*" we also believe and therefore speak, **14** knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present *us* with you. **15** For all things *are* for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.

Christian, make no mistake about it, what you find described here is a *very robust gospel* persisting *in very tough times*. But what is most remarkable is that Paul does not complain about the situation, *he rejoices in it* because, he sees the potential for so much good to come from it - *that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God*. In other words, he believes that he is able to experience difficult times in such a way that it brings life to others and glory to God. Christian, my job is to help you know and believe that the same thing is true of you – God can use your hardship for His glory and the good of others. So let's look at how that happens.

Paul begins, notice, contrasting the nature of our lives which are like *earthen vessels* and the nature of the gospel which he calls a *treasure*.

Remember, this was written two thousand years ago to people who had cups and bowls and plates made out of metal, and boxes and bowls carved out of stone or wood, but the cheap stuff, the ordinary stuff, the everyday stuff was made out of clay, it was pottery.

So Paul says putting the gospel in us, ordinary people, [earthen vessels](#), is like serving dinner at a 5 star restaurant on paper plates, or storing the Hope Diamond in a plastic bag.

The point is, there's nothing super special about Christians, even ministry leaders, missionaries, or pastors. We're all just [earthen vessels](#) – the good stuff is the gospel, it's the message. If you're served a five-star meal you don't eat the plate – you might lick it, but you don't eat it. No woman gets engaged and posts pictures of the box the ring came in on her Instagram. She may never even see the box, it's not about the box – it's about the ring, the [treasure](#) that was in the box.

I said this at one of the services last week, but it bears mentioning again – this distinction between the minister and the message is important, because it serves as something of a tear line, if the minister goes astray, does wrong, it doesn't take away from the message. If anything, it's the message that actually condemns the minister and his actions. It's the message that convicts him of wrong, so when a ministry fails or falls, remember that's just the vessel, it's not the treasure. The plate can be flawed, but it doesn't change the meal.

This is also why we need to be really careful about making superheroes out of Christian musicians or pastors. Christian celebrity is a thing, but it's a thing that Paul would shun. And we should be careful to do the same. It's OK to really appreciate someone's ministry, to benefit from it, resonate with it, but stay in love with the message, not the messenger.

Paul then goes on to describe the difficulties he's been through lately – this is a theme that recurs throughout the letter and that's because it's fresh on his mind, it's real. You remember he said back in chapter one, (vs 8) [we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.](#)

He's not exaggerating here. He's not puffing up the story for effect. He's been through some very difficult times; things he wasn't sure he would make it out of.

When we look at this description of his recent experiences, we find a progression of hardship that many of you can identify with, at least on the front end. He starts by mentioning the general experience of adversity – things are just hard; you're [pressed in on every side.](#)

Does anyone remember the scene from Star Wars, the original good ones, where after rescuing Princess Leia, Luke, Han Solo, and Chewbacca try to find a hiding place and end up in the trash chute? And then some creature that lives in the trash tries to kill Luke by pulling him down into the muck at the bottom. It eventually lets go and runs away, but only because it knows that the walls are closing in in order to compact the trash.



Anyone feel like you've suddenly got a good way to describe what your life feels like at times? A room full of debris with a monster that wants to kill you and the walls are closing in. Inflation is pinching, your calendar feels tight, your to-do list has appendixes, you're trying hard to juggle all the balls.

Paul then moves on to describing inner distress, to being [perplexed](#) – being at a loss for words or how to process what's happening. I know plenty of you have been through that recently, or you're there right now – you see the situation in front of you and you just don't know what to do or say, how to respond or what will happen next. You're [perplexed](#) and it's an almost constant mental and emotional strain. But it's still mainly internal – you trying to process things.

So Paul moves on to describe experiencing external hostility from others, you're [persecuted](#), picked on, singled out for unfair treatment, which happens, right? At work your boss or your co-workers are just mean, they give you the short end of the stick, expect you to take the bad schedule, or sit around and watch you work without offering to help.

And then he speaks of actual violence – you're [struck down](#). Now, hopefully none of you are there, but it's possible, it's real and if it is, you need to reach out for help or at least ask for help in getting help.

Paul says he's been exposed to this whole spectrum of trials, which we know is true from other parts of Scripture that tell us about his life. He's actually been the victim of mob violence that left him for dead – so when he talks about the hard times he's been through, he has the scars to prove it.

And yet, notice the enthusiasm here. Notice the conviction. Notice his confidence in the durability of the gospel – he's come through it all dented, bruised, battered and bandaged, *but full of joy*. Full of faith. Full of the assurance that this is still the right path.

And, more than that, convinced that God is being glorified and people are being helped along the way. Notice this,

[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. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.](#)

Christian, here is the key to surviving difficult times. Here is the source of light in the darkness. Here is how you stay afloat in the storms: you remember the life, and the death, of Jesus Christ, *but also the resurrection*.

You remember, Jesus went through hard times. Jesus endured difficulty, hostility, and spiritual warfare. He experienced the direct attack of Satan and the combined prejudicial mistreatment, injustice, and violence of men. Yet God used it all for a greater good, for our greater good. God used it to fulfill the gospel.

And what Paul is saying, and this is very, very important for us, is: if God has already done that through Jesus, I believe He can, and will, also do that through me *as I follow and serve Jesus.*

So listen to me church, because this is the part I really, really, want you to grasp. Here's what usually happens – we surrender to Jesus. We say we want to follow Jesus. We call Him Lord and Shepherd and Master. We sing to Him. Pray to Him. Worship Him. But then, when something hard happens in our life, we freak out. We focus on the problem more than Him. We talk to everyone and anyone about the problem, except for Him.

We are often surprised and find it shocking, unfair, and undeserved when any of the stuff that brought Jesus to earth in the first place suddenly appears in our life.

But Paul is not. In fact, he's counting on it. He's expecting it. He understands that he lives at war against his own lesser desires and the temptations of his flesh and the subtle maneuvers of the enemy of his soul who wanders around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour all while Paul attempts to navigate daily life on a broken planet surrounded by other broken people.

This is why Paul told the church in Ephesus that they needed to put on their spiritual armor – to suit up with their battle rattle as if they were going to war each day, because we are.

I'm working on War College right now as part of my military service and was recently doing some work with the National Defense Strategy – *the* document that guides everything the Department of Defense does. A new one just came out, but in the last one, dated 2018, General Mad-Dog Mattis the famous warrior-scholar who was Secretary of Defense at the time said something shocking when he wrote: "It is now undeniable that the **homeland** is **no longer** a sanctuary."

What he was saying was that for most of American history we could safely assume that nothing bad was going to happen here, on American soil. We fought wars, over there. Attacks occurred, over there. It was stuff other people dealt with, other people worried about, but not us, not here at home. General Mattis said, that's no longer true. We have to worry about domestic threats now.

Well, I think there's a parallel with the church. Most Christians in America have this homeland sanctuary idea – that we should all be safe, there's nothing to worry about, it's all fine, the enemy is over there. Paul says no. The enemy is here and he's flinging fiery darts around like Katyusha rockets in the Middle East.

The question is, how should the church respond? How should Christians respond? Should we cower in the corner? Should we look busy and avoid eye contact? Should we hunker down and lock the doors? No. We should understand that the world is dark and difficult *and that's exactly where God is sending us to be the light.* And along the way, we'll catch

some glimpses of real beauty as we find reflections of His grace in the most unlikely places – like discovering [treasure in earthen vessels](#).

We accept the exposure to death in order to see the hope of life in others.

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. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.

13 And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "*I believed and therefore I spoke*," we also believe and therefore speak

Paul is quoting here from Psalm 116 the theme of which is life out of death. Listen to how it opens:

Psalm 116:1 I love the LORD, because He has heard
My voice *and* my supplications.

2 Because He has inclined His ear to me,
Therefore I will call *upon Him* as long as I live.

3 The pains of death surrounded me,
And the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I found trouble and sorrow.

The Psalm opens with an experience just like Paul's, just like ours – life is difficult, full of [trouble and sorrow](#), [death](#) feels imminent, so he called upon the Lord.

4 Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
"O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!"

Look at the strength and the emotion of the prayer – [O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!](#) Church, it's OK to pray this way. Sometimes you need to pray this way, to beg God. It's OK to pray full of emotion just like you were talking to a friend or your father here on earth. Be sincere, be real. You don't have to pray like this all the time, but sometimes you do.

Looking back the Psalmist could say, the Lord heard that desperate prayer and He answered

5 Gracious *is* the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God *is* merciful.

6 The LORD preserves the simple;
I was brought low, and He saved me.

7 Return to your rest, O my soul,
For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

I love that verse, verse 7: [Return to your rest, O my soul,](#)
[For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.](#)

Later in the Psalm he will say, [I believed and therefore I spoke](#) – meaning, that even though my life was difficult, my situation was dark, I still believed in God. I believed He was real and that He was good, and so I cried out to Him, I spoke.

Paul says, me too.

But church I need you to notice something essential about the timing here - both the Psalmist, and Paul, and Jesus for that matter, went through very difficult times *before* they were able to rejoice, before they saw the end, before they tell everyone about what they had been through.

When life was hard, when they were oppressed, when they were opposed, when they were knocked down, *they were doing exactly the right thing*. They were in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing, and life was still really, really, hard for them.

In fact, for Jesus, it ended in betrayal, abandonment, injustice, mistreatment, murder, and finally, death.

But then, the resurrection. *And that's Paul's whole point.*

Sometimes you will be right smack in the middle of God's will, doing exactly what you're supposed to be doing, exactly the way you're supposed to be doing it, walking with God, depending on God, serving God, and still be [hard-pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, knocked down](#).

But, you won't be [crushed](#), there's no need to [despair](#), you are not [forsaken](#), you will not be [destroyed](#) – sometimes, in the will of God, you'll experience the death of Christ, but you will experience the life of Christ as well. And, as people see that in you and experience Him through you, as you shine the hope and encouragement of the gospel in their lives, as you bring the fragrance of Christ and the fruit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit into their lives, grace will spread and they'll give thanks to the glory of God.

Paul says it like this: [15 For all things are for your sakes](#), [all the stuff I'm going through – and letting God carry me through, it's meant to help you see and know that what I say about God is true, it's so] [that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God](#).

Jesus said (John 12:24) that [unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it produces much grain](#).

Here's what He's saying. If you take one grain of wheat, it can sit on your counter for days, weeks, months and years, and never become anything more. But if you let it fall to the ground, and you bury it, it will begin to produce a plant, and that plant will grow, and as part of it's growth it will produce whole heads of wheat each of which contains from 35-50 new grains.

Church, there is no doubt we are living through dark and difficult days, trying times. There is no doubt you feel **hard-pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted**, perhaps even **knocked down**. You're living in the garbage chute with debris all around, something's grabbing your leg and trying to pull you down, and the walls are closing in.

This is no surprise. You're experiencing the death of Christ; you're experiencing all the stuff that brought Him here from heaven, all the problems He came to solve. But if you're really in Christ, then His resurrection and life are available to you too – right here, right now, in the dark. You get to become the light. The earthen vessel holding a priceless treasure, the five-star meal on a paper plate.

And, if you can get this, receive this, and live this yourself – you'll be a source of encouragement to others who will then bring glory to God. Church, this is what we're made for, to be the light. To shine forth hope. To share the direction and courage we find in Christ. This is what Christ offers to us, this is what Paul models for us, this is what the world needs from us especially in the dark and difficult days.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 Painful on Purpose

Summary: Christians accept personal weakness because it brings glory to God by bringing grace and life to others.

- Many years ago Pastor Paul Jowett said, "Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing." What do you think he meant? Do you agree?
- What about life, ministry, and service feels most like a struggle right now? Where do you feel hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, or knocked down? How do this relate to previous seasons, do things seem easier, worse, or about the same?
 - Can you identify any spiritual aspect to the challenges or pressures you face?
- Can you agree with not feeling crushed, despairing, abandoned, or destroyed? Is there a quiet strength for you in the midst of everything? Do you feel that all the time or just catch glimpses of it occasionally? What helps you focus on it?
- Can you see a way for God to be glorified, not just by pulling you out of your situation, but be actually walking with you through it? Is there a way that your weakness could actually be for His glory?
- What makes you feel like an earthen vessel? Where and how do you experience the treasure of the gospel in your life?
- Paul says that enduring hard times well enables thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Is there anyone whose example you have seen and been encouraged by as they follow God through difficult times? What did you observe?
- Review Paul's calling in Acts 9:10-16. What does God have to say about Paul suffering? How would you react to such a calling?
- Read John 8:12 where Jesus says He is the light of the world. Then read Matthew 5:14 where Jesus says you are the light of the world. How do these two go together?

"Sometimes God permits our vessels to be jarred so that some of the treasure will spill out and enrich others." - Warren Wiersbe