

Paul has been defending his ministry against his detractors by stating the facts and his heart for them. Unlike some so-called ministers, he was not out for personal gain. His desire was that the veil over hardened hearts be lifted to see the light of the glorious gospel in the face of Jesus Christ. He encouraged the readers to behold the glory of the Lord and be transformed into the same image (3:18<sup>i</sup>).

*<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.* 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul is telling us that priceless treasure of the new covenant that transforms and makes us into new creations who are right with God is in our fragile bodies that he likens to a jar made of clay. Clay jars were like our disposable fast-food containers. Any archeological site is littered with pieces of broken pots. From dust they were made and to dust they return. They were the cheapest of storage vessels.

We go to great extent to protect things that are valuable to us. We rent safety deposit boxes or install safes in our homes to protect our valuables. But something more precious than all this world's wealth is in the clay pot we call our bodies. Our minds are so limited, our desires so easily influenced, and our strength is so limited, and yet God put the glorious new covenant in us and sealed it with His holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30<sup>ii</sup>). He makes us His ambassadors to share this treasure with the world (2 Corinthians 5:18<sup>iii</sup>).

There is a reason that He would do such an unlikely thing. It is to show that the surpassing passing power belongs to God and not to us. Surpassing power is power to an "extraordinary degree" (LEB), beyond what man is capable of doing. When the Apostles healed the sick or raised the dead they did not think, "Wow, I am so powerful! What an amazing person I am!" They knew the power came from the One who made His home in them (John 14:23<sup>iv</sup>).

If I deliver a powerful, anointed message that touches hearts and transforms minds, my wife does not say, "My husband is so incredible!" That is because she knows I have this treasure in this clay pot. She knows I am weak and fragile. No matter how carefully I care for this clay pot that is my body and try to keep it in subjection, it is still just a fragile clay pot. It will return to dust.

When you visit Jewish historical sites, you will see pieces of pottery everywhere. That is because when a pot became defiled according to the law, there was no way to cleanse it. So clay pots were often intentionally smashed. They are as fragile as glass or more so. Sometimes people used the broken pieces to write messages on because they were so abundant. Paul's point is that we are very fragile. If anything supernatural comes from us, if anything of lasting value and eternal significance, it is the power of God and not our own power. **Never think you are too weak to be a vessel for God.** He seems to intentionally use the weakest to show that the surpassing power belongs to Him.

As I studied this passage, it reminded me of several Christian leaders who had a profound impact and yet at the end of their life they fell into sin. Instead of discounting their words that touched lives, we should marvel at God who could even use such weak men (12:9<sup>v</sup>). That is by no means a reason to excuse their failure. Hezekiah was a great king of Israel, and yet he made some very poor choices at the end of his extended life. It does not discount the good he did. It just reminds us that the good he did was the power

of a merciful God in him (2 Kings 2:21<sup>vi</sup>). How much better to end well as a good testimony of God empowering us even until our graduation into glory.

We must understand that God does not make *us* powerful when we embrace our weaknesses. It is His power expressed *through* our weaknesses. We remain weak. To Him belongs strength. The results are that all the glory goes to Him where it should go. If a man used powerfully by God stumbles, we should not be surprised. Nor should we be surprised if he does not stumble for the Lord is able to uphold us with His righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10<sup>vii</sup>). All glory to God.

*Someone once asked St. Francis how he was able to accomplish so much. He replied, "This may be why: The Lord looked down from heaven and said, 'Where can I find the weakest, littlest man on earth?' Then he saw me and said, 'I've found him, and he won't be proud of it. He'll see that I am only using him because of his insignificance.'*<sup>viii</sup>

*<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;* 2 Corinthians 4:8,9 Our mortal bodies that Paul calls jars of clay with the gospel treasure inside are going to get banged around. Part of that is just living in a fallen world. God does not exempt us from ageing, or viruses, or bacteria, or suffering. But He does use it all to teach us endurance and trust in Him (Romans 5:3<sup>ix</sup>). He is our healer (Exodus 15:26<sup>x</sup>), which means He also allows us to be sick or injured. The believer's benefit is that we know God is working all things together for our good (Romans 8:28<sup>xi</sup>). He can heal us for further service or take us home to our reward at the perfect time. Not having to fear death is one of the great benefits that we have as believers. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21-25 <sup>21</sup> *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. <sup>24</sup> But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. <sup>25</sup> Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,* He wrote that in prison. Every day for him was Jesus! O that we might all live that! Then we can truly say that to die is gain, but if the Lord wants me to continue to serve, it is to bless others.

In verse 8 and 9 Paul gives four statements that contrast the hardships of life as a jar of clay with God's enabling power. The first is afflicted but not crushed, or as one commentator put it, "squeezed by not squashed."<sup>xii</sup> Paul knew affliction and pressure. He had what most commentators believe to be a disease affecting his eyes. Many people would be crushed by such an affliction, but God told him His grace would be sufficient for him (2 Corinthians 12:9). Someone has compared hardships to rocks under the surface of the ocean preventing a ship from entering a safe harbor. God's grace is like high tide coming in and lifting us over them, but not removing them. Some people face afflictions that I do not comprehend how they cannot be crushed, but I see the tide of God's grace each day lifting them and causing them to depend completely on Him.

The next difficulty is to be perplexed. Paul mentions times when they did not know where God was leading and could not see the way ahead (Acts 16:6,7<sup>xiii</sup>). But because we know we are in the hands of God who has planned our days before we were born (Psalm 139:16<sup>xiv</sup>), we can trust that we simply need to trust and not give in to despair. The unbeliever experiencing despair has nothing to turn to other than man. That will always lead to disappointment. In each of these hardships, we see that a relationship

with God gives us benefits that the world cannot experience. That is why we need to share the treasure with them. Seeing us endure hardship is often the reason they ask of the hope that lies in us (1 Peter 3:15<sup>xv</sup>).

The next is to be persecuted. Paul told Timothy that all who live godly lives will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 4:12<sup>xvi</sup>). That is because our lives bring conviction. The world will always go to the extremes of asceticism or hedonism, either self-righteous denial of all pleasures or abandoning oneself to pleasure without boundaries. The first is rare in our day, but hedonism is mainstream in our present culture. Their mantra is, “Do whatever you feel like, just don’t hurt anyone.” So, when they get to know a Christian or hear us speak of right and wrong or especially of righteousness and judgment, if the Holy Spirit is not working in their hearts and drawing them, they become angry, and that leads to persecution. Peter described it this way: 1 Peter 4:12-14 *<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.*

The enemy of our souls is clever in that he incites them to believe that we are the ones who are keeping people from being fulfilled. But sin always harms people. For hedonists, the facts about the consequences of immoral actions are ignored.

Satan incites people to think that persecuting Christians is a good thing because they make people feel uncomfortable about ungodly behavior. Jesus warned the disciples that the day would come when whoever kills you will think they are serving God (John 16:2<sup>xvii</sup>). Faith in Christ draws us out of the world’s culture into heaven’s culture and Biblical thinking. That means we will clash with the world (John 15:18-20<sup>xviii</sup>). However, when we are persecuted, we are not forsaken. Many persecuted believers tell us that it was during the times of persecution that they experienced the presence of Christ to a greater degree. We are persecuted but God will not forsake us. That is our assurance that He will see us through.

We will find that at times we are struck down, which implies being hit with a weapon. But we are not destroyed by the assault. We may be knocked down, but we are not knocked out! There are many ways to be struck down: with words in conversation, physical assault such as the stoning of Paul (Acts 14:19<sup>xix</sup>), condemned in court, or lied about even within the church. The expression “struck down” has the feel of not being able to get up, being defeated for the moment. It is to come to the end of yourself and feeling you have no options. But we are not destroyed. God will raise us up. He renews our strength when we look to Him and wait on Him to revive us (Isaiah 40:29-31<sup>xx</sup>). When we cast ourselves upon the Lord, He will sustain us (Psalm 55:22<sup>xxi</sup>).

Someone might ask why we would want to be a follower of Jesus if that is what we will face? Facing these difficulties happens to the unbeliever as well, they just do not have the promise of the response that we have in God. They become crushed, are driven to despair, are forsaken, and may be destroyed. The promise of God’s response of His power is for believers. In addition, our hardships make us stronger and lays up treasure in heaven. They draw us closer to our loving Creator.

*<sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.* 2 Corinthians 4:10 The word used in this verse for “death” refers to the process of dying and not the state of being dead. In other words, Paul carried

in his body the dying of Jesus. Jesus told him at the time of his conversion, “Why are you persecuting me” (Acts 9:4<sup>xxiii</sup>)? Jesus identifies with us when we are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, as we identify with His dying on the cross for us (Hebrews 4:15<sup>xxiii</sup>). It is an intentional refusal to cling to this life. It is a denial of self to allow God to have His way.

As we carry about the dying of Jesus, the life of Jesus is manifested in us as we are not being crushed, not despairing, not forsaken, or destroyed. That is both for our enduring through this life but also looking forward to the life to come when we will be transformed into the same image as our Savior (1 John 3:2<sup>xxiv</sup>).

I think this must have been one of Oswald Chambers favorite verses as he mentions it frequently in his devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*. It was through his devotional that I first realized what a treasure this verse is. Remember that Paul is speaking of himself and those who do ministry with him. However, as all who are in Christ have a ministry and are priests unto God (1 Peter 2:5<sup>xxv</sup>), I believe we should take this verse as a life goal. You have probably heard the expression, “We are the only Bible many people will read,” or “We are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today.” **The goal of the Christian life is to allow the life of Jesus to be manifested in our mortal flesh.** It was in the weakness of the cross that Jesus won the greatest victory by the power of God, victory over sin and death. But the only way we can do that is to have our old sinful nature be dying with Jesus on that cross. That is what he means by *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus*. Our carnal desires and selfish nature are always on the cross of Christ. That allows the life of Jesus to be seen in our mortal flesh. The body is not evil. If the old nature controls the body via our soul, the body is used for evil. If the resurrected life of Christ controls the body via the spirit made alive in Christ, our soul and body act in godly ways. Then Jesus’ life is seen in us.

Chambers writes in three different devotions the following: “*Of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you*” (Galatians 4:19<sup>xxvi</sup>). *Just as Our Lord came into human history from outside, so He must come into me from outside. Have I allowed my personal human life to become a ‘Bethlehem’ for the Son of God? I cannot enter into the realm of the Kingdom of God unless I am born from above by a birth totally unlike natural birth. “Ye must be born again.” This is not a command, it is a foundation fact. The characteristic of the new birth is that I yield myself so completely to God that Christ is formed in me. Immediately Christ is formed in me, His nature begins to work through me.*<sup>xxvii</sup>

Jesus said, “*If you would be My disciple, give up your right to yourself to Me.*’ *Then the remainder of the life is nothing but the manifestation of this surrender. When once the surrender has taken place we never need ‘suppose’ anything. We do not need to care what our circumstances are, Jesus is amply sufficient.*”<sup>xxviii</sup>

It is giving up our rights to ourselves that Paul is addressing when he writes, *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus*... That surrender should have come when we trusted Jesus to be our Savior. It is the only right response to all He has done for us, taking our sins and giving us His righteousness. But I think it is common for us to accept the gracious gift of salvation and then go about our lives partially surrendered. We give God certain areas of our lives but no other parts. But if our goal is to truly see Christ manifested in our mortal bodies, we need to fully surrender our rights to ourselves.

Here is another quote from Chambers: *It is not a question of whether God is willing to sanctify me; is it my will? Am I willing to let God do in me all that has been made possible by the Atonement? Am I willing to let Jesus be made sanctification to me, and to let the life of Jesus be manifested in my mortal flesh?*<sup>xxix</sup>

Paul is merely expressing in other ways what Jesus meant when He said, <sup>24</sup> *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* Matthew 16:24,25

<sup>11</sup> *For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.* 2 Corinthians 4:11,12 We must understand the previous verse to understand what Paul is expressing here. This sounds contradictory to someone has never experienced the re-birth we can have in Christ. “We who live” is referring to all who have Christ Jesus living in them, who experience a death to self and a surrender to Jesus as Lord. They continually crucify the desires of the old nature and walk in newness of life. It is these people who are always being given over to death, or as Paul said in the previous verse “always carrying about in the body the death of Jesus.” Put another way, those who are born-again continually die to the old carnal nature. We continually die to self to serve Jesus, which is a joy. Paul is not complaining, here. **He is talking about the upside-down world of the Kingdom of God where to die is to live and to give is gain and to deny one’s self is to be fulfilled.** The carnal mind is repulsed by these realities and so it must be continually crucified with Christ.

It is for Jesus sake! It is all for His glory! His mercy and grace have drawn us out from the world, calling us to be His own (6:17,18<sup>xxx</sup>). This is incomparably better than any worldly position of fame or fortune. But it can only be experienced by casting ourselves upon the grace and mercy of Jesus. The veil must be lifted so that we see who we are and who God is and realize how desperately we need His mercy. All things are for His sake, because He alone is worthy. But the marvel of it all is that He has given Himself to us and is transforming us into His likeness (3:18<sup>i</sup>)!

When He is glorified through our death to self, it brings His life to others. They see something in us that they instinctively know they need. The peace and joy that we manifest is Jesus’ life in us. Those who are truly seeking truth by God’s grace recognize it, and then we have the opportunity of sharing life with them, inviting them to die to self so they might truly live (John 17:3<sup>xxxi</sup>)! Do not hide the treasure. Let Jesus have *all* of you. Let His life be seen in your clay pot!

Questions:

- 1 What does treasure in jars of clay mean?
- 2 Why is that the case?
- 3 Why does God not make us powerful?
- 4 Review the four trials and God’s limitations.
- 5 Review the illustration of God’s grace while enduring hardship.
- 6 Why does the world persecute us?
- 7 What does *carrying in the body the death of Jesus* mean?
- 8 What should be the goal of the Christian life?
- 9 Review the three Oswald Chambers’ quotes. 10 What is Paul declaring in this passage?

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<sup>i</sup> **2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

<sup>ii</sup> **Ephesians 4:30 (ESV)**

<sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

<sup>iii</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

<sup>iv</sup> **John 14:23 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

<sup>v</sup> **2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

<sup>vi</sup> **2 Kings 20:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> And Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and Manasseh his son reigned in his place.

<sup>vii</sup> **Isaiah 41:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

<sup>viii</sup> R. Kent Hughes, [\*2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness\*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 90.

<sup>ix</sup> **Romans 5:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

<sup>x</sup> **Exodus 15:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer."

<sup>xi</sup> **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

<sup>xii</sup> Merrill Tenney

<sup>xiii</sup> **Acts 16:6-7 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup> And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

<sup>xiv</sup> **Psalms 139:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

<sup>xv</sup> **1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

<sup>xvi</sup> **2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

<sup>xvii</sup> **John 16:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.

<sup>xviii</sup> **John 15:18-20 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

<sup>xix</sup> **Acts 14:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

<sup>xx</sup> **Isaiah 40:29-31 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. <sup>30</sup> Even youths shall faint and be

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wearry, and young men shall fall exhausted; <sup>31</sup> but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

<sup>xxi</sup> **Psalm 55:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Acts 9:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Hebrews 4:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **1 John 3:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

<sup>xxv</sup> **1 Peter 2:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **Galatians 4:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!

<sup>xxvii</sup> Oswald Chambers, [\*My Utmost for His Highest: Selections for the Year\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Oswald Chambers Publications; Marshall Pickering, 1986, Dec. 25).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Oswald Chambers, [\*My Utmost for His Highest: Selections for the Year\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Oswald Chambers Publications; Marshall Pickering, 1986, Sept.13).

<sup>xxix</sup> Oswald Chambers, [\*My Utmost for His Highest: Selections for the Year\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Oswald Chambers Publications; Marshall Pickering, 1986, Oct 20).

<sup>xxx</sup> **2 Corinthians 6:17-18 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, <sup>18</sup> and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

<sup>xxxi</sup> **John 17:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.