

Weakness reveals the power of Jesus

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Sir Oliver Franks - British Ambassador to the U.S. (1948-1952). Responsible to convey important information to President Truman. He had at his disposal a number of channels to communicate to avoid Soviet intelligence. Diplomatic pouch and couriers. Secure telephone. Face-to-face conversation. But if the Ambassador had something vital to communicate, he was known to send a letter in the regular mail.

Brilliant in simplicity.

God has the same strategy, according to our text. Using normal, fragile, clay pots to carry the most important message ever.

Here, a well-known set of Scriptures showing kingdom strategy.

By now we know the context of the letter - Paul kind of defending his ministry against attack. He does it, strangely, by embracing the things others think are negatives.

He tells the church that weakness reveals the power of Jesus.

1) We Are Weak

Paul wouldn't be invited into many churches these days... he wouldn't have been able to record any TED talks. He wasn't a "model" achiever. He was too comfortable getting low.

But he knew his purpose. He knows the church's purpose and he shows us the way. He gives us permission to be honest about life.

Weakness. Afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down.

“Paul is emotionally honest. He does not cover up his difficulties, but, as one conscious of being a ‘jar of clay’, reveals something of his sufferings and hardships. In speaking of being hard-pressed he is referring to those ‘pressures’ which impinge on him because he is a Christian. Being perplexed means a feeling of being ‘cornered’. He says he is persecuted or ‘hounded’, doubtless on account of his ministry. Finally, he confesses to being struck down, which probably means, in our language, ‘depressed’.” Barnett

These are familiar things to us. Yet, it is not our reflex to admit it. We can find ourselves in environments where the best face forward doesn’t convey any of this.

It used to be that we just didn’t talk of such things. Now we say its true but we don’t want to express it because we don’t want to be a burden to other people.

But there is freedom in truth - even in admitting we are weak.

Ewen and Myth Busters - giving permission to feel.

This Scripture is not an anthem to say “look at how strong I am, how I am able to persevere by my skills and in my strength.” This is saying, it’s rough. Life is hard, and we can barely take it.

And if you can’t say that in the church - where else can you?!

While it might not be as physical or direct as Paul’s experience (he really was stoned, attacked, slandered, and eventually beheaded), it is true of us. Faced with the war against our own flesh, the uncertainty of our times, the emotional and financial toll... we feel the affliction, the perplexity, the weight...

Even between the exhaustion of our bodies, or emotions, we can be weak in Spirit, ‘can I trust, can I have hope?’

“In the new covenant of righteousness and the Spirit, God meets humans in their suffering, death and judgment - at their points of deepest need.” Barnett

Christianity is not for the strong.

The gospel is literally news that we can't cut it - but Jesus has - he is our enough!

When we left Washington State - friends bought a Jenga set and everyone wrote on the blocks to encourage us and say goodbye. One is keenly special to me - "Thank you for being weak Christians."

Here Paul is saying - this is who we are - this is what ministry looks like - this is what pursuit of Jesus and his glory can feel like. But he doesn't stop with weakness...

2) But Not

The key phrase in this whole text is "but not."

In Christ, our weakness is not the end.

Notice what Paul says, "afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

For each problem, there is a "but not." We are kept for something more than just our weakness. Not even "victorious living" but to turn the spotlight on someone else. Power belongs to God, not to us.

By that power we are secure. By that power we have hope. By that power, we can face our circumstance, our today, our tomorrow.

All so Jesus would be known.

Carrying the death of Christ in us so that the life of Jesus would be manifested, seen, in us. Repeated in 10 & 11 for emphasis - our purpose.

Carrying death, given over to death as Christ (similar ways), to sacrifice, surrender, fully embrace our weakness to show life - manifesting the life of Jesus, true life in him, eternally oriented life. Where things get interesting.

George Mueller - Faithful evangelist and director of an orphanage, used by God. Asked how he did it all: "There was a day when I died, utterly died," Müller once said, "to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will—died to the world, its approval or censure—died to the approval or blame of even my brethren and friends—and since then I have studied to show myself approved only unto God."

This is an opportunity to death - to self given over to death, surrendering the rule of our lives to Jesus, for his purpose, his glory. Weakness as a way of life.

"If you want to see resurrection at work here and now, in your own life, you have to be prepared to see crucifixion at work as well." NT Wright

It proves the power of God - it is him that carries us - not us.

Jacki devotion.

"Drink it to the dregs..."

We are shown to be weak to point to our powerful God. We are shown to be fleeting so our God is shown to be resilient. We are crushed to show our God cannot be, etc. I think there is a legitimate exhortation to resilience here, but more so, maybe, a call to weakness and death by which our God is revealed.

Used to draw others to Him. 12 "So death is at work in us, but life in you." Process of dying - is what "death" refers to.

"Without Paul's 'death' there would be no 'life' for the Corinthians. This principle of life arising out of death or costly sacrifice originates with Jesus. Jesus' death, literally speaking, is the source of eternal life to humanity; the death of those who minister, metaphorically speaking, is the means of life for mankind." Barnett

Following Jesus, dying to live.

We see that as better when we have the treasure!

3) Defined by Treasure

We are shaped by what we value, what we see as most important to communicate.

“We have this treasure...” What came before, the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

The light of the gospel! Mercy for sinners. New life. Identity. Grace upon grace. Favor with God. Union with Jesus.

Jesus lived and died for us, granting forgiveness, righteousness, and inheritance.

We persevere, staying in Christ, looking to him... **Hebrews 12:3** “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” (ESV)

We are made resilient then not because of the container but what’s inside. The church is carried and catalyzed by the grace of Jesus. So that people will notice, so they will receive the treasure for themselves. So their lives can be defined by “But not,” the hope of Jesus, his power working all things for good.

“We do not become powerful. We remain weak. We do not grow in power. We grow in weakness. We go from weakness to weakness, which is to remain vessels for his power - ever weak and ever strong... “The equation for power is: my weakness plus God’s power equals God’s power.” Hughes

Weakness was the occasion for God’s power. Paul’s crumbling flesh allowed the power of God to shine so brightly.

Are you ready for it? Shall we live this out together?

The power of the gospel comes in weakness, not in strength, not in our greatness, but in the fact that we are clay pots - and cracked ones at that!

Used for such a time as this. That’s you.

His power made perfect in weakness.