

The Purpose of Gospel Suffering

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

June 6, 2021

We are continuing a short series on Gospel ministry; 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and we'll pick up our exposition where we left off last time. But I'll start by reading the text starting back in chapter 4 verse 1. 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 1, Paul says, "Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our Gospel is veiled it is veiled only to those who are perishing.

"In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ is Lord, with

ourselves as your servants," or the word is *doulos*, slaves, "for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 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. So death is at work in us but life in you."

In that first section that we covered last week Paul is saying the true ministers of the Gospel, you should consider them as slaves, servants, for the sake of Christians, who serve the interests and the purposes of their Lord Jesus Christ. They don't serve themselves. They don't pad their nests. They don't line their pockets. They don't fleece the flock. They're not hirelings, they're not wolves, they're slaves of Christ and servants who serve the church.

And they have one message. They want to make abundantly clear, straight forwardly plain, making all the fine print bold print, very large font, the Gospel. They don't back off; they don't run and hide; they don't close the doors and go all online. They're bold, servants of the Gospel. Servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the section we're going to cover today, verses 7-12, we see that Gospel ministers, those who especially who are in leadership in the church, they are sufferers for the Gospel's sake.

They are those who speak so boldly and so clearly and so straight forwardly that the world cannot miss their message and it incurs suffering. It brings persecution their way. They are not paraded and champions in the world. They are not sought after celebrities with millions of fans and followers. They're actually despised, rejected, and persecuted.

This text explains Christ's purpose, for all the sufferings that his ministers endure in the ministry of the Gospel. And so, you know, as we think about this text obviously it pertains to those in leadership: Pastors, elders, shepherds in the church. But as the pastors, elders and shepherds are to set an example

for the flock and to equip them to do the work of the ministry, doesn't it make sense that it applies to every Christian? It's to pervade and, and saturate the, this mentality is to saturate the entire church? Indeed it is. And I think more and more these days we're going to have to think about how it is that we as Christians are to suffer well, to suffer righteously.

The hostile world is not getting any better. It's not getting any kinder to the cause of Christ. And that started when Jesus was put to death on the cross. It continued throughout the lives of the apostles, and it's no different today. What is the purpose then of suffering for the sake of Christ? What's the purpose of being persecuted for the sake of the Gospel? We know how it comes, but what is the purpose of God in it?

Simply put, this is what the text teaches: Suffering, persecution, and even death, the purpose of all of that is to manifest, to make known, to put on display, the life of Jesus Christ. The word manifest, *phaneroo*, it's used once in verse 11, there again in verse 12, and the word means to become visible. Something that is to be revealed. So it seems maybe that it's a bit of a paradox that the life of Jesus Christ becomes visible

in us when we are most subdued. When we are afflicted, persecuted, even put to death for Christ's sake.

We see this paradoxical principal in the lives of the apostles who are the, the foundation stones of the church. Their lives were simply following the same pattern of the life of Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. The cornerstone of that foundation, we sang his praises earlier. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord. The full manifestation, the greatest visibility, the highest revelation of that life in Jesus Christ, it came in the death of Jesus Christ. In the death of his apostles.

So, fellow Christian, if the head of our movement, if the founding fathers of our church, if that's what God ordained for them, we know what to expect for ourselves as well. If we profess Christ and we experience no suffering, no hostility for the sake of Christ, no, no suffering for the sake of sharing his Gospel, then we should see that as a potential problem in our lives.

Many today are preaching an innocuous, inoffensive, Christ. Many people are giving people a, a friendly non-confrontational

Gospel, one that leaves people at ease with sin, unconcerned with repentance. Making no demands for change in their life. And I'd say that's not a Gospel at all, and shouldn't be so among any of us because we know our bibles and we know who Christ is. We know what his Gospel demands.

But perhaps even those of us who know, those of us who learn and rejoice in good theology and in biblical preaching, perhaps it might be the case that we too can struggle a bit because we're just not getting out much. We're seldom in the company of the unbelieving. We're rarely telling them about Christ. We're rarely maybe putting the demands of his Gospel before the world. And speaking straight forwardly to them, or worse, maybe when we are we say very little. Maybe we say nothing at all about Christ and his Gospel. We try to skate out of the situation quietly. Perhaps we shrink back from making things awkward, because we don't like to make things awkward. Maybe we fear them rather than loving them.

Maybe we fear them instead of God. I think there's probably not a person among us that can't admit that in some time, at some times, and in some places we do shrink back. That we aren't as faithful as we should be. That we make excuses that, Well I'm

just not a, I'm just not great at that. That's for those red team people, that's why they're called the red team, because they are on fire and let them be on fire. I'll, I'll light the flame. I'll, I'll pay for the tracts." Maybe we make excuses, maybe we busy ourselves with so many things that we just never get in the company of unbelievers and maybe when we're in the company of unbelievers we, we just find ourselves fearful.

My prayer for all of us here at Grace Church is that we embrace the challenge laid for us, laid before us in this text. My prayer for us is that we engage the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That we lovingly confront their sins. That we press the demands of the law and the Gospel to their consciences and let them deal with the Lord of the universe, who makes the demand, "Bow before me."

Paul wrote to a young pastor Timothy, in 2 Timothy 2:3 at a time when Timothy, who had been through some trial, he had to face down the, some rogue elders at the Ephesian church, difficult for a young man to do. In 2 Timothy 2:3, Paul had to call him, "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." That's the spirit, that's exactly right, suffer hardship with me. Take your share of the suffering. Endure the

persecution. Join me for the sake of Christ. Paul is saying "Don't leave me here alone." And Grace Church that's what we elders are saying to you, not that any of you are doing this. But we say, "Don't leave us out here alone, join with us."

May we speak boldly as ambassadors for Jesus Christ. And when we do that, we'll draw fire. When we represent the true Christ, when we preach his Gospel, it is going to bring hostility. It's going to bring rejection, suffering, perhaps even some persecution. But let us never, by God's grace, by the Spirit's power, by the encouragement from the word, let us never shrink back, let us lean in to it. Let us look at Paul, his apostles, the apostles, look at his associates and those who minister with him and in, his, the name of Christ. Let us follow their faith and life. Let us see their faith and follow their example. That we might know the honor of being counted among them.

To have that Christ like courage, to live a life of Pauline faithfulness and boldness. It all starts with understanding the principle of glory through suffering. The principle of life that is manifest in death. That is what makes this text so

foundational. Not just to the Gospel ministry, a formal office of ministry, but this is foundational to Christianity itself. Because it teaches us the purposes of God in suffering for the sake of his Christ. Suffering for the sake of his truth.

I've got three points this morning and it follows the purpose clauses in the text. If you, maybe you noticed those as we read, there are three purpose clauses, clear purpose clauses, God has good purposes in our suffering. God has good purposes in our suffering for Christ and his Gospel. And when we understand his purposes for our suffering, we're not only willing to get out there and join in suffering for the sake of Christ; we become eager to do so.

We become excited about the prospect of receiving rejection and persecution and suffering for the sake of Christ. It's our call to arms, it's the trumpet that blows and, and brings us to the line. It's the command of our Savior to join him, to join his apostles, and to join the Christian church, in suffering for the sake of Christ.

So, we become willing, we can become even eager to suffer when we understand number one, here's the first point, number

one, God uses common Christians as vessels of divine power. God uses common Christians as vessels of divine power. This point just looks at verse 7, that "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." Jars of clay.

For archeologists jars of clay or earthen vessels, in the form of pottery, bowls, pitchers, dishes, all of them made from hard baked clay, archeologists find these things all the time in their digs. Very common. Some of the most common forms of evidence that they can find of ancient civilizations are in these broken pieces of pottery uncovered at every archeological dig. They actually refer to those pieces of pottery with the Greek name *ostraka*. They refer to the broken pieces of pots and jars and bowls, all made out of clay that they find while digging. These are commonplace vessels, receptacles that held all kinds of things that were useful in a home.

Dry goods like grains or liquid goods like oil or wine or water. These could be made from any various materials like, like metal, glass, even an ornamental stone, you know like alabaster flasks that held perfume and things like that. But Paul is specific about the kind of vessel he's talking about, he has

this word *ostrakinos*; *ostraka*, referring to that common every day vessel. It's not something precious, it's not metal, it's not gold, it's not alabaster, it's clay. Dirt from the ground. Clay that's hard baked, baked in the kiln, and that's what he wants us to picture here.

He wants us to think of a common vessel, not an ornamental one. He wants us to think of a cheap container, not one that costs a lot. Not something that's brought out to impress other people. Not something that's used to serve the important guests who come over for dinner. And though they're not ornamental or expensive, vessels that were made out of clay were extremely useful. It's what dominated all the, the life of the home is passing around these vessels made of clay. Very helpful. So the value is not in the material itself that makes up the vessel. It's not the composition of the vessel.

Clay dug up from the earth, molded by human hands, baked in the kiln or an oven, put into a, into use in the service of daily life, it's not the material. Paul says the value of the vessel is not the vessel itself, but it's what's contained in the vessel. The value is about what is inside, what it holds. Need milk? Take out the milk jug. Need to make bread? Go to the

grain bin. It's about the grain, it's about the milk, it's about what is contained inside.

Because these vessels, used in daily household life is, they're inexpensive. There's not a lot of bother when one of them breaks. A chipped or cracked vessel, still useful, even to a point. But when a bowl or a jar would break altogether there's no big fuss, it's expected, it's a normal part of life in the home. It's like one of your common cereal bowls when one of your kids drops it on the floor, you sweep up the mess and you go to the next one in the drawer.

If an earthen vessel that they would use, if it became too cracked for daily use, that one's discarded, another one takes its place, just throw it away and replace. Paul's saying this about himself and his fellow ministers. This is what we are, common, not very expensive, certainly not ornamental. You think Paul thought highly of himself? Not at all. This is in contrast to what the false teachers who infiltrated Corinth tried to say about Paul. He thinks a lot of himself. Not at all.

You think he considered his apostolic commission is that which elevated him above others; demanded deference, and

respect, and regard, not at all. Here he says, I'm just a clay pot. I'm just an earthen vessel. I'm meant to be used every day and even in uncared hands, at times abused. Those who are clumsy with me, they'll break me. And when my time is done, I'm discarded, as I should be, and replaced by the new model.

Not only did Paul never elevate himself, he really saw clearly the purpose of God in how he used the apostles. 1 Corinthians 4:9 Paul says "I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death." We're at the end of the line, we're the off scouring of the world, we're nothing. The real value though of these apostolic vessels, these clay pots, again it's not the material of which they're composed, it's the value in what they contain.

Paul says in verse 7, "Our vessels contain this treasure." What treasure? It's what he said in verse 6, the treasure is God himself shining in our hearts who gives us "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." He's speaking of himself as an apostle, with a, with a prophetic gift where God, by the spirit, reveals things to him about the Gospel and he preaches forth that Gospel. It's God shining in his heart, giving him the light of the knowledge of the glory of God

in the face of Jesus Christ. He brings that Gospel truth, and by the way, all that is written contained right here in Scripture, that treasure. That's what he brings. That's what his body contains. That's what his vessel holds.

The treasure itself, obviously as Christians, we know the infinite value; treasure is priceless, it's beyond the worth of the universe and all it contains, after all Jesus said, "What would it profit a man if he gained the whole world and forfeited himself." It's a treasure of eternal durability, one that will never break, one that will never grow old. It's a treasure of omnipotent power. It's able to call the universe into existence and also to regenerate and transform a sinner. It's a treasure of infinite glory. It's a treasure that outweighs the universe and all it contains. It's an unending, unfading, glorious treasure, because the light of the knowledge of the glory of God is in it, in the face of Jesus Christ.

If I were to give you something of great value. I don't have anything of great value other than this Gospel. But materially speaking, if I were to give you something of great value, a gold bar that I got as a little token gift from Fort

Knox, or something like that. The hope diamond, which weighs 45.55 karats. The Arkenstone for you Lord of the Rings fans. Where would you put a treasure of such great value? Where would you put it?

Put it in a shoebox under your bed? You'd store it in an old coffee can? No, shoeboxes and coffee cans are for trinkets. Things that have sentimental value maybe, but no value to anybody else. Where you put your pictures and your photo albums. If I gave you some treasure, a material treasure like that, you would immediately take that treasure and lock it in a vault. Under lock and key, monitored by a security system, guarded by a platoon of navy seals, you'd hire them all.

You'd lock it away. Why? Because you don't want anybody getting to it. It's not what God does with his treasure, he deposits a treasure of infinite value in earthen vessels, in human beings, in common breakable jars of clay. Why? Why does he do that? Because in God's economy, God guards his treasure by putting it in weak receptacles that are guaranteed to leak.

They're certain to break. Why is that? Because when clay pots break, the treasure is exposed to others. We have this

treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. The literal translation of that last part from the Greek text it makes the purpose clause just a little bit clearer it says that "we have this treasure in jars of clay in order that the surpassing power may be sourced in God and not derived out of us." Sourced in God.

We want that to be clear to people. And especially for shepherds, pastors, preachers, they don't, true preachers don't want anybody looking at them. It's not about them. If people get caught up in the vessel, they've lost it. They've missed the point. It's got to go beyond the vessel, beyond the human receptacle, so the people can see the treasure. If they don't see the treasure there's something wrong with our ministry. This treasure, Paul says, "God shining the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The treasure in our hearts is a Gospel of superlative power, the word there is *hyperbole*. I almost said hyperbole, because that's the word that comes from this, hyperbole.

Literally the word *hyperbole*, it means to throw beyond. *Hyper*, beyond, and then *bolo*, the word throw. *Hyperbole*, it's an

extraordinary power. It's a power that defies any human explanation as to its cause. It's a power far beyond anything explainable in man, explainable in the world, or the universe for that matter. The extraordinary power, the superlative power, this treasure, Paul's not talking about God's omnipotence in a general sense, though it's sourced in the divine omnipotence.

Paul's talking about something far more specific here in this context. The power of the treasure carried in weak vessels, human beings, common Christians, is the manifestation of divine grace, a grace that saves and sanctifies. This power, this treasure is the power of the Gospel to save and sanctify sinners. It's an extraordinary power, it's a superlative power, it's a hyperbolic power, one that has no source in mankind.

It's so extraordinary, so amazing, it defies any human explanation. Only God has the kind of power that is sufficient to convert and transform the sinner. Paul here is self-consciously committed to God's good purpose in this. Using fragile, weak, common vessels like himself as the receptacle to carry this treasure. He's conscious about it, self-conscious, and he's committed to making that apparent to everybody. He knows God's good purpose, he's fully on board with God's plan,

he sees God's wisdom, and so he's intentional to deemphasizing himself, the human vessel, because he does not want there to be any confusion whatsoever about the power source.

Coming to Corinth, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul talks about his entrance into the city of Corinth; came from Mars Hill bringing the Gospel to the Athenian philosophers. Seem, some try to portray Paul as coming away from that experience on Mars Hill in Athens as a discouraging time in his life, it wasn't. It just made him more fully convinced that the wisdom of man has nothing to contribute to the Gospel. The wisdom of man is not a step toward the truth of the Gospel.

And so, he was so committed, so convinced, that when he came into Corinth, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, he says, "When I came to you brothers I didn't come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech and wisdom." That's what the Corinthians were used to, that's what the Athenians were used to in the Greco-Roman world there were, there was a group of, of traveling teachers, preachers, conference speakers, called sophists, and that's exactly what they did they tried to impress people with lofty speech and erudite wisdom because they wanted to gain a

following, because they wanted to turn some of those followers into paying students. And those paying students had the prospect of taking up a career in law, or in politics, or in something that required them to be using lofty speech and eloquent wisdom.

Paul says when I came to Corinth, I said, I'm not doing that at all, verse 2, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." That's a message by the way that is foolish to the world. A crucified savior, if he can't keep himself alive what's going to guarantee he's going to keep you alive? They spurned and scorned that, knocked it, made fun of it, but he said, that's my message.

About this Christ, him crucified, because that is salvation, it's the power of God unto salvation. He says in verse 3, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, not before them, but before God my speech, my message," verse 4, "were not in plausible words of wisdom, that is human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Why? This isn't what he writes, but this is what he thinks, It's because I fear God and I love you. I fear God and will speak nothing but what he tells me to speak, and I love you and know that this message of a crucified Christ is what you

need to live.

Verse 5, "I want your faith not to rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." That's how he conducted himself and his ministry. That's how he commanded all of his associates in the ministry to conduct themselves. That's how we conduct ourselves, if we're faithful to the apostolic ministry.

You can go back to 2 Corinthians 4 now, there's such confidence, isn't there? In understanding that God has a good purpose in using common vessels like us God intends to show through us even through weakness, even through fragility, even through bad health, even, even through an inarticulate manner of speaking, even in our tendency to make mistakes, to get things wrong, even in our nervousness and our stuttering speech, there's such a confidence that God intends to show through us that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Why, it's so men don't put their faith in a fragile vessel like us, a common clay pot, there's no salvation in us. Rather we want their faith to rest safely, securely, eternally, in the power of God. This helps us, doesn't it, to, not to think too highly of ourselves. As if on the one hand our nature as a clay

pot has anything to do with attracting and drawing and converting or sanctifying a sinner.

You can't put enough paint on the clay pot to make it useful and powerful to save and sanctify. It's not about us, but the treasure we carry inside of us, it's what we proclaim, the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." So this has a tendency to curb our pride so that we mortify and kill it. On the other hand, this helps us to remember our nature as clay pots, common vessels, weak, sometimes failing vessels. The power of God in the Gospel to save and sanctify really has nothing to do with repelling the sinner either. Who we are as common vessels, we are not the one repelling the sinner, it's the power of God and the Gospel that repels the sinner. God knows that we're nothing more than clay pots.

He's the one who designed us. He's the one who formed Adam out of clay and breathed into him, an animating principle of life. His expectations about us are pretty realistic. In fact, this is why he put the treasure in you in the first place. It's to show everyone the surpassing power is so obviously not of us.

So thinking about it this way, our nature as clay pots, as common vessels, It's meant to encourage the faint hearted.

For those who shrink back from confrontation. Who don't want to make the room awkward by bringing up Christ and his Gospel. It's to encourage you that, listen, it's not about you it's about him. But learn from Paul's teaching here. Follow Paul's example, tell people about the Gospel. God uses common Christians as vessels of divine power. Knowing and understanding that it gives us confidence and courage, it gives us humility. It gives us boldness.

Secondly, when we become willing, another point here, when we become willing and even eager to suffer we'll do that when we understand, point number two, that God uses suffering Christians as carriers of divine life. God uses, point number two, God uses suffering Christians as carriers of divine life. Jars of clay don't hold up too well over the long haul. The more they're used, the more they'll have a tendency to break.

Put under pressure, banged up against things, and Paul knew that so very well. Look at what he says, in verses 8-10, "We're

afflicted in every way” us jars of clay, “but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”

This is where the earthen vessel, that’s built for ordinary use, when it is subjected to extraordinary pressure, external pressure in affliction, in suffering, it creates cracks and chips and it eventually breaks open. That’s not only normal for common vessels, but it’s intentional from God’s perspective. Because the less of the vessel that we see, the more of the incomparable treasure people will see.

Four sets of contrasts in verses 8 and 9, afflicted, but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. Four contrasts. And those four sets of contrasts you need to see are kind of in order. There’s a gradation of increasing intensity to this suffering. It starts with pressure in the first set, it moves to perplexity in the next set, leads to persecution and eventually ends in grave danger. And yet in each case Paul is quick to

acknowledge in the form of a contrast: the but not statements. There's a sustaining power all the way through that sustains him and holds up his life under immense pressure. So that he can endure that suffering.

Before we look at those individual terms in the abstract, it might be a helpful thing to see what Paul is talking about in a more concrete way. So let's turn over to the book of Acts. The book of Acts in chapter 14. Acts chapter 14, this is Paul's first missionary journey as he goes into a region that's now modern day Turkey.

Acts chapter 14 in verse 1, Jesus had told upon the event of Paul's conversion, Saul's conversion, he became known to us as Paul, he told Ananias, one of those early believers, who was reluctant to receive Saul into his house because after all, Lord don't you know this guy has been killing Christians and locking them up, taking them away? and Jesus said to Ananias, "I will show Saul how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Jesus doesn't say that by the way of punishment, by the way. He's not saying, yeah I'm going to rub his nose in the

suffering, he wants to persecute me I'm going to persecute him. That's not what he's saying. "I'll show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." For the sake of my name is what gets the emphasis there. It is an honor to share in the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is telling Ananias this is a vessel that I have chosen for a special honor.

Well, that suffering started on the first missionary journey in Iconium. The town of Conia, or Conja, in modern day Turkey, Acts 14:1 says this, "Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great..." what's that way that they spoke? Plain straight forward preaching of the Gospel right? Not in persuasive words of human wisdom but in powerful words of the spirit. They "spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers."

And so, they didn't walk away discouraged, licking their wounds. What does it say "They remained for a long time." They're like they must need more powerful preaching of the Spirit. Love that. Spoke "boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done

by their hands. But the people of the city were divided. Some with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews with their rulers to mistreat them and stone them, hmm, conspiracy to commit murder is brewing.

Well, "They learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country and they continued to preach the Gospel." So we see the unbelieving Jews, they've entered the scene. They've stirred up the Gentiles and so we can see there's a growing pressure amid this climate of increasing hostility they decide to carry on with the work of Gospel anyway. Had to think about that, they were, they were caught with this thing that confronted them, of this hostility, the carrying on of the work of the Gospel when a clear cut division formed in the society, a coalition of opposition formed, pressure is growing, hostility is increasing and the tone finally comes to a murderous pitch, then they realize it's time to get out of town.

So Paul and Barnabas head to Lystra, about twenty miles south of Iconium. And ministry started in Lystra when Paul healed a crippled man there, that's what the next part of the account

gives. Pagans there tried to worship Paul and Barnabas, they'd never seen any power like this. They thought they were Greek Gods descended to the earth and so they immediately, Paul and Barnabas, started a theology class. Restraining the people from committing idolatry.

It's clear to everyone in Lystra that Paul wielded an otherworldly power. That this divine treasure in jars of clay was showing the surpassing power belongs to God not to us. So Paul and Barnabas, they proceeded to explain that. But notice what happens next in verse 19.

The Jews didn't rest having kicked him out of Iconium, they pursued Paul, chased him down, and caught up with him in Lystra. Verse 19, "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium having persuaded the crowds they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city supposing he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and," love this, marched right back into the city. "On the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they preached the Gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations

we must enter the kingdom of God." Amen!

That completes the pattern that Paul described in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. In fact, go back there, 2 Corinthians chapter 4. That completes the pattern. The unbelieving Jews put pressure on Paul and Barnabas, chased them out of town from one city to another, and then finally they accomplished what they planned to do back in Iconium, striking them down. 2 Corinthians 4:8, "Afflicted in every way but not crushed."

The word afflicted is *thlibo*, it's like a, TH, sound and then libo, *thlibo*. Literally means to squeeze and to press, to exert pressure. It can also mean to rub together with the pressure, to chafe. Jesus uses that word in Matthew 7:14 to describe the narrow way. It's a pressured way, one that chafes you when you go in. It's compressed and confined, and that's the same picture here as well of Paul and his associates.

Who, they're continually pressed into these really tight spaces. They're squeezed into these thorny situations that it's hard to extract themselves from, hard to escape. And yet, they see God who always makes a way out for them. He shows them their escape route, he shows them the way out and they make a narrow

escape. The ESV translates this as afflicted in every way and not crushed, the word crushed, *stenochoreo*, it's, that's the verb and it means to be so restrictive. So confined, to be squeezed into such a tight place that one is completely overwhelmed, there's no escape, the impossibility, the difficulty says, there is no getting out of this whatsoever. It's being pinned down and then crushed.

Paul says, yeah, we've been squeezed. We've been pressured, we've been pressed, but not to an overwhelming degree. Not so there's not one way of escape, we find it, God has given us a way out and we take it. That's the first set of contrasts.

Next one, verse 8, "We're perplexed but not driven to despair."
0:16 There's a word play there in Greek, *aporeomenoi*, literally it's without a way, it's perplexed, it's without a loss, but not *exaporeomenoi*, greatly perplexed, overwhelmingly perplexed, that is to despair. They're not perplexed to such a degree that they, they're, they're caught in two minds forever. No, they finally land on the one way of escape and they take it just like Iconium.

Paul and Barnabas may have been perplexed by the growing

hostility, what do we do, how do we conduct our ministry, should we stay, should we go, is it time? That was only for a time. Everything became clear, and so for the moment they said, we're staying, we're preaching, they need more word not less. They need more power, not less. So we're going to care for these people, love them by preaching the Gospel.

But then, later on, when everything became clear again as murderous plots were afoot. A conspiracy formed all of the sudden. They sensed the call of God for them to preach in another place. So they left. Then in Lystra they were hunted down by the Jews and that brings us to the next contrast in verse 9, "Persecuted but not forsaken."

Being persecuted like that, especially by their own people the Jews, had to be tempting to give way to discouragement. Just like Jesus who came to his own and his own did not receive him. Same thing with Paul. His own people the Jews, Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh, turns out they couldn't stand him. They wanted to expel him from their synagogues, their communities. They hated him. He was once the rising superstar, theologian of Judaism. His name was going to be in a lot of theology texts. Why did they hate him, they hated him because he

represented Jesus Christ.

He represented the one that the establishment cancelled. He's the one that the leadership deplatformed. Wouldn't invite him into their conferences anymore. So because Paul took his side, they hated him too. They killed Jesus, and since Paul is aligned with Jesus. Since the life of Jesus is evident in his life, they wanted him dead too.

That will always be the case folks. That will always be the case, that the more we look like, sound like, act like, Jesus, the more we will provoke the hatred of the world. Jesus said, "If they hated me, they will hate you too." If you are liked by the world beware, you've got to start asking some questions. If you're liked by the world maybe it's just the case that they don't know you well enough. If everything you say is thrilling to the world, maybe it's the fact that they just haven't heard the real truth about you. Which is the Gospel. And once that comes out they turn.

So the Jews, they turned, they went searching for Paul. When they found him, they undermined his ministry. They turned his evangelism prospects against him. And when he kept going,

they hatched evil plots against him. First to mistreat him then to kill him altogether, big conspiracy in the town. When he finally left, they went looking for him in the next town hoping to silence him for good.

And they tried, unsuccessfully as it turns out, they tried to stone him, and that brings us to the last set of contrasts verse 9, "Struck down but not destroyed." Paul was struck down, stuck, literally struck down by stones. Struck down, *kataballo*, *ballo* the word cast or throw and intensified with a preposition *kata*; to strike down, to throw down, to strike someone down with violent intent, hostile intent. One source says the word means to, to be at death's door. It's like, like a soldier fallen on a bloody battlefield and the enemy is standing over with the sword raised ready to strike that last final blow.

And yet surprisingly, that's where Paul found himself and yet he's not destroyed. Lo and behold, right after being stoned to death he got back up, marched right back into Lystra and finished what he came there to do. Paul is just a clay vessel.

Paul is just a man like you or me. Paul is nothing special, he's commonplace. The fact that he got up after being stoned and

marched by, right back into that city to preach, don't look at the clay pot, that's what he just said in verse 7. We have this treasure in clay pots, jars of clay so that you will not think that that power to get up and pre, go right back in that city, you think I was scared? I was scared, humanly scared. I don't like being hit with rocks.

But don't look at him, the surpassing power to do that is not of Paul, it's of God. That's the point, that's the lesson. What happened at Iconium and Lystra was, was not an isolated incident in Paul's ministry. It wasn't a one-off experience of uncommon hostility by rude people. This happened to Paul everywhere, as Jesus followed through with his promise, to show Paul just how much he must suffer for the sake of his name. And it doesn't stop, Paul goes on to explain in verse 10, he said, "We're always carrying about in the body the death of Jesus Christ."

The word translated death, *necrosis*, is an active word. It's not talking about a static state of being dead. It's talking about the putting to death, it's an active word. So he's carrying about in the body, the putting to death of Jesus, actively, and Jesus, being the object, okay they're throwing

rocks at me but they're trying to hit Jesus.

Jesus is the object, he's the one they're trying to actively put to death and Paul carries around, that's the verb there, to carry around at all times the killing of Jesus in his own body. It's his body, but it's Jesus they want dead. They're always trying to kill Paul's body, because they hate and want to kill Jesus. They can't get to Jesus anymore because he ascended into heaven. They see the life of Jesus clearly manifest in the apostle Paul, supernaturally at work in him and they want to kill it they want to destroy it yet again.

They can try to kill Paul, but they can never succeed at destroying the life that really animates Paul, because it's not the life of Paul, it's a divine life. It's a life that's eternal in nature. It's a life that is supranatural. It can never be destroyed, because it is the life of God, in Jesus Christ, that's in Paul.

That's what Paul means here in verse 10 by saying, "We're always carrying around in the body the putting to death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Another purpose clause by the way, showing that as we said at

the start of this point, God has a good purpose in using Gospel suffering. He takes our bodies, he uses these weak, common place vessels, he applies some pressure, applies some suffering for the sake of Christ, in order that, purpose clause, as opponents try to put to death Jesus that's in us, instead they merely break the vessel and more Jesus shines. Ah, that didn't work out.

They crack the vessel, break the vessel, some chips come off and more of that treasure shines forth; the life of Jesus in us. How does that happen? Because even though enough pressure is applied, even though enough pressure to crush any common vessel, we're not crushed. Though there's enough confusion to perplex and bewilder and stymie, it's not enough to discourage any common vessel, Paul says, because we're never driven to despair. Though the world hates and rejects us, though the world finally chases us out of town and persecutes us, there's enough rejection to turn the world's greatest optimist into the deepest pessimist. Discouraged that everyone has abandoned us, Paul says, no the life of Jesus, in me, is such that I know we're never forsaken.

The attitude is the same as David's, Psalm 27:10, "Even if my," my, "father and my mother abandon me," the closest relation I've had on earth, "the Lord cares for me." That's what Paul learned through all the suffering and rejection and persecution. God said, Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." And Jesus made the same promise in the great commission, Matthew 28:20, "Behold I'm with you always even to the end of the age."

The Lord encouraged Paul, you see it later in this letter. 2 Corinthians 12:9, amidst the most painful suffering, a suffering that wasn't just external in physical suffering, and shipwrecks, and stonings, imprisonments, and all the rest, there's an internal suffering of concern for the churches; especially this church, seeing it ravaged by the wolves of false teachers. And as he pleaded over and over for the Lord to take it away, Paul pleaded with the Lord, and the Lord answered "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That's the secret.

Paul knew he lived and he ministered the Gospel under the watchful care of God. And he was armed with the promise of Jesus Christ and that care of God and promise of Christ instilled hope in most desperate times. Times of despair, he had peace in times

of hostility, comfort even in the face of human abandonment, and not just abandonment, but hostile abandonment. They abandoned him after trying to kill him. The only way he could experience the reality of God's care, the faithfulness of Christ's promise, the sufficiency of God's peace and comfort, is because of the suffering. Again it's paradoxical.

Suffering revealed the truth in him. But the suffering revealed that he truly was a carrier of divine life. An indomitable life, verse 10, the life of Jesus. That encouraged him to know that the life of Jesus is so clear in him that it evoked, or brought about, provoked, suffering. That indomitable life of Jesus Christ is made manifest in us. Made manifest in just these common earthly bodies, it's made manifest in this time at this place, but only through suffering when we endure for the sake of the Gospel. It's the suffering that reveals it. It's the pressure that exposes it.

Jesus said, "If they hated me they'll hate you too." It's the same hatred that conspired to kill Jesus that conspires against us. Faithful believers who speak boldly for him, we carry about in our bodies the putting to death of Jesus. Which means the more that Jesus is formed in us, the more his life is manifest

in us, the more people will oppose us, and hate us, and scorn us, even mistreat, abuse, and persecute us. Some of us may even suffer martyrdom for the name of Christ, because they see him in us. They will try in vain to snuff out the life of Jesus by killing our bodies. But the more opposition that comes, the more pressure, the more persecution for the sake of Christ, the more his life becomes manifest in us.

Again, the vessel breaks, reveals the bright shining treasure. In God's wisdom he uses common Christians, as vessels of divine power. He uses suffering Christians as carriers of divine life and, thirdly, we become willing and eager to suffer for him when we understand, number three, God uses dying Christians as beacons of spiritual life.

God uses dying Christians as bright beacons of spiritual life. Jesus once said, "Truly, truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit." That's the principle that Paul's about to describe. This is why we're carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, verse 11, "For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake. So that" another purpose clause, "so that the life of Jesus," also, "may be manifested in

our mortal flesh.”

When Paul writes, “We who live” he is specifically talking about himself and his ministry associates there, the we, all of them on their ministry journeys, they were always being over, constantly, continually, we who live always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake. And I want to illustrate this just by going to just a few pages to your right to 2 Corinthians 11.

2 Corinthians 11 and this is the point in the letter when Paul is turning his attention to the perennial problem of the false teachers in the midst of the church, to deal with and challenge and oppose their wicked influence, they had been effective at undermining Paul. They had been effective at trying to destroy his credibility in the Corinthian church and turning people against him, making them question his motives.

And so to help the Corinthians grow in discernment and help them to start listening to him again, so they can get that life giving treasure, Paul, rather reluctantly, he speaks about his apostolic qualifications. And for the first qualification on his list, look at chapter 11 verse 22, he speaks about his suffering right away. First, 2 Corinthians 11:22, he says, “Are they

Hebrews, so am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham, so am I," I was born in the right nation, just like them, "Are they servants of Christ?" Now there's a question mark isn't there? Well, "I'm a better one- I'm talking like a madman."

He's saying that because he hates trying to speak of himself this way, hates drawing attention to the vessel. But if he's going to draw attention to the vessel, he's going to draw attention to the suffering of the vessel. "-far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked."

I don't know if any of you have been in the deep sea when the waves are churning enough to tear apart a ship. It's exhausting, it is absolutely exhausting to think that three times, not just once, that to happen in a lifetime is remarkable you write a book about it. Three times he's shipwrecked. Ships torn apart by such violent storms and waves and he clinging to a piece of broken ship, exhausted, has to keep his head above water and get to shore.

"Three times shipwrecked a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure of me, of my anxiety for all the churches."

While he was floating around that day and a half on the piece of wood from the shipwreck he's wondering, "How are the churches doing." All that Paul says is on my resume. Not only his, but for all who traveled with him they experienced along with Paul the same thing. Men like Timothy, sighted in, chapter 1 verse 1, of this epistle. Or Sosthenese, sighted in 1:1 of the previous epistle. Men like Barnabas, and Mark, who traveled with him, Silas as well, Demas and Luke. We who live, includes those men too. Men who accompanied him on these missionary journeys, and he and his associates they are always being handed over to death. Always being given over, you hear the passive voice, it obscures the subject a little bit.

Like every time a little kid is called to account for something wrong, something broken in the house, It just fell. You know they, they don't take personal responsibility, like I knocked it off. It fell, they're using the passive voice, little kids understand the use of the passive voice very well. We see it here, it's obscuring the subject we say, who is the subject. Who is handing over, giving over Paul and his associates to death? This is called a divine passive, by the will of the sovereign God. It's under the direction of the sovereign Christ. It's by the superintendence of the sovereign Spirit that Paul and his associates suffer.

God is giving them over. God is handing them over to death. Why, why would he do that? Doesn't he know how much it hurts? Doesn't he love us? I mean isn't the whole point of the Gospel to escape suffering? No.

Eventually, yes. But in this life God loves us very much, but God loves all of his people and we need to remember that. So God uses dying Christians as beacons of spiritual life to hold up the light of the Gospel. Drawing more and more of his elect people to that beacon of light, that they too might find the

life of Jesus in the light of the Gospel.

That light shines the more we suffer. It shines brighter the more we are dying. It's for Jesus' sake in order that, next purpose clause, third one in the text. In order that the life of Jesus might also be manifest in our mortal flesh. It may sound like Paul here in verse 11, that he's merely restating what he wrote in verse 10. Verse 10 he said, "Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." And verse 11 says, "For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that," once again, "the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

It may sound repetitive; it may sound like it's just a restatement. He is restating the point, but he's adding to it. He's strengthening it. Notice in the two verses, verses 10 and 11, you can see in verse 10, verse 11, comparisons and contrasts. It's in the comparisons and the repeated words in the two verses, the word death is repeated, the word life is repeated, the word manifested.

He also repeats certain phrases. There's the subject, the

life of Jesus, and there's the verb, may be manifested. Then he repeats certain concepts and here's where he, we see different words and phrases. Instead of always carrying in the body in verse 10, he says in verse 11, "We who live are always being given over." Instead of in our bodies, at the end of verse 10, now he says in verse 11 in our mortal flesh.

Mortal flesh, you say, thanks for the observation exercise, okay what's the point? So glad you asked. Mortal flesh, mortal is in contrast to immortality. Immortality means never dying. Mortality means one day we'll die. What animates our mortal bodies right now is called the *psuche*, it's where we get our word psych, psychology, *psuche*.

We normally translate that word *psuche* with the word, soul. The *psuche* is the animating principle of our mortal physical life. Such that when we die it's the *psuche* that leaves the body. When the *psuche* leaves, nothing remains but an empty shell. Paul's enemies thought that by taking that *psuche* they were able to, at the same time, destroy the life of Jesus within Paul. But the word for life in that phrase, life of Jesus, it's not *psuche*. It's not that which animates the body, the physical body, the mortal body, it's *zoe*. It's life, what that which

gives life to the whole of man, body and soul.

Sarx and *Psuche*, material and immaterial, *zoe* animates the life of man, the composite life of man. Paul uses that word *zoe* four times in verses 10-12. He, twice in that repeated phrase the life of Jesus, *zoe* of Jesus, once in verse 10 again in verse 11. And then in verse 12 the phrase is life, or *zoe* in you.

But going back to verse 11 Paul refers to himself and his companions as, "We who live." It's a participle there, "We," comma, "the living ones." *Hoi zontes*, again it's the word *zoe*. We are the ones who have that spiritual life as the animating principle of us. We are therefore living constantly living, continually living, and by the way, eternally living.

No longer mere *suche*, a physical life that explains us, it's not the power of the *suche* that sustains us, it's spiritual life. It's spiritual life, it's divine life, it's eternal life that inhabits us. And this *zoe* is untouchable, it's beyond the reach of physical death and that's why killing them won't help. For the unbeliever, they have no *zoe*.

All they have is *psuche* that animates them. So when you kill them, take away the *psuche*, they're dead that's it. For us, having been granted spiritual life, having granted *zoe* from God, you take away the *psuche* that *psuche* is going to return because God has given us *zoe*. *Zoe* refers to spiritual life, divine life, that *zoe* is actually the essence of God himself. He is called the living God.

This is the life that John wrote about in the opening of his first epistle, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands." What were they seeing, hearing and touching? A body of mortal flesh in Jesus Christ. That which we have heard, seen, looked upon, touched with our hands, concerning the word of, *zoe*, life. And that, *zoe*, that life has been made manifest and we've seen it, testified to it, proclaimed to you the eternal life, which was with the Father, made manifest to us.

That spiritual, divine, eternal life, the very essence of God, not only made manifest to Paul and his associates, it's what they carried around within them. They didn't just see it externally, they had it internally, they carried it with them.

God uses suffering Christians to carry that spiritual life to others and he uses dying Christians with bodies subject to mortality as beacons of light. Showing sinners the way to spiritual life even in their death.

I see this a lot as a pastor in the death of every godly saint. As they're dying witness testifies, you see it coming with power. There's an inexplicable joy within them. A life in them. A life that shines brightly even in the hours of death. And that life is the spiritual life, it's a *zoe*, it's a resurrection life that raises them to heaven. Carries them beyond the grave into the kingdom. It's the same life we carry around in our daily lives as Christians when we suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and suffer for the sake of the name of Christ.

It is because of the life of Jesus, that *zoe* kind of life is now more evident in you than the mere *psuche* kind of life. The one comes to dominate the other. Others see in you, hear from you, that new kind of life, a *zoe*, a divine life, a spiritual life, which is eternal, indomitable. It comes from the Father, it lives in Jesus Christ, and he gives it to us.

Jesus said in John 5:26, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And so, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he will." God's good purpose in using mortal men to carry the Gospel, it's to assure them as his children they now share in the life of Jesus. You're suffering for the sake of Christ, it's because they see the life of Christ and they persecute and afflict you.

So let it encourage you, when you step out in faith, when you're obedient to preach the Gospel to others, when you suffer for it, when you're mistreated, when you're shunned, when you're cancelled, deplatformed, when you lose your job, when you lose relationships because of Christ. Let it encourage you that they're not reacting against you, the vessel; they're reacting against what's revealed in you, the life of Jesus within you.

Christ is being formed in you. Let that hearten you. Let that give you good courage. Leads to another encouragement, strengthens our hope in the Gospel. The unbelieving world, they manage to snuff out the *psuche* of Jesus Christ on the cross, for a time, three days. His soul departed his body, was laid in a

tomb, but they couldn't touch the zoe. The real power that animated Christ. The divine life that could never die.

And so, according to the will of God, who raised him from the dead, his *psuche* returned to him. The divine life could never die. How do we know that? Not only did God raise him from the dead, but that same life, that same principle, showed up again in the apostle Paul, all of his companions, and when they snuffed out, finally, the *psuche* of Paul, when they severed his head from his body, when his *psuche* departed his body and he was buried in the ground, once again, like his Lord Jesus before him, they couldn't touch the zoe, the true principle that made Paul alive.

The real power that animated him, that explained him, divine life. Now how do we know that, because the zoe shows up again in you and me. In all Christians of all ages who read these words and find life, that principle of eternal life is evident, manifest, in the pages of Scripture; as we believe it, as we embrace it, as we obey it, we see that principle animating us.

So Christians in all ages, in every place, from every

tribe, tongue, nation and people, they too following these words, they see the life of Christ in them. That's what Paul meant as he summarizes his point in verse 12. "So, death is at work," it energizes, "in us, in our mortal flesh, but life," energizes, "in you." Life animates you. Strengthens you. It's what explains you.

That's the principle of death that leads to life. That's the paradox Jesus gave in John 12:24, "truly, truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit." The *psuche* may die, when it does, the *zoe*, the life of Jesus, evident in we who are the living ones, that life lives on and produces more fruit.

Isn't that what you want in your life? It's what I want in my life. I don't want the grain of wheat in me to go into the ground, die, and nothing happens. No fruit. I want to see my life in suffering. Held faithful by God's grace. In dying, shining brightly by God's grace. I want it to produce more and more fruit.

And folks that's God's purpose in our suffering for the

sake of Christ and for the sake of his Gospel. God uses common Christians like us as vessels of divine power. He uses suffering Christians like us as carriers of divine life. And he uses dying Christians as beacons of spiritual life, shining brightly that Gospel that all the elect may see, hear, come, and find life eternal.

By dying to self, that's how we do it. By dying to self we scatter the good seeds of the Gospel. Look to God to bare the fruit in and through us to the glory of God in Christ. Let's pray.

Our Father we rejoice to see this principle of life coming through suffering and death. Not because of us, because of the vessels, but because of Jesus Christ, the life of Jesus in us. That life was manifest in the eternal life. We rejoice to proclaim that life to others. We pray that as we do and as the suffering and rejection comes, that you would keep us faithful, strong, encouraged. That we would know your abiding presence never concerned that all abandon us and turn their backs, but rejoicing because we know you to a greater, deeper, degree.

We pray Father that you would keep us faithful to this Gospel. That the power of your salvation and sanctification would never be mistaken as somehow coming from us the vessel. That your power would be so clearly demonstrated to be coming from you. And Father that's what we commit ourselves to, that the life of Jesus Christ may be seen in our suffering, exposed in our suffering, and shine brightly in our dying. We commit ourselves to you wholly once again, and ask that you would keep us faithful. In the name of Jesus Christ and for your glory, by the power of the Spirit we pray. Amen.