



This year marked my 20th year of being a pastor. In those years, I've had many encouragements, but I have also had many discouragements. Being a pastor isn't simply a job, it envelopes how you think, act, live. Kind of like parenting. You don't take the parent hat on or off as it relates to your children. You always think of them. You always are behaving in ways that affect and seek to care for them. And, you know that if anything happens to you, it's going to affect them. What shapes or damages you, will shape or damage them. It's a joyful-yet-weighty responsibility, isn't it?

As I look in the Scriptures, I also see how the spiritual realm, the demonic world, can particularly attack spiritual leaders. Maybe like me, you've read biographies of Christian leaders in centuries past. And there's a common thread you'll find: trials upon trials. Spouses and children die. Immense physical sicknesses. Opposition from friends or neighbors. Martyrdom. As I've gone through my 20 years, I look back and see seasons of intense mental trials, chronic physical pain that continues today, emotional pain, spiritual trauma, familial tension, and relational discord. Within this last year, as I was in the thick of certain struggles, a thought came to me. A potential "solution" to get myself and my family out of all the spiritual attacks: stop pastoring! I thought to myself, "By becoming a pastor, I entered into a minefield, and I called my family into it as well. Maybe if I just get out, it'll at least lessen." Every area of my life has been attacked as a pastor. Why not just stop! Do I just want more pain? What's the future going to bring? Thoughts of greener pastures came into my mind. And yet, deep within me, I couldn't embrace those thoughts.

I knew God had called me to this. And yet, I struggled. Why does God call us to enter into trials and suffering? When I was younger, I thought a passage like Romans that says, "We are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered," and then Paul says, ". . .we are more than conquerors," were encouraging! I thought that if I went through these slaughtering situations, I'd be strong like the Marvel superhero movies! But in going through the trials, I've come to realize I'm *very, very weak*. My perception of what God ought to be doing was very different than what God actually says he does. God does not bring trials in order to make us strong in and of ourselves. God brings trials to reveal how weak we are so that we can see how *strong* he is. That's what Paul says to the Corinthians, right? In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote, "**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.**"¹ Paul doesn't say that he's going to boast in the strength that he has. He's going to boast in his weakness because in doing so, you'll see how strong Jesus is!

Last week, Jonathan preached a wonderful sermon on gratitude in trials, and in today's sermon, I want to flesh that out. What does it look like to live in gratitude in the midst of trials? I mean, Jesus tells us that in this world, we will have trials. The apostle James then says that we are to count it all joy when we

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 12:9.

are in the midst of various kinds of trials all at once! How can we count it all joy in the tornado of trials? Well, I want to land in 2 Corinthians 4 this morning where Paul serves as an example for us.

In the midst of feeling my own chaos this past year, a dear friend shared with me 2 Corinthians 4, and it stuck with me. For the last few months, I've consistently been brought back to this passage, and I'm still pondering it. I debated whether or not to speak on it today because I feel the depth of beauty in this passage. But I am going to at least skim the surface this morning, and I pray that it would serve to give you strength spiritually as well.

This chapter is part of Paul's explanation of what it's like to be an apostle. It's painful. It's difficult. False teachers get greater credit. The Corinthians doubt his love for them. Yet, Paul persists in ministry. Paul relates his struggle in ministry with the death of Jesus. And yet, he also is firmly convinced that as he experiences these deaths in ministry, God is going to work miracles. Through these deaths, God will shine forth eternal, resurrection life through him.

As a pastor, I can resonate with what Paul's saying here. Yet, I think everyone here ought to be able to glean from this passage because Paul writes these things not only to defend himself, but to serve as an example of how we all ought to live. In Philippians 3, Paul gives similar truths of sharing in Christ's sufferings and resurrection, and then says to the Christians, "**¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.**"² The reality is that if you are a Christian, you are called to live a life of death. Did you know that? In Romans 8, the apostle Paul said, "**¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.**"(emphasis mine)³

In God's plan, death always comes before life. If you want to experience future resurrection, your life even in the here and now will have dying! This is completely opposite from how we think – especially in our society with so many privileges. I don't know about you, but I often am thinking about how to minimize pain and conflict. I'm often wanting to remove tensions. But **What if the tensions and the pains of this life are God's tools for removing my selfish impulses and are causing me and others to increasingly depend on and delight in the Lord?** Like one songwriter wrote, our prayer ought to be, **"O disarm me of everything that I would lean on/So I will lean on You/Jesus, strip me of everything I would depend on/So I'll depend on You"** (Altrogge, *It Was Your Grace*). Or, if we go back to 2 Corinthians, Paul says in 3:18 that God's goal for us is that we would increasingly be transformed to be like Jesus: "**¹⁸ 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.**"⁴ God's goal is that we'd be more like his Son, Jesus. Only the Spirit can do this work. Isn't this wonderful? Do you want to be more like Jesus? Yes! But how does God make us more like him? As we behold Jesus, we imitate him. And then in circumstances of life, we experience resistance and trials. Through God's Spirit in the Word and in circumstances, we're made more like Jesus.

The big question for you now is, "Is Jesus worth the trials and death?" In 2 Corinthians 4:5, "**⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.**"⁵

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 3:15.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 8:16–17.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 3:18.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:5.

Then, in verse 7, Paul refers to God's glory through Jesus as a treasure (we have this treasure. . .). I have to emphasize this point right here, right now, because if God's glory in Jesus is not a treasure to you, then suffering for the Lord and going through trials to be more like Jesus won't be worth it to you. And some of you here might not be enduring through trials because there's a deeper issue of the heart: you don't really value Jesus. Remember Jesus' words, "³⁹ **Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**"⁶ You try to hold on to this life and grasp for it, you end up losing life. But if you give yourself over to Jesus (lose your life), he gives greater life. Jesus isn't joking! He's serious! God's way is that through death is life. And you'll only go through the daily deaths and trials if the Spirit opens your eyes to see that Jesus is truly eternally valuable! Jesus is more valuable than money, your family, your accomplishments, your reputation, your comfort. If you believe this (or, even if you're here saying, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief), then the rest of this sermon will hopefully serve and encourage you.

In the following words of chapter 4, we find how God intends to shine his miraculous life through broken people like us who live in this sinful, broken world. Again, this isn't our tendency. Our tendency when trials come is to either **fight against them, run from them, or to ignore/suppress the "bad."** But for Christians, we have a different, freeing option. **Lean into the Lord and his gospel of death and resurrection in the midst of the trials.** Now, what does that look like?

Embrace your inherent weakness. In verse 7, Paul uses the imagery of us being jars of clay: ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.⁷

We created beings, we have inherent weaknesses. Did you know that? I think we often tend to immediately think that if we're in a difficulty, we have to get ourselves out of it. We have to be the problem-solvers. This reminds me of a statement that I heard years and years ago from a pastor who once said, "Pray like it all depends on God. Act like it all depends on you." I'm still disturbed by that statement. Do you know why? Because if I act like it all depends on me, I'm not living in reality. It doesn't depend on me! We all depend on God. The problem from the beginning has been people acting like it all depends on them. But our creatureliness is evidence that we are inherently weak. Side note: this is one reason why I'm grateful I get sick or have headaches at times. I'm reminded that with a snap of God's fingers, I'm brought to my knees. Oh that we wouldn't be so quick to think so highly of ourselves. Yes, we are created in God's image, but may we not idolize ourselves. The idea of being a jar of clay is that we are vessels that are created and limited. This must be our first thought. Embrace and come to terms with your inherent weakness. Do you need to do that today? If you do, then the next point Paul brings up is that we are to

Embrace the trials in your life. As you look at this picture on the screen, you see that the jar of clay is shattered in many places. And what is shattering it? I've drawn a cross, and next to it, I've written, "Afflicted, Perplexed, Persecuted, Struck Down." Why? Well, let's read verses 8-10: ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.⁸

In verse 10, Paul says he and the ministry leaders are *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus*. That doesn't mean that Jesus is literally being crucified within their physical bodies. He just said that being

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 10:39.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:7.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:8-10.

afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down is a sharing in Jesus' death. How can Paul say this? Because Jesus endured all these things. To be afflicted is to be oppressed or to suffer hardships. To be perplexed is to feel at a loss to the point of experiencing severe anxiety. What was Jesus doing the night before he was crucified? Was he not praying with intensity? This word for persecuted refers to when there's a plan put in place against you to oppress you. Clearly, Jesus endured this from the religious leaders. Then Paul uses "struck down," which means to be hurt badly or to cause to suffer. Which again, Jesus endured this.

Now, as you hear these words, you might want to minimize your trials. You might say, "I am not suffering like Jesus." And, you are correct. Jesus suffered to degrees we cannot ever fully comprehend. However, that shouldn't minimize your pain. As Jonathan spoke last week, Jesus shares in our sufferings. Do you ever feel perplexed to the point of anxiety? Do you ever feel like people might be against you? Have you ever been hurt badly by others for Christ's sake? Then, these trials are the death of Jesus in you.

And, since this is the case, we ought to *embrace* the death. This reminds me of the story my mom tells when decades ago, one of my sisters was living in rebellion and my parents were heartbroken. My mom wanted to resort to despair, and there was an older, loving Christian woman who had gone through her seasons of suffering, and she said to my mom, "Karla, you need to learn to make pain your friend." My mom thought she was crazy. But isn't that what the Scriptures call us to? It's like the hymn *How Firm a Foundation*, where the words are as if God is speaking, saying, "**For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless, And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.**" God never lets death have the last word! In fact, if we are dying, we can be assured that resurrection life is coming! And that's the next point. We embrace our inherent weakness and embrace the death of the trials,

Because through our death, Jesus' resurrection life is seen. Now, again, if you don't value Jesus, this won't mean much to you. But if you treasure God, then you will be amazed at this. Through death comes life. This is always the way God works in this world. So, if you look at this slide, you see at the bottom of this cracked jar a dark area. That's to represent Jesus' resurrection from the tomb. The tomb came after death, and the empty tomb is critical for our faith, right? If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then what's the point of his death? We are hopeless if Jesus didn't rise from the dead and conquer it! So, in our lives, trials picture the death and by the Spirit's grace and power, God reveals Jesus' resurrection through us. But what does this mean? We see we can persist through the death's of life

Because God works his miraculous promises in the death. As a basis for this jar of clay to rest, we have the promises of God. How do you and I know that we won't be utterly crushed? God's promise. Do you see what Paul says? Let's reread verses 8-9: ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. . ."⁹. Now we see the rays of light shining throughout the cracked jar. Jesus' life is on display through all the broken areas that the death of Jesus has cracked us open. Think of this imagery of Paul. If we don't experience death, the light of Jesus won't shine through us. We'd be hiding God's glorious power if we don't go through trials and submit to them. But why would we persevere through the various trials and count it all joy, like James says?

Look at the "nots" here. Not crushed, not driven to despair, not forsaken, not destroyed. This can only happen by the miraculous working of God. If you talk to many people about why they leave Christianity, I think one of the most common answers is the problem of pain and suffering in this world. I get that

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:8–9.

argument. I've felt it in the midst of my trials. I'm reminded again of my mom, when she tells another story when she was so upset with what was going on in her life that while praying she said to God that she was done, and then she said it was as if she heard God say to her, "But I'm not done with you." I've had those kinds of situations in my life. Have you? How is it that today I love and adore Jesus more than I did 10 or 20 years ago? How is it that I can have joy while sorrowing broken relationships that exist in the present? Only God. Because God made promises to me. And, Christian, he's made those promises to you. And these promises are secure! Jesus was crushed. Jesus was taken to the point of despair in the garden. Jesus experienced God's just wrath on the cross – forsaken. Jesus' body was destroyed by crucifixion. Yet, Jesus rose! In God's plan, life always comes through death. And so, just as it was for Jesus; so, it will be for all who follow Jesus.

But know this. Even though you're being broken, you're not going to be crushed. Even though you're perplexed, you're not driven to despair. You're not forsaken. You're not destroyed! Now, I don't know about you, but if I take a hammer to a clay pot, it's going to be broken. It might look destroyed. If it had a mind, it might be very confused. This is how we feel in trials. Yet, Paul is giving us a heavenly insight into our trials. This death is actually a fulfillment of God's promises to us! It's not simply that we're not crushed. God has promised to make us whole in Christ. It's not simply that we aren't driven to despair. God has given us eternal hope in Jesus. It's not simply that we're not forsaken. It's that we are united to the Creator God who loves us! It's not simply that we're not being destroyed. We are being built up in Jesus. Do you believe God can do this? Can God do the miraculous? Oh, he has proved it 2,000 years ago! Through death comes life. And if God did that in Jesus, he *will* do that through all of this children.

So, what Paul' saying here is that the life of Jesus (the treasure) shines through the weakness and brokenness that the death of Jesus (trials) emphasizes. Therefore, Christ's glory *will* shine all the more brightly through trials and *will* lead to increased thanks in others to God! In other words, we continue through death because gratitude will increase in others. Look at verse 11-12, and then verse 15: ¹¹ 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. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you. . . . ¹⁵ **For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.** ¹⁰

Paul says that we who live – followers of Jesus – are always experiencing death so that Jesus' life would be made clear in our weak, jars-of-clay flesh. So, he says, "death is at work in us, but life in you." But what does that life look like? Verse 15 is the answer: increased thanksgiving to the glory of God! In other words, more and more and more people will rejoice in God. Not only will you treasure God, but others will, too.

As I was thinking about this statement this past week, I was reminded of John the Baptist who said that he must decrease and Jesus increase. When his disciples seemed concerned that Jesus was taking all the crowds from John, John's response to them was that if you go to a wedding, you don't focus on yourself, you focus on the bridegroom. He's your joy! John was enamored and amazed by Jesus. Therefore, John's joy was that others would rejoice in Jesus. Jesus is the prize. Jesus is the treasure. Look to Jesus.

We should be able to grasp this concept. Even this past week, in celebrating Thanksgiving, there was probably something you ate that was so good that you immediately wanted someone else to try. Why? When you delight in something, you want others to delight in it. If that person is also excited about it, your joy increases, too. Well, what if there is One who is so glorious that all other glories pale in

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:11-12, 15.

comparison? There is One – he is our Triune God, who reveals himself through Jesus by the power of the Spirit. And, he’s at work in each of us who look to him so that we can know and savor him increasingly. As he does this work in us through trials, others will grow in rejoicing and gratitude to him. They’ll see that we couldn’t live this life in our strength. They’ll see there’s a divine, good Being behind this all who is very personal and eternally loving. They’ll rejoice and our treasuring of Jesus will only increase as they rejoice. Oh, do you know him? Do you love him? When trials come, do you say, “He must increase and I must decrease?” Think of this. As a parent, what’s your yearning? You want your children to rejoice in Jesus, yes? What about in ministry as an elder or a deacon or a church member? What about as a co-worker? **Do you want people to rejoice in Jesus? The Spirit works through *your trials (your deaths)* to do this. Will you embrace your inherent weakness and your trials because God is the supreme treasure? Do you know and believe God has miraculous life through the death? Will you say, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief?”**

Earlier, I said that we can tend to fight, fly, or deny/suppress when trials come. We turn to these things because we want to remove the tension of the trial. We don’t want to feel the pain it brings. Yet, did you notice what Paul said in verse 10: ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus.¹¹ Paul emphasizes this in verse 11: ¹¹For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake. . . .¹² Months ago, I drew this picture and then I wrote this: **do not remove this tension.** Fight, flight, denial seeks to remove the tension. That’s not what Christ-followers are to do. Did Jesus remove the tension of the cross? No. Hebrews says that he despised the shame, but he endured the cross for the joy set before him! And this is precisely our hope, too! We have joy set before us – that joy is grounded in eternity future (not simply in the trinkets we get in this life). We have eternal life and hope! We are being prepared for eternity and we have eternal life right now, and it’s being revealed to us and others as the death of Jesus continues to break and build us up!

When I look at the list Paul gave us to describe our trials, I can’t help but wonder if you might resonate with one more than another. I think all of us would hate any of these, but when I look at this list, the one I hate the most is the feeling of being perplexed. Feeling confused, like I don’t have the answer (and I’ve been led down the road to immense anxiety and worry). I can feel the despair that comes with being perplexed. Feeling like, “What’s the point?” But maybe for you, you resonate with another one. Maybe being oppressed. Maybe feeling like everything’s against you, being persecuted. Or, maybe circumstances come to you that are striking you down. I would encourage you to remind yourself of our good Father who says that you might feel like you’re being destroyed, but you’re not. You’re being built up. You’re united with him. You’re given hope. You are being made whole. What do you need to hear today? As Paul said to the Philippians, ¹⁵**Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.**¹³

God wastes no deaths in Christ. All death in Christ leads to life. When you realize this, you will rejoice all the more. **The life of Jesus (the treasure) shines through the weakness and brokenness that the death of Jesus (trials) emphasizes. Therefore, Christ's glory *will* shine all the more brightly through trials and *will* lead to increased thanks in others to God!**

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:10.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:11.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 3:15.