Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study *When Life Gets Hard*, these sermon outlines will use the same Scripture passages as the small group study, so the pastor can reinforce the study from the pulpit.

The Point: Every part of life – including difficulties – is an opportunity to glorify God.

Introduction: Several years ago, I was in a used bookstore and I saw a book titled *The Holiest of All*, by Andrew Murray. I have always enjoyed his works on prayer and the Holy Spirit, and this one sounded like a good devotional tool, so I bought it. I was looking at the book a short time later, and to my chagrin, I noticed that this version was published by Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. I abhor their theology, but I tried not to let it bother me. After all, they were only the publishers. The book was still Andrew Murray’s work, and the Copelands wouldn’t revise to fit their own theology, would they? As I read the book’s introduction, my dismay turned to disgust. They admitted they had indeed removed several pages from the original work. Their reason? His comments about hardship in the lives of believers didn’t line up with their “prosperity” theology.

Unfortunately, this kind of theology still has a strong following in America. People seem to think if hardship comes your way, then your faith in God must be weak, or you must have done something wrong. That would have been strange talk to the apostle Paul! He was probably the godliest man in the New Testament apart from the Lord Jesus, yet he faced trials and suffering everywhere he went. Nevertheless, he used his hardships for the glory of God. How can you honor God in your suffering?

I. The right perseverance.

A. What did Paul mean when he spoke of “treasure in earthen vessels”?
   1. “Earthen vessels” refers to clay pots, which were inexpensive and very breakable.
   2. Paul used the “earthen vessels” as a symbol of the human body.
      a. Paul no doubt bore the scars of his persecutions, and that made his body look frail and weak.
      b. Opinions vary with regard to the “treasure”, but the context suggests Paul was talking about the glory of God in Christ.

B. How does this apply in practical terms?
   1. We are able to endure suffering.
      a. “Troubled, but not distressed” – The word “distressed” literally means to compress or cramp. This phrase could also be translated as, “Pressured, but not crushed.”
b. “Perplexed, but not in despair” – In other words, we are often bewildered and even in despair, but not to the point of hopelessness.
c. “Persecuted, but not forsaken” – Even in the midst of persecution, Paul knew God was with him.
d. “Cast down, but not destroyed” – The word “cast down” was a wrestling term. We could paraphrase it, “Down, but not out.”

2. The life of Jesus is revealed in us.
   a. “Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus” – In other words, Paul’s sufferings were reminiscent of Jesus.
   b. God gave Paul the strength to endure in spite of suffering, and that was a powerful testimony for Christ.

II. The right perspective.

A. “I believed, and therefore have I spoken” – Paul borrowed this phrase from Psalm 116:10.
   1. The psalmist had faced all kinds of hardships – even to the point of death – but he still trusted God to take care of him.
   2. Paul noted that Christians can carry this faith one step further:
      a. We know Jesus is really who He claimed to be because He has risen from the dead, just as He said He would.
      b. We know the same one who raised Jesus from the dead will someday raise our dead bodies back to life.
B. Paul was willing to endure any kind of persecution or hardship.
   1. “For your sakes” – This included the Corinthians, of course, but also anyone else to whom he had preached the gospel.
   2. As more people received the grace of God through Christ, more people would give thanks and God would receive greater glory.

III. The right promise.

A. “We faint not” – Other translations say, “We do not lose heart.”
   1. “Our outward man perish” – Literally, “is perishing”. Paul was referring to our present physical bodies.
      a. They are subject to sickness and disease.
      b. They get weaker with age.
      c. They will eventually die.
   2. “The inward man is renewed” – Here he was referring to our inner spiritual nature, which is different from the physical body.
      a. The body gets weaker with age, but the spirit gets stronger.
         * When I was little, we had an elderly lady in our church named Stella Colvin (most of us called her “Miss Stella”). She taught a children’s Sunday School class for many years, and I was in the last class she taught. She fell on the ice that winter, and broke her hip, so she wasn’t able to return to teaching. Still, she lived for many years after that. Her body deteriorated as she aged, but her love for the Lord only grew stronger.
      b. Persecution weakens the body, but it can strengthen the spirit.
B. God is using affliction to accomplish His purposes.
   1. This does not mean that God causes suffering. However, when others
      inflict suffering, God can use it for His purposes.
      a. Our endurance of suffering is a powerful witness to others.
      b. The sufferings of this life make the promise of heaven all the more
         sweeter.
   2. We must keep our eyes on things that are eternal.
      a. When we get to heaven, our earthly problems will be insignificant.
      b. Our confidence of eternal life in heaven enables us to endure the
         sufferings of this world.

**Conclusion:** Both of my parents grew up in the Great Depression. They lived on farms
with no electricity or running water. They drew water by hand from a well, and they got
their milk from dairy cows. During warm weather, they had to put the milk in the well to
keep it cold. They heated their houses with wood-burning stoves, and they used coal oil
lanterns for light. My Dad’s family owned their own farm, but my Mom’s family didn’t even
have that. Her parents were sharecroppers, and they often lived in rather shabby houses.
They had to work hard just to survive. My parents readily admitted that the “good old
days” weren’t so good, and I admit I don’t want to go back to those days any more than
they did. Still, I worry that today’s church has become so fond of our prosperity that we’ve
taken our eyes off heaven. As Vance Havner used to say, “We no longer feel like traveling
on; we feel like settling down!”

Yet when tragedy or hardship strikes, we are reminded that this world is still under a
curse. Life in this world will never be fair, and as long as we are here, we will continue to
face various forms of suffering. The good news is, we have a better home waiting! Let
us keep our eyes on that heavenly home, and let us also keep proclaiming the message
of Jesus. He is the only solution to the troubles of this world.

   Jesus is the answer for the world today;
   Above Him there’s no other, Jesus is the way!

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