

Preaching From Brokenness

Old Union Minister's School – Thursday, March 23, 2023

The text for our lesson is **2 Corinthians 4:7-18**. Let's begin by considering the larger context of this book and the immediate context of our passage. 2 Corinthians addresses the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in both life and ministry. In this letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul spends much of his time addressing accusers who claimed that the suffering he endured demonstrated the weakness of his gospel and apostleship. In response, Paul is more autobiographical here than in any of his other letters. Rather than downplay his suffering, Paul displayed it. He mentions despairing of his own life in Asia (**1:12-2:4**), facing turmoil in Macedonia (**7:2-16**), experiencing anguish over the Corinthians' sin and the potential damage to their relationship (**1:12-2:4**), imprisonment, beatings (almost to death) with lashes and rods, being stoned, shipwrecked, frequent trips with dangers, physical labor, hunger, thirst, sleeplessness, the pressure and stress of pastoring churches (**11:16-33**), being dishonored, slandered, treated as an imposter and insignificant (**5:11-6:13**). Finally, he speaks even more about an unnamed thorn in the flesh that would not depart despite his desperate pleas for relief (**12:1-10**). Paul knew suffering intimately.

In the verses immediately preceding our text in chapter 4, we learn that the means of our ministry must match the message of our ministry. We must be forthright in how we handle God's Word, clearly presenting the truth. No playing, "hide the ball" with people. If people don't perceive the glory of our message, it is because Satan has blinded their minds from seeing Christ. We do not exalt ourselves as the solution for people's problems, but instead we exalt Jesus Christ as their only hope. We preach because God shattered the darkness of our own hearts by shining the light of the knowledge of Christ within us. In a sense, the principle of 2 Corinthians 4:5, *"For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake."* will be the theme of our message because it not only governs how we preach, but it is meant to be illustrated as our jars of clay experience the brokenness of this world.

I encourage you to now read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. I will break the passage down into three sections to guide our discussion: Purpose in our Pain (**4:7-12**); Preaching from Brokenness (**4:13-15**); and Promise in our Pain (**4:16-18**).

Purpose in our Pain

2 Corinthians 4:7-12 *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. 8 We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; 10 Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. 11 For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. 12 So then death worketh in us, but life in you."*

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What is Brokenness?

At its heart, brokenness is the pressure exerted upon the jars of clay. The jars themselves are nothing special. That is the point. Jars like this were used for a variety of purposes in Middle Eastern life. They were useful until they broke and were then discarded and replaced by another expendable clay jar. These jars were accidentally dropped and damaged every day. If they weren't exposed to stresses, they could last thousands of years (like the jars the Dead Sea scrolls were found in) but put them under much pressure and they would fracture and break. It is clear in our text that we are the jars of clay and would be like every other jar of clay apart from this treasure placed within us. I believe that treasure is the knowledge and presence of Jesus Christ dwelling within us and the calling to make His name known in this world.

Paul describes four categories of pressures experienced by these jars, including,

1. Troubled - oppressed, to be brought into difficulties, distress, or suffering.
2. Perplexed - to be at a loss, or to be filled with confusion from a failure to understand.
3. Persecuted - to be harassed, mistreated, chased, or caused to flee.
4. Cast down - thrown down, or to fall by a blow (e.g. down for the count).

These stresses are expansive, meaning that they cover many categories of difficulties we face in this life. It is significant that these challenges are not unique to Christians. They are the griefs, troubles, and trials common to mankind because of the curse of sin. They aren't necessarily brought upon us by a specific sin of our own but are part and parcel of the human condition in this world. In other words, repenting won't make it go away. For the purpose of our lesson, my definition of brokenness is being under sin, but not in sin. By this I mean that we are impacted by sin and its curse, but these trials are not the direct result of specific sin in our life. It is the kind of suffering experienced by the jars of clay. The suffering could even be a result of righteousness, a form of persecution. It may or may not impact us physically, but deep down inside, we are injured, we are hurting. We are broken.

But my definition of brokenness isn't the only one of significance for our lesson. Our society defines brokenness as a state of strong emotional pain that stops someone from living a normal or healthy life.¹ Herein lies our opportunity and the paradox of gospel ministry. The world expects brokenness to stop life. Yet through Christ, brokenness can be used to bring life. That is Paul's point in our text and the principle the Lord is wanting to proclaim through our preaching and our pain.

¹ Cambridge Dictionary Online, February 15, 2023.

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Enduring Jars

What we notice about these clay jars is that they aren't exhibiting typical behavior. In fact, for every word Paul uses to define the stress put upon these jars, we find a surprising resilience.

1. Troubled, not Crushed - confined, restricted, or without any hope of escape or survival.
2. Perplexed, not Driven to Despair - stranded in doubt or unable to maintain composure.
3. Persecuted, not Forsaken - abandoned, deserted, or neglected.
4. Cast down, not Destroyed - to perish, or to lose.

When the clay jars experience the sufferings of this life and yet endure with faith and hope in the Lord, it demonstrates that there is something unique about these vessels. We find that their durability has nothing to do with the quality of the vessel and everything to do with the quality of its cargo.

A Redeeming Purpose in our Pain

I want to be careful about how I use the word, "purpose" here. There is no way that I can know the extent of God's purposes behind all the brokenness in my life, much less yours. Our God is inscrutable and so are His ways. However, Paul finds a redeeming purpose behind the brokenness in his life and extends this purpose to our lives as well. It is a thing (not all things) that God seeks to do through our brokenness, and it is a glorious thing.

Twice in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11, Paul says that we are suffering so that the *"life of Jesus might be made manifest."* To manifest is to put on display, to make something clear and apparent. Paul found a purpose in his brokenness. It was designed to display that the presence of Christ was in Him, so that through his pain, others could be brought to life through the validated message of the gospel.

When God called you into ministry, He did not just call your mouth to preach and confiscate some of your time on Sundays. Our call to ministry implicates the totality of our bodies, our lives, our families, and our plans. I'm not suggesting that it is improper to have a life outside of our ministry, just that you will find that our good God will touch and shape those other aspects of your life for the high calling of gospel ministry.

Understanding how God redeems suffering completely changes our outlook. The health crisis you are facing that you think drags down your ministry can be redeemed to further the ministry. The same is true of the crisis you are facing with your spouse and children; a struggle with depression, panic attacks, gripping fears, and

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anxiety; stresses and pressure at work; challenges at church; persecution and opposition; grief, loss, questions, doubts and even the silence of God at times... all can be redeemed to magnify the name of Christ.

This only holds true when we rely upon the power of Christ within us to weather these storms. As a child of God, the power of Christ within us is real and profound and powerful when we face the sufferings that would otherwise break us. I'm not saying we don't feel pain... far from it. I'm saying that there is a power to endure in the hope of the gospel if we lean into Him.

I know my audience is acquainted with the passing of our oldest daughter Grace on March 18, 2021. She was driving to visit a graduate school for physical therapy while on Spring Break. It was raining. Somehow, she lost control and ran into a semi parked outside of a rest stop. She was unconscious immediately, but she fractured her skull and there was internal bleeding and she died at the hospital as they were trying to revive her. As we were living in Alaska at the time and she was in Indiana, we didn't know anything about the accident until after she passed. You can imagine the shock. I recall getting on my face and praying and reciting the words of Job, that God had given and now taken away, and I asked for His strength. Losing Grace remains one of my greatest struggles. Yet, I have found that He has given me a strength and a hope that defies my own expectations.

This became very clear to me just a week after Grace's funeral. We were in Phoenix, Arizona where our other three children were swimming at a regional competition. During the trip, our youngest son Micah began experiencing very bad abdominal pains, became very weak and could barely walk. A nurse on site checked him out and thought that it could very well be his appendix, so we rushed him to Phoenix Children's Hospital in the middle of the night. In the back of our minds, we were thinking about another swimmer we knew, who had just had a very bad case of appendicitis and came close to death after his appendix ruptured.

Of course, our emotions were already very raw, and all sorts of scenarios were passing through my mind as I drove to the hospital. When we arrived, a nurse met us at the entrance and said that only one person could accompany Micah in the E.R. because of COVID restrictions. I tried to explain our circumstance and begged to be allowed to join my wife, but the answer was, "no." They put Micah in a wheelchair and took him inside. I had to wait outside on the curb where I watched them in the waiting room through a window. But I was unable to be with them, to comfort him, to know what was going on. As I sat out there, I descended into a very dark place. There was a depth of anger, pain, and hopelessness that arose in my chest. I was on the verge of breaking.

By the grace of God, I learned after a few hours that Micah was only experiencing an abdominal migraine and that basic remedies and rest would restore his health. I was elated, of course, but also very distraught over what had transpired that night in my heart. As I prayed about it the next day, I asked God why He would allow

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this to happen right after Grace's death. Why would He allow me to descend so low? As I wrestled about this in prayer, it occurred to me that the Lord had allowed me to see the edges of the strength He had given me to endure Grace's passing. He had not called me to endure losing Micah but allowed me to glimpse the fragility of this jar, the jar that is James Keen. He also allowed me to see that the strength I had been given to hope and believe in the face of Grace's passing was beyond me. It was His strength sustaining me.

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2 Corinthians 4:13-15 – *"We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak; 14 Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you. 15 For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God."*

The focus of our lesson is preaching from a position of brokenness. Preaching is our calling, and at times, the Lord will guide us through seasons of brokenness. The call to ministry is not something we can shelve when we face suffering. There are certainly times to step back, rest, regroup, process, and pray. But whatever form our ministry takes, there is no biblical precedent for a faithful minister to give up when difficulty arises.

Paul gives us guidance on preaching from this posture of brokenness, but before I expound on that, let's talk about three damaging responses to brokenness.

Three Damaging Responses to Brokenness

1. Break and Fall into Sin

This should be obvious, but it bears repeating. James promises a Divine blessing for enduring under trial and a curse for breaking and falling into sin (**James 1:12-15**). The absolutely wrong response is to allow Satan to score a victory. Another man down for the cause of Christ. There is too much of this already and because of it, others have been discouraged and enticed to drift off the path of righteousness. It is also unnecessary, because our God has promised that with each trial, there is a way to faithfully overcome sin (**1 Corinthians 10:13**). Hard isn't bad; hard is just hard. We shouldn't be surprised by trials or facing brokenness in our own lives. Christ has never portrayed the Christian life as anything other than taking up our cross and following Him.

Even when we falter, we find that our Lord always has a place for the repentant redeemed in His service (**Luke 22:32**).

2. Pretend we aren't Broken

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I have witnessed a tendency among some ministers to pretend things are better than they are. Social media posts of happy faces and fun family gatherings don't accurately portray the hardships and heartaches that are carried behind the smiles. Sometimes the songs we sing don't portray the truth about the Christian life. Many of you recognize the verse, "every burden's getting lighter, every cloud is silver lined."² I don't find this to be consistently true in my life. It depends what God has called me to each day and how I respond to that calling.

We aren't honestly handling the Word and clearly presenting the truth if we pretend that the Christian life is always bright and shiny. While we would never preach a prosperity gospel, we can inadvertently advertise it when the life we portray to others and the life we live are distinct.

There is a need for a degree of honesty and transparency from ministers of the gospel. It took me several years to learn that my congregation's perception of my life differed from reality. They saw the pastor who showed up to church early with kids in tow, all dressed and ready to go. They saw me prepared for the day's activities, but they didn't see the hours of preparation. They didn't see all that happened behind the scenes, the difficulty we faced as a family or even the occasional drama on the car ride to church. They thought our life was different than theirs. They didn't think we had past failures that we had to overcome through Christ. As a result, when they faced the real problems of life, they questioned whether the gospel I preached could overcome the difficulty and darkness of a "real" life.

We experienced a bit of a break-through when we realized their perception differed from our reality and became more transparent in appropriate doses and settings. This is how Paul ministered. He was not afraid to be real about his suffering, his weaknesses, and his past, so that he could magnify the overcoming power of Christ.

3. Allow Brokenness to Define our Life and Ministry

There is an opposite extreme to the error of pretending we aren't broken. Some wallow in their trials and bring them up at every opportunity. It is a chance for attention, which is either an end to itself, or perhaps a fleeting hope it will bring a degree of relief to the pain. When we are in this state, pain dominates our field of view rather than the purpose and strength Christ can bring to our life. The brokenness defines us and flows into our ministry. If we can't see beyond our pain, neither will those to whom we minister.

² I Don't Know Who Holds Tomorrow

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Remember the whole thrust of our text. We don't preach ourselves, but Christ. We are troubled (distressed), but not crushed (without hope of survival). Our brokenness is redeemed when we find our strength in Christ, and that strength allows us to live beyond ourselves and minister to others.

It is important to recognize that the reason for seeking attention could be a lack of spiritual maturity or it could be a cry for help. If you find that you are struggling, whether you express it or suppress it, there is infinite hope and strength for you in Christ, His Word, and His Spirit. I encourage you to reach out to those who have handled adversity with the obvious grace and strength of Christ to seek counsel and prayer.

I Believed and Therefore I Speak

Paul now identifies with an Old Testament passage, specifically **Psalms 116:10**, which says, "I believed, therefore have I spoken: I was greatly afflicted." Before talking about Paul, let's consider the context of this quote. The writer of Psalm 116 is unknown. He had a great burden that he described as experiencing the sorrows of death, the pains of hell, and great turmoil of soul (**Psalms 116:3**). We don't know what exactly he endured, but we know that the Lord rescued him after he was humbled; and he found peace of soul that prompted him to rejoice in the Lord (**Psalms 116:5-9**). In verses 10-11, he recounts being broken in his anguish, and feeling that all men were untrustworthy, but he trusted the Lord. In fact, he said that he believed in the Lord and proclaimed his faith from the midst of his pain. In other words, the psalmist preached of the faithfulness of God from a position of brokenness.

This is exactly what Paul is identifying with when he quotes Psalm 116. He has the same spirit of faith that propels him to proclaim his faith in Christ from the midst of his brokenness. This is just like Job, on the worst day of his life saying, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord." (**Job 1:21**) There is an open acknowledgment of horrible pain, but also a bold pronouncement of faith in the One who has the power to hold together these fractured jars of clay, shining the light of His presence through the spreading cracks.

Paul goes on in **2 Corinthians 4:14** to speak about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of our future resurrection. Unlike the psalmist, who did not have the knowledge of what Christ would accomplish, Paul can look back in the rearview mirror to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and the promise that He would return and raise us in like fashion. His faith is even more crystallized in the living promise of a Savior who simply awaits the word of His Father to come and gather His children, replacing our weak vessels with glorious bodies fit for eternity, and wiping away every tear.

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You see, rescue hasn't yet come, yet Paul is saying, "I believe" and he is preaching, proclaiming the name and message of Christ from the midst of turmoil. This is preaching from brokenness, from the pit of anguish, in the midst of the storm. We don't have to wait for the storm to pass, the pain to be erased, the answers to become clear, or to be standing as a victor before we can proclaim our confidence in our Deliverer. There is tremendous power in a battered earthen vessel still holding to the promises and sharing the light of the knowledge of Christ with others that look on.

Our message is that God is greater than our pain. This treasure in earthen vessels defies all the laws of nature and logic when it comes to the resiliency of hope and faithfulness within the vessel. Paul again emphasizes that all his loss was for their sake, that they might have faith or be strengthened in their faith in Christ, that they might thank God and thereby glorify His name.

Promise in Our Pain

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 – *"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."*

So we don't give up. This is the main point of **2 Corinthians 4:16**. Everything else in verses 17-18 provides the basis or grounds for this resilience. We have soul-sustaining truths meant to buoy us up above the waves of despair.

Yes, the fact remains that our jars of clay are being battered, even sometimes daily. But our inner man, through union and fellowship with Christ, can find renewed strength to meet the distress. How?

We are gifted the promises of God. While their realization lies ahead, there is a present strength that flows from knowing our pain has purpose and will provide for us a great and enduring glory. We can bear up today through the resurrection power Christ imparts to our battered vessels in this life and the promise of the fullness of that power that will be realized on that great day. In fact, our present brokenness is small and passing by comparison to the awaiting glory. As we fix our hope and gaze upon the unseen realm, wherein dwells our Lord, we realize that the sturdier things, the better things, the restored things, are yet to come.

Whatever you have lost has been secured, improved, and multiplied in heaven. You have infinitely more good days ahead of you than behind you. So let us unashamedly preach from the midst of our brokenness, acknowledging its presence, but point our hearers to our treasure in Christ, who holds us together.