

Week after week, this congregation shares prayer requests through our care connection folders. Some submit them online during the week by going to our website and filling in the form on the homepage. Every week, there can be anywhere from 10-20 prayer requests. And the privilege of our pastors and staff is to pray for you.

It is an incredible privilege to pray with you in your sufferings. Ask anyone who has suffered, and they will tell you about the dark times. They will tell you how they wondered if God was there. They will tell you how they felt burdened and wondered if they could carry on. They will tell you about how they felt alone and weak. And anyone who has endured ongoing sufferings will tell you that the energy it takes to push through pain takes a lot out of you emotionally and mentally, not just physically.

What is striking about our sufferings is how hard it is for us to think about them biblically. Sufferings have a way of alienating us and causing us to doubt God and his goodness. Sufferings suck the hope out of us. This was Paul's experience. In 2 Cor. 1, he says that the afflictions he experienced caused him to despair of life itself.

And yet, suffering is intended to help us delight in Christ's resurrection now and in the future. The resurrection is the display of the power of God that he has overcome death by raising his Son to life. But what does that have to do with my present sufferings? In 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, Paul gives us some resurrection help for our present sufferings.

First, Trust Christ to Give You a Ministry in Suffering (vv. 7-12)

In vv. 7-12, Paul makes this incredible claim – that our sufferings are producing a ministry of grace. He begins by describing ourselves as jars of clay – we are pots that are useful but can be easily cracked or chipped. We have a frailty about us that time exposes. Our bones ache. Our muscles need stretching. And what once healed quickly takes more and more time to recover.

And yet, Paul says that the Christian has a treasure in them. In the previous verses, he called this treasure the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (vv. 4, 6). What God does is he puts this treasure in frail pots to show that the greatness is not the pot, but in the treasure inside. In other words, what makes us great and glorious is not ourselves, but the goodness of what God has done in us by placing the treasure of himself in us.

I remember visiting my grandfather on one occasion where he wanted to give me a little money. I was a poor student in undergrad, trying to make it through without borrowing or spending too much. I needed to buy a new computer, and so my grandfather went to his Kleenex box that was surrounded by a holder. He pulled off the lid, lifted out the box of tissues, and underneath was a thick wad of cash. My eyes opened up! There, on the counter, in plain sight, he had a stash of bills that could have probably paid for my entire semester! But it was in this unsuspecting place – a holder for a Kleenex box. This is what the gospel is like – it is hidden inside of a clay pot – to show that any greatness isn't in us, but it comes from God.

To make this point even stronger, Paul then describes the many ways that we feel death: we afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. But this is to show the resurrection power of God and the life of Christ. We aren't crushed, we aren't driven to despair, we aren't forsaken, we aren't destroyed.

Why does God give us this resurrection hope? Why does he put the hope of the gospel in us? So that we might minister the life of Jesus in our sufferings and hardships. This is Paul's point in v. 12 – death is at work in us, but life in you. There is a ministry that affliction produces. But the ministry it produces is intended to give us hope in the resurrection. The purposes of suffering are intended to remind us that we shouldn't put our hope in this life, but in the life of Christ.

This is how ministry works – it is intended to give comfort. It doesn't necessarily remove the affliction, but it gives comfort. If affliction causes us to despair, lose hope, and want to give up, then resurrection power now doesn't necessarily remove the affliction, but ministers the comfort of Christ to ease the pain as we wait for that final day.

It is important for us who live and minister in a technological society who think that everything can be fixed to realize this simple truth – Christian ministry isn't always about fixing, but about ministering resurrection comfort. This was Paul's point in 2 Cor. 1 – we are afflicted so that we might minister comfort.

The goal of ministry isn't to fix what can only be fixed in the resurrection. It's to minister the comfort of Christ here and now. We are so wired to fix – we want to remove the suffering, alleviate the pain, and fix things. But some things cannot be fixed until the resurrection. And when we can't fix things, what we need to realize is that our ministry is first a ministry of comfort. In our pastoral care ministry, one thing we are working to emphasize is that we are to be process oriented rather than results oriented. We are to be about listening, not problem solving. This is what suffering produces – it produces the kind of effective ministry of waiting for the resurrection.

Second, Trust Christ to Give you the Words (vv. 13-15)

As Paul speaks about the blessings of faith, he looks at Psalm 116 and sees how the Psalmist there, in the face of suffering, cried out to the Lord and was delivered, so he could praise God. And this is Paul's praise. He has been delivered from death, so this enables him to speak and rejoice and give praise to God for the grace that continues to spread.

And this means that because Jesus has been raised from the dead (v. 14), he will also raise Paul so that these present trials enable him to speak. In other words, the gospel words that Paul speaks are the words of resurrection power that keep him going in his present sufferings.

In looking at the results, Paul can see that as he speaks of Christ boldly, grace spreads more widely. And this enables him to praise God.

Why can he praise God? For this simple reason: the resurrection gives Paul the words of life and the resurrection empowers those words because he has confidence that he himself will be with the Lord (v. 14).

So often we forget that the ministry of evangelism – this message of the gospel that we are called to share – is not primarily about our skill, but it is the power of God for salvation. When we speak, if we don't see results the way that we hope, we remember that the god of this age has blinded the eyes of unbelievers so they don't see the glory of God (v. 4). We don't lose hope and think that the gospel is powerless; we remember that there is an evil one who is working to keep people from believing, hoping, trusting. He is sowing the seeds of doubt and skepticism. He is taking the afflictions of people and making them question the goodness of God.

But what the resurrection does is it says that there is hope beyond this life, and that the future glory that awaits us gives us hope in the present. It gives us hope that when we speak of Christ, God is doing abundantly more than we could imagine.

I think of some of the most powerful conversations that shaped my life. They weren't canned presentations. They weren't discussions about doctrine. They were people who were with me in the lowest, darkest moments of my life and ministered the life of Christ to me. They listened. They loved. And they simply spoke of Christ. Often they didn't know what to say. But God knew what I needed. And he met me.

So trust the power of the resurrection to give you the words of life when you don't know what to say.

Third, Trust Christ to Make you Bold (vv. 16-18)

So why do we not lose heart? You don't have to be strong, well trained, eloquent, or gifted for Christ to use you. In fact, Paul's point here is that we don't lose heart because of our weakness. Why? Because Christ is working in us even when we suffer to make us new more and more. These troubles are doing something in us – they are not any indication that God is against us. In fact, they are teaching us to rely upon resurrection power so that we would not look on outward things, but on the things that are unseen.

This is what God loves to do. He loves to use things that look foolish, weak, and despised things – the things that aren't – to show that the power of God is at work in weakness, in the hidden places, in the things that aren't noticed.

Here is a beautiful hope – the power of the gospel isn't dependent upon you! Cracked clay pots holding a treasure to showcase how beautiful the treasure is! Weak people speaking about Christ to show that what sustains isn't some wishful thinking that we can be all better now but the confident trust that Christ's power is best seen not in human competency but in Christ's resurrection.

Our Hardships, Christ's Resurrection, and the Faith that Keeps Us Bold – 2 Cor. 4:7-18

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When we have this confidence – it's not up to our ability, but up to God's power – you can say ridiculously bold things about Jesus.

The longer I am a Christian, I am becoming more and more aware that it isn't in my training or skills or education that opens doors of ministry. This week I had an appointment where I needed some care. In this appointment, the person I was seeing turned the conversation to matters of faith. And in that moment, I simply asked them, "Can I tell you something that's helped me – it's about why I believe in God." And for the next half hour, we talked. I shared about my hope in Christ. It didn't end with the person falling to their knees and praying a prayer to receive Christ, but I know we will talk again.

Or I was told of another member of our church family taking lessons and in this was asked about his hope, to which he asked this person if they would do coffee to talk further about Christ.

And I had someone text me to tell me about the burden they have to share Christ with their neighbours. And here we are – a small group of people on the outskirts of one of the fastest growing cities in our country, and we are being given opportunity after opportunity to speak of Christ.

Why? Not because we are great. But because when we are weak, then he is strong. So let's not stop speaking, trusting, hoping, and waiting. Why? Because Christ is risen, and he will raise us with him!