

The Paradox of Christianity 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

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I grew up being taught by parents and teachers that if I obeyed God's commandments then God would bless me in life. I think this is ingrained in the moral compass of the entire "western world" that is influenced by the Judeo Christian ethic. Yet, our experience may be different in that we go through various hardships even though we are walking down the straight and narrow path of God's law. In particular, we notice that missionaries, who were called by God to go to darkest Africa, or the Amazon rain forest have been killed by natives in the past. How or why would God allow such horrible things to happen to His people who are serving Him and being obedient to His calling? Biblically, we read in the book of Acts that the Apostles that Jesus sent out into the world to preach the Gospel were often beaten, arrested, and even martyred. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, Paul explains how this apparent paradox works, and explains why God actually wills this to happen. The Apostle Paul actually found encouragement in his afflictions because he witnessed the power of God in using a beat-up weakling like him to do great things. While afflictions were his in abundance, hundreds of churches were being planted and thousands of people were being saved. How could poor little old Paul be changing the world? As Paul said in 2 Cor. 3:4-6, "Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but OUR ADEQUACY IS FROM GOD, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant".

2 Cor. 4:7 - Awesome Treasure in a Cheap Clay Pot

We have all heard the cliché "You can't judge a book by its cover" or the adage that you can't judge the value of something by the package it comes in. This is certainly true of Christian missionaries who may not look like much, but their message of salvation is pure gold. In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a valuable treasure buried in common dirt, or expensive pearls that come in oysters. The great contrast between the glory of the Gospel message and the beat-up pitiful container (Paul) it comes in is the heart of this passage. In 2 Cor. 4:7, Paul wrote that God has put this great treasure in common "earthen vessels". It's obvious the earthen vessels are the Apostles ordinary physical bodies. The image is of the inexpensive clay jars or pots that everyone used in the first century. These clay pots had no value, so their only worth was in what they contained. In the same way, Paul's adversaries complained that he didn't look like much, and Paul makes the point that his value to the churches is huge because of the treasure he brought them. Like all of us, Paul's imperfections stood out in contrast to the glory of the treasure he brought them. What was the treasure? In the preceding six verses we read what he had brought: this ministry, the Word of God, the light of the Gospel, the preaching of Christ as Lord, and the light of the knowledge of God. Therefore the treasure is the whole Gospel message about Jesus, whom God sent as the perfect sacrifice to die on the cross to atone for our sins, and by believing we are forgiven and receive eternal life.

In What Way are God's Messengers Invincible?

In 2 Corinthians 4:8-18, Paul lays out the paradox of Christianity through four parallel paradoxes that illustrate the truth of Paul's statement in verse 7 that believers are earthen vessels with God's treasure in them. In the image that Paul used, he is the earthen vessel that is empty, but God fills it with His power to persevere through trials. Therefore these four paradoxes in v.8-18 are autobiographical of Paul's life. The paradoxes present ascending weaknesses, which were countered by God's empowerment. Paul's humility and weaknesses that he describes in v.8-18 did not destroy his ministry, but actually strengthened it. Paul found encouragement in his weakness because he witnessed the power of God in using a weakling like him to do great things. Since Paul did not have the ability or power to accomplish the great task God had given him, it was clear that God was at work. So actually our weakness and humility are essential and necessary for the full display of God's power. While doing God's work, Christians are never powerful in themselves, but are only empty clay jars in which God's power is revealed.

In v.8-9, Paul was "afflicted". The Greek word means to be put under pressure or stressed out. Although stressed out, he was not "crushed", and was able to continue his ministry. Next he was perplexed in that it was hard to understand how he could be doing God's work, and in the midst of it he was put on death row. In spite of his surprised confusion, he did not give up because of his hope in God. He seemed to be losing, but always ended up winning. Thirdly, he was "persecuted but not forsaken". His enemies were after him all the time with no let up, but God did not forsake him in the end. Fourthly, Paul was like a boxer who gets knocked down constantly, but is never knocked out, or a wrestler who gets body slammed, but he gets a last second pin on his opponent.

Paul summed up his experiences with a Christ centered statement in v.10, “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus”. Death here means the process of dying because all the enemies of Christ wanted him dead just as they had killed Jesus. They constantly were doing everything they could to make him suffer and die. Paul endured threats, arrests, beatings, and eventually martyrdom. Paul felt a solidarity with Jesus in his suffering. Meanwhile “the life of Jesus was revealed in his body” as he was not crushed, did not despair, was not abandoned, and was not knocked out. The sufferings of Paul were not random, but part of God’s sovereign plan to spread the Gospel. God has determined to use us plain empty jars of clay to show the power and glory go to God. In v.12, Paul included the church at Corinth in this process, “So death works in us, but life in you”, which means that while Paul is threatened with death, the church benefits by being saved by the Gospel that Paul delivered to them. Paul quoted from Psalm 116:10 to explain how he persevered. David had written that he believed in God’s deliverance so he gave testimony to it by faith. In the same way, Paul lived a life of faith, which compelled him to preach the Word. In v.14, his hope in the resurrection kept him looking forward and overcame his fear of death. In v.15, the Apostles were always giving thanks to the Lord for the new converts and the planting of churches, all of which abounded in the glory of God. To sum up, Paul was invincible because of his faith, hope, love, worship, and service to the glory of God.

Keep on Looking at What’s Not Seen

After Job was beset with a terrible list of troubles, he wrote “Man is born for trouble, just as sparks fly upward”. Job was saying that just as it is a reality that sparks from a fire fly up, trouble is also a reality for fallen mankind living in a fallen world. Solomon said that the rain falls on both the good and the evil at the same time. Paul also was expressing that this world is a mixture of joy and sorrow, blessing and suffering, and triumph and tragedy. Even Christians experience all the problems, sufferings, and tragedies just as Jesus told His disciples, “In the world you have tribulation”, but don’t worry because Jesus has overcome the world. For Paul, he had learned endurance as he experienced the paradox of being on the edge of death but living in Christ at the height of life.

In 2 Cor.4:16, Paul’s physical body or his earthen vessel of verse 7, was decaying but the treasure in it was being renewed and better every day. In v.17, from God’s perspective, the afflictions they were undergoing were producing great rewards in heaven for eternity. I think Paul said it well in Romans 8:18, “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (at the resurrection)”. As he continued to live in this world with all its problems, Paul had made the decision to keep his focus on the future resurrection and Kingdom of God. 2 Cor.4:18 then is a great introduction to his teaching on the resurrection in chapter 5. Paul had a heavenly perspective, and he also told the Colossian church to “Set your minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth”. Obviously we have to pay attention to everything going on in the here and now and continue to solve all our problems, but since we believe our true citizenship is in heaven we are really living for that day, not this day. If amassing a fortune, social position, or success in worldly pursuits define a man, then Paul was a massive failure. Yet Paul had gladly given all that up to live for Christ because as John wrote, “the world is passing away and also its lusts, but the one who does the will of God lives forever”(1 Jn. 2:17). We also can cultivate our inner spiritual person if we don’t let the present blind us to the future promises of God.

C S. Lewis, THE BUSINESS OF HEAVEN

Lewis wrote “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set out on foot to convert the Roman Empire...all left their mark on earth precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is because Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become ineffective in this. AIM AT HEAVEN AND YOU WILL GET EARTH THROWN IN; AIM AT EARTH AND YOU WILL GET NEITHER”.

CHARLIE TAYLOR

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