

The Purpose of Gospel Ministry, Part 2

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

When we become willing and even eager to suffer, we'll do that when we understand that God uses suffering Christians as carriers of divine life. 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 8-10, "We're afflicted in every way" us jars of clay, "but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."

Four sets of contrasts in verses 8 and 9, afflicted, but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. And those four sets of contrasts you need to see are kind of in order. There's a gradation of increasing intensity to this suffering. And yet in each case Paul is quick to acknowledge in the form of a contrast: the but not statements. There's a sustaining power all the way through that sustains him and holds up his life under immense pressure. So that he can endure that suffering.

Before we look at those individual terms in the abstract, it might be a helpful thing to see what Paul is talking about in a more concrete way. So let's turn over to the book of Acts. Acts chapter 14 in verse 1, says this, "Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way," what's that way that they spoke? Plain straight forward preaching of the Gospel right? They "spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers."

And so, they didn't walk away discouraged, licking their wounds. What does it say "They remained for a long time." They're like they must need more powerful preaching of the Spirit. Love that. Spoke "boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided. Some with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews with their rulers to mistreat them and stone them, hmm, conspiracy to commit murder is brewing.

Well, "They learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country and they continued to preach the Gospel." So we see the unbelieving Jews, they've entered the scene. They've stirred up the Gentiles and so we can see there's a growing pressure amid this climate of increasing hostility they decide to carry on with the work of Gospel anyway. when a clear cut division formed in the society, a coalition of opposition formed, pressure is growing, hostility is increasing and the tone finally comes to a murderous pitch, then they realize it's time to get out of town. So Paul and Barnabas head to Lystra. But notice what happens next in verse 19.

The Jews didn't rest having kicked him out of Iconium, they pursued Paul, chased him down, and caught up with him in Lystra. Verse 19, "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium having persuaded the crowds they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city supposing he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and," marched right back into the city. "On the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they preached the Gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls

of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." That completes the pattern that Paul described in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. In fact, go back there.

The unbelieving Jews put pressure on Paul and Barnabas, chased them out of town from one city to another, and then finally they accomplished what they planned to do back in Iconium, striking them down. 2 Corinthians 4:8, "Afflicted in every way but not crushed." The word afflicted is *thlibo*, literally means to squeeze and to press, to exert pressure. Jesus uses that word in Matthew 7:14 to describe the narrow way. It's a pressured way, it's compressed and confined, and that's the same picture here of Paul and his associates. They're squeezed into these thorny situations that it's hard to extract themselves from, hard to escape. And yet, they see God who always makes a way out for them.

The ESV translates this as "afflicted in every way and not crushed." The word crushed, it means, to be squeezed into such a tight place that one is completely overwhelmed, there's no escape, the difficulty says, there is no getting out of this

whatsoever. It's being pinned down and then crushed. Paul says, yeah, we've been squeezed. We've been pressured, we've been pressed, but not to an overwhelming degree. God has given us a way out and we take it. That's the first set of contrasts.

Next one, verse 8, "We're perplexed but not driven to despair." Paul and Barnabas may have been perplexed by the growing hostility, what do we do, how do we conduct our ministry, should we stay, should we go, is it time? That was only for a time. Everything became clear, and so for the moment they said, we're staying, we're preaching, they need more word not less. They need more power, not less. So we're going to care for these people, love them by preaching the Gospel.

But then, later on, when everything became clear again as murderous plots were afoot. A conspiracy formed all of the sudden. They sensed the call of God for them to preach in another place. So they left. Then in Lystra they were hunted down by the Jews and that brings us to the next contrast in verse 9, "Persecuted but not forsaken." Being persecuted like that, especially by their own people the Jews, had to be tempting to give way to discouragement. They wanted to expel him

from their synagogues, their communities. They hated him. He was once the rising superstar, theologian of Judaism. Why did they hate him? They hated him because he represented Jesus Christ. He represented the one that the establishment cancelled. So because Paul took his side, they hated him too. Since the life of Jesus is evident in his life, they wanted him dead too. That will always be the case, that the more we look like, sound like, act like, Jesus, the more we will provoke the hatred of the world. Jesus said, "If they hated me, they will hate you too."

So the Jews, they went searching for Paul. When they found him, they undermined his ministry. They turned his evangelism prospects against him. And when he kept going, they hatched evil plots against him. First to mistreat him then to kill him altogether, big conspiracy in the town. When he finally left, they went looking for him in the next town hoping to silence him for good. And they tried, unsuccessfully as it turns out, they tried to stone him, and that brings us to the last set of contrasts verse 9, "Struck down but not destroyed." Paul was struck down, literally struck down by stones. Struck down, *kataballo*, *ballo* the word cast or throw and intensified with a preposition *kata*; to strike someone down with violent intent,

hostile intent. One source says the word means to, to be at death's door.

And yet surprisingly, that's where Paul found himself and yet he's not destroyed. Lo and behold, right after being stoned to death he got back up, marched right back into Lystra and finished what he came there to do. Paul is just a clay vessel. Don't look at him, the surpassing power to do that is not of Paul, it's of God. Paul goes on to explain in verse 10, he said, "We're always carrying about in the body the death of Jesus Christ." The word translated death, *necrosis*, is an active word. It's not talking about a static state of being dead. It's talking about the putting to death, it's an active word. So he's carrying about in the body, the putting to death of Jesus, actively, and Jesus, being the object, okay they're throwing rocks at me but they're trying to hit Jesus. Jesus is the object, he's the one they're trying to actively put to death and Paul carries around, that's the verb there, to carry around at all times the killing of Jesus in his own body. It's his body, but it's Jesus they want dead.

They're always trying to kill Paul's body, because they hate and want to kill Jesus. They can try to kill Paul, but they can never succeed at destroying the life that really animates Paul, because it's not the life of Paul, it's a divine life. It can never be destroyed, because it is the life of God, in Jesus Christ, that's in Paul. That's what Paul means here in verse 10 by saying, "We're always carrying around in the body the putting to death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Another purpose clause by the way, showing that, as we said at the start of this point, God has a good purpose in using Gospel suffering. He takes our bodies, he uses these weak, common place vessels, he applies some pressure, applies some suffering for the sake of Christ, in order that, purpose clause, as opponents try to put to death Jesus that's in us, instead they merely break the vessel and more Jesus shines. Ah, that didn't work out.

They crack the vessel, break the vessel, some chips come off and more of that treasure shines forth; the life of Jesus in us. How does that happen? Because even though enough pressure is applied to crush any common vessel, we're not crushed. Though there's enough confusion to perplex and bewilder it's not enough



to discourage any common vessel, Paul says, because we're never driven to despair. Though the world hates and rejects us, though the world finally chases us out of town and persecutes us, Paul says, no; the life of Jesus, in me, is such that I know we're never forsaken; that's what Paul learned through all the suffering and rejection and persecution. God said, Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." And Jesus made the same promise in the great commission, Matthew 28:20, "Behold I'm with you always even to the end of the age."

Paul knew he lived and he ministered the Gospel under the watchful care of God. And he was armed with the promise of Jesus Christ and that care of God and promise of Christ instilled hope in most desperate times. Times of despair, he had peace in times of hostility. The only way he could experience the reality of God's care, the faithfulness of Christ's promise, the sufficiency of God's peace and comfort, is because of the suffering. Again it's paradoxical. Suffering revealed the truth that he truly was a carrier of divine life. An indomitable life, verse 10, the life of Jesus. That encouraged him to know that the life of Jesus is so clear in him that it provoked, suffering. That indomitable life of Jesus Christ is made

manifest in us. Made manifest in just these common earthly bodies, it's made manifest in this time at this place, but only through suffering when we endure for the sake of the Gospel. It's the suffering that reveals it. It's the pressure that exposes it.

Faithful believers who speak boldly for him, we carry about in our bodies the putting to death of Jesus. Which means the more that Jesus is formed in us, the more his life is manifest in us, the more people will oppose us, and hate us, and scorn us, even mistreat, abuse, and persecute us. Some of us may even suffer martyrdom for the name of Christ, because they see him in us. They will try in vain to snuff out the life of Jesus by killing our bodies. But the more opposition that comes, the more pressure, the more persecution for the sake of Christ, the more his life becomes manifest in us. Again, the vessel breaks, reveals the bright shining treasure. In God's wisdom he uses common Christians, as vessels of divine power.

He uses suffering Christians as carriers of divine life and, thirdly, God uses dying Christians as beacons of spiritual life. Jesus once said, "Truly, truly I say to you unless a grain

of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit." That's the principle that Paul's about to describe. This is why we're carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, verse 11, "For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake. So that" another purpose clause, "so that the life of Jesus," also, "may be manifested in our mortal flesh." When Paul writes, "We who live" he is specifically talking about himself and his ministry associates there, the we, all of them on their ministry journeys, they were always being given over to death for Jesus' sake.

And I want to illustrate this just by going to 2 Corinthians 11 and this is the point in the letter when Paul is turning his attention to the perennial problem of the false teachers in the midst of the church. And so to help the Corinthians grow in discernment and help them to start listening to him again, so they can get that life giving treasure, Paul, rather reluctantly, he speaks about his apostolic qualifications. And for the first qualification on his list, look at chapter 11 verse 22, he speaks about his suffering right away, 2 Corinthians 11:22, he says, "Are they Hebrews, so am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham, so

am I. Are they servants of Christ?" Now there's a question mark isn't there? Well, "I'm a better one- I'm talking like a madman."

He's saying that because he hates trying to speak of himself this way, hates drawing attention to the vessel. But if he's going to draw attention to the vessel, he's going to draw attention to the suffering of the vessel. "-far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure of me, of my anxiety for all the churches."

All that Paul says is on my resume. Not only his, but for all who traveled with him they experienced along with Paul the same thing. He and his associates they are always being handed over to death. Always being given over, you hear the passive voice, it obscures the subject a little bit. Who is the subject. Who is handing over, giving over Paul and his associates to death? This is called a divine passive, by the will of the sovereign God. It's under the direction of the sovereign Christ. It's by the superintendence of the sovereign Spirit that Paul and his associates suffer. God is handing them over to death. Why would he do that? Doesn't he know how much it hurts? Doesn't he love us? God loves us very much, but God loves all of his people and we need to remember that. So God uses dying Christians as beacons of spiritual life, drawing more and more of his elect people to that beacon of light, that they too might find the life of Jesus in the light of the Gospel.

That light shines the more we suffer. It shines brighter the more we are dying. It's for Jesus' sake in order that, next purpose clause, third one in the text. In order that the life of Jesus might also be manifest in our mortal flesh. It may sound like Paul here in verse 11, that he's merely restating what he wrote in verse 10. It may sound repetitive; it may sound like

it's just a restatement. He is restating the point, but he's adding to it. He's strengthening it. You can see in verse 10, verse 11, comparisons and contrasts. It's in the comparisons and the repeated words in the two verses, the word death is repeated, the word life is repeated, the word manifested.

He also repeats certain phrases. There's the subject, the life of Jesus, and there's the verb, may be manifested. Then he repeats certain concepts and here's where we see different words and phrases. Instead of always carrying in the body in verse 10, he says in verse 11, "We who live are always being given over." Instead of in our bodies, at the end of verse 10, now he says in verse 11 in our mortal flesh. You say, thanks for the observation exercise, okay what's the point? So glad you asked. Mortal flesh, mortal is in contrast to immortality. Immortality means never dying. Mortality means one day we'll die. What animates our mortal bodies right now is called the *psuche*. We normally translate that word *psuche* with the word, soul.

The *psuche* is the animating principle of our mortal physical life. Such that when we die it's the *psuche* that leaves the body. Paul's enemies thought that by taking that *psuche* they

were able to, at the same time, destroy the life of Jesus within Paul. But the word for life in that phrase, life of Jesus, it's not *psuche*. It's not that which animates the body, the physical body, the mortal body, it's *zoe*, that which gives life to the whole of man, body and soul. *Zoe* animates the life of man, the composite life of man. Paul uses that word *zoe* four times in verses 10-12. Twice in that repeated phrase the life of Jesus, *zoe* of Jesus, once in verse 10 again in verse 11. And then in verse 12 the phrase is life, or *zoe* in you.

But going back to verse 11 Paul refers to himself and his companions as, "We who live." It's a participle there, "We," comma, "the living ones." *Hoi zontes*, again it's the word *zoe*. We are the ones who have that spiritual life as the animating principle of us. We are therefore constantly living, continually living, and by the way, eternally living. No longer mere *suche*, a physical life that explains us, it's not the power of the *suche* that sustains us, it's spiritual life. It's divine life, it's eternal life that inhabits us. And this *zoe* is untouchable, it's beyond the reach of physical death and that's why killing them won't help. For the unbeliever, they have no *zoe*.

All they have is *psuche* that animates them. So when you kill them, take away the *psuche*, they're dead that's it. For us, having granted *zoe* from God, you take away the *psuche* that *psuche* is going to return because God has given us *zoe*. *Zoe* refers to spiritual life, divine life, that *zoe* is actually the essence of God himself. He is called the living God. That spiritual, divine, eternal life, the very essence of God, not only made manifest to Paul and his associates, it's what they carried around within them. They didn't just see it externally, they had it internally, they carried it with them. God uses suffering Christians to carry that spiritual life to others and he uses dying Christians with bodies subject to mortality as beacons of light.

So let it encourage you, when you step out in faith, when you're obedient to preach the Gospel to others, when you suffer for it, when you're mistreated, when you're shunned, when you're cancelled, deplatformed, when you lose your job, when you lose relationships because of Christ. Let it encourage you that they're not reacting against you, the vessel; they're reacting against what's revealed in you, the life of Jesus within you. Leads to another encouragement. The unbelieving world, they



manage to snuff out the *psuche* of Jesus Christ on the cross, for a time, three days, but they couldn't touch the *zoe*. The real power that animated Christ. The divine life that could never die.

And so, according to the will of God, who raised him from the dead, his *psuche* returned to him. The divine life could never die. How do we know that? Not only did God raise him from the dead, but that same life, that same principle, showed up again in the apostle Paul, all of his companions, and when they snuffed out, finally, the *psuche* of Paul, when they severed his head from his body, like his Lord Jesus before him, they couldn't touch the *zoe*, the true principle that made Paul alive.

The real power that animated him, that explained him, divine life. Now how do we know that, because the *zoe* shows up again in you and me. In all Christians of all ages who read these words and find life, that principle of eternal life is evident, manifest, in the pages of Scripture; as we believe it, as we embrace it, as we obey it, we see that principle animating us. That's what Paul meant as he summarizes his point in verse 12. "So, death is at work," it energizes, "in us, in our mortal flesh, but life," energizes, "in you." Life animates you.

Strengthens you. It's what explains you. That's the principle of death that leads to life. That's the paradox Jesus gave in John 12:24, "truly, truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bares much fruit."

The *psuche* may die, when it does, the *zoe*, the life of Jesus, evident in we who are the living ones, that life lives on and produces more fruit. Isn't that what you want in your life? It's what I want in my life. I don't want the grain of wheat in me to go into the ground, die, and nothing happens. No fruit. I want to see my life in suffering. Held faithful by God's grace. In dying, shining brightly by God's grace. I want it to produce more and more fruit.