Treasure in Jars of Clay Jan. 2, 2022
1 of 3 in *A Reflective Pause* 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Good morning, and Happy New Year!

As we begin our first sermon of 2022, I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome four new staff members who are just starting with us.

The first is someone most of you already know, and whose ministry you're used to being blessed by. Kristy Bhagat is now Cornerstone's new Interim Worship Director!

Next is another person many of you already know. Mymy Leung, who has been a member of Cornerstone for many years, has become our Welcome and Community Engagement Director!

Next, in the year ahead, one of our top priorities will be to invest in our Young Adults Ministry. As vital step in that direction, we have hired a Young Adults Pastor. Everyone, meet Keegan Kalideen!

We also have a new Facility Manager who we're really looking forward to working with. Her name is Marie Walker!

So at this time, why don't you all go ahead and give Kristy, Mymy, Keegan and Marie a warm Cornerstone welcome by clicking the "Welcome New Staff!" button in the chat.

We're so grateful for our staff team here at Cornerstone, both past and present, new and not-so-new.

Leading up to our recent hires, there have of course been several interviews to conduct, and lots resumes to review.

And most of those resumes included the usual things that come with a resume—education and employment histories, references and cover letters— applicants highlighting their aptitudes and strengths. Because that's how a resume works, right?

What you *don't* want to mention in a resume are your weaknesses. Although in job interviews, it's not uncommon for an employer to ask a candidate, "What's your greatest weakness?" You know what the standard answer to that question is, don't you?

> "Well, my greatest weakness is that I work too hard."

But as an article I read on the subject puts it:

> One thing you must never do [on a resume or in a job interview] is reveal a real weakness. Because however much employers may pretend otherwise, they aren't interest in fallibility. It unsettles them. It inserts a worm of doubt… They may ask about weakness, but all they really want is reassuring strength.

In the New Testament, however, you'll find that the Apostle Paul doesn't follow such advice. In fact, he goes in the opposite direction. When people from the church in Corinth were questioning the leadership credentials of Paul and his partners in ministry, he responded by offering a "resume" of their qualifications, so to speak. Except it wasn't a resume of their strengths. It was a resume of their weaknesses, of their hardships and difficulties.

Please follow along as I read from 2 Corinthians chapter 4, starting in verse 7:

> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.
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> It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.
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> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

We're beginning 2022 with a three-part series called *A Reflective Pause*, and it's based on the passage we just read. I'll be sharing today, Pastor Andrew will be joining me next Sunday for an Executive Team conversation, and the week after that, we'll hear from a few of our staff members who will share their reflections on the past couple years of ministry.

Because *so much* has happened over the past couple of years— hard things as well as wonderful things— for the church, for its ministries, and for so many of you personally.

To borrow Paul's words in these challenging COVID times, haven't we often felt like fragile jars of clay, prone to crack? And yet, like Paul, it is in the very midst of our weakness that we best experience the unspeakable treasure of Christ's presence within us, and God's all-surpassing power working through us, in spite of the challenges.

This is the very perspective that will both strengthen us in the present, and also prepare us to move into 2022 and the years beyond it. So in the time that remains, we're going to drill down on that perspective further by looking at three points of emphasis in the passage we just read. First, Paul honestly acknowledges:

1. The reality of suffering. [7:40]

Now I imagine some of you hear that and are thinking, "Nice New Year's sermon, Steve. *The reality of suffering.* So hopeful." Don't worry, okay? We'll get to hope later—in a big way—because Paul certainly does.

But a year ago, remember how people all over the world were so eager to leave a dark and difficult 2020 behind them? Surely, 2021 would be so much better, right? The pandemic would surely come to an end, things would surely get back to normal, and we would surely enjoy it to the max.

How did that work out?

As one of your pastors I cannot in good conscience stand before you and declare that 2022 is sure to be so much better and easier than 2021. But as followers of Jesus, you and I are not called to pin our hopes on the way circumstances may or may not pan out. Our hope and strength is to be found in Christ alone, at all times, regardless of circumstances. Amen?

So, Paul speaks of the reality of suffering. This point can be made quite briefly, because Paul mentions it briefly. He does so in verse 16, where he writes:

> Though outwardly, we are wasting away…

What does he mean by this?

Paul's talking about how on this side of Christ's second coming, everything in this world is steadily, irreversibly, falling apart or wearing away.

As you age, your body, your physical attractiveness, your skills and mental acuity wear away. Your relationships wear away, through time and circumstance, deterioration of health and inevitably death. I watch my elderly father, who's 95, wear away a little more each year.

Paul is saying that everything about this present life is like a wave on the sand. The moment you experience it, it starts to pull away, to recede from you.

"Outwardly, we are wasting away," says Paul, and he says this as just a passing comment. He mentions it briefly, with no further elaboration, and then he moves on with the rest of what he has to say. Why?

It's because Paul knew that everyone in *his* world—all the original readers of his letters—understood this all too well.

What was commonly understood not only in Paul's day—but in virtually all societies and cultures throughout history—is not very well understood by many in our society today.

We're the first culture in world history that is surprised by suffering, as if it's some strange anomaly. And this is evident in the way many people are responding to this pandemic.

But Paul is telling us that in this fallen world, suffering is a reality, so don't be so surprised by it. Like a wave on the sand, everything is receding from us even as we speak… *unless*. Unless what? That question brings us to the second point, which is about:

2. The pattern of Christian suffering.

As I mentioned before, the letter of 2 Corinthians is written to a church where Paul's authority and credentials as an apostle were being questioned. The main reason why people were questioning his leadership had to do with the fact that Paul went through what seemed like an inordinate number of hardships in his life and ministry.

And so some Corinthian Christians wondered, "How can this guy be an apostle and have so many problems? Because if God is with you, he protects you from stuff like that. If God is with you, you prosper, and your life should be relatively smooth sailing. I mean, if Paul were a real apostle, so many bad things wouldn't happen to the dude."

This way of thinking is also found in the Old Testament, in the book of Job. When the bottom dropped about of Job's life, what did his friends say? Basically they said, "Job, if God is really with you and for you, why are all these bad things happening to you?"

Have you ever asked yourself that question during an especially difficult season of your life? Maybe you're in such a season right now. Many people are. If you are, will you be honest enough click the button in the chat that says, "I'm in a difficult season"?

When he wrote 2 Corinthians, Paul was most certainly in a difficult season. But he argues his that own sufferings, although harsh, in no way led him to question or deny God's presence and work in his life. On the contrary, he wrote about how his sufferings served to *confirm* God's presence and work in his life. This is because of the pattern of Christian suffering, which Paul describes in verses 10-12:

> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. [1]

Paul is saying that Jesus' life becomes a template for our own. That's the pattern of Christian suffering. Humiliation leads to exaltation. Crucifixion leads to resurrection. Death leads to life!

When Paul says, "Death is at work in us," it's a metaphor for all our sufferings. And somehow, out of these little deaths, the resurrection life of Jesus can spring forth. How?

We can put it this way: **Faithful suffering for Christ's sake leads to greater life in us, and in those around us.**

Let's consider first how it leads to greater life in those around us. When Paul says, "Death working in me leads to life working in you," it means that his own faithful suffering for Christ's sake results in greater life for the people he ministers to—in this case, for the people of Corinth. Because of Paul's faithful suffering for Christ's sake, people were hearing the gospel; people were finding new life in Jesus; churches were being planted.

To follow Jesus faithfully is going to cost us, but it's also going to lead to new life for others. As Paul says in verse 15, all this happens:

[1] 2 Corinthians 4:10-12 (NIV)

> … so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. [2]

But that's not all. While Paul doesn't speak of it so much in this passage, in Romans 5, he says:

> We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. [3]

What does Paul mean? He means that the little deaths I experience as I follow Jesus also lead to resurrections of the life and strength of Jesus *in me*. As the text says, our faithful sufferings for Christ's sake produce in us endurance, strength of character, confident hope, and hearts filled with God's love.

If you could use a whole lot more of all of *that* in your life, go ahead and type AMEN into the chat.

A massive oak tree emerges from just one little acorn. And every oak tree brings forth more acorns. In this way, a single acorn contains the potential to forest an entire continent! But not unless it dies. As Jesus would say, not unless it falls into the ground and dies, will its life-giving potential be released. [4]

Guess what? As a person made in God's image and being redeemed in the image of Jesus, you've got infinitely more potential than an acorn. You've got tremendous potential within you for growth in compassion, character, wisdom, fruitfulness in kingdom service, and above all Christ-like love. But it will not be released, say Jesus and Paul, except through the little deaths that come through your sufferings, difficulties, and trials.

Do you know what that means? It means that these difficult times we find ourselves in hold tremendous potential for our growth, both personally, and as a church. God will waste none of your sufferings. And that's actually really hopeful. I think it's the kind of New Year's message we most need in times like these.

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[2] 2 Corinthians 4:15 (NIV)
[3] Romans 5:3-5 (NLT)
[4] See John 12:24

And with an even greater crescendo of hope, Paul talks about:

3. The future of suffering.

In verse 14, he writes:

> … we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. [5]

Jesus' resurrection was a watershed moment in history. Because Jesus was raised bodily from the dead in actual historical fact, as Paul assumes here, then the central meaning and trajectory of history is that out of death comes life.

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, one day, when he returns to earth, all who put their trust in him will also be raised bodily from death, to live forever in God's presence in a restored creation— the new heavens and the new earth. At that time, as Christian mystic Julian of Norwich once put it: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Ultimately, everything's going to be alright, because resurrection— life coming out of death—is the defining story of all who believe, and of the whole creation.

And so, in his sufferings, Paul can say:

> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. [6]

What he means is this: When you're actually going through suffering, you often do feel crushed, in despair, abandoned and destroyed. But Paul could look back on his trials and see that all along—even at the lowest points— God had been sustaining him with a strength and a hope that refused to be extinguished.

And in light of that hope, Paul comes to this conclusion:

> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. [7]

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[5] 2 Corinthians 4:14 (NIV)
[6] 2 Corinthians 4:8 (NLT)
[7] 2 Corinthians 14:16-18 (NIV)

This is astonishing. Paul is saying not only that our future glory will immeasurably outweigh our present sufferings. He's saying that our present sufferings help to actually achieve that glory. Our sufferings today will only serve to increase our future joy and glory, far more than if we never suffered them at all.

And that is the ultimate defeat of evil. That is the ultimate undoing of all suffering.

Paul's whole point is that our future hope in Jesus is so astonishingly good that it gives us strength to endure today's troubles, and even to count them joy. As Tim Keller puts it, Christian hope does not accept, avoid or embrace suffering— it engulfs it. It absolutely undoes it.

So how do we respond to our sufferings? Paul says that we fix our eyes on that future hope in the new heavens and the new earth, in which our sufferings will be revealed as the servants of our eternal joy and fulfillment in the Lord.

That future is yet unseen, but in faith, we fix our eyes on that hope nevertheless. For what is seen is temporary. But what is unseen is eternal. In this sense, our unseen future is Christ is more real, more solid, more lasting, than any of our present sufferings.

The Lord's Supper

And now, let's prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper with further reflections from Paul in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 12, he speaks of his thorn in the flesh.

It's a metaphor for some kind of persistent affliction that had tortured Paul day in and day out. No one knows just exactly what Paul's so-called thorn in the flesh actually was, but we do know that Paul asked God three times to remove it, to take it away… and God said no.

Does that remind you of anyone? Facing not a thorn, but the cross—the weight of the world's sin soon to be laid upon him, and all the powers of hell soon to be unleashed against him—Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, "If it is possible, Father, may this cup of suffering pass from me." And God said no.

No, because God's life-giving resurrection power could only explode into this world through Christ's suffering. This is what Paul suddenly realizes in his own situation. If Jesus Christ could uncomplainingly submit to his infinite suffering for us, then we, with Jesus helping us—can endure our finite sufferings for him, knowing that ultimately, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

So we carry on, knowing that the same pattern that applied to Jesus' suffering also applies to ours. Through Jesus' weakness, God's life and power were released into our lives and into the world, and through our weakness, God's life and power continue to be released in us, and then from us into the world.

God would not take Paul's thorn away, but would give him sufficient grace to endure it for the sake of the gospel. "My grace is sufficient for you [God said] because my power is made perfect in weakness." And Paul responded, saying, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (see 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). A resume of weaknesses, indeed.

With that in mind, we remember our Lord, and how on the night he was betrayed…