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 2 Corinthians 4:7-15
 Sixth Message
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THE NEW COVENANT: POWER PERFECTED IN WEAKNESS

Our daughter is a graduating senior at Lynbrook High School, so for the last few months, choosing a college has been foremost in our minds. Yesterday, May 1st, was the deadline for seniors to submit their intent to register with the college of their choice. For many of them, this was one of the most difficult decisions they've had to make their entire lives. What do they base their choice on? The school colors? The look and feel of the campus? The ranking of the college from some survey? How far away can they get from home? For some students, their parents tell them they must choose an Ivy League school because of prestige and name; it will look good in their resume. But what is really important? Will the student like the school? How nurturing is the environment? What is the Christian community like? We've encouraged our daughter to consider schools that may look unremarkable, but may be a fantastic choice for her. We want her to value what may be intangible or hidden, not to be only impressed with the fame or prestige.

In many ways, all of us face choices in which we need to look beneath the exterior, to realize what is hidden inside may be more important than what is seen on the outside. The apostle Paul is teaching the Corinthians this very principle in 2 Corinthians. There were false teachers in Corinth who were prestigious, with good reputations and letters of recommendation. Compared to them, Paul was unremarkable. He was not impressive in stature or in speech, and he was often in jail, in trouble with authorities. Yet his life exhibited integrity and incredible power. Despite his apparent weakness and inadequacies on the surface, Paul was always confident and joyful on the inside. How did he explain this? What is the source of power beneath the unremarkable exterior? The source and working out of God's power, Paul tells us, happens through the weakness and struggles of a Christian, not through strength or victory. This is one of the most wonderful and remarkable truths of the New Covenant: power is perfected in weakness. This is Paul's lesson for us in 2 Corinthians 4:7-15.

Who Are We?

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Cor 4:7 NIV)

Paul begins his explanation by recognizing that he is a humble, simple earthenware vessel or jar of clay. A clay jar is weak and unimpressive. It is not a very complementary view of ourselves, but it is accurate. All of us come from the same "stuff."

We are all made of the same brown clay from the ground. We may have different exteriors: some of us may be fragile china ware, while some may be tough terra-cotta pots. Some of us may be visible, like everyday dishes, while others serve in the background, like storage pots in the pantry. Tough or fragile, rough or smooth, we are all made of the same unflattering clay, put into the hands of the Potter. We are made to serve a purpose: to be a vessel, to hold and display something, or more accurately, Someone. And as clay jars, we are weak and will crack under pressure—and that's okay! When we have cracks, holes or breaks, then the "treasure" inside us will shine forth even more, even brighter.

The Treasure Within

What is this treasure, and how can we be intentionally conscious of it in our daily lives? From the immediately preceding verses of chapter 4, we find references to several aspects of this "treasure." In 4:4, Paul refers to it as "the light of the gospel of the glory of God." This gospel is the Good News of Jesus Christ: his life, death, and resurrection. It is a beautiful, priceless treasure we can't wait to share with others!

In 4:6, Paul refers to "the glory of God in the face of Christ." This means that our faces will reflect the face of Christ. Perhaps we don't feel like we accurately display Christ in our lives right now, but Paul says that becoming Christlike is a lifelong process of transformation. He writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "we are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory..." In time, this transformation will become apparent and glorious. This treasure is the hope of glory that we will have as we become conformed to the image of Christ through the working of the Spirit.

Finally, in today's passage in 2 Cor 4:7, Paul calls this treasure the surpassing, transcendent power of God. This is the aspect of the treasure that we want to focus on today. This power enables us to face trials with faith and hope, exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit.

How the Power Is Worked Out

How is the power worked out and displayed? In Paul's life, is this power displayed in a victorious battle in which all enemies are vanquished and he emerges triumphant? Not at all! He says the power is displayed when he is beaten down.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (4:8-9)

Paul faced much suffering and hardship in his journey as a Christian. He had been stoned, lashed, beaten and shipwrecked (2 Cor 11:24-26). He has endured much more than most of us have ever suffered. Yet, how did he view his life? Where was he on the “stress-meter” of life? Was he stressed out “to the max” each time? Paul says that in retrospect, he was never 100% stressed out; he was not at the end of his rope, nor at the point of hopelessness. The four parallel descriptions in verses 8-9 are beautifully balanced to illustrate that the apostle always had hope in every situation. In each case, he compares one suffering with another more intense suffering, contrasted by the phrase “but not.” Certainly, some of his trials did drive him to despair, as he says in 2 Cor 1:8-9: “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.”

Indeed, Paul admits he did despair and felt he was not going to survive. In retrospect, however, he says that the affliction was not extreme. For him, the situation was never hopeless, no matter how bad it felt as he was going through it.

I myself have gone through a deeply humiliating experience in which a co-worker of mine destroyed my reputation and “trashed” me in front of management and team members. I thought my career was over. I had no hope of raising my head in that company ever again. In hindsight, however, I realized that the “career death” I faced was not completely disastrous, not hopeless. In fact, something good did result from this confrontation, and I will relate it to you later.

Where are you today on your “stress meter” of life? Do you feel hopeless or at the end of your rope? Paul says that God’s power will not prevent stress, pain, agony or other “cracks” in our life. God’s power will help us to resist the pressure, to not crumble completely. Therefore, let me suggest that when we face trials, we pray not that God would deliver us from the pressure. Instead, we pray that we have the strength to bear that pressure without compromise. We have the assurance that enduring the pain will ultimately bring life to us. Moreover, this “momentary affliction” will bring life to those around us as well, as Paul explains in the next section.

Death Unto Life

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 be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (4:10-12)

Three times Paul uses the word “death” in this passage. The “death” of Jesus conjures for me the shocking images of the movie “The Passion of the Christ.” We will never experience that kind of torture and beating that Our Lord suffered on our behalf. But we do walk through terribly painful experiences that leave indelible marks on us. Some of us carry in our bodies the physical pain of cancer or other illness. We may

experience the emotional pain of the death of a parent, spouse or child. Some of us face broken marriage; our home may be facing foreclosure; our finances have dwindled. In each case, we feel part of us is dying. Are we willing endure these sufferings or “deaths” for the sake of Jesus?

Perhaps you have not experienced these afflictions in your life. Some of you may be asking, Does this apply to me? Do I need to experience the “death” of Jesus in this manner in order to be an authentic follower of Christ? Those are good questions. I have asked them of myself. I believe “dying” can occur more subtly in my own attitude: dying to self. Am I willing to give up what is most important in my life, like my family, satisfaction of a prominent career, or status and accolades of social position? Am I able to renounce the hidden sin or addiction, pride or self-dependence? Am I willing to die to my own worldly desires for Jesus’ sake, to carry in my body “the death of Jesus” in this more subtle way?

Being given over to this “death” results in life. Paul uses this word three times in these verses—life of Jesus, his life, life at work. What is the “life of Jesus” to you? How did he live as he faced trials and disappointments? He displayed compassion, character, calmness and trust in God in every confrontation, every angry mob, every impossible situation. We all want to live in that way, don’t we? We want that serenity of spirit and that trust in the Father in every circumstance we face. We want the life of Christ to be revealed in our lives, but we want that life without having to suffer through death.

Paul is saying that the life of Christ must flow from the dying of Christ. Jesus had to go to his death, willingly giving up everything. He gave up his deity, his humanity, and most excruciatingly, the intimacy with his Father as all the sins of the world were laid upon him. He gave up everything while trusting God would bring it all back in a way that is redemptive and beyond anyone’s expectation.

That is exactly the model for us as well. We must be willing to give up fame and fortune, comfort and security. We must be willing to let go of everything to trust God that in his timing and in his way, he will bring it back to us. He will make our life significant for his kingdom in a way that we may not understand right now, living this side of heaven. Suffering produces life, and this life will make a difference for God’s kingdom.

Furthermore, not only will you receive life for yourself, you will see life energized in others as well. As we endure our afflictions and suffering confidently and blamelessly, others will see the life of Christ revealed, and life will be spread to them. My example at work illustrates this point. I received the abuse and humiliation from my co-worker yet did not strike back at him. A colleague approached me afterward and asked me how I was able to control myself, and what was in me that enabled me to behave with integrity and serenity. I gladly told him what was in me—more accurately WHO was in me—that gave me this power. The power inside was not from me, but from God!

This led to a discussion of spiritual matters that ended up in his joining a Bible Study with me.

The lessons Paul has for us in these three verses are:

1. Endure the pressures, pains and sufferings, drawing on God's surpassing power to display integrity and character.
2. Others may see, wonder and believe.

Paul summarizes this lesson in 2 Timothy 2:10: "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory."

The Power Exercised Through Speaking

How do we exercise the power of God so that we bring life to others? The answer, Paul tells us in vv 13-15, is by speaking.

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With 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 in his presence. 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. (4:13-15).

Paul quotes Ps 116:10, "I believed; therefore I said." The psalmist was suffering a terrible ordeal in which he feared for his life. Even though he could not see deliverance, he is confident that God will save him. Therefore the psalmist speaks out confidently "I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people" (116:14). Paul invites us to have that same spirit, to speak and give testimony. As a result of our witness, grace reaches more and more people; salvation spreads to others around us. Finally, as people see life resurrected from a lifeless community, they will give thanksgiving and glory to God!

Are you willing to speak honestly and share transparently? Our society does not encourage us to talk about divorce, infertility, adoption, illness, death and addiction. But here in the family of God, we are moved and blessed by your testimony of humility and God's moving in your life. So I encourage you to share in Body Life at church, in small groups, or in another community in which God has placed you. This afternoon, a baptism is scheduled. I look forward to hearing how God met each person being baptized. Come and be blessed by the testimonies! And tonight, at the King City Memory Night, you'll hear how God changed the lives of kids and parents in King City, how he impacted our high schoolers and staff. They will speak, grace will be spread to you and me, and we'll give thanksgiving and glory to God! So come back later today and experience what happens when we believe and we speak.

Power of the Resurrection

What do we believe in? Verse 14 proclaims that we believe in the power that raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. This is Resurrection Power! This is the treasure that is stored within the jars of clay that is our lives; this is God's transcendent pow-

er that can bring life from the lifeless, victory from apparent defeat. Ray Stedman describes this power in his book *Body Life*:

We must understand that resurrection power is like no other power on earth. It is unique, and has no possible rival. For one thing, it is the kind of power that operates in the midst of death. It works when everything around it is dull, dead and barren. It works best in the midst of a cemetery, for that is where it was first demonstrated. When Jesus Christ was resurrected he came out from among the dead. Therefore, if you learn to live by resurrection power you can be alive and vital when everything and everyone around you is dead and lifeless.¹

Your Response

If you are not yet a follower of Christ, do you desire this life of Jesus? Do you want this resurrected life in you, to bring vitality into a dull and barren world? The good news is that Jesus can give you this power and life to be lived fully right now and for eternity. All it takes is for you to accept him as Lord and Savior personally.

Are you a believer but feel that life is desperate, broken and hopeless? This lesson is for you as well. Life as a follower of Christ will have trials, suffering and pain, and we as vessels will crack and break. Yet we know that God's strength and resurrection power is displayed in our weakness as we reflect the character of Christ in the midst our trials. Let us be transparent and share our brokenness. We will receive life and bring life to others.

Sharing

I want to share how one brother's suffering and sharing has brought life to many in the Men of Tuesday lunch Bible study. This brother's life is an incredible testimony to the resurrection power of God in the midst of brokenness. Neil comes from a Jewish family—traditional, but more cultural than orthodox religious. He is a smart man, having earned a degree from Carnegie Mellon and a law degree from Loyola Marymount. After his law degree, Neil accepted Jesus into his life and vowed to use his gifts for God's kingdom. He willingly gave up a lucrative career in law and worked for Christian missions organizations, becoming at one point an editor for US Center for World Mission. Some years ago, Neil moved up to the Bay Area. While he lived in San Francisco, he began to attend a Bible Study in a rough neighborhood in Oakland.

One day in June, 2004, Neil took the bus to Oakland and walked to his Bible Study. On the way there he was brutally assaulted, mugged and left for dead on the sidewalk. He was beaten so badly that he remained in a coma for over a week. Doctors gave up hope on him and doubted he would survive. But as Neil tells it, Jesus did not let him die. God resurrected him after nine days of coma. Neil was alive, but the beating severely traumatized his brain. He lost the ability to read, to speak, or even to think clearly. Neil literally carried in his body the scars, the dying of Christ, each and every day. But by God's

grace, Neil's mental capacity slowly returned over weeks and months and years. His memory was miraculously restored, and he learned to function in society once more. He is speaking again, slowly, hesitantly, but improving all the time. He currently works in the Santa Clara Library System, amidst the books and words that he loved so much. For Neil, prior to the attack, words were his life; his study of law and his work as an editor all revolved around words. Now, he finds it difficult to grasp words and express himself. How ironic, tragic and heart wrenching!

Yet Neil's vitality and love of Jesus is evident every time we meet on Tuesday. He continues to witness to his Jewish family, reconciling with his brothers and sister. He wants to tell others how much Jesus means to him. His questions and sharing teach all of us the resurrection power of God in earthen vessels like him, and like us.

I want to invite Neil to come up to the platform to share one vignette in his life since "Jesus brought him back from the dead." One year after the brutal attack, Neil had to go back to Oakland, this time to go to court to face his attacker. He had the chance to see the very person who destroyed his intellect, his speech, everything of worldly value in his life. He met the brutal attacker face to face in court. What did he do?

(Sharing from Neil)

I wanted to meet this gentleman; he was now 17. I had a chance at court to talk to him, and I had spent maybe one or two weeks thinking about what I wanted to say to him. I wanted to tell him, the main thing is that he needs to know Jesus. I told him that what he did was a bad thing, but that Jesus forgave him and I forgave him for what happened. I just let him know, "you just need Jesus, you need Jesus in your life."

Life now is still very difficult for Neil. The trauma has left him with seizures and other disabilities. He has had bouts of depression in the last three years. He even contemplated suicide. He needs our support and friendship, and he needs our prayers. I want to invite any in our body today who have been at Men of Tuesday lunch, who know Neil's story, to join me on the platform as we pray for our dear brother. I close by paraphrasing selections from our passage in 2 Corinthians 4, reading it from Neil's perspective:

I am hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. I always carry around in my body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in my body. So then, death is at work in me, but life is at work in you.

But the Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 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. (2 Cor 12:9-10)

¹ Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, Regal Books Division, 1973), pp. 64, 65. Revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1995), pp. 91, 92.

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