

Only the Weak Survive: Gospel Treasure in Earthen Vessels

2 Corinthians 4:7–12

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Introduction

What makes a minister of the Gospel successful? How would you picture a successful Christian pastor? What does he look like? What image comes to mind as I ask that question? Conventional wisdom in the evangelical subculture seems to paint the following picture in response to that question. A successful pastor is an attractive, well-built, well-dressed, well-groomed young man, who is an excellent communicator. He exudes charisma; people are just drawn to him and love to follow after him. He's an inspiring vision-caster who really knows how to hone the power of words to motivate his followers. Because of this, his church numbers in the thousands. He has a far-reaching multi-media ministry that is brimming with the utmost professionalism. He's written a number of books and always has several book deals waiting in the wings; he's invited to speak at all the major evangelical conferences; and he probably has a blog on The Gospel Coalition website. His beautiful wife loves him, his adorable, saved kids love him, his local church loves him, and the church-at-large loves him. He is the picture of ministerial success.

And what about the successful Christian minister who's not a pastor? What does he look like? After all, as we've been saying for a while now, it's not just pastors who are called to ministry. All of us who have been made partakers of the New Covenant are ministers of that New Covenant. So what does success look like for the New Covenant minister—for the church member who is eager to be involved in ministry as a layperson? Well again, if you queried the infinite wisdom of contemporary evangelicalism, you'd think of someone young and vivacious, energetic, attractive, married with believing, obedient children. You'd think of someone with a very pleasant personality, who's faithfully in church every week, fellowship group every week, Bible study every other week. You'd think of someone who was intelligent, well-educated, has a pretty good job, and does a pretty good job at his job, and yet still has time to read *Your Family, God's Way* with his family and *Basics of Biblical Greek* in his own personal study. You think of someone with an excellent memory who can just recall Scripture verses at will, someone who is never fearful to share the Gospel with unbelievers, someone for whom anxiety and self-doubt seem absolutely foreign—someone for whom life just seems easy. His tie is always perfectly knotted, her hair is always perfectly coiffed, and their shoes are always shining.

And with those pictures of the successful servant of the Gospel in your mind, you look at yourself, and you get discouraged. You see, you know *your* weaknesses. With work, school, the house, the kids—all of your responsibilities—running on fumes seems to be a way of life. You

love the Lord and desire to serve Him, but you are all-too-familiar with the remaining sin that is still at home in your flesh. You love the Bible and love hearing good biblical teaching, but you still feel ignorant of so many key truths that you wish you had time to study more. Other people always seem to be able to quote the perfect Scripture passage at a moment's notice, but you can never remember the verse you're thinking of. And while you understand the importance of speaking the Gospel to your unbelieving friends and neighbors, you're constantly fearful of starting those conversations. And whenever you do preach the Gospel to people, it never seems to go well. You haven't had people falling at your knees asking what they must do to be saved. At least one of the kids always seems to be sick, work always seems to be demanding more time, and life is just a little crazy all the time. You do your best to be faithful, but you know that you're just an ordinary Christian. And you settle into the thought that if God is going to accomplish something of greatness or importance in the church, He's going to use one of those successful super-Christians we just spoke about. You think of your weakness as an obstacle to God's purposes.

And you'd be in good company. Or perhaps not *good* company, but *prolific* company. There'd be plenty of people in the first-century church of Corinth that would have agreed with you. But the Apostle Paul was not one of them.

You remember the scene. False apostles from Jerusalem have infiltrated the church, seeking to peddle their Judaizing heresy among the Corinthian believers. And in order to make way for their *false* teaching, they knew they were going to have to undermine Paul's teaching. But because Paul was teaching the Gospel—and you can't undermine the truth—these men attacked Paul himself, seeking to discredit Paul's character in the eyes of the Corinthians, even going so far as to question whether he even was a true apostle of Christ.

And so they launched every accusation they could possibly think of against the Apostle Paul—no matter how farcical, no matter petty, no matter how low of a blow it was; they were merciless. They accused him of trying to deceitfully take advantage of the Corinthians. They seized the opportunity to style Paul's change of travel plans as evidence that he was “purposing according to the flesh” (1:17)—of saying one thing and doing another in order to manipulate the church. They accused him of being uncredentialed. He lacked authority. After all, he was just this sort of Johnny-come-lately apostle who wasn't part of the original twelve. He had no letters of commendation. They accused him of embezzling the money he collected as church offerings. The real reason he was so concerned about taking a collection for the saints in Jerusalem was because he was pocketing the money himself!

But chief among the accusations that the false apostles leveled against Paul was that he suffered far too much to be a legitimate minister of the Gospel. Paul's life was a tale of one crushing conflict after another crushing conflict. He looked nothing like conventional wisdom's picture of

ministerial success. Paul has just spent a chapter-and-a-half extolling the unspeakable glories of the New Covenant—celebrating what an amazing privilege it is to be a minister of the Gospel. This is the ministry that is itself the aroma of life that leads to life (2:16). This is the ministry of the Spirit—the ministry of righteousness—the ministry that does not fade away (3:7–8)! The glory of this ministry is the very light of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Christ Himself who is the perfect image of God (2 Cor 4:4, 6)! And it is the light of this Gospel that shines into the sinner’s dead heart and begets within it the life of the Holy Spirit Himself (2 Cor 4:6)!

And the false apostles are saying to the Corinthians, “Right! The Gospel of Christ is glorious! But are you telling me that the glorious God who has given us that glorious Gospel has put His blessing upon Paul?! He is anything but glorious! He’s always getting beaten and stoned; he gets chased out of every city he goes into; he often doesn’t even have the bare necessities of life—he’s without food and water, poorly clothed, homeless, always staring death in the face. And besides all that, the man is just nobody special—” in 2 Corinthians 10:10 Paul reiterates one of their accusations. They said, “His personal presence is unimpressive and his speech [is] contemptible.” They sank so low that they ridiculed Paul’s personal appearance. He was unimpressive—underwhelming, not very charming or charismatic, certainly not good-looking. And for someone who claimed to be a public speaker, his speech was contemptible; he wasn’t a good orator; he had no rhetorical skills that would commend him as a great communicator. And they’re saying, “This man who claims to be entrusted with such a glorious ministry is the furthest thing from “glorious” that you could possibly imagine!”

And it’s that very objection that Paul answers in our passage for this morning. Let’s read 2 Corinthians 4, verses 7 to 12. “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death works in us, but life in you.”

Ever since chapter 2 verse 14, throughout the whole of chapter 3 and then the first six verses of chapter 4, the Apostle Paul has been carefully defining the nature of New Covenant ministry as a ministry that is inestimably glorious. But now he turns to define the key features of the New Covenant *minister*. And what we find is that there is a fundamental contrast between (a) the glory of the New Covenant *message*, and (b) the weakness, shame, and suffering of the New Covenant *messenger*. You see, so far from disqualifying us from New Covenant ministry—as the false apostles claimed, and as we are so often tempted to believe—this passage teaches us that our weaknesses are in fact essential to our ministry.

And to see that this morning, we're going to unfold this passage across **three units of thought**. First, we'll see a fundamental and orienting **principle** for Christian ministry. Second, we're going to examine two **paradoxes** of Christian ministry. And finally, we'll look at the **profit** of Christian ministry. The principle, the paradoxes, and the profit—all with the goal of understanding the proper relationship between (a) weakness and suffering and (b) the faithful Christian ministry.

I. The Principle (v. 7)

Well, let's look first at this fundamental and orienting **principle** for Christian ministry. We see it in the first part of verse 7. Paul says, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels." This orienting **principle** for Christian ministry is that there is a fundamentally disproportionate relationship between the glory of the New Covenant *message* and the glory of the New Covenant *messenger*. There is a fundamental contrast between the glory of the New Covenant ministry and the shame of the New Covenant minister.

And we see that by the word picture that Paul uses. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." The Gospel, dear friends, is a treasure. The glorious Good News of the New Covenant is absolutely priceless. Whereas the Old Covenant brought only death and condemnation, the New Covenant brings spiritual life and saving righteousness (2 Cor 3:7–8). Whereas the Old Covenant provided only limited access to the concealed glory of God, the New Covenant provides continual access to open-faced admiration of the glory of God shining in the face of Christ (2 Cor 3:12–18). Whereas the Law made nothing perfect (Heb 7:19) and only further aroused our sinful passions (Rom 7:7–11), the New Covenant brings inward transformation and conformity to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Whereas the Old Covenant was powerless to transform the heart of man, the Gospel of the glory of Christ shines into that dead heart, and the Holy Spirit Himself awakens the affections to hate sin and to love righteousness (2 Cor 4:4, 6). This Gospel is a treasure! But, verse 7, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. The way that God shows off the splendor of this treasure that is the Gospel, is to house it in the most humble, unremarkable, unimpressive containers.

Paul compares himself—and all of us who are ministers of the New Covenant—to earthen vessels. An "earthen vessel" was just a common clay pot or jar, and was the very quintessence of that which was ordinary, unremarkable, easily breakable, easily replaceable, and not attractive or valuable at all. One commentator said, "Earthen vessels had no enduring value, and were so cheap that when they were broken no one attempted to mend them. They simply discarded them. Broken glass was melted down to make new glass; an earthenware vessel, once hardened in a kiln, was non-recyclable" (Garland, 221). Another writer said, "No one took note of clay jars any more than we would of a fast-food container. They were simply there for convenience. It was no

great tragedy when such vessels were broken. They were cheap and easy to replace” (R. K. Hughes, 89).

This is what we are, friends. This is what the Christian minister *is*. We are not the fine china that people use to impress their dinner guests. We are the ordinary, unremarkable, fragile, expendable earthen vessels. We are not the high-powered, put-together, well-respected, perfectly-polished, cultural elite. Remember what Paul had already told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:26. He says, “Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things [*agenēs*, no birth] of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not [*ta mē onta*, the nobodies], so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.” And turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 4. In this passage, Paul comments on the role that even God’s choicest servants have in this world. 1 Corinthians 4, starting in verse 9: “For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.”

You know, after a long time of putting on our suits and ties and nice dresses, coming to this amazing facility that the Lord has blessed us with, living in this glorious Southern California climate, driving our comfortable cars, and being generally well-to-do people—it can become easy to forget that we are the nobodies, of no birth, the scum of the world, and the dregs of all things.

What an unbelievable contrast between the treasure of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, and the earthen vessel in which that treasure is housed! The container is worthless, but the contents are priceless. The Gospel is so glorious, but God has chosen to commit the priceless treasure of the Gospel message to weak, suffering, perishing men and women like you and me.

Now, why would He do such a thing? Why in the world would God choose such a disproportionately shameful medium to display this priceless treasure to the world? Look again at verse 7: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.” Can you behold the genius of divine wisdom here? God entrusts the priceless treasure of the Gospel to be borne by insignificant, frail, unattractive earthen vessels, so that when something amazing happens—when the Gospel does its work, and hearts are awakened and affections are renewed and wills are transformed, when

eyes are opened to treasure Jesus and the fragrance of Christ smells like *life*—there will be no doubt about who is responsible! There will be no doubt about where that kind of transforming power came from!

You see, God delights to use humble, weak, common people to proclaim His Gospel, because most fundamentally, God is committed to showcasing the beauty of His own glory! If He were to place the treasure of His Gospel in an ornate treasure chest decorated with precious stones, the glory of the container might compete with the glory of the content. But by committing the Gospel treasure to earthen vessels, He magnifies the brilliance and the beauty of the Gospel message by setting it against the backdrop of weak and suffering messengers. And so you see, the high-powered, wheeling-and-dealing, self-sufficient, gifted-communicator, professional-and-polished ministers actually *detract* from the glory and power of God in Gospel ministry, because when they see results, people wonder whether it was God’s power or their ingenuity that brought those results. But Paul has *nothing*! He is beaten, homeless, hungry, thirsty; he’s not attractive, he’s not eloquent, he’s not charming; he is the scum of the earth. Nobody is looking at him and saying, “Wow, it’s sure cool to be like Paul! Maybe *I* could be a Christian too!” And so when someone does turn from their sin and does put their trust in Christ, there is no question as to whose power is responsible!

So in the end, Paul’s response to the accusations of the false apostles—that Paul’s weaknesses and sufferings are so disproportionate to the glory of the New Covenant Gospel—his response is: “Yup. I am nothing special. I am anything but glorious. But so far from *disqualifying* me from being a true servant of Christ, my suffering and my weaknesses are the very badges of my apostolic authenticity! Because it is these very afflictions that become the means through which God reveals the abundance of His divine power.” Dear friends, human weakness is the black backdrop for the brilliant display of the Spirit’s power. Human dishonor is the dark sky in which the dazzling stars of God’s glory shines forth. And it is in the shadowy gloom of Golgotha—of the suffering and shame of the cross—that makes the gleaming sun of Resurrection Sunday shine all the more brightly. And so true Christian ministry is not marked by the “glory” of worldly power and eloquence, by prestige and reputation, by financial success and freedom from conflict, but by the weakness and suffering of the cross.

And so I exhort you: flee from any conception of self-aggrandizement in Christian ministry! Don’t run from difficulty. Love your weakness! Love your powerlessness! Love your indignity! As you minister to the body of Christ, and things get difficult, and you feel overwhelmed, and you get tired, and frustrated, and drained—in those moments of weakness, remind yourself that you are exactly where God has designed for you to be. You are an earthen vessel, bearing the riches of the treasure of the Gospel, so that when God works through your frail and feeble efforts to make the Word of God effectual in the life of His people, your weakness will showcase the glory of God’s power, and there will be no doubt who the glory belongs to.

That is the orienting **principle** for Christian ministry that Paul teaches us in this text. There is a fundamental contrast between the glory and strength of the New Covenant *message* and the shame and weakness of the New Covenant *messenger*. And we need to embrace this **principle**—to be well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ’s sake. For when we are weak, then *He* is strong (cf. 2 Cor 12:9–10).

II. The Paradoxes (vv. 8–11)

Having laid out this principle of the contrast between the glory of the ministry and the weakness of the minister, Paul now turns to *illustrate* this principle by means of **two paradoxical truths** that characterize the Christian ministry. So, having examined the principle, we now turn our attention to the **paradoxes**.

A. Power in the Midst of Weakness (vv. 8–9)

And the first of those paradoxes has really been foreshadowed in verse 7. In verses 8 and 9 we have an illustration of the truth that the Christian ministry is marked by **power in the midst of weakness**. Look at verses 8 and 9. He says, “in everything afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” In what commentators have called “one of the more powerful rhetorical moments in the Pauline corpus” (Barnett, 233), Paul illustrates that this principle of power in the midst of weakness is fundamental to Christian ministry by means of four antitheses. In each first word, we see the weakness of the earthen vessel. And in each second word, we see the surpassing greatness of the power of God. Let’s look more closely at each pair.

First, he says, “We are *afflicted*.” *Thlibo*, from *thlipsis*. This word communicates the idea of being pressed, or of being under pressure. It is the most general term for describing any kind of distress or tribulation. I think the New King James renders this best by translating it, “We are hard pressed.” Paul endured pressure on every side. Everywhere he went, persecution and affliction pressed in on him. He says, back in chapter 1 verse 8, “We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our *affliction* which came to us in Asia, that we were *burdened excessively*, beyond our strength.” He was weighed down by the affliction—by the pressures that he faced because of his testimony about Christ. But, he says, we are not crushed. He might have been hard-pressed from every angle, but that pressure never crushed him. He might have been hemmed in, but he was never cornered. Because the power of God was active in preserving and delivering him, Paul always found a way of escape.

We see Paul afflicted in Corinth as outlined in Acts 18. In the midst of the kind of trials that resulted in personal comfort from the Lord Jesus Himself, Paul was dragged before the seat of

the Roman proconsul, and accused him of breaking Roman laws concerning worship. And I imagine Paul's back, wrists, and ankles began to tingle. Not fully healed from the last time, he started anticipating another beating and imprisonment. He began to feel the pressure of having to defend himself again. "But," says Acts 18:14, just "when Paul was about to open his mouth," the proconsul Gallio spoke up and dismissed the case out of hand. Paul was hard pressed, but not crushed. In his weakness, Paul was pressed with the prospect of another beating and imprisonment. But the Lord had worked, and by the surpassing greatness of His power, He provided a way out.

Second, Paul says, "We are perplexed." *Aporeō*. It means to be confused, to be bewildered, to be at a loss. Paul used this verb of himself in Galatians 4:20, where he tells the Galatians that he is perplexed about them; he is at a loss to understand how a church that had seemed to begin so soundly in the Gospel had become bewitched by the heresy of the Judaizers. As he experienced this daily concern for the health of all the churches, and as he experienced the opposition and the persecution in every city, Paul would just be at a loss to understand what God was doing or how he was going to get out of the predicament that he was in. But, he says, we are not despairing. And there is great wordplay going on here in the Greek: *aporeō*, but not *exaporeō*. Perplexed, confused, bewildered, at a loss, but never in a decisive state of despair—never losing all hope. Always ultimately confident and hopeful in the sovereign power of God. Commenting on this antithesis, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes wrote, "To be at the end of man's resources is not to be at the end of God's resources; on the contrary, it is to be precisely in the position best suited to prove and benefit from them, and to experience the surplus of the power of God breaking through and resolving the human dilemma" (139).

Third, Paul says, "We are persecuted, but not forsaken." Everywhere I go, I am hunted, chased down, and harassed by men. Five times whipped with 39 lashes, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, in dangers from rivers and robbers, from Jews and Gentiles, in the city and in the wilderness (2 Cor 11:23–26). If there was ever a word you could use to describe the Apostle Paul it was *persecuted*. But never forsaken. He was persecuted by men, but he was never abandoned by God. In Acts 16, Paul cast out the spirit of divination from the slave girl in Philippi whose masters were using her as a fortune teller. And because they lost their meal ticket, those men had Paul seized, charged, beaten and imprisoned. Paul was indeed persecuted. But of course, God had not forsaken him. You remember the story. God used Paul's impossible situation to put the surpassing greatness of His power on display. He sent a midnight earthquake to shake the foundations of the prison. All the doors flung open and everyone's chains fell off (Acts 16:26). And when the jailer saw such a miraculous display of divine power, he fell at Paul and Silas' feet and turned to Christ.

There is an illustration of ministry! Go to jail! Be absolutely helpless and dependent on the power of God! Pray and sing hymns, and watch God *show up* and save people! The jailer didn't

look at Paul and say, “Man, that guy’s got it all together! Look at how blessed he is! Look at how healthy and wealthy and favored! I’d like some of that blessing, I think I’ll become a Christian!” No! In the minister’s *abject helplessness*, God showed up and displayed His surpassing power. Who gets the glory for the jailer’s conversion? God alone. Because in his weakness, the earthen vessel could *never* compete with the glory of the treasure! Marvel at the genius of divine grace!

Finally, Paul says, “We are struck down.” *Kataballō*. Literally, “to throw down.” Paul uses this word in a technical sense that it acquired from athletic and military contexts. In wrestling, it referred to being thrown to the mat. In boxing, it referred to being knocked down to the canvas. In battle, it referred to being knocked to the ground by enemy forces. Paul was often struck down, but he was never destroyed. I think the boxing metaphor captures this the best. There were countless times that Paul was knocked *down*, but because God’s power is perfected in weakness, he was never knocked *out*. There are no TKOs in the squared circle of Christian ministry. In Acts 14, the Jews came down from Antioch and Iconium to where Paul was preaching in Lystra. They started a riot among the crowds and had Paul stoned! Paul was struck down—to the point that the crowd dragged him outside of the city and left him for dead! But he was not destroyed. Acts 14:20 says, “But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city.”

How about *that* for missionary strategy! Preach the Gospel, and get knocked unconscious by an angry mob throwing rocks at you! See, the ministry-gurus who had infiltrated the church saw Paul get stoned and said, “How could you conclude anything other than that this guy is under divine judgment!” But when Paul just got up and walked away afterwards (!) was there any doubt where the power of his ministry came from? It’s brilliant! God has specifically designed that His messengers be weak, so He can show off His power—His treasure—in the Gospel message.

And this kind of suffering—this kind of weakness—this was not some sort of anomaly in Paul’s ministry; it was not an occasional experience. Each of these participles is in the present tense, which speaks of continuous action. At the beginning of verse 8, Paul prefaces all four of these antitheses with the phrase, “in everything.” In verse 10, Paul will say that he *always* carries about in his body the dying of Jesus. In verse 11 he says he is *constantly* being delivered over to death. Friends, suffering is the business of Christian ministry!

Now, it’s true that the great majority of us won’t suffer in the precise ways that Paul suffers. But when you are doing the hard work of laboring with someone in their sanctification, pleading with them and strengthening their hands to put off sin and put on righteousness, there will be times when you’re perplexed, bewildered, at a loss as to how to move forward profitably. When you’re serving people who are difficult to serve, there will be times when you feel the pressures rush in from every angle. And when these dear brothers and sisters you’re ministering to, whom you love—when they turn on you, and in order to nurture their flesh and protect their sin accuse you

of prying into their business, or—on the opposite end—accuse you of not caring enough—friends whom you could never imagine speaking to you that way!—you’re going to feel like you just took a shot to the gut that knocked you straight to the mat. And in those moments, don’t you dare give up! In those moments, you recognize that you are right in the middle of fulfilling your calling to be a minister of the New Covenant in the body of Christ! Recognize, that it is only against the backdrop *of* those pressures, *in* your perplexity, *in* your weakness, that God is able to *show up*, and through the ministry of the Word which you’re speaking, able to display the surpassing greatness of the glory of His divine power.

So don’t waste the suffering that you experience in ministry. Receive those trials and difficulties as opportunities sent from God to make Himself look glorious and powerful. The nature of the Christian’s life of ministry is not health, wealth, and prosperity—not conflict-free mountain peaks of success after success. No, God displays His **power in the midst of weakness**.

B. Life in the Midst of Death (vv. 10–11)

And that brings us to a **second paradox** that characterizes the Christian ministry. Not only is Christian ministry characterized by power in the midst of weakness. It is also characterized by **life in the midst of death**. Look at verses 10 and 11. Paul says, we are “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

Now, we have here two parallel sentences; verse 11 says the exact same thing as verse 10, just stated slightly differently. And the two verses together form a theological interpretation and summary of those four contrasts in verses 8 and 9. Paul summarizes being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down and calls them “the dying of Jesus” and “being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake.” And he summarizes not being crushed, in despair, forsaken, and destroyed as “the life of Jesus.”

Now in that phrase, “the dying of Jesus,” Paul uses an unusual word for “dying.” It’s not *thanatos*, which speaks of “death” considered as a completed event. He uses the word *nekrōsis*, which we have borrowed and transliterated in English. In English, *necrosis* is a medical term that refers to the dying of organ or tissue cells. If your skin is *necrotic* it means that your cells are in the process of dying. The same was true in Greek. *Nekrōsis* communicates more the *process* of dying, rather than the single event of death itself. So when Paul says that he’s “always carrying about in the body the *dying* of Jesus,” he’s not referring to the moment Jesus took His last breath on the cross. He’s speaking of the daily trials and hardships that the Lord Jesus Himself suffered during His earthly ministry. Paul is saying, “When I am afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and

struck down in the course of my ministry—when I suffer for the cause of the Gospel—I bear in my body and display to the world the very sufferings of Christ Himself.”

Grasp the significance of that! The false apostles are looking at Paul’s sufferings and saying, “There’s no way he can be blessed of God and face so much conflict! No one sent from Christ could possibly be confronted with that much suffering and weakness and difficulty!” Do you hear it? They’re saying that he can’t be identified with Jesus because he suffered so much. And he says that *those very sufferings* are precisely what identify him with Jesus!

And it’s here that we recognize the *height* of the absurdity of the false apostles’ “health, wealth, and prosperity” model for ministry! the height of the stupidity of the “professionalized, corporate-success” model for ministry! If suffering and weakness disqualify you from ministry, what do these charlatans think of Jesus?! He certainly didn’t enjoy the finer comforts of earthly life! Paul’s argument is basically to point to Jesus and say, “The world hated my Master, and now they hates His slaves.” And that’s exactly what He said would happen, right? John 15:19: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world . . . the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”

You see, the same high-powered, cultural elite, ministry gurus who style success in ministry as a function of a minister’s popularity, and look down on those who are suffering and weak and mired in difficulty—these people would have thought *Jesus’* personal presence was unimpressive, and *His* speech contemptible! Paul is only following in the footsteps of his Master. And if the Master was treated so contemptuously as to be mocked, spit on, beaten, and crucified, what makes the *slaves* think we should have it any better, or that our lives would not be a continual crucifixion—a living martyrdom—of our own comforts and preferences? If what characterized the ministry of Christ is that He laid His life down, what in the world is wrong with us that we think our ministry would be anything less than the laying down of our life? Not necessarily in death, but dying daily (1 Cor 15:31), considered to be as sheep led to the slaughter every day (Rom 8:36), laying down our lives in a kind of *living death* so that the body of Christ might be built up and sanctified.

One commentator writes, “Christ crucified is not only [Paul’s] message, but it is also his model. He has become the suffering apostle of the suffering Messiah. . . . Paul’s suffering continues to reveal God’s saving activity as he carries around Christ’s death and displays it for all to see” (Garland, 230–31). And another says, “If God’s definitive salvific act occurred through the weakness of the crucified Jesus, then it should be no surprise that the saving gospel of the crucified Jesus should reach the Gentiles through the weakness of his apostle” (Bauckham, in Garland, 233).

Paul says, “I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17). There is a fellowship—a communion, a unique bond of intimacy—that Paul shares with His Lord and Master because of this common suffering. In Philippians 3:10 he calls it “the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.” And that is a fellowship that the false apostles, and the health-wealth hucksters, and the people who have never felt the sting of ministerial suffering don’t have! And so Paul says in that verse, “I want to know Him!” And knowing Him happens through knowing the fellowship of His sufferings and being conformed to His death! {SP}

And it’s precisely as we are conformed to His death that we know—not only the fellowship of His sufferings—but also the power of His resurrection. Paul says that the minister of the New Covenant is “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the *life* of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, *so that* the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

As Paul constantly stared death in the face, and experienced God’s gracious deliverance time and time again, the world would not only see Jesus’ dying in Paul’s sufferings, but they would see the resurrection life by which Jesus Himself conquered the grave, and by which the grave has been conquered for all who trust in Him. For only a living Christ could providentially deliver Paul from so great and so numerous afflictions. Only a living Christ could sustain the heart of a tired servant after constantly bearing the shame and indignity of getting *under* his brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul’s weakness illustrated the sufferings of the persecuted Jesus, but the surpassing greatness of God’s power illustrated the resurrection life of the living Christ.

You see? The resurrection life of Jesus is not most fully displayed when Christ’s people are healthy, wealthy, successful, and have it all together! And the Christian does not experience the resurrection power of Jesus, when they are triumphant and victorious and in ecstatic flights of fancy. The manifestation of the life of Jesus happens at exactly the same time as the carrying around of His dying! As one commentator put it, “It was not a matter of life *after* death, or even life *through* death, but of **life in the midst of death**” (Harris, 348). And that means, dear friends, that unless we bear Christ’s dying, we will not manifest His life. Unless we experience our own weakness, we will never see divine power. And unless we bear the shame of an earthen vessel, we will never fully appreciate the glory of the treasure.

III. The Profit (v. 12)

Well, we have seen this orienting principle for Christian ministry, and we have seen the two paradoxes which characterize Christian ministry. Let’s look, just briefly, at the conclusion of the matter: the **profit** of Christian ministry. Look with me at verse 12. Paul says, “So: death works in us, but life in you.”

Now, if you're following the passage closely, that might seem like a bit of a twist for an ending. If we follow the parallelism of the preceding verses, we would have expected Paul to say, "So death works in us, but life also works in us." But he doesn't say that. He says "death works in us, but life in *you*," Corinthians! The sufferings that Paul experienced on his missionary journeys | were the very means by which the Gospel was brought to Corinth. It is through those missionary labors that the Corinthians came to know Christ. And it is through those very same sufferings, as Paul continues to labor in them, with them, among them, that more and more spiritual life and growth is communicated to the church, unto their increasing maturity and sanctification.

"I have the suffering, and you have the benefit." The **profit** of the Christian ministry is that while "death" works in the weakness and suffering of Christian ministers who lay down their lives in service of Christ's Church, the fruit of their labors—energized by the surpassing greatness of the power of God—results in spiritual life and growth for our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

Can you be stirred, friends, not only by the idea of embracing weakness and indignity to put the power and glory of Christ on display, but can you be motivated also to embrace that weakness—that dying-living—for the sake of the people you're sitting next to? For the sake of the health of this church? How are we going to minister to the *moral* weakness in our church? It's by embracing the *positional* weakness of being slaves of all—to lose our lives, to go as sheep to the slaughter for the sake of the church (Rom 8:36), as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:31: to *die daily*; as he says in Philippians 2:17, to be poured out as a drink offering of the sacrifice and service of the faith of the church, to endure *all* things for the sake of the elect, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory (2 Tim 2:10).

Do you love Christ, friends? Then you'll love His glory. You'll delight to put His strength on display. But do you love Christ? Then you'll love His *bride*, and you will delight to be *slaves* to minister to her, to bind up her wounds, to help her in weaknesses, to love one another fervently from the heart (1 Pet 1:22).

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes wrote, "To see repentant sinners entering into newness of life in Christ makes every affliction borne for Jesus' sake and in His service a thousand times worth-while. And this is the joy of all Christian witness. It is the unconquerable life of the risen Jesus within that enables His servants willingly and perpetually to be handed over to death for His sake, in order that the same life of Christ may be kindled in the hearts of others" (145).

Conclusion

We're clay pots. We're the scum of the earth. We are not professionals. We are not the cool kids. We are not the centerfold. We are not the fine china. We are the *offscouring* of the world. Love

that. Because when you're weak, Christ is strong. Because when you are shamed, He is glorified. And when you are bearing about in your body in the dying of Christ—being the dying-living ones—the church is strengthened.

Only the *weak* survive in ministry. Only the weak survive. Pray with me that we would be humbled to that weakness, and that God would minister in *His* strength.