

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY DO WE HAVE TROUBLES?

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Most of us are familiar with something called a safe deposit box. It is a box for storing things we consider so important that we want to be extra sure they are kept safe – protected from theft, fire or loss. Some of you may be using a safe deposit box to store financial records, birth certificates and passports and possessions that are of particular significance or value. For some of us, the safe deposit box may be at a bank. For others, it may be a safe or steel, fireproof, locked box at home. Most of us are familiar with the idea of putting our treasures in a solid and secure container.

It is interesting to discover that God does not use that same principle when it comes to the most precious treasure there is – that light in our hearts that lets us experience the glory of God. The apostle Paul says that God gives us that gift through Jesus Christ and then he says that we have to house that treasure in “jars of clay.” Not a steel-reinforced safe deposit box that can resist the attacks of this world, but a common, ordinary clay and mud pot.

In our text today, Paul uses this analogy to help us understand His purposes for our difficulties – problems of any and every kind from traffic jams and fender-benders or math problems you can’t understand to really bad stuff like cancer, paralysis, the death of a loved one. Do you ever ask, “If God is good, why do we still have troubles?” When the Bible says if God is for us, no one can be against us, why are our days often filled with troubles?

That’s what I’d like to talk about today. At this moment, some of you are going through some pretty tough challenges. Many of you are not, but you know someone who is – and if you’ve gone just few miles in life, you know that sooner or later you’ll face hard times yourself. So, if God has given us victory over evil, if He is in control of everything, why does He permit bad stuff to happen to the people He loves?

This morning, I hope we can get away from simplistic answers to that question. Empty platitudes and shallow explanations really don’t help when the tough times come. We want to know “why?” We want to know why the God we worship allows suffering, even when we’re trying to do the right thing. I hope today, that you can go away with a better understanding about what God is doing in your life.

Before we get into our passage, I want to put aside some of the misconceptions we might have.

First, the Bible doesn’t say that trouble – sickness, disease, or poverty – comes into your life because you don’t have enough faith. There’s nothing in the Bible that says you’ll be rich or healthy and enjoy the affluent lifestyle if you believe hard enough, sow seeds of faith, and name and claim what you want. That’s the “health and wealth gospel” and goes under names like the

“Prosperity gospel” or “word of faith” movement. It’s false teaching and you should stay away from it. In the end, it cannot explain why faithful Christians suffer.

Another misconception is the belief that we have trouble because we live in a fallen world. While that is certainly true, some say that God has nothing to do with suffering. They say, He doesn’t want you to suffer. It’s not His idea, it’s the work of Satan. Sure, God will come alongside you and comfort you, sometimes He’ll answer your prayers and take you out of the pain, but it’s not what He really wants for you. But if God is all powerful, if He created the universe out of nothing, if He doesn’t want me to suffer why won’t He jump in and make everything OK?

Sometimes, we tell others that God wants them to feel good, that everything will work out in the end. We tell them to reach down inside themselves, suck it up, and keep on going. A great theologian by the name of Justin Sembler, calls this the theology of “sola bootstraps.” We do our best. But if we’re honest, those can be empty words, especially to folks who suffer hard for a long, long time. We have folks right here in this congregation who have experienced one setback after another. Maybe you’re asking “why me?” You want solid answers.

So today, I want to take this passage and show you what God has been teaching me. It is in times of trouble when God’s power really works in us. And, when God’s power is at work, that’s when we experience His glory. We’ll look at three reasons from our passage that tell us why a good God lets us have big and small troubles:

1. First, our troubles reveal Christ by contrasting God’s power in us with our weakness
2. Second, our troubles help other people glorify God because they link His power in us to Jesus’ resurrection
3. Third, God uses our troubles to shift our focus from our troubles to the glory we have as we are transformed to be like Jesus

GOD’S POWER CONTRASTED WITH OUR WEAKNESS

Our troubles reveal Christ by contrasting God’s power in us with our weakness. This is where the jars of clay come in. Paul says, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” The treasure is described in verse 6: “God has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Put another way, because we have been redeemed, because we trust in Christ alone, we get to join together and experience God’s glory, now and in eternity. That may seem a little odd until you realize that because we are created in God’s image to worship and adore Him, the only way we’ll have real satisfaction in life is when we do just that – glorify Him in everything we are and in everything we do. It’s what we are made for.

But Paul lets us in on an important secret. We will experience His glory, His power only when we come to grips with the fact that we are weak. The term “jars of clay” was often used as a metaphor to describe human frailty and weakness, especially when compared to God. Friends,

we are weak. Later on in this epistle, God says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul’s response? “I delight in weaknesses, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Someone once asked St Francis how He was able to accomplish so much. He replied, “This may be why: The Lord looked down from heaven and said, ‘Where can I find the weakest, littlest man on earth?’ Then, He saw me and said, ‘I’ve found him and he won’t be proud of it. He’ll see that I’m using Him only because of his insignificance.’”

But doesn’t that idea run counter to what we think we’re supposed to be? We’re supposed to be strong. Bright. Successful. Independent. Anything but weak. That’s what our culture tells us. When we run into trouble, we reach down inside ourselves, suck it up, and keep on going. Maybe we’ll say we trust God and say we rely on His power, but we sure don’t want to feel powerless and weak. But Paul is pretty clear here. Our treasure is in jars of clay in order that God’s power is shown. It is when we realize our inability, our powerlessness, that we see the awesome power of God

And how do we know our weaknesses? When we face trouble or difficulty! I know I’m weak and out of shape, not when I’m on the sidelines, but when I’m on the playing field running or blocking or being pushed around by guys bigger and stronger than me. Most of you know that four years ago, one Sunday afternoon I went to the emergency room with chest pains. The doctors discovered I had blocked arteries. I thought I was too young and too healthy to think about heart disease. I was wrong! The trouble of that day showed me that I was weak, and with that knowledge, we could do something about it.

God loves us so much that He gives us hardship so that we remember that we can’t respond to trouble in a godly way on our own. That’s right, suffering is a blessing. We are powerless and unable to experience God’s power on our own. God lovingly gives troubles big and small so that we remember that we need Him. He puts us in times of difficulty so we can’t pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and must rely on divine resources.

That’s what happened in Paul’s life. At the beginning of this letter (verse 1:8), he says “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.” He had some really tough times. Later in the letter he describes his experience:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Cor 11:24-28).

If you think you have hardship, you have nothing on Paul! With those kinds of troubles, Paul had every reason to despair. But look what he says:

Hard pressed on every side . . . but not crushed;
 Perplexed . . . but not in despair;
 Persecuted . . . but not abandoned
 Struck down . . . but not destroyed.

Paul had a lot of troubles (probably more than you and I will ever face) and in those troubles he comes to grips with the fact that he is weak. He learned that God's power would sustain him. God's power working in his life enabled Paul to respond to his circumstances in trust and obedience.

That's what Paul is getting at when He says, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." He's talking about the process of dying, not the final outcome. By faith, we share in Christ's dying so that we can have His life. Philippians 3:10-11 says:

"I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

Why? So the power of God, the life of Jesus, can be revealed in us.

Do you ever wonder about that? You know Christians who face extreme hardship, who struggle and weep, pray for relief and don't get it. Sure, they get discouraged, but they still keep on loving the Lord. Why don't they abandon the faith when relief doesn't come? What causes that? God did something marvelous in their lives. He gives them His life, His endurance, so they can move from despair to hope. That doesn't happen by their own power. You and I do not have the capability to live the Christian life on our own.

The purpose of trouble and weakness is to show us that our ability to walk before God does not come from ourselves. It is God's power alone. It is His work. It is in times of trouble when God's power really works in us. And, when God's power is at work, that's when we experience His glory.

OUR TROUBLES HELP OTHER PEOPLE GLORIFY GOD

When we know we are weak and God's power is at work in us, our troubles can then be used to help other people glorify God because they will link His power in us to Jesus' resurrection. In verses 13-14, Paul says, "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."

Paul's godly response in suffering is not new. He stands in a long line of righteous sufferers. He quotes from Psalm 116: "For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from

tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I believed; therefore I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'" This psalm was written by David during a time of great trouble. Throughout the psalm, David praises God because in the midst of suffering, he cried out to God and received the power to endure. It's like Paul's experience in Asia. In his death – suffering – he despaired even of life until like David, he cried out to the Lord and God's power gave him a sense of rest and gratitude, even as the suffering continued.

Paul's confidence was in the suffering of the Righteous One. Jesus died and was raised again. Paul – and all believers – will be raised. The resurrection is everything. He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who lives in you (Rom. 8:11). It is the hope that propels Paul's life. Jesus had to die first in order to be raised. If we want to grasp the reality of Christ living in us, first we have to die to ourselves, to the things that capture our hearts. We must deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow Him. God uses our troubles to bring us back to that point, to see our weakness, by faith join Christ in His death, and by faith join Him in His resurrection.

Note the part of Psalm 116 that Paul quotes: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since David and Paul have experienced God's power, they want to tell others. Paul envisions a future where God's grace is reaching more and more people who will overflow in thanksgiving and praise to God. That happens when people see the power of God in our lives. That power is not so much a miraculous removal from difficult circumstances (though that does happen) as it is a quiet perseverance in the midst of difficulty. The kind of endurance that is produced only by God and shows that His light shines in our hearts. Knowing that other people are coming to Christ because they see what we have is real and authentic is glorious.

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OUR TROUBLES SHIFT OUR FOCUS TO THE GLORY OF TRANSFORMATION

God uses our troubles to shift our focus from our troubles to the glory we have as we are transformed in to be like Jesus. That's what keeps Paul from losing heart. Recognizing what God is really doing through his troubles. Paul says that outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. That's not a description of our human bodies starting to fail as we get old, while our soul lives on. It is no body/soul dichotomy. Rather, Paul is talking about the whole person.

The outer man is our status in Adam in this present age. Through Adam, we inherited a sin nature and even after we were saved, that old nature still lives on. We are saved from the penalty of sin immediately at salvation, we are saved from the power of sin progressively as we walk with Christ, but that indwelling sin will remain with us until we come into the Lord's presence. Thankfully, inwardly we are being renewed. The second Adam, Jesus Christ, lives in us and we are being transformed. That's why Paul can call his problems light and momentary troubles. He knows that through them he is being prepared for an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Instead of destroying Paul, these sufferings are the very instruments God uses to reveal His glory. Paul considers that his present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. That hope enables him to pay attention to his future hope instead of his present troubles. The reality that one day we will be transformed, like Jesus, with even the presence of sin and evil removed, helps us set our minds on things above, not on earthly things.

CONCLUSION

Now Paul does not call us to suffer more. Troubles will happen. They are a part of life and God purposely allows them. But we must be careful not to reject the necessary role that troubles have in our Christian life. Pride tells us to refuse to believe that all we have are gifts from God for our good – even the hardships. Being raised with Christ does not mean escape from suffering, but the power to endure it for the sake of Christ and His church.

What have we learned? If God is good, why do we have troubles?

1. God lovingly gives us troubles to show us our weakness and need for His power to work in us
2. When God's power works in us, in the midst of trouble, other people see it. Our faith is real, so our God must be real. They may then link His power in us to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and give Him glory.
3. God uses our troubles to shift our focus from our troubles to eternal things, namely the transformation we have as we are made like Christ. That is glorious!

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