

Our Struggle is a Gift

Father, you are great and most worthy of praise. You are our refuge and strength to the end. Jesus you are our righteous redeemer and you are mighty to save. We praise you God that you are the anchor of hope for each and every one of our souls. May your word nourish and satisfy our hearts like a spring rain nourishes and satisfies your creation. We trust you to do exceedingly more than we ask and beyond what we can possibly imagine. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

I won't ask for a show of hands of how many of us have already failed in keeping our New Year's resolutions. Why is it we make and strive to keep resolutions in the first place? What is it about the flipping of the calendar that excites us and energizes us? While there may be a variety of answers to these particular questions, I would suggest there is an underlying reason that would be common to all of us. We are each longing, in our own way, for a new beginning. We want to put the old away, in the dust heap of 2018 and start fresh with the blank slate of 2019. Our dilemma, of course, is that this never works and we are left frustrated, either with God or ourselves or both.

So, is there any hope for resolving this innate quest for a fresh slate, to put the last year's failures and disappointments behind us and begin again with the new year? As with all things that pertain to God, there are at least two layers to answer that question. The first and most essential is this: Jesus is our only clean slate and the only place we can place our fears and failures, doubts and hypocrisies.

As Oswald Chambers writes: **"God's hand reaches back to the past, settling all the claims against our conscience. Our yesterdays hold broken and irreversible things for us. Let the past rest, but let it rest in the sweet embrace of Christ. Leave the broken, irreversible past in His hands, and step out into the invincible future with Him."**

But, there is another element to our quest for a new beginning and it is this: our struggle is real. I realize that may sound obvious and simplistic, but consider this: how many sincere Christians think believing in Jesus will solve all of life's issues? Come to Christ and your marriage will be perfect, your kids will be perfect, your job will be perfect, your health will be perfect. None of us would probably go out and buy a Joel Osteen book, but sometimes we unconsciously buy into a subtle form of prosperity gospel that ignores the fact that our struggle is real.

Thankfully, the Corinthian church faced a similar dilemma. So as Paul wrote to them, he wanted them to know the struggles they were facing were not because of their lack of faith but instead were part of the reality of continuing to live in a broken and fallen world. But God had a larger goal than that. You see, realizing our struggle is real is just part of the tapestry God is weaving in and through our lives.

As God inspired him to write to the Corinthians and by extension to us, Paul had 3 themes to commend about the reality of our struggle.

- In verses 7-12, the Spirit wants us to see that our struggle has meaning.
- In verses 13-15, God shows us that our struggle has purpose.
- In verses 16-18, Jesus assures us that our struggle has a goal.

Since our struggle is real and God wants us to know that it has meaning, we should ask: what is that meaning? Paul states it two different ways to make sure we grasp what he is saying. In verse 7, he uses the word picture of a treasure being carried or contained in a jar of clay. Why? To show that the value comes from the treasure, not the container. Think of a priceless work of art by Rembrandt, Monet, Van Gogh or others. What makes them valuable? Is it their frames or where they are housed? Would a simple, disposable frame lessen their value? Paul would argue such a frame would actually heighten their worth.

And the same is true for all who trust in Jesus. He is our supreme treasure. And God demonstrates this by placing the treasure in a simple clay pot. Think about it. Our bodies, like it or not are getting older and slower. Our minds are slowly atrophying. We still struggle against the world and the flesh and the devil. Add to that cancer, Alzheimer's, job loss, marital strife, and a hundred other things that make us go "why God?" The answer: to get our minds off of ourselves and fixed on our gracious, merciful, loving and patient Father and the all surpassing gift that he gave us in Jesus Christ.

Paul supports his point in verses 8-9 by basically saying God has graciously placed a floor or limit on our struggle. 2019 may be hard for you. It may go bad for me. But it won't ruin us. As his children we won't be crushed, we won't yield to despair, he will not forsake us and he certainly won't destroy us.

I think this is an important point that often gets forgotten, in part because it doesn't mesh with the ease and comfort of our age. If our struggle is real, God intends it for us. But that does not mean he has left us or forgotten us. It is just the opposite. Our struggle displays the magnificence of the treasure of Jesus, the grace he alone provides and showcases the power of his Spirit.

Because this is an important truth, Paul restates it a different word picture in verses 10-12. Here he points us to the reality that we are all approaching death. It is the one sure thing in life.

But Paul's focus here is not on death but on its contrast: the life we have in Christ. He says we are being given over to death so that the life of Jesus will be manifested in us. In other words our dying demonstrates, it displays that there is a life that far exceeds the one we are leaving behind.

None of this is to minimize the grief and loss associated with death. From our perspective it seems so permanent. Even Jesus wept at the death of his good friend Lazarus. Death is still the last enemy. Death still has a sting. But thanks be to God that we have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since our struggle has meaning, it also has purpose. As strange as it seems, God is actually using our struggle to accomplish something within his kingdom. If I can bottom-line for you, I would say it this way: our struggle builds our faith. Our faith fuels our thanksgiving. Our faith and thanksgiving together bring glory to God.

Paul is connecting the treasure we have in these jars of clay when he says "we have the same faith" in v13. This leads us to speaking. Speaking about Jesus. Speaking about God working in our struggles. Speaking about death and dying. Speaking about our hope that the resurrection of Jesus will be our own resurrection.

It is interesting here that Paul uses a word for knowing that doesn't just mean intellectual knowledge but knowing by seeing. There are things I know because I have learned them. And then there are other things I know because I've seen them. The best example I can think of is the Grand Canyon. I've read about the Grand Canyon. I've seen pictures of the Grand Canyon. I've heard personal testimony of the Grand Canyon. But then I went there. Before I knew in my head the Grand Canyon is massive and awesome. Now I know this in the core of my being.

That's God's purpose in walking us through our struggle. He is not looking for simple intellectual belief. As Dan continues to preach though the gospel of John, we will see people who "believed" walk away from Jesus. John 6 is a great example of this. Because in John, as it is in life, we can easily have a surface level faith. A faith that is good for smooth seas, calm winds and clear skies. But do you own such a faith? Can such a faith anchor you to Jesus our Rock? The storms come not so much to test our faith as to strengthen it and to display it and for us to look at everything that God has done and say "thank you!"

And while I don't have time to tease it out, we should also note there is a communal aspect to the purpose of our struggle. Can I say it this way? We are in this together. And one day, when we are truly united with Christ, we will also be truly united with one another.

I know many hearing this have had longer and deeper struggles in your life than I have. But there is one thing I know: As each of us looks at our own struggles and actually give thanks to God for using those struggles for building our faith and helping us to really see and proclaim the length and the height and width and the depth of the love of Jesus, God is glorified. I know first hand the just saying thanks to God seems too simple, too trivial. But that is the heart of true worship and the bedrock of how

we bring glory to our savior. John Newton states it like this: **"I have reason to praise him for my trials, for, most probably, I would have been ruined without them."**

Our struggle has meaning. Our struggle has purpose. And, our struggle has a goal. Listen again to Paul's words in verses 16-18. **So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.**

Paul restates what we already know. We are wasting away. To quote the Preacher from the book of Ecclesiastes "Everything is meaningless". Our lives are a shadow and a vapor. But Paul also exhorts us. Do not lose heart! Despite the struggle or more appropriately because God has walked with us through our struggle, we should not lose heart. Why not? Our struggle is not simply a device God is using, it is a key component in what he is constructing in our lives and the lives of people who are around us.

God is using our struggles to display his treasure in us. But there's more than that. He's also working into us the reality that everything we see here is transient. Christ and his kingdom, faith and hope and love, grace and mercy and forgiveness, these things are eternal. But there's even more than that.

Read v17 again. **For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.** Let this truth soak in, like rain on dry ground. What's the goal of our struggle? Our struggle is God's active agent in preparing us for glory and preparing glory for us.

What does this mean? I'm not really sure. We can see glimpses in Revelation 5 and 21, Isaiah 65 and Ezekiel 47. But here's what we can learn from 2 Corinthians: its all about the contrasts. Our struggle, as hard as it may be, is light when compared to the mass of the glory we will receive and be a part of. Our struggle, as long as it seems to last, is momentary when compared to the permanence of the eternity we will spend with Jesus and God our Father. What will it be? What will it look like? I can't out do Paul: it is beyond all comparison. It is more than you can ask or imagine.

So how do we summarize a topic that is this massive? The struggle that each of us face, it is real. But our struggle, it has meaning and it has purpose and it has a goal. If I were to package it all up I would say this: Our struggle is a gift.

Often we think of gifts very superficially. Typically they are things that make our lives easier or simpler or happier. By this definition, our struggle would not qualify as a very good gift. But perhaps it's our definition of a good gift that is lacking.

If you give me a new Kurieg and a year's worth of coffee, I would really like it and it would make my life easier and simpler and make me happier. But, would it really make a difference? Would it affect my character? Would it help me love Sally better? Would it inspire me to pray more, to trust God more? Would it help me to see and to savor Jesus more?

Our struggles are a different kind of gift. At the outset, they don't seem to make our lives easier or simpler or happier. But God is not just concerned about this moment in time. He is looking across the entire horizon of our lives and on into eternity. He gives gifts that prepare us, that strengthen us, that show us more of Jesus and less of us.

As we walk through our struggle, God is here, in our midst. He may bring relief and he may not. Either way, he is displaying the beauty of his great treasure: our new identity in Christ.

As we walk through our struggle, Jesus wants us to lean on him. There are no bonus points for being tough, for gritting your teeth. What Jesus consistently praises are people who come to him in faith. Little faith or big faith. Weak faith or strong. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that we come.

And as we walk through our struggle remember we can rejoice that this is not the end of the story. As C.S. Lewis put it: **"All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."**

Our struggle is real. Your struggle is real. My struggle is real. But it has meaning and purpose. And your struggle is a gift from your loving Father because it is preparing for you something that is beyond all comparison.

Father, help us to look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. Take our focus off of the things that are transient and place our hearts and our minds on the things that are eternal. We love you and

we need you. Today and and everyday and for all eternity. We ask this in the name that is above every name, the name of Jesus our Savior and Lord, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.