

HOW CAN WE FIND STRENGTH TO COPE?

SERIES: FREE AT LAST! THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Ron R. Ritchie

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.” (Matthew 7:24-27)

In these words of Jesus, spoken at the end of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), is found the secret of coping with reality. We are encouraged to build our life on him, the solid Rock; to depend on him for power and strength to cope with the storms and stresses of life.

I often think of those words when I hear the claims of the advocates of the “human potential” and the “new age” movements. As long as the weather holds, of course, their house looks like it has been well constructed; however, when the test does come, when the storms of life blow around that structure that has been built on sand, great is the collapse of that life.

With this in mind, we continue in our study of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, seeking to find the answer to the question, “Where can we find the strength to cope with our present realities?” Second Corinthians is the apostle’s “thankful letter.” He is writing in response to the Corinthians’ reception of a previous letter from him (known as his “painful letter”) in which he took the Corinthian church to task over sexual immorality in their midst. Paul has already explained that certain hardships, which he had suffered in Asia, had prevented him from visiting them as he planned: “We were burdened excessively,” he wrote in the first chapter of this letter, “beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:8a-9).

That experience had taught Paul the principles of the *New Covenant*, God’s new arrangement for living. No matter how the outward circumstances may appear, Christians are always being led “in triumph in Christ” (2:14); they always manifest the “fragrance of Christ...to one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life” (2:15-16); they are always acceptable in the sight of God because of Christ; and, they are always “adequate [competent] ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit” (3:6). It is because of these realities, Paul says, that we can live our lives with boldness, transparency, Christ-likeness, and with freedom to minister in the Spirit without veils, without masks. Further, Paul writes, as Christians “we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:5). As Christians proclaim Christ, many times his word will break through the darkness and change the lives of those with whom they come in contact.

I have seen this happen many, many times with people I never thought would come to faith in Christ. Just yesterday a woman who lives on my street came to my house and told me she had become a Christian. When she moved to the area a year ago and first visited our home I became aware of the trials

and difficulties she faced living as a single mother. Together with a few friends I began to pray for her, and yesterday we got the good news that God had indeed saved her out of darkness and death.

Reading this “thankful letter,” the Corinthians may well have imagined that Paul was some kind of super-being, that no one could live and share Christ like the apostle did. “Where could they find the strength to cope like Paul did?” they may have wondered.

Our power comes from God

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 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. So death works in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

Paul begins by contrasting what he just said about God, who causes his light to shine in our hearts (see Discovery Paper 532), and the fact that there is a spiritual battle being fought over the hearts and minds of men, a battle between God and Satan. Of course, God can break through the blindness of men and make his light shine in their hearts and Paul himself is a living demonstration of this truth. Remember, on the Damascus road he experienced the light of Christ as he was on his way to persecute the new church.

What “treasure” is Paul referring to? He is speaking of “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:6). The resurrected Jesus, living in our hearts, motivates us to preach to Jews and Gentiles alike the good news of John 3:16-17: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” So, the Lord himself and his Word of grace is the “treasure” Paul is talking about.

Christians have this treasure, Paul says, “in jars of clay.” We are not the treasure itself, rather we are the containers that hold the treasure. This is how Elihu, Job’s friend, regarded himself, saying, “Behold, I belong to God like you; I too have been formed out of the clay” (Job 33:6). The Corinthians would understand what Paul meant here. Clay jars were made to contain things such as milk, fruit, flour, oil, etc. and Paul says we, too, are clay jars, designed to contain the living God, who would make man’s life purposeful, useful and fulfilling. Today, as in Paul’s day, many people in the world are empty and despairing. That is why, for example, teenage suicide is on the rise. Young people feel empty and cheated. Their expectations in life are not being fulfilled. They can’t cope with reality because of the emptiness they feel inside.

The reason the “treasure” is contained in “jars of clay” is simple: “so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves,” Paul declares. This is the same power that caused light to shine out of darkness at the creation of the world, the same power that can break through hardened hearts and minds and turn the enemies of our Lord into servants of Jesus Christ. That presence and power is expressed in and through man, a clay jar, by means of the Holy Spirit, to show that the source of that power is God, not man. That has been God’s way of working all through the ages as he has demonstrated his plan of salvation in the world, using weak men and women, clay jars, to fulfill his purposes.

God used Abraham and Sarah, when they were old and long past the age of child-bearing to begin the new nation which he was forming. When Sarah heard of God's plan, she laughed to herself as she thought, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son" (Genesis 18:11-14). Sarah, the aged clay jar, gave birth to Isaac the following year.

God picked Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. "Who am I?" asked Moses, the weak clay jar. But God said to him, "I will be with you" (Ex. 3:12), and Israel was delivered.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon as he was hiding in a wine press and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior... Go...deliver Israel from the hand of Midian." "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." That was the answer God was looking for. He wanted to use a clay jar, so he said to Gideon, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man." (Judges 6:12-16.)

Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar through the power of God and gave thanks to God, saying, "Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him" (Daniel 2:20). All of these people were clay jars. In the midst of their circumstances, God's power moved through them.

Paul further demonstrates this principle using four illustrations from his own experience. Of course, both Christians and non-Christians experience difficult circumstances, but the key for the Christian is to look at stressful circumstances from God's point of view. Doing so enables us to cope with the stresses of daily life. As others see that our power to cope comes from God and not from us, they will see God's plan of redemption at work in and through our lives.

First, Paul says, "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed..." He faced afflictions, pressures and stressful circumstances on both a physical and an emotional level. Paul, Timothy, Titus, Silas and others were clay jars who experienced all sorts of troubles in their ministry. Later on in this letter Paul lists the troubles he experienced: "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches." (2 Corinthians 11:24-28.)

But the difference between a Christian who faces trials, such as these, and the non-Christian is the power which is available to the believer from within, and that power is Christ himself. Paul says if a Christian chooses to rely on that resource, he won't be crushed. Last week I talked with a Christian brother who was facing difficult pressures. I feared he would feel crushed under the weight of them as, unfortunately, had happened many times in the past. But he said to me, "I'm not afraid; I am trusting the Lord...I'm learning to choose to let the Lord within me hold out so that the pressure won't destroy me."

Next, the apostle says, "[we are] perplexed, but not despairing..." Paul is saying, "We are at our wits' end, without emotional resource, and we don't know how to proceed." The word "perplexed" is one of my favorites in the New Testament. I could have it tattooed across my chest—"Perplexed!" I always seem to be in a state of perplexity, not understanding what God is doing in my life. It's okay to say to God, "What is going on?" Perplexity is not sin. Paul and his brothers and sisters experienced that feeling

many times—in Troas, in Philippi, in Athens, in Corinth, in Roman prisons, etc. J. I. Packer in his book *Knowing God* says of these perplexities:

“[They are designed] to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy and to drive us to cling to Him more closely...God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities...to ensure that we shall learn to hold Him fast. The reason why the Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, a sure refuge and help for the weak is that God spends so much of His time bringing home to us that we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find or to follow the right road... God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore, he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Him, to wait upon the Lord. In light of that we do not despair, we are not without hope, because God is the one on whom we have set our hope.”

Thirdly, Paul says, “[we are] persecuted, but not forsaken [abandoned]...” As we read earlier, Paul and his companions faced persecution many times for their beliefs. Yet, despite all of this, he never felt abandoned by his Lord and Savior. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis for speaking out against Hitler’s regime, wrote in his “Letters from Prison”: “I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil...For that purpose he needs men who make the best use of everything. I believe God will give us all the strength we need to resist in all times of distress, but he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him alone.”

A fellow prisoner described the last hours of Bonhoeffer’s life in these words: “On Sunday, April 8, 1945, Bonhoeffer...held a little service for his fellow Christians. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said, ‘Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.’ Those words, ‘Come with us’, for all prisoners had come to mean only one thing—the scaffold...We bid him goodbye. He drew me aside and said, ‘This is the end, but for me it’s the beginning of life.’ The next day he was hanged at Flossenbug.” “Persecuted, but not abandoned.”

Fourthly, Paul says, “[we are] **struck down, but not destroyed.**” Many times Paul suffered the trauma of being suddenly smitten and cast down, which can be described as receiving a sudden and unexpected blow to the head. Once when he and Silas were walking to the home of Lydia in Corinth, a demon-possessed girl began to follow them and cry out to them. Paul turned and addressed the demon, “Come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ,” and the girl was set free from demonic power. Certain people who had used this woman for financial gain had Paul and Silas arrested and dragged before a magistrate. They were beaten and placed in stocks in prison (see Acts 16:16-24). Perhaps Paul remembered this event as he was writing this letter to the Corinthians.

While Jack Crabtree was a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church in 1976 his two-year-old son, John David, swallowed an almond one day and choked to death. But, as the words that Jack spoke at the memorial service for John David demonstrated, though he and Jody were “struck down”, they were not destroyed. Here is what he said:

“John David was more than a son, he was a miniature man who was our constant companion, a really, really good friend. We are going to miss him. But the incredible thing to both Jody and me...even though we stand, first numb and disbelieving...there are times when we experience... joy at what a magnificent, merciful, loving thing God has done when I think about what a fat assignment my son got from the Lord, to come into the world and spend two years having nothing but utter joy...and then being taken home. I feel privileged to have had a son with that kind of an assignment. To be able to

serve the Lord and go home to him as a full-grown and mature son now in his glory and to have missed a lot of the process that we have to go through—I'm privileged by that; what a merciful thing. Jody and I are both convinced that God has the right to take our son and that he has exercised that right; he has not done evil of John David, he has done good. But furthermore, he has not done evil of us, because John David is not our god, the Lord is our God. [The Lord] is our life, he is the bread on which we feed, and he is the one on whom we are going to depend and find our fulfillment in the future.”

All mankind is formed out of the dust. We are all “jars of clay,” and as such we face afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and trauma, both physically and emotionally. When we become Christians we are not suddenly lifted above the normal circumstances of life. We are the same “jars of clay,” only now we contain the “treasure” of the life and the power of the resurrected Christ within us. As such we have strength to cope with all the realities God brings into our lives. We will no longer feel crushed, despairing, abandoned or destroyed if we choose to allow the Lord to live through us. God uses all these circumstances to his honor and glory, to bring us to spiritual reliance on him, and also to bring us into spiritual maturity.

Paul then shares with the Corinthians the spiritual realities that God is at work, calling out of every nation a people for himself: “[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.” When Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, died on the cross, all the sins of humanity were placed upon him—all the pride, self-reliance, self-confidence and self-assertiveness of man. He then physically died, that is, his flesh died. Now, according to chapter 6 of Romans, all who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior are spiritually identified with his death. The old nature, though still with us, no longer has any power over us. We are no longer slaves to the flesh. We have power to choose to die to the lusts of the flesh (the lust for power), the lust of the eyes (the lust for possessions), and the pride of life (the lust for position). We are new creatures in Christ. “Our life is not our own; we were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). As servants of Christ, we are to take up our cross daily and choose to die to our rights and our feelings. As servants of the *New Covenant*, if we choose to allow the life of Jesus to be seen in our words and our actions, regardless of the outward circumstances, the result will be life out of death. People will see that we have bodies of clay just like them, and yet, something about us is different. We may look like we did before we became Christians, but people will say of us, “I think I've just been with Jesus.” What a contrast to the philosophy of the “human potential” movement.

Paul now addresses the realization that, at times, he finds his life being used by God without his consent. “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.” Notice the word “always,” which speaks to a pattern for life. In chapter 12 of this very letter Paul says, “To keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, comments: “Through tribulations of pain and loss for Jesus' sake we enter into a thousand little deaths day by day, and through the ministry of the Spirit we rise out of those little deaths into constantly recurring experiences of risen life with Christ.”

Looking back over my 30 years as a Christian to that day in Jerusalem when I asked Jesus Christ to be my Lord, I remember that I presented to him my list of hopes, dreams, and ambitions to one day be “king.” He thanked me, took my list, and that's the last I've seen of it. How my life has changed! I have

watched over the years as everything I held to be important seemed to quietly slip away. Based on that list, I stand before you today from a human perspective a failure, my life wasted. I'm not who I had hoped to be. I'm very far removed from the image I had created for myself in my mind. Yet, as I said to my son Rodd, "If you choose to be a servant of Jesus Christ (and he has), you will have made the best choice of your eternal life. But, as Ray Stedman once said, 'If you do, you'll find yourself completely fearless, constantly cheerful, and always in trouble!'"

"So death works in us, but life in you." Again, we need to come back to the basics: Jesus came to save sinners. In this age of the Spirit he is calling out a people for his name's sake from every nation. He desires to use you and me, "jars of clay", as ministers of the *New Covenant*, drawing on his life and power, dying to self so others can live.

Life comes from God

But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:13-15)

The quote, "I believed, therefore I spoke," comes from Psalm 116. As Paul experienced daily affliction, perplexity, persecution and trauma, he realized he was not the first Christian who experienced physical, emotional and spiritual stress. Here's how the psalmist described his experience in Psalm 116:

I love the LORD, because He hears
 My voice and my supplications.
 Because He has inclined His ear to me,
 Therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.
 The cords of death encompassed me
 And the terrors of Sheol came upon me;
 I found distress and sorrow.
 Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
 "O LORD, I beseech You, save my life!"

The psalmist cries out to God with a heart full of faith and asks God to save him. He believed that the invisible, but ever present, Comforter and Deliverer would somehow hear him in the midst of his trial. So by faith he spoke to God and waited in the midst of the trial. The psalmist continues:

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
 Yes, our God is compassionate.
 The LORD preserves the simple;
 I was brought low, and He saved me.
 Return to your rest, O my soul,
 For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
 For You have rescued my soul from death,
 My eyes from tears,
 My feet from stumbling.
 I shall walk before the LORD
 In the land of the living.

Following his deliverance, the psalmist realizes he can encourage the people of Jerusalem by telling them what happened to him. Likewise, Paul quotes from the same psalm to encourage the Corinthians: “having the same spirit of faith”—and while enduring the same kind of pressure and stress—“ we also believe, therefore we also speak.” He believed God could deliver him from all his enemies, both physical and spiritual, as well as from afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and traumas, “knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus...” is the same God who has the power to raise us out of deadly situations (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). Paul learned from his experience in Asia to no longer trust in himself, but in God who raises the dead.

He goes on to say this same God “will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.” Paul steps away from the stress he is experiencing and looks ahead towards his “perfection.” All of their afflictions will be worthwhile in light of what is coming in the future when they will all meet together in the presence of Jesus. “For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.” Physical, emotional, and spiritual stress is actually designed by God so that his grace, and his love towards men, who deserve nothing, could be made manifest.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

Where can we find the strength to cope? It comes from realizing that our power and our life comes from God.

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