

# EXERCISING THE POWER OF GOD

*SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE*

*By Doug Goins*

In the weeks that we have been working through the 2 Corinthian letter, we have noticed how the apostle Paul repeatedly uses descriptive words to capture mental images. At the end of chapter 2, Paul describes God's people as a perfume or a fragrant aroma. Wherever we go we have an impact on the people around us. At the end of chapter 3, Paul recalls that Moses used a veil to hide his fading glory. We learned that we also choose to wear veils so people can't see who we are, and inadvertently block ourselves off from truth and from needed revelation from God.

Moving forward in our study, we are going to examine three more first century visual images. First, clay pottery from Roman antiquity; second, the Roman arena of the gladiators; and third, the Roman instrument of criminal execution, the cross.

We find all three of these visual aids in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11. This passage is a wonderful explanation of the process by which the power of God is released in us as his people.

**But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may 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, 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, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.**

## God's deliberate plan

In 1989, I helped lead a number of our college and university students on a 3-week study tour of Egypt and Israel. There was one event that at the time seemed relatively insignificant, yet it came back to me while working on this sermon. Our tour guide, a Christian Armenian man named Diko, and I were walking together around the base of the wall of the old city. While we were talking and walking, he kept watching the ground. We got down around the low point of the wall, near an excavation. Diko kept watching the ground and then ran up a little hill and grabbed something to bring back down to me. It was a small handle for a rough earthen clay cup. Diko, an amateur archeologist, told me that there are a lot of those around, probably from the first or second century. He said this one looked like it was Roman, probably from a Roman soldiers' camp. I was thrilled and still have the artifact.

The fact that these kinds of pottery shards are everywhere is absolutely true. In virtually every archeological dig in the Middle East, there are innumerable pieces of clay pottery from the earliest civilizations. Clay pottery was the material of the common people. It was used to make everything from pitchers and oil jars and bowls, to griddles and washbasins and pots. Items of value like money or jewelry were often hidden in them. Clay jars were used to store liquids because the clay didn't let the liquid evaporate and it tended to stay cool. Broken pieces of pottery or shards were used for writing material for notes or receipts.

Paul compares each of us to a piece of ordinary first-century pottery. The incredible thing is that in Jesus Christ we are filled up with amazing treasure. It's the creative power of God.

## Our jar of clay

Look again at verse 7,

**“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves...”**

Earthen vessels are a very good description of basic humanity. God is the potter, and we are the clay. He shapes us and molds us into any kind of utensil or implement that he desires. The noun, “vessel,” refers to a container serving a very specific purpose like a jug, cup, pot or pan. And again, when it's used of people in the Bible, there is always a sense that we are an implement that God can use; an instrument to live out a lifestyle of ministry, loving people.

Before we continue on, don't miss the marvel of Paul's definition of our humanity. As people of a new covenant lifestyle, as vessels that are created for God's use, all of us are made from the same basic stuff. We are made of earthen, common, run of the mill clay, fragile and easily broken. No matter how sophisticated, how physically healthy and robust, how financially secure we are, underneath we are all just ordinary people. In verse 6, Paul says we have a treasure inside of us, “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.” If we have experienced salvation from our sins through Jesus Christ, then we have been given newness of life with him. The very resurrection life of Jesus Christ indwells us and can be expressed through us. Paul describes this in verse 7 as a transcendent power.

## God's transcendent power

Then, again, the question would be, why would God put something so important into weak vessels like us? Because God wants to use weak things. Things that are breakable, things that are available to him, that are serviceable, so that there would be no mistaking the origin of the power for living. The adjective “surpassing greatness” stresses the extraordinary quality, or the extent of power. The Greek word is *dynamos*, from which we get the English word, dynamite. Paul is describing power that we don't even understand or comprehend. To Colossian Christians he described this treasure in power as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

Even the most formidable things are not too powerful for Jesus to tear down.

May 18, 2000 was the 20th anniversary of the volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helen located in the Cascade Range of the state of Washington. That mountain exploded with stunning force, an amazing display of the power of nature. The explosion ripped 1,300 feet off the top of that mountain and it leveled Douglas fir trees that were 150 feet tall, up to 17 miles away from the point of the blast. We stand in awe of that kind of force. And yet, we are tempted to forget the equally awesome power than can be unleashed in our lives as believers in Jesus Christ. Clearly that kind of power is not from us.

Ray Stedman, in his book, *Authentic Christianity*, says the following about why God chooses to put the power inside of us, these weak clay pots.

*So often, in our time, power is used to tear things apart, to blast, or explode, or crush. But this transcendent power unites, gathers, harmonizes. It breaks down walls of partition and removes barriers. It does not make superficial, external adjustments, but works from within, producing permanent transformations. Do you know any other power like that? It's absolutely unrivaled;...*

*By design God entrusts this secret to failing, faulty, weak, and sinful people so it will be clear the power does not originate from us. It isn't the result of a strong personality, or of a keen and finely honed mind or of good breeding and training. No, it arises solely from the presence of God in the heart. Our earthiness must be as apparent to others as the power is, so that they may see that the secret is not us but God. That is why we must be transparent people, not hiding our weaknesses and failures, but honestly admitting them when they occur. (1)*

Craig Duncan and I are involved with a wonderful group of men. These are men who are fighting the battles in Silicon Valley every day. One guy in the group shared his struggle with combativeness, competitiveness, defensiveness, always needing to win every argument and to be right. He asked us pray with him. While studying the book of James together, we came to the section about the tongue and being able to control the tongue. This guy told us that he had an important meeting with a fellow manager over a very controversial issue. He said that everything in him knew he was right and that the other manager was dead wrong. He knew he would go into that meeting and "blow him away." He said, "I was studying the James passage and it was like God said to me, 'you can't do that.'" He went to sleep thinking about it, and woke up thinking about it. The next time we saw him, he said, "You guys you won't believe this, but I went into that meeting and I was none of those things. We reached an amicable, healthy compromise. You don't know what a big deal that is! That is not me, that is the Lord!" That is a good example of the power of God at work in us, changing us and transforming us.

## **Our frequent experience**

In verses 8 and 9, Paul is going to continue to show how completely practical this is and describe how it works in normal Christian living. Paul's vocabulary and the literal Greek language used in the four couplets in these verses suggest the hand-to-hand combat of the gladiator in the arena, or the soldier in the battlefield. But the battle he is describing is the battle that we fight every day in the different arenas of life. Paul writes,

**...we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing;  
persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.**

## **Affliction**

Paul says that we are "afflicted." It pictures the gladiator being forced back into a narrow or confined space in combat. We would say he's cornered, literally. For Paul, that represents the normal troubles, the difficulties, the handicaps of life, the things that irritate us. But Paul says we are not crushed or frustrated by the struggles of life because we have Jesus Christ indwelling us, expressing his life through us.

## **Perplexity**

Each of the four couplets becomes more intense. The second describes being “perplexed but not despairing.” It is a play on words in the Greek language and means literally, at a loss, but never totally at a loss. In other words, the gladiator may be momentarily perplexed or bewildered by his foe's battle strategy. In this letter, Paul has confessed his own puzzlement and difficulty in making decisions. We can identify with that fear, anxiety, and uncertainty as we face problems that seem insurmountable. But in Christ, we are never left in total despair. We may be afraid at times but we are never controlled by the fear because we claim the certainty that we are led by God in his triumph, in Jesus Christ. We know that in every circumstance God is accomplishing his sovereign purposes. There is a way through and he will lead us and direct us.

## Persecution

In the third couplet, the experience at the beginning of verse 9 is “persecution.” To be persecuted literally means to be pursued or hunted down like an animal. It is the language of the arena, as the gladiator would be hounded by his foes. It also sounds like the life of the apostle Paul as hostile Jews pursued him from city to city. He describes a much broader experience of persecution in 2 Corinthians 11:24, “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;...” That's a lot of danger! But, Paul assures us that no matter what degree of rejection or persecution we suffer for following Christ, we will not be forsaken. God will never desert us.

As Christians we know that even death, if that becomes a physical reality for us, isn't the end at all. William Barclay writes in his commentary on this passage,

*We are persecuted by men but never abandoned by God. One of the most notable things about the martyrs has always been that it was amid their sorest times that they had their sweetest times with Christ. As Joan of Arc said when she was abandoned by those who should have stood by her, “It is better to be alone with God. His friendship will not fail me, or his council, or his love. In his strength I will dare and dare until I die.” As David wrote in Psalm 27:1, “when my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.” The good news is that nothing can alter God's loyalty toward us. (2)*

## Catastrophe

The final experience in the last couplet of verse 9 is, “struck down, but not destroyed.” The gladiator gets cut down, badly wounded, and falls to the ground. The idea of catastrophic tragedy chills our hearts. It captures the stunning, shattering blows which come out of nowhere—a fatal car accident, severe mental illness, the violence of rioting or warfare, the death toll from natural disasters. They try our faith to the limit, and can leave us frightened and baffled.

But for the Christian, Paul says, there is no ultimate destruction. The reality of all of this is that we live in a fallen and sinful world. It is a world that breeds affliction, perplexity, persecution, and catastrophe. We cannot escape the universality of suffering in this world. No matter how closely we may walk with the Lord we can experience any of these difficulties. But out of that, God wants to demonstrate a different reaction and a different attitude than a nonbeliever going through the same experience. In the midst of the difficulties there is

about us a peacefulness, a hopefulness, and a loving sensitivity to others. It can't be explained in terms of our own natural resources physically, emotionally, or relationally. The only explanation can be that God is at work. It's got to be evident that the power belongs to God and not to us. The apostle Paul accepted his difficulties in life and the fact that he was weak. He was fragile, and an ordinary clay pot. Paul learned through a lifetime (and it does take a lifetime, we don't learn this overnight) that what really filled him up was what really mattered, "the surpassing greatness of the power of God."

Consider Paul's amazing summary of these issues in 2 Corinthians 12, beginning in the middle of verse 5:

...but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from 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, 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.

I have two friends here at PBC who demonstrate this amazing dynamic for living. They are a married couple who, from a human perspective, have every right to be angry, frustrated and resentful of their circumstances. The husband was forced into early retirement several years ago. He had a good career that he loved. But he had heart valve damage and in his 50's was forced to retire. He had to severely curtail all physical activities that he enjoyed. His wife suffers from fibro-myalgia, severe migraine headaches, and chronic fatigue syndrome. When my friend had his heart valve replacement surgery, I spent time with them in their home, in the hospital, and over the phone. The surgery was successful but the recovery was long and complicated. But in the midst of all of that, I have never before known two people who count more on the grace of God. In the face of this grinding difficulty and struggle, they have modeled toward me, toward family members, toward others in the body, and toward those in the community who serve them, the love of Christ, the joy of the Holy Spirit, and the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding. Jesus promised that to us; the kind of peace that doesn't make any sense from a human perspective. These people really are a delight to be around. I go to see them as a pastor to encourage them, but leave delighted and refreshed, and my own spirit lifted!

So what makes the difference? How do we learn to respond to difficulty out of joy? How can our lives be transformed into a continuous expression of this kind of living? The last two complex verses provide the answer. They are paradoxical—they have "the dying of Jesus" and "the life of Jesus." They have "death at work in us," and "life at work in us..."

## God's desired results

Paul's third visual focus is this Roman instrument of criminal execution, the cross, at work in Jesus' life and in our life. Chapter 4, verse 10,

**...always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, 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, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.**

The promised result in both verses is resurrection life—the beautifully attractive life of Christ being consistently expressed through us. We see the phrase twice, once in each verse, “the life of Jesus.” To be “manifested” means to “go public” or to be “made public” so that everybody can see. We want his serenity of spirit, his moral beauty, and his compassionate heart. We want his ability to entrust himself to his Heavenly Father even through trials. We want his fearlessness in the face of struggle. Verses 10 and 11 are not about heaven or about something we have to wait for until we get there. This is life that’s made public here—“in our body” in verse 10, and “in our mortal flesh” in verse 11. It’s when the pressure is on, when we are facing affliction, perplexity, persecution and catastrophe.

## **Crucifixion—an act of the will**

But if that’s the result we want, there is a clear requirement. We have to accept the implications and the practical results of Jesus’ death on the cross. The cross of Christ had only one purpose, to execute justice on human sin. Paul writes later in chapter 5, verse 21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Jesus took upon himself what we are in our sin and God had to put him to death. God intends to do the same thing with our sinful pride, apart from dependence on Jesus Christ. But we have to consent to sharing in the “dying of Jesus” as it says in verse 10. It speaks of an inner attitude, an act of the will, voluntary crucifixion. The phrase in verse 10 “always carrying about” is in the active voice—it’s a choice we have to make. The cross of Christ is where we put to death our proud ego. It’s that part of us that always needs attention; that demandingly justifies self-pity, self-indulgence, self-assertion, self-righteousness and self-deception. That’s what the cross puts to death in us.

If we want to experience the life of Christ, then we have to consent to having our ego crucified within us—to agree with God’s pronouncement of the death penalty on our pride and then allow it no place of indulgence in our lives.

But in addition to choosing to die to our self-effort, oftentimes we have to give up “choice” in the matter. God will give us over to situations that force us to renounce our pride, our own adequacy, and cause us to depend on him completely. The phrase in verse 11, “we who live are constantly being delivered over...” That’s in the passive voice. We’re involuntarily driven to the cross.

Paul described for us, in the first chapter of this letter, his own experience of being involuntarily given up to death:

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, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;...” (2 Corinthians 1:8, 9).

For us that is descriptive of all the trials, difficult circumstances and pressures that force us to rely completely on the resurrection power of Jesus Christ rather than our own strategies, our own defensive responses, or our own attempts to control and manipulate circumstances.

## Resurrection—allowing God to work

This paradox of spiritual life coming out of crucifixion is found all through the scriptures. Paul writes in Romans 6:11, "Even so consider yourselves dead to sin [reckon yourself, agree with God in this judgment on sin in your life], but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

He speaks of the same paradox in Philippians 3:10, "...that I may know Him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death..." Three things that Paul desires: first, to know Christ (intimacy with Jesus); second, the power of his resurrection; and finally, the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. If we are willing to submit to that, then we can have this outward evidence of resurrection life at work in us. And do you know what it looks like when you see resurrection life? Paul says in chapter 4, verse 1: "Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart,..." One evidence of resurrection power at work is that we are not hopeless. Look further down at verse 16; "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." Again, we do not lose heart and we are not hopeless. Ahead further still in chapter 5, verse 6; "Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage...."

## Exercising the power of God

The transcendent power of God gives us hope when we want to lose heart, and it makes us courageous even when we are not. What we can experience is the life of Jesus. We can live out his life before our family, friends, and co-workers. That is the miracle. People are watching us go through affliction, perplexity, persecution and catastrophe, and see in us, not a person about to explode or blow apart, but someone who actually expresses the character, the beauty, and the attractiveness of Jesus. That's what is so wonderful about my godly friends who are struggling with chronic disease. They are fragile clay pots filled with the resurrection life of Christ, and it's his power, his glory, and his beauty that you see in them. They are exercising the power of God and it is seen in how they care for people; people that come into their home, and their family members. They are sensitive and concerned more about the other person than their own struggles and difficulties.

Often as we think about how we would like the power of God to be at work in our lives, we think of big things like signs and wonders, the miraculous, the dramatic. Paul does pray for power for the Christians in Colossae. He writes,

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power [the issue of power], according to His glorious might [not our might but the power of Jesus inside of us], for [and here's the purpose] the attaining of all steadfastness [or endurance] and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Colossians 1:9-12).

In the middle of perplexity, affliction or persecution, even in the catastrophic things, what we really need is endurance, patience, joy, thankfulness, and gratitude. That's how you know the resurrection power of Christ is

being expressed. When there is every reason in the world to be impatient, but then God gives you endurance. That is what God wants to do for us.

NOTES:

- (1) Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*. © 1975. Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 124.
- (2) William Barclay, *The Letter to the Corinthians*. © 1956, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. P. 222.

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