

***Pass It On:
Light Shining Through
Broken Vessels***

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

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All is not what it first seems to be.

I'll come up with a bit more to say this morning, but at the core, that's it.

When you go down to pick your kids up from the daycare, and someone asks, "What did Pastor Ken talk about?" you can say -

"He said, 'All is not what it first seems to be.'"

You are, of course, welcome to stay tuned for more details.

Sir Oliver Franks was one of Britain's most influential diplomats in recent time. He was Ambassador to the United States immediately following World War II. Those were delicate and dangerous times, with the cold war, the founding of NATO and the like.

Franks was in regular contact with the British Prime Minister, as well as with the American President. He frequently needed to facilitate sensitive and important communications between Washington and London. It was far too risky to make a telephone call - the lines were certainly bugged. A supposedly secure diplomatic bag, designed for secure correspondence, was sent back and forth each day by air. Not bad, and fine for most work.

But do you know how Sir Oliver sent the absolutely most essential and utterly top secret material?

He refused to trust that to a bag that everyone knew was important.

Instead, he put it in an ordinary envelope and sent it through the mail.

No one would think to look there.

[N. Thomas Wright *Paul For Everyone - 2 Corinthians*, p.44]

Things were not what they first seemed to be.

The plain paper wrapper was no indicator of the value of the contents.

The packaging, which carried the message, was worthless.

The message inside, was of infinite importance.

God has pulled a similar trick.

He has entrusted to very plain, dull-looking people a message of infinite importance.

Things are not what they first seem to be.

If you read some of the earlier sections of 2 Corinthians you'll see that the church there had been rather fixated on the envelope. They'd been evaluating Paul as a person - at his appearance, his speaking style, at the fact that he was now in jail and weak and near death. And based on that they'd concluded that there was nothing remarkable about him. They could write him off. If he was a prophet from God, he surely would seem more impressive than that. [Wright, 44]

But things are not what they first seem to be.

The value is not in the outer packaging.

The value is in the contents.

In fact, it's far better that the packaging is somewhat dull, rather ordinary -- for if it were otherwise people would get confused, and perhaps even the packaging would begin to think that it had primary value, rather than the contents.

The envelope might think that it mattered more than the letter.

That's the life of an apostle - of the messenger of Jesus Christ.

It is a life that carries the death of Jesus in the body of the messenger,
and that prays for the life of Jesus to also be revealed through that.

The messenger, then, lives the gospel message out each day.

Living a weak life, a living death, so to speak,

And praying that the resurrection power of Jesus would be revealed through them.

That's how it works in the economy of heaven.

If we want to live the resurrection life, there will also have to be crucifixion.

That is the gospel.

There is no way around it.

And it is not something that is for each believer on an individual level.
That we suffer for a while in order that later we become rich.
It's not that way at all!

Paul writes that he experiences the death part of living, with the prayer that the life of Jesus would be revealed **among the Corinthians - NOT himself.**

He suffers.

They gain the blessing.

The sacrifice and suffering of believers can and does, in the mystery of heaven, affect those with whom they are living and whom they are serving.

How that all functions we can never really say.

But that it **does** happen is beyond dispute.

Things are not what they first seem to be.

If you want to be an effective messenger for Jesus Christ, an effective servant for the gospel, someone who follows in the footsteps as a diligent apprentice to the master,

what you will be looking for

and praying for

and expecting,

is not first of all opportunities to engage in glamorous or lavish or high profile events.

Instead, if you pray asking Christ to provide you opportunities to follow in his footsteps, you can probably anticipate -

suffering

moments of sacrifice

seasons that are very costly for you

chapters that seem to drain life out of you.

And in those times you may well be ignored.

Won't find your smiling picture in the paper.

Won't be asked to speak at conferences.

Nobody will come up to say thank you.

But this you can know, even as you prayerfully follow in obedience -

that you are a vessel carrying the most important and valuable treasure ever.

and knowing that, you'll be able to keep going.

You can keep going because you will remember that the deal is NOT about the packaging, about the envelope, but about the treasure that it conveys.

It's not about what **I** gain for **my** life.

But how my sacrifice can carry the gospel of Christ **to others.**

That is key for how you and I reflect on our own position in life, and the respective ministries we are part of.

It is also really key for how we think about and speak about and pray for and value other servants of Christ and the ministries they are involved in.

What we DON'T want to do is get confused and sidetracked by how things appear on the outside, like the Corinthians did.

They were looking for a fancy suit, lots of followers, healthy balance sheet, socially well-connected kind of ministry. Not for some malnourished guy in ragged clothes, stuck in jail, with a death sentence hanging over his head.

They wanted Oprah Winfrey, not Diane Morrison.

You may be asking, "Diane who?"

Precisely!!

It's a common trap to fall into - that Corinthian mistake.

People make it all the time.

Getting all mesmerized and fascinated with glamour and profile and power.

So Donald Trump comes to town and for \$1000 you get to attend a VIP reception with him.

And people buy the tickets.

And Entertainment gossip shows are at absolute prime time on the networks - 'cause people eat it up.

Old hockey players lace on figure skates, and people go, "Wow!!!"

How does that fit with the life of Jesus?

How does that fit with the Son of God who laid aside his heavenly power and splendor and beauty and was born into a clay jar of a human body?

Yes - where's the glamour in his life and ministry?

No place he ever called his own - not even a bachelor apartment.

Never owned a limo, let alone a donkey to ride.

Yes, crowds came to listen to him, but they turned their backs on him just as quickly.

And at the end - that clay jar is hung and broken on a cross.

Ah, yes - you're right.

That's not **really** the end.

For there's the resurrection - the **other** piece of the gospel story.

That's the power part,

the victory part,

the part that came **after**.

But during the time of life and ministry -

No, for Jesus there was no glamour.

And we shouldn't expect it for us, either.

What do you read about in 2 Corinthians 4?

affliction, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, living death.

Oh, indeed - not to the point of destruction, to the point of breaking.

That's God's promise - that he won't give us more than we can handle.

Don't you wish, though, that sometimes

he wouldn't push us quite so close to the edge?

How tough were these times for Paul?

He drops us a little clue which we're left to chase.

In the middle of the passage he drops a line -

verse 13....

"I believed, and so I spoke."

There's no clue in your pew bible where that quote comes from.

And it would be easy to pass it by.

But don't. Because it tells us volumes.

It's from Psalm 116.

I'm going to invite you to recite some of that Psalm with me.

The first time I really encountered that Psalm was walking alongside a person suffering from stomach cancer. She knew the end was near. She had struggled her whole life to be faithful to the Lord - had encountered much suffering during World War II, had encountered faith opposition from members of her family,

had never been very well off, was often misunderstood by people around her.
Now she was dying.
Please read Psalm 116, she said.

Here goes -

Psalm 116:1 I love the LORD because he hears and answers my prayers.
2 Because he bends down and listens, I will pray as long as I have breath!
3 Death had its hands around my throat; the terrors of the grave overtook me. I saw only trouble and sorrow.
4 Then I called on the name of the LORD: "Please, LORD, save me!"
5 How kind the LORD is! How good he is! So merciful, this God of ours!
6 The LORD protects those of childlike faith; I was facing death, and then he saved me.
7 Now I can rest again, for the LORD has been so good to me.
8 He has saved me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.
9 And so I walk in the LORD's presence as I live here on earth!
10 I believed in you, so I prayed, "I am deeply troubled, LORD."
11 In my anxiety I cried out to you, "These people are all liars!"
12 What can I offer the LORD for all he has done for me?
13 I will lift up a cup symbolizing his salvation; I will praise the LORD's name for saving me.
14 I will keep my promises to the LORD in the presence of all his people.
15 The LORD's loved ones are precious to him; it grieves him when they die.
16 O LORD, I am your servant; yes, I am your servant, the son of your handmaid, and you have freed me from my bonds!
17 I will offer you a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.
18 I will keep my promises to the LORD in the presence of all his people,
19 in the house of the LORD, in the heart of Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!
[New Living Translation]

Do those sound like the words of a person with an easy life?

But **THAT** is what Paul is referring to in verse 13 -

I believed in you, so I prayed, "I am deeply troubled, LORD."

Like, perhaps the trouble of Jesus on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Paul struggled.

His life anything but glamorous, powerful or successful.

However.....

All is not as it first seems to be.

For Paul writes that all his pain and struggle and heartache are working for something that cannot be seen at the moment.

He is looking **beyond** the world as it is in this present state.

He is looking **towards** the world as it will be when Jesus returns.

He is looking **towards** the New Heaven and New Earth era that were made possible by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and will be brought into visible, physical, rich and wonderful reality by that same Jesus Christ.

When we struggle in the name of Jesus today, the struggle is temporary.

Oh, it may not **feel** temporary.

And the discomfort and challenge and pain are not to be minimized.

But they do not play the final note.

What we live now is merely the prelude.
The glorious fullness of the whole Symphony is yet to come.

Paul keeps that focus.

He doesn't let himself get distracted by only the stuff that he sees around him.

He stays faithful to his calling.

Faithful to the God who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead.

And who, one day, will raise all who remain faithful to Jesus **ALSO** from the dead.

Raise them to eternal life and the weight of glory in the New Creation.

Paul knows that all is not as it first seems to be.

And so he continues to give praise to God.

And desires that the Corinthian Church would remain faithful and give praise to God

and NOT become sidetracked by little sideshows of glitz and glamour and so-called success.

Have one more peek at Psalm 116.

What's the determination of the writer?

It is, that he

in the midst of the struggle

in the midst of the serving

in the midst of it all

that he would give full and public praise to God.

That's what Paul desires.

The more people are praising God, the more the world is taking the shape it was meant to have, and the more God's power goes out to save and heal where those generous blessings are still needed.

Paul calls the Corinthians, and through them he calls us, to share his gratitude to God for the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the promised goal that it brings,

and then to turn our whole experience of life -

- where **we** live the death of Christ, and anticipate the glory,

- where we can turn that whole experience into praise.

[Wright, 50]

Praise rooted in hope.

Hope rooted in Christ's resurrection.

And all of that translated into humble service - wherever God calls us to go.