

2 Cor 4:7–15 The Trials and Results of Christian Ministry

Part 1

Story of the Dead Sea Scrolls—very valuable contents in clay jars. The great scroll of Isaiah sold to a museum for \$250,000 in 1954—about \$2.7 million today. Imagine finding a clay pot with \$2.7M in it! The contents of those clay pots turned out to be very valuable. No one thinks about the pots these days; they value the contents of the pots, not the pots themselves.

In our passage today, Paul talks about treasure stored in “earthen vessels”—clay pots. The Gospel is a great treasure, and those who have the Gospel and who proclaim it are like clay pots. Unfortunately, clay pots are weak and easily damaged. Paul tells us in this text about some of the damage that he’s experienced in Gospel ministry.

One theme that is very clear in the book of 2 Corinthians is that Christian ministry is not easy. At the beginning of the church age, as believers were spreading the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, they faced enormous obstacles. They endured persecution, harassment, and opposition. They faced imprisonment and death in many cases. Yet this opposition could not prevent the early believers from spreading the Gospel message far and wide.

Today, we are facing increased hostility from our culture. Large parts of our society have rejected the Bible, and those who still believe in biblical principles will face increasing opposition to our views. The Christian worldview is now counter-cultural. We live in a post-Christian world. Many today see biblical morality as old fashioned, odd, and even offensive. The majority in our country no longer values the Bible, the church, or Christian views of morality. Many promote and defend wicked, anti-biblical, perverse and profane ideas and behaviors. So we face considerable opposition and hostility to the Gospel message and to the Christian lifestyle—just like Christians did almost 2000 years ago.

This section of the text talks about the trials and the results of Christian ministry. Paul tells us about some of the troubles that he experienced, but also about the results of his ministry. And the obvious implication here is that the trouble is worth the costs because of the results. If people are being saved and God is receiving the glory, then all the trouble is worth it.

Likewise, if we engage in Christian ministry, we will experience some of the same afflictions, opposition, and trials listed here. We probably won't face imprisonment and death, at least, not in the near-term future; but we will have problems. But these problems should not stop us from participating in Christian ministry. The work of God is costly, but the results are worth the efforts. It's a great privilege to **contain** the treasure of the Gospel and to **convey** that message to others. That's the theme of this great passage—containing and conveying the Gospel message. We have the message, and it's our duty to speak that message to others.

Perhaps some here today who would consider pursuing Christian ministry as a vocation. I would highly encourage you to contemplate that option in spite of the high costs of vocational Christian ministry. Any efforts that we expend for Christ and for his people are worth the accompanying trials.

Let's consider what Paul says about the trials and the results of Christian ministry. Today we'll look at the *trials and hardships* often involved when we engage in ministry, and then, DV, next time we'll look at the positive *results* that make the costs worth the effort.

I. The trials of the ministry may be many and severe.

A. .7 The physical body is weak and fragile.

Paul describes himself and his colleagues as “earthen vessels” or “clay pots” (ὄστράκιος). What did he mean by that? In what way are we like clay pots? What's the comparison? I think Paul had two ideas in mind here:

1. Clay pots are fairly fragile; they are easy to break. Clay is not a strong or robust material. It breaks, chips, and cracks fairly easily.

The human body is sort of like a clay pot. We are in some respects weak and frail. We are mortal, subject to all kinds of problems and subject to death. Paul had suffered tremendous physical persecution and hardship for the Gospel. The human body is rather like a clay pot in its imperfection and weakness.

2. Clay pots are not especially valuable. Clay pots were fairly cheap in Bible times. Every household had a bunch of clay pots, and it was no great tragedy if one broke. You didn't usually repair a clay pot; you'd just throw it away and get a new one; they were cheap and plentiful.

Clay pots were the zip-lock bags or the cheap plastic containers of the ancient world.

Paul is not speaking about fine china here; he doesn't refer to himself as an expensive Grecian urn or golden goblet. He's talking about cheap, common earthenware containers—ordinary, average clay pots. That's how he pictures himself—an ordinary, expendable container; just a vessel. The Gospel *message* is a treasure, not the *messenger* who carries it and conveys it to others. The DSS were valuable, not the pots that contained them.

App: The picture here is of human helplessness, weakness, and fragility. The demands of the ministry are very high, but human nature is very weak.

However, human weakness is part of God's plan. God's power shines most strongly through weak and frail vessels. God can use people who know and who admit how weak they are.

2 Cor 12:9 *my strength is made perfect in weakness*

Ps 103:14 *For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.*

App: Christian ministry depends on ordinary, average clay pots—normal, everyday people. God has entrusted us with a great treasure, and it's our responsibility to serve God and others with that treasure in spite of our weaknesses.

Maybe you think of yourself as nothing more than a clay pot; that's good. Maybe you have a few chips and cracks. That's OK; God can use clay pots; they play an important role in God's program. Don't exclude yourself from serving God just because you are rather average. Even if you are ordinary, average, and mundane, God can still use you for his purposes. Old cool whip containers have good uses; there are good reasons to keep them around.

The fact that we are like clay pots is not an excuse for sin, but it does explain natural human weakness and failure. God can use ordinary people—even “crack pots” like some of us.

B. Christian ministry is often very difficult. .8-12

In vss. 8-12, we have a list of some of the difficulties and trials that Paul and his colleagues experienced as they sought to spread the Gospel message. This was their experience in planting churches. Most people who serve the Lord in Christian ministry will experience some of these same trials and problems.

1. .8 “hard pressed” (θλίβω) – squashed like grapes; i.e., afflicted, distressed, troubled. Paul uses this word or very similar one 12 times in the book; this was a common experience. The word emphasizes the pressures of ministry.

Note that this affliction and distress was “on every side.” Those who serve God in the ministry often experience *many* forms of pressure/distress—physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, social, familial, financial, etc. Pressure is part of Christian ministry. At times it seems like that pressure is all around us, “on every side.”

“Burn out” in Christian ministry is rather common. Some situations create a lot of pressure for pastors and missionaries, and they eventually can’t take it anymore. It’s a tragedy when a church makes it so difficult on a pastor that he quits the ministry. It’s tragic when circumstances become so distressing that a missionary has to leave the field and come home.

Many involved in Christian ministry have experienced great pressure and stress. It’s one of the hazards of that occupation.

2. .8b “perplexed”—without resources, at a loss; uncertain, anxious

There are a lot of frustrations in the ministry, things you wish you could fix but can’t. We often face complex problems we don’t know how to deal with. People tell us their problems and expect us to give them a solution. We often feel like we don’t have the resources to fix people’s problems. “They didn’t teach me that in seminary.”

3. .9a “persecuted”—hunted, chased, like a criminal or a fugitive hunted by the police.

For some people in Christian ministry, this literally happens. They face genuine persecution; they are hunted down and arrested.

4. .9b “struck down”—to suffer, to be badly hurt, to be laid low, to be abused, to be killed.

The word may describe a wrestler throwing an opponent to the floor. Sometimes in ministry you may feel like you’ve been body-slammed.

1 Corinthians 4:11–13 *To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. ... Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; 13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*

Paul experienced floggings, stonings, mobbings, imprisonments, labors, shipwrecks, muggings, sleeplessness, exposure, thirst, and hunger.¹ He was near death many times; he narrowly escaped with his life many times.

And if it’s not physical abuse and mistreatment, it could be mental, financial, or spiritual abuse that someone experiences.

Many pastors face personal antagonism and opposition every time they get up to preach. Every Sunday, they look out at church members who have a personal vendetta against them. They deal with people who are trying to undercut and sabotage their ministry. Most pastors won’t put up with that for too long.

5. .10 “always carrying about ... the dying of the Lord Jesus”

Jesus fulfilled his goals through suffering and death, and it may be that suffering and death is part of God’s providence for us as well.

As an apostle, Paul was a representative of Jesus; and such, Paul experienced similar forms of mistreatment. Jesus was beaten, abused, mocked, and murdered. And the early Christians experienced the same kinds of mistreatment; they faced constant peril and impending death.

¹ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 224.

The text says, literally, “always the dying of Jesus in the body bearing.” The passage emphasizes the death/dying of Jesus. In fact, the word he uses here (νέκρωσις) is not his normal word for “death” (θάνατος). This word refers to the rotting corpse, putrefying flesh, the decay of death.

Paul was often in imminent danger of death; death was around every corner. Note the “always” – this was his normal experience. He was under threat of death virtually all the time.

Notice the phrase “in the body” – there was a physical cost to this work. All these trials and tribulations had an adverse effect on the human body. Just like Jesus bore the scars of his death, so Paul bore the marks of his loyalty to Jesus. He truly suffered for Jesus.

Gal 6:17 ... *I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.*

I imagine that Paul’s body was full of scars. I imagine that he was in almost constant pain from all the times he’d been beaten and flogged and stoned.

There are still many people today who are suffering physically because of their loyalty to Jesus. Around the world, people bear the marks of suffering for Christ. For many people, physical suffering is part of the ministry. For some, death is the result of their ministry for Christ.

6. .11 “delivered (παραδίδωμι: ‘to give over, to hand over.’²) to death” – it’s the same word as “betrayed.”

Illus.: The story of William Tyndale.

In Christian ministry, betrayal by people you thought were your friends happens sometimes. It’s happened to me.

7. .12 “death is working in us” – the apostles were willing to risk their lives to bring the Gospel message to the world. They were willing to risk physical *death* so that others could enjoy spiritual *life*.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 566.

Quote: Christ crucified is not only [Paul's] message, but it is also his model. He has become the suffering apostle of the suffering Messiah. ... Paul knew suffering beyond the imagination of many but endured because he also knew the power of the resurrection.³

These were the trials and tribulations of the Christian ministry for Paul and his companions. They endured all of these hazards for two reasons: “for Jesus’ sake” (.11) and “for your sakes” (.15). They were willing to risk their lives and face the constant threat of death out of service for Christ and for the benefit of those who would be saved. That should be our motivation as well—we serve for Christ and for others.

If you engage in Christian ministry, expect opposition and hostility. You probably won't suffer like Paul or the other apostles did, but it may be costly and uncomfortable at times. You may experience opposition and hostility. We should expect that and not be surprised by it. It should not deter us. We must endure these trials and not lose heart or quit.

Serving the Lord is often difficult. It's costly and troublesome and often inconvenient to be a SS teacher, a nursery worker, a helper in VBS, a deacon.

Christian ministry is often very difficult—physically, mentally, spiritually, financially, and in other ways. Those who serve often experience pressure on every side. Some are abused, some are killed because of their desire to serve Christ and his church. But like Paul and his colleagues, we must endure and continue serving no matter the cost.

What makes Christian ministry worth the effort and worth all the pain and suffering associated with it? It may sound like I'm warning you *not* to be involved in Christian ministry. But there are good reasons to participate in the ministry, and Paul next tells us that the results of the ministry make the trials worthwhile.

³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 230.