

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

Part 2

Three weeks ago, we began looking at this passage in which Paul talks about treasure stored in clay pots. The Gospel is a great treasure, and those who have the Gospel and who proclaim it to others are the clay pots.

At the beginning of the church age, as believers were spreading the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, they faced enormous obstacles, including persecution, harassment, and opposition. They faced imprisonment and death in many cases. Yet none of this opposition prevented 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 experience increasing opposition to our views. That opposition leads to difficulties in the Christian ministry.

Part of our text talks about the trials of Christian ministry, which are often many and severe. Paul tells us about some of the troubles that he experienced, including various pressures, frustrations, persecutions, afflictions, abuse, and the constant threat of death. That was his experience as he engaged in Christian ministry.

Likewise, if we participate in Christian ministry, we will experience some of the same afflictions, opposition, and trials. But these problems should not stop us from involvement in Christian ministry. The work of God is costly, but the results are worth the efforts. It's a great privilege to serve as a clay pot. We *contain* the treasure of the Gospel and *convey* that message to others.

Christian ministry is costly and often painful. But we should also keep in mind that the results of ministry far outweigh the costs. Let's consider what Paul says about the results of Christian ministry.

Paul's basic theme here is that, in spite of the many and severe difficulties,...

II. The results of the ministry make the trials worthwhile.

A. .7 We have the glorious Gospel message—“this treasure”

1. Clay pots can contain fantastic treasures. In the ancient world, people stored valuable things in clay pots. You could open a clay pot and find gold, silver, and precious jewels. Valuable documents might be stored in a clay pot—like the DSS.
2. The “treasure” in view here is the truth of the Gospel and of the Christian worldview (cf. 4:6). This Gospel is kept in a clay pots—that is, people like us, those who serve the Lord. We are the clay pots who contain the treasure.
3. The supreme thing is the *message*, not the *messenger*. We are all just a bunch of clay pots. But God has given us the privilege of *containing* and *conveying* the glorious, valuable message.

Quote: The striking contrast between the splendour of the treasure and the commonness of the vessel in which it is stored directs attention away from the preachers to the glory of the message they proclaim.¹

4. The glorious divine message of the Gospel is housed in contemptible, weak, cheap vessels. The vessel is insignificant. The message it contains is valuable and beautiful. Thus, God must receive the glory in the ministry.

Psalm 115:1 *Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, But to Your name give glory, Because of Your mercy, Because of Your truth.*

Illus.: Jim Elliot martyred at age 29 clearly understood Paul's description of precious treasure in mere jars of clay when he described himself and his co-workers as a “bunch of nobodies trying to exalt Somebody.”²

App: We should see it as a great privilege that God has entrusted the Gospel message to us. We are nothing but clay pots, but we “have this treasure.” It's a great honor and privilege to be used of God to communicate this truth to others.

¹ Collin Brow, NIDNTT

² https://www.preceptaustin.org/2corinthians_47-9_commentary#4:7

All of us ought to be somehow engaged in this great effort/ministry— “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6). We have this treasure, and we want to spread the wealth to others.

- B. .7b We experience the power of God. Since the human vessel is so fragile and weak, whatever success happens is due to the power of God, not to human ability or talent.

Notice the language here: “excellence of the power” (NKJV) = “overflow/excess of power” (ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς δυνάμεως)

Paul had firsthand experience with suffering and affliction, but he also experienced the extraordinary power of God. He was an apostle and experienced God’s supernatural power working through him.

.7end But he knew that this overwhelming power was “not of us.” The Christian minister is just a clay pot; he’s nothing special. Whatever is accomplished in Christian ministry is due to the power of God, not from human manipulation. The Christian ministry is no place for glory seekers or show offs. It’s no place for manipulation or high pressure tactics. It’s a great shame that many churches employ high pressure and manipulation tactics rather than trusting the power of God.

We are not the Holy Spirit; God must do the work. We do what we can, but we don’t try to do what only God can do. The results of ministry should come through the power of God, not through human manipulation.

We are not apostles, and we don’t expect miraculous apostolic power to flow through us. But we still may experience a measure of the power of God. It’s a wonderful privilege to see God work in the lives of people we are serving. We want to be the kind of clay pots that God is willing to use.

Illus.: Years ago, I read a book titled “The Man God Uses.” I want to be the kind of person that God can use. I want to be used of God to reach people with this Gospel treasure. I hope you want that as well.

- C. .8f We persevere in the work in spite of the obstacles.

Paul survived a lot of abuse and mistreatment without entirely cracking up. He has chips and cracks in his “earthen vessel,” but he is still intact. God has sustained him through all his afflictions.

Quote: Even though Paul may look like death, his suffering is really ... the way God has chosen to reveal and spread the gospel.³

Paul now gives us a list of difficulties that he had endured. He had persevered through all these difficult experiences in Christian ministry.

1. .8a We are “not crushed” – hemmed in, completely overwhelmed, confined, cornered; literally “to be squeezed in a narrow/tight place.”

Paul had experienced all sorts of stress and pressure—“pressed on every side”—but it did not cause him to quit; it did not crush/squeeze him to death. He was not ready to give up or surrender.

Many pastors, missionaries, and Christian workers experience extreme pressure, but they don’t give up. They keep plodding on for the sake of Christ and of his church. We don’t want to fold or give up under pressure.

2. .8b “not in despair” – these two words, “perplexed, despair” are based on the same root word in the original language (ἀπορέω/ἐξαπορέω). We could translate them “doubting, but not doubting greatly.” Or “to be at a loss but not in utter despair.” Or “to be anxious but not overcome by anxiety.”

The old earthen vessel is chipped and cracked, but not smashed.

Probably many Christian workers could say the same thing. We admit that Christian ministry is difficult, but we have not quit. We’ve endured many trials, but we keep on going.

3. .9 “not forsaken” – to be left behind, deserted, abandoned. Many others had forsaken Paul, but God had not forsaken him.

A very common feeling in times of trouble is that God has forsaken us. But that is impossible; Jesus promised never to leave us or forsake us. Even under heavy distress and persecution, we should not think that God has forsaken us.

4. .9end “not destroyed.” He had been knocked down, but not knocked out; thrown down but not pinned; badly hurt but not killed.

³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 228.

5. His point is that, in spite of the problems in ministry, we continue in the work. We don't quit. The power of God keeps us going.

Unfortunately, many pastors and missionaries have experienced exactly what Paul is talking about here. And like Paul, they have not quit; they continue on for the sake of Christ and his church.

That tenacious perseverance ought to be our attitude as well.

D. .10-11 Others see Christ because of our suffering.

1. .10b "the life of Jesus" is "manifested in our body." .11b "the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."
2. The result of all that suffering was that Jesus was "manifested" or displayed/revealed to others. God had spared Paul's life; he had suffered, but he had not quit; he had not died. God kept him alive. In the midst of all this suffering, people were being saved. Sinners were gaining spiritual life because Paul was willing to risk his life and suffer persecution.
3. It could be that the way we respond to trials and suffering has an impact on others. Others notice how our commitment to Christ affects the way we respond to the trials of life. Trials give us the opportunity to be a good witness for Christ.
4. What does it say about God when we quit serving him because the pressure becomes too great? "There's too much opposition, too many personal threats. Serving God is too inconvenient and costly." I guess we would have to admit that God's grace and power are not able to sustain us.

Pr 24:10 *If you faint in the day of adversity, Your strength is small.*

5. Persevering in ministry in spite of the obstacles is a way of demonstrating or revealing our commitment to Christ. It's a testimony of God's grace when we face difficulties without quitting.

E. .12b Others are saved.

1. "but life in you." Paul and his companions brought a message of life to the people in Corinth. That message nearly caused the death of the apostles, but it brought life to the Corinthians. Paul and his companions suffered and risked their lives so that others might enjoy spiritual life—salvation.

2. The salvation of souls makes all the cost and efforts worthwhile. We can bear the difficulties of ministry because we can see the lost being saved and the saved growing in the Lord. Through our weakness, we see the power of God on display.
3. Many thousands of Christian missionaries have risked their lives and even lost their lives to bring the message of life to the unsaved. It brought suffering and often death to the missionaries but life to those who heard and accepted the Gospel.

Illus.: Jim Eliot and his colleagues were killed in their mission work, but their death led to the salvation of hundreds of people and hundreds of others going into the ministry. Their ministry resulted in death for themselves, but it resulted in life for many others.

Christian ministry of any kind can be difficult. Being a SS teacher, a nursery worker, a musician, a VBS helper—these ministries are often not easy. We don't risk our lives to serve in this way, but ministry can be taxing, costly, inconvenient, and annoying. But the results can be and should be worth our efforts. To see those we are serving grow and mature and live the Christian life makes the effort worthwhile.

1 Corinthians 15:58 *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.*

I hope you want to be part of that great work as well.

F. We have confidence. .13-15

1. .13 We have confidence in the *message*. -- we believe and speak
This is a quote from Ps 116:10. Paul is just lifting some of the language from that text to affirm his confidence in the Gospel. In spite of all the hardship and suffering, he still believes the Gospel and is still proclaiming it.

We should have confidence to speak about this as well. If we believe it, we should not hesitate to speak about it. Affliction and opposition should not prevent us from speaking.

The Christian minister *contains* a message and *conveys* that message. We are both *pots* and *proclaimers*. We have the *treasure* within ourselves, but then we also *transfer* it to other. We both believe and speak; we speak because we believe. We should not be ashamed to do so—Rom 1:16. We should take every opportunity to speak for God.

2. .14 We have confidence for the *future* -- “he who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus.” Even if his enemies kill him, Paul is confident that he will experience resurrection. The final outcome is assured; Christ will resurrect those who are his. The future is certain.

The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee that the Gospel message is true. Christ’s resurrection guarantees the resurrection of all those who believe in him.

We know that Jesus rose from the dead, and that fact gives us confidence to believe and speak.

3. .15 We have confidence in the *results* -- “grace...may cause thanksgiving to the glory of God.”

Those involved in Christian ministry face many obstacles, but the results make the efforts worthwhile.

.15 Notice three main reasons/purposes for participating in Christian ministry:

- (1) for the benefit of God’s people (“for your sakes”). When ministry is tough, remember why you are doing it—for the benefit of others. You never know how others are responding to your service on their behalf.
- (2) for the conversion of the lost (the spread/increase/multiplication of grace). We can be vessels through whom God’s grace flows. God reaches others through us. We should want to be used as a conduit for God’s grace.
- (3) for the glory of God. Here is the ultimate goal of all the work and hardship involved in Christian ministry—the glory of God. The highest aim/purpose in all our work for the Lord is that God would get the glory.

In our ministry, the glory of God should be the final and highest goal. We are not engaged in ministry for ourselves. We do it for the benefit of others, and ultimately, for the glory of God.

God uses clay jars—human vessels—to accomplish his purposes. And even though it's a difficult task, with the potential for perplexity, persecution, opposition, and even violence, the Christian minister perseveres. We are confident that the Christian Gospel brings salvation to those who accept it. Our highest goal is to glorify God through serving God's people.

Those who engage in Christian ministry don't do it for themselves. If you want to have an easy life and avoid persecution, opposition, and threats of violence, then Christian ministry is not the place for you. But if you are willing to endure the difficulties of ministry for the sake of God's glory and for the benefit of God's people, then perhaps God could use a clay pot like you in his service.

If you are saved, it's because someone brought you the Gospel message, and you accepted it. The one who brought you the message was nothing but a clay pot, an "earthen vessel." If you are saved, it should result in thanksgiving and praise to God—not so much for the clay pot, but for the treasure of the Gospel.

Maybe some of the clay pots here today should think about how God could use you to take this treasure to others. Maybe some of us could participate more fully in Christian ministry. Maybe some could be like Paul in risking his life to bring the Gospel message to those who had never heard it. What a wonderful privilege it is to be the *container* for this great treasure and to *convey* this treasure to others. Don't neglect this great privilege, and don't let anything stop you from engaging in this great work.