

Learning a Lesson, Cultivating a Vision

2 Corinthians 4:7-11

Maggie Fontanini's Testimony. We wanted Maggie to share her story as a lead-in to what we're going to talk about the next three weeks leading up to Easter. Namely, we are going to discuss how the uncertainty and disruption and loss and hardship of these days provides an opportunity for us to learn some specific, profound lessons that we might miss when our lives are "normal." Those lessons are very much related to our identity in Christ, our identity as people who are united with Him in His death and resurrection.

Without in any way suggesting that God *sent* COVID-19 to teach us something, we can say with great confidence that God wants to *use* the hardship and loss and disruptions we're experiencing to teach us some deep lessons. As we learned in James 1, God never wastes a perfectly good trial to refine us and to conform us to the image of Christ.

The idea that God wants to refine us through trials is something we talk about quite often. But rarely has the church experienced a trial like this one that brings *all of us* face to face with our weakness and helplessness; rarely have we experienced a trial like this one that shatters the illusion that we are in control of our lives. The fact that I am here in an empty worship center and you are watching at home demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are not in control of our lives and that in many ways we are weak and helpless.

During the next several weeks and months we have the opportunity to learn some things that will sustain us during this season and might change the way we live our lives permanently. If you are a follower of Christ, your goal should not be to "get back to normal." All of us have habits and priorities that need to change. This is true whether you are just beginning to walk with Christ or whether you've been walking closely with Him for decades. This lockdown has revealed to me ways that I need to change my daily and weekly routine. If we are teachable, God can use these weeks and months to teach us some deep lessons and give us a vision for a new way of living.

For that to happen we need to interpret our hardship and loss through the grid of Scripture (vs. the grid of our emotions or the grid of our culture). [See NOTE at end of message.] The next three weeks we'll see how Paul interpreted his hardship and suffering; we'll see that he patterned his suffering after that of Christ. We will be studying 2 Corinthians 4 and 5.

The hardships we're experiencing due to COVID-19 are very different than Paul's hardships. Paul suffered because of his calling to take the gospel to people who'd never heard it; out of obedience Paul walked into hardship like a soldier into battle. By contrast, COVID-19 has happened to us; we didn't choose it. Nevertheless, if we're teachable, we can learn the same lessons he did. When we learn those lessons, we can have the same vision for our lives that he had for his.

The Lessons of Hardship and the Vision that Follows. (2 Corinthians 4:7-11)

In the previous paragraph Paul explained how God shone the light of the gospel into their hearts so that they could shine the light of the gospel to others. In other words, Paul and his fellow believers were now God's chosen means of shining His light into this world, helping people come to faith in Jesus. In verse 7 Paul makes a striking contrast:

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

Paul refers to the message of the gospel as "this treasure." In chapters 3 and 4 Paul has been describing how the glory of the new covenant far surpasses the glory of the old covenant. The message about Jesus and the salvation He gives is so valuable that Paul calls it a treasure. Jesus also likened the kingdom of God to a treasure buried in a field (Mt. 13:44).

The irony, Paul writes, is that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels"; the NIV translates it "jars of clay." By calling the human body a clay pot, Paul is pointing out how humble we are in comparison to the infinitely-valuable message we bring to others. Clay jars were inexpensive, fragile, and disposable. Jars made out of metal were durable and could be repaired; jars made out of glass were expensive and could be melted down and remade. But a jar made out of clay was just thrown away if it broke. "We have this treasure in jars of clay"; the glorious gospel lives in a very fragile container.

I think that our experience with the COVID-19 confirms that we are clay pots; a virus has disrupted life as we know it. We have daily reminders that we are not invincible or indestructible. Scripture likens humanity to grass that withers and flowers that fade. We live in mortal bodies, bodies that are subject to sickness and death. If you're a believer in Jesus, when He returns you will be raised immortal with a body akin to His resurrection body. But in this life we live in bodies that are frail and mortal.

BUT, Paul writes, ***this is by God's design***. God put this treasure in clay pots (us) so that "the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." In other words, God wanted to demonstrate His power through weak, frail human beings so that nobody would mistakenly think that we are powerful in and of ourselves. Our weakness is a constant reminder that God is the Strong One in this relationship.

In chapter 12 Paul writes of being given "a thorn in the flesh" - probably some type of physical limitation - to keep him from being prideful. Here's what we read in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 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. 10 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.

Paul learned a deep humility through his suffering. Humility means saying to God, "If my weakness, loss, and hardship provides a showcase for Your power, then so be it."

In verses 8 and 9 Paul gives four examples of the hardships and limitations he experienced. See if you can relate to any of these.

8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed." Paul experienced all sorts of hardships/afflictions - physical, personal, emotional. In chapter 11 he will mention being beaten with rods, stoned, robbed, hungry and thirsty. Yet, he writes, "but not crushed." He survived his afflictions with his faith intact; he persevered.

"Perplexed, but not despairing." Things happened to Paul that he didn't understand; this suggests that you can be spiritually mature and still be perplexed. Significantly, Paul was perplexed, but not despairing. The fact he didn't understand everything that happened to him didn't make him throw up his hands and say, "What's the use!?!?"

This pandemic is very perplexing; it's incredibly bewildering to live in a town that's in lockdown. We don't know how long it will last and what it will mean medically, economically, socially, etc. But Paul demonstrated that it is possible to be perplexed without despairing. It is possible to have joy in the midst of circumstances that we don't understand. As a matter of fact, if we feel like we need to figure everything out before we can thrive and have joy and peace, we're setting ourselves up for a life of fear and frustration. "Perplexed, but not despairing."

"Persecuted, but not forsaken." Paul experienced persecution almost everywhere he preached the gospel - both verbal and physical. And yet God never abandoned Him. After commanding His people to "go and make disciples among all the nations," Jesus added, "And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Paul experienced that firsthand.

"Struck down, but not destroyed." To use a boxing analogy, Paul was knocked down but never knocked out.

In verses 10 and 11 Paul explains more specifically what he's been talking about. In these verses he says that his hardships are analogous to Jesus' suffering and death; and his perseverance is analogous to Jesus' resurrection life.

10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

Paul is speaking about their bodily suffering when he mentions “*carrying about in the body*” the dying/death of Jesus. When they were “afflicted. . . perplexed. . . persecuted. . . struck down” they were suffering the way Jesus suffered. He experienced those same types of things. When they persevered bodily, “*the life of Jesus was being manifested in [their] bodies.*” When they were “. . .not crushed. . . not despairing. . .not forsaken. . .not destroyed,” they were experiencing the resurrection life of Jesus. They persevered because Jesus was alive and sustaining them by the power of the Spirit.

In verse 11 Paul changes the imagery just a bit but makes the same point:

11 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.

Again he’s talking about their bodily experience of being put into deadly situations for the cause of Christ. Every time he went into a new city and talked about Christ, Paul was potentially being “delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake.” But Paul took that risk because that was the only way that ***the life of Jesus*** could be manifested in their mortal flesh! We don’t get the impression that he wished he were living a life of ease and comfort. In Philippians 3 Paul said that he suffered the loss of all things so that He might know Christ in a comprehensive way; he wanted to know both the power of His resurrection ***and*** the fellowship of His sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

I’d summarize this passage this way: Because Paul willingly suffered hardship (being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, knocked down) and persevered, his life was a parable of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because he ***learned humility and suffered well, he embodied the gospel*** whereby people heard and saw the truth about Jesus.

Let’s consider how this COVID-19 ordeal is an opportunity for us to learn humility and to cultivate a vision for embodying the gospel.

Learn Humility.

This current pandemic provides an opportunity for every single one of us to deepen our humility in some way. I’d have you evaluate what you’ve been experiencing the past couple of weeks and what you will experience in the days ahead. Pay attention to what aspect of humility God might want to teach you. It will vary from person to person.

You may need to learn how to be perplexed without despairing. As I mentioned, there are many things that are perplexing about this virus, its spread, and its consequences. We will probably get clarity and answers as time goes on. But we can cultivate a type of humility that trusts God even before we have answers, even while we’re overwhelmed with “what if’s” and “if only’s.”

In addition to today’s passage, the book of Job can help. It’s really a case study in being perplexed to the glory of God. Job experienced devastating loss. His initial response was worship and faith: “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. . . Shall we accept

good from God and not adversity?" (see Job 1:20-22, 2:9-10). But his friends couldn't live with ambiguity; they had air-tight logic that explained Job's suffering. They tried to convince Job that his suffering had to be the result of some sin in his life. Being perplexed wasn't an option for them, even though the readers know they didn't have a clue. Maybe we need to learn the type of humility that allows for being perplexed without despairing.

Some of you are experiencing financial hardship because your hours have been cut or because your clients/customers aren't spending money. In Philippians 4 Paul said that he learned the secret of being content in whatever circumstance he found himself (both having abundance and suffering need). If you're suffering financially, learning humility could mean a number of different things: learning to cry out to God in prayer and in faith, learning to ask other people for help, learning to cast all your anxieties upon God because He cares for you. Financial stress is one of the core ways we learn that God is the Strong One in our relationship with Him.

Some of you are working really long hours keeping the rest of us safe and fed: those of you who work in grocery stores and in healthcare (pharmacies, doctor's offices, hospitals, care facilities, etc.) and caring for children (without being able to leave home). I was in the grocery store on Tuesday and I saw a woman in the self-checkout who's served me for years. She looked exhausted. I asked her, "Has everybody been nice to you today?" She paused and said, "Some people have been very rude to me today." I told her, "I'm so sorry that happened. I'll pray for you." And I did. Maybe you're exhausted because you're working longer hours than everybody you know. It's hard not to get bitter and resentful when you're exhausted from work. Humility involves caring about the needs of others even when you're exhausted.

Your situation may be very different from anything I've described. Maybe you're experiencing loss like Maggie described earlier - the loss of experiences that you anticipated for a long time. Whatever your weeks are like, I'd encourage you to evaluate your life and notice how you're responding to your specific circumstances. Pay attention to ways God wants to teach you humility. Humility invites the grace of God; He is opposed to the proud.

Today's passage also challenges us to . . .

Cultivate a vision for embodying the gospel.

Paul definitely preached the gospel with words. He announced the good news that Jesus suffered and died for our sins and was resurrected on the third day to live forever; if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you will avoid spending eternity in hell and you will experience eternal life in the new heaven and new earth. He preached the gospel in words.

But as we've seen today, he also embodied the gospel. Through his **body** Paul demonstrated the gospel for people: he suffered and he persevered so that others could see both the suffering and the resurrection life of Christ. He **embodied** the gospel.

We need to understand that ***if Paul hadn't learned humility through his suffering, he never would have embodied the gospel.*** Because he learned humility through his weaknesses, he didn't fear suffering for the cause of Christ. He knew that God's grace was sufficient; God's power showed up in the midst of his weakness. Paul basically said to God, "I am willing to endure any amount of hardship and suffering because that's what that what it means to **be** a disciple and that's what it takes to **make** disciples" (see 1 For. 9:6).

Paul's example is a powerful challenge to me. His way of embodying the gospel challenges me to examine my core attitudes about sharing the gospel. Embodying the gospel doesn't happen by accident; it cannot be an afterthought. And it's not without cost. Embodying the gospel requires cultivating the type of deep humility that Paul had; it requires being so enamored with Jesus that we genuinely desire to know Christ in a comprehensive way - both the power of His resurrection AND the fellowship of His sufferings.

I'm not suggesting that we should go out looking for trouble or persecution. But I am suggesting that if we genuinely humble ourselves before God, we will take more risks in sharing Christ because we aren't afraid of insults and opposition and rejection. We will have learned what Paul learned - that God's grace is sufficient.

Would you join me over the next few weeks and months in examining your attitudes toward sharing Christ with others? Let's not miss this opportunity to cultivate a vision for embodying the gospel.

I will pray now. After I pray you will see on your screen a couple of discussion questions suggested by this message; they will be there for a few minutes. If you're with other people, take some time to discuss these question; if you're alone, take some time to ponder and pray about your responses to these questions.

Pray.

How might you learn humility during these weeks of uncertainty, disruption, and loss?

How might that humility prepare you to take risks and to embody the gospel?

NOTE: Everybody mentioned in the Bible who walked with God experienced hardship and loss; we simply don't have examples of people who walked with God for whom everything was "up and to the right" (where they only experienced increase and prosperity and success). What we find is that ***their suffering was an essential aspect of their walk with God***. If they hadn't suffered, they wouldn't have become men and women God could use.

The second king of Israel, for example, King David, basically spent the decade of his 20s on the run (living in caves and mountains and among the Philistines) because King Saul was trying to kill him out of jealousy. If he hadn't lived in exile during those years, he never would have written many of the psalms in which he cries out to God for protection (see Psalm 35, 40, etc.).