

How Can We Find Strength To Cope?

by Ron R. Ritchie

'Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock. [A wise man builds his life on Jesus Christ and his words.] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house [his life] on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.'

In these words of Jesus, spoken at the end of his wonderful Sermon on the Mount, is found the secret of coping with reality. We are encouraged to build our life on him, the solid Rock; to depend upon him for power and strength to cope with the storms and stresses of life.

I often think of these words of our Lord when I hear the claims of the advocates of the 'human potential' and the 'new age' movements. As long as the weather holds, of course, their house looks like it has been well constructed. But when the test comes, when the storms of life blow around that structure that has been built on sand great will be the collapse of that life.

With this in mind we resume our studies in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, seeking to find the answer to the question, 'Where can we find the strength to cope with our present realities?' This letter is called the apostle's 'thankful letter.' He is writing in response to the Corinthians' reception of a previous letter from him (known as his 'painful' letter) in which he took the Corinthian church to task over sexual immorality in their midst. Paul has already explained why he could not visit them as he had planned. Certain hardships which he had suffered in Asia had prevented him. 'We were under great pressure,' he wrote in the first chapter of this letter, 'far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.'

That experience had taught Paul the principles of the new covenant, God's new arrangement for living. No matter how the outward circumstances may appear, Christians are always being led in triumphal procession in Christ; they always manifest the 'sweet fragrance of the knowledge of Christ' to those who are being saved, while to those who are perishing they are 'the smell of death'; they are always acceptable in the sight of God because of Christ; they are always 'competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit.' Because of these realities in their lives they have boldness, transparency, Christ likeness, and freedom to minister in the Spirit without veils, without masks. Further, Paul wrote, Christians 'do not preach themselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, for God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.' As Christians proclaim Christ, many times his word will break through the darkness and change lives of those with whom they come in contact.

I have seen this happen many many times with people I never thought would come to faith in Christ. Just yesterday a woman who lives on my street came to my house and told me she had become a Christian. When she moved to the area a year ago and first visited our home I became aware of the trials and difficulties she faced living as a single mother. Together with a few friends I began to pray for her, and yesterday we got the good news that the 'God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son' had saved her out of darkness and death.

Reading this 'thankful letter,' the Corinthians may well have imagined that Paul was some kind of super being, that no one could live and share Christ like the apostle. Where could they find the strength to cope like Paul? they may well have wondered. Paul's answer is,

1. Realize our power comes from God 4:7-12

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.'

'But,' Paul begins. He is making a contrast with what he has just said about God who causes his light to shine in our hearts and the fact that there is a spiritual battle being fought over the hearts and minds of men, a battle between God and Satan. Yet God can break through the blindness of men and make his light shine in their hearts. Paul himself is Exhibit 'A,' a living demonstration of the truth of this. On the Damascus Road he experienced the light of Christ as he was on his way to persecute the new church.

What is Paul referring to when he says we have this 'treasure'? He is speaking of 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (verse 6). The resurrected Jesus, living in our hearts, motivates us to preach the good news to Jews and Gentiles alike, the good news of John 3:16-17: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever would believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him.' The Lord himself and his word of grace is the 'treasure' which Paul is talking about.

Christians have this treasure, Paul says, 'in jars of clay.' We are not the treasure, rather we are the containers that hold the treasure. This is how Elihu, Job's friend, regarded himself. He said to Job, 'Behold, I belong to God like you. I too have been formed out of the clay.' (Job 33:6) The Corinthians would understand what Paul meant here. They used clay jars of all shapes and sizes to hold milk, fruit, flour, oil, whatever, in that culture. Clay jars, they knew, were made to contain things. As a clay jar, man was designed to contain the living God, who would make man's life purposeful, useful and fulfilling. Most people in the world, however, are going around empty and despairing. That is why, for example, teenage suicide is on the rise. Young people feel empty and cheated. Their expectations in life are not being fulfilled. They can't cope with reality because of the emptiness they feel inside.

The reason the 'treasure' is contained in jars of clay is simple: 'to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us,' Paul declares. This is the same power that caused light to shine out of darkness at creation, the same power that can break through hardened hearts and minds and make enemies of our Lord into servants of Jesus Christ. That presence and power is expressed in and through man, a clay jar, by means of the Holy Spirit, to show that the source of that power is God, not man. That has been God's way of working down through the ages as he has demonstrated his plan of salvation in the world, using weak men and women, clay jars, to fulfill his purposes.

God used Abraham and Sarah, when they were old and long past the age of child-bearing, to begin the new nation which he was forming. When she heard this, Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure? Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.' Sarah, the aged clay jar, gave birth to Isaac the following year.

God picked Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. 'Who am I?' asked Moses, the weak clay jar. But God said to him, 'I will be with you,' and Israel was delivered. The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon as he was hiding in a wine-press and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior. Go and deliver Israel from the Midianites.' 'How?' asked Gideon, 'I'm nobody.' That was the answer God was looking for. He wanted to use a clay jar, so he said to Gideon, 'I will be with you and we will defeat the Midianites as one man.' Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar through the power of God and gave thanks to God, saying, 'Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to God.' All of these men were clay jars. In the midst of their circumstances, God powerfully moved through them so that all could

see him accomplishing his plan of redemption. In the words of Psalm 62, 'Once I have spoken, twice I have heard this, that power belongs to God.'

Paul goes on to demonstrate the principle that all power belongs to God by using four illustrations from his own experiences that will also apply to us. Let us remember that all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, experience those kinds of circumstances. The key for the Christian is to look at stressful circumstances from God's point of view, that he enables us to cope with the stresses we confront daily. As others see that our power to cope is coming from God, not from us, they will see God's plan of redemption at work in and through our lives.

First, Paul says, 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed.' He faced afflictions, pressures and stressful circumstances on both a physical and an emotional level. Paul, Timothy, Titus, Silas and others were clay jars who experienced all kinds of troubles in their ministry. We only have to look at chapter 11 of this letter to see the troubles Paul experienced '...three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country...! have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food...Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.'

But the difference between the Christian who faces trials and the non-Christian is that power is available to the believer from within, and that power is Christ himself. If the Christian chooses to rely on that resource he won't be crushed. Last week I talked with a Christian brother who was facing difficult pressures. I feared he would feel crushed under the weight of them, but he said to me, 'I'm not afraid; I'm trusting the Lord.' I said to him, 'That's funny. Usually you choose to be afraid and then you are crushed.' He said, 'I know, but I'm learning to choose to let the Lord within me hold out so that the pressure won't destroy me.'

Secondly, the apostle says, '[we are] perplexed, but not in despair.' We are at our wits' end, without emotional resource, we don't know how to proceed, is what he is saying. 'Perplexed' is one of my favorite words in the New Testament. I could have it tattooed across my chest_ 'Perplexed!' I always seem to be in a state of perplexity, not understanding what God is doing in my life. But I can be perplexed and not sin. It's OK to say to God, 'What is going on?' Perplexity is not sin. Paul and his brothers and sisters experienced that feeling many times--in Troas, in Philippi, in Athens, in Corinth, in Roman prisons, etc.

J. I. Packer in his book 'Knowing God' says that these perplexities are designed

'...to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy and to drive us to cling to Him more closely...God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities...to ensure that we shall learn to hold Him fast. The reason why the Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, a sure refuge and help for the weak is that God spends so much of His time bringing home to us that we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find or to follow the right road...God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Him, to wait upon the Lord.'

In light of that we do not despair, we are not without hope, because God is the one on whom we have set our hope.

Thirdly, Paul says, '[we are] persecuted, but not abandoned.' Paul and his companions faced persecution many times for their beliefs. He was beaten times without number; he was imprisoned; five times the Jews gave him 39 lashes; three times he was beaten with rods; once he was stoned; he was falsely accused and imprisoned for the sake of Christ. Yet, despite all of this, he never felt abandoned by his Lord and Savior.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis for speaking out against Hitler's regime, wrote in his 'Letters from Prison':

I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil... For that purpose he needs men who

make the best use of everything. I believe God will give us all the strength we need to resist in all times of distress, but he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him alone...

A fellow-prisoner described the last hours of Bonhoeffer's life in these words: 'On Sunday, April 8, 1945, Bonhoeffer...held a little service for his fellow-Christians. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil--looking men in civilian clothes came in and said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us." Those words, "Come with us," for all prisoners had come to mean only one thing--the scaffold...We bid him good--bye. He drew me aside and said, "This is the end, but for me it's the beginning of life." The next day he was hanged at Flossenbug.' 'Persecuted, but not abandoned.'

Fourthly, Paul says, '[we are] struck down, but not destroyed.' Many times Paul suffered the trauma of being suddenly smitten and cast down--rather like receiving a sudden and unexpected blow to the head. Once when he and Silas were walking to the home of Lydia in Corinth, a demon-possessed girl began to follow them and cry out to them. Paul turned and addressed the demon, 'Come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ,' and the girl was set free from demonic power. Certain people who had used this woman for financial gain had Paul and Silas arrested and dragged before a magistrate. They were beaten and placed in stocks in prison. Paul probably remembered this sudden blow to the head as he was writing this letter to the Corinthians. He had been 'struck down, but not destroyed.'

While Jack Crabtree was a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church in 1976 his two--year--old son, John David, swallowed an almond one day and choked to death. But, as the words that Jack spoke at the memorial service for John David demonstrated, though he and Jody were 'struck down,' they were not destroyed. Here is what he said:

John David was more than a son, he was a miniature man who was our constant companion, a really, really good friend. We are going to miss him. But the incredible thing to both Jody and me, I think--I just stand first, unbelieving that it happened; I'm kind of numb and disbelieving--but the incredible thing is our whole reaction to this. There are times when we experience... joy at what a magnificent, merciful, loving thing God has done. when I think about what a fat assignment my son got from the Lord, to come into the world and spend two years having nothing but utter joy...and then being taken home. I feel privileged to have had a son with that kind of an assignment. To be able to serve the Lord and go home to him as a full-grown and mature son now in his glory and to have missed a lot of the process that we have to go through--I'm privileged by that; what a merciful thing. Jody and I are both convinced that God has the right to take our son and that he has exercised that right; he has not done evil of John David, he has done good. But furthermore, he has not done evil of us, because John David is not our god, the Lord is our God. He is our life, he is the bread on which we feed, and he is the one on whom we are going to depend and find our fulfillment in the future.

All mankind is formed out of the dust. We are all 'jars of clay,' and as such we face afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and trauma, both physically and emotionally. When we become Christians we are not suddenly lifted above the normal and abnormal circumstances of life. We are the same 'jars of clay,' only now we contain the treasure of the life and the power of the resurrected Christ within us. As such we have strength to cope with all the realities which God brings into our lives. We no longer feel crushed, despairing, abandoned or destroyed if we choose to allow the Lord to live through us. We are enabled to see how God uses all these circumstances to his honor and glory, to bring us to spiritual reliance on him and also bring us into spiritual maturity.

Next, Paul shares with the Corinthians the spiritual realities that God is at work, calling out of every nation a people for himself. He says, 'We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.' When Jesus the perfect Lamb of God died on the cross, all the sins of humanity were placed upon him, all the pride, self--reliance, self-confidence and self--assertiveness of man. He then physically died, that is, his flesh died. Now, according to Romans 6, all who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior are spiritually identified with his death. The old nature, though still with us, no longer has

any power over us. We no longer are slaves to the flesh. We have power to choose to die to the lusts of the flesh (the lust for power), the lust of the eyes (the lust for possession), the pride of life (the lust for position). We are new creatures in Christ. 'Our life is not our own; we were bought with a price.' So as servants of Christ we are to take up our cross daily and choose to die to our rights and our feelings. As servants of the new covenant, as 'jars of clay' we are to choose to allow the life of Jesus to be seen in our words and our actions, regardless of the outward circumstances, and the result will be life out of death. People will see that we have bodies of clay just like them, but something about us is different. We may look like we did before we became Christians, but people will say of us, 'I think I've been with Jesus.' What a contrast with the philosophy of the 'human potential' movement.

Paul now moves from that situation, where Christians are constantly making choices to give up their rights, their hopes, their dreams so that Christ can live through them, to the realization that at times he finds his life being used by God without his consent. 'For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.' Notice the word 'always.' This is a pattern for life. In chapter 12 of this very letter Paul says,

To keep me from becoming conceited...there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

'Through tribulations of pain and loss for Jesus' sake we enter into a thousand little deaths day by day, and through the ministry of the Spirit we rise out of those little deaths into constantly recurring experiences of risen life with Christ.' (J. I. Packer, 'Knowing God')

We are 'given over to death,' the death of our hopes, our dreams, our ambitions, our place in history. Looking back over my 30 years as a Christian to that day in Jerusalem when I asked Jesus Christ to be my Lord, I remember that I presented to him my list of hopes, dreams and ambitions to one day be 'king.' He thanked me, took my list, and that's the last I've seen of it. How my life has changed! I have watched over the years as everything I held to be important quietly slip away. Based on that list, I stand before you today a failure, my life wasted. I'm not who I had hoped to be. I'm very far removed from the image I had created for myself in my mind. Yet, as I talked to my son Rodd last week I said to him, 'If you choose to be a servant of Jesus Christ, and you have, you will have made the best choice of your eternal life. But, as Ray ' has said, if you do you'll find yourself completely fearless, constantly cheerful, and always in trouble! '

'So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.' Again, we need to come back to the basics: Jesus came to save sinners. In this age of the Spirit he is calling out a people for his name's sake from every nation. He desires to use you and me, 'jars of clay,' as ministers of the new covenant, drawing on his life and power, dying to self so others can live.

Where can we find the strength to cope? Realize our power comes from God; and secondly,

2. Realize our life comes from God 4:13-15

It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Paul here quotes Psalm 116: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' As he experienced daily affliction, perplexity, persecution and trauma, Paul realized he was not the first Christian who experienced physical, emotional and spiritual stress.

Here is how the psalmist described his experience in Psalm 16:

**I love the Lord, because He hears My voice and my supplications.
Because He has inclined His ear to me.
Therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.
The cords of death encompassed me,
And the terrors of Sheol came upon me;
I found distress and sorrow.
Then I called upon the name of the Lord:
'O Lord, I beseech Thee, save my life!'**

The apostle remembered that the psalmist cried out to God with a heart full of faith and asked God to save him. He believed that the invisible but ever present personal Comforter and Deliverer would somehow hear him in the midst of his present deadly trial. So by faith he spoke to God and waited in the midst of the trial.

The psalmist continues:

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate. The Lord preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me. Return to your rest, O my soul, For the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For thou hast rescued my soul from death, My eyes from tears, My feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the Lord In the land of the living.

Following his deliverance, the psalmist realized that if he shared with the people of Jerusalem what had happened to him it would be a great encouragement to them. Paul quoted from the psalm to encourage the Corinthians, 'with the same spirit of faith,' and in the same kind of pressure-cooker stress, 'we also believe and therefore speak.' He believed God could deliver him from all his enemies, both physical and spiritual, as well as afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and traumas, 'because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead...', that same God has the power to raise us out of deadly situations. (1:8-10) Paul learned from his experience in Asia that he would no longer trust in himself, but in God who raises the dead. That same God will also deliver those who have set their hope on him.

And this same God 'will raise us up with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.' Here Paul steps away from the stress he is experiencing and looks ahead towards his and the Corinthians' perfection. All of their afflictions were worthwhile in light of what was coming in the future when they would all meet together in the presence of Jesus.

'All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.' All their physical, emotional and spiritual stress was designed by God so that the grace of God, the love of God in action towards men who deserve nothing could be made manifest.

God, by his grace, is saving sinners who are unable to lift a finger to save themselves. Here is the gospel:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry [through jars of clay] of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us [jars of clay] the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God was making his appearance through us [jars of clay]. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

The result of all this is that 'death is at work in us, but life is at work in you' and others who are being saved so that thanksgiving may overflow to the glory of God.

Where can we find the strength to cope? It comes by realizing that our power comes from God; and by realizing our life comes from God.

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