

Some of us will live long lives, mostly healthy and hearty.

Others of us will die at a relatively young age, after we have endured disabilities, frequent illnesses, physical weakness, or chronic pain.

What we have to grasp is that God has a purpose for each of us. The purpose is explained in Romans 8:29, "...to be conformed to the image of [God's] Son..." The highest purpose for our lives is that we become gradually formed into the image of Jesus. Ephesians 2:20, "*we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*"

"Workmanship" is the Greek word from which we get our English word "poem." God is working on a poetic purpose for us... a beautiful purpose for us. We are God's artful handiwork, God's poem turned into a living sculpture, we are God's masterpieces. God chooses the tools. God's tools are suffering, illness, disability, to shape us. We each are God's poem.

When it comes to health and strength of our earthly bodies, God does not ask all of us to walk the same pathway. Not every poem of God has the same words.

After Jesus rose again, but before He ascended to heaven, he told Peter how Peter was going to die in order to glorify the Lord. Peter looked over his shoulder at John and said, "Lord, what about him?" In John ch. 21:22, Jesus replied to [Peter], "*If it is My will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!*"

Jesus was saying to Peter, and to all of us, that Christ has a purpose for each of us. Whatever our situation medically, whatever our strength or weakness, whatever our ability or disability, we are each to follow Christ in faith and trust.

God shows Himself strong and merciful, and God gains glory in different ways through different lives. If God assigns suffering in our lives, God does not do so lightly. God does so for very specific, very important reasons. One main reason is to remind us of God's power. Power to heal. OR, power to not heal but rather to sustain. Power to keep a treasure safe in a fragile container. That bring us to our main point.

Suffering believers who are disabled are a picture of all believers - precious and valuable treasures within disposable containers, so that we notice God's power.

1. Notice God's power – seen in the church's experts in living with personal powerlessness, without despair. (v.7)

Growth in holiness is a demonstration of God's power. Do you notice it?

God's power is seen in our holiness, shining through our weakness.

Verse 7, "*...we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*"

Treasure. God's treasure. Priceless treasure. Where is it? In jars of clay. Literally the expression is earthenware containers. Disposable containers. In the ancient world if a person bought a piece of gold jewelry, how did they transport it home? In a clay jar. That clay jar would be holding treasure. What would have the same significance in our day as the clay pot of the first century? The cardboard box! If a person bought an expensive electronic device, how would that get transported to your home? In a cardboard box. A disposable box. The box is expendable. Think how many millions of them are made and used, and yet we don't hear headlines about the price of cardboard going up.

Our fragile dying bodies are the containers of the gospel news of God's grace, that gives everlasting life to our precious eternal souls.

A person believing in Christ is a treasure in a box.

Who are we to tell God what kind of box He should use to store His treasure while on earth?

Christ has many things to consider in planning for a child of God. Christ has in mind what is best for the individual person, what is the greatest gain from that person's testimony, what is needed in their relationships to many other Christians, what will most bring attention to God's power now and in the future, and what will bring about the most good.

May we never doubt God by saying God is not powerful enough to heal or that God does not have enough love to heal. Rather, let us say the truth - that of course God can heal, and that God will heal if it is best for us and best for His glory. Let us agree together that God is the best determiner about whether or not He should provide power of a healing or power of enduring. Let us agree that God is equally as powerful and merciful and glorious when He decides to heal the body of His child, as when He decides not to heal the body of His child.

When a believer suffers with a disability, it is personal powerlessness. That person cannot walk, or else cannot hear, or cannot have a baby, or cannot see or cannot think clearly. That is powerlessness. A believer in a disabled body. A precious person in an earthen container. Why? In order to show that the surpassing power does not belong to that person or to any of us. The surpassing power belongs to God. God is able to help that person to avoid despair, to avoid hopelessness, despite having an ongoing condition of powerlessness. That takes the power of God. That is what we see on display in Christians who are disabled.

Growth in holiness is a demonstration of God's power. Do we see it?

2. Notice God's power – seen in suffering believers being physically squeezed, but not spiritually mis-shapen. (v.8-9)

Here Paul is brutally honest. Paul is emotionally honest. Paul did not cover up his personal difficulties. Paul opened his heart to his readers, and revealed something of his personal sufferings and hardships. To use our language, Paul was struggling

with discouragement and depression. And Paul is specific about it, even providing us with a list. Paul says, this is where we all are. WE. Join Paul in your honesty.

Along with each area of hardship, Paul listed areas of his own growth. Unending trials, but consider also Paul's unending hope. Paul's body is frail and weak, but the power of God through the gospel transformed Paul's life. Paul's strength to endure suffering came not from Paul himself but rather from God. This whole list is a display of God's power in Paul.

In verse 8, "...we are *afflicted in every way, but not crushed...*" Literally we are squeezed in every way, but not squeezed into a different shape. In other words, the experience of hardships being foisted upon us does not result in us being completely overwhelmed by these difficulties. Why? Because these hardships are physical, and physical hardships cannot confine or restrict the size and shape of our hope. Our health is physically squeezed and mis-shapen, but despite being squeezed and pressured, we do not end up spiritually mis-shapen.

Verse 8 continues, we are "*perplexed, but not forsaken...*" We are perplexed, or at a loss, but not lost. Not in doubt. Not left in uncertainty. Even when we are the most perplexed about this physical world, not having the diagnoses or the treatment plan, we always know exactly what is going on spiritually. God is uphold our souls. We are never despairing of life, never despairing of living. Our living is upheld by our God, in power.

Verse 9, "...we are *persecuted, but not forsaken...*" We are being chased, with intent to harm, and yet we are not abandoned or deserted.

Verse 9 continues, we are "*struck down, but not destroyed.*" Our bodies seem to be thrown down, but our souls receive no collateral damage in the event. Our souls are not destroyed by our physical ailments.

There is a repeated contrast between each weakness stated, followed by each instance of God's power. It is not simply a change of outlook on Paul's part, but rather God's intervention. God will not allow Paul to be crushed, driven to despair, forsaken, or destroyed. God is protecting Paul and causing spiritual maturing in Paul.

God's grace extends to Paul, and we notice what God is doing within Paul. Paul made it clear in verse 15, "...it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God." Paul intends for us to notice God's grace being given, and to give thanks to God and to give glory to God, and to seek God's grace for ourselves in a similar way as Paul received God's grace. Paul's story is given for our sake.

Suffering is intrinsic to the Christian life, and to Christian ministry. We notice in Paul what God can do in the heart of a believer suffering disabilities, and we are all thankful to have such a great God.

The person with disabilities is thankful. The caregiver is thankful. All of us are thankful. God's grace is extending to more and more people.

3. Notice God's power – in the form of 'the life of Jesus' at work in us, when we observe the 'death of Jesus' in the body of the suffering believer. (v.10-12)

Verse 10, "...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."

Here Paul is summing up and explaining his previous list from verses 8 and 9. In short, what does it mean to be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, but also to be preserved from being crushed, driven to despair, forsaken and destroyed? It feels like dying, while being upheld.

When Christ calls us to suffer, but Christ preserves us, it feels like always carrying around an experience of dying for Jesus, but actually receiving the blessing of the protection of our lives by Jesus.

Living in this world in our bodies, our broken and aging bodies, some with abilities and some with disabilities, is like a prolonged process of withering and failing and dying. It feels like we are being put to death, or left here to slowly die. Paul experienced this with constant afflictions as an apostle, and on at least one occasion, he was literally beat up and left to die. But verse 10 is not describing an single event for us, but a constant ongoing process.

Consider how verse 11 supports this, "*For we who live are ALWAYS being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*" Paul faced dangers and death every day, and that is a picture of the walk of all Christians. Death is our daily companion. Romans 8:36, "...for your sake we are being killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

But notice verses 10 and 11 summarize the experiences listed in verses 8-9, that it is not just the daily possibility of a violent death that might come, but rather the actual experiences constantly of deadly trials, which feel like dying constantly, and any one of which could deal us the final blow of an actual physical death.

This was the dying experienced by our Lord Jesus. We were baptized with Christ in His death. We are daily dying to the sin of our own sinful nature. We are gradually being weakened in our physical abilities to serve Christ.

This is not just for an apostle, a missionary, or a pastor. This is for all Christians.

But there is the life of Jesus to be shown in our lives, in our bodies, in our mortal flesh, in our experiences, while others watch us. God is at work in our lives. God is upholding us in it all and through it all.

God gives the ability not simply to endure, but even to rejoice in the middle of adversity. That is the life of Jesus in us, that others can see. When we are really hurting, we still believe that God is at work in and through our suffering for a future good so great that all present suffering is small in comparison. Verse 14 – He who raised Jesus will raise us also, with Jesus, and bring us into His presence.

The future focus of believers is key. What we long for and expect in the future does determine how we live today. Hope is the engine that drives us.

Specifically, it is the future life that belongs to Jesus by virtue of His resurrection that Paul has in view here. And that resurrection life of Jesus is given to us.

We are faced here not with the earthly life of the historical Jesus, but rather we are faced with the immortal life of the same Jesus, who had already risen from the dead by the time Paul wrote both letters.

What is the lesson? Paul put it succinctly in verse 12, like a recap, “*So death is at work in us, but life (is at work) in you.*”

The single word that Paul used in verse 12 to encapsulate the Christian experience was not suffering, but instead was death. It is not that suffering is at work in us. No, that is not strong enough. Instead, it is nothing less than death that is at work in us. Paul wrote that our identification with Christ is not just in the sufferings of Christ, but in the death of Christ, which was, of course, the climax of His sufferings. To suffer for Christ is to die with Christ.

What does this mean? It means that for the Christian suffering a disability, this is not a sign of God’s disappointment with us, but rather a sign of an opportunity to engage with God within our daily lives! It was God’s power that preserved Paul in body and spirit, so it is God’s power that preserves us, in body and spirit. God’s power, God’s life is at work in us. Whenever we are delivered from despair or prevented from despair, it is the power of God giving us life through hope in Christ.

We have both death at work and life at work, concurrently. The resurrection life of Jesus is evident in us at precisely the same time as there is a “carrying around” our assigned portion of Christ’s suffering and our assigned portion of Christ’s slowly dying.

This is my third point in this sermon – we notice God’s power – in the form of ‘the life of Jesus’ at work in believers who are disabled, so that we observe the ‘death of Jesus’ in the body of the suffering believer.

Conclude: You are a cardboard box. But inside of you is the treasure of the gospel of Christ, and the Spirit of Christ. This is deliberate, in the plan of God.

Remember that you are ALWAYS being squeezed, but NEVER squashed.

In other words, embrace your weakness as an occasion for God’s power to uphold you.

Or, to say it another way, those who are used most to draw attention to the good news of Christ, are those who accept weakness, suffering, and a very long dying process as the operational principle of the Christian life.

The lesson about God’s power in our weakness is here for us in our moments of brutal honesty and real weaknesses. It is the chief theme that binds

together the whole letter of 2 Corinthians. God's power in our weaknesses is the unifying feature of this whole book.

At the end of this letter, Paul found grace to rejoice that his weakness makes him a conduit of God's power. 2 Corinthians 12:9, where Paul wrote, "[God] 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Since we can boast of our weaknesses, we can let a Christian with a disability boast.

The breaking up of our cardboard box, the breaking up of our bodies through the crushing circumstances of the lives that God has assigned for us, allows the power of God's gospel of grace to be displayed in full.

We remain weak. Most of the time, the disabled remain disabled. In fact, the disabled seem to go from weak to weaker.

As you know, Johnny Erickson Tada became a quadriplegic in 1967. You might not know that after a worldwide impact and dozens of awards and recognitions, and after writing 40 books, she then suffered the diagnosis of breast cancer in 2010, requiring surgery and chemotherapy. But that is not all. Again in 2018 her cancer returned, requiring radiation. Right now, she is cancer-free again, but my point is that we all remain weak. And often we go from weak to weaker.

We do not grow in power. We just keep showing God's power.

Someone asked the ancient pastor St. Francis of the 12th century, who was credited with helping to re-build Christianity, how he was able to accomplish so much Christian ministry in his lifetime. He replied, "This may be why: The Lord looked down from heaven and said, 'Where can I find the weakest, littlest man on earth?' Then He saw me and said, 'I've found him, and he would be proud of it. He'll see that I am only using him because of his insignificance.'"

Embrace your weakness, and notice God's power in your life.

Know that you are always being squeezed, but never squashed.

In other words, embrace your weakness as the occasion for God's power to uphold you.