

April 25, 2021

8. Vessels for the Lord — 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed . . .

While these words were originally written by the apostle Paul, I'm pretty sure I said something similar in a text message to a friend last week. They seem to sum up the way I feel these days as we navigate the ongoing pandemic. Quick-spreading, highly contagious variants and greater restrictions in much of Canada certainly have many feeling some combination of being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down.

A key difference between our experience of the pandemic—or most other hardships—and Paul's experience is in verse 11 (emphasis added): "For while we live, we are always being given up to death *for Jesus' sake*, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh." "*For Jesus' sake* excludes a reference to the aging process or to the normal trials of everyday life. Paul is thinking of the hardships and troubles that he experienced as a result of carrying out his ministry."¹ The difficulties Paul is describing in this passage are not the universal experiences of pain or hardship that are part of human life on earth. Paul's afflictions are *for Jesus' sake*—a direct result of his commitment to spread the message of Jesus.

Whether a result of faithfulness to God's calling or circumstances beyond our control, there is equal opportunity for the life of Jesus to be made visible in our mortal flesh. Just as Paul and his companions did, we too share the treasure of the powerful knowledge of Christ's incarnation and resurrection. In this way, we too can make the life of Jesus visible in our mortal flesh.

But how!? We follow Paul's example. In verses 13-14 he says that because of his faith, he spoke about Jesus and his conviction "that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (4:14). Paul talked about Jesus every chance he could. It seems that in every situation he could find a way to bring it back to the hope and promise of God's work through Jesus.

I'm not good at that. I feel weird about it. I don't want people to feel uncomfortable or to think I'm preaching at them. (I'm inserting a plug for Sara Wenger Shenk's new book *Tongue-Tied: Learning the Lost Art of Talking about Faith*.²) It seems way easier to commiserate with people about frustrations regarding vaccine availability, government responses, or how others are behaving than to talk about what Jesus' resurrection might mean in the face of these realities. It seems way easier to talk about our desire for things to get back to normal than to identify the ways God might be carrying us through to something new.

1. "God's Power Is Made Known Through Ministerial Hardships," IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (InterVarsity Press, n.d.). Available at BibleGateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Gods-Power-Made-Known>.

2. Herald Press, 2021, <https://heraldpress.com/books/tongue-tied>.

Paul's example challenges me to learn how to do it better: to be intentional about speaking of the hope that I have in Christ; to claim the reality that God dwelt among us in an earthen vessel and that his broken body has become a source of sustaining—not in lofty metaphors, but in the grit of daily life. I need to learn to articulate my gratitude for the health and safety I am currently experiencing. I need to learn to talk about the way the Spirit enabled me, in the nick of time, to respond to that child with

grace rather than a snarl. I need to learn to talk about the way the words of that song were just the thing I needed to reframe my thoughts and turn my day around. These things are truer and longer lasting than the things that are causing my current frustrations. I need to learn how to talk about them.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (4:16-18)

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Resources for this session

- **Kevin Ressler** is the presenter for unit 2, New Creation. These teaching videos are great for leader preparation or introducing each weekly session. *The videos are free and available on [MennoMedia's YouTube channel](#).*
- A **Salt & Light Reproducible** is available for use with this session, found at www.MennoMedia.org/SL.