

Treasures in Tupperware

Few things are as precious as a freshly cooked meal, straight out of the oven and steaming hot. As a family we get to appreciate such meals most every evening, as all of us eagerly await to devour the scrumptious meal momma prepared with the greatest of love and care. All the way from chutney chicken and roast potatoes to chicken enchiladas, not to mention lamb chops and mash, her cooking, not to exaggerate, is the thing that dreams are made of. But what is equally thrilling, to me at least, is the opportunity to have another go at some of them, around lunch the next day. This of course is all made possible because of the invention of Tupperware and fridges. A simple, plastic container kept at the right temperature can amazingly contain and preserve the tastiest and nutritious meals, serving after serving, day after day, joyful laughter after joyful laughter.

Until they break...

Yes, Mr. Tupper's containers were indeed made to store away the food equivalent of gold and to withstand some pressure. Indeed, they can be handled with fatty hands, you can drop them, bend them, use their lids as Frisbees (kids do it all the time), sit on them (toddlers especially like that) and so on. But since they are made of only plastic, they will eventually break.

The apostle Paul once taught the Corinthian church a valuable lesson as it involved containers and the precious contents within it. Here's what he said:

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

This is the second time Paul writes to the Corinthians, a church that had great sin among them and who were therefore in need of some help and stern warnings. The main reason for his writing to them a second time was to remind them of who they were in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17-19), to guard the doctrinal integrity of the church (2 Cor. 11:3-4), and to impress upon them their responsibility to steer clear of sexual immorality (2 Cor. 12:21).

But Paul does not do so without reminding them about their limitations as human beings. This is why he inserts the passage found in chapter 4. He wanted them to know that although they are saved, that this treasure of the new man in Christ, or the new woman in Christ, is being carried around in jars of clay for the remainder of their lives. The Greek word being used here quite literally refers to "baked clay," or "earthen vessels (NKJV). These were clay pots that are prone to breakage. At best they would develop only small little cracks that would allow fluids to slowly leak through. In ancient near eastern households these clay pots would, like today's Tupperware, be used for all kinds of applications, not just food. Families would store almost anything imaginable in them for whatever purpose they needed to. Some of them were even used as refuse bags (ancient black bags) in which garbage and sanitary waste were collected, stored, and eventually disposed of outside the house (2 Tim. 2:20). Interestingly, sometimes even valuable possessions would be stored inside of these clay pots.

This is where Paul's analogy was especially helpful. The Corinthians had to be reminded that in this life they will still experience the effects of this fallen world that we live in. They had to know that just because they are now saved it didn't necessarily mean that all their troubles were going to disappear and that life was going to become a breeze. No, instead of falsely assuring them of things which simply isn't true, Paul reminds them that even though they are still bound to the effects of the fall and indwelling sin, God has allowed for the greatest of wealth to be stored and preserved in them until he comes for them one day at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15: 48-49).

And this is still the reality for us alive today. We are no different from the Corinthians. Although we might know the Lord and be assured of the treasure of Christ we possess (Matt. 13:44-46), we are still human beings who are awaiting glorification. This God-given new life that we enjoy is glorious indeed, but the point that Paul makes is that we have not seen the height of it as we will see later in the passage. For this reason, one can certainly expect some trials and tribulation, which Paul is not shy to highlight.

So reading this passage in reverse, Paul refers to this fact that God's children are still finite human beings, yet ones who are the receivers of the greatest wealth having been made the children of God to help the Corinthians (and us) to see their sufferings for Christ in the right perspective. Just from his own life story, Paul could teach the Corinthians so much as it involves suffering as a clay pot. This walk of the faith with the Lord that he had been enjoying was indeed not void of the valleys, as it also was never without the mountain top experiences. What he reminds us of here firstly, is the prevalence of suffering for the Christian, but also the prevalence of the means to deal with it.

The prevalence of persecution and hardships

Paul was no stranger to persecution and hardship. Strictly speaking, persecution was no foreign concept for any of the disciples who became apostles (Ac. 5:41). In the same letter to the Corinthians he included a brief CV of his sufferings for Christ. This was not to brag of course, but rather to show the Corinthians that some suffering as a Christian is only to be expected every now and again. Here's his brief recounting of some of these events:

²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food,^[a] in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:24-28).

We have all met hardships at times, but this list is certainly astounding. Speaking of my own life, there a few that I can say "I have endured the same." I understand toil and hardship. I have experienced many a sleepless night. I do know what it is like to have the daily pressure of the church on me. But that's the extent of it really. When compared to Paul, then perhaps I have not yet suffered in my life. I sometimes stand in awe of this list, and on some occasions would remind myself of his great suffering in the form of persecution whenever I am encountering some of my own.

But the list certainly does its job. It should convince us that this Christian walk is not going to be without its difficulty. All who desire to live a godly life will encounter

some or other form of persecution at some or another time (2 Tim. 3:12). The explanation of our frailty again helps in this instance. We are not yet glorified even though we one day will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52) at the rapture (1 Thess. 4:14-16).

How will persecution look for us today? It might not be as overtly evil as physical persecution (beatings, floggings, execution). In other words, the Lord is not expecting us to die for our faith... *yet*. But he is expecting us to die to self and to this world, and our commitment to that alone could very easily become the source of some persecution. As we get more and more committed to not “love the world or the things of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15), we should expect some opposition. As a believer grows in Christlikeness they can no longer go on as before. Where a guy used to enjoy coarse joking with the men during a coffee break at work, he will now no longer enjoy it and gradually develop an aversion for it. This could set him up for some persecution and perhaps cost him a promotion, since he is no longer one of the boys. A young lady might be seen as a “goody two shoes” when she refuses to gossip about the personal lives of others while her friends refer to it as harmless socialising, resulting in her being vilified and seen as archaic.

What helps us to overcome these daily persecutions? Thankfully Paul admits that there would have been no way for him to get through these trials if not for the Lord in him. He says in that many words: “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” In other words, he admits that he was no superhuman himself. He had much difficulty with all of these sufferings. So where did his strength come from then? He gives us the answer after admitting to his battles with a “thorn in the flesh” which the Lord had given him to keep him humble (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Paul declared that it was the grace of Christ alone that had been his strength throughout all his hardships. He wholeheartedly declared that he is content with his sufferings in order that “the power of Christ may rest” upon him (2 Cor. 12:9). “For the sake of Christ” he was happy with all of his “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” He knew that when he was at his weakest, that he was actually at his strongest (2 Cor. 12:10).

The prevalence of the means to deal with persecution and hardships

By God’s grace, he does not leave us without the ability to handle the suffering that he has allowed to come our way. Please know that I am not saying this from the beach, looking at you, while you are in the ship being beaten by the waves. No, I say this as I am thoroughly aware of the effect of the fall, and how the Lord can use these to test his saints, sometimes even to the max. I have had my fair share of medical, social, ecclesiastical, and other hardships. And I say this knowing that I haven’t seen the beginning. I know if the Lord blesses me with years of life that I will encounter more and more as the years progress.

But I do also know that by God’s grace, I can agree with the apostle Paul that when I am weak I am strong. I know that God will not allow me to be tempted beyond what I can handle (1 Cor. 10:13), knowing that I can handle every trial that comes my way, or our family’s way, because I can do this, we can do this as a family, through him who gives us the strength to push through. Like Paul, even though I was not tested as heavily as he was, I can say: “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:12-13).

The truth is, as God's children we should all be able to declare the same! God has promised that the treasure that we have been given will never be destroyed, even though it is contained in earthen vessels, because he will ensure its preservation. Paul refers to this fact as well when he talks about our frailty. Back to our original text, he says in verse 8-9: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

I love this so much. This is so good for the soul who has encountered trials of various kinds (Jas. 1:2). This is like cream on dry skin. It is like hearing food is on the way, when we have forgotten the taste and texture of the food we so need. God here encourages us who are jars of clay (for now) that he will not ever allow suffering to get the upper hand. As it serves God's purpose, ensuring our being purged of sin and growing in faith, it will never ultimately destroy us. We might be afflicted in every way at times but we are never crushed or obliterated. As hard as affliction can be, it will never ultimately crack and demolish the pillars of our faith. Do we get perplexed? You can count on it. But do we get so perplexed that we are finally so despaired that we think we are without hope? Not possible! And so we are never ultimately forsaken even though we endure persecution. We are never destroyed even when being struck down. This is the Lord's promise for us. Our pots might have a few cracks here and there but the Lord has promised that whatever suffering he brings our way that it is ultimately for our good and for his glory.

The purpose of persecution and suffering

Whatever it is that we are facing, it is really for our own welfare. I know this is difficult for us to believe sometimes, especially when we are going through fiery trials. But it is nevertheless true and this should encourage us as we cling to our Lord through every trial. Paul himself was comforted to know that every trial, every form of suffering for Christ is for his sanctification. For this reason he exclaims: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." A few verses earlier Paul had encouraged the Corinthians that all God's children will enjoy the resurrection of life one day. When he says "so we do not lose heart" he is saying this in reference to God's promise of never allowing his children to ultimately break under the pressure of suffering, but also of the great *relief* that awaits each of us when we are finally transformed into the likeness of our Lord, receiving a body that can no longer suffer.

This alone is enough reason not to lose heart. The prospect of resurrection alone is what should drive us forward each day to face every trial that our Lord brings our way. The mirror might tell a different story but looks can be deceiving according to Paul. He says, "though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." Let's face it. There is nothing that we can do to undo the effects of the Fall. The Lord himself is the only one who can do something about it, and believe me, he will one day undo it, completely reversing the effects of the Fall (Rev. 22:3). Our bodies will continue to deteriorate, grow weak and dim until that final day of each of our body's liberation. Hardship will have its toll as well, and this, as we have already seen, is a given for every child of God. But how encouraging to know that God is renewing our spirit day by day as we encounter various trials. This contrast is so spectacular really. As the child of God's body gets weakened by the trials he faces, their spirit keeps on getting stronger. Interestingly, it doesn't just tick on, rather, it gets newer, and purer, and stronger as we learn how to respond to trials.

Paul said this elsewhere as well. He encouraged the Ephesians in the same way. His prayer for them was that God would strengthen them in their trials, “that according to the riches of his glory he may grant [them] to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in [their] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [their] hearts through faith”—this is the ultimate goal of suffering. It should lead us to be strengthened in our walk with Christ. God is the one who brings it our way not because he just randomly chooses to do so, rather, he chooses so in order that our faith might increase and that we should have a steadier walk with him as we are rooted in him (Col. 2:6-7). This should be our attitude toward trials until the Lord’s comes for us in death or at the Rapture.

The prize for persecution and hardships

The suffering we now endure will finally be replaced with our reward. In the grander scheme of things, our suffering is nothing compared to the reward that awaits us in heaven one day. These clay pots that we find ourselves in will finally crack, but this gives way to the immortal life which we forever will enjoy with our Lord as we are forever comforted and restored after a life of suffering (Rev. 21:4).

This I why Paul reminds the Corinthians that their suffering in jars of clay is only temporary. It will be here today and gone tomorrow. In addition, this affliction, though real, is considered minute compared to the rich reward that awaits us in heaven. See what Paul says:

“¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Our suffering is by no means permanent. Whatever it is that you are dealing with right now, whether it be illness, economic hardship, emotional turmoil, or whatever, the Lord is going to remove them all. When Paul refers to the fact that it is “light” he really has in mind something that is trivial or insignificant. He uses a Greek term that quite literally means “weightless.” These afflictions we must endure are at best fleeting, and we can praise the Lord for that. They are light indeed, but equally comforting should be the fact that they are oh so temporary. Paul says that they are momentary and will simply not last. This is why he could tell the Philippians that to be with Christ is something which he yearned for, “for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23). Being well acquainted with suffering Paul comforted himself knowing that all suffering will eventually end when we see our Saviour face to face and are forever changed (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

But we must be like Paul. We cannot even allow ourselves to get wrapped up in our afflictions. When we do that, we lose sight of the glories of heaven. We must be committed to seeing this life as temporary. This is why Paul reminds us that we must look to the things that are above. We can only handle these light momentary afflictions “as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

We can only really place our sufferings in its proper perspective when we view it in light of eternity. Our affliction, though seen, is temporary. On the other hand, our reward that waits in heaven is unseen, yet it is eternal. Nothing can ever take it away. Though seen, our pain and suffering is temporary. Yet our eternal comfort is forever!

So my encouragement to us all is that when we encounter hard times, which we will (Jn. 15:19-25), that we would be quick to understand it from this perspective: physically speaking, we are only crackpots at best. For this reason we will endure all kinds of uphill battles, in our finances, our relationships, mentally and in our emotions, physically and spiritually. But let's not forget that we are saved crackpots, each containing an immeasurable treasure. This is the treasure of Christ in us accompanied by the promise of spending eternity with him and our fellow saints. For this reason we look not to our circumstances (Matt. 14:22-33), which right now are "the things that are seen." Rather, we look to Christ in the "unseen," who right now as you read these words, is interceding on your behalf in heaven. He who became a man knows very well how tough things can get for us mere mortals. In fact, no one suffered as much as he did. But because of this he has become our comforting intercessor who knows exactly how hard things can be for us (Heb.4:14-15; Heb. 13:5). Our Lord is right here beside us in every trial, in every tribulation, affliction, hardship, and yes, even in the midst of catastrophe.