

2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10

- 1) Paul speaks of the gospel as a treasure held in jars of clay “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (4:7).

Paul’s use of “power” in his letters to the Corinthians is both complex and foundational to his message. Read the passages in the accompanying handout. What does God’s power do for and to believers?

- 2) The Greek word used here, *dynamis*, means “potential for functioning in some way, power, might, strength, force, capability” (BDAG). This hints at “empowering”, suggesting that God’s Spirit doesn’t merely work in and on us. On the other hand, as Carson says, “We want to experience power so that we can be in control; Paul prays for power so that we will be controlled by God himself” (*Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 197). Based on your answers to Question 1, how does God’s Spirit empower us? Does this fit with your experience?

- 3) In Eph 3:14-21, Paul prays for his readers to have *power*. Carson writes of this prayer,

Is this not what you want? When was the last time you prayed along these lines? Do you not want to make it your goal to do so? Why not incorporate this sort of petition into your daily praying for the next six months? Can we perhaps hear God whispering, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:2)? [198]

Do you pray for God’s power? Why or why not? Where do you wish God would empower you?

- 4) In 4:7-18, one of the most eloquent passages on suffering, Paul used four words to describe what he suffered for the Church:¹

Afflicted (*thlipsis*): inward experience of distress; affliction, trouble – loss of comfort in order to serve others; material sacrifice; hectic schedule; etc.

Perplexed (*aporeo*): lit. “without a way” – confusion about the next step; doubt (not just about one’s own life but others’ as well)

Persecuted (*diokoo*): to harass someone, esp. because of their beliefs – could include persecution or spiritual attack, hostility from unbelieving family members, job mistreatment, etc.

Struck down (*kataballo*): to be cast down – sudden, unexpected failures; cherished plans or relationships lost; ministry failure; betrayed by fellow workers

It is very important we remember that Paul’s efforts were *not* universally appreciated by the Corinthians, and his troubles and frustration were due to both unbelievers and to the Corinthians themselves! In the midst of these trials Paul comforts himself that even his setbacks have value. It is through these, carrying the death of Jesus², that “the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (11).

1 See <http://www.xenos.org/classes/principles/cpu2w6.htm#a5> for more details.

2 Paul is quite graphic in 4:10; the phrase for “carry around” was typically used of pallbearers, and the term for Jesus’ “death” is *nekrosis*, connoting stench and rotting flesh (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*).

As Witherington says, “his labors and sufferings are not just the unfortunate cost of apostleship or occasions to demonstrate his faith, but they are at the heart of his witness” (390). When you feel frustrated, tired and ready to throw in the towel in your work for the church, how might God be making the life of Jesus visible through your trials? Is Paul’s encouraging statement, “death is at work in us, but life in you”, only true when those we minister to are responding and seeking God as well?

- 5) How does this power show through in the lives of Paul and the Corinthians? Is Paul saying that the results of this power are clearly supernatural, and therefore point to God? Is Paul saying, “The fact that we are still standing and keep plugging shows that we must be empowered by God and are legit”? Can you point to a believer (other than Paul) who demonstrates this effect? Or a non-believer who was swayed by the perseverance of weak and fallible Christians?
- 6) In 2 Cor 4:16-18, Paul says his “inner nature” is daily renewed “because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen.” Carson describes the “inner nature” as follows:

Most of us in the West have not suffered great persecution, but all of us are getting older. In fact, sometimes we can see in elderly folk something of the process that Paul has in mind. We all know senior saints who, as their physical strength is reduced, nevertheless become more and more steadfast and radiant. Their memories may be fading; their arthritis may be nearly unbearable; their ventures beyond their small rooms or apartments may be severely curtailed. But somehow they live as if they already have one foot in heaven. As their outer being weakens, their inner being runs from strength to strength.

Conversely, we know elderly folk who, so far as we can tell, are not suffering from any serious organic decay, yet as old age weighs down on them they nevertheless become more and more bitter, caustic, demanding, spiteful and introverted. It is almost as if the civilizing restraints imposed on them by cultural expectations are no longer adequate. In their youth, they had sufficient physical stamina to keep their inner being somewhat capped. Now, with reserves of energy diminishing, what they really are in their inner being is coming out. (184)

Believers use various means to keep a heavenly mindset even while drawn into the turmoil of work, chores, parenting, marriage, committees, financial management and all the other cares of the world. They practice quiet times, they meet in small groups, they worship on Sunday mornings, they journal. To what degree are your practices keeping your sinful impulses in check, as opposed to renewing your inner nature?

- 7) *Extra credit*: What do you learn from 5:1-10 about the “intermediate state” between death and resurrection?

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Fun fact: In this famous passage the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (4:6) is held “in jars of clay” (4:7), which may refer “to the cheap pottery lamps made in Corinth and used for walking about at night. Precisely because of their thinness, these vessels let out more light.” (BW3, 287)

“Power” in Paul’s Letters

- “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its **power**. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the **power of God**.” (1 Cor 1:17; also Rom 1:16)
- “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his **power**. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph 6:10-12; also Rom 15:19 and 2 Cor 10:3-4a)
- “For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the **power** of signs and wonders, by the **power** of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.” (Rom 15:18-19; also 1 Cor 12:28; also 13:2; 14:13, 37)
- “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his **power**.” (1 Cor 6:14; also Eph 3:17b-19)
- “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes **from his glorious power**, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col 1:11-14; also 2 Tim 1:8)
- “To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill **by his power** every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thess 1:11-12; also 2 Tim 1:7)
- “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the **power** of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 15:13)
- “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration **of the Spirit and of power**, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on **the power of God**.” (1 Cor 2:4)
- “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their **power**. For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on **power**.” (1 Cor 4:19-20)

Leader's Introduction:

Paul is dealing with multiple criticisms: He doesn't accept patronage support; he nevertheless asks for support for the Jerusalem collection. And worst of all, he faces struggles and setbacks, which, when compared with the ideal Stoic philosophers who are apparently the model for his enemies, makes him look like T.V.'s Columbo.

In this part of the letter he builds sympathy for his situation while sharing the godly view of suffering. Far from explaining setbacks or excusing them, they are central. In the previous chapter he said that reflecting on Christ is one of the ways we become more like Christ, going from glory to glory, by the Spirit. In this section he points also the suffering itself as an indispensable means of growth and transformation. And most importantly, when writing to the very people who are so vexing to him, but so beloved, he shows us the attitude of a true leader, and gives us his keys to remaining engaged and not discouraged despite all his trials and setbacks.