

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

II CORINTHIANS 4.7-15 LIFE THROUGH DEATH*

Ernest Best

Paul finished his last paragraph on a high note: God had shone in his heart and had given him an important ministry. But his life would not have looked important to an independent observer. To all appearances he was no more than an earthenware vessel, a cheap clay pot. Precious objects and treasures were however regularly kept in such pots. What treasure then is contained in the clay pot that is Paul? The answer is certainly not an immortal soul or divine spark kept in a perishable and mortal body. The clue comes from the preceding paragraph (this treasure). It may be either Paul's ministry or the light which shone in his heart when he became a Christian or the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. In fact these three cannot be clearly marked off from one another. The light which shone in Paul's heart on the Damascus road made him a Christian, gave him his ministry and brought him to see the glory of God in the face of Christ. What he says here of himself is true of every Christian and is seen most clearly when daily life is given up to the ministry of others--and all daily life should be a ministry to others.

For Paul a correlative of the recognition of human weakness is always the opportunity it gives to God. So the success of his ministry and the vitality of his Christian existence (neither should be measured in human terms) do not spring from his own ability and dedication but from the transcendent power of God. Paul draws out what this means with four vivid contrasts (vv.8,9). By

*This is an excerpt from the author's forthcoming commentary on 2 Corinthians in the series Interpretation and is printed here by kind permission of the general editors of the series. This series (John Knox Press, Atlanta, Georgia) 'is designed to meet the need of students, teachers, ministers, and priests for a contemporary expository commentary.' Several volumes have already appeared.

(all Scriptural references are to 2 Corinthians unless otherwise designated.)

all human reckoning he ought to be crushed, driven to despair, feel himself forsaken and destroyed because of what he has been through. It is useless to speculate what past incidents in his life Paul has in mind. He lists some of his trials in 11.23-28 but here he does not seem to be thinking primarily of physical suffering. Far worse is the anguish of mind that comes when we see those we love get into trouble, and Paul has seen this happen to the Corinthians. Despite his care they are failing to follow through in their Christian living. We might use other terms to describe the anxieties that come to us, not from the general human situation, but because we try to live as Christians. We do good and our goodness is ascribed to an attempt to curry popularity. We are profoundly perplexed when we try to apply Christianity to the terrifying problems of modern society: is unemployment worse than inflation? Does the possession of nuclear weapons endanger or preserve society? We are frustrated in our attempts to carry out some reform in an organisation or community of which we are members.

The pressures on Paul to which he refers did not get him down. God's transcendent power enabled him to endure. Some people stubbornly refuse to give in to adversity; with stiff upper lip they endure whatever fate throws at them. We admire them. But that was not how Paul endured, for the source of his strength lay not within himself but in the grace of God. God's power was made perfect in his weakness (12.9). That power is also always there with us to balance every outside circumstance and every interior thought that would bring us down. The promise is not that our troubles will pass away with time or that they only appear to be troubles or that a way out of them will eventually be found. The troubles are real and may never disappear, yet the power of God is there to bring us through them.

Paul generalises the four contrasts of vv.8-9 into three more in vv. 10-12. Of these the first two are parallel but the third breaks new ground. The affliction, perplexity, etc., of vv. 8-9 are rephrased as 'carrying in the body the death of Jesus' and 'being given up to death for Jesus' sake'. Paul's thought progresses naturally here for the treasure of Jesus was also in a cheap earthenware vessel --his human existence. There he had

been afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. At first sight we might hesitate to apply 'perplexed' to Jesus. Did he not always know what to do? But was he not perplexed when he thought of the hungry and poor? Should he turn stones into bread? This and other temptations assailed him for many days. In all the ways that Jesus was afflicted we see his dying (= 'death'; Paul uses here a word that describes a process rather than the single event of the crucifixion). Jesus' dying went on all through his life.

Paul relates himself here to the death of Jesus. He does this in several ways in his letters. Christ has died for or instead of him, he has been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2.20), baptized into his death (Rom. 6.3), united with him in a death like his (Rom. 6.5). Such statements help us to understand Paul when he talks of 'always carrying in the body the death (dying) of Jesus'. Because Paul once died with Christ he dies daily with him (I Cor. 15.31). It is not that he is continually in danger of death because of his missionary work or that he rejects the claims of his body through the practice of asceticism. It is rather that he never escapes affliction, perplexity, and the like. So also Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses (Mark 8.34). This is not something confined to the moment we become Christians but is part of the essential nature of living as Christians. It was the way Jesus lived, a continual denial of the self as important and worthy of consideration. This is a kind of dying which goes on all through life.

Paul of course does not deliberately seek suffering. It comes as he lives as a Christian and results in the life of Jesus being seen in him. There is a natural connection in the thought here for Jesus' dying was followed by his rising again. When then Paul though afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down is not crushed or destroyed (vv. 8-9) it is because the life of Jesus is in his life. Because Christ has risen, Paul can 'walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6.4). He no longer lives but Christ lives in him (Gal. 2.20). As there is a process of dying so there is a process in which the risen power of Christ manifests itself in Paul's life. As a result of this he is changed into the likeness of Christ

(3.18). As long as he lives he is dying for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be seen in him (v.11). And this is true for all of us: there is no escape 'while we live' from the process of dying which is the denying of self until we physically die. That kind of dying is inherent in all Christian existence.

Equally inherent in all Christian existence is the presence of the life of Jesus within, but it is a life which is never to be shut up within but always to be manifested to the world. Paul does not die in his ministry to satisfy some inner urge for unity with a dying Savior but that the life of that Savior should be seen by others. The manifestation of the risen life of Jesus, seen in loving service, wins men to learn of the Christ who died for them. Paul certainly preaches Christ crucified (I Cor. 1.23) but one of the essential ways in which he does so is by showing Christ's life in his life. He cannot show this unless he accepts Christ crucified for himself, and this of course he has done. Both the death of Jesus and his life are simultaneously visible in the life (body) of Paul.

We expect Paul now to go on and say 'You should be finding the same in-yourselves'. Instead he introduces a new and surprising contrast: 'death is at work in us, but life in you' (v.12). It is however not so surprising once we have understood the purpose of Paul's dying. It is not for his own gain but for the sake of others'. Here we come close to what he wrote in 1.6 (see also 11.7). It is taken even further in Col. 1.24 (this may not be by Paul) where his sufferings are said to make up for what is lacking in those of Christ and to be for the sake of the church. In a sense Paul's death is a representative death just as was Christ's. But Paul's death is not independent of Christ's as Christ's was of all other deaths. Dependent on Christ's death Paul's dying wins converts to Christ and, more importantly in this context, it should bring life to the Corinthians. Christ's risen life which Paul sees in himself ought to be appearing in them. Paul's dying is not for himself but for them. Is it not logical that, if Christ's dying can mean so much for us, Paul's dying and our dying should not also mean something for others and bring life to light in them? (See 1.3-7 for the way in which suffering and comfort are

transferred between Christians.)

Paul has been saying this in the context of his ministry to the Corinthians yet what he writes applies to all Christians. In troubles and anxieties we Christians find that God lifts us up over them if not out of them, that in our dying with Christ his risen life shows itself in us and that as a result that same life appears in those, or at least in some of those, with whom our lives are involved. In turn we are helped by those others just as Paul found himself helped and refreshed in a deep and spiritual sense by his converts (I Cor. 16.18; Philm 20; cf I Thess. 3.8). This is a mutual process in which every Christian should be bringing help to others and be receiving it from them.

It is not perhaps possible to explain in simple rational terms this interchange of spiritual benefit between members of the church. It is linked to the conception of the church as Christ's Body in which the members rejoice and suffer together. If not easily rationalised it has been a fact of the experience of the church throughout the ages. It means incidentally that members of a congregation have as much to give those who minister to them as to receive from them. More generally it means that every Christian by faithfully enduring affliction builds up other Christians in life and joy.

At least a part of Paul's contribution to the Body of Christ has been his preaching. It indeed landed him in all the trials he described in vv.8-11. But it was also for the sake of the Corinthians (v.15), that life might be at work in them. Moreover if he preached he did so out of faith, he preached what he believed. He draws in here a verse from the Psalms (116.10) probably hoping thereby to disarm those who criticised him because he did not use the Old Testament enough (cf chapter 3). The RSV translation of this verse of the Psalm is based on the Hebrew text and it differs from what we have here. Paul quotes the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). He usually quotes from this version for it would be the one his Greek speaking readers would have had available.

Paul however goes a little further than merely quoting the Old Testament. By saying that we have the same spirit of faith he joins the believers of the Old

Covenant to himself. Both he and they believe because God's Spirit has been at work in them and produced a believing spirit or disposition. Belief leads to speech. If we genuinely believe something to be important we will talk about it. Paul believed the gospel to be all-important and he went around preaching it. If he had not done so he would never have been persecuted or perplexed and the Corinthians would never have been given their hope that they would be raised with the Lord Jesus and brought with Paul eventually into Jesus' presence. This is not just a vague hope for the future. Already Paul has found the life of Jesus within himself (vv.10-11) so he knows and the Corinthians should know the certainty of their future presence with Jesus.

In what follows (4.16 - 5.10) Paul is about to go on to say more about what the life with Jesus will be but before he does so he cannot restrain himself from running on beyond his immediate objective to his ultimate: everything that happens is for the glory of God. The Greek here is difficult and we may either take it as in the RSV of the extension of the church in numbers or as in some other translations (e.g. AV) of the growth of the majority in the depth of their faith. Whether more join the church or each member grows in grace all will increase their thanksgiving to God from whom everything derives, and this will be to his glory.