

## 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

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[ 0 : 00 ] And turn back to our passage this morning, 2 Corinthians chapter 4.! What is your greatest strength?

! What do you think? Some of you may be heading to new colleges, universities, maybe you're starting new jobs. On your application form, in that box that says strengths, skills, gifts, what do you write?

And older, like me, actually, when you come to that part of the application form, that is the bit that really stunts you. It's quite hard, isn't it, to think of your strengths.

And maybe actually, when you get asked that question, you really don't like thinking about that. Because perhaps you don't really feel very strong at all.

You don't really know if you've got any strengths. What is your greatest strength? If you ask the Apostle Paul that question, Paul's greatest strength is actually his weakness.

[ 1 : 16 ] Just flip back to chapter 1 and verse 8 of 2 Corinthians. This is what Paul opens his letter to them with.

For we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

He says to the Corinthians, listen, there's one thing you need to know. I don't want this to be covered up. I want this to be well known amongst you that actually we've suffered beyond our strength.

There is a limit and we've reached it. And now we know that we're weak. We are not strong. We want you to know this, Corinthians.

So he doesn't cover up his weaknesses. Actually, he wants them to know about them. He wants them to know about his limitations, doesn't he? And in our passage this morning, he describes himself, along with Timothy and the Apostles, as a jar of clay.

[ 2 : 19 ] And in a world where our strengths are applauded and played up and paraded around, we want to avoid weakness, don't we? And maybe even as we come to church, we kind of put a bit of a mask on, don't we, maybe?

And we struggle to know how to deal with our weaknesses. Strangely though, the Corinthian world is not very different, and Paul embraces them rather than fighting them.

He embraces his weakness. Now, Paul is an apostle, isn't he? He's God's chosen messenger to take the good news of the gospel to the Gentile world.

He's been chosen by God, and so it turns out that God chooses weak people. He chooses people who break, who get tired, who get old, who get frail, who get sick.

Weakness. And do you know, Paul, he loves that about God. He embraces that. He embraces that for three reasons.

[ 3 : 25 ] Firstly, he embraces his weakness, because his weakness shows God's power. It shows God's power. You know, it's really impressive when very precious things are carried around in precarious ways, isn't it?

In unnecessarily risky ways. Think of the tightrope walker who carries a baby, or something like that. It's a perfect thought. I was watching a TV show the other day, it's sort of a name TV called Millionaire Hotels, and it featured these sort of six-star hotels.

It was amazing. And one of these hotels was on an island off Jamaica, and the way they served the food to the guests was that a servant would come in with a tray of lavishly expensive food.

One of y'all came in, it was the most expensive lobster you could buy, with the most expensive champagne and caviar. Incredibly lavish and expensive.

And he walked in with this tray, but how was he carrying it? On his head. With no hands. Folding his arms. And when he came into the room, they're going, wow, this is amazing.

[ 4 : 42 ] What's he doing? How's our food going to survive this? Then he starts doing squats. And tying his shoelace. And hopping on one leg. And watching this, thinking, what is he doing?

It looks so precarious, this. Look, this great meal, this treasure meal, can fall at any moment. It can all come crashing down on the floor.

But it doesn't. And that's the skill, isn't it, of the servant. Why does he do that? Well, he is showing something off there.

He is showing his skill off and his power. As a waiter, precarious things carried around in unnecessary risky ways. Just look at verse 7 there.

We have this treasure in jars of clay. To show that the surpassing power belongs to God. And not to us. Paul says that's the Christian life.

[ 5 : 42 ] The Christian life is to carry around a treasure. It's to carry around the most precious thing that this world has ever known. The good news of the gospel.

That's what he's been talking about in previous verses. The good news of the glory of God. In the face of Jesus Christ. In the message of gospel.

It is a treasure. What could be more valuable? Than the message of reconciliation. Of forgiveness. Of man and God.

It's the most valuable thing that this world has ever known. And what does God do with it? He doesn't put it in a bank. He doesn't put it in a safety deposit box.

He doesn't put it in some cathedral vault. Never to be touched. By human hands. No, he puts it in the most fragile. The most precarious.

[ 6 : 39 ] The most breakable place. He can find. He puts it in us. In jars of clay. You know, these jars of clay.

They're like the ancient equivalents. Of a thin white plastic bag. Now don't think bag for life. These aren't the 10p kind of bags. They're the thin ones.

You get in the pound shop. Isn't it? And it's like shoving wads of cash. Into a thin white plastic bag. Archaeologists. When they dig up Roman sites. All they find is broken pottery. There's just tons of it. In Roman burial sites. Just common. Commonplace.

Domestic containers. Domestic containers. And containers. These jars of clay. Wondering 2,000 years. When they dig up your house. What will they find? They'll probably find a drawer. Ram full of plastic bags.

[ 7 : 35 ] Won't they? Maybe they'll go in a museum. But that's all they are. Jars of clay. Breakable. Just commonplace. Household items. You break one. It's fine.

Just get a new one. They're replaceable. So it's nuts. Isn't it? This precious treasure. Of the gospel. Is carried around.

In a clay jar. It's carried around. In you. And me. It's a precious thing. Carried around. In such an unnecessarily. Risky way. And we wonder. Why do it Lord?

Why do it this way? It could all come crashing down. In a big mess. At any moment. How precarious it looks. How fragile we are.

But it is part of this show. That God is laying on. God is showing off. God wants to show his skill. And his power.

[ 8 : 35 ] So that no one here will be able to say. I did it. When the gospel works. In our lives. The surpassing power.

Paul he says. It belongs to God. And not to us. So he says. Yes. For the Corinthians. I am breakable. I am dispensable. I am replaceable. I am fragile.

And God wants me. Later in the letter. In chapter 10. Verse 10. They say about Paul. That his bodily presence. Is weak.

And his speech. Of no account. This guy. Is a loser. Humanly speaking. And you know. Paul. He loves that. About the way God works.

Because his weakness. Shows Jesus's. Power. It is the surpassing power. Of God. Power that overwhelms.

[ 9 : 31 ] Power that. Is irresistible. It's the same word. In the original. For when you might. Have a dam. That breaks. We were talking about this. This morning. With the.

The kids. Imagine a reservoir. Full of water. And it happens. Doesn't it? Suddenly. There is a flash. Flood. A flash. Cloudburst.

And the water. Builds up. Higher and higher and higher. Until the pressure. Is just so immense. That the. The dam. Breaks. It is smashed through. By the power of the water.

It is surpassed. That's the. That's the word. No matter what gets in the way. This surpassing power of God. Is unstoppable. Not even the Roman Empire.

Can stand up to it. Can it? The gospel meets the Roman. Imperial. War machine. If you like. And it. Smashes through it. Doesn't it? If you read the book of Acts.

[10:28] The word. It grows. And it grows. And it grows. It's the surpassing power. Of God. And so Paul embraces his weakness.

Because that is the show. God says. Look at me. Look at what I'm doing. With these jars of clay. Down here. A precious treasure.

Carried in such an unnecessarily. Risky way. He says. Look at what I'm doing. In this fragile church. Around the world. Hundreds upon thousands of people.

Daily. Are coming to Christ. You know. Al Jazeera. They've published some statistics. I don't know. Whether to take them. As authentic or not. But it gives you a ballpark.

Doesn't it? They say. That there are 600 converts. To Christianity an hour. That's Al Jazeera. And if we are strong. If we are invincible.

[11:27] If we can do without sleep. If we don't get tired. If we are not weak. Then people will make the huge mistake.

And think it's about us. Won't they? So God chooses weak people. And we don't need to just get over that. We need to embrace that. This morning.

What kind of people. Do we value. And welcome. And expect to see here. In church. What kind of people.

Do we want to present ourselves. As being to ourselves. Into the world. Paul embraces his weakness. Because it shows Jesus' power.

Secondly though. His dying. Shows Jesus' living. His dying shows. Jesus' living. I don't know if you know much about the Apostle Paul. He's great to get to know.

[12:26] As a man. As a Christian. And as you look at the Apostle Paul. And his life. I wonder what it is that you see. What sort of man do you see there?

If you flip over the page. And look at verse 10 and 11. If you just scan through that. Paul there speaks a great deal there. About his mortality. Doesn't he? He speaks about his body.

The sort of body that he's in. He's encased in. His mortal flesh. He's not trying to cover up. The limitations of his body.

Is he? Of his mortality. Of his fragility. Of his fleeting existence. It's like a clay jar. Can be dropped. At any moment. He's brittle. He's delicate. Verse 10. He says he's always carrying in his body. The death of Jesus.

[13:21] You see the Apostle Paul there. He's imitating. The pattern of Jesus' death. Isn't he? How glorious. How glorious. And how powerful. His death was.

We've just sung of that. Haven't we? The power. Of the cross. As he brings. Men and women. And boys and girls. To himself. There is power in his death.

And so. Paul follows that pattern. He has a. A kind of. Death shaped life. Doesn't he? A cross shaped life.

Always carrying in his body. The death of Jesus. A cruciform. Time of life. And so you look at Paul. And you look at a man who is very weak. You look at his body. At his frailty. Look at his weakness. Take a good hard look at me.

[14:16] He says. That's what he says. In this great list of. Things from verse 8. There isn't it? He says. We are afflicted. In every way. We are perplexed.

We are persecuted. We are struck down. Let's look at me. In all of this weakness. In this death shaped life. But you know. The thing about Paul is.

That he just keeps going. Doesn't he? Just keeps going and going. And there is this amazing. Three letter word. That comes up in that list.

From verse 8. The three letter word. But. So important isn't it? He is afflicted in every way. He is like a general. In an army. Who is surrounded.

By the enemy. He is totally outnumbered. He is outmaneuvered. But. He says he is not crushed. Just manages to escape. He is persecuted.

[15:16] It is the same word. That you might have for an animal. Who has been hunted. He is hunted. He is hounded. He is trapped. But.

He is not forsaken. Somehow he escapes. He is perplexed. He is totally bewildered. By the situation. That he finds himself in. In as a Christian.

But. He is not driven to despair. There. Just keeps going. Doesn't it. Paul. Just keeps getting up. Again and again. Blow after blow.

It is like one of those. Duracell bunnies. Just keeps going and going. You look at him. In his mortality. In his weakness. And in his. His fleetingness.

And the question is. How does he keep going? And in his life. In this death shaped life. That looks so weak. What is happening.

[16:12] Is that he is displaying. A magnificent life. That is within him. There is a life. So strong. That cannot be stopped.

It is a display. Of a surpassing power. Of the life of Jesus. Working in him. Now that is the pattern. Of verse 10 and 11.

Isn't it? It starts with him. Speaking about his death. His dying. Which shows. Jesus' life. Verse 10. He is always carrying.

In the body. The death of Jesus. So that. The life of Jesus. May be manifested. In our bodies. Verse 11. We are always being given. Over to death.

So that. The life of Jesus. May be manifest. May be shown. You see. The more death shaped. His life and experience gets.

[17:07] The more that. Jesus' life. Is clear. In him. How does he keep going? Well it is the life of Jesus. That we are seeing in him.

I don't know if you followed the story. Of the Hatton Garden. Jewelry heist. Last year. It was amazing. Wasn't it? Awful. Four guys. Broke into the Hatton Garden.

Safety deposit company. And they sold. Two hundred million pounds worth. Of cash. And jewellery. And when they escaped. They had to hide. The treasure somewhere.

I wonder where you hide it. In that situation. Would you hide it in a safe. In a combination lock suitcase. Well they didn't hide it. In anywhere like that. They went to a cemetery. And dug a grave for it.

And they hid it underground. It's genius really. In plastic bags. You see the place where the treasure was. Was the place where the dead were.

[18:06] And to get the treasure. You have to get into the grave. And Paul knows from experience. That as he faces his own mortality. As he dies to himself.

As he takes this death shaped life. And he embraces this cruciform life. The surpassing power of God. This life of Jesus.

Is seen in him. In the very place of his own mortality. In his weakness. And in his human mortality. It becomes so obvious there.

So obvious. That something else is going on with this man. It just keeps going and going. Flipped it in every way. But he's not crushed. Perplexed.

But not despairing. Persecuted. But not struck down. God delivers him again and again. And it's the surpassing power of Jesus.

[19:02] And it's so obvious. Isn't it? When you have a weak man like Paul. And God chooses weak people. He chooses the most fragile containers. He can get.

To put his treasured gospel in. He chooses dying men and women. Like Paul. So it will be so obvious. To the world.

That the power belongs to God. Belongs to him. And so Paul embraces his weakness. He wants them to know about it. Because that's where the treasure is.

For all to find. That display has brought life to others. Hasn't it? In there verse 12. Death is at work in us. But life in you.

That is the display. And it's working. Verse 15. He says it's all for your sake. Corinthians. This is God's way of growing his kingdom.

[19:59] Through weakness. One Christian writer writes. We come to appreciate the power of our own Christian ministry. Whatever that is. Only when we acknowledge our own death.

Wow. Sounds a bit over the top maybe. Doesn't it? But it's true. When we embrace our weakness. When we embrace our own mortality.

Actually the true power of the gospel is on show. Because it's in those weaknesses that Jesus' life. And his power. His surpassing power come to the fore.

Now just think about that. Think about the people who most influenced you in your Christian life. Who've most encouraged you. Most inspired you.

Perhaps people who've been gone long ago. You've read about them. People that you know today. Just hold that person in your mind. I wonder if most of the people that we're thinking about in our heads.

[ 21 : 05 ] Are the kind of people who've been willing to die. Every day. In some way. Maybe even literally. Those kind of people who God speaks to us through most.

Are often those people who've experienced great suffering. And great weakness. And you know that is why church is such a great privilege isn't it.

Because we get to spend time with one another. With people who've suffered. Who've carried in their bodies the death of Jesus. Every day. And God's people are like that.

And you look at them and you think. How do they keep going? How does he keep going? How does she keep going? There was something so strong. In him. In her.

There is some power that is going on here. In this weak fragile church. And it is not them. It is the life. And the surpassing power of God.

[ 22 : 06 ] And it's really clear when we are weak. Isn't it? In our weakness. In our mortality. In our limitations. So you are never past it.

In the Christian life. You are never past it. As long as you've got breath. You are never too old. Or too young. To be used by God.

Your weaknesses are not an excuse. To get involved. With church life. Actually they are a reason to get more involved. Aren't they? Paul embraces his weakness.

Because they show. God's surpassing power. And they show Jesus' life. Thirdly though. He embraces his weakness. Because his suffering.

Shows a weighty glory. His suffering. Shows a weighty. Glory. And what does all of this mean? Well I think. A big point of application.

[ 23 : 05 ] Is verse 16. Isn't it? Verse 16. If you look there. So. After all of this. We do not lose heart. We do not lose heart.

Paul lives. In a kind of upside down world. In this passage. Really. When you ask him. What is your greatest strength? He says.

It's my weakness. It's my mortality. It's upside down. Isn't it? It's far from the way. That the world thinks. The world looks at Paul. And he thinks.

His body is weak. His speech is of no account. It's just insane. You wonder what sort of guy. Paul would have been like. To hang around with. I think he is insane.

But you know. Insanity. Actually is. The inability. To connect. With reality. That's the definition. Insanity. The inability. To connect. With reality.

[ 24 : 06 ] And Paul. Actually is saying here. That to be weak. And to embrace it. Is to be more connected. With reality. Than anybody else. It means to be living.

In reality. Even though it looks ridiculous. Because Paul sees the world. As it really is. He kind of puts reality goggles on.

And sees how the world is. He sees himself. And his weakness. And his suffering. In proportion. To what is going on around him. And what will happen in the future.

And do you notice that he compares. Lots of things here. Doesn't he? In verse 16 to 18. He compares. His outer self. To his inner self.

He compares. His light. Momentary afflictions. To an eternal weight of glory. He compares. Things seen. With things that are unseen.

[ 25 : 03 ] He compares. Things that are fleeting. With eternal things. And he's saying. Just get a set of scales. And measure those things up.

Measure your weakness. And your fragility. In this world. And measure it against. What you will become.

And he says. Doesn't he? That they are not even worth. Comparing. Verse 17. It is beyond. All comparison. Just try and do it.

For a moment. Think. Think about your body. Think about your body. About your outer husk. Of a shell. Of a body. Of the fleeting things we see around us.

Just weigh them up. Compared with. That the weight. The weight of glory. The eternal weight of glory. That awaits us.

[ 26 : 01 ] With the things that are unseen. Paul says. If you do that. There is no comparison. Your body. And your suffering. The things that we see around us. Are just like dust on scales.

They're just. Like a feather. That word. Surpassing. Comes back again. Actually. It's not easy to see. In the.

In the English. But it's there again. It's the eternal weight of glory. That is beyond all comparison. That word. Surpassing. It comes up in Corinthians.

It's quite an important word. In chapter 1. Verse 8. He's already used it. We were suffering. Beyond. What we could handle. It surpassed us. Then there's.

God's power. Which surpasses. And here. There is a. An eternal. Weight of glory. That surpasses. Everything that happens today. Paul is seeing.

[ 26 : 57 ] An eternal. Weight of glory. That is. That it. It breaks. The banks. Of our suffering. It will surpass. The dam. Of whatever it is. We're going through today.

For Paul. The world. That we see. Is not. Real. There is. Something more. Real. Paul. And the people. To pity.

Are those. Whose. Outward. Husk. And their. Inward. Life. Is perishing. At the same time. Paul embraces.

His weakness. Because. He sees. That. They show. The surpassing. Power. Of God. That his. Death shaped.

Life. Shows. Jesus. His life. Within him. And his. Suffering. Is nothing. Compared. With this. Future. Glory. That is.

[ 27 : 53 ] To come. Let me. Ask you. The question. Again. What is. Your. Greatest. Strength. This morning. God.

Has. Great. Ways. Of. Reminding. Us. That we're. Jars. Of. Clay. Doesn't he. There are. Times. That we. Go. Through. When we. Just. Feel. Broken.

When we're. In bits. On the. Floor. But. Paul. Is not. Ashamed. About. That. He's not. Embarrassed. About. That. He.

Embraces. That. He. Embraces. This. Life. Of. Weakness. This. Death. Shaped. Jesus. Cross. Shaped. Kind. Of. Life. And.

It's. Good. For. Him. And. It's. Good. For. Us. To. Do. That. It. Gives. God. The. Glory. When. We. Do. That. It.

[ 28 : 51 ] Is. Good. For. Us. To. Sleep. It. Is. Good. For. Us. To. Stop. And. Rest. And. Take. A. Day. Off. A. Week. It. Is. Good.

To. Understand. Our. Limits. It. Is. Good. To. Understand. Our. Own. Mortality. And. Our. Own. Limitations. And.

So. What. Is. It. That. We. Need. To. Be. Effective. As. A. Church. What. Sort. Of. People. Does. God. Choose. In. His. Church. This. Church. Is. Full. Of. Gifted.

People. There. Are. Lots. Of. Gifts. In. This. Room. And. That. Is. A. Glorious. Strength.

That. God. Has. Given. To. Us. Is. Our. Weakness. And. Let me. Tell you. That. If. You. Are. Feeling. Weak. And. You. Are. Feeling. Fraggled.

[ 29 : 46 ] And. You. Are. Feeling. Absolutely. Shattered. On. The. Floor. You. Actually. Are. This. Church. Is. Greatest. Asset. You.

Are. Useful. And. If. You. Are. Feeling. Like. That. If. You. Feeling. Strong. Well. God. Is. In. The. Business. Of. Breaking.

That. Illusion. And. That. Will. Be. Good. For. You. Let me. Finish. With. Some. More. Words. From. Paul. Later. In. This. Letter.

Which. I. Have. Some. This. This. Up. To. Keep. Me. From. Becoming. Conceited. Because. Of. The. The.

Revelations. That. God. Had. In. The. Flesh. I. Pleaded. With. The. Lord. About. This. But.

[ 30 : 39 ] He. 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. For. The. Sake. Of.  
Christ. Then. I. Am. Content. With. Weaknesses. For. When. I. Am. Weak. Then. I. Am. Strong.  
Let's. Pray.  
Together.