

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



ESV 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 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. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Dear Friends in Christ, Fellow Redeemed,

How much do you trust the reviews? If you're looking to try a new restaurant or maybe searching for a new salon to get your hair cut, are you one of those people who whips out their phone to read the Google or Yelp reviews? If you're wanting to see a new movie, maybe you'll check out how many stars it has, or at least see what the critics have to say before you watch it. I don't know about you, but a few positive reviews go a long way in getting me to commit to trying something unfamiliar. Sometimes I don't even read the entire review; oftentimes a glowing headline is usually enough to draw me in. If I see captions like "Juiciest Burger in Town" or "Tom Cruise Shines Again in Action-Packed Thriller," you got me; I'm in.

If I asked you to write a brief review of the Christian life, what would it say? What are the main points that you would highlight? What kind of spoilers would you give away? What would your headline be?

A brief review of the Christian life is exactly what the Apostle Paul writes in God's Word for this morning. It's a life that he knew well – a life that proclaimed a message throughout the known world! If he were to put a headline on this review, perhaps it would have gone something like this...

Theme: JESUS SHINES IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

- I. As the Light in a darkened heart (5-6)
- II. As the Power in a challenging life (7-10)
- III. As the Hope in a blessed death (11-12)

I. As the Light in a darkened heart (5-6)

The life of the Apostle Paul was not all sunshine and roses. As a consequence of his Christian faith, Paul had been in prison, flogged, stoned, shipwrecked, robbed, starved, and abandoned. As if all that wasn't bad enough, some of Paul's critics in Corinth were suggesting that his suffering was God's judgment. These false teachers were proclaiming an early form of what we call the "prosperity gospel," (think Joel Osteen) saying that God shows his love for us by making us wealthy and comfortable, not poor and afflicted like Paul.

That's why our text begins with Paul clearly stating his mission: **For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.** ⁶ **For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts.**

What's he talking about, "God said, 'Let light shine out of darkness.'"? Where did that come from? Well, he's talking about Creation. He's comparing the creation of faith in a person's heart to the creation of the universe. It's a pretty surreal comparison, isn't it?

How does the Bible begin? **In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.** ² **The earth was without form and empty, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.** ³ **And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Gen 1:1-3)**

I've always found it interesting that on the first day in time, God created the light *before* he created the objects that radiate light (sun, moon, stars on day 4). Where did it come from? What was the source of the light in the darkness? It was God's Word! God spoke, and light appeared! And just like the empty darkness that covered the deep, the natural human condition is empty and dark. You know, popular psychology likes to tell us that deep down everyone is a good person. That if we can only scrape away all the bad things on the outside, we'll discover the true, virtuous self within each of us.

But the prophet Jeremiah tells us: **The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)** Like creation in the beginning, our natural state is empty darkness. Our hearts are eclipsed by our original sin from Adam and our actual sin from our daily lives. But like creation, the empty darkness of sin has the same antidote! What is the source of the light in the darkness of our hearts? God's Word! God speaks the good news of Christ's sinless life, guiltless death, and universal atonement – and the light of faith appears within us! Jesus shines in the Christian life by beaming the light the Gospel in the Christian's heart!

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. You remember how Moses' face glowed after he spent time on Mt. Sinai face-to-face with God? When the people saw that light reflecting off Moses' face after he spoke with God, they could tell a few things about God. They could tell He was filled with glory and majesty and that He was not joking with this law. It was serious. In Christ Jesus, we see the light of God shining once more, and in Him we see the fuller, complete picture of a God whose glory it is to forgive and to suffer and to endure and to embrace sinful people like us that we might be saved.

No, our Christian lives aren't all sunshine and rainbows, but because we have this assurance: that Jesus is our Savior and sin no longer rules over us, our lives can take on a whole new perspective! It may not all be sunshine, but there is always silver linings for Christians like you and me. **We know that for those who love God all things work together for good. (Rom 8:28) We know the plans the LORD has for us, plans for good and not for evil, to give us a future and a hope. (Jer 29:11) We know that there is laid up for us the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to us on the Last Day (2 Ti 4:8)** These are just of some of the wonderful things that we now know because of the treasure of the Gospel that dwells in our hearts by faith.

II. As the Power in a challenging life (7-10)

Speaking of treasure... Where does a person usually keep their treasure? Where do you keep your treasure – you know, your valuables, jewelry, family heirlooms? Do you keep them in a brown paper bag? How about plastic sandwich bag? I doubt it! It's more likely that you keep what valuables you have locked up somewhere, right? Maybe in a safety deposit box at the bank or a fireproof lockbox in your

closet. That's what you do with treasure... you lock it up somewhere so you don't lose it and no one can steal it.

The treasure of this good news is far more valuable than any amount of money. And yet what does God do with that treasure? Verse 7: **We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.** We humans – we Christians are the clay jars into which God has placed his most precious treasure! The message of the forgiveness of sins! What treasure! It's an amazing picture that has a ton of meaning packed into it!

First of all, clay jars were ordinary! They were everywhere, especially in the homes of peasants and common people. Wealthy people used more exotic materials, such as ivory, marble, glass, or fine wood, but regular people used clay pots. It would be like saying today, "we have this treasure in brown paper bags."

Second, clay jars were fragile! Compared to marble, ivory, or even wood, clay didn't last. Since it was so cheap, no one really expected it to. People used a pot for a while, and when it got too chipped or cracked to use, or when it fell and shattered, they simply got another one.

Paul creates this great paradox: God has taken this great treasure, the good news of Jesus Christ crucified, and placed it in people like you and me, who are as common and fragile as clay pots. Why would God store something so valuable in a container so ordinary? One reason: to be the source of Power in the challenging lives on ordinary, fragile vessels like you and me. That way, it's clear that whatever challenges we go through in this life, are only overcome through God's power!

From the little we know, the apostle Paul was not an impressive person. He was not an eloquent speaker, he may have been small of stature, and he seems to have had health problems, maybe poor eyesight. His opponents loved to criticize, slander, reject, and persecute him. Yet despite all this, he became the greatest evangelist to ever live! He established churches all over the Mediterranean world! The only explanation? The Gospel power of Jesus shone through him! It doesn't make much sense to place something so valuable in a container so ordinary and fragile, unless of course, you want people to notice the treasure and not the container. So, God pours his life-giving, life-changing Gospel power into ordinary containers, like Paul, like you and me, so that when people see the challenges that we overcome in life, they praise him, and not us!

The harder life gets, the more roughed up and dented the clay jars get, the more obvious the treasure becomes. Paul says, **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;** When's the last time you slumped through the day as if you had the weight of the world on your shoulders? Have you ever been so overwhelmed by the complexities of life or by some difficult decision that you were completely paralyzed? Have you experienced one setback after another: financial trouble, health problems, lost job, or family strife?

That's how Paul felt too. Everywhere he went, Paul was hounded and criticized and beaten and wounded for His faith in Jesus. Emotionally and literally, Paul's been knocked off his feet again and again... Maybe you know how that feels... Paul and his companions were stressed out, mixed up, picked on, and knocked down. What a review of the Christian life! Sounds rough! But do you know what? They were not crushed; not driven to despair; not forsaken; not destroyed. How is that possible? How did he not just give up on the whole Christianity thing? How?!

This is how: Paul wrote in **Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** My Jesus loved me, died for me, rose for me, and now lives in me. Everything I suffer, everything I endure,... I do for Him. The devil has done his worst to us. He did all he

could to tempt Jesus into sin. He did all he could to make Jesus' death and resurrection not count for us. He failed. The world does all it can to us, to drag us down, to make us doubt God's love for us. But we Christians are still standing! Not because of who we are – we're just a bunch of clay jars – but because of the life-giving Gospel power that God has placed within us. Jesus shines in the Christian life! Always. The good times and the bad. Jesus still shines!

III. As the Hope in a blessed death (11-12)

The other thing about jar clays is: they're meant to be used, not admired. God's not looking for sterling, silver tea sets. He's looking for rough and tumble clay pots – the kind that can be used every day. The kind of pots that don't need to be tucked in a china cabinet but can be sent out into a difficult world, carrying within them the death of Christ. The kind of pots that, sooner or later, will break down. The kind of pots that will one day fall apart and come to the end of their earthly lives – and return to the clay from which they came.

Paul says: **We who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.** Jesus shines in the Christian life, perhaps most brightly as the hope in the Christian's blessed death.

When's the last time you've been to the funeral of an unbeliever? Is there a more depressing place in all the world? Without any real comfort to hold onto, all that's said at such a funeral is the fond memories, the laughs, all talk about how good of a person the deceased was. It's all shallow. And it's all meaningless, there's no comfort at all in any of it.

By contrast, when's the last time that you've been to a Christian funeral? We had one of those yesterday, for our recently departed Sister-in-Christ, Emily Kuehne. And, perhaps it's because it's so fresh in my memory, but I would contend there is no more hopeful and blessed place in all the world than a Christian funeral! Sometimes we don't even call them funerals, we call them victory services! At Christian victory services we read the Bible passages proclaiming the promises of eternal life! We sing the hymns ushering the beloved into the holy halls of heaven itself as we sing together with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven! We rejoice because the souls of our dearly departed are even now in paradise awaiting the last day when Christ will raise our broken bodies from the grave, glorify them, join our souls once again to them, and take us to be forever in heaven with him!

A Christian funeral is a celebration, not of the Christian's life, but of a Christians blessed death! For in their life, they might have been afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, BUT Jesus still kept them in His loving hands, so they are not crushed, not driven to despair, not forsaken, not destroyed. Instead, by the grace of God, they kept the faith and finished the race, and so a Christian funeral is a celebration of victory – the ending of the fight – a crossing of the finish line! What a way for Jesus to shine in that Christian's life one last time!

So, what do you think of Paul's review of the Christian life? Not bad, huh? "Jesus Shines in the Christian Life!" We are just clay jars. Jesus is the treasure! The treasure that shines as the light in your darkened heart, as the power even in a challenging life, and especially as the hope in the Christian death! Thanks be to God! Amen.