

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a bad day when you felt like you were down and every time you tried to get up somebody kicked you down again? I heard a funny story about a New York City lawyer who traveled to South Texas to do some dove hunting. He shot a dove and when it fell in a nearby pasture, the lawyer climbed the fence to retrieve his bird. As he walked through the pasture, the rancher who owned the property came driving up on a tractor. He asked the hunter, “What are you doing on my property?” The lawyer said, “I shot a bird, and I’m going to go get it.” The rancher said, “This is my private property, so you can just get off of it right now.” The hunter said, “I’ll have you know that I’m a lawyer from New York City, and if you don’t let me get my bird, I’ll sue you for everything you’ve got.”

The rancher said, “Down here in Texas, we settle disputes with the Texas three-kick rule.” The lawyer said, “What’s that?” The rancher said, “Well, I kick you three times, then you kick me three times, then I kick you three times, and so on until one man gives up.” The lawyer looked at the old rancher and thought, “I’m stronger and younger than this old man. I can take him easily.” So he said, “Okay, we’ll use the Texas three-kick rule.”

The rancher climbed off the tractor and walked toward the lawyer. Before the lawyer could prepare, the rancher planted the tip of his old cowboy boot in the middle of the lawyer’s shin. While he was holding his shin, the rancher kicked the lawyer in his mid-section knocking the breath out of him. When he fell to his knees, the rancher kicked him on the side of the head. The lawyer saw stars and lay there in pain for a few minutes, but then he got to his feet and said, “Now it’s my turn you old codger. I’ll show you how we kick in New York.” As the lawyer moved toward him, the rancher smiled and said, “Naw. I give up. Go get your dove.”

There are times when we all feel like we’ve been kicked down and we don’t get a chance to kick back! Today the title of our lesson is “Down but Not Out.” Paul had been knocked down many times, but he had never been knocked out.

2 Corinthians 4:7-12. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

We learned in the last lesson that we’re just ordinary jars of clay—and most of us are cracked pots. But those imperfections allow the light of the gospel to shine out through us. God created us to be a container of the priceless treasure of the life of Jesus Christ. Sometimes you can find treasure inside the most ordinary things. There was a couple in Lander, Wyoming who visited the local garbage dump to dispose of some trash. As they were dumping their trash they saw someone had discarded the headboard to an old wooden bed. The couple took the headboard thinking they might be able to restore it. The headboard was extremely heavy and as they were loading it into their truck, a wooden plug on the bottom of the one of the bedposts came off.

From inside the headboard, which had been hollowed out, a large amount of old gold coins came spilling out. Both legs of the old headboard had been hollowed out and contained a fortune in gold coins dating to the 19th century. You can often find treasures hiding in the most unlikely places! You and I may not be much to look at—we’re just plain old clay jars. But we contain the priceless treasure of the life of Jesus Christ. The emphasis isn’t on the pots, but on the supernatural presence of Jesus in the pots!

A cracked pot is a person who isn’t perfect; it represents someone who has a few flaws in their life. In this message we’re going to examine HOW we get these cracks and then WHY God uses pain to make us better vessels of service.

1. GOD PERMITS YOU TO BE CRACKED BUT NOT CRUSHED

Last week I stressed that God uses broken things. When Gideon’s army surrounded the enemy, it wasn’t until their clay jars were broken that the light could be seen. Like this clay jar with cracks, God’s light can shine out through our imperfections and flaws. In these verses Paul mentions four personal sources of pain in his life.

(1) You may be cracked by personal pressures

Paul wrote that “we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed.” The word “pressed” is a word meaning to be confined on every side. Have you ever felt as if all the walls of your life are closing in on you? In the first Star Wars movie, Luke Skywalker and Hans Solo were trying to rescue Princess Leia from the Death Star. As they were escaping they end up in a garbage hold. They hear a grinding noise, and suddenly the walls start moving in. They realize they’re in a huge garbage compacter! They are in a panic because nothing they prop between the walls works. The crushing continues. Chewbacca lets out a rather sad-sounding roar which sounded like Wookiee for “This is the end, I just know it!” But just before the walls crush them, R2D2 shuts down the garbage compacter, and they escape with only inches to spare!

That’s in the movies, but it’s possible to feel as if the invisible walls around you are starting to close and you suddenly find yourself being pressured like never before. It may be financial pressure, pressure at work, or pressure at home. You’ll be pressured, but God’s Word promises that you won’t be destroyed. You may be cracked, but you won’t be crushed.

(2) You may be cracked by personal frustrations

Paul wrote that he had been “perplexed, but not in despair.” This word “perplexed” was used to describe someone who had been ruined in business and his creditors had left him with nothing. This person was at wit’s end, and couldn’t figure out what to do next. Life can be perplexing.

I think Paul was bewildered because he was suffering so much when he was trying to serve God. After all, it seems logical that if you love God dearly and follow God sincerely, then life should be fine and dandy. But we know it doesn’t work that way. Someone once told me, “Now that I’m a Christian, it means the end of my problems.” I smiled and said, “You’re right, it is the end of your problems: The FRONT end!”

The truth is we all have questions about why good people suffer and bad people prosper. Even the best saints have second thoughts. When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent word to Jesus asking, “Are you really the Messiah, or should we look for someone else?” This was the very same guy who baptized Jesus and saw heaven opened and heard the voice of God speaking, “This is my well beloved Son, listen to him.” And yet, John was perplexed, and had to ask if Jesus was really the Messiah.

It’s okay to ask questions, as long as you don’t allow your frustration to turn into despair. If you remember our study of Job, he asked a lot of questions about why he was suffering. God came to Job and started asking a series of questions Himself. Basically God said, “Job, when you can answer my questions, THEN I’ll answer yours!” And yet in spite of Job’s perplexing situation, he never gave in to despair. By faith Job said, “Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him.” (Job 13:15)

I love the quote from Barbara Johnson about all our unanswered questions. She wrote: “I’m glad God has all the answers, ‘cause I barely understand the questions!” Life can be so frustrating that we find ourselves cracking under the uncertainties. You may be cracked, but you won’t be crushed. You may be perplexed, but you don’t ever have to be in despair.

(3) You may be cracked by personal attacks

Paul wrote that he had been “persecuted, but not abandoned.” The word “persecuted” referred to the practice of hunters tracking down an animal. Paul understood this word better than we do, because during his ministry there was a group of radical, militant Jews who followed him from town to town trying to have him arrested and punished. Even today, in parts of our world, like the Sudan, Christians are hunted down and killed for their faith.

Persecution against Christians in America is more subtle. Most of the persecution we receive comes from people who use taunts, slander, and criticism to attack us for our faith. Maybe you know what it is to have friends or family members ridicule you because of your faith. Every time they make a sarcastic, cutting remark you feel hairline cracks appearing in your faith.

When we were children and someone poked fun at us we were taught to say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But that was just a cover-up because we all know that harsh, harmful words wound us more deeply than sticks and stones do. Your physical wounds usually heal over and are forgotten, but you may be struggling with emotional wounds from the critical, unloving words that someone used to injure you.

Anyone who has ever dared to do what they thought was the right thing has been attacked by critics. When Abraham Lincoln was President he was constantly under attack from newspaper editors and even politicians from his own party. If you read some of the editorials of that time, you’ll soon discover the public attacks were much more vicious than any published today.

But Lincoln once wrote something about his attitude toward those who attacked him. These words are so powerful that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill kept them on his desk

during WWII. Lincoln wrote: “If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how—the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what’s said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.”

You may be attacked, but you will never be abandoned by God!

(4) You may be cracked by personal failures

Paul wrote that he had been “struck down but not destroyed.” The word “struck down” came from the gladiatorial games when a fighter had been pinned by his opponent waiting for the thumbs up or thumbs down signal. Paul had been knocked down many times, but he had never been knocked out.

Paul realized he wasn’t a perfect, flawless vessel. He admitted his own cracks when he wrote in Romans 7 that the things he didn’t want to do, he found himself doing those very things. He possessed some kind of “thorn in the flesh” that debilitated him. He was a cracked vessel, but he was full of the treasure of Jesus Christ.

When a Christian messes up, we often speak of that person being a “fallen Christian.” But the key to usefulness is to get back up. There are many things in this life that knock you down; some of them are our own bad choices. But the secret to usefulness is to keep getting back up.

In 1976 an unknown writer and actor by the name of Sylvester Stallone presented a script about an underdog boxer named Rocky. Several studios turned it down, but finally a studio took a chance. It was filmed in only 28 days and cost \$1.2 million to produce. Rocky became a sensation. It won best picture of the year in 1976, and has made over \$117 million. There have been five sequels, the last one being Rocky Balboa in 2006—30 years after the first Rocky. My personal favorite was Rocky IV in which Rocky beats the terrible Russian, Ivan Drago. In this fight, which took place in Russia (but was filmed in Idaho), Rocky had been knocked down so many times and gotten up that by the end of the fight, even the Russian spectators were chanting, “Rocky, Rocky, Rocky!”

What was special about Rocky? These bigger, stronger, more talented boxers like Mr. T, Ivan Drago, or Apollo Creed kept pounding him, but he just wouldn’t quit. He got knocked down but he kept getting back up to fight some more. He even lost the fight to Apollo Creed in the original Rocky movie (and yelled “Adrian” at the end). But there’s something inspiring about someone who gets knocked down and they keep getting up.

I’ve got good news for you: We’re in a fight, but it’s a fixed fight. We win in the end, and our victory is absolutely certain. Before the final round, we’re going to be knocked down, but we won’t be knocked out. When it’s time for us to leave the ring, can we say like Paul, “I have fought a good fight?”

Some of you feel like giving up today. You want to quit and throw in the towel. You've been knocked down so many times you don't think you can get back up. Go ahead. Get up! Stand up! Stand firm! "Standing on the promise that cannot fail; though the howling storms of doubt and fear assail; by the living Word of God, I shall prevail!"

How can you survive these experiences that crack you? It will help when you realize:

2. GOD HAS A PURPOSE IN YOUR PAIN

The age old question that perplexes people is, "If God is all loving and all powerful, then why do bad things happen to good people?" In God's Word, we discover that there are at least three things that God wants to accomplish through your personal pain.

(1) Pain forces you to rely on God alone

In the first chapter of this letter, Paul wrote about WHY he faced such pain and pressure. He wrote, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure ... this happened that we might not rely upon ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah ran from God. You can run from God, but you certainly can't hide! God sent a fish and before long Jonah found himself in a king-sized predicament. Jonah 2:1 says, "From inside the fish Jonah cried out to the Lord his God." His predicament, forced him to rely on God.

Like Jonah, most of us are so hard-headed we don't really cry out to God until we reach what I call the POTD. That's the Point of Total Desperation. God will always meet you at the POTD. When you get "POTDed" you realize you can't handle your life by yourself, and it makes you rely on God, and on God alone.

(2) Pain focuses your attention on heaven

We've got some good stuff coming over the next few weeks. Jump ahead a few verses and read how suffering makes us think more about heaven. "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen." (2 Corinthians 4:17-18) I'll be saying much more about that verse in a couple of weeks, but for now, just notice that compared to the glory of heaven, any trouble and pain we face here can be called "light and momentary."

How tragic it must be to go through life believing this is the only existence you'll ever have. No wonder some people call this life "hell on earth." But we belong to a people who sincerely believe there is a wonderful heaven awaiting those who know Jesus. So when the pain gets too bad to bear, we can focus our attention on heaven where there will be no more pain, no more sorrow, and no more sickness.

Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Since she was deaf and blind, she spent the first few years of her life in isolation and ignorance. Only later, through the persistent

teaching of Anne Sullivan, did Helen Keller become aware of the world around her. You might think that someone who spent her life in darkness and silence might be bitter or angry. But instead, her handicaps just caused Helen Keller to anticipate heaven more.

Not long before she died she wrote: “For three things I thank God every day of my life. Thanks that He has (given me) knowledge of His works; deep thanks that He has set in my darkness the lamp of faith; deep, deepest thanks that I have another life to look forward to—a life joyous with light and flowers and heavenly song.”

(3) Pain forms you to be more like Christ

Paul wrote that “we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.” Because Christ suffered, the only way we can display the same Christlike attitude is through suffering. Paul wrote, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” (Philippians 3:10) The only way to become like Christ is to share his sufferings.

Paul Billheimer wrote a marvelous book entitled, *Don't Waste Your Sorrows*. The title alone is worth the price of the book. He writes: “There is no way Christlike character can be formed in man without suffering. If he refuses to allow his ‘self’ to go to the cross he will remain hard, self-centered, unbroken, and therefore unChristlike. Whole, unbroken men are of little use to God. Resentment and rebellion to suffering only wastes one’s sorrows whereas humble acceptance and brokenness allows the creation of an ‘eternal weight of glory.’”

CONCLUSION

So if you are someone who has been through a tough time and you find you’re like a clay pot with a lot of cracks, cheer up, because God gives hope to cracked pots. God delights to use cracked pots—the cracks are just openings to allow His light to shine forth.

I came across a poem recently written by my favorite poet, “Anonymous.” It speaks about how we will be cracked, but not crushed:

*Pressed out of measure and pressed to all length;
Pressed so intensely, it seems beyond strength;*

*Pressed in the body, and pressed in the soul;
Pressed in the mind, till the dark surges roll.*

*Pressure by foes, and pressure by friends—
Pressure on pressure, till life nearly ends.*

*Pressed into knowing no helper but God;
Pressed into loving the staff and the rod.*

Pressed into liberty where nothing clings;

Pressed into faith for impossible things.

*Pressed into tasting the joy of the Lord;
Pressed into living a Christ-life outpoured.
(Anonymous)*

You might feel like you're under a lot of pressure right now. You may be struggling and hurting right now because of all the personal pain you're having to endure. Upon the authority of the Word of God, I want to encourage you to hang in there and endure. You may be pressured, but you WON'T be crushed; you may be perplexed, but you WON'T be left in despair; you may be attacked and persecuted, but you WON'T be abandoned by God; you might even be knocked down, but you WON'T be knocked out!

Let me demonstrate this with a simple illustration—and yes, kids, you can try this at home. Do you see these two Coke cans? On the surface they look the same, but there is a huge difference between them. I'm going to try to crush this one, and it's doesn't take much strength at all to crush it. Do you know why? It's empty. It's open to the world. There is no internal pressure to resist the outward pressure, and even a child could crush it. Sadly, this represents a person who is empty, living a life without Jesus Christ. When trouble, adversity, and pain come into their lives, their spirit is often crushed by the pressures of this world. Oh, this person might even claim to be a Christian, or to believe in God, or to be spiritual, but there's nothing on the inside. The can still advertises a refreshing drink, but there's nothing on the inside to live up to the name on the outside.

But I have another can here as well. I'm going to try to crush it with all my strength. I can't. Do you know why? It's full of something. It's full of the refreshing drink that's advertised on the can. It can withstand external pressure because the drink on the inside not only equals the external pressure, it exceeds it! If you don't believe that, I could prove it by shaking up this can and popping the top! This can represents a person who is full of the life of Jesus Christ. The internal support Jesus gives is always stronger than the external pressures of the world and the devil. The Bible says, "Because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4) Jesus said, "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) So rejoice in the Lord, because you may get knocked down, but by the powerful presence of Christ living in you, you'll never be knocked out!

OUTLINE

1. GOD PERMITS YOU TO BE CRACKED BUT NOT CRUSHED

You may be cracked by personal

- (1) Pressures (hard-pressed but not crushed)
- (2) Frustrations (perplexed but not in despair)
- (3) Attacks (persecuted but not abandoned)
- (4) Failures (struck down but not destroyed)

2. GOD HAS A PURPOSE IN YOUR PAIN

(1) Pain forces you to rely on God alone

"We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure ... this happened that we might not rely upon ourselves, but on God who raises the dead." *2 Corinthians 1:8-9*

(2) Pain focuses your attention on heaven

"Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen." *2 Corinthians 4:17-18*

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"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." *Philippians 3:10*



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes