THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JESUS

2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10

Key Verse: 4:10

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”

How do you keep going in life? Aren’t there times when you’re so tired, so discouraged, you just want to quit? Some people keep going for their own honor. Some, for the sake of others—somebody they love, or their children. Some do it to reach their goal—success, or getting out of debt, or having lots of money. Sometimes we keep going not really knowing why—we just don’t know what else to do! In today’s passage Paul explains to the Corinthians why he kept going in ministry. He had a spiritual secret he always held onto: the death and life of Jesus. For Paul it wasn’t just abstract theology or knowledge—it was his lifestyle. In this study we’d like to learn what it means to hold onto the death and life of Jesus, and how it keeps us going in our Christian life and ministry. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words.

As we read today’s passage we notice how Paul repeats several times the phrases “in our body” or “in the body” (4:10,11; 5:6,8–10). He refers to our bodies as “jars of clay” (4:7) or an “earthly tent” (5:1,4). He calls them “mortal” (4:11; 5:4) and describes them as “wasting away” (4:16)—meaning the aging process, or maybe even decaying after death. Why so much emphasis on the body? In the previous passage Paul was talking about the radiant face of Moses. He said our faces can be radiant, too, if we spend time contemplating the glory of Jesus. Now he’s describing how our whole body is affected by our faith in Jesus. As our bodies get tired or sick or old, we find a good excuse to quit. But Paul says that by faith in Jesus, we see our bodies differently, and we keep going.

Read 4:7. Here Paul uses a poetic expression, in one way, to describe our humanity. The “treasure” can refer to our souls, and the jars of clay, to our bodies. It reminds us of how God formed the first man from the dust of the earth, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and made him a living soul (Ge2:7; cf. Job4:19). But in this context, the “treasure” also seems to refer to God’s light shining in our hearts, giving us the knowledge of his glory in the face of Christ (4:6). This is a true “treasure,” worth far more than all the wealth of this world—precious metals, jewels, investments or possessions. “This treasure” is the greatest thing a human being can experience. The great irony is, it’s contained in “jars of clay.” “Jars of clay” are ordinary, of no value, and easily broken. Normally you wouldn’t think of putting a priceless treasure in a jar of clay. Looking at such a jar, you’d never imagine there’d be such a treasure inside. But this is exactly what God does when he reveals the glory of Jesus to us.

Why? Paul says, “…to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (7b). This is the first time in this letter Paul mentions the word “power” (6:7; 10:4; 12:9; 13:3,4). Jars of clay are fragile and weak, but the treasure inside has an “all-surpassing power.” Paul stresses that this power comes from God, not us. What’s he referring to? It’s the Holy Spirit (1Co2:4,5; cf. Ac1:8a). How can our feeble bodies contain the treasure of the light and glory of Christ? It’s not by our ability, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even with all our weakness, the Holy Spirit helps us contain and carry the treasure of Christ’s presence. Paul tells us our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God” (1Co6:9). The Holy Spirit within us is the one who gives us God’s power. In Greek the word “all-surpassing” literally means “a throwing beyond,” meaning much higher or farther. The Holy Spirit enables us to go so much higher and so much further than we could ever go on our own.

Paul goes on to demonstrate how this power works. Read verses 8,9. Paul is again mentioning his sufferings (1:5–10; cf. 1Co4:9–13; 15:30–32). Later in this letter he’s going to go into much more detail about them (6:4–10; 7:5; 11:23–29; 12:7–10). But his main point here is that the treasure of Christ within him, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is what helps him to persevere, to miraculously keep on going: “hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” It’s not his human strength or greatness, but Christ alone who sustains him, through it all.

He explains it even more directly. Read verse 10. He emphasizes the word “always.” And the word “death” here is not a static thing. The Greek word Paul uses is unusual. It literally means “the dying of Jesus” or “the killing of Jesus.” It refers especially to the process, even including the smell. Paul says “we always carry around in our bodies the death/dying of Jesus.” To “carry it around” means a lot. First of all, it means keeping it with us as a constant reminder. Husbands used to keep pictures of their wives in their wallets. Wives used to keep pictures of their husbands in a locket worn around their necks, or pictures of their children. People wear a cross necklace for various reasons. But to always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus means much more.

It means to always treasure what Jesus did for us on the cross. It means, while we’re suffering, to keep thinking about how Jesus was humiliated, how much pain he went through, how he was mocked, insulted, beaten and pierced, how he endured all the opposition, poured out all his lifeblood and stayed on the cross to the end. His cross dominates our thinking and shapes our entire way of life. It may seem morbid to always be thinking about the dying of Jesus, but actually, it’s not morbid at all—it’s so beautiful, so inspiring! It’s part of our “treasure” (4:7). To “always carry around in our bodies the dying of Jesus” means to love his cross and embrace his cross of suffering as our very own.

We all know that suffering is hard. In our human nature we have a real aversion to it. We try to avoid suffering at all costs, or escape it as quickly as possible. If we have to, we suffer grudgingly and reluctantly. We have to be dragged or forced to suffer. In life there are meaningless kinds of suffering we should definitely try to avoid. But the sufferings of Christ are different. They’re special because they accomplished something amazing, our salvation. His dying on the cross was once for all, but it’s also something that we participate in. We deny ourselves and carry our own cross and follow him (Mk8:34). As we do, he changes our hearts to stop running away from suffering. Instead, we come to share abundantly in his sufferings (2Co1:5). We rejoice to participate in his sufferings (1Pe4:13a). We’re more than willing to suffer like him. Like Paul, we long for ever deeper fellowship with him as we learn to become like him in his death (Php3:10). We welcome his sufferings into our bodies (Col1:24). When we love his sufferings, we can keep on going, no matter how bad things get.

We notice in verse 10 how Paul uses the words “we” and “our.” In fact, throughout this passage it’s striking how often he uses the plural pronoun. He uses the word “we” 28 times, the word “us” nine times and the word “our” eight times—that’s a total of 45 times in just 22 verses! Of course he’s talking about his own sufferings as Christ’s apostle. By writing “we,” “us” and “our” he’s probably also including his coworkers Timothy, Silas and Titus (1:1; 8:23), his apostolic team who suffered together. By using these words he’s also including the Corinthians. He wrote in 1:6that they patiently endure “the same sufferings we suffer.” But by repeating “we,” “us” and “our,” he’s also including all believers, including us. Paul is saying that sufferings are normative for Christians. How so?

Read verse 11. He’s basically restating what he said in verse 11. He repeats the word “always.” He repeats that the life of Jesus “may also be revealed” in our bodies. What does he mean? Paul is saying that as we die like Jesus, we live like Jesus, and it’s “revealed,” people around us can see it. As we may know, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the contents of the gospel (1Co15:3,4). But they aren’t just old historical facts or theology; they’re at the core of a Christian’s daily life experience. In verse 11 Paul uses the expression “being given over to death.” This implies that God is doing it. God is giving us over to death, just as he did Jesus. God is allowing us to suffer as Jesus did at the hands of his enemies. Why? Paul says it’s “for Jesus’ sake.” It means it’s to help other people see Jesus through us, to help them believe in him. Paul has already said that people need to smell the aroma of Christ in us. They need to see the glory of Christ reflected in the light of our faces. Here, they need to see the life of Christ at work in us to keep us going in the midst of our sufferings. We need to believe the gospel and preach the gospel, but we especially need to live the gospel, dying with Jesus and living with Jesus every day. Why? Read verse 12. This is how God works—as his servants suffer and die like Christ, others come to experience his life (Jn12:24).

When we’re really suffering, it’s hard to say anything. But suffering didn’t shut Paul up. Read verses 13,14. Here Paul introduces the power of faith. Because we believe in Jesus, we keep on speaking about him, no matter what we may be suffering. We especially believe that his resurrection power will apply to us someday. This gives us the hope to be with Jesus and with all his precious people in his kingdom, and it gives us hope for the people we’re praying for. Look at verse 15. Paul sees the much bigger picture of his suffering. It’s so that more and more people can experience God’s grace, overflow with thanksgiving, and finally, so that God can be glorified all the more. Without the gospel, our suffering makes us self-absorbed and narrow-minded. But as we suffer with the gospel of Jesus in our hearts, we can see God and his great vision for the world.

Read verse 16. This is the second time in this chapter Paul says “we do not lose heart” (4:1). It’s because, through our sufferings, we’re experiencing the dying and living of Jesus. As we experience his dying, outwardly we’re “wasting away.” But his resurrection power renews us inwardly, day by day. We can keep coming to God in faith. We can keep embracing our cross. We can keep loving and serving those around us. We’re renewed in his grace, in thanksgiving and in a clearer and clearer vision. What do we see? Read verse 17. We know the saying, “My cold is more serious than your cancer.” It means we tend to blow our sufferings way out of proportion. When we think we’re suffering unbearably, we get so burdened, and then we burden those around us. But as we go deeper in the gospel of Jesus’ suffering and resurrection, we actually see our sufferings as “light and momentary troubles.” We endure them joyfully. Paul also says “they are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Our eternal glory in Christ becomes more and more real to us, and so much greater than the small sufferings we’re going through now. To help us live out this faith in our cold realities, Paul goes on. Read verse 18.

After introducing our hope of eternal glory through dying with Jesus, in 5:1–10 Paul goes on to describe this hope more. Read 5:1. To Paul, his earthly tent, his body, very likely could be destroyed at any time by those who wanted to stop him from spreading the gospel. But he was looking forward to his eternal house in heaven, which is so much bigger, better and more secure than any house on earth. Read verses 2–4. Here he’s describing what we long for. It’s such a real longing that we’re actually groaning for it. Generally, groaning is probably not a good thing; it can sound like we’re moaning and complaining. But as Christians we’re allowed to groan for our heavenly dwelling. It’s our resurrection body, which we really want to be clothed with (1Co15:53,54). How can we be sure that this is really going to happen to us? Read verse 5. On our own we could never make it to this resurrection glory in heaven; we’ll surely fail along the way. But the gift of the Holy Spirit within us is like God’s guarantee that he’ll get us there, all the way to the end.

How does this faith help us? Read verse 6. Paul is basically saying that not only are we confident, but also with this faith in Jesus we don’t get too comfy in our current bodies. He repeats in verse 7, “For we live by faith, not by sight” (see 4:18). In fact, this faith gives us a new preference. Read verse 8. Really? Do you really prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord? But we don’t just sit around longing to get out of here and get to go home with Jesus. What do we do? Read verse 9. Whatever we’re doing, we seek to please Jesus, knowing he could take us home at any moment. What a beautiful life goal, living to please Jesus in all that we do. This goal also helps us keep on going. If we’re not really inspired by the hope of our heavenly dwelling, to be with the Lord, Paul finishes with one more gospel truth to help us keep going. Read verse 10. We can’t rest on our laurels or past experiences; we need to live with the godly reverence that one day we are going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for how we lived in the body, whether good or bad.

Read 4:10 again. May God help us to newly embrace dying with Jesus, so that his life may be revealed through us and make us a blessing. May he fill us with this heavenly hope to help us keep going to the very end.