

Life on Mission: Go and Multiply

Death in us... but Life in You

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Nate Irwin

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.

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak,¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 (ESV)

INTRO

"There ain't no such thing as a free lunch." The "free lunch" refers to the once-common tradition of saloons in the United States providing a "free" lunch to patrons who had purchased at least one drink. Many foods offered were high in salt (e.g., ham, cheese, and salted crackers), so those who ate them ended up buying a lot of beer.

Today is our fourth and final message in a series on discipleship. What is discipleship? In a nutshell, it is teaching people to obey everything that Jesus told us (Matt. 28:19); it is the process by which we help one another to have Christ formed in us until we are brought to maturity (Col. 1:28). Or, closer to our passage for this morning, it is helping a follower of Christ to become more like Christ by beholding the glory of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18).

This doesn't happen automatically or without effort. Because of the fallenness of humanity, because of our sin natures, because the world and the devil conspire to lead us in the other direction. In fact, Jesus said that unless you are willing to give up everything, to die to yourself, you cannot be His disciple. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote "The Cost of Discipleship." This morning I want to take that theme and turn it

just a bit to see from 2 Corinthians 4 how not only is discipleship costly, but our making disciples of others will be costly as well. The cost of disciple-making---maybe this is one reason we don't do more of it.

Come with me to the city of Antioch around A.D. 45. Followers of Jesus had come north of Jerusalem after the persecution of Acts 8 and had started a fellowship of believers. Acts 11: 21 tells us that the hand of the Lord was with them and that a great number who believed turned to the Lord. Yet, these folks were slow to pick up on the Great Commission and Jesus' very final words to them in Acts 1:8, "to the ends of the earth."

Now there was another city, Corinth, about 1000 miles west of Antioch as the crow flies. Corinth was the third most important city in the Roman Empire as well as the wealthiest city in Greece. She was the sports and entertainment capital, like New York City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas wrapped in one. Corinth was a cultural melting pot of all social grouping and religions. Corinthians were crassly materialistic, self-confident, and proud, and they had a remarkable reputation for loose living. In classical Greek, to act like a Corinthian meant to practice fornication, and a Corinthian companion meant a prostitute. This sexual immorality was permitted under the widely popular worship of Aphrodite. One ancient writer described Corinth as a town where "none but the tough could survive." Not a ripe harvest field for the gospel!

So here's the question: How are disciples in Antioch going to make disciples in Corinth? This was not going to be easy. But Paul, led by the Holy Spirit, sent out by his church in Antioch, and burning with the passion to preach Christ where He had not been named (Rom. 15:19), did it. Now, remember, he had the misfortune of living 1800 years before the inventions of electricity and the internal combustion engine and 1850 years before the advent of air conditioning. He lived almost 1900 years before the first commercial trans-Atlantic flight, 1900 years before the first McDonald's, and 1950 years before the Internet. So it was tough. (2 Cor. 6:4,5; 11:23-27)

In our passage today, Paul reflects on his ministry of disciple-making and concludes that it is the greatest endeavor he could give his life to. The same is true for you. But to understand that, you need to understand three things about disciple-making.

I. THE PRICE, vv. 7-10a

What is the treasure? It is, in a word, the gospel; v. 6, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ; v. 4, the gospel of the glory of Christ. It is the ministry of the new covenant, of the Spirit, who gives life (3:6). It is the most wonderful news anywhere!

The message of life in Christ is stored in jars of clay—our physical bodies. Paul uses imagery that would be very familiar to a 1st century audience. Clay jars were the throwaway containers of the ancient world, the Styrofoam box you get your hamburger in. Wine does not keep well in silver or gold vessels, only in clay. And so, Paul says, the wine of the life of Christ is stored in weak, fragile, breakable, disposable vessels that are easily chipped or cracked. But this is done by design. If it were otherwise, the jars might regard themselves as important, when really it is only the treasure that matters. Paul says, "since I'm so

weak and could never have reached you Corinthians under my own steam, the fact that the gospel is here and a church was started proves that God gets the credit and not me. Our weakness is essential for the display of His power. It's not until the jar is cracked that the light can shine out."

He goes on in vv. 8,9 to describe what it feels like to proclaim the gospel from within a jar of clay. But first, see 1:8,9. Now notice the difference in chapter 4 as he reflects on his pain in the light of the glorious gospel: clear rays of hope emanating from embers of faith even in the midst of depressing circumstances. He gives a series of four contrasts, begins with "In every way," probably applying to all four.

Afflicted (as ch. 11)	But not crushed, smashed to pieces; remains intact
Perplexed—not always know what to do	But not driven to despair, not completely baffled
Persecuted—physical pain	But not forsaken (same word as Christ on cross!)
Struck down	But not destroyed; down but not out

Or, squeezed but not squashed. Bewildered but not befuddled.
Pursued but not abandoned. Knocked down but not knocked out.
He's like the Timex watch that takes a lickin' but keeps on tickin'.

Verse 10 summarizes—always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus. It could be translated, "carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus" because Paul does not use the usual word for death here, *thanatos*, but rather a word that he uses only other time, in Rom. 4:19 where he speaks of Abraham's nearly 100 year-old body being as good as dead. The word is *necrosis*. You doctors know what that word means: the premature death of cells in living tissue. It's not pretty. Like gangrene. In the dying there is decay, stiffness, swollenness, eaten away, putrefying. Dying is unceasing, constant, with no reprieve; suffering is business as usual.

This should not be news to the Christian. If God's definitive act of salvation occurred through the dying of His Son, it should not be a surprise that the saving gospel of the crucified Jesus should reach the nations and that they would be discipled only through the dying of His servants (Bauckham). We not only tell the gospel; we experience it, we live it out, in our bodies. We die. Christ crucified was not only Paul's message; it was his model. He became the suffering apostle of the suffering Messiah and so incarnated the message. He lived the gospel out, a living (and dying) parable. And it was not just for him. Paul speaks in the plural; this is "normal Christian life" for "us."

Bauckham says, "Even without the physical dangers of Paul's career, anyone who throws themselves into the work of Christian ministry of any kind with half the dedication of Paul will experience the weakness of which Paul speaks; the times when problems seem insoluble; the times of weariness from sheer overwork; the times of depression when there seem to be no results." Our story . . .

So what Paul is saying is that if you look at my body, at my outer man, it's a mess; it's taken a beating, and it's dying because it's just clay to begin with and it's gone through severe trials. I'm shot. This is the price Paul paid for making disciples in Corinth. You can't get something for nothing. There is no free lunch.

When someone asked George Mueller the secret of his success, he hung his head and said, “There was a day when I died.”

II. THE PRODUCT, vv. 10b-12, 15

What a depressing story that would be if it ended there. While we need to be clear about the cost, we also need to see the benefit. What is produced when a follower of Jesus, in proclaiming the gospel, gets beat up? There are three products:

1. The life of Jesus in us, v. 11

If everything is going well, if we’re making it on our own, we never need the life, the power, the presence of Jesus to help us. If we’ve got it, He’s got nothing to do. It is precisely in our weakness that God comes to meet us. It is not until we become less that He can become greater. It is not until we die that Christ’s life can live in us. It is in our weakness, 12:9, that His power can be perfected.

When we allow ourselves to be given over to death for Jesus’ sake, God steps in and the life of Jesus becomes manifested in our lives. If you want to see the resurrection at work in your life, you have to be prepared to see crucifixion at work as well.

2. The life of Jesus in others, v. 12

How has life come to the Corinthians? v. 2, the open statement of the truth. v. 5, proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. Then what happened? v. 6, God said “Let light shine.” And just like on the first day of creation when darkness covered the face of the deep, God said, “Let there be light,” and there was and everything changed; so, in the dark heart of Paul and the apostles, God said let there be light and there was; and just like there was darkness in the hearts of the Corinthians when they heard the message of truth that Jesus is Lord, in some of their hearts God spoke the word and there was light; they could now see the glory of God in the face of Christ.

The ministry of the Spirit that brings life, 3:6-11, that is written on hearts, not on stone tablets, that comes with greater glory than the angels on Mt. Sinai, that brings righteousness not condemnation and that is permanent and will never come to an end—these are the things that have happened for the Corinthians. This is the life that has come to them—because Paul was willing to experience the dying of Jesus. He had become, v. 5, ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

This was, of course, the path Jesus took. How did He give us life? By giving up His own. It was in His dying that we live. Should it be any different for us and our ministry? John 12:24 says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Colossians 1:24 says, “I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, which is the church.”

The second part of our story, now used in a wider capacity, more sensitivity to challenges our missionaries face . . . Wouldn’t have wanted that seminary, but in our dying others are now living.

3. More glory to God, v. 15. This is all for your sake. He is being poured out for them. But what is the final product? As this grace extends to more and more people, as those who are born again and now have life share it with others, the ripples keep expanding, and every circle, everyone who is touched with the life of Jesus, now bows down in thanksgiving to their Savior. And greater glory comes to God! More glory comes from more believers who come from more suffering on the part of the messengers.

There is a price to pay to bring the life of Jesus to people. But what is the result? What if Paul had played it safe or had retreated at the first sign of danger? The Corinthians would have been bereft of the gospel. Now they have the very life of Jesus, and the news is spreading, resulting in more praise to God. So, is it worth it? Absolutely!

III. THE PROMISE, vv. 13,14, 16-18

But there's more. There are still three great promises that Paul clings to in the midst of his suffering for the Gospel. One is liquid, and it can be cashed in immediately and continuously. The other two are on deposit; they will mature upon death. These are promises that cannot be seen with the eyes of flesh and do not concern the world that we can see; they must be seen with the eyes of faith.

And so, v. 13 quotes from Ps. 116 where the Psalmist said that the snares of death entangled him, and he suffered distress and anguish; yet in the midst of his weakness, he called out to God to save him and He did! God delivered his soul from death, his eyes from tears, his feet from stumbling, so he could walk before the Lord in the land of the living (vv. 3-9). "I believed, therefore I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'" Paul, in his afflictions, believed God's promises and so he spoke and so he speaks to us today. What he believed about the future had everything to do with how he lived in the present. Matthew Henry, "The grace of faith is a sovereign cordial and an antidote against fainting."

1. Renewal, v. 16. How is it possible not to lose heart, especially when necrosis is setting in because of what we've gone through to get the gospel out? We need to see the whole picture, not just half of it. We must understand that there are two parts of who we are, our outer nature and our inner nature; our body and our soul/spirit. The Greek root is "exo" and the word is exoskeleton. Where is the real bug? While the body is taking a beating, it is wasting away. Paul says something remarkable about our spirits: They are being renewed day by day. Every day, we take a licking on the outside; but every day, sure as shooting, we can go to the well to have our souls restored. How? We find the answer in 3:18: by beholding the glory of the Lord. Fellowship with Jesus, with the living, resurrected, reigning Lord Jesus, on a daily basis will bring life to our inner beings and give us the perspective and the wisdom and the energy to keep serving Him.

2. Resurrection, v. 14. The end of this life is not the end of the story. In fact, it will just be the beginning! Paul knows one day he will be raised to life, along with all other believers, and he will be with Jesus forever. Paul knows this to be true, for God raised Jesus, and Paul saw him alive. God promises He will do the same with Paul and with all who believe in Jesus.

Death and misery are not boundless. When God's enemies are through with their scorn and torture and instruments of death, they are through; but God is not. They can only put to death; God is able to raise the dead.

3. Reward, vv.17, 18. Here Paul says something absolutely astounding. Remember the list of his sufferings for the gospel? See what he calls them here: slight—light, easy to bear, not a burden. What seemed a burden too heavy to bear in, 1:8, now he calls light—because he has a new perspective, one that sees the unseen world, by faith. One of the reasons his sufferings are light is that they are momentary. I mean, at best, they are going to last, what, 30 years, 60, maybe even 90. Is that a long time? Well, it depends on your perspective. From here, yes. But in the light of eternity? Just a blip. They will pass like this; they will be like a dream that is gone in a flash. It is a tempest in a teapot. A small or unimportant event that is over-reacted to, as if it were of considerably more consequence. Think of inoculations: a moment of pain, forgotten the next day, but with benefits for months/years.

But then he goes on to say something even more astounding. These light, momentary afflictions are preparing for us, working on our behalf, to give us something. “Excessively to excess an eternal weight of glory.” Let's break that down. Glory. That is the same word as glory for God in v. 15. Now for us?! If you are a good Bible student, you will know Is. 42:8: “I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to anyone else, nor share my praise with carved idols.” You think I will never get to share in God's glory. But here he is just saying that he won't share it with false gods, those who presume to take His place. But Rom. 8:17 says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” Paul is saying that those who die with Christ, who suffer with Him to get the gospel out and disciple the nations, will share in His glory. He will invite us into His glory.

But go on. Weight of glory. Contrast to the lightness of our afflictions. Heavy, compared to them. Scales. Then, eternal. It will last forever, whereas our afflictions were temporary. Then, finally, excessively to excess. Greek, “hyperbole” on hyperbole, out of all proportion. Like a mom all tired out, says, “I would give a million dollars if someone would just vacuum and clean the house.” Or if someone would do my taxes. And then they give it!! It will be ridiculous how He will lavish reward on us. It won't make any sense; we'll be shaking our heads. But it will be ours—a heavy weight of glory—our reward for suffering with Jesus—forever. A wallet of cash for a trunk load of cash behind the curtain?! For Paul, the heaviness of the glory made the present afflictions seem light.

Why don't we get this? We have spiritual myopia; we see only that which is close to us. Our culture has conditioned us to see and appreciate only counterfeit glory and honor. Yet the heavy becomes light and the long short in the light of eternity. So, he concludes in v. 18, this is why we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. The things that are seen, our troubles and trials, are temporary, passing away like a moth in the flame. But the things that are not seen are eternal, and that's why we should focus on them. In fact, that's what we'll be doing in the next sermon series on Heaven, so pick up a study guide as you leave today.

CONCLUSION

Compare and choose your focus:

Can be seen	Cannot be seen
Wasting away	Being renewed
Light	Heavy
Momentary	Eternal
Affliction	Glory

So what does this have to do with disciple making? Everything. Disciple making is not just for pastors and full time Christian workers; it is for us all. Do you see yourself as a disciple maker? Matt. 28:19 is written for you if you are a follower of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul explains the cost but also the great joy of making your life count as you help others move towards maturity in Jesus.

And yet we get so caught up in the rat race of life. Life is hard and busy. We can find ourselves just punching the clock, paying the bills, taking the kids to sporting events; and the cycle just goes on and on—and if you look at, you’re not using your life to bring anybody closer to Jesus or to maturity in Him. Try a little exercise: in the last three months, who have you nudged closer to Christ? Has it been a busy three months? Okay, how about six months? A year? Are you bearing any fruit as a follower of Jesus? Remember the parable of the soils that Jesus told in Matthew 13? Some seed of the Word fell among thorns, and though it sprang up quickly, it did not last because “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

Maybe you say you don’t know how to help a person grow in maturity. It’s not really that complicated. If you are a follower of Jesus, you have a story; how can you help others to grow in their faith through what God has done in and through you? Use the place you are at in life and the people God has brought into your life to talk about Him. Use your day care, your kids’ dance class, your business trip . . . to meet people and point them to Jesus and to becoming more like Him. Or be more proactive and read the Word with one or two others, and memorize Scripture together. Download the Disciple-Makers guide on the website.

There won’t be time in your schedule. So here’s where you have to realize the value, the product, and the promises we’ve looked at. And be grateful you won’t have to suffer like Paul! But you will need to die . . . so that others might live. What’s one thing you need to do differently, to bring life to others?

Hast Thou No Scar

by Amy Carmichael

*Hast thou no scar?
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,
Hast thou no scar?*

*Hast thou no wound?
Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent.
Leaned me against the tree to die, and rent
By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned:
Hast thou no wound?*

*No wound? No scar?
Yet as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole. Can he have followed far
Who has no wound nor scar?*