



The Middle East Initiative

Pray.
Learn.
Engage.

Embracing Vulnerability

By Rima Nasrallah

Text

2 Corinthians 4:7-18 (NIV)

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 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. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.



13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. 15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Text Exegesis

The strength of this letter is that it came as a result of a stressful period in Paul's life when he knew himself to be deprived of human support and saw the prospect of his life's mission evaporating before his eyes.

His beloved Corinthians were disappointed by his leadership skills. While they wished for a powerful and impressive leader, they could neither respect nor take pride in this man whose personality and life story were marked by failure and suffering. On the contrary, they were tempted to look elsewhere and consider other leaders. This letter can best be understood in the context of Paul's appraisal of his own missionary career and can be seen as an attempt to frame his failures and weaknesses using Jesus's life and ministry as a model.

In this passage Paul is not denying the accusations launched at him. On the contrary, he is emphasizing the contrast between the kind of messenger he is and the quality of the message he bears. Though nothing fancy or glorious surrounds this messenger he still carries a glorious Gospel: "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:4). By doing so, Paul highlights that God works despite his weaknesses.

His opening verse sets the scene: "we have this treasure in jars of clay." Paul's reference to pottery resonates well with the Corinthians since Corinth was known for its earthen vessels. These were known to be cheap and of no enduring value in themselves. They derive their value from their content which cannot be always guessed from the outward appearance of the vessel as well as from their usage in temples and rituals.

Yet, though these clay jars were both cheap (humble) and fragile (breakable, disposable) they remind the reader of an earlier Jewish imagery; earthen vessels are the handiwork of the potter, God the creator fashions them in his own way. Here, Paul uses images from both Hellenistic culture and Jewish scriptures; on the one hand the vessel is cheap and fragile on the other it is still fashioned by God and reflects something of Him.

Having established that his power comes from outside, from a higher source, he demonstrates it further using a 'catalogue of hardships' or *peristasis* catalogues.

Afflicted (pressed hard) but not crushed

Perplexed but not driven to despair

Persecuted (pursued) but not forsaken (abandoned)

Struck down but not destroyed (defeated).

The image one gets from this catalogue is that of a wrestler in a ring getting one blow after the other and yet managing not to be defeated, thanks to an external power. The words Paul uses are not only for poetic and rhetoric reasons, but describe his missionary journey so far. He was afflicted or hard-pressed and cornered in a tight place. So great was the peril he experienced in Asia that he did not believe he would get out of it alive and yet he emphasized that he did not feel abandoned by God. He was persecuted, harassed, or pursued when his Christian witness was under attack. He was struck down by adversaries, and yet they were not able to destroy his work.

We are dealing with a text full of paradox: cheap pot versus treasure, life versus death, the seen versus the unseen and suffering versus glory. Though this text is a defense of Paul's ministry it is also a pastoral letter, almost a love letter. All that Paul does is for the Corinthians. "Everything is for your sake!" he says. As he puts his life in peril every day,

he does not lose heart. On the contrary he hopes that more and more people would be touched by grace.

Relating the Text to Today

In July 2015, a major garbage landfill in Lebanon was suddenly and definitively shut down. Garbage collectors had no place to dump the trash and trucks stopped cleaning the streets. In no time, piles of garbage started building up; first blocking the sidewalks and then the roads. In the terrible heat of summer, Beirut became a stinking, ugly city. Tourists, who were taken by surprise, had to look very hard to be able to appreciate the beauty of a city covered with garbage.

The problem of the garbage in Beirut is only one of the many manifestations of corruption and sectarian policies in a country that has been running without a president for almost two years now. The current mistrust in an incompetent and corrupt system is driving many young people to give up hope and decide to invest their creativity in more rewarding and stable countries. The dramatic developments in the neighboring countries – Syria and Iraq in particular – have convinced many Christians that there will be no bright and easy future for them in this area.

As churches – struggling with the aftermath of our own war decades – we stand like Paul facing a distressful situation where the prospects of our ministry and mission evaporate before our own eyes. We feel weak with exhaustion after having stood strong against the storms of the region. We feel weak as our memberships drop due to emigration. Our impact on society has dramatically decreased and become less visible and audible and we wonder how and why we should continue to exist.

Like jars of clay, the church communities feel their vulnerability. With the borders in the south closed for years and the Syrian belt around Lebanon on fire, the country has become an island in the middle of a volcano. Like Paul, the churches feel afflicted by years of war and injustice, perplexed about what the future might bring, restricted geographically and socially, and even struck down.

All that is ‘seen’ is discouraging and coated today with a thick layer of garbage. Yet the church is challenged to see the treasure ‘unseen’ and live up to it. The fragility and weakness of Paul made his ministry questionable to his beloved Corinthians who were losing heart but his trust in God’s power and his love for his people – a love till death – transformed vulnerability into glory.

Can the Lebanese churches experience this glory again? Can they see life at work amid all signs of death?

Instead of denying his own vulnerability, Paul admitted it and perceived in it the very source of the power of his ministry. As individuals and as churches, it is not our strength and might that will allow us to make connections with others and to serve them. On the contrary it is our readiness to embrace the fragility and humility of a clay jar. When we are aware of how precarious life is, when we are able to empathize with those who are being crushed, when we stand vulnerable and unprotected only then can the other listen to what we have to say. The more we attempt to fortify our position and seek our own

protection the higher the wall between us and the other. Embracing vulnerability is a big challenge and risk yet it is the first step towards seeing the grace “reaching more and more people causing thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

Questions

1. We live in cultures that value power and beauty. In what ways do Paul’s words about weakness and humbleness stimulate our thoughts about the manner in which we proclaim the Gospel?
2. In a way, Paul is implying that weaknesses and afflictions increase his ministerial authenticity; are we to derive then that weakness and affliction are to be sought after?
3. In this text we encounter many paradoxes: life/death; seen/unseen; jars/treasure; etc. Christian life in general seems to be built on paradoxes and ambiguity. How does this affect the Gospel in a world that values clear answers?
4. What can cause “thanksgiving to overflow” in the ministry of the church worldwide and in your church in particular?

Prayer

Most Holy God,

Creator of heaven and earth,

We come to you, oh wonderful potter, aware of our fragile existence.

We confess that it is your Spirit that animates our lives and gives us light.

We ask forgiveness for all the instances when we have felt discouraged and tempted to give up.

We all have experienced and witnessed events that have made us feel weak, incompetent and threatened.

Protect us from the instinct to fight back and to seek power.

Help us to see your power at work through our vulnerability.

Keep us humble in your service,

And give us love for your people that we may witness your grace touching the lives of many.

This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

References

1. Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary vol. 40: 2 Corinthians*, Word Books Publisher, Waco, Texas, 1986.
2. Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A theological account*, Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 2010.

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