

II Corinthians 4:6-12 - "This Moment Is Real ..."

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Date: 03 April 2016

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[0 : 0 0] the opportunity to open God's Word with you this morning. Before I do that, before I read God's Word, I want to paint two pictures. I want to take you across the street to the lodge. February 2009, it was the very first meeting of Providence Presbytery, and I was the very first transfer exam. So I was coming already a pastor, coming from Norfolk, Virginia, and was examined by the Presbyterian, was received to be the pastor of North Hills Presbyterian Church in Meridianville, just north of Huntsville. Now let me take you to North Hills. You may not have been there, but if you go north on the parkway, there's a fishing pond on the left, right past Bob Wade Lane, and there's a church behind that. That's North Hills. And in February 2016, we had a Presbytery meeting there, and at that meeting, Will Spink was approved by the Presbytery to be the new senior pastor here, after y'all had voted overwhelmingly for him to be so. And let me tell you, after we did the business, and we can be all about the business as Presbyterians, we stopped, and we had a lengthy time of prayer. It was one of the sweetest moments in my seven years of being in Providence Presbytery, rubbing shoulders and doing business and praying together for our Presbytery, as we rejoiced in the way that God is leading this congregation at this time. So I'm thankful for Will. I'm thankful for his friendship and his partnership. I'm thankful that he's preaching at North Hills this morning, so that I can come and preach to you here. My passage this morning is 2 Corinthians 4, 6 through 12. And as I read it,

I want you to know that my connection with this passage is very personal. And you'll, I think, get a sense of that personal connection as I preach through it. In 2013, at the age of 36, I was diagnosed with colon cancer. And it ended up being stage 2, which I'm very thankful for. But in the midst of it, we were very fearful of a stage 3 or 4 diagnosis. Had major surgery, went through chemotherapy and radiation, and it was a most difficult and continues to be difficult season in our lives and for our family.

But God has been good in the midst of our suffering. And so hear God's Word this morning. And again, I thank you for listening as I preach this morning.

For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shown in our hearts to give light light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Would you join me in prayer? Father, we praise you for your Word. We praise you for how it interprets the things that we experience in this fallen and painful world. Father, we pray that by your Word and your Spirit, you would open our hearts and minds to receive from you what you are giving to us this morning. It is a good and precious gift, and we thank you for it. And I pray for myself, a simple man, a simple servant, that where there is encouragement and edification, those would be your words and would remain with us.

[4 : 5 7] Where there's confusion or uncertainty, Lord, I pray that those would be my words and they would quickly pass. We pray all of this in Jesus' matchless name. Amen. Trauma happens. Other things happen, but in a fallen world, trauma happens. Pain happens. Suffering happens. And then there's what I read a couple years ago in a New York Times op-ed piece by David Brooks. Many of you may know his name. He wrote in this op-ed piece called The Art of Presence, he wrote about the Woodowice family and what they have faced. In 2008, the Anna Woodowice, who was 27 at the time, was working with a service organization in Afghanistan. And on April 1st, she went horseback riding and was thrown and died from her injuries.

In 2013, her younger sister, Catherine, then 26, was biking to work from her home in Washington. She was hit by a car. Her face was severely smashed up and she's endured and has continued to endure a series of difficult operations. For a time, she breathed and ate through a tube, unable to speak.

And you can imagine that the recovery from such injuries would be painfully slow. Catherine Woodowice wrote this. She wrote about this. She said, there will be days when you feel like a quivering, cowardly shell of yourself. When despair yawns as a terrible chasm. When fear paralyzes any chance for pleasure. This is just a fight that has to be won over and over and over again. It is a fight that has to be won over and over and over again.

There will be a time, or there has already been a time in your life, in your family, personally or otherwise, where you have to enter that sort of fight. The fight with trauma and pain and suffering and all the rest. What is that fight from a Christian perspective? It is to fight for a greater reality, an understanding that even in the midst of those experiences, as real and as harsh as they are, that God is at work, that there is something greater going on. Is God at work in this fallen world? Yes. Is He at work within your life, where you are? Yes, He is. And so my theme for this sermon is very simple. Two points. We're just going to break it down in half. We're going to say, this moment is real.

[8 : 21] But it is not the only reality. This moment is real. Whatever it is you're going through, whatever you're experiencing, it is real. But it is not the only reality. So I'm going to take two passes at this text. If you have the Bible open or you want to follow along as we look through, we're going to pull on the thread of pain and suffering. Then we'll pull on the thread of God's transcending work of grace. So this moment is real. In the midst of what we face in this fallen world, we experience frailty, suffering, death. So I want to talk about our frailty, our suffering, our death.

This passage starts very positively. I know we're just jumping into sort of the middle of a chapter. Paul has been talking about the ministry of proclamation. And in verse 6, he is focusing on the work, that transcending work of God's grace. It starts very positively in verse 6.

For God who said, let light shy down of darkness, has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Well, thank you, Paul. That makes that very clear. It's a very Pauline-type statement. There's a lot there. But the very next place that he goes is to talk about our frailty in verse 7. We have this treasure that God's given us, this grace, this work of God, is where? Within us, jars of clay. We are very common, everyday, ordinary clay pots. And maybe some of us are a little broken, or will become broken, or have been broken. We understand frailty within our own bodies. As we get older, we might say in the South, I'm about to give out. We don't have a lot left. So in 2013, I'm going through chemotherapy, therapy, and I decide that it's a good idea to play tag on a scooter with my son. I'm getting worn out and tired, but we're riding these little Razor scooters. And I'm not very coordinated to begin with, but that's okay. And I'm going to tag my son just one last time. And as I'm going down, I make it down the driveway just fine. Hit the pavement, reach out, and then all of a sudden, I'm on my backside. And I'm thinking, my backside should be hurting, but it's my knee that's hurting.

So in the midst of the health issues that I was already enduring, going through the, recovering from surgery, going through the chemotherapy, I partially tore the MCL in my knee.

[11 : 24] And now they're saying, well, you can't have surgery right now, though that might be needed, because of your depressed immune system. You need to do physical therapy. So now I'm doing physical therapy in the midst of chemotherapy. Let me tell you, I felt like a broken jar of clay. I understood my frailty in a very real way. I imagine that you understand that, or you will come to understand that.

Even those athletes that seem to transcend sport. I think of Kobe Bryant, one of the best basketball players in the National Basketball Association, NBA, has ever had.

He's not quite the same anymore, and it's probably a good thing he's retiring. Even those who transcend physically, they themselves, you yourselves, are a jar of clay.

There's our frailty. There's also our suffering. And look at the radical honesty within this passage. It's rare that we often speak so forthrightly about what we're going through. People ask us how we're doing.

We give the fine. I found as I was going through treatment that I didn't know how to answer that question anymore. How are you doing? Do you have time? Because I'm not feeling so good.

[12:48] And so, Paul speaks. He begins to say, okay, so we have this treasure, but it's in a jar of clay. And also, verse 8 and 9, we are afflicted in every way.

Ever felt that way? That's what life in a fallen world can look like. Afflicted in every way. Or perplexed, he says. Have you ever asked out loud or in your prayers or in your heart, God, I don't know what you're doing.

I don't understand. Perplexed. Persecuted. We may not feel that as much here in our American context, but we certainly, as we think about brothers and sisters around the world, they understand this when Paul says persecuted.

And we may come to a point where we understand it more intimately. And then finally, he says, struck down there in verse 9 at the end of it.

Have you ever felt like you're just crawling through the day trying to fight for the next moment? Oh, this moment is real.

[14:06] The affliction, the perplexion, the persecution, the being struck down, all of that is real, and we must acknowledge it if we are to understand the greater work that God is doing.

We must be honest and say, I am suffering. suffering. And then, Paul talks about death. You see, it's not getting any better.

We go from frailty to suffering to death. Verses 10, 11, and 12, Paul makes remarks about death.

Verse 10, he says, we are always carrying around in our body the death of Jesus.

Here, the death of Jesus could be translated as the dying of Jesus. That is meaning that it is encompassing all of Christ's passion, the mocking, the betrayal, the spitting, the lashes, the cross, all of it.

The dying of Jesus. That's what we carry with us as believers, this work of Christ. And then verse 11, the beginning of it, he says, for we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake.

[15:21] Did anybody tell you that part when they shared the gospel with you? Did they say, this is going to be a part of the Christian life? A lot of times we just say, hey, everything's going to be better. It's not always better, is it?

Because we still live in this fallen world. And so, death is at work within us, this verb here, being given over.

It's the same verb that's used in Romans 8, 32, where we read of God, he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

The difference is that in Romans, it's active, and here in Corinthians, it's a passive verb. What does that mean? Well, that means that you don't sign up for this.

Nobody's going to go out into the lobby or onto the website here at Southwood and sign up for the class of suffering and dying to self. We don't want that.

[16:24] Our sin doesn't want that. Our human nature doesn't want that. We don't want to go through that, so God takes us through it. And so, that's why I say that cancer is a sanctifying grace.

I didn't ask for it. I didn't want it. I certainly was shocked that I would be diagnosed at that age of 36 with it, but it's a sanctifying grace because my inclination, my desire as just a person walking through life, even a believer, is I want the Staples easy button.

You know what I'm talking about? You just push the button and the little guy says, hey, that was easy. I want life to be like that. I want, when things get hard, to be able to just, boop.

And maybe I wish God was a little bit like that sometimes. Let's be honest. Sometimes we want to just be able to kind of say a prayer and have God make everything easy for us.

God doesn't work that way. He's not a genie in a bottle. He's not our servant. He's the Lord of lords and kings and kings, and He's doing something in our lives, even if we're not comfortable with it, and we didn't sign up for it because it is hard to die to self.

[17:47] Are you with me? It is hard to die to self. So God takes us there, even if we hadn't signed up for it. Finally, verse 12 says, death is at work in us.

So three times, verse 10, 11, 12, Paul talks about our dying, our death, our being given over to that. I read a book during treatment, I don't know why, I ended up in tears several times.

It's called The Little Way of Ruthie Lemming. I recommend it. It's written by Rob Dreher, who I believe writes for the American Conservative. But this book's about his sister. And they grew up in St. Francisville, Louisiana.

It's a little tiny town in Louisiana. It's a poor community, but Ruthie Lemming loved her community. She loved the people. She was a teacher. And she was well regarded.

She was a Christian. And in her mid-30s, she was diagnosed with single cell lung cancer, stage four. One percent who received that diagnosis live past five years.

[18 : 57] Ruthie Lemming was not in that one percent. And so as I'm reading about her life, her story, and all, I'm hearing these same themes again and again.

Frailty, suffering, death. Ultimately, certainly, literally, she does end up, and she did, die.

The moments that she faced, the moments I faced, the moments you face, the moments that we face of frailty, of suffering, of dying to self, they are very real.

No sugarcoating, no ignoring them, no pretending that it doesn't exist will make them go away. right? You have to live there whether you want to or not.

And there are no easy answers in the midst of such a situation. And we who are not suffering at a particular time should be very careful to not simply give easy, trite answers.

[20 : 01] I hope that's not what you hear me doing this morning either as I preach. We have to acknowledge the hard parts of living in this world. the consequences of our sin, the consequences of the fallenness of this world.

We live with these realities. And we must acknowledge them to being real if we are also going to be able to see what God is doing.

And here's the fight. And here's my main point. If this moment is real, you have to fight to see, to understand the greater reality of God's work in our lives.

So, point one was this moment is real. Frailty, death, suffering, that's all real. Second point, the second part of this is, but this is not the only reality.

For every real moment, there is something that God is doing in our lives. And this is actually the main thrust of what Paul is doing in these verses.

[21 : 10] There's our frailty, but God's power. There's our suffering, but God's but. There's our death, but God's life.

So, let's consider now our frailty in light of God's power. So, we go back to verse 6. Remember, I said we're going two times through this passage.

So, here's the second pass. Go back to verse 6. This is the greatest reality. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, there is no greater reality than what God has done in giving you your salvation.

There is no greater reality than that, and we have to keep coming back to that again and again, thanking God and reflecting on the grace that we receive. We don't deserve God's mercy.

We don't deserve God doing this work of recreation. in our lives. From fallen creatures, God takes us to a new creature.

[22 : 13] So, He says, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness, that's picturing God's initial creation. Here, has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

that is, God is giving us this great work of salvation in our hearts, our lives. He takes us from the darkness of our sin to the light of His grace.

And so then, when He comes into verse 7, He indeed says, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

who does the power belong to? God. That's right. It belongs to God and not to us. And we need to remember that again and again because the reality is, whether you're a mom or whether you're in business, whether you're retired, whether you're in school, we want to be kind of lords of our own domains.

We want to be in charge. We want to be in control. We want to have the world at our hand. And God's saying, no, that power belongs to me and this is how I demonstrate it.

[23 : 33] I give it to you in frail vessels so that you look to me when you're broken, when you understand your brokenness, when you see your suffering, you look to me. Jeremy put it so well when we came to that time of confession of how we run to insufficient structures.

Paul is directing us back to that great refuge of God and that is His power and the work that He is doing in our lives. So, great weakness but great treasure.

And it's not about you. It's not about you. It's not about me. It's about God. So, that's our frailty but God's power. Now, consider our suffering but God's butt.

Now, I'm not trying to be crass here or cavalier, but I've always thought of these but's here in verses 8 and 9 as holy but's. If it helps you remember it, great.

Alright? So, listen again. Verses 8 and 9. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed.

[24 : 59] Do you see it? God is telling you in His Word now that these things are real but He is doing something greater in your life.

Alone, apart from Christ, then indeed you could say crushed, and driven to despair and forsaken and destroyed.

But in Christ, you have the power of God's work and you have His butt. Again, Jeremy referenced it earlier. You see this throughout Scripture, God doing amazing things in the midst of great trials.

So, Genesis 50, 20. As for you, you meant it for evil but God meant it for good to bring about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

Or you hear this but or but not over and over again in Scripture, Psalm 73, 26. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

[26 : 16] Ephesians 2, you hear it there, a great section, verses 2 through 10, especially speaking of that work of mercy and grace in granting us salvation.

You were dead in your trespasses and sins, verse 1. But then you jump down to verse 5 and what do you hear? But God, who is rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace, you have been saved. This is true. You are a sinner and you are dead in that sin, but God does this work of mercy and grace.

So we hear these but not's here as Paul is acknowledging very difficult circumstances. Here's the problem as I see it, as I've experienced it.

We live in the commas. We live in the in-between, between the pain and the grace.

[27 : 30] It's what theologians sometimes refer to as the already but not yet. We're already saved but we're not yet fully there. We're still living in this fallen world.

We still live with the difficulty. Life is lived in the commas. But that is where you fight for the reality of these but not's.

So as you go through trial, whatever it may be, as you go through suffering, you're looking not just for that reality because you know it, but you're also fighting for this greater reality of what God is doing.

Finally, there's our death but God's life. And I just want to point you in verses 10, 11, and 12, every point where Paul speaks of our death and our dying to self and our being connected with the cross of Christ and all that he does in that.

He says there's purpose here in all of this. So always carrying in the body the death of Jesus. Why? Here's the purpose. So that life may be also, the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

[28 : 46] Verse 11, 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.

So death is at work in us but life in you. Verse 12. See, God has purposes that he's working out in the midst of what he's doing and what does that do?

When you fight for that greater reality and you're living that life that God has given to you, it makes you attractive to the world around you. When you can suffer in light of what God is doing, when you can acknowledge that work that God is doing, it makes you attractive to the world around you because it makes people say, what treasure do you possess that I can't buy and I can't earn?

What treasure do you have that allows you to suffer with this greater perspective of looking for what God is doing? It makes us attractive. Ruthie Lemming was very much that way.

She had a friend and his name was Big Show. I don't know if that was his given name but that's what people called him, Big Show. And he was mad at God for what was going on.

[30 : 06] He was furious that God was allowing Ruthie Lemming to suffer. And Ruthie said to him, you can't be. I'm not giving up hope.

He has a plan for me. In the post office a few days after she had died, a woman was wondering why there were so many cars around because it was actually her funeral.

And she says, sure are a lot of cars around today. What's going on? Post office worker tells her that Ruthie Lemming has died and she says, oh, that woman died? I just saw her in here last week and I said, baby, you don't look like you feel too good.

And Ruthie said in reply, no ma'am, I don't. But I'm going to real soon. That is what fighting for a greater reality looks like in the midst of what you're going through.

I want to tell you four things real quick as I'm wrapping up of what it looks like for us together to fight for a greater reality. One, you've got to go to scripture. You've got to allow scripture to interpret what you're going through to help you understand the but-nots.

[31 : 24] By the way, this is not pop psychology and this is nothing that a pastor wouldn't tell you or hasn't told you a hundred times but I'm going to tell you again. Go to scripture, number one.

Number two, pray. Pray your heart out. Pray your eyeballs out. Pray your tears out. Pray. And pray again. Number three, sing. Love the songs that we sang this morning because they take us through those experiences of difficulty but also pointing us to that greater reality so you sing.

And then finally four, do life in community. Don't suffer alone. One of the great blessings of going through cancer treatments was to know that I wasn't suffering alone even though I felt horribly alone a lot of times.

To know that the elders at Southwood Presbyterian Church were praying for me. To have Vineet Mahesh, one of the elders here, call me regularly to find out how I'm doing.

For other churches, other people in the community, other believers, my own church to surround us, my family, don't suffer alone. Do life in community and be there for people when they are suffering.

[32 : 40] That's what it looks like for us to fight for this greater reality. Last thing I'll tell you, a friend of mine, my best friend growing up, was hit in a head-on collision.

He was driving to a race with his family to run a 5K of some sorts in the Atlanta area where we had grown up and a car crosses over the line, hits this minivan head-on, they flip and Glenn suffers traumatic brain injury as does his wife.

Thankfully, his children were okay in their seats. They were able to be safe. It's amazing. Two kids. But Glenn and Sandra were not unscathed.

Sandra had to go through much time of physical therapy, relearning to walk. Glenn, my best friend, when we were kids, died. He was declared brain dead and he passed.

We went to the funeral and at the end of the funeral, a song is being sung. higher than the mountains that I face, stronger than the power of the grave, constant through the trial and the change, one thing remains.

[33 : 54] Your love never fails, never gives up, never runs out on me. On and on and on it goes. Your love never fails.

And so, here was Sandra walking up the aisle, going out of the church with her walker. And she stopped as the song was being sung and she was in tears there, praying and singing and shouting to God.

Fighting for the greater reality at her husband's funeral. Brothers and sisters and friends that are here today, I submit to you that that's what it looks like.

Even in the hardest times, to acknowledge God's love never fails. It is the greater reality in your life. And my prayer for this congregation is that wherever you are, individually and corporately, you will fight for that.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your great love for us. Thank you that it never fails. No matter what we're going through, no matter what you're taking us through, no matter how much we suffer and experience frailty in this life, Lord, we praise you and thank you that you are at work in doing something much greater.

[35 : 14] Help us to fight for that and to see that. Help this congregation, these people, to fight for that. Father, we praise you and thank you for your work and we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Will you stand? I'm not sure what your practice is, but I want to give you the benediction, God's blessing upon you as you go.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.

And God's people say, Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.