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## POTS, PRESSURES, AND POWER

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### **What is light?**

Scientists tell us that until it is received by the eye and interpreted by the brain, light is just electromagnetic radiation. The universe is flooded with electromagnetic radiation, most of it invisible to the human eye. Gamma rays, X-rays, microwaves, radio waves, infrared waves, ultraviolet waves, cosmic waves--these are all forms of electromagnetic radiation which are invisible to us. Only a very narrow portion of the vast electromagnetic spectrum is visible to us as human beings--the portion that we see in a rainbow or in the rainbow-like smear of color that comes from a prism.

Yet God has designed our eyes and our brains in such a way that they can transform that narrow range of electromagnetic radiation into information, meaning, and emotion. That's right, emotion! We human beings perceive colors as *emotional qualities*. To us, red is a "warm" and "exciting" color, blue is "cool" and "serene." A field of wildflowers can fill us with a joy so intense, it verges on grief.

Our ability to experience the many shades of light and color as shades of meaning and emotion is an echo, a reflection of the appreciative capacity of God our Creator. He looked upon the light that streamed from the stars and galaxies He had created, the light which sparkled on the oceans and snow-capped peaks He had arranged, the light which fell through the leaves of the forests brimming with life. He saw the light which highlighted the beautifully molded features of the people He had made in his own image--

And He declared it all "good."

Light is one of the most powerful and meaningful of all the visual symbols God uses to illustrate spiritual reality in His Word. The miracle of regeneration has been described by the Apostle Paul as light, springing up suddenly from midnight darkness. Light makes no noise and cannot be touched or felt, but it is unmistakable. It not only can be seen, but it is the medium by which we see everything else. "That is what coming to Christ is like," Paul says, in effect. "It enlightens you by the knowledge of the glory of God."

But Christianity is more than conversion. It is, as we have seen, a *total life* to be lived in the midst of this present world without evasion or defeat. It is opposed by the flesh within and the Devil without so that one thing is certain--it won't be easy! But though total life isn't easy, it will be remarkable, as Paul makes clear in his description of the authentic Christian life beyond conversion: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

### **Nothing but pots**

There are two profoundly important factors in this verse: the description of basic humanity and the revelation of the intent of God. Paul first looks at the basic material with which God works, and he describes it as being a lowly vessel--"We have this treasure in clay pots." This is not the only place in Scripture where this figure

occurs. Perhaps you have never thought of yourself as a vessel, but it is a fundamental and essential concept of the biblical view of man.

What are vessels for? They are essentially containers made to hold something. The vessels in your home (pots, cups, bowls) are made to contain something, and when nothing is in them they are, of course, empty vessels. That is the significance of this verse of Scripture. It reminds us that we human beings were intended to contain something.

What were we made to contain? That is the alluring question which has set man on a quest for his own identity since time began. The startling answer of the Bible is that we are made to contain God! The glory of our humanity is that it was intended to hold the Almighty. Our humanity is designed to correspond to Deity. "The home of God is among mortals," says Revelation 21:3-4. "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes." That is the glory of humanity.

It is accurate to describe lives without God as "empty lives." That is exactly what they are--devoid of what they were meant to contain. Dr. Carl Jung has described the world today as suffering from "a neurosis of emptiness." The result is hollow men and women who display an outward shell of busyness and interest but within there is nothing but an echoing emptiness.

It is fascinating to discover that in this verse we are not just vessels, but we are (as the King James Version puts it) "earthen vessels"--made from clay, very common material, which in itself has little value. There is nothing very pretentious about human beings in and of themselves. Despite our vast God-given possibilities and our specious claim to great wisdom and cleverness, we must face the humbling fact that we are directly responsible for the terrible problems that now throttle the earth. Apart from God, we are nothing but a humble earthen pots--and sometimes we are cracked pots at that!

Of course, there are all kinds and grades of clay. Some people are like fine china--they crack easily. While they have a very fine texture, it is nothing more than a form of clay. Others are more like sun-dried mud and crumble at the first rap. Some are tough and resilient by nature, and others are pliable and easily molded. But all are clay. Underneath, we are all ordinary people.

### **Hidden treasure**

But the Christian is more than an empty vessel. He has something within--or, more accurately, *Someone* within. We have a treasure in our clay pot! And more than a treasure--a transcendent power! That is humanity as God intended it to be. The clay pot is not much in itself, but it holds an inestimable treasure, beyond price, and a transcendent power, greater than any other power known to humanity.

That is the second great truth found in this verse of Scripture. God has designed even ordinary people like us so that we may be the bearers of the most remarkable riches and power ever known. It must be apparent to all, however, that the treasure and the power are not from us, but from God. Does that not sound familiar? "Nothing coming from us; everything coming from God." The point is that God designed it this way; he intended that his great power, wisdom, and love should become visible in very ordinary and otherwise inconsequential people. As Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

The tremendous thing about all this is that the apostle is not merely using beautiful imagery. He is speaking of hard realities, of something genuine and practical, not merely idealistic and visionary. There is an inestimable treasure in each believer; there is a power beyond all telling. Paul puts it in clear terms to the Colossians as he describes his ministry to them: "To them [the apostles] God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles *the glorious riches of this mystery*, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

The only hope we have of realizing, even in this present life, the glory God intended for us is to learn to draw

upon the treasure within and be empowered by the power available. That treasure and that power are Christ, in you! So valuable is the treasure that the world would pay anything to get it. It is, as we have seen, the secret of human adequacy, and billions of dollars are poured out every week in a vain effort to identify this treasure and channel it into the normal affairs of life.

"Christ in you" is the lost secret of humanity, but when the full implications of the secret are realized, a person's life is enriched far beyond the ability to declare it. That is what sent Paul around the world of his day declaring what he called "the unsearchable riches of Christ." To see lonely, selfish, empty individuals transformed slowly but surely into warm, loving, wholesome, and happy people is to become aware of why Paul describes Christ as "unsearchable riches."

The great secret within is such a treasure because, first of all, it is a transcendent power. Transcendent means beyond the ordinary. It is a completely different form of power. So often, in our time, power is used to tear things apart, to blast, or explode, or crush. But transcendent power unites, gathers, harmonizes. It breaks down middle walls of partition and removes barriers. It does not make superficial, external adjustments, but works from within, producing permanent transformations. Do you know of any other power like that? It is absolutely unrivaled. There is nothing like it anywhere else. Many philosophies and teachings seek to imitate this, and for a time they may produce a credible imitation, but in the end they all prove to be cheap and shoddy imitations. They cannot stand the tests to which life as it really is will expose them. In the end only "Christ in you" endures.

By design God entrusts this secret to failing, faulty, weak, and sinful people so it will be clear that the power does not originate from us. It isn't the result of a strong personality or of a keen and finely honed mind or of good breeding and training. No, it arises solely from the presence of God in the heart. Our earthiness must be as apparent to others as the power is so that they may see that the secret is not us but God. That is why we must be transparent people, not hiding our weaknesses and failures, but honestly admitting them when they occur.

## **Headed for trouble**

To show how immensely practical these biblical truths are, the apostle goes on to describe the way it works in the trenches of daily living: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

There are all the pressures common to humanity, and all present in the life of a Christian. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest misconceptions held by many is that being a Christian means that life should suddenly smooth out, mysterious bridges will appear over all chasms, the winds of fate will be tempered, and all difficulties will disappear. No, Christianity is not membership in some red carpet club. All the problems and pressures of life remain, or are even intensified. Christians must face life in the raw, just as any pagan will. The purpose of the Christian life is not to escape dangers and difficulties but to demonstrate that they are handled in a different way. There must be trouble, or there can be no demonstration. Look at the four categories of trouble Paul describes:

*1. Afflictions:* "We are pressed on every side." These are the normal irritations of life which everyone faces--the bothersome, troublesome incidents which afflict us. The washing machine breaks down on Monday morning; it rains on your day off; the dog gets sick on the new carpet; your mother-in-law arrives unexpectedly for a long visit; the traffic is worse than usual; you flunk the exam you expected to pass. All these are normal afflictions. They are the buffetings of life which come to everyone. Christians are not exempted from them.

*2. Perplexities:* Even the apostles did not always know what to do. They were sometimes uncertain and couldn't understand why God allowed some things to happen in their lives. They occasionally found it difficult to make decisions, just like the rest of us. Paul said he tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit would not allow him to do so. He intended to preach the gospel in the province of Asia, but was ultimately forbidden by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 16). Even Jesus seems to fluctuate, telling his brothers he is not going up to the Feast, and later changing his mind and going (see John 7). There will be many times of uncertainty in our lives, many occasions when we do not understand what to do, what to say, or why things happen the way they do. These

are normal perplexities.

3. *Persecutions*: The Christian is promised persecutions. Even the "worldlings"--those who are in and of this dying world--are often persecuted, but the Christian can absolutely count on it and expect it, for his Master was persecuted also. The word persecution covers the entire range of deliberate offenses against Christians from slight ostracisms, cold shoulders, and critical remarks to smears on reputations, hindrances to ministry, personal and bodily attacks, and even torture and death. Christians can expect any or all of these. The apostles were persecuted unto death, as even the Lord was, and "the servant is no greater than his Master."

4. *Catastrophes*: "*Struck down!*" The word has power to chill the heart. It refers to the stunning, shattering blows which seem to come to us out of the blue--cancer, fatal accidents, a heart attack, riot, war, earthquakes, Alzheimer's disease, insanity. Christians are not always protected from these catastrophic events. They are terrible experiences which try faith to the limit and leave us frightened and baffled. The Book of Job is clear proof that these stunning catastrophes can occur to believers and that the loving heart of God is nevertheless behind them.

### **Authentic Christians--and unbelieving believers**

But look at the reactions to these trials which Paul describes. "We are hard pressed on every side, *but not crushed!* Perplexed, *but not in despair!* Persecuted, but not abandoned! Struck down, *but not destroyed!*" There is a power within, a transcendent power, different from anything else, which keeps pushing back with greater pressure against whatever comes from without, so that we are not crushed, despairing, forsaken, or destroyed.

This power within was given to us for the very purpose of handling the afflictions which are our lot. We are exposed to them in order that we might demonstrate a different reaction than one which would come from a person of the world. Our neighbors, watching us, will find us difficult to explain, and it is only when we baffle them that we are likely to impress them with the advantage our faith gives. There will be a quality about us which can only be explained in terms of God at work. It must be evident that the power belongs to God and not to us.

When we ask ourselves whether this actually is the reaction of Christians to the normal trials of life, we must hang our heads in shame. All too often we react exactly as the unbelievers around us--and sometimes not as well. We lose our tempers at minor irritations, we grow pouty and sulky when we're not given the favored place, we resent the perplexities to which we are exposed, and grow bitter and sullen at the catastrophes we experience.

In all this we reveal ourselves to be unbelieving believers. Our problem is, as we have seen before, that we either are ignorant of the way of escape or do not choose to use it because we desire to have *both* the pleasure of sin *and* the deliverance which comes from the transcendent power within.

But this is not possible. No man can serve two masters.

Once again the apostle brings us the key. In a passage of infinite light and beauty he indicates the process of switching from the old covenant, with its built-in death, to the new covenant and its power and life. The process requires a certain invariable order: "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" (2 Corinthians 4:10-11).

The life of Jesus, manifest in our mortal bodies, right now, in time, is what we need and want. There are two factors which can produce it. One is an inner attitude to which we must consent (verse 10). The other is an outward circumstance into which we are placed (verse 11). But the result is the same for each: the life of Jesus, manifest in our mortal flesh. Not in our immortal flesh, someday in heaven, but *right now*, precisely when we need it, when we are under the gun, facing the afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, and catastrophes of life!

What is the secret? It is, first, that we "always carry around in our body the death of Jesus." That is the inner

attitude to which we must consent. The key to experiencing the life of Jesus is our willingness to accept the implications of his death. We will not discover the glory of the treasure and power within us until we are ready to accept in practical terms the result of the sacrificial, obedient death of Jesus.

### **The cross at work**

The death of Jesus was by means of the cross, and the cross was designed for only one purpose: to end the existence of an evil man! Those who were crucified had no life in this world beyond that point. It may sound strange to us to apply the term "an evil man" to Jesus, but it must be remembered that a little further on in this very letter the apostle says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Literally, he was *made sin*. He became what we are. When he became what we are (evil men), there was nothing else God could do except to put him to death. That is what God does with evil people; he puts them to death. Thus, in the cross of Christ, God took all that we are in Adam, all our natural life with its dreams and hopes and resources and brought it to a crashing end by the dying of Jesus.

The cross of Jesus put to death the proud ego within us. It wrote off as utterly worthless that faculty within us which wants to blow a trumpet whenever we do what we think is good. It sentences to death that inner desire which wants no one else to be as educated or as popular or as skillful or as beautiful as we. It is the thing within us which struggles to be at the center at all times and expresses itself in self-pity, self-indulgence, self-excuse, and self-assertion.

I must clearly understand that it is not up to me to put this natural life to death--*it has already been done*. I am only expected to agree with the rightness of that execution and stop trying to make it "live" again before God. When a son was promised to Abraham, he cried to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" (Genesis 17:18). But God refused, for Isaac was the child of promise, not Ishmael. Abraham must learn that though Ishmael was permitted to exist, God would fulfill none of His promise of blessing through him. Only through Isaac would the blessing come.

Thus when I cease trying to justify and excuse the activities of the flesh and agree with God that the flesh is rightfully under sentence of death, then I am fulfilling this powerful figure of always carrying around in my body the death of Jesus. If I welcome the cross and see that it has already put to death the flesh rising within me so that it can have no power over me, then I find myself able to say no to its cry for expression. I can then turn instead to the Lord Jesus with the full expectation that as I will to do what he tells me to do in these circumstances (love my enemies, flee youthful lusts, wait patiently for the Lord, and so forth), He will be at work in me to enable me to do it. Thus the life of Jesus will be manifest in my mortal life.

It is this necessity to agree with the implications of the cross in terms of actual experience which Jesus has in mind when he says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Paul is saying exactly the same thing here. The key to the new life is the belief that the old has been rendered of no value whatsoever by the cross. And throughout Scripture the order never varies. First death, then life. Death is intended to lead to resurrection. "If we have died with him, we shall also be raised again with him." When we consent to death, then the life of Jesus can flow unhindered from us. It is never the other way. We cannot claim resurrection life first, and then by means of that put the flesh to death. We must first bow to the cross, then God will bring about the resurrection.

### **Something done to us**

The second factor which produces the life of Jesus in us is: "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" (2 Corinthians 4:11). That sounds very much like the first, but there is an important difference. The first was an attitude within to which we must consent. It was stated in the active voice (always carrying in the body the death of Jesus). The second is stated in the passive voice, that is, it is something done to us, not something we are to do. We have no choice in this second matter. We are being given up to death. This refers to those circumstances of trial and pressure into which God puts us to force us to abandon trust in the flesh and lean wholly on the Spirit of Christ.

The encouraging thing about this is to see that it is impossible for a true believer in Jesus not to walk in the Spirit at least some of the time. God will see to it that the true believer is put in circumstances which force him to do so. A case in point is the experience of Peter walking on the water. When he first got out of the boat and walked on the water to Jesus, it was by his own choice, though the power to do so came from the Lord. However when his gaze wandered and he began to sink, it was a moment of desperation. It was either look to Christ or perish. When he cried out in terror, "Lord, save me," Jesus lifted him up and they walked back to the boat together. So God is forever putting us into situations where we are way over our depth and are forced to abandon hope in all human resources and cry out, "Lord, save me." It is this which Paul calls being "given over to death for Jesus' sake."

There is a perfect illustration of this in Paul's own experience, recorded in the 2 Corinthians 1:8,9. He says, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

We do not know what this experience was which Paul describes. Perhaps it was the riot which broke out in Ephesus as recorded in Acts 19. At any rate it was something so threatening and so dangerous that Paul despaired of life itself. He felt he had received the sentence of death. He was, literally, "being given over to death for Jesus' sake." Notice, though, Paul's conclusion: "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

God put him through this trying circumstance to keep him from relying on his own resources. And this is said of an apostle who thoroughly knew and understood the operation of the new covenant. Even he needed this painful help from time to time to keep him from succumbing to the subtlety of the flesh and to enable him to trust the God who raises the dead, the God of resurrection power.

This is why pressures and problems arise in our lives. The God who loves us is delivering us up to death in order that we might trust, not in happy circumstances or in pleasant surroundings, but in the Lord of life who lives within. In the Scriptures we learn the attitude we are to have which releases to us the life of Jesus. Through our circumstances we are forced to *experience* this so that the treasure within might enrich us and the power within demonstrate before a watching world a totally new and different way of life.

### **Walking through life**

Here we see a powerful, life-changing, two-step process--a process that is repeated over and over again throughout Scripture, a process referred to in Scripture as "walking in the Spirit." We are to believe in the death of the cross and then appropriate the power of the resurrection. The simplest way to put it is: repent and believe. *Repenting* is changing one's mind about the value of the old life; believing is appropriating the value of the new. In Romans 6 Paul says, "Consider yourselves dead to sin" (step one) "and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (step two). In Ephesians he says, "Put off the old man" (step one), "and put on the new" (step two). These are not widely differing things; they are the same, but put in many different figures so that all will understand. A walk consists of two steps, one with each leg, repeated again and again. So the walk in the Spirit is achieved when every demand life makes on us is met by taking up the cross, so that we might experience the resurrection. It can happen dozens of times a day.

All this has an effect far beyond one individual life. The apostle says to the Corinthians:

So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 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 in his presence. 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. (2 Corinthians 4:12-15).

This passage is a recognition that the glorious effects of the life of Jesus may not always be seen to the full in a

single believer's life. Sometimes the death is felt by one, and the resulting life by another. Paul feels this is the case with him. "Death is at work in us, but life is at work in you." The Corinthians were experiencing the benefit of the death to which he was daily being delivered. He was content with this, being willing to be sacrificed for their faith so that they might understand and grow in the grace of Christ. His quotation is from Psalm 116:10 where the writer speaks of being sorely afflicted and not knowing quite why, but he had nevertheless believed in God and so had spoken of deliverance even before it came, saying, "For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling" (Psalm 116:8). Thus Paul, too, is confident that God will strengthen him along with the Corinthians and bring them all together into the fullness of glory.

The closing sentence in the passage above is a magnificent statement of the unity of believers as members of one another. What affects one affects all. But though there are suffering, death, and tears, yet it is all working together for good, and as the new covenant is understood by more and more believers, it will result in a great outburst of praise and thanksgiving to the glory of God. Who can help but praise a God who can bring joy out of sorrow, life out of death, and liberty out of bondage? That is the new way of life which the church is called upon to demonstrate before a watching world.

But even that is not the whole story. This present experience only points the way to something beyond, which is so breathtaking, so glorious, that the apostle is at a loss for adequate words to describe it. That is the adventure that awaits us in the next chapter.

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