

In the ancient world, a jar of clay was a throwaway item. Earthenware jars were used for everyday purposes—storing and transporting liquids and grain, cooking and dining, storing leftovers, etc.—and so were not considered to be of any great value. They existed for convenience and were easily replaced when broken. A jar of clay had no greater value in the ancient world than a fast food container in the modern world.

In vv. 7–12, Paul continues his theme of the glory of new covenant ministry by pointing out that it is the message, and not the messenger, that is glorious. New covenant ministry is like a great treasure stored in a throwaway container.

In 4:13–5:10, Paul will develop the theme of human frailty, comparing it with the glory of eternity, before returning to his main theme of gospel ministry in 5:11. To our present text, however, he observes several things about the “surpassing power” (v. 7) of the gospel ministry that resides in jars of clay.

## The Proclamation of Surpassing Power (v. 7)

Paul begins this section with a straightforward declaration of the surpassing power of the gospel: “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” While he is writing primarily of himself and Timothy (1:1), the principle extends beyond them to every faithful minister of the gospel.

The key to fruitful gospel ministry is to recognise our own weakness. We are throwaway vessels, which God uses to store his gospel message. The container is entirely dispensable; it is the contents of the vessel that are so precious.

When St. Francis of Assisi was asked how he accomplished so much in ministry, he replied, “The Lord looked down from heaven and said, ‘Where can I find the weakest, littlest man on earth?’ Then he saw me and said, ‘I’ve found him, and he won’t be proud of it. He’ll see that I am only using him because of his insignificance.’”

Note that Paul is not suggesting that God’s strength infuses our weakness with strength and makes us strong. His point is precisely the opposite: We remain weak. If anything, we grow weaker. The weaker we are, the greater the power of the gospel is in and through our lives. It is when the jar of clay is completely shattered that the light it contains shines most brightly and effectively for those in darkness.

### TO THINK ABOUT

In what way does human weakness display the power of the gospel? In what way might our misperceptions of personal strength hinder gospel ministry in and through us?

## The Paradox of Surpassing Power (vv. 8–10)

To the Corinthians, human strength and wisdom were everything. The superapostles latched onto this and accused Paul of ineffective ministry because of his weakness. Paul argues the exact opposite. He argues that, paradoxically, his weakness and suffering were the stage on which the ministry of the gospel performed most effectively.

### TO THINK ABOUT

As you discuss the paradoxes that Paul presents, ask yourself, are these things true of me? Is it necessary for a Christian to suffer in the same way and to the same degree that Paul did in order for God to use his life as a powerful witness to the gospel?

There is something of a crescendo in the biographical paradoxes that Paul presents. There are four stages in which he describes his suffering for the gospel.

1. **Afflicted, not crushed (v. 8a).** The word “afflicted” carries the idea of pressure. One unpublished Bible translation reads, “We are squeezed but not squashed.” Pressures mounted all around him, but they never crushed him.

2. **Perplexed, not despairing (v. 8b).** The Greek words rhyme, and many English translators have tried to capture the wordplay. The aforementioned unpublished Bible translation reads “bewildered but not befuddled.” Paul did not always know what God was doing, but he expected times of perplexity and therefore had a plan to deal with it. He lived the charge that he gave to Timothy: “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5).

**TO THINK ABOUT**

Human frailty does not always grasp divine providence. There are times that God does things that we simply do not understand. What strategies can you put in place to persevere joyfully in the face of perplexity over the mysterious providence of God?

3. **Persecuted, not forsaken (v. 9a).** A cursory reading of the New Testament shows that Paul was familiar with persecution. And yet he knew always of the presence of God, even when others abandoned him (see 2 Timothy 4:9–18). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word translated “forsaken” is always used in reference to being abandoned by God (Genesis 28:15; Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; 1 Chronicles 28:20; Psalms 16:10; 37:25; etc.). “Paul was absolutely confident of God’s abiding presence regardless of how or where he was hounded” (Hughes).

4. **Struck down, not destroyed (v. 9b).** The word translated “struck down” implies assault with a weapon. Once again, Acts bears ample witness to the truth of this claim. But God’s grace did not allow the attacks of Paul’s enemies to destroy him. In each instance of weakness, God’s allowed his strength to shine through brilliantly.

**TO THINK ABOUT**

Nobody enjoys opposition. We try, understandably so, to avoid whatever opposition we can. While we certainly should not deliberately invite opposition, how should these paradoxes transform our outlook when we face opposition for the sake of the gospel?

Paul was able to persevere in the face of such affliction because he knew that the dying he was facing with persistent persecution would ultimately result in glorious life. As Jesus had died and risen again, so no affliction—even death itself—could ultimately destroy Paul, who would experience a glorious resurrection. (This is the theme he moves to in 4:13–5:10).

## The Principle of Surpassing Power (v. 11)

We must note the repeated use of “always” in vv. 10–11. The affliction of which Paul writes was not an unusual thing; it was his ordinary expectation as God’s faithful servant. But such suffering did not deter him, for he knew that his suffering ultimately manifested the life of Jesus. That is, he knew that the sufferings he experienced were not haphazard but were a part of the divine plan to spread the gospel.

**TO THINK ABOUT**

No suffering is pleasant, but would you be willing to suffer, as Paul did, if you knew that your suffering would magnify the glory of the gospel?

## The Peculiarity of Surpassing Power (v. 12)

As he draws this section to a close, Paul makes something of a peculiar leap. He does not say, “Death and life are at work in us,” but, “Death is at work in us, but life in you.” The great gospel truth is on display here: The death of the messenger results in life for others. As Jesus’ death resulted in life for many, so recognition of our frailty, and willingness to be broken, results in the power of the gospel in our ministry.

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*The equation for power is: my weakness plus God’s power equal’s God’s power. It’s humbling to hear that all my acknowledgement will not make me strong—embracing weakness leads to more weakness. But it is also so beautiful and liberating to know that God’s power in our lives does not come from our pursuit of power.*

(R. Kent Hughes)