

Date: October 25,2009

Title: God's Grace Changes Everything

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Scripture:

**7** We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. **8** We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. **9** We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. **10** Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. **11** Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies. **12** So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you. **13** But we continue to preach because we have the same kind of faith the psalmist had when he said, "I believed in God, so I spoke." **14** We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus, will also raise us with Jesus and present us to himself together with you. **15** All of this is for your benefit. And as God's grace reaches more and more people, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory. **16** That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. **17** For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! **18** So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever. 2 Cor 4:7-18 (NLT)

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I'm going to begin this morning by giving you a homework assignment for when you get home later today. This is not something that will take a lot of time, but many of you might find it to be rather difficult. But as difficult as it may be, I really want you to do it. What I want you to do is to go to your homes and look at yourself in the mirror. Now, I'm not talking about a quick glance, I'm talking about a good long look. What I want you to do is to take in the expression around the eyes. Do you see any joy there? Or do you see sadness, or anger or frustration? Do you see wrinkles that didn't used to be there? How about if you back up and get a full-length view? Maybe you see that there is more of you than you really wish there was. Or maybe you wish there was more in different places. The bottom line is that when you look in the mirror, you may not be completely happy about what you see. And this is made even worse by the images we see on the TV and the movies. Presumably we are supposed to compare ourselves to the idealized image we see on billboards, on TV and in magazines. And I know that whenever I do that, I come up way short. And it's not getting any better as I get older. I have less hair, my muscles are slipping, my five senses are more like 3.75 senses. Any of you who are over 50 know what I'm talking about don't you? There is just no way of looking at the outer shell of our bodies and feeling really good about them. They might be fine now, but just wait a little bit. The cosmetic industry is close at hand to give us all some help and we are glad for the help. It is estimated that Americans spend close to 8 billion dollars every year for cosmetics and an estimated 7 billion for elective cosmetic surgery. Wow, that's a lot of money just to make these clay vessels look a little bit less like clay and more like something ageless and beautiful. But as we talked about in our Live Like You Were Dying series, we know that we are not ageless and any beauty we possess is temporary.

It's temporary, that is, unless we have something else that is goes deeper than the surface of our skin. Paul says that when we know Christ, we have this light shining in our hearts. This is such a great image.

- We can be old
- We can be weak
- We can be unattractive by the world's standard
- We can be poor and without political influence.
- We can be unhealthy and even sickly
- We can be outcasts who are looked down upon by most of society

But when all is said and done none of this matters if you have the love and light of Christ living in your heart.

But having Christ in our hearts is not solely about counteracting our appearance. It is also about giving us strength in times of trouble. Paul says that even in times of trouble we are pressed but not crushed, we are confused or perplexed but we're not driven to despair. You know what happens if you put a pottery vase in a vise and begin to turn the handle so as to squeeze the jaws of the vise in on the jar. Eventually if you keep pressing, the vase will crack and break because it is fragile. What Paul is telling us is that when we are filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ, we are able to withstand the pressures of life that press in and threaten to destroy us.

I recently read what Joni Eareckson Tada had to say about her daily struggle just to get out of bed in the morning. For those of you who are not familiar with her, she is paralyzed from the neck down and has been since a diving accident when she was a teenager. Listen to what she says about the challenge of living in a clay vessel that has been damaged for many years:

*Honesty is always the best policy, especially when you are surrounded by women in a restroom during a break at a Christian women's conference. One woman, putting on lipstick, said, "Oh, Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your wheelchair. I*

wish that I had your joy!” Several women around her nodded. “How do you do it?” she asked as she capped her lipstick.

“I don’t do it,” I said. “May I tell you honestly how I woke up this morning?”

“This is an average day. After my husband, Ken, leaves for work at 6:00 a.m., I’m alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00 a.m. That’s when a friend arrives to get me up. While she makes coffee, I pray, ‘Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, get me dressed, sit me up in my chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don’t have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don’t have a smile to take into the day. But you do. May I have yours? God, I need you desperately.’”

“So what happens when your friend comes into the bedroom?” one of them asked.

“I turn my head toward her and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It’s not mine; it’s God’s.” I point to my paralyzed legs. “Whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning.”

*I have learned that the weaker we are, the more we need to lean on God; and the more we lean on God, the stronger we find him to be.*

— Joni Eareckson Tada, “Joy Hard Won,” *Decision* (March 2000)

Just imagine that kind of pressure. She knows that the only way she can get out of bed is with the help of another person. She knows the challenge of living in her paralyzed body and how difficult it is just to begin her day. But with the power of God living inside of her she is able to move forward with life. Talk about being pressed but not crushed – perplexed but not to the point of despair. Joni Eareckson Tada is a living example of how God rescues a person, sometimes even on a daily basis from the trials of life. But the grace of God living in a person does not stop with that person.

In verse 12 Paul says: *So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you.* The power of Christ allows people to face death themselves so that others may have life. I can only imagine how many people have received strength and solace from the grace of God they have seen living in Joni Eareckson Tada. But you don't have to go that far, do you? The amazing thing about the grace of God is that no matter where you find it, it changes and transforms the world. It doesn't always make the world what we would like it to be, but the transformation is there just the same.

What I find to be so amazing about the grace of God is that you can find it anywhere.

And where we find it or find it missing is a surprise too. For example, some of the most amazing cathedrals are built in honor of God. In some cases it took over 200 years to complete these magnificent structures. But if you go into them on a Sunday morning you might find only a handful of people actually worshipping there.

On the other hand, if you were to walk down the streets of the worst parts of Calcutta you might even consider the slums there to be *God forsaken* or forgotten by God, but if you spend enough time there you will see the grace of God at work through the ministry that Mother Teresa started in 1952 to help the poorest of the poor in that city. The grace of God is not predictable, nor is it containable, nor is it always visible in the customary sense of the word. In verse 18 Paul says *we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.*

It is almost as if Paul is telling us that there is an invisible force that has the potential to pervade everything. We cannot always see it, but it is there and it is timeless. The beauty that comes from God's grace may not look like

the beauty you see on TV or in the movies, but it is a beauty that goes much deeper and lasts forever. It is beauty that may grow in spiritual intensity even as the physical vessel may lose most of its appeal and functionality.

*I read of a man who was involved in a tragic accident. He lost both legs and his left arm and only a finger and thumb remained on the right hand.*

*But he still possessed a brilliant mind, enriched with a good education and broadened with world travel. At first he thought there was nothing he could do but remain a helpless sufferer.*

*A thought came to him. It was always nice to receive letters, but why not write them--he could still use his right hand with some difficulty. But to whom could he write? Was there anyone shut-in and incapacitated like he was who could be encouraged by his letters? He thought of men in prison--they did have some hope of release, whereas he had none--but it was worth a try.*

*He wrote to a Christian organization concerned with prison ministry. He was told that his letters could not be answered because it was against prison rules, but he still decided to commence this one-sided correspondence. He wrote twice a week, and it taxed his strength to the limit. But into the letters he put his whole soul, all his experience, all his faith, all his wit, and all his Christian optimism. Frequently he felt discouraged and was tempted to give it all up. But it was his one remaining activity, and he resolved to continue as long as he could.*

*At last he got a letter. It was very short, written on prison stationery by the officer whose duty it was to censor the mail.*

*All it said was: "Please write on the best paper you can afford. Your letters are passed from cell to cell till they literally fall to pieces."*

You may think that you have nothing to give. You may look at yourself in the mirror and think terrible things about the person you see there. You may see disappointment, you may see fear, or you may just see a fragile vessel that is wearing out. What ever you think you are going to see, I really want you to look. And then when you get through looking into a mirror, I want you to take a deep breath, smile at God's creation and remember what Paul says about these fragile bodies. They are fragile, they are temporary, and unless you are pretty young it's mostly down hill from here. And if that were the whole story of our lives, that might be pretty depressing. If we were to believe that the extent of our lives is what we are able to accomplish with our rickety mortal bodies, by our own efforts, we would have little choice but to watch with horror as the vitality of our lives slowly, but steadily slipped away.

But when we know Jesus, we know a different story. It is a story of transformation that takes place from the inside out. With God in our lives, we are not simply fragile pots that will soon be cracked and broken, we are treasure chests that hold and disperse the best treasure of all....God's grace. We may not look like much, really. I guess it's true that without God we really aren't much at all. But **with** God's grace, living within us, and **with** God's grace flowing out of us....well, that changes everything. Amen.