

GREAT EXPECTATIONS  
II CORINTHIANS 4:7-12  
DECEMBER 30, 2018

The New York City Transit Authority was missing a bus and a driver some years ago. For over a week, authorities searched for the man but couldn't find him. Finally, ten days after the man had disappeared, he was found -- bus included -- IN MIAMI! The driver said, "I'd had it with the cold weather, the passengers, and my family. One day after I got off work, I thought, 'I wonder what would happen if I just took off.'" So, that's what he did. He headed south where he enjoyed the sun and surf for over a week, ALL BY HIMSELF! Have you ever felt like that bus driver at times? Maybe -- that's why you're here! Let me tell you, there have been moments when the thought of just escaping for a little mental vacation has crossed my mind!

Maybe, like the bus driver, life is just getting to you. It could be your health, your kids, your job, the political climate -- even your marriage. One thing I have discovered over time is that there are definitely times that life brings us pain and disappointment. We think things are going to happen in a certain way, and we find out they are not what we expected at all. Bills pile up, health fails, relationships crumble, cultural shifts divide. We are criticized by those we love. Our jobs are disappointing.

And who knows? Perhaps there have been times when you have even thought about giving up on your faith. You started out with high hopes of a more fulfilled life and found it to be a lot tougher than you expected. You may have secretly expected that you would have fewer problems and you didn't. Christians were not always as caring as you thought they would be. And you began to think after awhile, "What's the use in coming to church? Why not just drop out and live life on my own?"

If you have ever been discouraged, I think that the Scripture that you just heard may offer some encouragement today. So, let me set the context of this letter for you. Paul has written to the believers at Corinth because some folks had come into the church saying that Paul's word could not be trusted, that he was not truly an

apostle, and that he was using manipulation to deceive the church. Paul's critics also implied that the money he was collecting for the persecuted church at Jerusalem was actually going into his own pocket. In spite of it all, he chose the high road. And, he had learned a few things that he wanted to share with the church.

**First, he had released his expectations.** Paul faced the reality of his situation – free of unrealistic expectations. He had been disappointed but he was not going to give up. Listen again to these words: *We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;*

If you have lived long enough, you will have noticed that more often than you would like to admit it – life is not fair. Dr. Jerome Frank at Johns Hopkins University talks about our '**assumptive world**'. What he means is that we all make certain assumptions about how life will go. Often our assumptions are unstated but nonetheless real. The problem with expectations is that they set us up for disappointment.

And disappointment is the difference between our expectations and reality. Everyone knows disappointment sooner or later. Friends break their word, marriages end in divorce, children move away and rarely call, colleagues betray us, investments disappear, and dreams are shattered. And very often we disappoint ourselves. But deep down, we believe that if we do the right thing, good things will happen. We assume that we have earned certain things out of life. If those expectations are not met, we are disappointed. There is a strong connection between good mental health and having assumptions that match reality. And there is a high correlation between misplaced assumptions and a host of other problems, including depression. Put quite simply, we are disappointed when things don't go the way we had hoped they would go. What we are talking about here is discouragement – the pressures from without that often create problems within. When we're exhausted, when we are frustrated, when we are afraid, it is very easy to become discouraged.

Paul was troubled on every side, yet not crushed. The word 'troubled' in the Greek means 'to crowd'. Paul experienced troubles to the extent that he felt life's difficulties were closing in on him. I think we would use the word 'stressed' to describe what Paul was experiencing here. Yet, he said, "Though I am pressed, I am not crushed!" He may have been struggling, but he refused to wallow in despair.

Paul reminds us that 'we have this treasure in jars of clay.' Paul would tell you that he was like a clay pot that is easily broken. His ability to recover from the physical and emotional abuse, and yet not retaliate, was due to the presence of Christ in his life. Paul did not seem to expect to be rescued from his difficulties – he had learned to accept that those things were a part of life – but he did not need to be controlled by them.

That, for me, is our treasure - good news that sustains us against disappointments, that strengthens our spirits, and, finally, that promises us eternal life. That helps me understand why Paul could compare himself to a clay pot. Paul says we have a treasure, but it is in earthen vessels, so that it might be made clear that God steps into the midst of our own human vulnerability to help us to live triumphantly through the worst that life can bring. We don't have to do it alone.

Then Paul takes us down another path to remind us **that life is not simply about the pursuit of happiness but about the transformation of our character in Christ.** This is one of those truths that I really don't like to face. Now, I am not saying that the Christian life is meant to be one of suffering – it is not. In fact, the most interesting and engaging Christians I know are ones whose lives are defined by joy – even in the midst of challenging circumstances. However, our life purpose is to be transformed – to somehow become image bearers of God to our community and world. Sometimes the pathway to transformation takes us right through the valley of suffering. When faced with tough circumstances, my first inclination is to move into problem solving mode. Like many of you, I try to fix my situation – which seems to be the logical course of action. But, here is the dilemma. I know that there is a time for problem solving, but I have also discovered that sometimes I simply need to release my situation into God's hands. Sometimes, the right course

is to simply hold on, trusting God to work in and through our situation, transforming our character through the clay jars that are our lives.

This week I ran across a little Japanese word, *kintsukuroi*, that means "golden repair." It is the art of restoring broken pottery with gold so the fractures are literally illuminated—a kind of physical expression of its spirit. As a philosophy, *kintsukuroi* celebrates imperfection as an integral part of the story, not something to be disguised. The artists believe that when something has suffered damage and has a history, it becomes more beautiful. In *kintsukuroi*, the true life of an object begins the moment it breaks and reveals that it is vulnerable. The gap between once perfect appearance and its visible imperfection deepens its appeal. And that goes for our lives as well.

Often when I get discouraged about a situation, it helps to step back and get a broader perspective. Have you noticed that time has a way of reversing judgments, and eternity has a way of telling us what was valuable and exposing the unimportant. Not only that, but those momentary struggles then become the canvas on which God paints the masterpiece of our lives. It's about who you become with what life has dealt you. Sometimes it is precisely who we are in the difficulties – that is the most profound witness of God's presence in our lives.

Journalist David Hajdu recently told a memorable story about Wynton Marsalis, one of the premier jazz trumpeters of our time. One night, Marsalis was playing with a small combo in a New York basement club. A few songs into their set, he walked to the front of the bandstand and began an unaccompanied solo of the 1930s ballad, "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You." Marsalis' performance was exquisite – the crowd hanging on every note. Stretching the mood taut, Marsalis came to the final phrase, with each note coming slower and slower, with longer and longer pauses between each one: "I don't stand a ghost of a chance. . . "

Then someone's cell phone went off. It began to chirp an absurd little tune. The audience laughed, the man with the phone jumped up and fled into the hallway to take his call, and the spell was broken. "MAGIC—RUINED," the journalist scratched into his notepad.

But then Marsalis played the cellphone melody note for note. He played it again, with different accents. He began to play with it, spinning out a rhapsody on the silly little tune, changing keys several times. The audience settled down, slowly realizing that they were hearing something altogether extraordinary. Around and around Marsalis played for several minutes, weaving glory out of goofiness. Finally, in a masterstroke, he wound down seamlessly to the last two notes of his previous song: "with you." The audience exploded with applause. In the same way, our brilliant, adaptable God is at work throughout our world, bringing beauty out of chaos, love out of loss, and character out of pain. God is creating a work of art using the ordinary clay jars of our lives.